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**Legion**

by NeverTooOld

**Summary**

Summary: Brockton Bay has an amazingly temperate climate. But sometimes, winter storms come through anyways. Because of this, Taylor was left in the locker for much longer, with far reaching consequences.

Reposted Chapters 1-10 to remove some malware and to include some editing.

Disclaimer: I own nothing. Worm belongs to Wildbow. We just get to play in this universe. It is fanfiction, thus is by definition AU. Any changes or modifications are purely for my enjoyment.
Chapter 1

Prologue

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------Legion*** ***Legion-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Beep

Beep

Beep

Darkness ...

voices? ...

who? ...

light? ...

darkness

beep

beep

beep

beeeeeeellllllllllllllll

PAAAAIIINNN!!!!
She's breathing on her own again, and her heart seems to be okay now. Keep someone here 24/7 until she is stable and I have had a chance to see all the new tests and we can get her off life support. NO visitors, NO exceptions. Not even the family. Not yet, anyways.

Darkness ...

Chapter 1

"Ms. Hebert, your father is here, he is filling out the discharge paperwork at the nurse’s station, so that you can go home now."

I tried to focus on his face from where I was sitting next to the window, but I didn't have my glasses on, not that they did much good anymore. My left eye was still bandaged, or rather the eye socket was bandaged, and my right eye seemed even worse then it had been before the …

NO! I wouldn't think about it, just the thought of... was enough to trigger a panic attack. PTSD the shrink called it, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Flashbacks, emotional volatility, panic attacks, all sorts of fun things. And that was just some of my mental problems; my physical issues were even worse. My left eye gone, eaten right out of … NO! My right leg is missing almost 30 percent of its muscle tissue, surface scarring over 60 percent of my body, including my face, multiple infections, some of which they could not even identify, some sort of joint disorder similar to arthritis in most of my joints. And the doctors keep telling me how LUCKY I am, just to be alive. I wonder if they would be so cheerful and upbeat if this had happened to them.

They didn’t get to wear a mask, just so the people around me don’t get sick. They don’t have to see a face that doesn’t belong to me anymore; I know the doctors did the best they could, but my face makes the Phantom of Opera look pretty.
He had been babbling on about me needing to sign some papers before I could leave, but I just ignored him, even when he tried to hand me a clipboard and a pen so I could sign his stupid papers. Finally, I took the clipboard, just to shut him up. I looked at the papers, but as I had suspected, they were too out of focus for me to read. I dropped the clipboard in my lap and said, "I can't read them. I'll have my dad look at them for me."

At that he reached for the papers saying, "These are just some routine disclaimers for the hospital, nothing to worry about, I'll just explain them to you so you can sign them and go home."

"No, I think that I'll just have my dad read them for me." As I spoke, I grabbed the clipboard and hugged it to me. I was getting a very bad vibe from him and I was not nearly as trusting as I used to be. Especially now, when I could barely see well enough to walk around this room without tripping over things. Even though I could barely see the man, I could see well enough to know that I didn't trust him. I reached over to the controller on the table next to me and pushed the call button sending for a nurse. One of the few advantages of my injuries was that they didn't waste any time calling back to my room to see what I wanted, when I pushed the button, a nurse showed up immediately. In return, I didn't use it frivolously.

When the nurse showed up I simply said, "I don't know who this person is and he wants me to sign some papers that I can't read. Could you get him out of my room and send my dad to me," I looked over at the man who was edging towards the door, and said, "And maybe you should call security to check out just who this strange man is, since he never actually said who he was, and why he is in the room of a helpless, minor girl, without her or her father’s permission."

After looking between the man and me, she grabbed her phone, pressed a couple of buttons and said, “Dr. Armstrong, room 622, stat.” Then she called out behind her, “Mike, could you give me a hand here?”

At this the man bolted, pushing the nurse aside and taking off at a dead run. A few seconds later I could hear a scuffle and some muffled shouts, and then it got really quiet. After about 5 minutes the nurse came back and she brought my dad along.

“Hey, kiddo. I hear you had some excitement here? What’s going on?”

I lifted the clipboard and waved it at him, “Some strange guy came in here, he never did say who he was, and tried to get me to sign these papers.” I handed the clipboard over to him, “It’s not like I can read them anyways, not until I can get some new glasses.”

At that he jumped a little and pulled something out of his jacket pocket and handed it to me. It turned out to be an eyeglass case, and when I tried on the glasses, I found that I could actually see again. Not perfectly maybe, but at least I could see well enough to read and to see the nurse clearly enough that I could tell more than just a blurry shape that was light green in color.
Dad had brought me some clean clothes, so I could wear something more than hospital PJ’s as well as a new jacket since it was snowing again. He left them on the bed, took the clipboard and left the room, closing the door behind him. The nurse, her nametag said Sally, helped me get dressed, since I couldn’t bend over very far. She actually had some cool tools to let me pick things like my underwear and pants up and slip them over my legs while I was still sitting down. She even had a U-shaped piece of plastic with a long looped cord that I could use to put my socks on. My new shoes were slip-on’s that I could simply step into with the help of a long shoehorn. Even with her help, it still took me almost ten minutes to get completely dressed and ready to go.

Once dressed, I used the walker next to my chair to pull myself to my feet, and shuffled around the bed to the wheelchair that an orderly or maybe a male nurse had brought to my room. Slowly and carefully turning myself around, I sat down in the wheelchair with a sigh of relief and tried to catch my breath. I had never been really athletic, even before, but now just about everything was exhausting. Not to mention painful. Physical and occupational therapy truly sucked, but an older patient, had given me some advice that was turning out to be very helpful, although I didn’t think so at first.

FLASHBACK

I had been taken down to my first PT session since I woke up from my coma, and while I was sitting in this stupidly uncomfortable wheelchair, feeling sorry for myself, an old guy, I think he must have been at least 80 years old, kind of shuffled over next to me using this weird looking walker. It had a seat on the front, a couple of storage bags and what I would swear were hand brakes, which only became clear when he got right up next to me, since I didn’t have any glasses yet.

The first thing he said was, “First time, huh?”

“What?” I replied, kind of surprised that someone was actually talking to me, since other than dad, only the doctors and this Red Cross lady who brought puzzles and books up to the wards ever spoke a word to me. Everyone else seemed to keep their distance, not that I blamed them, not after I had a chance to look in a mirror. The first time I saw my face in the mirror I nearly threw up, even now it was hard for me to look at myself.

“First time for PT. You got that look on your face that every fingie does when they show up here for the first time. Like, ‘Oh shit! This is gonna hurt! I can’t do it.’ which it will, sweetie. It’s gonna hurt a lot. The only thing you can do, is just focus on doing whatever exercises the therapist gives
you. Try and ignore the pain, ‘cause everyone here hurts, and finish every set, even if it hurts so bad that you just can’t stop from cryin’.”

I looked at him, really looked at him, as best that I could, and I started to see the scars on his neck and hands, and when I looked down at his legs, he just laughed and grabbed the cane that was hooked to his walker and banged it on his leg. CLANK!

“Yeah, got a prosthetic foot on the right and a BK on the left. Guess you could call it a final FU from the ‘cong, since I was actually walking across the airfield to catch a plane back to the world when a mortar attack came in.” He shrugged and said, “Kinda poetic justice since I was a mortar grunt, too.”

“So why are you telling me this? I mean, it’s not really a very good pep talk, you know. More like scaring me to be honest,” I said nervously.

“Maybe so, but here’s the important part: PT sucks, but it also works. And the sooner you start, and the harder you work at it, the better off you are in the end. I seen a bunch o’ big, strong, macho men give up or blow off doing their PT exercises, and ever’one of ‘em paid for it. Usually with more pain and less strength or range o’ motion in the end. You’re gonna think your therapist is a sadistic ass who gets off on how much pain they can cause their victims, I mean their poor, sufferin’ patients. But they’re not. Most o’them really want to help, but they know that the best way they can help you is gonna hurt you. No question about that, and no help for it either. You just gotta suck it up, an’ keep going ‘til you’re done.”

I looked around the room, not that I could really see anything, but I could hear, maybe even better… and it sure sounded like the people here were in pain, but also really struggling to do … whatever it was they were doing.

I looked back at the old man, whose name I didn’t even know, and slowly nodded, “Okay. I’ll try…”

He smacked his cane on the floor and said, “There is no try. Do or do not,” in what was probably the worst imitation of Yoda that had ever been done.

With that I actually laughed, for the first time in months, since last summer probably. And when I was taken by the Physical Therapist and he started me doing a series of stretches and exercises, I kept the old man’s words in mind and finished every exercise and stretch to the best of my ability and then pushed even harder to do just one more, to stretch just a little bit farther. No matter how much it hurt.
One of the nurses, that I had known for weeks, even if I had never really seen her, collected up my PT and OT equipment, bagged it up with the few toiletries and clothing that I had, and placed it in my lap and started pushing me down to the main entrance of the hospital, where my dad was already waiting with the car.

Before we left the room, I said, “Wait a moment, please,” when she stopped the wheelchair, I carefully unstrapped and removed the mask, and put in my bag. “Okay, I’m ready now.”

“Are you sure Taylor?” she asked very carefully.

“I’m sure. I didn’t do this to myself, they did this to me, I have nothing to be ashamed of and I refuse to hide myself away or pretend it didn’t happen,” I explained.

She gripped my shoulder and said, “Good for you, Taylor. I’m proud of you. Just remember to wear it at night, it really will help with the scarring.”

She finished taking me to the main entrance and handed my stuff to my dad and helped me get up and into the front seat of the car while he put all the stuff in the back seat. She wished me well and reminded me to call the hospital immediately if I started to run a fever or got ill in any way.

As dad drove home, I started thinking about what I was going to do next, what my choices and options were, especially concerning school. Dad and I hadn’t really talked about the bullying before…I ended up in the hospital, but really, there was no way he didn’t know by now, because there was no way the school could completely cover up a student being stuffed in her locker for days, and then in a coma at the hospital for weeks before she could be released. I just knew that I couldn’t go back to Winslow, no matter what. And truthfully, given how weak I was, and in such constant pain, I couldn’t really see me in any school. Maybe I could do online classes or homeschool instead. Anything but going back there.

We pulled into the driveway about 15 minutes later, and dad helped me out of car and got me my walker, but he let me work my way into the house at my own pace, which was slow, but steady, but by the time I got to the living room I was exhausted again, so I sat down on the sofa while he carried my things up to my room.
He came back down and sat in his chair across from the sofa and just looked at me, then said, “You are not going back to that school.”

What? “What?”

“When you're ready to talk about what happened to you, I will be ready to listen. But going back to that school is never going to happen. They were criminally negligent and based on the papers you gave me, they are well aware of it. I will never let you near them again. Not without me, and probably a cop for protection.”

What the hell? What was he talking about?

“Dad, what are you talking about? What papers?”

“The clipboard you gave me had a bunch of legal papers that basically said that neither the school or anybody associated with it, staff or student, was responsible, that you had basically locked yourself in the locker as ‘attention-seeking behavior’ so only you were liable for any damages or injuries. There was also a form acknowledging that you agreed to accept all financial responsibility and could not sue anyone for damages.”

“And they thought that I would agree to that?” I was stunned that the school could possibly think that I would ever sign papers like that. After a moment’s thought I realized they were so used to stepping all over me, that they probably assumed they could keep doing it, even after everything they had condoned and covered up coming out so publicly.

“They probably knew that you were mostly blind and on a lot of drugs, and assumed that you would not realize what was going on. Which is just stupid, because you are a minor, and heavily medicated, you can’t legally sign anything. No judge would accept those papers as legally binding, but maybe they just wanted to have them as a form of insurance or blackmail. I don’t really know what they could have been thinking, to send someone after you like that.” He leaned back and sighed. “Hopefully, the hospital will press charges against him. Trespassing or something.” Changing the subject, he asked me, “How are you feeling, now that you're home?”

I lifted my hand, palm upward and said, “I don’t know really, about the same as in the hospital, except more relaxed since it’s home, you know? I’m pretty tired, which seems to be my new normal, but I’m not ready to go to bed. Maybe just watch some tv until dinner time, do my exercises, then get ready for bed. I have been sleeping a lot, and the doctors kept telling me that was a good thing, since it would help my body heal, but I still need to move and get stuff done.”
Dad nodded in agreement and, changing the subject yet again, asked, “Spaghetti and meatballs sound okay?”

I smiled, “After having to eat bland hospital food, it sounds heavenly.”

He got up, handed me the tv remote and headed into the kitchen to start dinner. It may have only been 4 o’clock in the afternoon, but an early dinner and bedtime sounded good to me.
After dinner, I slowly and carefully made my way up the stairs. I had already decided to stay in my bedroom, and I would be using my need to climb the stairs several times a day as just another form of exercise. I got myself ready for bed, using the grippers and other tools that I had been given while in the hospital to be as independent as possible. I knew that I would need a lot of help from my dad, but I wanted to prove to myself that those bitches hadn’t beaten me, that I might be slow and in pain, but I would never give up. They hadn’t managed to break me over the last 18 months, and I wouldn’t let them do it now.

Getting to sleep however was another matter. Without the activity of other people to distract me, without the subtle noises of the hospital, the odd sounds, sensations and images, were harder to ignore. Although images wasn’t the right word, they were more like flashes of light and motion, than actual pictures. Ever since I had woken up in the hospital, I had been having these weird sensations. At first, I thought that I had gone crazy while in the locker, but one of the doctors had explained that I wasn’t insane, and that it was probably a side effect of the infections I had had, and that they should fade in a couple of weeks or months. Until then, I had some sleeping pills that had been prescribed for me, but I rarely took them, since they not only made me feel groggy the next day, it felt like using them would be giving into my weakness.

When I woke up the next morning, I found that dad had laid out clean clothes for me on the foot of my bed. I had to admit that, no matter how much I wanted to prove my independence, having my clothes laid out for me, along with my OT tools, made getting started in the morning much easier. Taking my time, I dressed and used the cane, instead of my walker, to get downstairs. I might ask dad to bring the walker downstairs before he left for work, so I had it if I needed it. As I reached the bottom of the stairs, the smell alone told me that dad had already started making breakfast.

After breakfast, I helped dad make lunch ahead of time, sitting at the table, making him sandwiches and dishing up some fruit salad for him into a Tupperware container. After finishing his, I went ahead and made some up for me, and wrapped them up separately so I could just grab one for a snack if I got hungry in between meals.

As he got ready to head off to work, I picked out a couple of books to read and two empty notebooks that I figured I could use to start making some plans. Plans and lists of what I wanted and needed to continue my schooling, only without going back to that hell-hole. Dad got everything I needed and staged it in the living room on the table next to the sofa, including a blanket and pillow in case I felt like taking a nap.
I started by listing what I had to work with, as well as where I wanted to go, especially as regards my education.

**Assets** – pretty limited, we had hardly any money, and whatever savings we had were probably going to have to be used to pay for my hospital stay and all of the meds that I still needed to take. I couldn’t even get to the library by myself to use the computers and internet or to do research. Mom and dad’s college text books and references. Which covered quite a bit, although it was mostly out of date.

**Goals** – getting my GED. Prepping for college. Maybe taking some AP exams. Getting a job that can help pay the bills. The Dock Workers Association didn’t bring in a lot of money, but I couldn’t see dad working anywhere else, as bad as things were here, Brocton Bay was home. This is where he and mom met, fallen in love, gotten married, where I was born, this is where mom was buried. I don’t think anything would make him want to leave. And honestly, this was my home too, as bad as it was, I still loved it.

**Needs** – a computer w/internet access. School books, maybe from the library? Getting strong enough to walk to the bus stop and go to the library and back on my own. Learn to drive? Job skills? I was pretty good with computers, but nowhere near good enough to properly earn a living as a programmer and there was no way I could risk anything even marginally illegal. I was a decent typist, or at least I used to be, but after everything… I really wasn’t sure if I was still good enough to actually make a living. I did know some basic programming, so maybe I could get some books from the library and teach myself?

**Resources** – limited. Me, dad, maybe some of his friends from the DWA. Maybe the school could be shamed into providing an old pc and some text books. Probably not though, given everything they had done so far, and what dad had said about those papers they wanted me to sign, they were more likely to just continue to stonewall and ignore me. After all it’s all they had done since I started there.

I stopped around 1 o’clock for some lunch but instead of starting on my lists again I just took a short nap. Which ended up lasting until dad got home around 6:30, bringing with him a couple of pizzas, breadsticks and some soda. We talked about our days and I asked him to bring me to the library tomorrow at lunch time so I could look into the homeschooling requirements for New Hampshire and Brockton Bay, and start some research on what was available to help people with severe handicaps like me. Because, God knows that those bitches had really handicapped me. Maybe I could qualify for Social Security benefits? Medicare? I didn’t know, but hopefully I could find out in the library.

We quickly settled into a routine, on Mondays at lunchtime, dad would take me to the library
closest to home, I would either return any books I was finished with, renew them if I needed to and then start in on my internet research. After being home for two weeks, I felt strong enough to spend the afternoon there, so Dad would drop me off with some snacks and then pick me up after work.

As I had expected, the school refused to do anything to help, not even loaning me any text books or allowing me to use the school library for research. Not that I actually wanted to go back to that school for any reason, but it was like they were bending over backwards to be non-cooperative. It didn’t make any sense to me; even if we couldn’t afford to sue them, I know that the BB Police Department was investigating, one of the doctor’s had been talking about it outside my room. It was very strange though, no one would tell me if they were pressing charges or investigating, and truthfully I felt so bad that it was hard to force myself to care about it. I was struggling just working on daily life and my education.

Every other Thursday, dad would pack me a big lunch with several snacks and drinks, and drop me off at the Central Library where I could take advantage of the better internet access and computers. One of the research librarians apparently knew Mrs. Knott, and had actually heard about the locker incident, so she helped me fill out all of the forms that I needed, as well as organizing my medical records, to apply for Social Security benefits and Medicare, in my own name rather than dad’s, because she thought that it would go through the approval process faster. She ordered different text books for me, on long term loan, so I could keep them for 3 months at a time, and prepare to take the AP exams. She also introduced me to one of the ROTC instructors from the college who proctored these special college exams, that could get me anywhere from 1 to 6 credits towards my BS. The only hold up was that I needed to complete my GED and SAT’s first, and then be enrolled in an Accredited program of study.

I didn’t consider that to be an issue, not since I had found that, by NOT attending Winslow, and being away from those bitches, I was learning much faster and retaining what I learned much better. The state Dept of Ed had online tests that I could take from the library computers that covered almost every High School course offered within the state, and those tests clearly showed that I was mastering the material much faster than I had been at Winslow. I guess that showed the value of the education provided by that fine institution. Note the sarcasm, please.

One Tuesday, about a month after I got out of the hospital, dad came home shortly after I had eaten lunch and brought in 4 large boxes, that turned out to be filled with a relatively new pc (only 2 years old!), a flat screen monitor and laser printer, as well as all the cables and other accessories. The last box was printer paper, toner cartridges and over 2 dozen books on computers and programming languages. College level and professional books, not high school text books.

I looked up at dad and asked, “Dad, where did you get this from? How can we afford it?”

He looked back and said, “I didn't do anything illegal to get this, this is a gift from Mrs. Knott. She said that she used some grant money she got from a foundation that helps disabled children to get all of this for you. She said that she wished she could do more but that she was legally prevented from doing or saying anything more.” He shook his head and added, “She looked really pissed
when she said that, like someone was putting a lot of pressure on her to force her to cooperate. And that this was the only thing she could do to try and support you.”

At this I just started to cry, the very thought that someone other than dad actually cared about me, wasn’t treating me like I was less than garbage was stunning; so he grabbed ahold of me and made me sit down next to him on the sofa and held me while I just cried and cried at the thought that someone really cared. After what felt like forever, but was probably only twenty minutes or so, he cleared off his desk completely, moving his files and records into a couple of boxes to take upstairs and then the two of us began putting the system together.

After we were done with that, we started putting all of the books on the shelves next to his desk, which was now my desk apparently. I also organized my text books as well, keeping all the books from the library together, as I finished that, dad started handing me the books from Mrs. Knott which included a binder filled with the installed software, all of the needed documentation, including the bills of sale. Which turned out to total more than I had realized. A lot more.

I took a few minutes to hand write a heartfelt thank you note to Mrs. Knott, although I was careful to not actually say what she had done for me, since I was afraid of getting her in trouble. I tried not to get any tears on the notepaper as I thanked her for being the only person other than my dad who seemed to even care if I was alive. I checked the phone book and found only one Knott, Gladys listed so I mailed it to her home address. I was afraid if I sent it her at Winslow, I would get her into trouble. As I stamped the envelope, I realized that I was becoming more and more paranoid as time went on, though I refused to give into it anymore than I gave into my pain and disabilities.

After a dinner of a vegetarian casserole, that I had found online while at the library, I went back to the living room to try out the new system, leaving dad to do the dishes. As I booted up the system, there was a folder in the middle of the screen labeled “Open Me First” which had a list of free or reduced cost dial-up ISP’s. After checking them out, I showed them to dad and to my surprise he told me to pick whichever one of them I wanted, that as long as it cost less than $20 a month, we could afford it. Eventually, I picked out one that only cost about $16 a month, and had several local Brockton Bay access phone numbers which would keep our phone costs low and affordable. I finally forced myself to close everything down and go to bed, since both dad and I needed to get up fairly early, he to get to work, and me to do my exercises and then back to my schoolwork.
On the Thursday after getting my gift from Mrs. Knott, instead of spending the day at the library, I got up a little earlier than normal and made dad breakfast and his lunch, instead of the other way around. After the breakfast dishes were done, I dressed for the outdoors; I put on my new eyepatch, black with a silver starburst, a gray hoodie, with my new jacket over it.

I had long since decided that my appearance was just a thing, and I refused to hide myself away. I would force myself to leave the house, no matter how nervous I was, and I refused to hide my face; the hospital had given me a partial face mask, that would cover a lot of my facial scarring, but I never used it after I left the hospital, well except for when I slept. Supposedly it would help reduce the scarring, but it was so extensive that I felt it was pointless. Those bitches had done this to me, and every time I gave into my fears and insecurity, it was like they were winning again.

I went for a short walk, just around the block and then back inside, stopping once to mail the thank you note to Mrs. Knott, hoping that she would get it. Since it was still pretty cold, I made a point of dressing to stay warm, but I was still following the exercise routine I had been given, and as usual, I was still pushing myself to go a little bit farther and a little bit faster each day. And though I wasn’t really getting any faster, I was going just a little bit further. Today was the first day I felt that I could actually walk around the block by myself, which I did.

At 10:30 there was a knock at the door, which surprised me, because ever since I came back from the hospital, nobody stopped by without calling first. Getting up, I grabbed my cane and the canister of pepper spray that dad insisted I keep with me whenever I left the house, or answered the door, even if it was just to get the mail or to pay for the pizza delivery.

I hoped it would be the supplies dad had ordered for me; most of my studies were right out of the book, or online at the library, but I needed to do actual labs for my chemistry class, and without any support from the school system …?

Dad still had some of his supplies from college, but we had needed to order replacements and supplies enough so that he could set up a small chem lab for me. It wasn’t going to be much, but his friends from work had already found a steel table and vent hood out of the kitchen on one of the smaller ships in the Graveyard. A little late-night salvage and a few hours of work, paid for with some beer and pizza, had gotten everything set up last weekend.

I also wondered if I could get some assistance from the same foundation that Mrs. Knott had used to pay for my new computer system; if so, it could be a big help paying for supplies for my chemistry class, and perhaps my physics class as well?

I unlocked the deadbolt, but left the chain on. To my surprise, it wasn’t my chemistry supplies, but something completely unexpected.

Standing on my front porch was Armsmaster, with Miss Militia standing off to one side!
I stared at them for a moment in disbelief then checked out the street and surrounding houses, but the only thing that seemed out of place was the white van, with the PRT logo on the door.

“Um… Can I help you?” I asked uncertainly, keeping the door on the chain, not opening it fully, and keeping most of my body hidden from sight.


“Yes, I am. Can I help you?” I asked again.

“We would like to ask you some questions about one of your fellow students at Winslow High School…”

As soon as he mentioned Winslow I froze, then said harshly, “I don't go to Winslow. And I most certainly do not consider anyone there to be my 'fellow students'.” The two heroes exchanged odd looks at that and Armsmaster asked, “May we come in, I would rather not discuss this while standing on your porch?”

“No. Not without my dad here,” I said, as I stepped back to close the door.

Miss Militia spoke up then, “Ms. Hebert, a student at your… at Winslow was badly injured, and we are trying to determine if it was an accident, or an attack that was disguised as an accident.”

At this I paused, thinking back to all the times that those bitches had attacked me, and it got ignored or covered up as an 'accident', and wondered if they had picked a new target, since their old one had gotten away. If so, if there was even a chance that some other poor girl was beginning to be targeted, like I was; I really couldn’t just ignore it; I wouldn’t just look away like everyone else did, when I was their target.

Finally, I decided to let them in so that they could ask their questions; and maybe if those bitches had picked a new victim, I could at least try to warn these two about the Trio, let them know just how dangerous and insidious they were. Who knows, maybe the ‘heroes’ would do the right thing, unlike the school?

“Come on in, then,” I gestured them into the living room and pointed to the kitchen table; after they entered I closed and locked the front door again. “Have a seat at the table. Would you like some juice or water to drink?” I asked, trying to be polite, as I slowly limped into the kitchen, still sore and tired from my morning walk.

Armsmaster just shook his head no, while Miss Militia said, “Some juice if you don't mind?” I think Miss Militia was surprised at my appearance, because I was wearing a short sleeve shirt in the house, my arm and hand scars as well as my facial scars were completely visible; she didn’t seem disgusted or revolted by them, but rather she just seemed a bit angry, Armsmaster just didn’t seem to notice or care about them. I couldn’t tell if he was oblivious or had just seen worse.

I grabbed two glasses from the cupboard, put them on the table and then got the pitcher of apple juice from the fridge and filled both glasses. Setting the pitcher back down on the table, I pushed one glass towards Miss Militia, then I sat down and said, “Okay, ask your questions.”

Clearing his throat, Armsmaster stated officiously, “Two days ago, a tenth grade female student was attacked, and ended up in the hospital. When the initial investigation found some rumors of bullying and suggestions that the attack may have been caused by the use of a Parahuman ability, the investigation immediately came under PRT jurisdiction.” At this point, he stopped and looked at me expectantly, after a moment of waiting he went on, “While you were attending Winslow, did
you see any signs of bullying or harassment going on?"

I stared at him in disbelief; then just asked dumbly, “What?”

Miss Militia tried to interrupt him, but he just bulled on ahead without hesitating a moment, “Did you ever see any of the students assaulted, tripped or having their belongings destroyed?”

I pushed my chair back from the table sharply and said, “Is this a sick joke? Are you seriously asking me if I witnessed any signs of bullying at Winslow? Look at me!” I held both arms outstretched, turning them over so the extensive scarring was obvious, gestured at my face, pulling my hair back and removing my eyepatch to show all of the damage. As I spoke, my voice kept rising from anger. Miss Militia reached out to grab Armstrong's shoulder, but again he ignored her and repeated his question.

I grabbed my cane and leveraged myself to my feet and gave him a disgusted look, pointed at him and said, “Don’t you dare move; wait right here, I'll be back in a minute,” with that I left the kitchen, limped up the stairs to my bedroom and got the stack of notes out of my dresser, the notes that I had made while still in that hell-hole; detailing all of the crap that those bitches had put me through, since September of last year. Four, almost five months of constant assaults, property destruction, theft, and harassment of every kind; verbal, written, electronic; with copies of the emails and text messages that had been sent to me.

When I got back to the kitchen and sat down, I tossed the two inch thick stack of papers, held together with a couple of big bulldog clips on to the table and said contemptuously, “This is only since last September, I didn't think to keep records in the beginning, because, I still had hope that the faculty would do their damn job and stop it, like they were supposed to.”

I sat there, sipping my juice, trying to calm back down from that outburst. I watched them skim through my notes and saw that although Armstrong didn't seem to even care about what he was reading, it was like what he was reading didn’t matter in the least to him; Miss Militia though, she seemed to be getting angrier as she kept reading, occasionally looking at me.

After a few minutes of watching them in silence, I realized that something was 'off' about this whole situation. Why would two of the biggest heroes in Brockton Bay come to my house to ask questions about some girl getting bullied? Finally, I couldn't restrain myself anymore and politely asked, “You know, you never did say who was attacked, nor how she was attacked? Could you please tell me who it was?”

As I asked that question, both heroes looked at each other, shook their heads and Armstrong simply said, “Due to privacy concerns, I cannot reveal the identity of a minor during an investigation.”

As he said that, I noticed that Miss Militia's power, the glowing light, was flickering faster and faster, changing into different weapons as if she was upset or angry, and searching for just the right weapon to deal with whatever was making her angry; and considering the looks she had thrown my way, I was getting the uncomfortable feeling that she was angry at ME!

The longer I watched the two of them sitting at my kitchen table, skimming through the notes that recorded my torment; the more I realized that nothing about this situation made any sense; why would two superheroes come to my house to question me about the bullying of some random schoolgirl; why didn't some police detective or a PRT investigator handle such a routine issue… unless it wasn't routine at all?

With that thought, all of my fear and paranoia, well-learned through 18 months of non-stop abuse
and watching as the people in authority, the very ones who were supposed to protect me; instead continually using their position and power to enable and protect my abusers; everything finally crystallized and I forced myself to ask the question again, fearing what the answer might be.

“Who was injured?” They didn't answer me, but I could see that Miss Militia was getting angrier; even so, I had to know, so I tried again, “Why are two ‘heroes’ questioning me about a schoolgirl getting bullied? Unless there is something special about the girl? Can't be rich or politically connected, not at Winslow, so what could it be?” I sat there trying to figure it out when Armsmaster spoke up and said, “Ms. Hebert, you do not need to know the identity of the victim. That is classified information.” Miss Militia grabbed his shoulder and shook it harshly and said, “Stop it.”

But it was too late; so many things, both large and small, came together and finally made sense; as I realized the horrible truth, “A Ward, the student who was attacked was a Ward; that's the only reason you would be here…” I paused, thinking about all of the Wards, and which one could possibly be at Winslow; then I realized that only one Ward matched up with anyone I knew from Winslow, and that was… “Sophia. Sophia fucking Hess. That's why you're here,” looking across the table at the ‘heroes’, I saw that Miss Militia's power had stopped cycling and was now manifested as a large pistol holstered at her hip.

Armsmaster spoke up yet again, “Ms. Hebert I am afraid that is classified information and I now have no choice …”

At that I lost it. Completely. They're going to kill me, kill me to protect Sophia Hess; no big deal, such a simple thing, to protect Sophia at all costs, just like always! I threw myself out of my chair in terror, and scrabbled backwards across the kitchen floor until I was in the corner, trapped again, the locker all over again!; braced up against the cupboards screaming and pleading, “NO! NOO! LET ME OUT! PLEEAASE! PLEEAASSE NOOOO!”

When they got up and came towards me, I tried one last time to get away, flailing at the cupboard doors, trying desperately to open one, perhaps hoping to hide inside, until finally one of the doors was knocked open, but before I could do anything, to escape or run, or anything; it felt like I got hit in the chest by a big hammer… and then blackness.

-------------------------Legion*** Miss Militia ***Legion-------------------------

I tried to stop Colin, but it was too late; the girl had realized that the injured student was a Ward, and given even the little I had read from that stack of notes, Ms. Hebert had jumped to the wrong conclusion and thought that they had come to cover up Shadow Stalker's misdeeds. And based on the looks she has been giving my power as it shifted, she probably thought that I was here to kill her to stop her from talking. As Taylor fell to the floor and tried to crawl away, her face pale and sweating in obvious terror and panic, I reached for my phone to call for an ambulance, than her eyes rolled back in her head and …

Destination.

Agreement.
…I pulled myself up off the floor, with that vision still in my head as I stared at the young girl, who if I was right had just triggered, right in the middle of having a heart attack. I looked over at Colin as he tried to turn over, “Colin, call for an ambulance. I think she’s having a heart attack!”

“No, she triggered. Not a heart attack,” he mumbled as he struggled to get to his feet.

“Call for an ambulance, damnit!” I yelled as I placed her on her back, checked her for a pulse and breathing; finding neither I started CPR. While I tried to keep the poor girl alive, Armsmaster finally called for an ambulance, telling them to be ready for a young female cardiac patient. Once he had done that, he called the PRT trooper in and had him seal off the house and direct the paramedics inside when they arrived.

Coming back inside, he watched for a moment and then asked if I wanted to trade off yet. Shaking my head, I said, “Not yet. For now, make copies of all of her notes. I don't want them to 'disappear' like it seems most of her other complaints have.”

He nodded and started paging through the stack, capturing an image of both the front and back of each page, occasionally cursing at some of the things he read. When he finished he restacked the notes neatly, and said, “I sent a copy to both your Protectorate and your private email. I don't know how Shadow Stalker got away with this shit for so long, but I can't imagine she didn't have help from someone. Someone else has been making sure no reports made it up the chain, and that someone is going down, hard.”

Finally, after almost 6 minutes, her heart started beating on its own; fast and weak, but beating. I continued with the rescue breathing, checking regularly to ensure her heart kept going on its own, until, at last the paramedics arrived and took over, giving her oxygen and using a breathing bag to force air into her. They finished prepping her for transport and placed her in the Rescue and left to
take her to Brockton Bay General Hospital.

Armsmaster picked up the knocked over chairs and put the pitcher of juice away and then grabbed the stack of papers to use as evidence against Shadow Stalker and the school. As we started to leave, a FedEx truck pulled up to the curb and the driver got out and after a moment of staring at us in surprise, picked up his clipboard and approached us.

Diffridently, he asked, “Sir, Ma’am, I have some packages for a Mr. D. Hebert, or a Miss T. Hebert,” he looked at the Rescue that was just leaving, then went on, “Was that them? And should I leave the packages with you, since…” he glanced at the where the Rescue had been again, “well, someone has to sign for them, and…?”

Armsmaster started to shake his head no, but I spoke up first, “Certainly, I’ll sign for them, just bring them into the living room, please,” I held the front door open for him and pointed to where I wanted them left. He brought in four, fairly large, packages marked FRAGILE, that I signed for.

After he left, Armsmaster checked the shipper’s address and attached invoice, on his way out of the house. “Hmmm. That’s a bit suspicious. I wonder what she is planning to do with these chemical supplies? You could create some rather dangerous chemical weapons or explosives with this material; I suppose I’ll have to get a warrant to confiscate them,” he mused.

I had looked over the delivered materials, but I had also seen the books on her shelves and desk. She was clearly studying so she could complete high school or get her GED. At his comment I just shook my head and interjected, “Colin, don’t be an idiot. She’s homeschooling herself; those supplies are needed to complete her lab assignments. Not make bombs or poisons. Just leave them here, you have neither the authority or cause to do anything with them. We can lock up the house as we leave, so let’s go.”

After a moment, he agreed and used one of his many tools to lock the deadbolt as we left. When we had started back for the PRT building, he shook his head and said, “You’re right, she’s just a kid. I originally had thought that perhaps she had Triggered during the Locker Incident back in January, and had used her powers to get back at one of her abusers. But everything she said makes it apparent that she was just trying to put it all behind her and get on with her life; not to get revenge. And we both know now that she didn’t Trigger last month and she didn’t use her nonexistent powers to attack Shadow Stalker, despite her accusations.”

I laughed mirthlessly, “True, given that she actually triggered in front of us; that kind of points the finger at just who has been using their Parahuman abilities to attack whom.”

“Director Piggot will not be happy with this report. I am going to recommend immediate incarceration during the investigation. With her history, and given some of the incidents described in these notes, she is almost certain to attempt to flee. Not to mention that someone in the PRT has been covering for her actions; and either coercing or assisting the school officials to do so as well.”

He paused and then went on, “The police will need to be read in as part of the investigation, to handle the civilians, and this will be a mess to coordinate. Deputy Director Renick will probably end up running all of it. Making sure that Ms. Hebert stays safe and is properly compensated during all this will be no small task, either.”

I nodded my agreement, and thought about what we could do about Ms. Hebert, and what we owed her because we had failed in our responsibility to keep a sociopathic Ward under control. Eventually I just said, “Drop me off at the hospital, I’ll make sure that she is getting proper treatment as well as keeping you informed. You’ll have to report all of this to both the Director and the Deputy Director; but try to get her Triggering classified if possible, alright?”
“I’ll try, but why do you want to do that, in addition to the normal classification?”

“To prevent any attempts at recruiting; Director Piggot can sometimes be heavy-handed about recruiting newly triggered capes; and after everything Ms. Hebert has gone through, I can’t see her wanting anything to do with the PRT at this time. Better to leave her in peace, and let any contact with the Wards or PRT come from her end, not ours.”

He nodded thoughtfully and said, “I agree and I’ll do my best with that; let’s go.”
When Armsmaster pulled to a stop outside the main entrance of the hospital, I started to open the door but paused, “Armsmaster, something just occurred to me, I will need to inform Ms. Hebert’s attending physician that she has Triggered. I intend to use the standard Ward/Minor NDA that all of the doctors have signed to cover her status as a Parahuman. If you are successful in getting her status classified, please have a standard package prepared and delivered to me here so that I can get her properly protected.”

He nodded and said, “Not a problem; even if it isn’t classified, I will have NDA’s prepared that cover her specifically. Less chance of a mistake happening.”

“Thank you,” I said as I closed the van door, and headed into the hospital proper.

Walking up to the Information Desk, I greeted the elderly woman sitting there, “Good morning, I am Miss Militia, could you please tell me where Ms. Taylor Hebert is? She would have been brought in by Rescue not long ago, she had suffered a heart attack, but there may have been further complications, as she was released from here not long ago.”

The woman smiled, typed at her computer for a few moments, then looked up and said, “She has already been transferred to ICU, but you will not be able to speak with her; her attending has placed her in isolation.”

“I understand,” I replied. “Could you tell me her doctor’s name please?”

“Dr. Smythe is her attending, and as far as I know he is currently in the ICU,” she replied.

“Thank you,” I said as I turned and headed towards the elevator.
Taking the elevator to the third floor, I followed a path that I was all too familiar with, having had to visit far too many times when dealing with the aftermath of gang warfare and Cape fights. Stopping just inside the entrance to the ICU, I spoke to the nurse who was currently working there. “Is Dr. Smythe available to speak with me about Ms. Hebert?”

She smiled at me, recognizing me from previous visits, she said, “Not yet, he is still in the room with her. I do have authorization to tell you that at this time, her heart is working on its own, but we are closely monitoring it,” she pointed at one of the bank of multi-function monitors, with Hebert written on medical tape stuck on the base of the monitor, “she has spiked a high fever, apparently from her earlier infections. They are setting up a full set of monitoring equipment, and have already sent a lot of bloodwork off to the lab. Beyond that, you'll have to wait for the Doctor, which shouldn’t take more than 15-20 minutes, so if you’d like a seat,” she nodded at a chair behind the counter with her, “we have coffee, tea and other drinks in the break room behind me, as well.”

“Thank you, I’ll have some tea, can I get anything for you?” I asked her as I came around the end of the counter.

“No thanks, I just got a refill,” she said as she lifted her mug.

Taking a seat, I sipped my tea and did some work on my PRT phone as I waited. It ended up being closer to 30 minutes than 15 before Dr. Smythe was free to speak with me.

“Miss Militia, nice to see you again, I really wish it was under better circumstances, though. I will need to get back to her as soon as some of the test come back. I only have the barest history on her right now, her record has been locked by her previous attending, Dr. Penday. He is on his way in to give me access and has given me a verbal history over the phone, but if you could tell me what happened this morning, it would help.”

“Certainly, I assume the EMT’s told you that I was the First Responder, correct?” He nodded agreement, so I continued, “Armsmaster and I were asking her some questions about a case we are investigating, strictly background only, she was being asked for background information on a person of interest, after a few minutes, she seemed to have either a terror-driven flashback or some sort of PTSD episode, I don’t know for sure, and then she had her heart attack. Unfortunately, at that point she also Triggered.”

He covered his face with his free hand and said, “Oh dear, that may complicate things,” he looked back at me and asked, “Do you have any idea what powerset she has? If not, were you able to get any idea what she was afraid of? Depending on her powerset, it may have a significant effect on her treatment.”
I nodded my understanding and said, “Just to be sure, you know that she is covered under the Ward/Minor NDA, correct?”

“Of course, not a problem,” he replied.

“Very well, just before she collapsed, she was screaming, No, please let me out, No. In my opinion, she was utterly terrified; literally frightened to death. It took me just over 6 minutes of chest compressions to restart her heart, but I continued rescue breathing until the paramedics arrived and could take over. That was approximately 17 minutes, all told. I don’t know when she began breathing on her own, though,” I explained.

He frowned and said, “She didn’t, she is on a respirator right now, though her heart seems to be responding well to treatment. I have put in a consult with Infectious Disease, because I fear that the infections she had during her last visit have not really responded well to her antibiotics, and may need radical treatment; I am currently using some very powerful, broad spectrum antibiotics until I get her test results back.”

I nodded and asked, “Has her father been notified by the hospital yet, that she has been admitted?”

He shook his head and explained, “No, not until I give permission; I very much want to see her chart and history from her previous visit to ensure that I don’t either miss something or duplicate efforts. Hopefully I will be able to have him contacted by 2:00 pm so that he can see her, although I have had her placed in the isolation room. Partly for the infections, but also so we have the room and equipment to handle any problems that may come up.”

I asked him, “Would you mind if I contact him personally? I have his work address and phone number and think it might be best if I bring him here myself. Less chance of a worry-driven accident, since he is a widower and Taylor is an only child.” I was glad for my eidetic memory at times like this, letting me see a possible issue so that I could act to deal with it in advance.

“No, not at all. I’ll leave orders that he be allowed to decon here and be provided assistance to get properly masked and gowned, getting into the room is dependent on her new tests, and my reading of her old chart, though,” he assured me.

I thanked him for his help and left the ICU so that I could speak with the Director about Ms. Hebert’s condition.
Taking out my phone, once I was in an empty waiting room, “Director Piggot, this is Miss Militia calling from Brockton Bay General.”

“Yes, Miss Militia, how is Ms. Hebert doing?”

“Marginal, Ma’am. Her heart is stable at this time, but she never began breathing on her own and is on a respirator. In addition, it seems that the infections that she developed while she had been left in that locker are not responding very well to antibiotics. Her attending has already requested a consult with Infectious Disease to help with dealing with multiple infections. He hasn’t provided a prognosis yet, and won’t until all of her test results come back and he gets his consult with ID. Personally, I am concerned that she may not fully recover on her own.”

“Why is that?”

“The doctor has been informed that she Triggered, but very few doctors understand just how much that can complicate things. I think they may be underestimating just how bad off she is and may become. I would like to put in a priority request for Panacea’s assistance, if I may.”

“Hmm. Perhaps you're right. I believe she has just returned from dealing with the Canberra aftermath, so I’ll send the request to New Wave for her assistance with Ms. Hebert.” She paused for a moment, clearly typing something on her computer, then continued, “Very well, the request has been sent, hopefully she will get back to us soon and I have listed you as the Point of Contact for Ms. Hebert. Will there be anything else?”

“Yes, has the PRT notified her father that she has been taken to the hospital?” I asked her.

“I know that we have not as yet, however it is possible that the hospital has done so. Why do you ask, do you wish to contact him personally?” The Director asked, clearly unsure if that was a good idea.

“Yes I do, since I was there when she had her heart attack, and was her First Responder, it would also probably help that I could not only inform him of what happened, but how she is doing now, as I just got an update from her doctor. In addition, I am concerned that if he is informed by phone, he may not be able to drive to the hospital safely, as Taylor is his only remaining family,” I explained, hoping that she would accept this as a valid reason. After almost a full minute, the Director finally replied, “Very well, I do agree that, on top of everything else, he may be distraught from worry. I have also classified her Trigger, at Armsmaster’s request, in addition, please keep in mind that while Shadow Stalker is currently under arrest, her actions are still under investigation and that the final disposition of her case is still pending. Though even with just a quick look at Ms.
Hebert's notes of the last 6 months leaves me little doubt of the final decision. One way or another, Shadow Stalker is gone from the Wards.”

After hanging up, I sought out Dr. Smythe to let him know my plans, “Has there been any changes in Ms. Hebert’s condition, I will be going to speak with her father personally, and plan on bringing him back with me.”

As I turned to leave, I spotted a PRT agent, with a thick folder in his hand, heading directly for me. I turned back and said, “One moment, Dr. Smythe, I suspect the new NDA’s are here.”

As I had hoped, they were in fact the NDA’s covering Ms. Hebert, personally. I had the agent wait while everyone currently on staff read and signed their forms. I took the extra forms and had the nurse put them in a locked cabinet drawer, and had her put a note in the ICU system so that anyone who worked on Ms. Hebert should sign one of the forms. The signed forms were returned to the agent to be filed in headquarters.

Once he had his forms, I gave him his new orders, “Trooper Davis, you and I will be returning to HQ, then I will be using your sedan to pick someone up and bring him to the hospital. Afterwards, I will be returning the sedan to the motorpool, so be sure to note the mileage when we get there. It’ll help keep the paperwork straight.”

“Yes, ma’am. As you say, ma’am,” he said, as he came to attention, rather than saluting me.

I parked outside of the office of the local Dock Worker's Association, which was actually located on the waterfront. This was the only part of the Docks that appeared to be in good shape, the roads were clear and in good repair, the dockside crane that I had passed was working at unloading a small freighter, that probably only handled short hauls, just in the northeast. All of the nearby buildings were neatly painted with no missing windows or obvious damage and I could see what looked like a machine shop or garage that had men working in it, as well as loading a truck. I hoped it was legitimate work, but I certainly wasn’t going to check. Although I suspect Armsmaster would have. As I walked towards the office, I looked around, but couldn’t see any gang tags. Clearly, even without steady work, the men who worked around here took care of the area, and had a lot of pride.

I stepped into the building, and all of the conversations and movement stopped. I cleared my throat and asked for directions to Mr. Hebert's office. As I spoke, a thin balding man stepped out of one of the offices and said, “I'm Danny Hebert, how can I help you Miss Militia?”
“Mr. Hebert, I’m sorry but there is no easy way to say this, but your daughter Taylor is at Brockton Bay General Hospital. She had a heart attack this morning and we had her taken to the hospital immediately.” As I spoke I watched Mr. Hebert turn pale, but then he steadied himself with a single deep breath.

“She had a heart attack? How in the world…? Sorry, never mind that. Dave, I have to go see Taylor, everything is pretty well handled except I was waiting on two contracts from Boston; can you handle those for me? Everything else can wait until tomorrow or whenever I get back.”

The tall, very well built black man said, “Sure, Danny, just go take care of Taylor; I got this.”

I was impressed at his self-control, as well as his faith in his friends and co-workers, but I spoke up to offer my help, “Mr. Hebert, if you would like, I can drive you to the hospital and bring you back later. I will explain what I know about your daughter’s condition and care, while I drive.”

He studied me for a few seconds, then separated his car keys from his key-ring “Thank you, I appreciate this very much,” turning, he tossed his car keys to one of his other friends. “Kurt, have one of the boys put it in the garage when you close up for the night. I’ll either get it tonight or more likely pick it up in the morning.” He then gestured for me to lead the way to his car.

Heading out to the parking lot, I lead the way to the PRT sedan that I had borrowed from the trooper earlier, I unlocked it, we both got in and headed towards the hospital. I had the lights flashing, though I kept the siren off, I also used the Expediter, which ensured that all of the traffic lights worked in my favor.

After a few minutes, he finally asked, “I’m sorry, but I just don’t understand how the Protectorate could possibly be involved with my daughter, I mean, I’m glad you were there to help her and call an ambulance, but…Why were you speaking to my daughter in the first place?”

I glanced at him for a second as I carefully wove through the lunch-time traffic at a high rate of speed, and then said, “Please understand that everything I will be discussing with you is classified because it concerns an ongoing investigation, and some of the People Of Interest are minors, which strictly limits what I can disclose to you. Alright?”

He nodded in agreement, and said, “Yes, I understand. Please explain what you can.”

“Armsmaster and I are investigating a number of things concerning Winslow High School,” I glanced at him, and could see that he was angry, not that I blamed him. “and yes, your daughter’s assault in January is part of the investigation, it’s just not the only part; we were asking her
questions about Winslow in general, not about her situation specifically, when she had what I suspect was a flashback to when she was attacked. I am so sorry, but she appeared to be terrified, when she collapsed and had her heart attack. I began CPR while Armsmaster called for a Rescue, specifying that it was for a cardiac patient. I continued CPR until her heart started beating on its own and the EMT’s arrived and took her to the hospital.”

“I followed her to the hospital and spoke with her doctor, once they had her stabilized in the ICU. I was told that she was on a respirator, and that they were monitoring her very closely. They had also started a broad-spectrum antibiotic regimen to help deal with some infections. Beyond that I am afraid that you will need to speak to her doctor, Dr. Smythe. I will introduce you to him once we get there. Now, I will try to answer any of your questions to the best of my ability.’’

Danny nodded slowly, and was clearly thinking very deeply about his daughter’s situation, but didn’t say anything to me until we pulled up at the hospital, and even then all he said was, “After I see to Taylor, and speak with her doctor, I would like to talk to you some more about the meeting you had with my daughter, alright?’’

I winced inside at the thought of just how badly that conversation might go, looked at him and nodded, “Not a problem, whenever you’re ready to ask your questions, I’ll be there to answer them.”
The next morning was difficult, my meeting with Mr. Hebert was very uncomfortable, because I felt quite guilty for being a part of the reason that Ms. Hebert had her heart attack, Triggered and was now in the ICU. I also felt guilty because I couldn’t tell him about his daughter’s Trigger, even though classifying it had been something that I had recommended.

However, it would have been just wrong to tell her father about her Trigger before she even knew about it herself; to do so would have been a profound betrayal of a very nice young woman. A young woman that I was finding to be quite remarkable and special. It was clear that she had tried over and over to get the school to help her, to do the job that they were supposed to be doing, but she never stepped over the line or struck back at them.

She resisted, she endured, I couldn’t even count how many times she did exactly what as adults we constantly asked our children to do, to trust us, the adults, to ask them for help; but she never did the one thing that would have stopped the bullying campaign in its tracks. She never complained to or asked for help from the local chapter of the E88 to stop Sophia Hess.

Neither did she bring a gun or knife to school and attack her abusers or betrayers.

The one good thing I had to look forward too, was the looks on the faces of people like the principal and most of her teachers, when the arrest warrants were finally served; even though it might take another 2 or 3 months. As far as I could tell, only one of them had tried to help her, and it looked like she was either being blackmailed or outright threatened to keep her silent and helpless. Though I suspect that wasn’t working out as well as they hoped, because we had some very interesting emails and voice recordings that had appeared in my private email account. So far, neither Armsmaster or Kid Win had managed to track the origin of the tips and evidence. And I had convinced Dragon to not let anyone know who it was until the warrants were ready to be served; she agreed unless it was necessary to protect the source.

Even more tiring was late night training patrol with Kid Win. It was very fruitful; he was coming along very well; he was starting to feel more confident in his Tinkering as well as in being a superhero. It was looking like he would be ready to patrol with only one other Ward soon, which meant changing the patrol schedules. Again. Even though I no longer needed to sleep, I still needed
I stopped by the hospital to check on Ms. Hebert’s condition around 8 o’clock. When I checked in with the ICU, I found that I had to wait until Dr. Smythe had finished his morning rounds. When he finally had a free moment, I found him to be very concerned for her.

Contrary to his initial hopes; her condition had seriously deteriorated over night; she had slipped into a coma, and her infections were not responding well to any of the antibiotics he had tried. Apparently her injuries left over from her previous stay in the hospital had not healed as well as expected, and were being aggravated by either her heart attack or her Trigger event. Or both.

He knew that she had Triggered the day before, though he hadn’t seen any indications of just how her parahuman ability was going to manifest, but he suspected that her coma might not be medically caused, but was due to her trigger. If that was the case, he feared that he would be unable to do more than provide life support for her and hope that she could recover on her own.

I doubted she would heal on her own; if she had not shown any regeneration or enhanced healing by this time, she probably never would.

I could only hope that Panacea's help would turn the tide for her. Unfortunately, when I asked the Dr. Smythe if she had been by, he explained that the hospital had been notified that Panacea had been removed from healing for one week by her mother, Brandish, after returning from Canberra, and that they were not allowed to contact her for any reason; that she would need some time to recover from her efforts to help in Australia.

Hearing this, I was puzzled; normally if Panacea was going to be unavailable for any length of time, New Wave made a point of letting the PRT know so that we could make arrangements for assistance from some of the other healers available, both Protectorate and independent.

In addition, when I had last spoken to Panacea, by phone last week during her efforts in the recovery after the Canberra fight, she had seemed to be fine and was expecting to be home soon, Wednesday in fact, and should have been back to her normal routine by today. I sent an email to Legend, hoping to find out if anything had happened to Panacea since I had spoken with her, and asking if he could call me directly.

Less than an hour later, he called me back. “Ms. Militia, how can I help you?”
"I had submitted a priority request for Panacea's aid with a young girl who was severely injured due to the actions of a parahuman last month. Yesterday, she triggered while having a massive heart attack, and today she is in a coma, with most of her major systems failing. Her doctor believes that without expert Parahuman healing she will die within the week. Brandish has forbidden Panacea to perform any healing, apparently in response to something that happened in Canberra, and I wanted to know if I should continue request her help, or if I should try to get another healer in to help her?"

Legend’s response was thoughtful, “When I spoke with Panacea Wednesday, before she was brought back to Brockton Bay, she gave me no indication of any problems; she was a bit tired, but seemed pretty happy. I thought she would just need a good night’s sleep to be fully recovered. If you would like I can speak with New Wave personally, and see if there is anything wrong?”

I thought about it for a moment, then replied, “No, I will try speak with Brandish personally, but if I have no luck I may need you to intervene. Hopefully not.”

“Well, let me know how it goes. And good luck.”

“Thank you.” I had a feeling I was going to need it.

An hour later I was quite frustrated and beginning to get angry. Mrs. Dallon had not taken my calls, refused to answer my emails or text messages, and the rest of New Wave, when I reached them, were of little help, simply saying that Brandish felt that Panacea was becoming over-worked and need some time off, and that I should take any problems up directly with Brandish. Even emails and calls directly to Panacea were being blocked. It was as if I or the PRT had directly insulted Panacea, and Brandish was trying to protect her from us, but no one on my end had a clue what was going on, just that New Wave wasn’t talking about Panacea.

Finally, in desperation, I left my office in the PRT building and entered the Ward's complex and sought out Gallant, who had monitor duty that morning. “Good morning, Gallant.”

“Good morning, Miss Militia, how can I help you today?” He had obviously spotted my urgency even as I approached.

“Do you think you could contact Glory Girl and have her give me a call?”
“Certainly,” he paused, and then asked me, “is it an emergency?”

“An emergency, no. It is however rather urgent, so…” I gestured for him to stand up and I took over the monitoring Console while he stepped away to send a quick text message to his girlfriend.

After a moment he came back and said, “It’s lunch time at Arcadia, so she should get my text right away. I gave her your number and asked that she call you right away.” He looked anxiously at me and asked, “That’s ok, right?”

I smiled at him and said, “Yes it is,” just as my phone began to ring.

Stepping aside, I answered my phone, “Miss Militia, how may I help you?”

“Hi, this is Glory Girl, what's up?”

“Thank you for calling back so soon, I have been trying to get in touch with your sister, but have been unable to reach her. Is she nearby, could you put her on the phone or at least ask her to call me back?”

“Just a sec, she's getting her lunch now, so I’ll pass her the phone as soon as she… here she is,” In the background I could hear Glory Girl say, “Hey, Ames got a call for you, I think it’s important.” A few seconds later I heard Panacea's soft voice say, “Hello?”

“Panacea, this is Miss Militia. I’m sorry to contact while you’re in school, but I need your help.”

“Oh, are you injured? Or one of the Wards?”

“No, both I and the Wards are fine. Unfortunately, there is a young girl who is in desperate need of your help. She suffered some serious and crippling injuries several weeks ago due to a vicious attack by a Cape. Yesterday, however, she suffered a relapse. Armsmaster had been asking her some questions when she had a panic attack and suffered a heart attack; during which she also Triggered.”
“That’s not good. Where is she now?” She asked sharply.

“Brockton Bay General Hospital. I can provide transportation for…”

“Wait a moment please, Vicky can you give me a lift to Brockton Bay General?”

“Now? Can it wait ‘til after school?”

“Probably not. Can it wait Miss Militia?”

“Truthfully, I don't think so.”

“Alright, I'll have my sister drop me off as soon as we can get there. Main entrance right?”

“Yes. Her name is Taylor Hebert and she is in the ICU now.”

“Fine, I will expect you to give me a full explanation about just what Armsmaster was doing to frighten someone into a heart attack and Trigger, once I have had a chance to take a look at her.”

Before I could reply, Panacea had hung up. Looking at the phone for a moment in surprise at how brusque she had been, I thought, That was rather harsh, definitely out of character for her.

“Thank you for your help, Gallant.” Handing him his phone, I went on, “Please log me as out of the building and in to Brockton Bay General Hospital, until further notice.” I then checked out a sedan, and left to meet up with Panacea at the hospital.
After a quick stop at the office to check out of school, letting them know that I would be at Brockton Bay General for the rest of the afternoon, I met Vicky just outside the main entrance and had her fly me directly to the hospital main door. As soon as she set me down, I took a moment to thank her before taking off for the ICU at a run.

“Thanks, Vicky. I'll give you a call later if I need a lift, but I will probably grab the bus.” I yelled back over my shoulder as I punched the up button. Getting out at the third floor, I turned into the CCU/ICU wing and stopped at the nurse’s station to ask, “Miss Militia called me in, for a Ms. Herbert? Could you tell me which room she is in?”

Nancy, the senior day nurse, smiled and corrected me, “Ms. Hebert, Taylor Hebert. She's in room 6.” At that I froze for a moment, since 6 was an isolation room that was reserved for the cases needing the most extensive life support measures as well as precautions against any contagions or infections. I had a feeling that this was going to be bad, epically bad.

“Chart please,” reaching out my hand for the ward chart, I asked, “Just how bad is she?”

Nancy shook her head and said, “Really bad. She's been having one or another organ failing every hour it seems. And a number of unidentified infections as well.”

While skimming through her chart, I asked, “Is she conscious? Can she give consent? Or is her next of kin present to give it?”

“Unless she has woken from her coma in the last 30 minutes, then no. But her father is here and has already given both verbal and written consent for Parahuman Healing.”

“Allright then, I’ll just get started,” I said as I handed the chart back and stripped off my coat and scarf as I paused at the entrance to room 6. Before I opened the door I looked in through the window, where I could see someone completely masked and gowned, who was probably Ms.
Hebert’s father, sitting next to her life support bed. I shook my head in sympathy before I dropped my stuff on the table outside the little airlock, opened the door, walked in and sealed it behind me, before entering the ICU room proper.

“Mr. Hebert? I'm Panacea; do I have your permission to treat your daughter?” As I spoke, the man I had assumed was the girl’s father jumped and then said, “Of course, Panacea. Please help her, anything that you can do… she’s all I have left, and she’s so sick now…” His voice trailed off in worry for his daughter. I smiled at the man, trying to put him at ease, but even just looking at her made it obvious that this was going to be bad. Her skin was gray, dry and cracking. Her hair seemed to be falling out of her scalp by the handful, and she was so thin that she looked like she was in the final stages of starvation. I hadn't even touched her yet and I could tell that she was dying.

Taking a deep breath, I reached out and placed my hand on her thin arm. As soon as I touched her and could see just how much damage had been done, and how much work it was going to take, just to keep her alive, much less actually heal her, I gasped and let go of her arm.

Paling, I said, “Mr. Hebert, I am going to have to ask you to step out of the room while I get started,” I turned to the nurse who had followed me into the room and said, “Please get at least three units of packed cells started stat, I will also need an subclavian feeding tube started. She is going to need a lot of nutrition while I work, but the blood will do to start with.” Mr. Hebert backed out of the room as I pulled his chair closer to the bed and sat down to begin work.

---Legion*** ***Legion---

First, the blood infections. 4 different types, with several sub-types of each. Pockets of necrotic tissue, teeming with even more infections in most of her muscles. Liver and pancreas nearly dead, one of her kidneys is dead, the other is failing. Okay, liver first, rebuild at least minimal function, left kidney first, it's in the best condition. Start regrowing the spleen and pancreas. Locate and seal the holes in the large and small intestines. Scavenge the stomach completely, regrow it later. Clear the fluid from the lungs, recycle as much of the biomass as possible, repair the worst damage to the heart, and blood vessels, repair the leaks, my god she has fistulas everywhere, seal them and absorb the blockages. The bones, the marrow is just dead, absorb it and regrow, look for other problems.

I stopped for a moment and looked up at the clock, and saw that almost an hour had passed. I was shocked that so much time had passed, while I worked so desperately to fix the worst of the damage to her body, and yet there was still so much to do. I looked around and I could see that 2 units of blood had already been transfused and the IV feeding tube was hooked up, though only saline was running at the moment.

I spoke up, startling everyone, “Good work so far, but she's a long way from being okay. This is
going to take a lot of work and time, before she’s stable. I'm gonna need some things in here to keep us both going.”

“First, I'm gonna need liquid food for me; soup, broth, milk and juice. Things that I can just drink fast and have a lot of nutrition and calories, ‘cause we are both going to need them. As for her, run the feeding tube as fast as you can, I’ll need every bit to heal and regrow her body.”

“Second, set up a bed for me next to her, I'm going to stay in this room until I’m finished healing her, her organs and systems are constantly failing and collapsing, which means I will be healing her, as well as actively keeping her systems from failing. This is going to be constant process; even as I am repairing her, I will also be maintaining her organs and systems to prevent further damage. Based on what I’ve seen so far, she's going to need the ventilator for a while yet, so don't remove it until I clear it, even if it looks like she can breathe on her own.”

“Third, I will be in constant physical contact with Ms. Hebert; even while asleep. You need to make absolutely certain that we are not separated, by anyone for any reason. To be honest, only my family is really likely to try to do so, “For my own good,” so no one is to separate us without my prior permission. Doing so is very likely to kill her, and it wouldn’t be good for me, either. While I am sleeping, I will be using my own immune system to support hers.”

“Lastly, could someone let my sister know that I will not be home today, and probably not for a couple of days. She can pass that on to the rest of my family and school. I’ll probably be another hour for the next bout of healing, so you should have time to make those arrangements for me.”

With that I shifted the chair closer to the head of the bed, laid my head down, placed my hand back on her skeletal arm and dove back into Ms. Hebert, desperately working to find and repair as much of the damage that she had suffered as I could; even as I had to keep going back to support and repair injuries that I had fixed once before. I concentrated on her internal injuries, the rest could wait. One of the biggest problems was balancing incoming nutrition with ongoing repairs, while not letting myself get so overwhelmed that I missed something from fatigue or carelessness.

As I had planned, I came back to the rest of the world after about an hour to find that another bed had been placed next to hers, and a tray with a variety of dishes, all of them liquid was waiting for me to eat. After ensuring that she would stay stable, I spent the next ten minutes eating everything on the tray. None of it was really warm, but it was all nutritious, and even sort of tasty. After that, I stripped out of my school clothes and changed into a standard hospital gown, putting my clothes in one of the little cupboards and then lay down on the open bed next to her and gently and carefully took her hand into mine.

This set the pattern for the next three days; I would heal for an hour or two, pause to eat and drink, use the bathroom if needed, and then back to work. Even while sleeping, I kept my hand in hers so
that I could synchronize our immune systems, using mine to stabilize hers, to ensure that the repairs I had completed didn’t deteriorate. Using my immune system like this was a first; I had never had a patient who needed this kind of care and support before, and I was stretched to develop new methods and techniques, that allowed me to actually sleep, or rather nap, knowing that my body would automatically maintain her, just like it automatically maintained me, without any need to concentrate on it.

This cycle continued throughout the weekend with no real changes, until early Monday morning.

“Um… Hi?”

At the sound of someone's voice, a gentle contralto voice that I didn't recognize, I turned my head on the pillow and looked, bleary eyed at the girl lying next to me who just woken up..

“Hi yourself,” I answered, as I tried to fully wake up for the first time in a couple of days, the days of near-constant healing, interspersed with very light naps, had left me a bit confused, though my confusion cleared quickly, “Did you sleep well?”

She started to answer me, but she then looked down at herself, saw that she was mostly naked, except for the tubes in her arms and other places, and the various sensors attached all over her body, and then she looked over at me, only slightly more modestly covered by a light hospital gown. “I guess so, but um… why are we in bed together? Mostly naked? And, please don't take this the wrong way, but … who are you?”

I started to giggle quietly, mostly in relief that she seemed to be okay, that her terrible injuries and illnesses did not seem to have caused her permanent impairment, “In no particular order, I'm Amy Dallon; you've been very sick; and we aren't actually in bed together, my bed is just right next to yours.”

She looked back down to where my arm was wrapped around her naked waist, and drawled, “Right, not really in bed together. Uh huh. Sure, this happens to me all the time.”

At this I started to giggle even harder, as I realized that no one who saw us like this would ever believe that this was totally innocent; and also that I really didn't care if someone walked in on us; that I didn’t actually care what anyone else thought about this; except maybe for Taylor, I really couldn’t call her Ms. Hebert after all this, since she was a part of this. Which really surprised me; normally, I was always worried about what other people thought; about me, my behavior, how
At the very least, I was always worried about what mom would think. Mostly because I could never seem to get *IT* right, whatever *IT* was? But right now I found that I simply didn’t care.

“Anyways, I’ve just spent the last three days healing all of the injuries and illnesses you were suffering from; so if you could just give me a minute, I need to check you out, alright?”

Taylor smiled at me, “What, you didn't get enough of 'checking me out' over the last three days, you still need more time? I think I've been insulted! or maybe complimented; I’m not quite sure which.”

At that I looked up again, this time in astonishment and then I turned bright red and my mouth dropped open as I realized just what I had said, and how it sounded. At least my mortification had the advantage of making her laugh, which I had to admit sounded really nice.

After a few minutes of laughing with and at each other, when we had calmed down enough so that I could let her know what I had done to her over the last few days, I decided to tease her back a little, “May I call you Taylor, I mean Ms. Hebert just sounds so formal after spending the weekend in bed together, and you may call me…” This time she was the one who turned bright red and spluttered wordlessly, while I got to laugh at her expression.

Eventually, we both managed to stop laughing, although we would regularly turn bright red and giggle as we remembered our words.

“Anyways, as I started to say, please call me Amy, and I hope that I may call you Taylor; First; I've stabilized you, while I’ve been able to eliminate the infections and the worst of your internal injuries, there is still more to do. Second; while I was healing you, I could clearly see that you had not only Triggered recently, you have had what we call a second Trigger, as well; although, I must admit that I have no idea just what your Parahuman ability might be. Third; I’ll try to answer any questions that you have, to the best of my abilities.”

After letting that settle into her mind for a few minutes, Taylor asked me, “Okay, I have a few questions to start with; what does it mean; that I had a second Trigger? How is that different from a normal Trigger?”

I nodded at her questions, and tried to answer her, one question at a time; “First, a second Trigger is extremely rare; one of the best known and most well-documented Capes with a second Trigger is the Canadian Cape, Narwhal.”
“In simple terms, a Trigger occurs when you are having what is often referred to as the ‘worst day of your life’. When you are in the most intolerable situation; drowning, caught in a building fire, helplessly watching a loved one die, completely depressed and contemplating suicide, something along those lines.” I paused to see if she was following me, then continued at her nod, “Sometimes, for some people, at that moment you may Trigger, gaining a Parahuman ability. I once heard it described as reaching into a toolbox and pulling out just the tool you need to escape or deal with your crisis.”

“It is often a power that is related to your situation, such as if you are drowning, you might gain the ability to breath water. But sometimes, it seems as if the tool you get; really doesn’t correspond to the situation. For example, if you were trapped in a fire, that instead of gaining fire powers, you may gain Hydrokinesis, the ability to manipulate water; or you might gain the ability to Teleport, so you could get away from the fire, or you might even become a Tinker.”

I stopped and watched Taylor’s face, seeing the changing expressions as she thought about the information I had just given her. At last, as her expression calmed down, I went on.

“A second Trigger is extremely rare and may occur when you are in a situation similar to your original Trigger, but one that your current powers can’t deal with. Supposedly the psychological trauma of your second Trigger is far worse than the first time. What changes is that your power evolves, becomes far more capable, or far less limited, than it used to be.”

Taylor nodded, then asked, “Is there a way to tell if someone has triggered, I mean, does their body change somehow?”

I smiled at her question and then explained, “Yes, there is. Right at the top of your brain, there are two tiny structures, the Corona Pollentia and the Gemma. These are always present in the brain of someone who has the potential to Trigger, but remain dormant until you actually Trigger. Once you do, both of the structures become active, and the difference is very obvious if seen using an MRI. If you have a second Trigger, both the Corona Pollentia and the Gemma change, growing slightly more complex, the blood vessels going to the structures also enlarge, allowing greater blood flow, and the activity levels for both structures significantly increase while using your powers. The difference between a normal Trigger and a Second Trigger is fairly obvious to me, though I suspect it is too subtle to spot using an MRI.”

“In some cases, the Trigger may also cause extreme changes to your physical body, these changes may be minor, and easily hidden or ignored, or they may be extreme, in some cases monstrous. A rude term for those unfortunates is ‘monster cape’ a more common, polite term is ‘Case 53’s.”
Taylor started to speak, paused then tried again, until finally she asked, “Do you know what Parahuman power I received? I mean, what can I do?”

I shook my head and said, “I’m sorry Taylor, but as I said earlier, I have no idea what your power is. Sometimes it’s extremely obvious how your power has manifested, but most of the time it isn’t obvious at all, until you start using them.”

She looked a little sad as I told her that, “I’m sorry that I can’t tell you what your power is right now,” I took a slow deep breath, I really didn’t want to tell her the next part, but she needed to know, “the PRT is very good at helping a newly Triggered Parahuman find out what their power is and what their limitations are. Please understand me, you do not have to go to the PRT for this or for any other reason. You do not even have to admit that you have a Parahuman ability of any kind; they can ask, but you are under no legal obligation to answer, no matter how much they might like it if you were.”

“I’m very sorry Taylor, but unlike most people who Trigger, in your case, the PRT will not suspect that you may have Triggered, they know that you have Triggered. I was told that both Armsmaster and Miss Militia were present during your Trigger event, and when that happens, when someone Triggers with another Parahuman nearby, the other Parahuman is knocked out temporarily. It’s unmistakable when this happens, and the other Parahumans present will know that Trigger Event has occurred. As members of the Protectorate, both Armsmaster and Miss Militia are legally required to report who it was that Triggered.”

Taylor paled and started to shake slightly in fear; I was still holding her, and her body’s response was obvious to me, “Taylor, come on Taylor, look at me,” I leaned towards her, drawing her attention back to me, “there you go; I’m sorry about that, but I had to tell you, I couldn’t let you get blind-sided by the PRT, I needed to make sure you knew about this. The PRT may know that you have Triggered, but you don’t have to admit anything to them; if they ask, simply ignore them, or tell them you don’t want to talk about it. Don’t lie to them, just make it clear that your Trigger and your powers are off the table.”

She bit her lip and nodded shakily, “Amy, what do I do now? I, I don’t want to hurt anyone but if I don’t know what I can do, I, I,” she stopped speaking and started to hyperventilate for a moment, but then she forced her breathing back to normal using nothing but sheer willpower and then went on, “I could do something wrong, by accident and, and then I’ll be back in, in, in the…” she started to panic again, but this time I acted first to reduce her rapidly spiking adrenal levels, smoothing out her stress just enough for her to get back in control. “… I would rather be dead than back in … there. I can’t do it again, I just can’t…” She trailed off again, but this time her tears kept coming.

I pulled myself closer to Taylor, trying to soothe her fears, I really didn’t want to use my power on her any more than I had to, but she needed my help right now, so I tried to just let her know that she wasn’t alone, that I was here for her.
After a while, half an hour, I suppose, she had calmed down enough that I felt I could ask her some questions.

“Taylor, may I ask you some questions? Questions about your original injuries, as well as your Trigger event? I’m not asking just because I’m curious, but because I think you need to talk to someone about all of this, and I’d like to help. Each time that you come near this topic, you start to panic, and I’m afraid that you might be hurt if this continues. I can find you a good psychologist, one who treats Parahumans, if you’d like; but I know what a Trigger is from personal experience so I think I might be able to relate to you and what happened to you better.

She was still shaking slightly, but she nodded and whispered, “Okay. You can ask me questions… I’ll try to answer them for you, but …” she swallowed and then reached out and weakly tried to pull me closer.

I took a few minutes to get us both rearranged so that we were on our sides, facing each other with some pillows and rolled up blankets to support Taylor, and so we were actually able to hold onto each other, before I started asking any questions, “Okay, first thing; nothing that we talk about here is going to be repeated without your permission. Second, I promise that I will never use anything that you tell me to hurt you or anyone else. Third, I will answer any of your questions to me, to the best of my ability, completely truthfully. Lastly, we can stop anytime you want to, okay?”

Taylor nodded her head and said, “Okay… I guess that this might help, because every time I even think about the, the, locker…I start to shake and cry, so if you think this will help, I mean, you did just save my life so… yeah, please, he, help me… Oh god, I’m so scared, every time I start to think about this I go to pieces, so I’ve been forcing myself to not think and it’s so hard and I, I, I…” She stopped again, almost hyperventilating again. This time, instead of using my power to force her to be calm, I just held her and stroked her back gently, and soothingly, softly whispering to her, nothing really specific, just simple words, like I’ve got you, it’ll be okay, you’re not alone anymore, stuff like that.

Eventually I felt that she was as calm as she was going to get, so I went ahead and asked my first question, “Taylor, do you think you tell me how it all started, way back in the beginning? What was the first time that you noticed things going wrong?”

She frowned, just a little bit, and then said, “It was so long ago, the summer before I started high school. I had gone to a nature camp, a long one, three weeks long, my dad sent me there to help me move on after mom died,” she paused in thought and then went on, “I had gotten back from camp and was excited to go see my best friend,” Taylor looked almost sick for a moment, “to share what I had done with her, with Emma…” she stopped, and seemed unable to go on.
I encouraged her to go on and said, “What happened then?”

“I went to her house, I was so excited to see her, but she wasn’t alone…” she stopped again, but this time she was able to start on her own, “That was the first time I saw her.”

“Her?” I prompted her.

“Sophia. Sophia Hess. I’d never seen her before, but I certainly saw her a lot after that. Emma had changed since I saw her last, right before I left for camp. She had cut her hair, she had changed the clothes she would wear, no longer dressing first for comfort, and second for fashion. Now it was all about being fashionable, having the latest of whatever; clothes, music, video games. It all had to be the best,” she stopped again, and had this lost devastated look on her face, “I didn’t realize it at the time, not until just now, but Emma, my Emma was gone. It was like she had died and someone else had taken over; I know that isn’t what happened, but that’s what it felt like.”

“I tried to talk to her, to reach her, but she wouldn’t take my calls or talk to me if I came over to her house, not unless she was there.”

“She?” I asked her. I knew she meant Sophia, but she needed to make the connection.

“Sophia. Sophia Fucking Hess. She was with Emma every day, and she had this attitude, this way of making you feel like you didn’t count, that no one mattered except her, and she was vicious when she talked to me, really mean, in a way that I just couldn’t understand, not until later. Later after school started and I found out that she was going to Winslow with us, I realized that Emma had been telling Her all of my secrets, the things that I had shared with Emma over the years, things that I had trusted her with. Things that She used to hurt me, deeply.”

Taylor paused for breath, than went on, “In school She and Emma recruited others to help them. I mean, it started out small, little things, like getting bumped in the halls, when homework was collected, they would slip mine out of the pile, so I would get a zero, juice poured onto my seat, other little things; but they added up. I tried to ignore it at first; then I worked to actively avoid them, but She would always find me and escalate. Things would disappear from my locker, even when I changed the combination.”

“Finally, I went to the teachers for help, but they, they… they just said it was my word against theirs and, and I had no proof…” Tears were starting again, so I had her stop for a bit.
“Shhhh, stop. Just breathe slowly and evenly…That’s right, just like that,” I told her, still rubbing her back. As she calmed down I asked, “Can you keep going, or do you need to stop?”

“I can go on,” she said, and she did. With a few stops to calm down and recover, Taylor spent the next hour and a half telling me about how three school girls, Emma Barnes, Sophia Hess, and Madison Clements organized and lead a never-ending campaign of harassment and torment. How all of her complaints were ignored by the faculty; that it had gotten to the point, where they didn’t even bother to make up excuses for why they couldn’t act. They just told her to get out of the office and to stop lying and bothering them.

“I even tried to transfer to Arcadia, I had the grades and test scores to get in easily, I would have qualified for one of their Academic Scholarships without any problems, but…nothing came of it, and I couldn’t figure out why. Not until once, after I dropped off another written complaint of bullying and a Transfer Application, I went back to get my book bag that I had forgotten, and I caught the secretary shredding all of the paperwork that I had just dropped off … she knew I was watching and she didn’t even care. I, I, I think that’s when I finally started to break.”

“That was the day that I began to realize that it wasn’t that they didn’t believe me, that they weren’t just taking the Trio’s side over mine. That was when I first realized that I was being sacrificed to keep Them happy. I tried to deny it to myself, to convince myself that I was being paranoid, but…” The tears started again, “It never stopped, sometimes it would ease up, almost like they were getting bored, but it always started up again, even worse. Even during the summer, I would get phone calls during the day, while dad was at work, or they would send me these nasty emails, always from anonymous accounts, not quite death threats, but almost as bad. Last October, they got a boy, he seemed really nice, a new transfer so he hadn’t seen all the things they put me through, he convinced me that he liked me, and then They set me up for him to drop me in public, in the most hurtful, humiliating way they could imagine.”

“That night, I tried to kill myself. I took all of the old medicines in the first aid kit, from the bathroom medicine cabinet, and I washed them all down with an old bottle of Scotch. It didn’t work. I woke up in the morning, threw up in the bathroom, and finally just cleaned myself up. I felt like such a complete failure, I couldn’t even kill myself. I just told dad that I didn’t feel well, so I could stay home from school.”

“I brought mom’s flute to school one day before Christmas, I don’t know what I was thinking, maybe that I could use it like a talisman; if I could touch it, see it during the day, maybe I could convince myself that I wasn’t completely alone, that at least my mom loved me, at least she thought I was worth so, some, something, anything.” She paused for a few moments, and then went on, “I went to my locker right after lunch, but her flute, mom’s flute was gone, mom was gone again!! I searched everywhere, I found Emma, and I begged her to give it back,” the tears were flowing constantly now, “she laughed at me. I finally found it in the dumpster behind the kitchens and…and they had defiled it. It looked like they beat it with a brick, the keys were half broken off, the body was dented and flattened, then they rubbed, STUFF all over and in it. I couldn’t bear to
touch it, I went to find a bag or some cloth, anything, so I could pick it up, maybe dad could fix it, he could fix anything; but when I got back with a bag, her flute was gone. And they all just denied having anything to do with it, but they just laughed, and, and…”

I soothed her again, kissing her tears away, trying so hard to not let her see or feel how enraged I was. I think, no I know that I would have been happy to have the opportunity to kill those bitches, in the most painful way possible; I could do it, too, I know more about the human body than anyone. I could make it last weeks. And I wanted to, oh God did I want to. Taylor didn’t deserve what they had done to her, no one did. I had thought earlier, before she ever woke up, that anyone who could do what was done to her; would have fit right in with the Slaughterhouse Nine. And I was right; they could have given lessons to the Nine on how to slowly destroy someone.

Eventually, Taylor went on, “The last thing they did, was sometime over the Winter break, they filled my locker with, with used pads, and tampons, and nasty garbage, and just let it rot and ferment, until we came back from break.”

She paused and tried to pull herself closer, finally hiding her face in the crook of my neck, before she went on, “My locker is on the third floor, in one of the back corridors, well out of the way. When I got to school, I could smell something as I got close to my locker; I was afraid of what I would find, but I needed to know, so I covered my mouth and nose and opened my locker. It was vile, stuff started to slide out, and all of these bugs were crawling around, a, and I couldn’t help myself, I threw up right into my locker. And while I was doing that, someone grabbed me by my hair and rammed me into the locker, rammed my head into the back of the locker so hard that I was stunned, and I went blind for a moment, but by the time I could think and see again I was being crammed inside the locker. The locker wasn’t very big, but they forced me into it. They closed the door and locked it, then they laughed and left. I begged and screamed to be let out, but they just laughed and walked away.”

I had to ask, “And no one did a thing did they, they didn’t drop a note to the principal, a 911 call, nothing? Didn’t one of the teachers from a nearby classroom check on the noise or smell?”

Taylor just laughed, a bitter helpless laugh, “Winslow doesn’t actually use many of the third floor classrooms, and none in that corridor. Which might be why I was assigned a locker there at the beginning of the year.” She was silent for a few minutes, then said, “That was the day the big snow storm started, and they dismissed school early. I know, because I was still sort of aware when the other kids got their stuff from their lockers for early dismissal. Some of them even banged on my locker and wished me a nice night as they left…they left me there…for three days, until finally one of the janitors came in to open the school and check for damage. I think he could smell my locker or maybe he just followed the bugs. He called for EMT’s, got me out of the locker, but it was far too late, at that point I was in a coma, mostly dead. But, I REMEMBER, I remember screaming for help, begging for help, and finally begging to be allowed to die, I remember as they ate my eye and my face, and all of the rest of me. I couldn’t do anything, I tried to smash my head so that I would at least be unconscious; dead if I was lucky, but…I couldn’t…I didn’t have any room to move, so I just had to …endure.”
She looked up at me, a sad little smile on her mutilated lips, “I’m insane, you know. I went crazy in the locker, and I never got better. I still see things, hear things that aren’t there. I can still feel them as they crawl around inside of me.”

A few minutes later she spoke again, softly, “I’m grateful that you saved me, for my dad’s sake, because I don’t think he’d make it if I died, but Amy, I’m broken, I’m crazy and I’m afraid of what I might do, especially if you’re right and I have powers?” Taylor twisted so she could see my face clearly. “Amy, promise me, please, if I can’t be fixed, if my crazy gets out and hurts someone, promise me that you won’t let them put me in a box again, make them end me. I, I, don’t think I can go back in a box. Being dead would be much better; it will be just like sleeping, won’t it?”

By now I was crying as hard as she was, “Oh, Taylor, what they did to you is so wrong, you didn’t deserve this; you deserve so much more, so much better. But yes, oh God, I promise, that if I can’t fix you, if you really are crazy and can’t control it, I will never let them put you in a box. Never, you will never go in a box again.” I hoped that I would never have to keep that promise, and I knew I would do almost anything to avoid it, but I would never let her be put back in a box. No matter what I had to do.

I held Taylor as she fell into an exhausted sleep again, still thinking about everything she had told me. I swore that I would find out if the PRT or Police had begun an investigation into Hess and the others, and I would apply pressure as needed. I might not have a superpowerful offensive ability, but a lot of people owed me their lives. If I needed to call in a few favors to ensure Taylor got justice, I was good with that.

If I had to, I could even ask mom about legal options against the school and those girls, I was sure that some sort of compensation was owed Taylor for the egregious maltreatment from the faculty, as well as the other students.

But for now, now I was going to think about some things that only I could do, things that might make sure that Taylor was able to protect herself, so she could make sure she was never put back in the box. My god, she was so afraid at the thought of being back in the box. Being put into a mental hospital or prison would destroy her. But there was a way, options I could give her. These were options that I had never mentioned to anyone, ways to modify and improve the human body so that it could do and withstand so much more than the original.

Strength, speed, enhanced senses, armor, hidden weapons and tools. Maybe even ways to emulate actual powers, only using science and biology, not adding another Parahuman ability. Things I had imagined doing, if only I had dared. Things that would get me ‘caged or even have a kill order signed, if it ever became known what I could do. Though I have to admit, even the possibility of being able to do this was exciting, and far more interesting than some more routine healing. Of course, I would never describe what I had done for Taylor as ‘routine healing’, far from it.
Now, all I had to do was be patient and wait for her to wake up, and then make the offer.

When she did wake up, it was still only 5:00 am, and Taylor whispered to me, “Thank you for listening to me, for being here for me; some days, I feel like I’m invisible, the way people just seem to not see me. At least now I know that it’s my scars that disgusts everyone, but before, they didn’t see me because the Trio had pretty much destroyed me socially, and that’s not something I was ever good at dealing with. And really, other than my dad, no one was willing to even hear me, much less believe me. I’ve felt so alone, that sometimes…well, I already told you, but even so, sometimes it’s hard not to just give up.”

“Other days, the only thing that kept me going was the grim satisfaction I got from knowing that as long as I kept going, refused to give up, I was frustrating them, forcing them to realize that no matter how hard they tried, they still hadn’t won. They hadn’t succeeded in breaking me. It’s probably the reason I never brought a gun to school just so I could shoot them. I wouldn’t let myself by like them.”

I looked at her in amazement; I had only known of her for three days, and only had this one conversation, and yet I admired her so much and was fiercely proud of her. After a moment I said, “You’re so much stronger than I am, if I had to face those bitches,” I stopped as Taylor started giggling.

“What?” I asked her, a puzzled look on my face.

“I always call them the ‘Trio’ out loud, but I call them ‘those bitches’ inside my head,” she said, still giggling.

I smiled slowly, “I like that, ‘Trio’ in public, ‘those bitches’ in private. I think I’ll do it that way, too.”

“But as I was saying…what was I saying again? I can’t remember now, oh yeah those bitches, that’s right;” she giggled at me, but I went on, “I was thinking that you are a lot stronger than I am. I would have not been able to hold back against them, the way you did. It doesn’t seem like it, but in some ways, having powers makes it harder to hold back. I would have been sorely tempted to turn them into some sort of monster, or ooh, I know, I could turn them into a shrub or small tree, or maybe a giant slug and drop by the kitchen to get some salt.”

Taylor gave me the strangest look, then asked, “A shrub?”

I grinned at her and said, “Or a slug. I like the slug idea.”
She just shook her head, and said, “I don’t think we’ll mention the slug idea to anyone else, they might get the wrong idea about you.”

I said, “Or maybe the right idea. You make me think of different things, I really like that.” I stopped grinning, but watched her as I settled down and then said, “Taylor, I really am proud of you, you chose to do the right thing while being placed under absolutely immense pressure. No matter what they did, or how much they hurt you, you always stayed true to who Taylor Hebert really is.”

“You are a wonderful young lady that I’m very pleased and proud to know, and I think that your dad is equally proud of you; I know that he really loves you and he was terribly worried about you, when you were first admitted into the ICU.”

Taylor blushed lightly, and then asked me, “What about you, Amy? You have just spent the last three days and nights with me, constantly healing me, repairing all of the damage that was done to me.”

“You didn’t know me from Eve; but I’ve heard and read a lot about you; that you don’t get paid and you won’t accept gifts, yet you did this for me. And I doubt that it’s either the first or last time you’ve done something like this.”

“You do know that you’re kind of famous here in Brockton Bay, right? That as a city, we are damn proud of you, for the way you keep coming to the hospitals, doing hours of healing every week, never taking any money.”

“Going to every Endbringer fight and then staying for days and weeks afterwards. Just doing the right thing, day in and day out. Just hearing about you is pretty inspirational. At least for me it is,” Taylor said, blushing slightly as she realized she was gushing like a fangirl.

“So, when you say that you’re proud of me, then I’ll say the same to you. I’m proud of you Amy, so damn proud and impressed. And more so since I’ve met you.”

Taylor shakily held out her right hand and said, “Hi. My name’s Taylor Hebert, and I’m very pleased to meet you.”

I slowly reached over and clasped our hands together and said, “Hi. My name is Amy Dallon, and I am very happy to meet you, too.” I held her hand tightly as my tears started to slowly fall.
Now it was my turn to be held and comforted as I cried. Once Taylor saw me crying like she had been, she did her best to comfort me by rubbing my back and kind of humming/purring to me. When I finally realized what she was doing, I gave her a puzzled look, which took her a minute to understand, then she just sighed and said, “Sorry, I wanted to sing you a lullaby, but I really can’t carry a tune in a bucket. But I can hum, and when I used to babysit, I was told that it sounded nice and seemed to soothe the babies and children when they didn’t feel well or were sick.”

“Oh, well personally, I think it sounds very nice. And yes, it is very relaxing and soothing. I’m sorry if I made you self-conscious or uncomfortable. That’s the last thing I would every want for you,” I explained.

Taylor smiled at me and then said, “I’m glad that you’re feeling a little better, but now I’d like to do for you what you did for me. If that’s okay with you?”

I swallowed and thought about doing my normal redirection and distraction, but I just couldn’t do that to her, not after she had been willing to trust me and open herself up like that. Who knows, it seems like it worked for her, at least a little, and maybe it would work for me as well.

“I don’t know if you realize this, but I’m adopted. The Dallons are not my biological parents.” Taylor just shook her head, so I went on, “I don’t know any details, but I’m fairly sure that at least one of my biological parents was a villain.”

Taylor kept looking at me, not judging me, just watching me, and rubbing my back. I decided to start with my first issue, which was going to be hard after she had said how proud she was of my healing.

“I have had my powers since I was twelve years old, almost thirteen. Once I realized just how good my healing was, I started volunteering at the hospital after school, pretty much every day. I loved it, even though I mostly worked with terminal and critical patients, it was still wonderful to see them get better and I found that I liked seeing the families rejoicing at their new-found good health. But there was a worm in the apple. My mom, my adoptive mother, Carol Dallon. She began pushing me to do more, to heal more people. But at the same time she would be constantly reminding me that I couldn’t afford to make a single mistake.”

I shuddered at the memory of some of her comments, “She would say things like ‘you have great power, and you must always be certain you are worthy of it’, or she would wait until the end of a shift, and ask me ‘are you sure you didn’t miss something?’ after the patients were long gone, and I couldn’t actually check to be sure. She was so good at making those comments, just when it would hurt me the most, but she always did it with a caring tone of voice, but her eyes, god her eyes were so cold. To me it was obvious that my mom was expecting me to fail in some horrible way, but I was never sure why, was it something I did? Something I didn’t do? It wasn’t until I overheard her talking to someone on the phone; she never knew I was there, and I’m not sure who she was
speaking to, but she said, ‘you know it’s true, she has bad blood, and sooner or later Amy is going
turn into a villain, just like…” my sister Vicky came slamming into the house right then, talking
about some fight she had gotten into, and mom changed the subject.”

“Since then I’ve begun to realize that I’ve been trying to gain the approval and love of a woman
who hates me. She has always given Vicky her love and affection, freely and openly, but not me,
ever me. I have tried so hard, for so long; hoping that someday, if I’m good enough, if I work hard
enough, praying for her to just once, just one time tell me that she loves me, but it’s never going to
happen.”

By this time, I crying uncontrollably, my sobbing loud enough that I was very glad that it was early
and that this room was as sound-proof as it was air-tight. Taylor was doing her best to hold me,
without pulling all of her tubes loose. She managed to pull a sheet up over us, ensuring that we had
at least a tiny bit of our modesty preserved, since by this point my gown had pretty much fallen off
of me, becoming disarranged while I had been comforting her, and Taylor’s efforts to comfort me
had pretty much finished it off. Eventually, I cried myself to sleep just as she had done earlier.

--------------------Legion*** ***Legion---------------------

When I woke later, I found that breakfast had just been delivered, and Taylor was still holding onto
me, only just starting to wake up herself.

Although breakfast was still mostly liquid, it did have some hard boiled eggs and buttered toast, to
help fill in the gaps.

After we had finished, I decided that I needed to know one more thing, so I asked her, “Taylor, do
you remember how you ended up in the hospital this time? Understand something, this does
concern your Trigger event, so if you don’t want to talk about it, then that’s okay. Sharing your
Trigger event is considered to be very intimate, so if you feel uncomfortable, you do not need to do
this.”

Taylor looked a little pensive, but then asked me, "Will you tell me why you want to know?"

I smiled at her gratefully, "Certainly. When I was contacted by Miss Militia, asking if I could heal
you, she told me that she and Armstrong had witnessed your Trigger event. She had promised me
full disclosure of the circumstances, but I have been simply too busy to get back to her about it.
Mostly, I was concerned that two Capes had actually witnessed your Trigger; this is a very unusual
occurrence, so I wanted to make sure that everything was okay.”
Taylor nodded slowly and said, “Alright, I don’t mind if you know, but only you.”

“Well, I was visited at home Thursday morning by ArmSMaster and Miss Militia, which was a surprise, let me tell you. He was asking questions about a student being attacked at my old high school, Winslow, and if I had ever seen any signs of bullying.”

*What the …?* I just stared at her, unable to believe he could have possibly asked that.

She smiled at me, a little sadly, but went on, “The whole thing felt odd, the questions he was asking just didn’t make any sense to me. Why would the Protectorate care about some girl getting attacked at Winslow? They certainly didn’t care when it was happening to me! I finally showed them the notes I had been keeping about all of the things the Trio had been doing to me,” Taylor held her thumb and forefinger about two inches apart and said, “it made a stack about this thick.”

“It puzzled me that ArmSMaster kept asking these stupid and weird questions about this girl and I just kept trying to force things into some sort of sense when I had an epiphany; This girl who had been attacked, she really *mattered* to them, she was *important* somehow,” She paused and looked at me expectantly, so I thought about what she had said and then I sat up straight, “SHIT. She’s a Ward, isn’t she?”

She nodded her agreement. I looked at her thoughtfully and asked, “What were your bullies’ names again?”

She just smiled at me and said, “Emma Barnes, Madison Clements, and …”

I nodded and said it at the same time as she did, “Sophia Hess.” *Oh hell, she must be Shadow Stalker, she never did unmask to me, but with some of the things I’ve overheard the other Wards say she has to be.*

Taylor just nodded and went on, “Shadow Stalker. When I realized that Sophia was a Ward, I had a panic attack. You need to remember what I said earlier about being insane; I truly believe that I am or am in the process of becoming insane, I am constantly having minor visual and audible hallucinations, I have been developing severe paranoia for the last several months, I am not at all sure if I can be trusted around normal people. So now I have ArmSMaster sitting across the table from me, his halberd on his back and he keeps saying things like, “that is classified” or “you do not need to know” and how he now has “no choice” all the while Miss Militia has been trying to get him to shut up. It’s right at that point that everything clicks and makes perfect sense, now I finally understand what’s going on.”
“If you look at it from my point of view, especially in light of how the school had been treating me, the fact that two superheroes had come to my house doesn’t make any sense; until I noticed that Miss Militia’s power has stopped doing it’s little ‘new weapon every second’ dance. It’s settled down to ‘Great Big Pistol’. And since Miss Militia has been getting angrier as our little meeting has been going on, I decided that they came to my house, with this stupid story just so they could get inside and take care of their little problem. It was at this point that I completely lost it.”

I looked at Taylor and nearly threw up right then, as I could practically see everything, as if I had been there in the kitchen myself, “You really thought they were going to kill you, didn’t you?”

She just nodded sadly, and said, “Here and now, lying in bed with you, I know that would never happen. But right there, right then, it all just made so much sense, it explained everything, why the school did nothing, why I wasn’t allowed to transfer, everything. I was just a sacrifice to keep Shadow Stalker happy. I was nothing, less than nothing. I felt utterly helpless: all I wanted to do was escape, to not die in my own kitchen. I think that’s when I had my heart attack. I remember it feeling as if someone had hit me in the chest with a big hammer. Then it all went black.”

I was beyond livid, and desperately grateful that Taylor could not read my body like I could read hers, I was afraid that if she could, I would have terrified her, and that is the last thing I wanted to do. Armsmaster had literally frightened an injured and ill young girl to death; causing her to Trigger at the same time. If it had not been for Miss Militia performing CPR, Taylor would not have made it. Even the cursory reading of the initial report by the EMT’s made it clear that only her actions kept Taylor alive. It looked like Miss Militia was at least trying to help Taylor, but that Armsmaster was just ignoring what he did. Like it didn’t matter, like Taylor didn’t matter. He was supposed to be a hero, but now he did something worthy of the worst super villain. And left it up to Miss Militia to fix his damn mistake.

I took a deep breath and told Taylor, “Well, Miss Militia is the one who got in touch with me, even after my mom, Carol, had told me I couldn’t heal until at least Tuesday; she had one of the Wards get ahold of Vicky, who told me about this. Apparently my phone had all of the PRT and Protectorate numbers remotely blocked. I suspect Carol really wanted me to take a break. Still not sure why, though.”

“Taylor, in my experience, Miss Militia is a very nice person, who would never hurt an innocent. Armsmaster, on the other hand, has all of the social skills of a poison arrow toad, and I could believe just about anything of him.”

Taylor laughed at my description of Armsmaster, which I was glad to hear.
“Anyways, we have more work to do, but I think we can take long enough to get cleaned up and changed. After that I’m going to want you to eat some more. It’ll be liquids I’m afraid, but you are going to need a lot more calories before we finish.”

I called one of the nurses to help Taylor get cleaned up and in a new hospital gown, while I took a few minutes to shower and change into a fresh gown as well. Once I had Taylor settled back in bed, I had her start in on the large liquid meal that the kitchen had sent up. As she ate, I explained what we would be doing next.

“You’ve lost a lot of weight, between being so sick, and all of the healing that I have had to do so far, so you are going to need a lot of calories. I can restore you to a healthy normal size and weight, but you’re going to need to eat, and keep eating as I fix you back up.”

I watched as she really looked at her body, as she was now almost literally skin and bones. She had lost a lot of weight since she had been admitted, and she really couldn't afford it.

“God, how much do I weigh? I look anorexic!”

I sighed and said, “82 pounds. According to the admission records you weighed 104 when you were brought in. At your height and build you should be around 135 lbs, but unfortunately my healing isn't free. I can't just create biomass like some healers can; I can only work with what is there.” I reached out and gently touched a large tube that ran into her chest. “You have had to be fed through this feeding tube, in addition more to units of blood than any one person should ever receive. All of that has been used to keep you going while I tried to repair the damage.”

She was obviously stunned, not realizing just how sick she had been. She looked over at me and asked, “God, how can you even stand to look at me? It was bad enough before, but now,” she shuddered then added, “I must be disgusting. The scars were bad enough, now most of my hair is gone, and I look like an undead skeleton. Just how bad was I? I mean, I know that I wasn't really well after, the locker and all, but I thought I was getting better.” She paused, and then asked, “Wasn't I?”

I looked at her for a moment, then scooted closer and held her tight again, “No. You really weren't. In fact, some of the infections were so deep-seated, and so, well, weird, that I couldn't just destroy them, I needed to isolate each infection, practically on an individual microbe basis, counteract it, and then try to rebuild the destroyed tissues and organs. They combined the worst of a nasty retrovirus, prions and a Tinker-designed bacterial plague. When I told you earlier that I was impressed that you had lasted so long, I wasn’t exaggerating. I was deadly serious. Most people would have been dead in one or two weeks. And I could find no signs of parahuman healing or regeneration that could have kept you going. As far as I can tell, you just refused to die.”
“I can heal most people easily. What I could normally handle in a few minutes or at most an hour, took me over three days. Part of that was because of the infections, but a lot of it was from having to balance your body’s resources, incoming nutrition, fighting the infections and healing all of your injuries. I have actually replaced most of your internal organs at least three times. The infections were constantly mutating, and I was having to repeatedly locate and destroy the infections, as well as repair the damage the infections caused. I don’t think they were actually Tinker-designed, but these tiny pockets of infection would merge with your muscles or organs, and become almost invisible, even to me, because they would be nearly identical to the host organ, until they were ready to, well, explode. Honestly, I know your body better than I know my own now.”

“Twice I’ve had to seal the room, because one of them had mutated into a virulently contagious airborne disease. Fortunately this room is designed to handle situations like that. Now, no one enters unless I certify the room as safe, and even then they wear self-contained Level Four suits, as I’m sure you noticed, and go through a decon shower and airlock. Good practice for them, I think they have their CDC disaster drills all signed off for the year. I’ve also had to develop a whole series of techniques for dealing with air and fluid borne contagions so that I could decontaminate this room without draconian measures. I am worried that even though I’m only a Striker, I’m may have to accept a Shaker rating too. Which will no doubt suck.”

“But Taylor, you were dying. Not quickly, but very surely.” At that, she began to shake as I continued to hold her, letting her know that she wasn’t alone, that I was there for her. Finally, after quite a while, Taylor calmed down again and asked me, “Amy, what do I do now? Am I ever going to be okay again?”

I looked at her and brushed her remaining hair out of her face and back behind her ears, “Taylor, there is something you need to know. About me, I mean. I can do more than just heal; my power is a lot more versatile than just healing.”

“What do you mean, ‘more than just heal’?”

“I mean that some capes, like Othala, can gift regeneration, or can take the injuries of others onto their body, then regenerate it. But I don't do either, I actually take control of any biology that I touch, and then I can change it in any way that I want.”

“Really, that's so cool! Any change you want?” As soon as she said that, Taylor's face actually went white, and she grabbed a hold of me and tried to pull me close, then whispered to me, “Please tell me no one else knows! You can't let anyone know what you can do, they'll put you in …”

I put my fingers across her lips and whispered back, “Shhhh. No one knows, no one but you and I.”
Not even my family realizes just how much I can do.”

Shifting around so I was holding Taylor closer, I continued, “The reason I am telling you this is that I can help you get better.”

Taylor looked puzzled as she replied, “I know, you already have.”

“No Taylor, not just 'not sick' but actually better. When the PRT did their original power assessment of me, right after I triggered, I was designated as a Striker 6 and Thinker 1. Striker because I could only heal at touch range, and Thinker to explain my ability to see any biology that I touch. What they didn’t understand then, even though I tried to explain it, was that they had significantly under rated me. That I could do a LOT more than they thought. Over the years my ratings have increased to Striker 8 and Thinker 3, but I should actually be rated Striker 10, Thinker 5, and Trump 4 or 5, and maybe Shaker 3 now. My Thinker rating means I can not only understand the biology that I touch, and can model any changes I want to make, before I make them; but I can understand and predict how the changes will respond over many generations. Actual inheritable changes.”

“The Trump rating is because I can modify and enhance someone so that they would qualify as a cape, even without having an active Corona Pollentia and Gemma. As in, giving someone Brute and Mover ratings. Three or four probably. A low Thinker rating is possible due to enhanced senses, two or three. Possibly higher, though I haven't actually done this before. I might even be able to create a rating in the other categories with practice.”

“The Shaker rating I gave myself is because I've figured out how to create air and fluid borne organisms, biological tools that I can target against other pathogens, to seek out and destroy them without causing any other problems.”

“Can you do this to yourself, make these upgrades and modifications?”

“No. My power doesn't work on myself, any more than I can actually work at a distance, other than releasing custom organisms.”

“Oh. Sorry about that.”

I smiled at her and simply said, “That's just how my powers work.”
“Okay, then if you can change my biology, does that mean you can make me a cape, a parahuman?”

“No, you are already a parahuman; though I don't know what your ability is. You have a fully developed and active Corona Pollentia and Gemma, which means you are a parahuman, just like me. What I can do is actually alter and enhance your body so that it is just stronger, tougher, and faster than a normal human body is.” I paused, thinking about it, then went on.

“For example, I can change the composition of your bones and cartilage to be stronger and harder, modify your nervous system so that the signals move faster, with less degradation, and add a reactive mesh around your organs and just under the skin that instantly responds to impact by becoming rigid and unmovable. If I then altered your muscle tissue, so that you had a much higher proportion of Fast Twitch cells, your strength and speed would increase from what is normal for a girl of your height and weight to three to five times as much. The final result would be around Brute 4 or 5 because of your increased strength and toughness. Not quite bullet-proof, but close. Your speed and reflexes would qualify you for at least Mover 3.”

“I have ways to significantly improve many of your organs that will help as well; enhancing your kidneys and liver to better scavenge toxins from your bloodstream, ways to increase the oxygen your muscles can store and process, reducing the production of toxins like lactic acid and other waste products from using your stronger muscles, so that you don’t tire as quickly. There are ways to improve your lungs’ efficiency at absorbing oxygen and expelling carbon dioxide, to improve your ‘wind’. I have literally hundreds of modifications that I can offer you, though I promise you, none of them will be apparent to an outside observer.”

“Your Thinker rating would be mostly based on improving your senses; your eyes to have perfect vision, including low-light capability and just a little bit of Infra-red and Ultra-violet vision as well. Your hearing would be enhanced to allow you to hear much higher and lower frequencies, as well as much lower volumes. Possibly the senses of smell and touch as well. Although with all of these I would want to include cutouts, cutouts that you can control, so that you don’t get overwhelmed by too much information.”

Taylor lay there looking stunned. I guess that she had never thought about what could be done, if you were willing to just do it. I know that I thought about it. A lot, especially since I had a pretty good idea what would happen if anyone found out what I could really do. I would be lucky if I ended up in the Birdcage. A kill order was more likely. Unless they decided to force me to enhance people the way they wanted. I would become a slave, a toy for someone else’s pleasure. I’d rather die.

Finally she spoke up, “You won't get in trouble for doing this, will you? I mean, what if anyone notices that I'm stronger or faster?”
“No. If I don't tell, and you don't tell, then nobody will know. And even if someone suspects something, the fact that you ARE a parahuman, would make it seem as if your enhancements, were from a 'normal' trigger.”

“Wow. Can I think about this?”

“Of course you can. This offer is for you, partly to help you fully recover, and partly so nothing like what those bitches did to you can ever happen again.”

With that, Taylor closed her eyes, snuggled a little closer, and fell asleep. After watching her for a few minutes, I closed my own eyes, and let myself fade away.
The next morning, I woke up as someone put a tray of food on the table next to the bed and then
left without saying a word. Looking around, I saw that Amy was still asleep, although she had
rolled onto her back and was lying next to me holding my hand, rather than holding tight like she
had been last night when I fell asleep.

Looking at the tray of breakfast, I decided that I wasn't actually hungry and would wait until Amy
woke up to eat, besides, the broths, soups and juices were fine when they cooled. They could wait.
Using the bedside controller I turned the lights back down and tried, unsuccessfully, to fall back
asleep. Instead, I found myself thinking about the offer that Amy had made the night before; to
rebuild and enhance my body, the idea was beyond tempting; but I was worried about what would
happen to her if anyone found out what she could do.

As tempted as I was by Amy’s offer, and I was truly tempted, one thing did puzzle me; after
everything I had been through, how many times I had been setup and betrayed, lied to and abused;
how come Amy didn’t frighten me? I wasn’t worried about how she could use her power against
me; I was worried that others would find out what she could do and the consequences she would
face. Why did I simply trust her to do as she said, to not lie to me or betray me, like everyone else
had for the last year and a half?

It wasn’t faith, I was sure of that much. Honestly, after everything that I had endured, I had no faith
in people. I simply assumed that everyone I dealt with was going to turn on me at some point; I
spent a lot of energy anticipating it and preparing my escape routes.

But Amy was different, it felt like I had known her for years, and I knew that I could trust her;
knew that she wouldn’t lie to me or betray me. Though I didn’t understand it, I knew it, like I knew
that my dad loved me.

I spent the next half hour, thinking about why that was; and what I could do to keep people from
even wondering if she had anything to do with my powers. The best that I could come up with was
to define everything as the result of a slow form of self-biokinesis, like what I had read about on
PHO, where the Ward Aegis could adapt his body to compensate for any damage or environment,
but not as quick. The first step would be to use deception, not exactly lie about it to them maybe,
but encourage them to reach false conclusions, such as that all of my enhancements were a part of
my Parahuman powers; the next would be to ensure that no one could get a good feel for my powers, what they were or how strong they were, nor could I let anyone give me a physical or medical exam. Lastly, I would claim that any changes that were made to me or my equipment were caused by using my powers, perhaps a form of Tinkering.

I finally decided that if she was still willing to do this for me, I would accept. The stronger I was, the better I could protect myself, and my precious people. Which now seemed to have doubled; dad, like always, and now, oddly enough, Amy.

Did I want to be a hero though? Growing up, Alexandria had been my idol, the cape I most wanted to be like. But now? After finding out about Shadow Stalker, and that the PRT had someone like her in the Wards, plus Armsmaster’s behavior was hardly what I would call heroic. I really couldn't see myself being a part of organization that would keep and promote people like that. I certainly wouldn't join any of the cape gangs in town like the Empire or ABB. New Wave was out if only because of the danger to dad, though working with Amy would be nice.

I looked over at Amy and wondered what other options there were? Maybe, once I figured out what powers I had from my Trigger, I could find a non-combat option, something that I could use to earn a decent living at, so that I could help dad with some of our bills. And maybe put together a normal life. Well, maybe not normal, but at least better than what I had been living.

Eventually, as I lay there with my thoughts beginning to go in circles, Amy started to wake up.

“Good morning, sleepy head,” I said as she stretched and started to sit up. “There is some breakfast, if you're interested,” I said, pointing to the trays next to our beds.

She looked over at it, shrugged and used the controls to raise the back of the bed. “Might as well, it will at least be nutritious, if not particularly tasty.”

When I tried to pull the table closer, however, I realized that even that much effort was beyond me. Amy just leaned over me and pulled it across so that we could both reach it, took the covers off and said, “Dig in, you really need some calories.”

For the next twenty minutes or so, we just quietly drank the hospital liquid breakfast. Once it was finished, Amy got up, moved the table aside and grabbing a bag out of the closet, quickly dressed herself, not even bothering to turn her back or walk out to the bathroom. After she was done, she tossed her used gown into a bin in the corner and pulled a comfortable looking chair close to the side of my bed.
“Have you thought about my offer?” She asked finally.

“Yes, I have. I’m just not sure what I would do after that. I mean, I can’t see joining the Wards. Not after Sophia, Armsmaster and Winslow. I don’t think I can let myself be a part of any organization, much less one that dropped the ball that badly. I would rather trust myself than let someone else make decisions for me.”

Amy nodded her understanding, saying, “That pretty much leaves either an independent Hero or going Rogue. Each of which has its own advantages and disadvantages.”

I agreed, adding, “I suspect that once I figure out what my power is, I will be able to find something I can use it for. Hopefully something that will let me make a living.”

“A living? Like Parian or Strider? As a Rogue then, not a Hero? Are you going to go back to school? Maybe you could transfer to Arcadia?” she asked me.

“No, dad has pretty much decided that public school is not going to happen, and I’ve already started on a homeschooling program. It’s actually pretty easy to do, you just have to pass your GED by the time you turn 18. Which is actually simple to do, as long as you follow the guidelines from the State Dept of Education. I much prefer self-study, I am, or at least was, getting more out of it than I ever did from public school.”

I paused a moment, before continuing, “There is one thing that I’ve noticed, that I wanted to talk about, before anything else…”

Amy looked interested, and asked “Like what?”

“I know I’ve told you how I am becoming more paranoid, right?”

Sadly, she said “I know, and really that’s understandable. Between those bitches and the criminal behavior of your school, I’d say that paranoia is actually healthy and normal, if you weren’t at least a little paranoid, you really would be crazy.”

I snorted at that, almost laughing, but went on, “You’re probably right, however, the point I was
trying to make is that none of that applies to you, and no offense, but other than my dad, you are
the only person I don’t expect to turn on me or attack me somehow. And I don’t understand it.”

Amy stared at me blankly for almost a minute, then said, “Wow…Okay that’s something I didn’t
expect. Uh…let me see if I understand you correctly? You trust me, and don’t expect me to attack
you? And you find that unusual?”

I nodded and said, “Yep. Pretty much.”

Amy sat back and frowned thoughtfully. Finally she said, “Now that you mention it, I have to admit
that I’ve been acting a little off from normal. Because I have never told anyone the things I’ve told
you, about my powers and how I feel. I’m normally quite reserved and sort of private, especially
with people I don’t know. But not with you. Which means that something is affecting the both of
us. Helping us to become more comfortable with each other, much more than is normal for either
of us.”

I shivered and asked, “Like a Master? Controlling us?”

Amy paled at my comment, but shook her head, “No, I don’t think so. I know everyone who has
come in this room, and touched them all within the last couple of months. None of them are
Parahuman. And if it was you affecting me, I don’t think your power would be affecting yourself,
as well. Besides, I’ve been touching you almost nonstop for the last 3 days, and I haven’t spotted
any significant activity in your Corona Pollentia or Gemma, which means you haven’t used your
powers, at all.”

I asked her then, “So, what? Normal human chemistry?”

Amy smiled, shaking her head again, “No, I would’ve seen it if that had happened to either of us.
That type of attraction is hard to miss, at the moment or later on; the chemical traces in the brain
are unmistakable.”

Amy paused again, obviously thinking hard, “Maybe…Look, I don’t know if this makes sense or is
even possible, but maybe it’s our powers? Maybe they just blend together really well, kind of
like…um…”

“Complements? Where two things blend together to become greater than the two are when
separate. Is that what you mean?” I asked.
Amy nodded and sighed, then said, “I suspect we are going to have to look into this on our own, I’m not sure if I would trust anyone to help us without screaming ‘Master/Stranger Protocols… Lock ‘em up!’”

She smiled at me again, than asked, “Do I have your permission to heal you and make the changes that we discussed? Please be aware that most changes will be gradual, as what we do here will just be the beginning, building the foundation for the rest of the enhancements. I will need to see you at least once a week to monitor and adjust the changes, as well as to continue to add the modifications for the next month or so.”

I replied just as formally, “Yes, I give you permission to heal me and make the changes we discussed. You may add or modify any changes as you deem fit.”

With that, Amy took my hand in hers and started making changes. This time I could actually feel what was happening, unlike when she had been healing me before. It wasn't painful or even uncomfortable, just… odd. Like some things were moving slightly inside of me.

After about a half an hour, she leaned back and pressed the call button. “I'm going to have more food brought in, a full meal every hour or so. Even though the modifications are going to be over time, it’s going to take a lot of food for you to keep up with all of the healing and changes. I have also changed your digestive system to break down any food you eat much faster and more thoroughly, so that you can eat as often as you need to, without any discomfort or problems.”

When the nurse came in, Amy explained that she would need full meals for me delivered every hour until further notice, to keep up with the additional healing that was needed. Other than the odd look she gave me, the nurse seemed to take Amy's request in stride and said that she would let the kitchen know what was needed.

While we waited for the meal to be delivered, Amy asked me a whole series of questions that were intended to help figure out just what power I had triggered with. She also had a series of exercises that had been developed by the PRT to help new capes figure out the specifics and limitations of their powers, without the trauma or danger of putting someone into a life-threatening situation in hopes that they would spontaneously figure out what their power was. By the time the tray of food was delivered we had narrowed it down to either a Thinker or a Master ability, possibly both.
Finishing up the initial healing was going to take time, mostly because Taylor still had so little body mass to work with and she would need to eat a lot of big meals throughout the day to help fuel her healing. Hopefully I would be able to do at least some of the skeletal and muscular changes today, which would help her with preparing for future modifications.

Stopping while Taylor quickly ate her second breakfast, I took the time to pull out my phone and read through the text messages from the last few days. Grimacing at some of them, I sent a couple of quick replies, and then turned my phone off.

“Okay, hopefully that will keep my family off my back for a while longer. I sent them a few texts earlier, letting them know I was dealing with a critical case. If I'm lucky no one will stop by until tomorrow, at the earliest.”

Glancing over the tray, I asked, “All done?” At her nod, I picked the tray up and set it on a table just inside the door, before sitting down and taking her hand again. This set the routine for the rest of the day; heal for about 45 minutes, eat for 10-15; lather, rinse, repeat. Around 6:00 pm I was able to start strengthening her skeleton and joints, and converting her muscle tissue to be faster and more efficient.

Finally late in the evening I finally leaned back and simply said, “That’s it. At least until tomorrow morning. We need to let everything settle down for the night, and then make any adjustments that you may need in the morning. At that point you should be good to go for at least a few days, maybe as long as a full week. I can get you released by noon, if your dad can pick you up? I'm not letting you take a bus at this point. You should be able make it to the weekend without any problems, though I will expect you to call if anything happens.”

I put a stern look on my face and shook my finger at her, “I mean it. Anything odd, call me at once, I don't care if it’s about your powers, bad dreams, odd sensations. Anything feels different, you call me. Day or night.”

She blinked at the change in my posture and voice, and meekly said, “Okay. Anything odd, I'll call you. I promise.”

“Good. Now, I need to update your chart and leave night orders for the staff.” I wrinkled my nose and continued, “And see if there are any other crises that need to be dealt with tonight.”

Taylor gave me an odd look for a moment, and then asked, “Really? Do they have that many problems that need you to handle?”
I tried to look as normal as I could, but I don’t think it worked, “Yes and no. I normally limit myself to only truly terminal cases, with no requests accepted. The biggest exceptions are Endbringer fights, and the Local Protectorate and Wards. If I didn’t set some limits, people would be asking me to fix their hangnails and to enhance their 'assets',” I cupped my hands in front of my breasts as I spoke.

“Seriously? People really ask you to do that for them?”

“Not anymore, they don't. I’ve made it really clear that doctor's spend years learning how to help people get better, and that I was not going to waste my time fixing minor issues or doing cosmetic changes when there were more people than I could heal who could not be healed by normal medicine.” I grinned at her, a seriously evil grin, and added, “The last woman who tried to 'convince' me to give her a breast job, changed her mind when I offered her a set of 56EE's and a butt to match.”

She goggled at me, “Who was stupid enough to push you to that point?” she asked, awed that Amy had struck back so perfectly.

“Not telling. But she’s a Hollywood Reality Star. I don't think she had really thought the whole 'enhancement' idea through, before confronting me.”

“I'll say. Serious Monkey Fist there.”

“Yep. After that I sat down and wrote up a list of rules that I follow. Some of which are published on New Wave's website. Some of which only I know about.”

She nodded at that and whispered, “Brains and Trump, right?”

That surprised me, then I grinned, “Clever girl. There are a couple of others, but yeah, those are the biggies. NO ONE knows about those two, especially not my family and the PRT. Well, except for you.”

She reached over and took my hand, “And you know that no one will ever know from me. No one. Ever.”

I just looked at her, than realized that with my hand holding hers, I could read her whole body, and
knew she was telling the truth, and even more importantly, she knew that, and that’s why she had taken my hand, “Damn, girl. You really are smart. And I don't think it has anything to do with your maybe-Thinker power. That's pure Taylor Hebert.”

Squeezing her hand, I went on, “Anyway, you try and get some rest while I take care of my paperwork issues and I'll be back soon.”

“Alright, I'll try. Don't be long though,” she said as she lowered the bed from its sitting position to a more restful, sleeping position.

I picked up the last of the many trays that we, though mostly Taylor, had cleared that day and cycling through the airlock, headed for the central nurse’s station. I checked and found only two patients who needed my help, one in CCU and one down in the ER. Taking care of them only took about 10 minutes, so I headed back up to the ICU to start Taylor’s paperwork. Writing out the night orders and scheduling her for discharge in the morning only took about 15 minutes.

She was just starting to drift off when I returned, so I stayed quiet, changed into a night gown and climbed into my bed. As I lay down she reached over and took my hand, squeezed it and softly said,

“Good night, Amy.”

I gently squeezed back and said, “Night yourself, Taylor.”

With that I turned down the lights and finally relaxed and fell asleep.

-------------------------------Legion*** Taylor ***Legion-------------------------------

Waking up the next morning was interesting. For the first time in literally months, I actually felt good. No pain, no aching joints or muscles, I wasn't tired. Nothing. In fact, I was feeling like I could get up and run a mile without a problem, maybe even more. Instead I just lay there trying to see if I could feel any of the changes that Amy had made. Other than not feeling bad, I really couldn't, not until I stopped trying to look for changes in how I felt and actually looked at my body, the outside I mean.

Once I did that I could see some pretty obvious changes. My skin wasn't gray and dry; I actually
had some muscle tone to my arms and hands, not a lot, but more than I had before the locker. When I pulled my hair around to where I could see it, it was just like before, dark and curly, it actually had some body again, instead of being limp and dry, although it was shorter than before, only just coming down to brush my shoulders. As I realized just how much Amy had done for me I couldn't stop the tears from falling again, although they were tears of happiness and relief, not pain or despair. I managed to get myself back under control before anyone came in, wiping my eyes on the sleeve of my gown, which was when I finally realized that even without my glasses I could see. Perfectly, out of BOTH eyes. I hadn't even noticed when she had replaced my missing eye.

In fact, when I sat up and looked around my room, I could see the nurse at her station reading a newspaper; it took a moment because it was upside down from the way she had folded it, but I could easily read the text of one of the stories. I suspected that my new and improved vision was better than 20/20. A lot better. After testing it by successfully looking around the room, checking under the edges of counters and in the shadows, I decided to run some tests on my other senses as well.

I found that I could focus my hearing well enough to hear a doctor giving orders outside the room, not perfectly because I couldn't actually make out his words, but even the soundproofing wasn't completely stopping the sound of his voice.

My sense of smell though, was actually overwhelming. I could smell not just the disinfectant's that they used to clean this room, but the different medicines I had been given, and even what was stored in the cabinets, and a set of odors that took me a few minutes to identify as people smells; they didn't smell bad at all, rather pleasant to be honest, it was just that there were so many of them; me, Amy, the doctors and nurses; it was all rather confusing, although those were fainter since they had been wearing those spacesuits for the last few days. I suspected that with practice I could learn to quickly tell the different ones apart and possibly even learn to remember them and possibly follow them. Which would be pretty cool, kind of like being my own bloodhound.

I figured my sense of touch and taste would have to wait until later, probably until I got home. I have to admit that she had done an outstanding job when she had boosted my senses, because with a little experimentation I found that I could easily adjust the, sensitivity of each of my senses at will.

Relaxing after I finished testing myself, I waited for Amy to wake up, figuring that she deserved to sleep as long as she wanted, especially considering how hard and long she had worked to put me back together. Eventually a nurse, who was no longer wearing the blue spacesuit, brought in a two breakfast trays, one after the other, with real food, instead of the usual liquids. She smiled at the sight of Amy sleeping peacefully and quietly put each tray down on its own table before leaving again.

Again, I chose to wait for Amy to wake up before eating, especially since I didn't actually feel hungry, not like I had the day before, when it seemed that I couldn't actually put enough food in my stomach to keep feeling full. About an hour later, as I was finally starting to get sleepy again, Amy
stretched and woke up.

“Morning Taylor. How do you feel this morning?” she asked.

“Pretty good actually. I woke up a while ago and couldn't help but notice a few improvements.” I held my hand up so she could see it, “Notice the muscle and skin tone? Everything is like this.” I reached out and pulled her into a hug, “Thank you. Thank you so much. For everything.” Letting her go, I tapped my eyes and ears, but didn't say anything. Not out loud, but she could clearly see the gratitude in my eyes.

As she adjusted the bed so she was sitting up, I pulled my tray table over with almost no effort, feeling as strong as I had ever felt, so that I could reach the food and begin eating. Following my lead, she did the same, but just sighed at the sight of the hospital breakfast.

“I swear, I’ve had more of these breakfasts than I can count. I know that they’re healthy and balanced nutritinally, but really, I’d rather have a bowl of Cheerios or Life instead.”

I laughed at her, but just kept eating the food, enjoying it, even cold, after all of the liquid meals I had eaten recently.

Taking our time, we finished everything on the trays before setting them aside. Amy then took my hands and adjusted my metabolism and immune system so that I would continue to heal at an accelerated rate, explaining just what she was doing as she did it. I found that I could actually feel the changes as she made them, almost seeing the actual movement of the cells and the changes to my systems. I didn’t actually understand what she was doing, but I could feel it.

I also felt it when she put in a kind of mental 'switch' that would let me turn the enhanced metabolism on and off at will. Once she was done, she had me try the switch several times until she was sure that it was under my complete control.

“Okay, try to deactivate your appetite, both it and the rest of your accelerated metabolism should turn off when you do.”

It took me over a dozen tries, even with Amy’s coaching, before I managed to turn off my appetite the way she wanted me to. Turning it all back on was just as hard; however once I had succeeded, it became easier each time I did it. I spent the next 10 minutes or so just practicing turning my accelerated digestion and metabolism on and off, before Amy was satisfied that it was firmly under
my control.

Implementing the latest changes and ensuring that I had full control of my systems took us until almost 10:00 am. When we had finished with all of our work, Amy got up and dressed herself, then headed out to the nurse's station to start my discharge process and call my dad.

While she took care of the paperwork, a doctor and two nurses came in to check me over, apparently for legal reasons, as well as to pull out the various tubes and disconnect all of the sensors that were stuck to my body, something I hoped to never have to do again; it was slightly painful and quite embarrassing. After they were done, one of the nurses brought in a bag of my clothes that my dad had left for me. She helped me with another sponge bath, though this time I was able to wash myself, except for my back, which was a definite improvement. Getting dressed was a lot easier than it had been before, and all she had to do was hand me the next item I needed to put on.

After dressing myself, the nurse carefully helped me out of the bed for the first time in almost a week; I was a definitely a lot stronger than I had been a week ago, but I still got shaky as I tried to do anything. Whether standing or walking, I was only good for a few minutes before I needed to sit and rest. But at least I was able to recover my strength faster, as it only took a few minutes to rest up before I could move again. As I practiced, it quickly became obvious that although I was better than before, I still had a long way to go before I was truly able to say that I had completely recovered.

While I was sitting to catch my breath, Amy came back in, with my dad right behind her.

“Dad!” I exclaimed, standing up as he grabbed me into a hug.

“Hey kiddo, you're looking a lot better than before.” He turned and looked at Amy, “I guess I have you to thank for this. So, thank you again. If you ever need anything, just call. If I can't do it, I'll find someone who can. Doesn't matter what it is, you ask and it’s yours.”

Amy looked a bit embarrassed by dad's words, but simply said, “Mr. Hebert it was no problem. Taylor was a very good patient, and she really needed my help, so…” She just shrugged. “It's what I do. And she deserved the best that I could do for her. I've already gotten her discharge paperwork started so she should be ready to leave shortly.”

With a quick smile for me she turned to leave, but then turned back to hand me a small piece of folded paper. “Taylor, here's my contact info. Remember what I said before; call me right away if you notice anything off, okay?”
I let go of dad and pulled Amy into a hug, “Thank you, I don’t have a cell phone, but I’ll send you an email with all my info as soon as I get home.”

About then a nurse brought in a wheelchair for me, which to be honest I was grateful for. As I sat down, Amy handed my dad a thick packet of papers and took the handles and started wheeling me towards the exit. Without any delays, we left the ward, took the elevator down to the main level, and headed towards the exit. Once we got to the exit, dad left to bring the car up and Amy pulled out her phone to send a quick text.

As she finished, she said, “I asked Vicky to pick me up and take me to school. Remember, call or text me any time, for any reason, okay?”

Grabbing her hand, I said, “I will. And you remember to take it easy, alright? Call me if you need anything, to talk, to vent, even if you need to get away for a while.”

Looking out the glass doors and seeing Glory Girl coming in for a landing, I remembered something she had mentioned once before, about Vicky's tendency to try a guilt her into double-dates, “And if she tries to set you up with another double date, tell her you already have one, then call me so I can meet you. We can go see a movie or go shopping or get something to eat. Anything really, just don't let her try to guilt you into anything you don't want to do.”

She just looked out at her sister, and sighed, “I'll try, it's just that, she's the only one of my family who even tries to be there for me.” She chuckled softly, “Even if she really sucks at it. At least she tries.”

“Good point. Still, if you don't want to go on another, what did you call it?” I gave her a sidelong look, “Date from hell, then use me as an excuse. Trust me, I won't mind at all.”

She just gave me a quick hug, then walked out through the doors and let her sister pick her up and take off into the sky. I watched for a couple of minutes until they were out of sight, by which time dad had pulled up and was coming in to get me. It only took a minute to get me into the car and for him to return the wheelchair inside, before we started for home.

Once we had left the hospital proper, dad finally asked me, “So how are you really feeling? I have to admit, you look amazing, especially with how you looked before.”

“Good. Really good. Amy…”
He interrupted me, “Amy? You call Panacea, Amy?”

“It is her name, you know. Besides, she asked me to. Considering that we pretty much shared a bed for the last week, even if I don't remember most of it, formality would have been pretty pointless.”

“Oh, okay. Wait… you shared a bed? Why?” He glanced over at me and grinned, “And is there something you want to tell me? Hmm?”

“Daaad! It wasn't like that,” I didn't whine, really. “Mostly, from what she told me, whatever was wrong with me, the infections I mean, pretty much required constant monitoring and correction. It took her three days to actually fix the worst of them, and then another to restore me to normal.” I paused a moment in thought, then went on, “At least mostly. She boosted my digestive system and metabolism so that I can keep healing for the next month or so. In fact, somewhere in that pile of papers she gave you should be a recommended diet that I need to eat. She warned me that I will need to eat a lot more than normal, about two to three times normal, so expect our grocery bills to be higher for the next month or so. After that it should settle back to normal.”

“I see. And she boosted both your digestive system and your metabolism, right? So you will be getting even more out the food you eat, than most people do?”

“Yes. She actually started it yesterday, and had me eating a full meal every hour, on the hour, from about eight in the morning until eleven last night. She just needed to make sure I had enough nutritional energy to let her force my body to heal properly. As she explained it to me, some healers can actually generate biomass to replace any lost due to injury or illness, but that she can only work with what the patient has. Which meant that one of the first things she did was have them start giving me transfusions and constant IV feedings.”

“And that was so she had the material to actually heal you with, right?”

“Uh huh,” I answered, semi-coherently as I found myself distracted by the colors that I could now see and all of the detail I was noticing for the first time with my improved vision.

“Hah, sounds like TANSTAAFL.”

“Tenstaffle?” I turned back to my dad, “What language is that? German? Russian? What does it mean?”
“It's from a book your mother made me read back in college; The Moon is a Harsh Mistress. It's not from a different language, it's actually an acronym, it means: There Ain't No Such Thing As A Free Lunch. That there is nothing for free, you always have to pay for what you get, one way or another. You should read the book; it's actually quite good, even if it was written back in the sixties.”

“Sixties? Fifty years ago? Seriously?”

He looked over at me and smiled, “Seriously. It really is a good book, even if it was written long before Scion showed up and cape powers appeared.”

Not long after that, we pulled into our driveway and with only a little help, I made my way into the house and took a seat on the sofa to rest. Dad dropped the papers on table, and headed into the kitchen.

“Should I assume that you are getting hungry now, or do I have some time before your stomach starts to growl?”

“Now would be good, though I can wait if you need to pick up some food,” I called back.

“Tuna fish okay?” He asked me.

“Sure, as long as there is enough for both of us.”

“There's plenty, I made some up last night. Two sandwiches do for you?”

“You're kidding, right? I'll probably need at least four, depending on what else we have to go with it,” I answered back as I came into the kitchen, hoping to set the table while dad made the sandwiches. Getting a couple of plates and cups out of the cupboard, I took them to the table before opening the fridge looking for some juice or milk.

Dad just shook his head and placed the first two sandwiches on my plate and went back to making more toast. “There should be some macaroni salad on the bottom shelf of the fridge,” he told me. “Just set it on the table and we can dish it up as we go.”

“Okay,” I replied, looking again in the fridge, and finding it behind some soda bottles.
After he had finished making our sandwiches, he grabbed a couple of forks and a serving spoon and we sat down and started eating. I think, even after telling him how much I would need to eat, it shocked him to see me not only clear my plate, but get up and make another two sandwiches before he had even finished his first one. He just shook his head in disbelief and went back to eating. Finally, after four sandwiches, two large helpings of macaroni salad and three glasses of milk, I actually felt full, though I wondered how long that would last.

When we had both finished eating, dad started leafing through the papers he had brought home while I cleared the table and put all the perishables away. After rinsing the dishes, I put them in the dishwasher and left them until later. Figuring that I could run it after dinner, I left the kitchen and went back to the living room, thinking that I could do some reading and take a nap if I got too tired.

A few minutes later, dad came out with the sheet of recommended foods and handed to me, asking me,

“Let me know which of these things appeal to you, and I'll pick some up after work.”

I grabbed a pencil and started marking the items that I thought would be easiest to make, as well as least expensive, figuring that I could work up a menu of easy meals once I had some basics to work with. I made a point of choosing things that could be worked into several meals, ones that we both would enjoy, figuring that I could make simple meals to snack on during the day, and save the major meal for dinner when both of us would be eating. I also planned on making lunch in the morning, so that dad could at least enjoy some of what we needed to buy for me.

After I finished the list, dad gave me a hug and headed off to work and I sat down at my computer and pulled out the assignments I had been working on when Armsmaster and Miss Militia had interrupted me last week.

I ended up working for almost two hours, before my stomach started growling and I realized that I was hungry again. Sighing, I went into the kitchen and started a can of beef vegetable soup then pulled out the salad from earlier and finished it off while the soup heated up. Checking the bread box revealed that there were only the end pieces left, so I just buttered them and had them with the soup and some water.

After I had finished eating, I cleaned up my mess and started putting together something for dinner. Based on what we had in the cupboards and the freezer, I decided that my best bet was a mostly vegetarian chili, because while there was only one small steak in the freezer, I had plenty of beans and veggies. The steak may have been a bit freezer burned, but I figured that once it had a chance to simmer in the pot for a few hours it would be more than tender enough. Browning the meat while I assembled the rest of the chili only took about ten minutes, after which I just left on the stove with the burner turned on LOW. Other than stirring it once or twice an hour, it was pretty
much done until dad and I were ready to eat.

Heading back out to the living room, I took a look over my school work and decided that I had reached a good point for stopping, saved it and closed up all of my files. I put my books away on the shelves. I was trying get into the habit of being organized, of always putting things away when I was done with them.

I sat back down on the sofa and started working through the exercises Amy had shown me, quickly finding that I could see the lights and hear the sounds that the doctors had originally told me were side effects from my infections; and that I had feared were just proof of my insanity, although Amy had been very clear that they were nothing of the sort. She explained that those types of minor hallucinations were caused by micro-scars on the brain, and that by the time she had finished eliminating all of the infections and healing the residual damage, there was nothing like that remaining.

As for my fear of insanity, she swore that my brain chemistry was fine, a little more active than most non-capes, but still well within the normal range. As far as she could tell, and she had a lot of experience at seeing people with all types brain chemistry, I was fine.

Although nothing seemed really clear yet, I could tell that I was seeing something. I still wasn't sure if it was a Thinker ability, which seemed to cover enhanced senses as well as clairvoyance and precognition, or if it was a type of Master ability, where I was actually using the senses of others, either animal or human.

I decided to concentrate on just vision, and see if I could focus it down to only one thing, since it seemed to be an almost kaleidoscope of images, that constantly moved.

Doing this was a lot harder than it sounded, as well as much more tiring. So much so that I could only do it for ten minutes or so, before I needed to take a break and relax before I could try again. After every two attempts, I would go into the kitchen and carefully stir the chili, before making another attempt. Finally, just before five o'clock, I actually had a momentary success, when my vision snapped into focus for just a few seconds, letting me see the outside of the house, from nearly ground level. It took me a couple of seconds to realize that I was seeing through the eyes of what was probably a cat or a small dog. I couldn't tell for sure because I lost the connection before I could really see anything except the side of the house.

“Okay, that's pretty much a Master ability. Next I'll have to see if I can make whatever creature I am seeing through do anything. If so, that will definitely make it a Master ability. Then I can see what types of animals I can connect with, and take it from there.”

Looking at the time, I decided that rather than do any more work on my parahuman power, I would
just write up my conclusions and plans, then make some biscuits or rice to go with the chili, maybe both. Taking about 5 minutes, I wrote everything up on a simple text file and saved it to a flash drive that had come with the computer. A moments thought convinced me that, though the original impulse was just from my paranoia, it still made good sense. For now I kept the flash drive in the folder with the software disks, figuring that I could find a better hiding place later.

Ensuring that everything was put away and properly shutdown, I headed to the kitchen to begin my final preparations for dinner. Taking a look through the cupboards I found a large bag of rice, as well as everything I would need to make a scratch batch of drop biscuits. Setting the bag of rice to the side since it would only take about 15 minutes to make; I started mixing the biscuit dough so that it could rise for a bit before dad got home. Just before six o’clock, dad pulled into the driveway and came into the house with the first armload of groceries.

------------------------------------------Legion*** Danny ***Legion------------------------------------------

As Danny left the house to head into a short day at work, he paused, worried about leaving Taylor alone the first day home from the hospital, but taking a deep breath, he forced himself to get in the car and drive away.

*I have to trust that she’ll call for help if she needs it, and honestly she looks better than she has in a long time. Panacea really is a miracle healer.*

I pulled into an empty spot outside my office, parked the car and headed in. As I walked through the doors, I greeted some of the other workers, stopping occasionally to explain that Taylor was home again, and feeling much better. I finally was able to get to my office and began working through some of the backed up work from this morning. Fortunately, I had been able to spend most of Sunday catching up on my backlog, so there was only a little bit left to do.

I worked diligently for almost two hours, clearing my desk of everything that I could finish today, so I would have time to make a phone call that I was both looking forward to, and fearing what I might hear.

I pulled out the card, dialed the number and waited.

*“Miss Militia, how may I help you?”*

*“Miss Militia, this is Danny Hebert, is this a good time to talk?”*
“Certainly Mr. Hebert, in fact I was about to call you to give you an update.”

“All right, what’s up?”

“First, as I’m sure you know, Panacea finished healing your daughter this morning, and has declared that all of her physical injuries and illness have been successfully treated. In addition, she expects her to continue to improve and will be checking up on her periodically to ensure that.”

“Yes, she was very clear when I spoke with her this morning. Taylor is happy to be home again, and was working on her schoolwork when I left.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Secondly, this concerns the legal issues, so please keep it to yourself, at least until the investigation is finished and the warrants are ready to be served; Shadow Stalker has already been transferred to a Simurgh Containment Zone, and contrary to her current belief, she will be facing many additional charges in due time.”

“Good, she deserves that and more.”

“Indeed. As for the school, that is a bit more … difficult. We are coordinating with the Brockton Bay PD, and making sure that everyone who is interviewed is thoroughly gagged, and well aware of just how severe the consequences will be if anyone at all finds out about the investigation. The PD can’t enforce that level of silence, but the PRT can…and will. Two people within the PRT have been found guilty of covering up Shadow Stalker’s actions, and they have implicated several members of Winslow’s faculty as well. It’s at least a good starting point.”

“All right, what’s next then?”

“Certified copies of all depositions and evidence are being prepared for you, so that you will be able to file any civil suits you wish. Personally, I hope that you do; your daughter, Taylor, suffered horribly, and she is owed compensation from those who wronged her.”

“Well, I am already intending to bring civil suit against the school, faculty and the girls, or their families, who were involved in the vicious attack that Taylor suffered, as well as the prolonged bullying campaign. I am still uncertain about the PRT though, I mean, I’m not sure how much you could know of what was going on at Winslow, since most of the Wards go to Arcadia. They do, right? Go to Arcadia I mean.”
There was a long pause before she continued, “Please don’t discuss this with anyone else, but no, normally some of the Wards would be attending Arcadia, while others would be assigned elsewhere. However, here in Brockton Bay the decision was made four years ago to consolidate the Wards. It simplifies many things, not the least of which is protecting the Wards civilian IDs and maintaining proper oversight. However, Shadow Stalker was very clever in preventing her transfer, for reasons that are now clear. That has led to some charges that she will find impossible to refute, which carry very long prison terms.”

“Good. Is there anything else I should know about?”

“Perhaps. Of all the staff and faculty at Winslow, only two have been truly cooperative, and so far in our investigation we have found that both of them had complained about the bullying Taylor was suffering, but had been threatened to keep them quiet. How that will work out for them in the end, I cannot say.”

“Interesting. Well, if there’s nothing else, I’ll let you get back to your work and I’ll get back to mine.”

“Very well, have a nice day.”

Hanging up the phone, I stood and left my office to check on how things were going in the shops, as I planned to leave a little early today so that I could pick up some groceries, because if Taylor needed as much food as she ate for lunch, we had nowhere near enough at home.

Around 4:30 I left for the grocery store. I intended to make it a fairly quick stop; working off the list I had, I tried to pick up most of the items Taylor had circled.

Even so, I still didn’t get home until just after 6:00 pm. Opening the back door, I brought the first load of groceries in and set them on the table.

“Evening Taylor, something smells good. What's for dinner?” dad asked as he set the bags on the table.
“Chili, with rice and biscuits on the side. What did you get, and how much more is there?” I replied as I started emptying the bags and putting away the food.

“Just a couple more loads, I figure that we can write up a proper list and do a full shopping trip on Saturday. That will give me a chance to see just how much we'll need to get, as well as clean out the cupboards and fridge before we go.”

“Sounds like a plan to me. I can tell you already that I'm going to need to learn how to bake bread; because I need to eat so much, that it would be a lot cheaper to bake it myself, rather than buy it.”

“Plus, home baked goods always taste better than store-bought.” He set down the next load and asked, “Do we need to pick up a good cookbook?” He paused a moment in thought, then went on, “I'm pretty sure that, other than your mom's recipe cards we don't actually have a one.”

“I think you're right, at least I don't remember seeing one on the book shelves. I will need to look through her cards and see what I can do with them while making up a grocery list.” I replied. Even before the locker, I had been cooking most of our meals, usually using mom’s recipe cards or ideas from some PBS cooking shows. Given how much I needed to eat now, making the effort to really learn how to cook, even if it was just being able to follow the recipes in a cookbook, would be worth my time. I would have to check the library or some used bookstores to see what I could find.

When dad brought in the last load, he told me he would finish putting them away so that I could finish making dinner. As he put the last of the groceries away, he got out my meal sheet and a note pad and started writing up a shopping list.

Starting the rice first, I turned on the oven and started dropping the biscuit dough onto our two cookie sheets while he told me how his day at the Dock Workers Association had gone. When he finished, I told him what I had done that afternoon, leaving out my cape practice.

I figured that I wouldn't tell him about being a cape until I had a good grasp on my powers, what I could do with them, as well as what I intended to do with them. Dad was a proud man and I wasn't sure how he would take it if I told him I wanted to use my powers to make money to contribute to the family finances. Speaking of which, I might have to withdraw my application for disability, because with all the healing that Amy given me, I couldn't see how I would still qualify.

The more I thought about it, the more I decided to wait and see. At the very least I would talk to my friends at the Central Library and see if they had any advice. So far, they hadn’t steered me wrong, and I hoped that they wouldn’t do so now.
Over dinner I described how I wanted to start exercising, at least a little, so that as I healed and got better, I would be able to get into better shape. Dad was a little concerned at first, but I set his mind at ease when I explained that I just planned on starting with simple stretches and calisthenics and working up to walking around the block and eventually building up to a jog, I figured that would be enough for now.

Dad complimented me on dinner, although he did tease me a bit over how much I had made as well as how much I ate. I just shrugged it off and explained that I had planned for plenty of leftovers, since I apparently needed to snack every couple of hours, even with big meals. I also asked him if it was okay if I made big casseroles and soups, instead of the types of meals that I normally made, and if so, did he have any preferences. He suggested a few items, but mostly left it up to me. After dinner, dad put away the left-overs while I cleaned up the kitchen and started the dishwasher.

After the clean-up was finished, we sat down in the living room and watched tv for a while, before heading to bed around nine o'clock. I took a minute to remember how to turn my metabolism back down, and found that as soon as I had done so, I started to fall asleep without any tossing or turning.
The next morning was the beginning of my new routine. It was simple, but intense, taking full advantage of my improved health. I started at 6:30 in the morning with a shower and making breakfast for dad and I, then I made and packed his lunch for him.

After he left for work I would start my baking. I normally baked twice a week, making both bread and desserts, usually pies or pastries. I would start a large batch of bread dough, and while it was rising I would clean the kitchen and start making my desserts. Once those were baking, I would begin prepping whatever main dish we were going to have for dinner; which once dad had picked up a large 8-quart slow cooker was easy to start and forget.

When I had all of my baking and dinner work started and under control, I would work on my homeschooling assignments until lunch time, with a couple of pauses for big snacks. I focused first on my high school studies, aimed specifically at completing my GED as soon as I could. Lunch was usually soup, salad and sandwiches while I either baked the bread that had been rising during the morning or did laundry while eating.

The afternoon started with either my college level studies or professional studies, I alternated them each day. With the possibility of testing out of some of my undergraduate courses, I was focused on the courses that were considered Gen Ed requirements. The College Level Exam Program had over 30 different exams, that covered not only the major topics but some specific course exams. They were divided into 5 general areas, which covered a huge amount of an undergraduate college education. I just wasn’t sure how much the different colleges would accept.

Professional studies for me was almost exclusively computer studies of one sort or another; programming, network security, network admin, or machine level hardware. Certifications were something I was still looking into, but some of Mrs. Knotts books mentioned gaining Certification, such as A+, Microsoft Expert, Cisco Networks, and Linux Admin, and had general outlines of what they covered.

I didn’t know which, if any, I was going to look into first, since there seemed to be some very high startup costs, before even trying to learn the material. I think the easiest to do would be to gain my Linux Admin and Security and MS Office Specialist certifications because the software seemed to
be open-source, or free. Which is just about all I could afford.

From three o’clock on, I concentrated on identifying and developing my parahuman abilities. I decided that I didn’t want to use the term ‘cape’ because of the implications of choosing to be either a ‘hero’ or a ‘villain’ and the constant conflict that would involve. If I was not going out in a mask and costume, than I was a parahuman, not a Cape.

Twice a week I would go shopping. By that I mean I would map out 3 or 4 thrift stores and at least 2 used bookstores and do some careful and frugal shopping. I found some older cookbooks that were in decent shape, and had some really good general cooking tips as well as some books on sewing and home repair as well. I have to admit that I did pick up a few novels too, just for the change of pace.

Careful searching of the thrift stores let me find some really nice stainless baking pans for about a tenth of what I would have paid even at Wal-Mart, as well as some sewing items to fill out mom’s sewing kit. I brought her sewing machine down from the attic and set it up in the guest bedroom, but I wouldn’t be able to use it until I had a chance to get it cleaned and adjusted.

I lucked out and found two nice leather jackets for only $35 each, one that would be a little large for me, and the other in dad’s size, the outer shells were in decent shape, though the linings for both were quite torn and ripped. I was hoping to be able to replace the liner, with a nicely padded one, so that he could wear it during the winter, I hoped that I would have it finished in time for his birthday in August. Mine could wait until later for me to repair it.

To ensure that I made the most of Amy's hard work, I did a set of exercises from an exercise book that I found in a used bookstore. Apparently the Canadian Air Force had developed this exercise program for both men and women that only took about 11 or 12 minutes each day to complete. They had apparently developed it back in the ‘50’s, and were still using a version of it today.

I adapted it so that I was doing both routines, using the men and women's exercises without duplicating anything; it ended up taking just about 15 minutes to do a complete set, so I went through the routine before each snack or meal. After about a week, I added in walking/running outside after breakfast and again after lunch, instead of just the running in place.

For now, I did a 30 minute running routine, 15 minutes out, than I would turn around and come back rather than a set distance. All I wanted to do at the moment was to slowly work up to getting good enough to run non-stop, after that I planned on increasing my speed until I could run full-speed, both ways, without stopping. I would worry about tracking my actual speed and distance later, once I had hit my first goal of 30 minutes of continuous running.

Around 5:30 I would stop all of my work, make sure I had put everything away, and then finish all
of the dinner preps so that dad and I could sit down and eat together and just learn to be a family again. My only real issue was that I was still hiding stuff from my dad. At least now I actually planned on telling him that I had powers, I was just waiting until Amy said I was fully healed again and I had at least one non-combat job that I could do, preferably two or more so I had options when I did talk to dad.

When I finally got to the Central Library, I shocked them by being fully healed and looking completely normal, and even knowing that Panacea was considered to be the best healer in the world, they found it to be almost unbelievable. After double-checking the posted requirements for disability compensation, it was agreed that I should just let things progress normally, but if they requested further information, to have the hospital send them ALL of my records, and let them decide what to do. If they said no to the disability, I don’t think I would appeal, but I was almost certain to qualify for full health insurance coverage from Medicare.

Early on, I checked out two different cookbooks from the library, one for slow-cookers, and the other for baking, but not just breads, it included pastries, cookies, cakes and pies and had really good advice on baking in general, rather than just recipes. I ended up transcribing a lot of the best tips from both into a large notebook that I was using as my personal cookbook. I also got a list of blogs for cooking and housekeeping that I planned on subscribing to, hoping to get some good tips from them. If I didn’t, I figured that I could just unsubscribe.

Amy and I traded emails a couple of times a week, in between our face-to-face meetings. We just needed to make sure that we didn't put anything problematical in them, so they were mostly chatty and did let us get to know each other pretty well, we’d talk about what we were learning and if we had read or learned anything interesting or new. I didn't say anything about my progress with my new abilities until I could meet up with her in person, usually twice a week, every Wednesday and Sunday, normally at the boardwalk.

Our first meeting was the Sunday after I was released from the hospital. We met at the Public Library on the Board Walk. It was one of few that actually had Sunday hours, even if they were only from noon until 4:30 pm. She confirmed that I was healing well and that the mods she had started were progressing well, so she just made a few additional changes to my muscles and lungs.

After that first visit, on Sundays we would usually grab a bite to eat then go window shopping or watch a movie, usually one of the Earth-Aleph imports, since they were generally better, and then just talk about how things were going for both of us. It was nice to have someone to talk to, someone that wouldn't judge me and would just listen if I needed to rant, and who felt free to talk or vent to me as well.

Wednesday’s were shorter, so we would sometimes have a bite to eat, or meet at a library for a couple of hours, before separating to head for home and the hospital.
Amy had found that just holding hands with me for a few minutes was all she needed to do a full checkup on me and make some additional minor changes; and with practice she was able to hold a conversation or watch a movie while making the changes at the same time.

After Amy had finished my checkup and let me know how I was doing, she would then make some suggestions for how I could change my exercise routine to take into account my improving health. By the end of the second week, she let me know that I was cleared to begin actual weight training or other intense exercises. Once we finished with my check up, we would have some fun trying out ideas on how we could use our abilities in new and unusual ways. This is when we would brainstorm enhancements, weapons, and possible ways to leverage our powers for greater effect.

During my second week home, I had noticed that I was needing less sleep at night, even with a full day of studying and exercising, but Amy assured me that was normal with an accelerated metabolism, and that I should just try to find a sleep pattern that I was comfortable with, either going to bed later, or getting up earlier, whichever worked best for me. Eventually I settled out at about four and a half hours a night, going to bed around 10 and waking up around 2:30. I usually went downstairs to study quietly, trying not to disturb dad, but sometimes I would work in the basement on different projects.

We also discussed future research projects, most of which we couldn’t do anything about due to lack of funds and space; but some of our ideas were fascinating, trying to figure out ways to emulate powers or implant weapons or senses. It was a lot of fun, and I spent a lot of time at the library doing research into other animals that did things like electro-location, the way whales could dive underwater for almost an hour, how birds navigated; really anything that came to mind. I stored everything on a flash drive that I kept around my neck, until I could transfer it to my big flash drive that I kept hidden at home; after that I would reformat the flash drive until next time. Paranoia or good security practices?

I finally managed to talk her into trying out the Air Force routine I had found by demonstrating the Stage 1 exercises for women and giving her my copy of the book, and she started doing the exercises in the mornings before she had breakfast. I didn't know if she would keep it up long enough to really show results, but I was hopeful and tried to encourage her as much as I could. I was still trying to convince her to start running a few times a week, but no luck yet.

After only a couple of weeks of daily practice while staying in the house, I found that I could sense/control animals within about two hundred feet, and that I wasn't limited by species, but rather by size. I could control cats and small dogs, birds and reptiles, anything that weighed from about thirty pounds or so, all the way down to tiny bugs and worms.

One Sunday, when we had gone down to walk on the beach, I discovered that I could even sense
and control small fish. If nothing else, if I could boost my range enough, I might be able to get a job calling fish to the nets. After that, I started to practice keeping in contact with all of the creatures around me, whether I was sitting still or moving. Doing so while walking or running was hard, but I eventually learned how to do it automatically.

I also found that there didn't seem to be any limit to the number of creatures that I could link with; that I could control all of the animals in my range. I did have some issues with using their senses though; I found that the larger brains were easier to sense through, while trying to use a bugs' eyes was particularly difficult. Paradoxically, using an insect’s hearing, taste or touch was ludicrously simple. I had no idea why, just that it was. Powers, go figure.

With Amy though, when it came to biological control, her only real limitation seemed to be range; she was strictly limited to touch only, with one exception. She had learned, while treating my infections, how to modify the bacteria in the air she breathed and on her skin, to become tailored air-borne tools. She could create counter-agents for a disease, a fast-acting incapacitating agent, or a deadly disease. It took me a while, but I finally convinced her to use me as her test dummy, which let her practice her attacks, over and over again, to the point where even the barest touch was enough for her to do any of a number of attacks.

I also insisted she use me to test her air-borne techniques, though we normally only did this while alone, either sitting on the beach or in a quiet part of a park. Sleep, partial or full paralysis, pain, disease; the last two she hated to do, but I insisted, since she could and did heal me up immediately. It also gave her a chance to work on identifying and counteracting a disease quickly, though she was very careful to tailor her agents for extremely short lifespans, and no reproductive ability.

We normally saved the touch attack practice for when we went to watch a movie, taking seats in the very back, staying in the dark so that no one would notice if I slumped over or showed other odd symptoms due to our practice.

I had been thinking a lot about her range limitation, and since she insisted that her air-borne techniques needed to be a secret, a point that I whole-heartedly agreed with; the only workable alternative I could come up with was to use a living weapon. Like an extendable baton or a whip, only organic, and designed to let her powers work freely through it. She believed that both were workable, but refused to even try the whip option, believing that it would make her appear to be a villain. Unfortunately, she was hampered by not being able experiment freely, since she had no private, secure location that she could use. I invited her to come over to my house so she could experiment safely, but she wanted to have at least some idea for what her base biology would be before she did, as she wasn’t sure how often or how long she could visit.

I had been doing as much research as I could, looking for options that she could use. So far, I had three possibilities for her to work with, the first was simply coral. I hoped that she could use it as a
base material for all of her weapons. The second option was toxins: specifically the toxin from bullet ants or jelly fish, either of those would provide an extremely debilitating pain, and hopefully she could develop a non-lethal, ultra-fast acting variant. The last option that I had come up with was based on the electric eel. This could be modified into either a handheld stun gun, or a ranged taser, hopefully without needing any wires.

I was still tracking down sources and supplies for these materials, my best bet was coral. My hope was that I could set up one or two aquariums for cultivating coral that she could modify into different weapons. The other things were harder to get samples that she could work with, but I wasn’t going to give up. I hoped that we would be able to start on our weapons development soon. My thought was that if she could develop a weapon or two using these as a base she would be much safer, and if she got in trouble for possessing them, I would claim that I had developed them and given them to her for self-defense, and if the supply trail led to me, and the coral tanks were in my basement, it would be proof of my claim to have developed the weapons, thus keeping anyone from suspecting her expanded abilities.

-------------Legion*** Taylor/Amy ***Legion-------------

Sunday afternoon, about three weeks after I had been released from the hospital, Amy and I were enjoying an unseasonably warm and sunny day by sharing a pizza at an outdoor table on the Board Walk, when we were interrupted by her sister and a very handsome boy.

“Well, hello sis. So this is where you've been disappearing to lately.” She stopped and grinned at both of us, then continued, “And with who. I guess that explains why none of the guys I tried to set you up with worked out.”

At her knowing grin and teasing tone of voice, both Amy and I blushed. At first I tried to think of a way to explain that we were just friends, but then suddenly I was looking at Vicky as if I had never seen anyone so beautiful and desirable before in my life. In a blind panic at these strange and foreign feelings, I reached out to all of the creatures that I could touch within my range, throwing my mind and emotions away from what I instinctively considered an attack. As I did so I also reached over and grabbed Amy’s right hand with my left, and tried to somehow protect her from this attack. When I grabbed her hand she jumped in her seat, and looked back at me with a startled look on her face; but then she smiled at me and squeezed my hand back and said, “Stop it Vicky. Pull your aura back in, you’re making a scene, and it’s getting out of control.”

As Amy chastised her, Vicky looked embarrassed for a moment and said, “Oops. Sorry about that.” As she spoke, I could feel a pressure lighten and then disappear completely. She then looked around at all the bystanders, some of whom had started to head towards her, but most of them were just looking confused. Her date just shook his head and said, “You need to watch that Vicky. Amy's right, your aura is very strong, it can be overwhelming if you aren't used to it.”
Turning to me, he said, “Sorry about that, when she gets excited, sometimes her aura can get out of control.” Holding out his hand, he went on, “Dean Stansfield, nice to meet you.”

I glanced at Amy to make sure she was okay, then shook his hand and said, “Taylor Hebert, nice to meet you too.”

Vicky apologized again, saying, “I really am sorry about that, I didn't mean to do that to you; I was just so happy to see Amy actually socializing with someone of her own free will, since I usually have drag her along to meet people.”

“Vicky, you know I get uncomfortable in crowds or around strangers,” Amy said defensively.

“Yeah, I do. I just want you to be happy, to get you away from the hospitals and seeing patients all the time. I just wanted you to have some fun, maybe see that there's more to life than healing all the time. God knows I could never get you to go to any of the school events or any parties, but I guess you found someone to hang out with on your own, didn't you? Oh well, live and learn I guess.”

She glanced again at where our hands were still clasped on top of the table, smiled at us, and went on, “Anyways, I'll let you get on with your date, while Dean and I find somewhere else to eat and leave you two in peace.” With that she and Dean waved goodbye and walked off down the board walk, looking for a place to eat.

After they had left, I eased off my hold on the surrounding animals, and said “Sorry about that, I guess she just assumed that we are … dating. I hope it doesn't make you too uncomfortable?”

“No, it's fine. It's not like she's completely wrong, since I really don't like boys that way.” She squeezed my hand again, then let go and leaned forward and quietly asked, “What did you do? I could see that she had hit you pretty hard with her aura, but then you looked pissed for a second, and it was like she wasn't affecting you at all. And then when you took my hand, I couldn't feel her aura anymore either. Which is a first for me; I can always feel it when she amps her aura up, though it doesn't really bother me. Sooo, just what did you do? I mean it's not like you are naturally immune like me; you actually threw off the effects.”

I nodded and said, “When I felt her aura hit, I reached out to all of the animals in range and put my emotions in them instead of in me; which I didn't know I could do until right then. But when I grabbed your hand it was different, I could feel her aura trying to fill you up,” I paused a moment
in thought, then nodded my head, “Yeah, that sounds about right, it was trying get inside you. As for what I did, I guess I sort of wrapped myself around you and forced her aura away. Sort of. I guess. That's really the best way I can describe it; it felt a little bit like when you were healing me, and I could feel the changes. I just turned it around and did to you. Sort of.”

Amy giggled and nodded in agreement. “That sounds about right. I’ve had the same kind of problem when I try to explain how my power works. The English language really doesn't have the right words to describe how parahuman abilities work; so we have to fudge it with odd descriptions and analogies.”

She took a sip of her drink and had another bite of her piece of pizza. “I'll tell you something else that I noticed, when you wrapped yourself around me. I've healed a lot of people since I Triggered, both capes and non-capes, and not once has anyone ever been able to feel what I do, I mean, sure anyone can tell when I regrow tissue, but you can actually feel what I’m doing, on a fine level, not just the gross changes. And no one has ever been able to return the favor, to let me feel it when they use their powers. Because Taylor, when you were holding my hand just now? I could feel a sort of echo of the animals you were linked to, all of them.”

“Well, enhancing or changing someone’s powers, that’s pretty much the definition of a Trump, which we both know I have a middling rating in, while you have at least a mid-tier Master rating, but no Trump ability that we’ve noticed. However, I’ve never asked about combining powers or anything like that; nor have I ever heard anyone else ever talking about the possibility of doing that. And I don’t think that I'll be asking any questions like that, either, not where anyone other than you can hear me. I don't think either of us would like it if anyone, especially anyone nasty, found out, or even suspected what we can do, and decided to run some ‘tests’ on us. Not something I would look forward to.”

“No, a new career as a lab rat doesn't sound like much fun to me, either,” I replied. Like Amy, I went back to eating our lunch, while thinking about what we had just discovered about our powers, and what it might lead to in the future. Eventually we finished our pizza, though I do have to admit that I ate most of it.

We took a few minutes to clear our table and then we continued with our afternoon out. Amy showed me a couple of tiny clothing shops, tucked away in one of the side passages that poked off the boardwalk, away from the ocean. I actually enjoyed looking at new clothes, and even tried on a couple of outfits, but didn’t buy anything. I was still trying to be frugal, and wasn’t going to buy anything that I didn’t really need, even though it had become apparent to me that being in near-perfect health, unstressed by school and bullying as well as working out constantly, meant that I was actually having a growth spurt. I figured new clothes could wait until I found a way to earn some money, or I learned how to sew better. Which was now on my early morning list of things to
As the afternoon wore on, I finally brought up something else that I had been thinking about ever since meeting up with Vicky and Dean, “Amy, I was wondering if our ability to ‘echo’ with each other when we’re touching, you know where you can feel my creatures and I can feel you healing; means that you could use me to heal yourself, or even make the same kind of changes to yourself that you made to me. Do you think that’s possible?”

Amy looked surprised for a moment, then just thoughtful, before she answered slowly, “Maybe. If you're willing, maybe we could try it out. If it works, it would open up a lot of possibilities, for both of us.”

“Oh, what kinds of things are you thinking of?” I asked, my attention totally focused on her as we walked down the boardwalk.

“As you suggested, if I can ‘echo’ off of you, maybe I can heal and modify myself, and possibly I can learn to heal at range as well.”

I grinned at that and said, “Nice, very nice. I can think of some other combo-techniques we could try as well. Maybe I could learn to use some of your hidden implants, at least if you are within my range? And maybe, again with practice, you can learn to use my swarm sense?”

We tossed some of the different possibilities of what we could do together back and forth. Finally, I decided that this was as good a time as any, so I told her about my bio research.

“Amy, talking about this has reminded me of something I was looking into recently.”

“Oh, like what?”

“Well, I’ve been concerned that your powers are strictly touch-based, which means that if you had to defend yourself from an attacker, you might end up going into close melee with a Brute, or being picked off by a Blaster. Not something that makes me happy, let me tell you.”

“Alright, clearly you have something in mind; hopefully something better than carrying a gun. I really don’t like the idea of using a lethal attack, not for any reason.”
“I do actually. Several things. The first is coral; I believe that you could use that as the base material for any weapons that we design. I’ve already ordered some of the things I need to start growing coral in the basement. With that as a base material to work with, many weapons are possible. You will need to do the hard work of growing and modifying the coral for increased strength and hardness. I will work on some possible designs for different weapon options that we can work from. I was thinking of an extendable baton to start with. Since the coral is both organic and alive, you should be able to shape and modify it into any form you like. So you could give the tip a sharp point, just enough to get through clothing or armor, and then, BANG, you have them at your mercy. The second is to develop fast-acting, non-lethal toxins, perhaps based on jellyfish or bullet ants. Both of them are extremely painful, but not necessarily fatal. The last idea is based on the electric eel. Either a hand-held stun gun or a ranged taser, hopefully without the wires.”

I gave her a smug look and said, “Well, what do you think? Could you work with that?”

Amy just stopped for a minute, looking at me then got a big smile on her face, and jumped on me to give me a big hug. After a couple of minutes, she let me go, but kept her arm around my waist as we headed down the boardwalk.

What I didn't know, even with my creature linkage up, was that Vicky had spotted the two of us and was trying to stay out of sight while following us.

Eventually we wrapped up our conversation since we both had to go our separate ways and head home. Giving Amy another hug, I sat down to wait for my bus as she boarded her own and left to go home. I found that I was looking forward to meeting her on Wednesday, as she planned on taking a half day off from school so we could meet at my house and do some experimenting with combining our powers.

---------------------------Legion*** Vicky ***Legion---------------------------

After watching Amy and her girlfriend do some window shopping, I kept an eye on them as they headed for the bus stop. Sadly, other than one hug from Amy, they were both too discrete for any real PDA’s, which dropped my chances for any good blackmail to about zero. But at least I should be able to get some good teasing in.

As Dean drove me home, he looked over at me with a knowing look and asked me, “Vicky, you aren’t planning on teasing your sister about her friend, are you? You know how shy she is; you could really hurt her feelings, especially if you bring it up in front of your mom.”
“Mom? Why especially in front of mom? Why would that make any difference?”

He gave her a sidelong glance and said, “Seriously? You've never noticed how your mom gets on Amy, for just about everything? Sometimes, I would swear she's just looking for a reason to get mad at her.”

“No way. She'd never do something like that.”

“Vicky, you know I can read people’s emotions, right? Well, when your mom is around Amy, she's always on edge, your mom I mean, and it gets worse whenever your sister does any healing around her.”

“Huh. I never noticed that,” I said pensively.

Dean just laughed, “Vicky, you know I love you, but really sometimes you can be totally oblivious to what's going on around you. Especially when it's the people you love. You sort of figure that you love them, so everything has to be okay.”

“I'm not that bad, am I?” I asked plaintively.

“Vicky, you're not bad at all. You mean well and you just want everyone to be happy and have a good time. You just need to remember that not everyone is as outgoing and fun-loving as you are. Some people are just naturally quieter and prefer to NOT be the center of attention. Like your sister. Just try to give her some space to be herself. Cause you have to admit, she didn't seem to have any problems finding herself a nice friend, did she?”

“That's true, she didn’t, did she? So, being that you can see other people’s emotions, what can you tell me about her new friend?” I asked, worried that the other girl might break Amy’s heart.

“You know that I'm not going to give you any details about her girlfriend,” he said as he pulled to a stop outside her house, “not unless she's a danger or a threat.”

“I don't want any juicy secrets, well, actually I do, I'll just wiggle 'em out Amy, not you. I just want to be sure that she's not going to try and use Ames or something.”
“Okay then; I don't see her doing anything to hurt Amy, she seemed to genuinely like her. You, on the other hand. Whoa. Now don't take this the wrong way, but when you hit her with your aura, she *really* didn't like it. I think she thought you were attacking her or something, and once she broke free from the effects, she was seriously pissed at you. If she hadn't been more concerned about Amy, I think she would have come across the table to kick your ass.”

“What? No way, she's just a normal…isn't she? Doesn't she know who I am?” I asked in disbelief.

“As far as I know she is a completely normal girl. She knew who you were all right, she just didn't care. From what I could see, she thought you hurt Amy, and until she broke free of your aura and could see that Amy was fine, you were a threat and she was going to take you down. Or at least she was going to try,” Dean tried to explain.

“Wow, that's different. She was really going to try and attack me? For Amy? I wonder how long they have known each other?” I wondered, surprised that she could actually think about attacking me, usually people are sort of stunned the first time my aura hits them, even if it's just because my aura get out of control for a moment.

Dean shrugged and said, “I've no idea how long they've known each other, but yeah, she really would have attacked you if she had continued to see you as a threat to Amy. We both know that she couldn't even touch you; to be honest, I think even she knew she couldn't hurt you, it just didn't matter. Amy did.” He stopped for a moment's thought and then went on, “It didn't feel like obsession or anything like that, just that Amy is that important to her. And well, you aren't. To her, you don't even count.”

“I don't know if I'm impressed or shocked by that. It's certainly a first, though.” I said, before I noticed that Amy coming around the corner from the bus stop, and said, “Well, I guess that's my cue that it's time to head in. I'm going in with Amy, just in case you're right about mom giving her a hard time.”

Dean nodded then leaned over and gave me a kiss and said, “Good idea. I'll see you in school in the morning, alright?”

As I got out of the car, I leaned back in and said, “Sure thing, I'll probably drive her into school, it'll give us some time to talk by ourselves.” Slamming the door closed, I walked across the sidewalk and waited 'til Amy caught up and said, “Hey Ames, ready to head in?”
Boarding the bus to head home, I took a seat by the window and watched Taylor until the bus finally turned the corner and I lost my line of sight to the bus stop. Sitting back in my seat, I thought about the afternoon I had spent with Taylor, especially when Vicky had showed up.

_I don't know how or why it happened, but when Taylor broke Vicky's aura by using her Master power to shift her emotions away and out to the animals that she was linked with, she also shielded me from the aura as well. Which means that I'm NOT immune to it like I thought, but just really used to it. Which may also mean that my feelings for Vicky are caused by her aura and not because I'm a pervert, like I always feared. I'll have to watch carefully to see if my feelings change when I meet up with Vicky, and if they do then maybe on Wednesday, if things work out like I hope they do, we can figure out a way to shield us both from her aura, and maybe any other Master effect. Like Heartbreaker's or Valefor's. Because I think I would rather be dead than enslaved by someone like them._

Thoughts like these were enough to keep me occupied until my stop, so when the bus stopped, it felt like hardly any time at all had passed. I got off and walked around the corner and toward home, still thinking about Vicky’s aura. As I came up to the driveway, Vicky stepped around Dean's car and greeted me.

“Hey Ames, ready to head in?”

As I looked up at her, not having paid attention as I walked the last little bit towards home, I could feel the shift in my emotions, which both depressed and relieved me, since it was now obvious that Vicky’s aura really was affecting me all the time, just as soon as she came close to me.

“Sure Vicky; did you and Dean have a nice day?”

“Yeah, we did. We caught an early movie before we headed to the boardwalk to get something to eat. How did your da-ayy go?” Her stutter made it obvious that she had started to say 'date' but changed her mind mid-word.

Amy smiled in relief and said, “We had a very nice day. We did some window shopping and bought a couple of books before we picked up some pizza. It was especially nice since it was sunny and warm today, so we could eat outside. What movie did you see?”

“The latest Pirates of the Caribbean movie from Earth-Aleph. It was okay, but not as good as the first ones. Although Johnny Depp is seriously cute,” she replied as they walked up to the front
Opening the door, Amy asked, “And does Dean know that you think that Johnny Depp is cute?”

“Of course he does, just like I know he thinks Angelina Jolie is hot. They're both movie stars, so it's not like it matters.”

As they closed the door, their mother asked, “What doesn't matter?” And looking at the clock, she started to ask something, then visibly changed her mind to ask, “And did the two of you have a good time? Although I thought you were going out with Dean, Vicky?”

“Oh I did, we saw the new Pirates movie, which you know isn't Amy's style, so we met up later on the boardwalk. Amy just did some window shopping and picked up a couple of books, then we all ate later.”

I was surprised that Vicky was covering for me without being asked, and without telling a single lie, just some misdirection. It certainly made getting home a lot less stressful, although I suspect that she is going to tease me with a lot of questions about Taylor later that evening. Which was still a lot better than having Carol cross-examining me as if I was on the stand, digging for every little error or inconsistency.

I was equally surprised by Carol; once again she had obviously changed her mind about questioning me about my day out. Lately it seemed that she was trying to be more fair and consistent in how she treated me and Vicky, which I was still finding both odd and a bit disturbing. I had long since decided to just accept her new behavior; it was certainly a lot more pleasant and less stressful for me, so I wasn’t going complain or rock the boat.

It turned out I was right, Vicky did have a lot of teasing to get off her chest, although because she waited until we were both ready for bed and did it behind my closed bedroom door it wasn't too bad. I did manage to keep how I had actually met Taylor a secret, which was a surprise, considering I stayed in her room for almost a week. I had never done that before, and couldn't imagine doing it again, not for anyone else, anyways. I mostly described the non-cape topics that we talked about, and told her some of the tiny places we had found to eat and shop in, a couple of the movies we had seen. I think that by the end of it, she believed that we were right on the edge of formally dating, but that liking another girl was new for both of us, so we were being careful not to move too fast.

The worst of the teasing was actually when she complained that if I had just told her that I liked girls, she could have picked out some better date options, to which I reminded her that I had told her that I really wished she would stop trying to set me up with those boys. She just reminded me that there were a lot of cute girls at Arcadia who would have been happy to go on a date with me,
naming three girls off the top of her head. At which point I felt there was only one appropriate response. A pillow to the face. The resulting pillow fight was a lot of fun, and I was losing gloriously, when mo-Carol came in.

Even with her new attitude, I think it was only Vicky's admission that she had started it that kept me from being grounded.

As we picked up my room, I thought some more about what Vicky had been teasing me about, about liking girls, and how Taylor and I made such a cute couple, even if we weren't actually dating yet, and I realized that while I wouldn't mind if we dated, it wouldn't be fair to her to sneak up on her when she was thinking that we were just friends, friends who were working on our cape powers together.

Not two girls who were dating. For that matter, I had no proof, no hints even, that she might like girls too. The odds were a lot higher that she liked boys, even if she didn't have a boyfriend, then that she would be open to dating me. And truthfully, until I figured out how to keep Vicky's power from making me love her, I didn't think it would be right to try and date someone else. Instead I decided to focus on being her friend, not just her healer, but a good friend, the best friend I could be and just not worry about anything more. After all, I was still only 16, and I had plenty of time to grow up and figure out what I wanted out of life.

Before I turned out the lights and settled down for night, I sent Taylor an email from my phone, letting her know I was home safe, and that I would try to get Wednesday afternoon off from school so we could work together. Though I didn't say it, I figured that if I couldn't get permission, I would just skip. It's not like I wasn't passing all of my classes easily, and was usually at least a week ahead with my assignments. Just one of the advantages of being Panacea; having a complete syllabus for all of my classes, with all the assignments listed so that if I needed to leave to cover any medical emergencies or disasters, I wouldn't fall behind. They were also very flexible on rescheduling any quizzes or tests that I missed, even allowing me to take them via email when I needed to, like during Endbringer aftermaths.
The next morning I woke up as usual at 2:30, quietly dressed and went downstairs to the living room to get started on my studying. I picked out a text on AP Biology and started reading. At the same time, I reached out to all the creatures in range to enhance my multitasking and practice using their brains. For the most part, I let those that were sleeping, continue to do so, trying to use their resting brains without waking them. It worked fairly well, since I wasn’t pushing myself too hard yet.

While I was studying I also spent some effort thinking about what Amy’s sister had done to us with her aura and what we could do about it. I was pretty sure my Master power could help protect me, at least somewhat, if I realized it was happening, but what if I didn’t? Or what if the other Master could make me like what he did to me, so I wouldn’t want to fix it? This was going to take some experimenting, trial and error, to find out how to block any external influences.

Around 4:00 am I finished with my book, and when putting it away and picking out my next choices, it occurred to me that I needed a way to really leverage my multitasking and control. Picking out two entry-level books on computer and network security, I sat down on the sofa to read.

Even as I started reading, I thought of ways that I could interface better with my computer; extra monitors to display multiple sources of information, maybe I could use cats or maybe birds, to watch the screens; keyboards and trackpads that could be activated by my bugs. In fact, bug controlled electronics of every kind were possible, I suppose, but I was going to need cash for equipment and other materials, as well as a way to get them without being tracked.

The biological materials I was gathering I could claim to need for my coursework, as well as being a way to hide Amy’s involvement in modifying diverse biology’s into weapons and tools. In fact, I could sell coral cuttings for income, which would be the perfect blind for what we were really using it for.

At that point I realized that I needed some more information, because it occurred to me that making costumes out of spider silk would be a relatively inexpensive way to develop body armor without leaving a paper trail. I booted up my computer and took a few minutes to set up a virtual machine that would use one of the free ISP’s that I had looked at, rather than my normal one. I couldn’t
ensure perfect untraceable browsing, but I should be able to keep it fairly anonymous, which I hoped would be good enough.

A few minutes browsing told me that my best bet for local resources was to use Black Widow spiders to spin dragline silk into thread and weave multi-layered cloth to use for our costumes. The sheer numbers that I thought I would need was shocking. At least 8000, preferably twice that number. I also looked into ways and methods for treating silk to hopefully improve its fire- and water-proofing, as well as how to dye it various colors.

“Damn. Where in the hell am I going to get that many spiders? And where am I going to keep them? I can’t keep them in the house, or anywhere someone might stumble on them, that many territorial spiders would be lethal to anyone.”

I took a moment to scan the surrounding houses and found two that were empty, but neither was truly abandoned, just empty and for sale. I need a lair or something nearby that I can keep under my control pretty much 24/7, or at least where I can isolate the Widows when they won’t be under my control. That’s the only way I can keep them from eating each other or escaping into the wild. Maybe Amy will have some ideas, I can ask her on Wednesday if I can’t figure out a working option before then.

Turning back to my computer, I looked up the chemical composition for bullet ant toxin, Asian Hornet sting, and blue ring octopus toxin and copied them to print out later, after dad left for work. Hopefully Amy could work with this information, because I couldn’t think of a way to get actual biological samples of them without getting PRT attention, or even arrested.

Around 6:00 am, I saved all my work, closed everything down and carefully cleared all my browsing and download history. Following one of the suggestions I had read about, I initiated a full disk defrag. I planned on looking into getting some disk compression and encryption software, as well as email encryption that Amy and I could use, but that was going to take some serious research to ensure I wasn’t getting something with nasty Trojans or backdoors built in. I was also going to look into ways to hide any traceable links when I was online. For now, staying out of sight and under the radar would have to do; security through obscurity.

Once I was done with all that, I headed to the kitchen and started preparing dinner, figuring that I could have it in the crockpot before dad came down for breakfast, which would make it easier for me to get to the library early today.

Once the orzo soup was started, I decided to use up the last of the bread by making French toast, leaving only enough to make some sandwiches for lunch.

Dad came down just as I took the pan of bacon out of the oven and started to transfer it to the
I turned and handed him a plate of French toast and said, “Nope, slept fine, I just woke up early is all. Did some studying and then started on breakfast. Your lunch is mostly leftovers, is that okay?”

He took the plate and headed to the table, saying over his shoulder, “Sure, better than eating off the lunch truck anyways.”

I just giggled as I brought the plate of bacon and my French toast to the table and sat down to eat. “Just don’t let the other guys try any, I don’t feel like feeding those bottomless pits every day.”

Dad just smiled back and started to eat. It was nice to be able to talk with him, without feeling like I had to watch every word and gesture. And hopefully, I would be able to tell him that I had triggered soon. I was finding it entirely too easy to lie to him, and I wanted to stop, it just wasn’t right.

A few minutes later, as I finished my first plate of breakfast, I asked, “Hey dad, do you know if anyone has some free weights for sale? Amy said I can start exercising more intensely and I thought that if we had some weights, I could start using them.”

He looked at me quizzically then said, “I guess you’re really trying to take advantage of the boosted metabolism while it lasts, huh? Sure, I’ll pass the word around today at work, and see if anyone wants to get rid of some. Any preference for how much weight?”

“He just chuckled and said, “Who knows, maybe I’ll start lifting weights too.” He patted his belly and said, “The way you’ve been feeding me, I better do something or I gonna put on a ton of weight.”

I just rolled my eyes at him and said, “I doubt it, I’m the one who’s eating all the food; you don’t even take seconds most meals. Of course, that just means more for lunch and snacks the next day, I’ll need to be careful when my metabolism slows back down so I don’t explode into a baby killer whale.”
Dad laughed again, which was a nice change from the way things had been for such a long time. Finishing the last of his bacon, he cleared his spot and put his dishes in the sink before heading for the living room to grab his jacket. I got up and pulled his lunch from the fridge and handed to him as I sat back down to finish my breakfast.

He dropped a quick kiss to the top of my head and left through the back door, heading for the car to drive in to work.

Once I finished breakfast, I cleaned up the kitchen and started my baking; once the bread dough was rising, I started on some desserts, just a couple of pies and a batch of oatmeal cookies. As soon as I finished preparing them, I preheated the oven, then started on my first set of exercises. 15 minutes later, I put the pies in and left on my morning run.

Thinking back to my thoughts this morning, I stretched out my senses as far as I could, specifically looking for where the Black Widows were lairing, so that I could gather them at a later date, once I had a plan for managing them. I varied my route back so I could check a different area, and found a total of about 2,334 Black Widows within about 5 miles of my house.

Walking into my kitchen, I checked the pies and saw I had enough time for my shower before I needed to take the pies out, so I ran upstairs and grabbed clean clothes and jumped into the shower. Even having to wash my hair, I still made it back down in time to take the pies out and slide the first batch of cookies into the oven. Although I sort of missed my long hair, I had to admit that it was a lot easier to take care of now that it was shorter. I set the timer for 12 minutes and went to get the library books that I needed to return and pocketed the list of books and videos I wanted to check out.

Checking the clock, I saw that I had more than enough time to finish my baking and still catch my bus to get to the Central Library as it opened. I went back to my shelves and grabbed my chemistry book and lab workbook, figuring I could at least plan my next labs for this afternoon; I did take a couple of minutes to record the results of my run and exercises before I started on my schoolwork.

Just as I finished reading through the procedure and laying out my lab record sheet, the timer went off so I stopped, removed the cookies and transferred them to the cooling racks. Putting the next batch in only took a few minutes, and I was back to working on my chemistry. I did this for the next 45 minutes until all the cookies were finished and cooling, before putting my chemistry books away and grabbing my jacket and purse and heading for the bus.

Riding the bus, I thought about what we would be able to do if we could actually meld our powers together. It gave me hope that we could at least give Amy some of the same enhancements that she
had given me. If we could, I would definitely need to encourage her to push herself to maximize the benefits, just like I was. Maybe I could even convince her to start running a couple times a week, every little bit would help. Having some weights to work with would be a big help for both of us to achieve our max potential.

When I got to the library, I first returned my books then looked for the items I wanted to check out. Once I had collected the books and videos I wanted, I signed up for an internet pc. What I was looking for was some internet resources for computer security; white papers, ebooks, college articles, really anything that looked useful. I was also able to find and download 3 different programs for encrypting files and emails that were highly rated on different tech sites. Hopefully they would help me stay invisible, or at least unnoticed.

I left after two hours, getting back in time for lunch and to start baking the bread. As the bread was baking, I ate my lunch and started working on my computer studies, as well as transferring all of the files I had downloaded onto my computer, so that I could sort them and install the ones I wanted to use.

While I was working on the computer, I decided to work on a different aspect of my multitasking; I found a stray cat and brought it into the house so I could use her to help me with this experiment. I removed all of the parasites before bringing it in, both internal and external, and would ask Amy to check the cat over on Wednesday if this experiment worked, just to make sure she was healthy. I would set up some food and water in the basement, as well as a comfortable, locking cage to keep the cat in while I was out of range. I planned on letting the cat out regularly, rather than getting a litter box, though I wasn’t sure if that would work out.

I set up two books on improvised book holders, the one on the right was my AP Biology text, while the one on left was a college level history book on the origins of the Islamic faith, specifically covering the century before Mohammed’s birth and the 200 years after that. I was using the cat to turn the pages and read the Biology text, while I was reading the history book, and so far it seemed to work fine. I suspected that I could do a lot more, but I would need another animal for each book I wanted to read or ebook that was displayed.

Even with the cat helping, I could only read so fast, I couldn’t read a-page-at-glance unfortunately. But even so, I had to call this a successful experiment. As usual, I stopped work around 5:30 to start dinner.

While dad and I ate, I asked if Amy could come over Wednesday afternoon, and possibly stay for supper. He thought for a moment, then nodded and said, “That won’t be a problem, since I already had planned to visit with Kurt and Lacey on Wednesday evening after dinner, so that will work out just fine. I put up a couple of notices asking about any free weights and asked some of the guys to pass the word around as well.” He paused to take a few bites then continued, “I also bought a second hand freezer and Kurt and another guy will be helping me move it in on Thursday, so it should be ready to start filling on Saturday, when we can make a big grocery run.”
I smiled and said, “I’ll start making sure the cupboards are ready, and clear a spot in the basement. Oh, is it an upright or a chest freezer, and how big?”

“I think it’s about 18 cubic feet, and it’s a chest style.”

“Thank you so much dad, this is going to be great.”

When Wednesday finally came, I was practically jumping out of my skin waiting for Amy to arrive. She called me around 11:30 to let me know she was on her way and that the bus should get to my stop at 12:15 or so, and I told her that I would meet her there and walk her back to my house. I also let her know that I had already made lunch and that we could eat before we got started on our work.

I spent the next half hour running around the house, trying to make sure that everything was clean and ready for her visit until it was finally time to meet her bus.

Walking to the bus stop only took me about 5 minutes, and then I had to force myself to sit quietly until she got there. When her bus arrived and she stepped down, I still had to hold myself back from just running over and giving her a hug. I couldn’t stop myself from standing up and smiling at her through and calling out, “Hi Amy, I’m really glad you made it.” As I walked up to her, I went on, “Ready for some lunch before we get started? I made a beef stew and biscuits, I hope you like them.”

She smiled back and hung her book bag off her shoulder and replied, “That sounds really good, especially on a chilly day. And definitely better than the tomato soup and grilled cheese they were serving today.”

At that we both started walking towards my house, just chatting about some of the local goings on, nothing of any real importance, saving those things for when we were more private. As we talked, I practiced my sensing abilities by monitoring everything around us, looking for anyone or anything that seemed to be watching us, as well as trying to push my range limit out past my current radius of about 300 feet.

When we got home, I took her coat and bag and gestured for her to take a seat. As she sat, I filled a bowl with stew for her and took the basket of biscuits that had been warming from the oven and
brought them both to the table.

“What would you like to drink, we have water, juice and milk, is that okay?” I asked her.

“Milk please,” She replied as she sliced open a biscuit and spread butter on both halves.

I served myself a bowl of stew and brought it and the carton of milk to the table before seating myself and starting to eat.

After a few bites, she paused and said, “You made the stew and biscuits both from scratch, didn't you. I mean, it's obvious that neither of these are from a can, they taste far too good.”

I nodded and swallowed and then said, “Yes, I did. As much as I've been eating lately, we could never afford to buy prepared foods. It may take longer, but working from basic ingredients is a lot cheaper, and I think it's a lot better tasting. Plus I can try different seasonings and ingredients instead of what the recipe calls for, and it often ends up tasting better. At least my dad thinks so.”

Amy nodded her head and said, “I would have to agree, my dad does most of the cooking for us, and I always thought what he makes on a regular, normal day is a lot better than what mom makes for her dinner parties and special occasions, she just mostly follows the recipes. And I’ve always felt that homemade is much better than the food we get served at most restaurants. It may not be as fancy or pretentious as some of the dishes served at the expensive places, but it's usually a lot more appetizing.” She gestured at her bowl of stew, “Just like this.”

I blushed lightly at her complement and said, “Thank you,” as I got up to refill my bowl with more stew.

By the time we had finished eating, we had settled on a basic plan for our experiments for the afternoon. Clearing the table, Amy put the milk and butter away while I put the biscuits back in the oven, turned it off and then put the rinsed dishes into the dishwasher.

As Amy sat down on the sofa, I brought the cat up from the basement and explained what I had done with her and asked if she could check the cat and verify its health.

Amy held her hands out and the cat jumped up on her lap and settled down, letting Amy pet her. As the cat purred contentedly, Amy looked at me and asked, “Are you controlling her, or is she
really this friendly?”

“A little of both, actually. I’m linked to the cat, but only slightly directing her, most of her behavior is all her, not me,” I explained as I took my seat next to Amy.

She nodded and looked down at the cat for a moment then said, “Actually, she’s in very good shape, no parasites or diseases, no injuries and her eyesight is decent.” She looked around the room and then asked me, “Are you going to have her read a book while we work, or just wait until we’re done?”

“I was planning on letting her rest, so that I can focus everything on our work. I don’t want to risk any accidents until we are comfortable with this and sure that it will work.” As I spoke the cat jumped down and ran across the room to the recliner and curled up there to nap in the sun.

We reached out and clasped our hands together, and started using our powers simultaneously. Amy began by checking on all of the changes and improvements that my body was undergoing, while I extended my links outward to touch all the animals within my reach. This allowed me to greatly improve my multi-tasking ability, which I would need so that I could try to follow along with her, as her power seemed to flit from point to point within my body. I found that while I could mostly see where she was going, I just couldn't understand what she was doing. Not only was she moving too fast, it was obvious that she could analyze and understand everything she was perceiving almost instantly, while I needed to first figure out what I was seeing, and then try and understand it. Since I really only had a high school student's grasp of human anatomy and biology, I was really left behind. On the plus side though, I had a feeling that, with how fast I could now read and comprehend new material, using my enhanced multi-tasking ability, which grew as I linked to more and more creatures in my range, that I would eventually be able to at least follow along with her, and possibly make suggestions for improvement. Only time would tell, though.

After a minute or so, Amy spoke up, “Everything looks really good, muscle and bone strength are even better than I had hoped, by almost 20 percent, you’ve obviously been working out hard, and all of the organ enhancements are right where they should be. If you're ready, I want to begin with the reactive organ sheathing that we had talked about. That should take about half an hour, at which point you're going to want to eat again before we move on,” she looked at me for a moment before adding,

“Questions? Comments?”

I shook my head and said, “Not really. Though I think that when we start again after my snack, that we should see if you can make any changes to yourself using my 'echo' first, before moving on with my enhancements, so that we shift back and forth.”
Amy looked a little unsettled by that, but nodded and said, “Maybe, we'll see how things go first. Simple steps, one at a time.”

I smiled at her and said, “Agreed, so let's get started.”

Amy took a deep breath and started working on my organs, building an interlocking mesh 'cage' of what I eventually identified as 'fast twitch' muscle fibers around my heart, only they seemed to be constructed more like tendons or ligaments, with long, overlapping cell chains, that I took a moment to memorize so that I could try to compare them to other substances. They seemed to remind me of something, but I couldn't quite identify it, at least not then. By the time I had finished memorizing the cell construction, she had already gone to work on the lungs and major blood vessels in my chest. It was fascinating to see not only how fast the sheathing was being completed, but also how quickly and efficiently she was converting the food in my stomach and the fat reserves under my skin into the cells that she needed. I quickly gave up on trying to understand everything she was doing, and just settled for watching her do it, and only taking a moment to memorize what she was doing, when it looked like something new.

By the time she seemed to have finished working on my chest and abdomen, my stomach was empty again, and when she let go of my hands, I immediately realized that I was hungry again. Very hungry.

Opening my eyes, I said, “Whoa! That was cool. And you were right, just about half an hour, and I am definitely ready to eat.” I double-checked the clock, and asked her, “How about yourself? Are you hungry, you were doing a whole lot of work, in hardly any time at all? Are you tired? Would you like something to eat?” I asked as I got up and headed into the kitchen to serve myself some more of the left-over stew.

Amy followed me into the kitchen and got the milk and butter out of the fridge while I filled my bowl. I set it down on the table and got the lasagna I had prepared this morning out of the fridge and put it into the oven and turned it on, setting it to 400 degrees F.

When I sat down, I found that Amy had already poured me a large glass of milk, and split and buttered two of the biscuits. I smiled at her and said, “Thank you. Are you sure you don't want some?”

She just shook her head and said, “I'll just have some milk and a biscuit, you're the one who's going to need the calories. Speaking of which,” she reached over and touched the back of my hand, and said, “There, that should boost your digestive system enough so that you'll be able to keep up with the work I'll be doing during the next session. Which will be to finish sheathing all of the primary and secondary blood vessels, throughout your body and then improve your lungs ability to exchange oxygen and carbon dioxide. After that I'll begin the tissue upgrades to all of your major
As I went back to eating my stew, Amy buttered two more biscuits for me and went on speaking. “These upgrades are going to be like what I did for you in the hospital; prepping the muscles to change and grow as you exercise them. Although you won't have to worry about getting all bulked up and ripped, the changes are going to be a lot more subtle then that. Unlike the organ sheathing, the fast and slow twitch muscles are going to change over the next couple weeks, increasing your strength, speed and stamina to a very large extent. Another part of the changes is that the overall aerobic efficiency of your muscles will be improved. Your body will be able to convert oxygen and sugar to energy faster and longer. How much will depend largely on how hard you work on it.” Amy refilled my glass with milk and pushed the biscuits over to me, then stood up and took my bowl back to the crockpot, refilled it and set it down in front of me.

“I did notice as I was working on building the sheathing, that you were observing me; just as you thought, I could feel an echo of my powers through you and back into my own body. Once I finish setting up your muscle upgrades, I plan on working through you to see if I can make any changes to myself.”

As she explained this, I started to worry about what would happen if she made a change, and it went wrong because of me, but Amy anticipated what I was going to say, even before I got started. “Don't worry, I plan to start very small, in a spot that no one would notice, and only make a change that, worse case, I can simple snip off with a pair of nail scissors,” she explained in a calm voice.

I took a deep breath, nodded my head and said, “Okay. When the time comes tell me then exactly what you're going to do, and what you need me to do, and I'll make sure it happens the way you want.” With that, I went back to eating my stew and biscuits, finishing off that bowl and getting a third one. Even considering the size of the bowls and how many biscuits and glasses of milk I had consumed, when I was done, I didn't feel stuffed at all. No longer hungry, yes, but not like I had stuffed myself with a big Thanksgiving dinner; I didn't feel sleepy either. When I started to clear my dishes, Amy touched the back of my hand again, and then put the milk and butter away again, taking the last biscuit for herself, and headed back to the living room sofa again.

When I joined her on the sofa, she held out her hands to take mine, and went back to work. This time, since I was only observing her work, I found that I had fewer problems keeping up with her, I wondered if it was because I was trying to do less, or if it was because I was getting better at getting our powers to work together?

As she finished sheathing my blood vessels, I took a moment to check the veins near my elbow, right were a blood sample would be taken and saw that she had left a sort of gap or slit so that a needle could slide in without triggering a response, but would only leave a slight vulnerability.

It wasn't until she started making the changes to my muscles that I realized that I completely...
understand not only what she had done, but why she had done it that way, and how the mechanism would work. This was a level of understanding that was far beyond my own education and experience, which meant that we had actually managed to link our powers together on some level. As I thought about this, it made me much more confident in Amy's ability to use my powers to let her work on herself. By the time I finished that train of thought, Amy had finished her work on my muscle groups and I realized that even though I had not been paying attention consciously, I had still followed what she was doing, and again memorized the unique cell structures that she had built. Clearly, my multi-tasking ability was a lot more powerful than I had realized, just as her biological manipulation ability was so much more powerful and versatile than anyone had ever realized.

Amy was just sitting there with big smile on her face, watching me work through my conclusions, before she said, “That was pretty cool wasn't it? I've always wanted to be able to show someone just how amazing the human body is, especially the way I see it, but this is the first time I've ever been able to.”

I smiled back at her and said, “It is, it really, really is. I don't think you're going to have any problems echoing off my powers, although I bet that the more creatures I am linked with, the easier you're going to be able to do it. One thing I noticed during this session was that I was beginning to understand what you were doing, even as you did it. And, Amy,” I paused and looked at her very seriously, “I was understanding your work on a level far beyond my education, I believe that I was actually linking to your power as you worked. Which really makes me think this is going to work just fine.”

She looked back at me for a moment then started to grin, “Excellent, after I'm done with the next session, I would like to try following you as you control some of your creatures, alright?”

Leaning back, I took a moment to twist and stretch my back, before reaching out and taking her hands again, “Absolutely. What change are you going to make and what should I do if I see a problem?”

She wiggled her left index finger at me and said, “The first thing I'm going to do is make my fingernail grow about an inch or so. Once that is done, and I'm sure the change is permanent and stable, I will reverse it back to the starting point. After that I will work with changing the color around and finally I plan to change the molecular structure to make it look normal, but much harder and stronger as well as very slow growing.”

I frowned in thought and then asked, “Okay, but why? Do you have a specific purpose in mind? An end result?”

She nodded, “Yes I do. For one thing, if it works, I would have a weapon available at all times, it might only be a very sharp edge, but that might be enough to let me get free if I'm tied up
I nodded my agreement, but reminded her, “Very true, but then you would have to be extra careful not to cut someone or something by accident, which would reveal your hidden weapon. You are also going to need extra supports from the nail bed to the bone, so that your nail doesn't get ripped off or broken.”

Amy just said, “That's absolutely true, but in addition to that, I want to use the same kind of mental switch I gave you for your boosted metabolism and digestive system.”

I cocked my head in puzzlement, not sure of her meaning, and she went on. “Well, imagine if I could create a switch that could activate my power, in a very limited and specific manner, just as if I was ‘echoing’ off of you. The switch could be used to let me change my nails from normal appearing to a being a little bit longer and much sharper, but only when I want and need it.”

I had a shocked look on my face for just a moment, which turned into a positively evil smirk, and I said, “I can imagine a lot of other uses for the ability to turn your powers and modifications on and off. It would let you have a whole array of hidden weapons and tools, that don't even exist until you want them too, which means that they would be impossible to detect. You could even set up contingency switches that would take action, even if you were knocked unconscious.”

Amy nodded and thought about that for a few minutes, imagining what kind of options she could set up, before realizing that she needed to test whether or not that type of mental switch would work to activate her powers in very limited and specific ways. “We're going to need a whole series of tests, even if the basic concept works. So let's do the first step, and try to make the switch, and then we can take it from there.”

I took Taylor's hands again, and started carefully making my changes. The first thing I had to do was carefully look into Taylor, and try to follow her out to her creatures. It took almost 15 minutes of trial and error, with Taylor coaching me as to what I should sense, but eventually I began to clearly sense each of her linkages to her creatures. I found that the larger mammals were easier to sense, as the bugs tended to blend into a blur and the birds seemed to be hard to pin down and sense.

Once I had succeeded at that, I attempted to actively ‘bounce’ my powers off Taylor and back into myself. At first nothing seemed to work, until Taylor asked me if I was trying to use her or her linkages to ‘bounce’ my powers back into me.

As soon as I tried to use the linkages themselves, I felt my power enter into my body for the first
time in my life. It was amazing! I was used to being able to see my biology, but for the first time I knew I could actually affect myself.

“Taylor, Taylor! It worked! I can do it! Thank you, thank you!” I let go of her hands and threw myself at her, knocking her back onto the sofa as I hugged her with all of my strength.

She just laughed and wrapped her arms around me and hugged me back, until I finally calmed down enough to let her go and sit back up.

“I told you it would work; I’ve just had longer to practice seeing you use your power. Now, calm down and fix your nails, okay?”

I nodded eagerly, took a deep breath, and reconnected to her linkages.

First I gave myself a perfect manicure on my index fingernail. Smooth, perfectly trimmed, it looked as good as if I had just left the salon. Next, I grew it a full inch longer, then changed the color. In fact, I got a little distracted with the different colors and designs I could create on my nail until Taylor coughed, getting my attention. Blushing, I returned the nail to its original appearance, before beginning the next experiment.

I first changed the structure of the nail to be similar to Taylor’s bones, both strong and hard, then growing it a half an inch. I made the edge extremely sharp, far sharper than a razor blade, but because of the strength and hardness of the nail, I thought it would cut almost anything.

I tested this with a small pocket knife that Taylor handed me without even being asked. I opened the knife, and using my nail, I found that I could actually shave a thin strip right off the point of the blade, with hardly any effort at all. I set the knife down on the coffee table and went back to work.

Now that I knew the nail would meet my needs, I finished it off by creating links from the bottom of the nail down through the nail bed and into the finger bone. Next I began setting up two different states for my index finger nail; the first one looked perfectly normal, except that it was perfectly smooth and trimmed, as if I had just had a professional manicure. The second state looked much the same, except that the nail was a half inch longer and the edge was beyond razor sharp, and anchored directly to the bone. After a moment’s thought I went back to the first state, and created the same anchors down to the bone.

The last step was creating the mental switch to shift back and forth between the two states. The
switch was very similar to the ones I had created to let Taylor control her digestive system and senses in the way I could control it, but quite different in function. I had to figure out how to emulate the ‘echo’ effect in a very limited and specific way that would only control my nails. It took me about 20 minutes but eventually I finished what I thought was a functional mental switch, that wouldn't activate unless I wanted it to.

When I was satisfied, I let Taylor's hands go, and tried the switch again. It seemed to work just as I had designed.

“Okay, test one complete. Now for the next test.” Glancing up from being focused only on my nail, I said, “I need you turn your power off completely, so there’s no chance that I’m still ‘echoing’ off of you. Disconnect from all of your creatures, if you please?” As she did so, I could actually feel a slight difference, even though I wasn’t touching Taylor anymore. It wasn't much, just a tiny change, like a soft, barely audible sound had stopped, that I couldn't quite identify. When I flicked the switch, my nail grew just like it was supposed to, when I tested it on the knifeblade, I had the same results as the first time.

“Test two complete. I think I need get outside your control radius and try again.” I looked around for my coat, planning on walking back to the bus stop to ensure I was far enough away to ensure a fair test, when Taylor stood up and said, “I'll do it. Lend me your cell phone and I'll run down to the bus stop, make sure I can't see you or the house, turn off my powers and call the house phone to let you know to do the test. If it works, tell me so and I'll head straight back. Does that sound good to you?”

I pulled my phone out of my book bag, told her the security code as I handed it to her and said, “Sounds like that should work just fine. I'll be waiting for your call, so thank you very much.”

She grabbed her coat, put my phone in her pocket and headed towards the bus stop at a run. As she left, I watched her new cat jump off the recliner and head for the basement. I watched it for a moment, before I realized that Taylor was putting the cat safely away until she got back.

I reached back out to my creatures, taking a moment to send the cat to the basement, ordering it to eat and drink, then rest until I called it, as I ran at full speed and didn't slow down until my house slipped out of my viewing range. As I came to a stop I figured that Amy was at least 100 yards outside my normal range, and even when I tried my hardest I still couldn't reach any of the animals in or around the house. I pulled out her phone and dialed my house phone and waited for Amy to pick up the phone. As I waited, I realized that my breathing was completely normal and that I wasn't feeling at all tired, even after sprinting my fastest for over two hundred yards.
Amy picked up before the first ring was finished and said, “That was quick, are you ready to test?”

“Yep, you're at least 100 yards outside of my range and my power is completely off … now.”

A couple of seconds later I heard her shout, “Yes!” even though she had put the phone down on the table while she tested her fingernail. Picking it she said, “It works perfectly, I tried it six or seven times, and it only got faster as I did it. Hurry back home, this is great!”

I laughed out loud with her and said, “I'll be back in couple of minutes, so see you soon.” Then hung up her phone and ran back to the house even faster than I had coming out here.

Again I found that I wasn't short of breath or tired at all by the time I got into the house. Taking off my coat I hung it up and gave Amy her phone back. As we sat back down on the sofa, this time she sat down next to me, rather than facing me and leaned into me, closed her eyes and said, “This is all so amazing, I don't even know what to do next.”

Looking over at the wall clock, I saw that it was almost four o'clock and I didn't need to do anything with the lasagna or dinner preps for at least an hour, since I had turned the oven down during our latest series of tests, so I just put my arm around her shoulders and pulled her into relaxed hug and answered her, “First thing we do is modify all of your nails to be able to do that. That should only take a couple of minutes so–”

Amy interrupted me and said, “Done.” Holding out her hand, she showed me that all of her fingernails looked as if they had just had a professional manicure, though without any color or designs added.

I blinked, “Oh, okay. Double check your switch so you can do any or all of them, then we’ll take a break. We don't actually need to do anything else right now. All of our tests and experiments are done and I don't need to do anything about dinner for another hour. I would just as soon sit here and relax for a while. I figure the next test for you is to try it out once a day, probably at night or first thing in the morning, and make sure it keeps working, so again, nothing to do right now.”

“That sounds pretty good to me, almost as good as the lasagna smells,” she replied with a cute little smile on her face, even though her eyes were still closed. “Wake me up when it's time work on dinner, otherwise I think I'll just take a nap right here.”
I laughed quietly and said, “That makes a lot of sense to me, I don't plan on moving either.” With that I set my internal alarm for an hour, flipped my little metabolism switch and dozed off right there, sitting on the sofa, leaning on Amy as if she was my own personal pillow.
A little over an hour later, I woke up from my short nap, flicked my metabolism switch back on and started waking Amy up. That was when I found out that Amy wasn't actually a morning person. Waking her up before she was ready to get up wasn’t pretty, although quite funny. My experiences with her in the hospital didn't help me, since I had let her sleep until she woke naturally. Although, my attempts were quite funny; she just twisted around, wrapped her arms around my waist and tried to burrow into my side the first time; my second try was even funnier; she growled like a little puppy attacking a slipper, and said “No wakey, comfy, go'way,” and went back to sleep. By this time it was taking just about everything I had to just not break down laughing. I only wished that I had a way to record the whole thing so I could show her just how funny the whole thing was.

I decided that I would give her one more chance to wake up before I simply let her sleep, while I got up to finish dinner, so this time I checked to see if she was ticklish. I used a lock of her hair and gently brushed it across her cheek, going from her ear to her nose. It only took two strokes before her hand came up and waved in front of her face, as if she was trying to chase a fly away. A couple more strokes was all it took before she opened one of her eyes just in time to see me use her strands of hair to tickle her nose. She re-closed her eye and covered her face with her free hand, saying, “Oh god, I forgot to set my phone alarm wake up, didn't I?” She opened both of eyes this time and asked, “Just how badly did I embarrass myself this time.”

I smiled down at her and said, “Not badly at all. Really.”

“You were tickling me. With my own hair. That tells me it had to be pretty bad,” she said back. Sighing again, she leaned back against sofa and said, “Go ahead, I'm a big girl, I can take it, hit me.”

I decided to let her off the hook and said, “The words “No wakey, comfy, go'way,” may have been uttered, right after you started growling like the cutest little puppy.”

“Ug. Puppy growls. I was wrong; I'm not a big girl, I'm a little puppy. Just kill me now.”
“Nope,” I said, as I finally gave in and started laughing, “I'm afraid you've left me no choice. I'll just have to feed you lasagna. With garlic toast and salad.”

Hearing that, she straightened up and said, “Really? Wow, you sure know how to punish a girl. I guess I'll just have to suffer.”

I disentangled myself and gave her a hand up before leading her to the kitchen. Once there, I sat her down at the table and gave her a platter, a cutting board and the bread knife, before putting down one of the loaves of bread I had made that morning.

“Go ahead and slice the whole loaf up while I get the spread ready.” She nodded and started slicing the loaf into 1 inch thick slices while I started softening a couple of sticks of butter with some olive oil. While it was warming in the double boiler, I peeled a full garlic bulb, ran the cloves through the press, mixed up the rest of the herbs and added them to the butter/oil mixture and ensured that everything was thoroughly mixed. I let it all begin cooling as I pulled the lasagna out of the oven, covered it with some foil to let it set, turned the broiler on LOW and got the cookie sheets out. We placed the bread slices on both sheets, carefully brushed the topping over the bread slices and set them on top of the stove while the broiler warmed up.

While we worked, I brought up a couple of my ideas, “Amy, I had some ideas I wanted to bounce off of you.”

She looked up, then answered as she continued to slice the bread, “Sure, what did you have in mind?”

“Well, the first thing is I want to use Black Widow spiders to weave cloth to make our costumes out of, but I will need a lot of spiders to do so. Which is kind of a problem because I need them close to maintain control, and my basement won’t work. The other thing is that I’ve ordered some coral samples that I plan on cultivating, both for sale and to use as a base material for tools and weapons that we can use.”

“Hmm…coral, that has … possibilities. I should be able to modify the cement that they extrude, making it stronger and harder, I’ll need to experiment with it though. I can also accelerate the growth so that you can have more to sell, at least I should be able to, as long as you can get samples or pictures of what sells best. Nutrients for the coral might get expensive though.”

I snickered and asked, “Do you think you can break down a small swarm of insects into whatever the coral needs? Cause I can get plenty of insects.”
She nodded and replied, “Oh sure, no problem. Ooohh, I just had an idea for your Widows! Do it in your backyard.”

“What?” was all I could say to that.

“Seriously, have ants and beetles dig really deep, 3 or 4 feet down, and create a bunch of little chambers for your Widows to stay in, then move them out to a larger one that they can weave in, work them in shifts, have the ants bring them food and water, and voila! Hidden weaving lairs.”

I just stood there, the pan of garlic bread in my hands, as I realized what she had said. A slow smile crossed my face, as I turned to put the pan under the broiler. “Amy, you’re a genius. That is just perfect, in fact I can have the ants create a tunnel into the coal cellar in the basement for the Widows to use as their primary work space.”

Amy just ducked her head to hide her blush as she started laying the bread slices on the second pan and I began coating them with the garlic topping.

I accepted the pan from her and set it on the stove top and asked Amy to set the table for three, since dad hadn't been sure if he was going to come home before going over to Kurt and Lacey's, and I didn't want to assume that he wouldn't be home. I pulled the garden salad out of the fridge and chopped up a couple of tomatoes to toss into to it, then swapped out the sheets of garlic bread. While the second one was toasting, I added some grated parmesan and romano cheese to the first sheet of toast, and Amy finished up the salad. Just as I was putting the second sheet of garlic toast under the broiler for the second time to lightly melt the cheese, dad finally walked in the back door, and stopped dead in his tracks.

“Well, isn't this a pleasant surprise. Lasagna, garlic toast and a tossed salad. And you must be the Amy I've been hearing so much about,” he smiled at her and said, “It's very nice to meet you again Miss Dallon, and thank you again for all that you've done for my Taylor.”

“Call me Amy, please. And I like to think that Taylor has done just as much for me, as I've done for her. Having her for a friend has been wonderful. Far too many people can't see past the image of Panacea, the 'miracle healer', to see me, just plain, old Amy.”

While they were talking to each other, I finished up the garlic toast, sent dad to get washed up, and finished putting all the food on the table and got everything ready to serve.
Once dad came back to the table, we sat down and enjoyed our meal, talking only about casual things, keeping to our unspoken agreement not to bring up anything serious or depressing while we were eating.

When we had all finished dinner, I sent dad on his way to get ready for his evening out while Amy and I covered up the left-overs and put away what we could, and then cleaned up all the dishes and counters and we had the dishwasher loaded and running by the time he was ready to leave for his evening out.

While he had been taking his shower and getting changed, Amy and I had worked out how we were going to get her home safely. She didn't want to call her sister or parents for a lift, and I refused to let her take the bus alone at night. The buses were pretty safe during the day and early evening, but night time was a different matter. I eventually wore her down and convinced her that I would be fine coming home alone on the bus; especially after all of the work she had done on my enhancements.

When dad, as expected, offered to drive her home, she politely declined, explaining that she had already made arrangements to get home safely and that he should just enjoy his evening out, as we would both be fine. Although he clearly had reservations, he let the subject drop and gave us both hugs before he left.

Once he had gone, while we were sitting on the sofa again, Amy said, “You are so lucky to have the dad that you do,” as she leaned forward and put her face in her hands, sounding like she was trying not to cry.

I was shocked at her sudden shift, but scooted next to her and wrapped my arms around her, giving her the hug she so desperately needed. That was all it took to for her to collapse; she just threw herself onto me, crying and shaking with her sudden grief and despair. I had no idea what had brought this on, but knew that it didn't matter at that point; all that mattered was that she needed help, and I was going to give it to her, no matter what.

We had talked a little bit about some of this stuff while I was in hospital, about all the pressure she felt from her mom to be perfect, and to always do the right and proper thing. But this felt different, this time was worse, like she had done something horribly wrong and was feeling both guilty and terrified by it.

She eventually stopped crying and I was able get her settled more comfortable on my lap, and gave her some tissues from the box on the end table. When she had blown her nose and wiped the tears from her cheeks, I decided that she had calmed down enough that I could at least try and ask her what had happened.
As I gently rubbed her back to calm her down, I asked, “Do you think you can tell me what’s wrong?” I tried to be as calm and non-confrontational as I could manage, but I was shaking inside. I couldn’t imagine what could be so terrible, that had caused her to just suddenly breakdown like that, but clearly something had. She shrugged, and tried to just not answer, but I just held her close and kept rubbing her back, and just waited for a few more minutes before asking her the same question again.

This time, she managed to answer, with a great many stumbles and hesitations, “My dad…he, he’s got really bad depression. He’s got meds, and, and they help, but he do-doesn’t always take them, and then he just sits there, like he’s not even in the same world as us, and…”

She stopped again, trying to calm herself down, then went on, “I, I can fix him, I know I can, but … I’m afraid.”

I waited a moment to see if she would continue, then I asked her, “Because of your rule about brains, right?”

She nodded, and said, very quietly, “Yes. It would be so easy to go too far. To fix too much. Every time I heal someone, I can see their brain, I can see where things could be changed to make them faster, smarter, to remember more easily. I can see all the tiny injuries and flaws, things that just happen during life. And I could fix all of that in just a couple of seconds.”

She looked up at me, fresh tears appearing in her eyes, “And that terrifies me. Because it’s our brain that makes up who we are, all of our memories, the way we think, the way we perceive the world; everything that defines us as a person comes from our brain. And if I change that, I would be killing them, that person would be gone, just as much as if I used a gun. It’s the same as murder.”

“So I made a rule; absolutely no changes to the brain. No matter what. And I’ve stuck to that rule, even when I had to let people die because I refused to act.”

She clung to me even harder, “I’m not God, I can’t change people like that, like they are just toys for me to play with. But I want my daddy back, I want him to be all better, and I can’t!”

I held Amy tight, and kept rubbing her back as I tried to think of what to say, how I could ease her distress and pain. Before I could come up with anything, she went on.
“There are so many things that could happen when I heal someone; if I lost my concentration, got distracted by an odd thought, I could make someone a monster, swap their gender, change them in a hundred, a thousand ways. And then, what if I can’t change them back?”

I decided than to speak up, that maybe I could reassure her, “Amy, you know that I can see what you are doing, right?”

She looked startled at the non sequitur, “Yes, why?”

“Because I have to say that, based on what I’ve seen you do, even if you did make a mistake and caused unwanted changes, you could restore it back to its original condition very easily. The only way I could see you having any problems with that would be if you were not allowed to correct your mistake. I’ve watched you; while you made changes to me, and while you made changes to yourself. You just do it right. I trust you to get it right the first time, and I trust you to fix it if, god forbid, you get it wrong.

And if you ever need me to, I can come and monitor you as you work. Because, like I had said, by the end of our experiments, I was able to follow and understand everything you were doing.”

She looked conflicted, but then said, “How would I explain it, that all of a sudden I could work on brains, when I’ve spent years telling everyone that I couldn’t? Mom would hate me; she’d claim that I just didn’t want to heal my dad.” She stopped for a few minutes and then continued, “I know that she hates my biological father, even if I don’t remember him or know his name, and I’ve heard her talking on the phone a couple of times, saying how I was just like him, th-that I was going to be just as bad, as evil as him. She said that I was, was ‘bad blood’ an-and that…”

At this, she started sobbing again, and even as I tried to comfort her, crooning soft sounds to her, I couldn’t believe her mom, no not mom, never her mom, Carol, could ever see Amy like that. It was just stupid. She didn’t deserve to have someone as sweet and gentle as Amy as a daughter. Although, I suppose it did explain a few things about how she treated her; it certainly didn’t explain why she would have chosen to adopt Amy in the first place. Unless she intended to use the adoption as a way of punishing Amy’s father, through her. Which was just sick.

It was obvious that even with her rules, people keep putting pressure on her to make just a “little, simple change’ often while she was trying to fix something that was critical. I also wondered if people were offering her money or favors to get her to heal someone who wasn’t a terminal case, someone that could be healed by regular doctors. Based on a couple of comments she had made, I was sure that was the case, which of course put more pressure on her. Even if she didn’t accept, or even want them, the bribes was the only word I could think of, Carol would probably be making her little comments, holding Amy responsible for other people’s actions.
And considering what she had said about dad, just before she had her breakdown, she was probably comparing her relationship with her dad, who she obviously loved but couldn’t help, and mine with my dad. It probably looked like heaven to her. And I guess it was, in comparison to hers, even if she couldn’t see all of the hard times we had gone through after mom died, and while I was being bullied by the bitches. I guess the grass really is greener on the other side of the fence.

And now, all those rules that she had come up with, that she had followed so strictly since she triggered; were being broken or changed, for me. She no longer had the structure and safety of her rules to protect her, and she was scared.

And then there was her sister, no not her sister, her adopted sister. Her adopted sister who had an extremely powerful emotion controlling aura, an aura that she had been exposed to for years, all day and all night. An aura that was so powerful that it had made me fall instantly into both love and lust with her, with no warning or way to resist. It was only because I was able to push everything that I felt into the link, whether they were my emotions or Glory Girl’s, using my own Master ability to counter-act hers, that I had been able to break free of the thrall she had put me under.

And then somehow I was able to use my Master ability to create a shield around Amy; once I did that, Amy had seemed to go back to being as clear headed as she normally was, unlike when Glory Girl had first showed up.

So now, on top of everything else, she still has yet to find out that her sister has been unintentionally Mastering her for years, causing her to fall in love with her. It would be devastating to her; I know that having her force an artificial emotion on me was horrible, and Vicky wasn’t my sister. Amy probably didn’t even know if her preference for girls over boys was her own, or if Vicky had caused it in the first place.

Oh god!! As I realized just how screwed up Amy's family life really was, how much her family was destroying her, I started to cry, like she had earlier. I couldn’t stop myself; I could see all of these problems and how much they were hurting her, crushing her down, but I couldn’t see any way to fix them. And I wanted to…no, I needed to. Amy was so fragile right now, that it seemed that just one more thing, one more problem and she would just break into a million pieces. But I was also afraid that if I tried to do something, anything, it would almost certainly backfire and just make things worse.

Though I tried to keep my crying silent, my attempt was doomed to fail because I had forgotten that I was holding Amy, which meant skin contact, which of course meant that she could see everything that was happening with my body, like my skyrocketing stress levels, my tears, all of it. She may not have known the cause, but there was no way she could miss the effects. It was enough
to snap her out of her downward spiral of despair and focus on me and my own sudden mood swing.

“Taylor, what happened? You were fine one second, talking to me and then everything switched, instead of me crying, it was you. Please tell me what happened?” I thought for a few seconds and then asked, “Did something happen to your dad, did you see something through your linkages that upset you?”

Taylor was obviously struggling to find a way to express something, but I had no idea what it was. She tried a couple of times to say something, but failed each time, and she was getting more upset with each failed attempt, finally she seemed to just give up, and what had been silent tears, became the same type of breakdown that I had just had. If it wasn’t Danny, then maybe it had to do with something that I said. Though I had no idea what that might have been, since I had little idea of just what I had been talking about, it was pretty much a ‘stream of consciousness’, I could only do for her what she had done for me; hold her, soothe her, and when she calmed down then maybe I could find out what happened.

For me though, this was pretty rough; because I had come to see Taylor as my rock, someone that I could cling to and depend on when life seemed about to overwhelm me, even if she didn’t know it; and now it was my turn to be that rock for her. I didn't know what to do at first, but then figured that I could do for Taylor, what she had just done for me.

“Okay sweetie, you go ahead and let your tears go. I've got you now, just like had me before, and when you're ready to talk to me, I'll be here. I'm not going to leave you to get through this on your own, any more than you left me when I needed you. You taught me that you know; even as you woke up in the hospital, you showed me what truly matters and how to be a good friend. I don't think you could be a bad friend, even if you tried, so I'm going to just stay right here and keep holding you, just like you are holding on to me even now. I can feel it you know, that no matter how much you're hurting right now, you're holding onto me, trying to shield me and protect me and take away my pain. I don't know what it is, and I don't know what caused it, all I can tell is that even though you are so terribly hurt right now, you won't let go of me and that you are trying to find a way to help me rather than looking for a way to fix your own pain. So I'm going to find a way fix you first, then you can fix me so that whatever is hurting you will all go away.”

“I don't know how to do this yet, because I'm not nearly as smart as you are, but I'm stubborn. I bet I can be more stubborn then you, I bet I can be more stubborn then anyone. Even if I'm not as smart, I'll still get you fixed because I won't give up on you.”

I paused without saying anything for a couple of minutes, then whispered very softly, “I know you
can hear me, and I know that no one else can hear me now, so I'm going tell you something that I learned this week, something that only I know that I want you to know. I just hope you won't hate me for it.” I drew in a slow shuddering breath and went on, praying that this would work, “Sunday, when Vicky came up on us and turned her aura on at such a high level, she made you love her. I could feel it as it happened but before I could do anything to try and stop her, you broke her thrall, you snapped it like piece of old, rotten thread instead of the steel chains that it normally feels like.” I hugged her closer, and began running my fingers through her hair and then went on, “And then you did something else, something that I had no idea was possible, something wonderful. You wrapped your soul around me; you pushed Vicky's thrall out of me like it wasn't even there. I’ve had it in me for so long that I couldn't even feel it anymore…no, that's not right, it wasn't that I couldn't feel it.” I shuddered again, and this time it was obviously from disgust and horror, “it was because I thought it was supposed to be like that. She made love her, she made me fall in love with her so deeply that I couldn't even think about being with anyone else, and the worst part of it, the most terrible part of it is that she didn't mean to, she never even knew that she had done it and she kept doing it, over and over again, every day. Until you saved me, you saved me and you didn't even know it.”

“I’ve thought about it a lot since then, and I decided to test it, that very night, before I lost my nerve. I would test to see if she was doing it without realizing it, so I sent myself a delayed email from my phone. To be delivered the next morning, it was just a few words that wouldn't mean anything to anyone except me, but it would be enough to remind me of what had happened, what I had realized, so if her thrall made me forget everything, I could then get help, your help. Because I figured that if you could free me once, that you could free me again if necessary.”

“So that evening, when I got home, she was still saying goodbye to her boyfriend, and walked in the house with me. And as soon as I got within about ten feet of her, her aura wrapped around me again, just like before.”

Taylor had stopped crying by this point; indeed it seemed as if she was hardly even breathing as she listened to me whisper my deepest, most terrible secret to her, someone that was supposedly her rock and savior; though as I said it, I could tell that Taylor just felt confused and uncertain at that.

“There was a difference though; this time, even with the thrall running through me, I never forgot a thing about what I had realized, and this time I could tell the difference between her feelings and my feelings. That's because of what you did for me when you broke her thrall; you showed me what it was like to be free again. And now I can tell the difference between loving my sister and being in love with Vicky, the difference between love and lust.”

“It was also pretty obvious that she had no idea of how her aura was affecting me, because it was equally obvious she was happy with the idea of me dating you, she didn't care that I was apparently dating a girl, she just wanted me to be happy, and if being with you made me happy, then she would do everything she could to make sure that I could keep seeing you.”
“It was also the first time that she realized that Carol treated me differently from her, really saw it and realized what it meant, and she knew then, that if Carol found out I was seeing you, she would find a way to split us up. And since that would apparently make me unhappy, she did everything she could to keep Carol from finding out about you.”

As I finished speaking, I kept rubbing Taylor’s back and running my fingers through her hair, as I tried to give her as much time as she needed to process everything.

Finally Taylor cleared her throat, before asking me, her voice raw from her harsh crying, “So what else did you figure out? Do you have any other ideas for getting our powers to work together? Maybe some way to stop Vicky’s power from affecting us when we are separated. Because I know that having you there made it a lot easier to off-load all of those emotions, it may have been the only thing that made it possible, that both of us and our powers are needed to counteract hers.”

I nodded at her and said, “Yes I did, although I wasn't sure how to bring it up to you or how we can test it without Vicky's help. Eventually, I want to be able to create a way to shield us both from any type of Master effect or thrall, especially from someone like Heartbreaker or Valefor. The thought of being under their control is terrifying for me. I would truly rather be dead, than 'owned' by someone like them.”

“I don't know enough about how human Mastering works, compared to the non-human Mastering that you do. I suspect that we may require multiple techniques to counter all the different Masters that are out there.”

After a short pause, I went on, speaking in a normal tone of voice, trying not to upset or overwhelm her, because I suspected that this might be what had triggered her breakdown. “Taylor, is there anything else that needs to be dealt with, so that we can be sure that everything is taken care of? Besides Vicky and Carol?”

She frowned for a moment, but she didn’t seem to be upset by my question, just worried, and she said, “Just one thing, I got overwhelmed when I saw what I considered to be your biggest problems; the way your mom is treating you, that your dad was sick, the fact that Vicky was Mastering you, and your rules, which I happen to think are good rules, mean that you can’t heal him. And I couldn't even figure out where to get started on fixing them.”

I looked at her quizzically, and then said, “Taylor sweetie, it's not your job to fix my problems for me. I'm sure that I'll figure out a solution to them with time.”
She just shook her head, and said, “That's not how I see it. When I went crazy and just about killed myself, you could have just fixed my heart problem and let the shrinks and doctor's figure out the rest. But you didn't, did you? You found and fixed all of my physical problems, not leaving my side until you were sure that I would be okay, and then held me and made me work through all of my emotional and mental issues until there was nothing left that was going blindside me,” taking a deep breath she went on, “and then you went even further and told me just how much you could really do with your powers, and offered to not only heal me back to normal, so I wasn’t a monster anymore, but to also enhance me in ways that I could barely imagine, as well as helping me to figure out what I could do with my own powers. You trusted me, when you had no reason or need to do so…” I tried to interrupt, but Taylor just shook her head and pressed her fingers over my lips, then went on, “you chose to be my friend, when I so desperately needed one. Well, friendship goes both ways. So now, when I see the problems that are hurting you just like mine were hurting me, I will do for you, just as you did for me. You mean far too much to me to ignore something that is hurting you. But, as much as I wanted help, at the time I simply couldn't figure out a way to get started, and that crushed me. I just didn't know what to do… but you did, you had already figured out how to fix your Glory Girl problem, when I was too terrified to even bring the topic up to you. Carol can wait for now, I have a few ideas about how to deal with her, and I think we can handle her together. Your dad though, fixing him should be easy now.”

I looked at Taylor and asked, “What do you mean, easy? If I heal him, it'll be obvious that I could have done so all along, which will make Carol go ballistic.”

“Very true,” she agreed, “so you do it like you have been doing me, slowly, with incremental changes, instead of instantly, like you normally do. Your dad's main problem is chronic, severe depression, right?” she asked.

I nodded in agreement, so she went on, “So instead of fixing the underlying biochemical imbalances right away, then trying to get him into therapy or counseling to deal with the emotional causes, change his brain chemistry slowly, a little bit every day or so. In my reading for AP Psych, one the major problems that the text book mentioned was that chronically depressed or bi-polar patients would often take their meds until they started feeling better, than they would stop taking them because they felt like they no longer needed them. Which would put them into a really bad feedback loop, a loop that you can stop before it even gets started.”

“Do it like this; in the mornings, you need to change his routine, like maybe putting his meds in a little cup next his juice at the breakfast table, so that he doesn't have to remember to take them, go to the medicine cabinet, sort out how many and which ones he needs, then go get some juice to swallow them down with… Do you see where this is going? Make taking his meds a non-issue, maybe get Vicky to be the one set them out for him, because I think Carol might get upset if you’re the one to suggest making any changes. Since you wouldn't be making any big fixes to your dad, just changing his routine; with Vicky's help you would be able to hide the slow improvement under the cover of him just being more consistent in taking his meds. Also, if you watch how his meds are working, you might be able to make some suggestions to his doctor. After all, I can’t imagine he would ignore advice on the medications that he prescribed, not when it comes from Panacea.”
“That’s sneaky,” I said admiringly, and then I paused, thinking about something she had said, “Taylor, how did you know?”

“Know? Know what,” she asked, puzzled by my question.

“My dad’s morning routine for taking his meds. He practically makes a ritual out of doing it the exact same way. He never varies it, at least when he remembers to do it. It’s always after breakfast though, so we are usually already out of the house when it’s time for him to take them, so if he forgets, nobody knows until it’s far too late.”

“Oh. Umm, I didn’t; I was just stating an example of how some people take their meds, that’s all.”

“Maybe. But you described his routine perfectly, down to the fact that he will only use fruit juice to help swallow his meds, never water or anything else. And we both know that you’ve never even been to my house, much less seen how he takes his meds.”

“So how in the world did I know to describe it like that? I thought that it had been proven, years ago, that actual human-to-human telepathy was impossible, right?”

“That’s what I’ve always been told. That empathy works is well known, but that every case of telepathy had been proven to be either a delusion or fraud. As far as psychic powers go: precognition, post-cognition, clairvoyance, empathy, mental domination, mental illusions, telekinesis, teleportation. All of them have been documented and confirmed, in all the different variations that capes have manifested. But never Telepathy.”

“So, how did I know?” Taylor had clearly accepted that her knowledge of my dad’s routine was both accurate and real, and wanted to know how it happened just as much as I did.

“I don’t know, but…can I ask you a question about your Trigger?”

“Sure, I already told you what happened that day.”

“I know, but…my question is; Did it happen in your kitchen? Were you on the floor, in the corner, trying to escape, to hide, maybe in a cupboard?”
She looked at me, stunned, then swallowed and said quietly, “Yes, that’s exactly how it happened. How did you know?”

I took a deep breath, and said, “Back in the hospital, when you told me about your Trigger the first time, I saw a vision of you on the floor of a kitchen,” I pointed over my shoulder, “that kitchen. You were terrified, and then … it was over. At the time, I just thought it was my imagination. But now…?”

“Yeah. This is big, really, really big; we can’t let anyone, anyone at all, know about this. It doesn’t matter if it’s just a form of touch-based post-cognition or actual Telepathy, if anyone finds out we will be in a lot of danger.”

I nodded agreement and said, “You’re right, Hero or Villain, it wouldn’t matter, I’ve read about cases where capes who were suspected of being telepathic were hunted down and killed, masked or not. And I heard Carol talking about the disappearance of a couple of suspected telepaths in California, once. That’s enough for me to want to hide even the possibility of either of us being telepathic, even if it’s just with each other, from ever coming out.”

“So, not to change the subject, even if I am; for now, let’s just ignore Carol’s issues, and concentrate on how we can block my sister’s Master power? Especially without her knowing about it.”

“The same way we’re going to fix your dad; slow and sneaky. I think that her emotional aura is actually a Shaker ability that makes changes to the brain’s biochemistry, because her power works in a radius, without really being under her control.” Taylor looked at me and asked, “She doesn’t really control it so much as turn it on or off, right? The output seems be based on how she wants to be perceived, rather than under her actual control. That’s a big difference compared to how my Master power works. I have immediate feedback from my links, and can adjust how much control I am imposing on my creatures, but from what I felt Sunday, that’s not how hers works.”

I nodded eagerly, “I can certainly spot it when her aura hits me, now that I know what to look for, especially if you’re right and it causes changes to my brain chemistry. I’ll have to specifically look for the changes, but they should be easy for me to see. I may not be able counter-act the changes myself without your help, but just knowing what the changes are would be a big help. In addition, if we make a point of holding hands whenever her aura hits, I can compare how it affects you and me, then fix you first and then echo back to me.”

She paused for a moments, thinking about it, and then said, “If the changes are consistent, do you think you can design a flick-switch, like you have for your nails, only have it counter-act the chemical shifts. Automatically if possible, manually if not, which would protect you from being constantly being flooded with chemical changes…” I stiffened in alarm, causing Taylor to stop
speaking, “What's wrong? What did I say?"

I shook my head and said, “It’s not you, I just realized something. Her aura, the biochemical changes that it causes, may actually be addictive, which could explain ever so much about my family’s social dynamics. If I’m right, she actually addicted me to her aura. And though I think that’s mostly fixed now, I’ll keep eye out for any problems. But what if she was also screwing up dad’s meds without meaning to? If she is, I may need you to help me fix up an automatic defense for him, like what we were talking about for us.” Taking a deep breath, I went on, “I think that's going to be enough for now. I don't want to let myself get all worried about 'maybe's' before I can confirm anything for sure.”

Disentangling herself from me, Taylor got up and helped me up as well and said, “If you're still planning on going home now…”

“I have to,” I interjected, not really looking forward to going home to face the same old tensions.

“…then we need to head out now to be sure of catching the right buses. And so I can get back home before it's too late.”

“I’m going to get cleaned up before we leave, alright?” I asked Taylor.

“No problem, upstairs, end door on the right,” she replied. “let me double-check the kitchen and get my coat and stuff,” Looking down at her sneakers she added, “I think I'll change to my boots because it looks like it may start snowing again.”

While I went to the bathroom to wash my hands and face and remove any traces of my crying. Taylor made sure that the lasagna was properly covered and all of the other perishables were put away, when I was done upstairs, she did the same, and then put on her boots and coat.

-----------------------------Legion*** Taylor ***Legion-----------------------------

Locking up the house, Amy and I held hands while we walked to the bus stop to catch the downtown express. Once on the bus, we made a point of only talking about school and general topics, nothing even remotely cape oriented. Even with waiting for our transfer, it only took about 45 minutes to get to Amy's bus stop. Once we got off, I double-checked the time until the next bus headed back home, and then wrapped my arm around her and pulled her close to help block the cold wind because she started shivering as soon as it hit.
“Do you want to boost your cold tolerance, like you did for me? You can turn it back off once we get close to your house.”

“No point really, it’s only about half a block to get home, so this will do just fine,” she pointed out. I just shrugged and said, “Okay, but once you’re comfortable with making changes to yourself, you should start a list of things you want to add, for both you and me. I’ll do the same, and we can compare them later on.”

“I will,” she said, “though I don’t plan on leaving that anywhere where Carol might find it, so if you don’t mind, I may start using your computer for stuff that I want to keep secure. I know for a fact that she has been snooping into my computer at home, not that there is anything for her to find there.” She looked up at me and added, wiggling her eyebrows, “Of course, since I’ve been hanging out with you, I’ve become nicely corrupted. You know, all sneaky and stuff, skipping school, not mentioning where I am spending my free time; all of that horrible evil, ‘teenager’ stuff. Why, the next thing you know I might even start, GASP, playing video games!”

“Oh dear, the horror, the absolute horror. You might actually become … normal,” I tried to say the last in a faux frightened whisper, but I couldn’t keep a straight face and we both just started giggling. Until an adult voice spoke from the shadows in front of an unlit house to our left.

Startled, I let go of Amy and stepped in front of her, as the stranger said, “Well, I guess that explains why Carol has got herself all bent out of shape again.”

“Aunt Sarah, what are you doing out here in the cold?” Amy asked, startled but not frightened or upset.

“Waiting for you, dear. Vicky called me when your mom realized that you weren’t home for dinner…”

“But…” Amy started, when her Aunt Sarah stopped her. “I know, I know. Your sister knew where you were, your father knew, and had already given you permission for you to go to a friend’s house and have dinner, but you know how your mom can get sometimes, although this time she seemed more worried than upset. Speaking of dinner, I haven’t had mine yet, so I’d like get my sister’s little drama handled and out of the way so I can go home and eat.” Turning her attention to me, she said, “I apologize for the family drama, but you would be Taylor, correct?”

“Yes ma’am. Taylor Hebert. I’m sorry to have caused you any problems,” I said, politely introducing myself. “Amy’s not going to get into trouble because of me, is she?”
“No dear, Amy did nothing wrong, as I will be sure to remind my sister. She just needs to remember to leave her lawyer persona at work, and not bring it home.”

As the lady, Mrs. Pelham, I finally remembered, said that, Amy stiffened up again until I put my arm back around her and gave her a gentle hug, after which she finally relaxed.

Mrs. Pelham just raised an eyebrow, and continued, “Would you like to come in and meet the rest of the family, dear?”

I looked at Amy, and could see that she was torn between wanting me there, and being afraid that Carol would say something unforgivable. I just smiled at her, then answered Mrs. Pelham, “Not tonight ma'am, I need to catch the next bus if I'm going to get my transfers. Perhaps another day, when I won't be a surprise.”

Amy turned to face me directly and gave me a proper goodbye hug before saying, “Good night, Taylor. Let me know when you get home, so I don't worry, okay?”

I nodded and said, “I will,” with that I turned and headed back to the bus stop, although I kept a close watch as Amy and her Aunt turned and went into the lit up house that was obviously her home. I found that I could see and hear what was going on through the eyes of their pet Siamese cat, until just before I reached the bus stop.
The ride home was boring without Amy to talk to; the only thing to occupy my attention was trying to see how many bugs there were still around despite the cold and damp. As I expected, there were many still inside the buildings and in the sewer tunnels and storm drains, but what surprised me was just how many I could sense inside the cars and trucks that were on the road with the bus, as well as those parked nearby.

When I got home, the first thing I did was check to see if there were any new messages, but there weren't, so after that I hung up my coat and put away my boots and then sat down, booted up my computer and went on line. Checking my email first, other than some spam that I deleted, my inbox was empty. I took a moment to think about how it would look to Amy's mom, then I wrote her a short email, first telling her that I was home safe, and just waiting for dad to get back from uncle Kurt's, after which I thanked her for spending some time with me and for her help making dinner. Closing out my email I wished her a good night and told her I would talk to her later.

Logging off the Internet, I decided to work on my OOP programming course until dad got home, or 10 o'clock, whichever came first.

As I worked on my programming course, I found that I had no problems with reading and comprehending the two books as well, the cat handled one book while I read the other book. When I tried to add another book, a PDF e-book this time, in another window, I found that I could read it just fine, but that was my limit though, simply because of how long it took to look back and forth between the different books. The one that the cat was reading was actually the easiest and fastest to read, so I closed up the e-book, and carried on. I laughed as I pictured myself living in a house with 30 cats, all of them reading different books. I did wonder if it was possible to use audio books, a different one in each ear, at a higher speed than normal. That would be a test for a different day, possibly when I had more money to work with.

I finished up my work and put the cat outside since I didn't have a litter box yet, and wasn't sure if I wanted get one, since the cat wouldn't run away when I let her out. Once she had finished her business, I brought her in and sent her downstairs to sleep in her box.

After putting away all of my school work, I washed up and finished the last of the beef stew and
garlic toast. Then I divided up the lasagna so that dad could have some for his lunch and I could have the rest for snacks during the day. That still left about half of the original lasagna, which I divided into quarters, sealed up and put into the freezer to have later when I was in a hurry.

I put the crockpot and lasagna pan to soak while I put away the clean dishes, cleaned up the counters and started to lay out the ingredients of a chili verde that would slow cook all night, because I had found that it, like regular chili, tasted best when allowed to slow cook for a long time. In between doing all my prep work, I scrubbed out the crockpot liner and lid, and put everything in so that it could begin its simmer. I was just starting on the lasagna pan when dad finally got in. Thankfully, he took over scrubbing out that pan, while I got to sit down and listen as he told me all about his evening; it turned out that several other friends from the Association had come over, and it seemed that they all had a good time, playing cards and just getting a chance to relax. In return, I gave him a highly edited version of our night, making it sound like we both just relaxed and talked about books, movies, and music. Which we did, at least a little.

The next morning before dad left for week, he said he would call home before bringing the freezer by.

“Dad, how big is the freezer? You said it was large, but no dimensions, and I want to make sure we have enough room for it downstairs.”

“Hmm? No, I didn’t did I, sorry about that. But it’s a fairly large sized chest freezer, I think Steve said it’s a Fridgidaire 18 cubic feet, which should fit right next to the dryer.”

“Oh, okay. I’ll check its dimensions online, and will make sure to clear the spot, and I think that there’s an outlet close by that we can use. I’ll start looking into grocery sales so we can stock it up this weekend, okay?” I asked.

“Sure. Start a list; make sure you indicate which stores have which items. That way we can actually plan out the trip for the most efficient use of our time.”

With that, he gave me a hug and kissed me on the forehead and left for work.

I decided that the freezer was my first priority and went down into the basement to see what needed to be done. I only had to move a few boxes filled with what looked like old woodworking tools, I thought that they may have been my grandfather’s, so I carefully moved them next to the stairs to go through later. I swept and mopped the area that the freezer was going to be in, then decided that if I was going to clean up down here, I might as well do it right, so went ahead and swept and mopped the whole basement. While I was doing that I sorted a lot of trash and bagged it up to be picked up on Monday.
By lunch time I had finished as much as I intended to, and begun planning how I could use the extra space for some of our experiments and to give us a place where we could train and store the weights I had asked for. The windows were tiny and mostly blocked by the shrubs, so I thought we could cover them and have complete privacy for anything we wanted to do.

It wasn’t until I was looking around, trying to imagine how we could arrange things that I realized that I had never turned on the lights, but could see perfectly well.

“Well, I guess the low-light mods Amy gave me seem to work fine. I wonder how it will look when the lights are on?”

When I turned them on, I saw that other than replacing a couple of bulbs, it would work out fine. I also noticed a small door in the back corner by the driveway, which closed off a tiny room that I had never noticed before. Once I went in and looked around, I decided that it had probably been a store room for the coal furnace when the house was originally built, it was only 3 feet by 4 foot, and about 5 feet high; not very big, but still big enough to be useful.

In fact, if I drilled a hole in the wall nearest the backyard, my ants could make a tunnel straight into their lair, so that the Black Widows could commute regularly between their work site, and their sleeping/eating chambers. If I could find some simple designs for stretching and weaving cloth on, I could build and install them in the coal room so that my Widows could work while being hidden.

Taking a last look around, I turned off the lights and went upstairs to have lunch. I took a quick shower to wash off all of the basement grime that I had gotten covered in while cleaning up down there. Freshly washed and wearing clean clothes, I went down for lunch. Because of my basement adventure, I had to catch up on my cooking and baking after I’d eaten, and decided that my school studies could wait until tomorrow, that today was just going to be for catching up on housework, chores and working on food lists and menus.

After getting dinner started, the kitchen cleaned up and a load of laundry started, I pulled out the list of meals I had started and the Sunday paper to go through all of the flyers to start my shopping list. As I started writing it I made sure to cut out any useful coupons, stacking them in groups for each of the four stores I planned on going to. About 2:30 I finally finished my lists, including how much I thought each was going to cost.

As I went back down to finish the laundry I realized that after everything that I had gone through, and was still going through, I had become thoroughly domestic. I cooked, I cleaned, I did the laundry, I was even planning on making my own clothes; I was pretty much the perfect 1950’s housewife, although fortunately not married with children, yet. I wasn’t ready to rule them out; I knew that I would love to have a daughter or two someday.
Bringing the dry laundry upstairs, I sat down on the sofa and began sorting and folding the clothes, hoping to finish before dad showed up with the freezer. As I worked, I thought some more on how much my life had changed, especially since I got away from Winslow and the bitches. No matter what, I was far better off than before. Dad and I were closer than ever, I was learning more and faster than in school, and, thanks to Amy, I was strong, healthy, and much happier.

After putting away the clean laundry, I did a quick cleanup of the upstairs bathroom, hall and my bedroom. Before I finished, the phone rang, and dad told me that he and a couple of friends were on their way with the freezer. I told him that there was a clear path from the back door to the basement, and I would make sure it was unlocked for them.

Not long after dad called, I saw him pull to a stop in front of the house, while uncle Kurt’s truck backed into the driveway almost all the way to the back door. A few minutes later dad, Kurt, and another man that I didn’t recognize, brought in a big freezer using a big dolly and some heavy straps, and carefully took it downstairs. I followed behind them and watched while they put it down and plugged it in.

After they finished, I waited to follow them up and turned out the lights as I went. They were all sitting down at the kitchen table, which looked seriously small with three big men sitting around it instead of just me and dad. Not quite sure what to do next, I finally decided to at least offer drinks.

“Thank you very much for bringing the freezer in, it’s going to be a big help. Would any of you like something to drink? We don’t have coffee, but we have tea, juice, and soda, if you’d like.”

Dad looked at the other two with a raised eyebrow, and Kurt said, “I’ll take a coke, if you have any? Jimmy?”

“Tea would be great, thanks.” The man that uncle Kurt had called Jimmy, looked at me with a puzzled look and opened his mouth to say something, but just shook his head and stayed silent.

“Dad?” I asked, as I got a bottle of coke from the fridge and filled a large glass full.

“Tea for me as well, kiddo. Thanks.”

“Okay.” I put the glass of coke on the table and turned the burner on under my tea kettle. Getting out three mugs, I turned and asked, “Any preference for type of tea? I have black, green, Earl Grey and Lemon Lift.”
Dad asked for Earl Grey, big surprise there, I could never get him to try anything else. His friend, Jimmy asked for green, which I also chose for myself. Pulling out the appropriate bags, I dropped them in the mugs and passed them out, placed the creamer and honey jar on the table, and took a seat myself and just listened to them chat, while I waited for the tea kettle to heat. When there was a pause in their conversation, I decided to ask Jimmy a question.

“Jimmy, you looked like you wanted to ask me a question earlier, so go ahead, I promise not to be offended.”

Dad and uncle Kurt froze, and Jimmy looked very uncomfortable, but finally asked, “Umm, look I’m really sorry, but I, well everyone really, heard that you were badly hurt at your school, and in and out of the hospital…but damn, excuse my French, you look just fine, perfectly healthy. What’s up with that?”

I giggled and said, “That’s not a problem, I’ve heard much worse. I really was a wreck, but I was fortunate enough to healed back to perfect health by Panacea. She was able to fix everything wrong with me, for which I am very grateful.”

He looked between dad and me, and then asked, “Can I…can I ask just how bad it was? If you don’t mind I mean?”

I sighed, “I don’t mind, I lived through it, and with Panacea’s help, I’m much better, and past it. As for how bad it was? Very, very bad. Without her help, I would be dead by now. I could even show you some pictures of what I looked like, but I suspect they would ruin your appetite…for the next day or so.”

Dad snorted his agreement, saying, “She’s not kidding. She was…bad. I just thank god and Panacea that I have my Taylor back again.”

Uncle Kurt spoke up, tightly controlled anger in his voice, “What about the ones who did this, and let it happen Danny? What’s gonna happen to them?”

Dad looked at me for a long moment and then said, “They will ALL get what’s coming to them, I can promise you that. There is a very thorough investigation being conducted, and the guilty parties WILL be charged, and with any luck at all, go to prison for a good long time. I can pretty much guarantee that there will be no cover up or pressure from high places this time, Taylor.”

I sat there in shocked silence at his words until the kettle whistled so I got up, took the kettle off the stove and poured the hot water in the mugs, and placed the kettle on a trivet in the middle of
the table. Deciding to ignore the whole set of legal issues for now, I then took my tea out to the living room and sat down at my computer to continue my studies. Booting it up only took a few minutes, and then I started on some of my online work, of course checking my email first. Other than a short note from Amy, letting me know that everything was fine, that her Aunt Sarah had talked with Carol, and that she hadn’t actually been angry, just worried since she didn’t know in advance that Amy had permission from her father to be at a friend’s house, and since she was home well before even a school night curfew, she finally just let it drop. She did say that Vicky kept giving her weird looks when her Aunt had mentioned that I had escorted Amy home, and that she had spent some time before bed teasing her about her ‘guuurll friend’.

Overall it seemed that Amy was doing okay, even after we had our little meltdowns. I had to admit that I certainly felt pretty good, all things considered. I sent her an equally short note, letting her know that everything was going well on my end, and mentioning that dad and some friends had just brought home a freezer, that I was hoping to fill at least part way on Saturday.

I was looking up some of the requirements to cultivate different types of coral for sale, as well as the prices I could expect, when dad stuck his head in to let me know they were leaving and that he’d be back around six, as usual. I saw them all out, refilled my mug and went back to work.

The rest of the evening was pretty quiet, though after dinner, I did spend some extra time working on my programming studies before finally wrapping it all up for the night.

--------------------Legion*** ***Legion-----------------------------

Saturday was a big day, dad and I started at Costco, picking up a lot of bulk staples like rice, flour, sugar, frozen veggies, canned tomatoes and sauce, things like that. We also picked up a variety of sealable containers, both for left overs and to store things like flour and rice. Even though I could keep any insects out of the house, dad didn’t know that, and protecting them from moisture was still a good idea.

We decided to go home, unload and have lunch before heading out again. Our next two stops were at two different grocery stores, so we could shop their sales for miscellaneous items like toilet paper, soap, condiments, fresh fruits and vegetables and deli meat. Our last stop for the day was actually just outside of town, at a wholesale butcher shop where we got almost 100 lbs of assorted meats. There was also a coop dairy store next to the butcher shop, so we picked up 25 lbs of assorted cheeses, six dozen eggs and four gallons of milk. Besides buying in bulk, the unit prices was between 1/3 and ½ the normal cost. I hadn’t expected to get that much, but dad wanted to get the freezer filled up as soon as we could, so that we could really spread out our grocery bills.

Even having unloaded much of the stuff we had bought earlier, it still took us until almost ten o’clock to finish putting everything away in its proper place. I was really glad that we had ordered some pizza to be delivered rather than taking time to cook some dinner. I had made a point of
ensuring that all of the leftovers were finished before Saturday, and was enjoying the idea of having plenty of choices when it came time to write up my menus.

Sunday, both dad and I slept in, and when I woke up, at almost 7:00 am! I decided to make an actual brunch for the two of us since I wasn’t meeting Amy until 1:00pm at the Brockton Bay Maritime History and Art Museum. Amy had suggested it, both for a change of pace and to keep Vicky from trying to follow us, which, according to Amy, was something she liked to do. She hoped that the museum would bore Vicky, and I actually liked history, so it sounded like a good idea all around.

Just after noon, I left to catch the bus downtown, figuring that I could walk from the plaza to the museum. The weather was definitely warming up, and spring seemed to have finally arrived in full. Some of the trees were starting to turn green and flowers were beginning to bloom, here and there. As I had hoped, Amy was waiting just outside the front doors of the museum, even though it was still five minutes before the museum opened.

“Hey Amy!” I greeted her as I ran up the steps of the museum.

A smile bloomed on her face as she spotted me, “Hi Taylor, I’m glad you made it. Any problems?”

“Nope, I actually had extra time, so I walked here from the plaza. It was nice to see the trees and flowers showing some color, after this last winter. I don’t ever remember it being this cold and snowy before.”

Amy frowned for a moment and said, “I know, I’ve heard that some people think that Behemoth and Leviathan are actually changing global weather patterns, but that they don’t know if it’s long-term or not,” she shook her head and went on with a determined smile, “That’s way beyond me, and I would rather just enjoy the museum with you.”

I nodded, and seeing a museum attendant opening the doors, nodded and said, “Me too, let’s head in since they’re open now.”

Amy and I went in and showed our student ID’s which let us get in free, since it was Sunday. Even though I was now being homeschooled, I still had my old Winslow ID, and for this I was willing to use it. Although I supposed that I’d have to see about getting something from the city for next year, since my Winslow ID would have expired, unless I was in college by September.
We were able to enjoy the museum in relative quiet, since only a few people had decided to come here to be inside on one of first really nice days of the spring. In fact, aside from a couple of college-age adults who seemed to be very interested in the early days of Lord’s Port, we pretty much had the museum to ourselves.

Amy seemed to really like the paintings, many of which were by artists who had either originally come from Brockton Bay or had lived and worked here. I found the sculptures and an exhibition of glass, both blown and stained, that was on loan from some museum in Virginia, to be both fascinating and beautiful; they had most of the pieces cleverly lit, using tiny spot lights which really made the colors shimmer and glow.

As we moved into the glass gallery, Amy asked me a question, “Taylor, this stuff really doesn’t interest me as much as the paintings, so would you mind if you extended your links and let me ‘echo’ off of you? I’d like to see if I can install some of the armor sheathing that you have around my organs and blood vessels. I doubt we’ll have time today to grow the sub-dermal armor, much less the muscle and nervous system upgrades. But I want to get some of it done, every time we meet, alright?”

-----------------------------Legion*** Amy ***Legion----------------------------

She just hugged me close and said, “Oh, god yes, please do. If I walk too fast, or distract you let me know.” She let go her hug, but took my right hand and intertwined our fingers, like we seemed to do whenever we were together, and started walking slowly into the gallery. As she did so, I could feel her power expand, the linkages connecting to everything in her range; insects, worms and moles in the ground, squirrel and birds in the sky and trees and all of the thousands upon thousands of insects everywhere.

Working slowly and carefully, I connected to her linkages and began to convert my body fat into the reactive mesh that I was growing around my internal organs. As we walked through the gallery, Taylor pointed out the different pieces that she liked and read the information cards for each piece. Amazingly enough, I was not only able to grow all the modifications without error; I was also able to listen and respond to Taylor at the same time.

Apparently she had been right; that when we ‘echoed’ off of each other, we could even learn to use a small portion of each other’s powers as well. Although, so far it seemed to be only our Thinker powers that we could share; some of my innate understanding of biology and at least a little of her multitasking ability. The future possibilities were mind-boggling.

I was only able to work for about 90 minutes before I exhausted all of my readily available mass and nutritional energy that I was willing to use and wouldn’t cause my appearance to change. Slow and steady wins the race. However, in that time I was able to complete sheathing all of my internal
organs, primary and secondary blood vessels, and began the initial muscle upgrades.

When I finished up, I looked around to see that we were in a currently empty gallery that looked over a small park with sculptures and fountains in it. Before I realized what was happening, Taylor had sat down on a convenient bench and pulled me down on to her lap. Wrapping her arms around me and squeezing me tight she said, “Thank you Amy, thank you so very much for doing this.”

I was a bit surprised at both her actions and words, but hardly upset, and I could tell that she was both happy and relieved, returning her hug. I replied, “Uhh … Okay, I was going to thank you, for letting me do this today, but apparently you’ve been wanting this done as well?”

She nodded and said, “I’ve been getting really worried that you were too vulnerable, and I didn’t know how to bring it up and explain it to you. So when you suggested it, I jumped at the chance to help you.”

We sat there quietly for about 15 minutes before we got up and finished walking through the museum. We didn’t stop holding hands, though.

We left just as the museum closed at 4:30, and walked back to the plaza, where we wandered around until we found a little restaurant that seemed to offer an eclectic mix of French, Italian, and Spanish (not Mexican) dishes. I had earlier convinced her to let me buy dinner for the two of us in thanks for having me over for dinner on Wednesday; despite her protests, I was insistent so eventually she gave in. I have to admit that I enjoyed out-stubborning her, it just reinforced my belief that, while she might be smarter than me, I was more stubborn.

The restaurant was pretty good; they had two different mixed-cuisine appetizer trays that had a wide variety of tiny dishes, so we ordered one of each and shared them both. The combination was remarkably good, being both tasty and visually appealing, and we enjoyed it immensely.

Because of all the work that I had done to myself, I boosted my digestive system to max, and my metabolism by about 25%. That should be enough to support the progressive changes, without being immediately obvious. When we ordered, we made a point of ordering different entrée’s that could be shared, and that were so large that they seemed to have been designed to feed two people each. The extra calories were much appreciated by both of us.

We finished eating around seven, and walked over to the bus terminal to catch our buses home. Because I had no transfers, I insisted that I would be fine on my own, and that she shouldn’t worry, but take her own bus instead.
I did worry though. I didn’t like the thought of Amy being alone and unprotected, I knew that she could take care of herself, and her new upgrades would help, but still…

I finally agreed, and since her bus left first, at least I knew she would be off to a safe start. As I waited for my own bus, I decided that I was going to expedite getting those biological samples for her, and encourage her to continue working on her own enhancements, and maybe some built-in weapons as a last resort. I was starting to feel almost frightened at the thought of her being attacked and hurt by some stupid gang-banger or druggie who was too stupid or high to realize just how much world-class hurt would come down on whoever hurt Panacea. I could see that being enough to bring the Triumvirate to town, and I didn’t think even Brockton Bay’s capes and gangs would survive a visit like that.

Some things are just unforgivable, and Amy being hurt was one of them. I decided at this point to significantly up my training, even though I had originally intended to wait until I had a chance to use the weights I had asked for. In addition to the Air Force exercises I was doing, I was going to look into developing a isometric or isotonic program to really build my strength. Speed was harder, but I could probably start running at night, suitably covered up, to build my speed and endurance.

Tomorrow I would check the library for any books or videos on martial arts and exercises that didn’t use much or any equipment, what kind didn’t really matter to me, just something I could work with. Maybe I should check the online catalog first to see which branch had what so that I wouldn’t waste my time at the wrong place.

At least for now I couldn’t afford to pay for any form of training, so I was going to need to do it myself; even if it wouldn’t be as good, it would be better than nothing. I would also need to do some research into how capes got around in cities, I mean I had heard of them running and jumping across rooftops, but how did they do it? Was it powers or practice? Could I learn to do it? I could see that I was definitely going to need to start going out at night, for a lot of reasons, once dad was safely asleep, so that I could push myself and practice some things, like running, jumping, and climbing without holding back.

When I got home, I greeted dad and headed straight for the computer. I logged in and sent Amy a quick email letting her know that I was home safe, and thanking her for a wonderful time at the museum and for dinner as well. Leaving my mail open, I logged into the library catalog and searched for some martial arts videos and books. There was actually a huge variety of styles available, and I finally settled on Tai Chi and Kenpo, mostly because they were both available at the local branch and I had actually heard of them before. After some quick research at Wikipedia and Youtube, that lead me to some references for isometric exercises, as well as a .pdf copy of the old Charles Atlas workout course ‘Dynamic Tension’, I decided that this would do to start with, to build on my current exercises. And that the books and videos would at least get my started until I
could afford to pay for actual lessons. I reserved one of each, book and video, for each style, for me to pick up tomorrow and logged out of everything except my mail.

I started reading one of my Psych textbooks while waiting for Amy to email back since I knew I wasn’t going to get any sleep until she did. It wasn’t until almost 11:30 pm that she finally emailed me, by which time I was starting to get frantic, since she had never been this late in getting back to me.

Fortunately for my peace of mind, she hadn’t had any more problems with Carol, but instead had gotten called in to help deal with the injuries from a fire in an apartment building. It was apparently one of the many near the docks that were no better than abandoned slums, and somehow a fire got started on the lower floors, so a lot of people were badly hurt getting out of the building. As she explained, she had only just gotten home when she and the rest of New Wave heard about the fire, and they had all responded, helping the Brockton Bay Fire Department get as many people as possible out of the burning building while the Fire Department fought the fire. They had rescued nearly 100 people from the burning building before it got so bad that they had to back away and just let the FD finish the job. Amy had been able to treat everyone who needed help on the scene so she didn’t even have to spend any time at the hospital, which I was glad for since it meant that she would get a good night’s sleep. I sent a quick reply and wished her a good night before logging off and heading to bed myself.

--------------------Legion*** Amy/New Wave ***Legion--------------------

As I boarded my bus to head home, I watched Taylor until I finally lost sight of her. Sighing, I sat back and just smiled as I remembered everything we did today, the museum might be small, but it had some beautiful exhibits, and exploring them with Taylor made it even more fun. Even doing my upgrades was fun, because I wasn’t doing it alone, I was doing it with Taylor. I was also pleased with the restaurant we had found; the mixture of continental dishes were both interesting and tasty, as well as filling and … god, I had it bad. I had just realized that I was picturing everything we had done together, and then comparing it to what it would be like without Taylor. This wasn’t a crush, or even an infatuation; I am actually resenting the time I spent away from her, and am counting the hours ‘til I could be with her again.

Sitting there on the bus, I decided to take advantage of being alone for a few minutes to think about this; Was this a good idea? I still had no way to block Vicky’s aura, and I could feel the shift in my emotions every time she came near. Which meant that asking Taylor if we could date right now was just wrong. I had to figure out a way to fix the way her aura affected me. I did not want to lust after my sister, but every time she came near me I did, I couldn’t help myself.

Sighing as my thoughts brought me no solutions, I checked to see how much longer until my stop, then went back to my thoughts, Okay, I can’t do anything about the aura, but what about dad? If I talk to Vicky, I bet I can convince her to help me with changing dad’s routine, to ensure he takes his meds every day. And after a couple of days, I can slip a tiny correction to his brain chemistry, just to smooth it out a little. Nothing major, Baby steps only.
I pondered just what changes I would make first, then thought that it would be better to check him tomorrow morning before he took his meds, and then just before I left for school and again before dinner; and if I did this for 2 or 3 days I would have a good base-line for smoothing his brain chemistry out.

By the time I had worked out my plan of action, my stop was coming up, so I zipped up my jacket, picked up my purse and signaled for the bus to stop at the next stop. Once the bus had stopped, I left the bus, wishing the driver a nice night and started walking home.

Three minutes later I was stepping through the front door, and greeted my family.

“Hey Vicky, mom, dad. Did you all have a nice day?” I asked as I hung my jacket up in front hall closet.

“Yeah Ames, I did a patrol this afternoon with some of the Wards, only saw a couple of muggers and one convenience store hold up, pretty quiet overall.” Vicky said brightly, looking up from the romance novel she was reading to smile at me. As she did, I could feel her aura gently changing me, and I watched very carefully, just as I had been doing for the last week. As always, her aura shifted my brain chemistry towards affection, love and … lust. But being aware that it was externally imposed helped me ignore the effects and act normally.


“Sure, Kid Win and Vista were doing a North-Central patrol route, so I kept them company. It was nice, and like I said, mostly quiet.” She replied matter-of-factly.

“No Gallant today?” I asked her a little worried, because I thought he had duty today.

“No, he had to go to New York with his family, some sort of problem with one of his cousins, he didn’t say what it was though,” she explained.

Dad had looked up from his magazine, and smiled at me, but that was it. No questions, no teasing, nothing. Damnit, I will fix his depression, one way or another, and if I can’t I’ll find another healer who can and work out a trade in kind. Panacea’s willing help, for a non-critical patient should be worth a lot. Like Taylor said, slow and sneaky.
Mom had been watching Vicky and I banter back and forth, and when we came to stop, she spoke up, “So did you have a good day today, Amy?”

I blinked in surprise, because once again, she had spoken to me in a normal tone of voice, no hidden edge, no hint that I must have been doing something shameful or wrong. On one hand, I was waiting for her to lash out at me in her old, cold and subtle way, but on the other hand, it was nice the way she had been treating me lately, and I really didn’t want it to stop.

“I met a friend at the Maritime Art and History Museum and spent the afternoon there, and then we went out to dinner at a Continental Fusion restaurant. The food was very interesting and good, but the appetizer platters were amazing.”

“Any interesting exhibits at the museum, I haven’t been there in years?” She asked, seeming to be actually interested in what I was talking about for once.

“Oh yes! They have a beautiful exhibition of glass, all forms of worked glass on loan from a museum in Virginia, I don’t remember which one. Taylor was totally fascinated by the glass and sculptures. I liked them well enough, but much prefer the impressionists and abstract paintings,” I explained.

Mom frowned in thought for a moment, then smiled at me and said, “Well, I’m glad you had a nice Sunday off. It’s good to see you relaxing and enjoying yourself,” with that she picked up the files she had been reading and went back to them.

Vicky and I exchanged puzzled glances, then I said, “Well, I’m going to take a shower and get ready for bed, we have school tomorrow,” as I turned and headed upstairs. Vicky waited a few moments, then got up and followed me upstairs.

She slipped into my room silently, and closed the door behind her. After watching me set out my clothes for school, and pick out my pj’s and shower things, she spoke up at last, “So did you really have a good time? At a museum?” Her voice, though a quiet speaking volume, let her disbelief that anyone could have a good time at a museum come through, loud and clear.

I just grinned at her and said, “Why yes, Vicky. I really did have a good time, even if it was at a museum. And dinner, don’t forget the dinner.”
She smirked at that, “Dinner, of course, we can’t forget the dinner. Was it really that good? You’re normally not fond of restaurant food, as I recall.”

“Well, it was a lot fancier than Taylor’s cooking, but truthfully, it was almost as tasty. And the appetizers really were amazing.” I giggled, and lowered my voice, “Actually, I think she was trying to figure out how to make the different items, so she could try it at home for herself.”

Vicky looked at me for a moment, then shook her head and said, “I think I have to copy Clockblocker on this one and call bullshit. No way is a 15 year old kid that good of a cook, not without special training.” She pointed a finger at me and said, “And you told me she’s self-taught, not cordon bleu trained.”

I just smiled back at her, secure in my knowledge of just how good Taylor was, in so many areas. “I’ve eaten her cooking…and you haven’t. Normally she makes simpler dishes, but they are very tasty, and very healthy too.”

Vicky opened her mouth to say something in rebuttal, when mom called up the stairs, “Girls, costume up and get ready to go, there’s an apartment building fire and Sarah and the others are on their way to pick us up. 5 minutes, so hop to it.”

I looked down at my pj’s and said, “Well, shit, so much for a shower and early bedtime.” I tossed the clean clothes on the bed and headed for my closet, while Vicky zipped out the door and headed to her room.

I pulled out my costume, and with a moment’s thought, selected a warm pair of tights and a light gray leotard to wear under my costume, because while it wasn’t too cold right now, the temperature was expected to drop overnight, and spray from the firehoses could drop the temperature as well. And I still hadn’t installed the climate control mod, as Taylor called it, which would let me stay comfortable in sub-zero temperatures or running from a blazing fire. Oh well, live and learn.

I set the clothes I planned on wearing down, and started stripping out of my date clothes, even if I would never admit that I thought of them that way to anyone but me. I was sitting on my bed, pulling up my tights when Vicky burst back into my room, “Hurry up slowpoke, the cous…” She stopped and stared at me, mostly naked, as if she had never seen me without my clothes before.

I leaned back and pulled the tights up over my white high-cut panties, before picking up the leotard and started slipping it on, ignoring Vicky’s stunned look.
Once the leotard was on and I had it adjusted to be both comfortable and supportive, I slipped into my white winter boots, and pulled my Panacea robes on, leaving my mask down around my neck, rather than pulled up like a surgical mask as I usually do. I also grabbed one of my medical kits, the one for fire and trauma.

“Lets go Vicky, times a wasting,” I said as I stepped past her and headed for the stairs. She shook her head, and said, “Well, I can see I need to have a good long talk with my sister, but not tonight. Tonight, we have people to rescue and a fire to fight.”

We ran down the stairs and followed mom and dad out the front door, just in time for our cousins to come in for a landing in front of us. From long practice, we partnered up so that everyone could fly or be carried to the site of any emergency at very high speed. Aunt Sarah carried uncle Neil, in his powered down state, dad was picked up under his arms by Crystal and Eric, mom turned into her hard light ball-form so that uncle Neil could kind of push her along as aunt Sarah flew, and of course Vicky carried me. As soon as we were properly arranged, we headed for the docks at the highest speed that we could all maintain, which I knew from long testing, was just over 85 miles an hour.

In under 10 minutes we were approaching the building that was on fire. Aunt Sarah called out orders to everyone, though practice and training let us all know what was generally going to be expected of us. We landed just behind the fire chief, and mom and aunt Sarah, Lady Photon, reported to him and got a quick update from him and where we could help him the most.

I went to where the EMT’s were treating people, and finding the one in charge, said, “I am Panacea, show me the ones who need help the most, and please organize a triage so I can help you most efficiently. Please continue normal treatment protocols until I can get to them, that is their best hope to get through this okay.”

The EMT didn’t even hesitate, he just started snapping orders to his people, and patients on gurneys began forming up in a line in front of me. Because it was an emergency situation, the law allowed me to heal injured people, even if they were unable to give consent, or if I felt that their injuries made them unable to give proper informed consent. I didn’t like not having prior consent, but it did make my job easier.

As I healed all of the injuries, burns, smoke inhalation, broken bones and the cuts and bruises due to panic, I also kept half an eye on how my family was doing with the evacuation. After a few minutes, Velocity, Aegis, and a new Ward I didn’t recognize showed up. Based on his appearance, I suspected he was a Brute what with his bulging muscles and thickset build.

Fortunately, I was able to easily keep up with the patients as they were brought to me, and I decided to fix a few of their less obvious problems. Things like asthma, arthritis, internal parasites,
chronic illnesses. Most of them, I simply reduced to much lower levels, but did not remove entirely; STD’s, parasites, and potentially lethal diseases were the only exceptions. I did not upgrade anyone, though I was sorely tempted with some of the children.

At last, just after 10:00 pm, the fire was out, all of the residents had been found and healed, with the exception of six people who had died before we had even been notified of the fire. As everything was wrapping up, I asked the fire chief, if any of his people had been injured, and if I could please check them out just to be certain?

He paused to survey the fire scene, then said, “If you could do that, I would be eternally grateful, firefighters are much too macho for my taste, and they don’t always report injuries, especially if they think its ‘just a scratch’.”

I smiled at him and nodded, “I see that all the time, and it’s not just the men; one of the worst offenders for that kind of behavior is a 15 year old girl. Most stubborn person, I’ve ever met. Anyways, where and with whom do you want me to start?”

He checked the scene again, and called over about eight men who were just getting finished putting away some of their equipment. As they made a circle around us, he said, “Panacea has graciously offered to check out all of us for current and old injuries, I’m going to have her start with me, and I expect that all of you will remember you manners and watch your language, got it?” The last came out in a hard snap, and all of them responded with a chorus of “Yes, boss” “You got it, Chief” and similar responses.

I reached up to the Fire Chief, Captain, actually as I read his badge for the first time. “Do I have your permission to check you for any injuries or problems, and fix them if possible?” I asked him, even as I scanned his body for anything I needed to fix. “And would you like me explain precisely what I’m doing, give a general description or just do it and only mention things that may need to be followed up on?”

He thought about it for only a second before he said, “Give a general description, and if you could, speak loudly enough so the other guys know what to expect.”

“Certainly,” I said, my respect for him, already high, now climbing even higher.

“Multiple instances of traumatic arthritis in your joints, dissolved, joints realigned and regrown. Severely stressed kidneys due to multiple minor impacts, regenerated. Three ulcers, sealed and acid production balanced back to normal. You will need to follow up on that, because that is clearly job-related stress, I see it all the time. Plaque buildup in many arteries, dissolving and removing.
Another follow up issue, proper diet should keep it from coming back. Your heart and lungs are in very good condition, you clearly remember to use your protective gear, and exercise regularly. Returning your eyes and ears to normal, no tinnitus, no more reading glasses. Now for the biggie, you have early stage liver and prostate cancer. Cured, but you need to be checked every six months to ensure that it doesn’t come back. If you don’t do the follow up checks, I can pretty much promise that at least one of them will be back within 3 years. That’s it, all done.”

One of the other firefighters, spoke up and said, “Three minutes, twenty-six seconds. That’s just unbelievably fast, Panacea, to do so much so fast. Just … wow!”

After that they lined up for me, and it took me only 90 to 120 seconds for each firefighter, though the four women took slightly longer, as I asked each of them some questions that only another woman would appreciate and helped them with some gender-specific issues. Even so, I was finished with all of the Emergency Responders, whether Firefighters, EMT’s or just the drivers before my family had finished with their debriefing with the other capes.

When they finished up, we sorted ourselves out again and flew home, a little bit slower this time, since we were all getting a bit tired.

Once home, I let Vicky use our shared shower, and I went and used the one across the hall, while mom and dad used the one in their bedroom. I’ve seen that bathroom, it was as good as a professional spa, and more than big enough for two to use it at once. When I was done, I put a robe on over my pj’s, roughly dried my hair and headed back to my room. As I had expected, Vicky was waiting for me, probably to finish our talk from earlier.

I dropped my dirty clothes in the hamper, moved my clean clothes to my dresser top, and sat down on my bed to brush my hair and tie it up for the night. “Go ahead Vicky, you had started to say something when mom called us down for the fire. If you can remember it, ask it.”

She looked thoughtful, then shook her head, “Nah, trying to argue that Taylor isn’t as good of cook as you claim is just stupid. Maybe if I ever have a chance to try her cooking for myself, I could decide for myself, but right now I’ll just let that subject drop.”

I laughed and said, “Good call. So what do you want to talk about?”

She took a deep breath and said, “When you were changing, I noticed that your body had changed, you have dropped body fat, and are building muscle, and…well, your breasts are a little bigger, and seem firmer. What’s going on?”
Well, that wasn’t a topic I was expecting to have come up this soon, or from Vicky, however I already had a cover story ready. I leaned over to my desk and pulled a ratty looking book out of the top drawer and threw it to her.

She caught it easily and looked at it cluelessly, then looked back up at me, “What’s this?”

I rolled my eyes, “It’s a book, Vicky, open it, and read the first part, okay?”

She did, and she really is a fast reader, faster than me, though not nearly as fast as Taylor, so a couple of minutes later she looked at me and asked, “So, you’ve been doing this program, and it works that well?” She pointed directly at my breasts.

I nodded, and said, “Yes I have, before I go down for breakfast, and usually just before I take my night time shower. I also do some specific exercises that, along with being very careful with what and when I eat, have let me get the most out of my workouts. Remember, though I can’t affect myself with my powers, I can monitor myself.”

Vicky got this look of sudden understanding and said, “So you can tell if what you are doing is giving you the results you want as you do them, and change your workout as needed to get it do work perfectly for you, right?”

“Yep. I’m pretty much the best personal trainer in the world, at least for me. I plan to start running soon, so that my wind and overall stamina improves too.”

Vicky looked at me and then asked slyly, “But why, you’ve made it pretty clear that you don’t want to be a combat cape, that healing is what makes you happy, so why the working out like this, why now?”

I looked back at her with my best ‘little miss innocent’ look and replied, “What, I can’t just want to be in better shape, be healthier? I have to have some ulterior motive? Vicky, my dearest sister, you wound me with your suspicions.”

She just looked back at me and said dryly, “I’m your only sister, so I had better be your dearest one too. Besides, I never said you had an ulterior motive, just that you had another one. So, spill.”

I started to blush as she said that, and said, “You know why, please don’t make me say it, Vicky,
please?” I was almost begging by the end, and she surprised me by sliding over and giving me a side hug.

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure I know why you’re doing this. You really like her that much, don’t you? Do you know if she returns your feelings yet?”

I shrugged and said, “I don’t know for sure, I think she does, but she hasn’t admitted it to herself yet. She…she had a really bad time, and is only really starting to fully recover from it recently. I can and will give her as much time as she needs to see what we have together. I won’t push her, but I will support her and I believe that it won’t take too long. I hope.”

Vicky sighed, then said, “I only met her for a couple of minutes, but she did seem nice, but…Dean told me something that I think you need to know, it’s not bad really, but, well. Anyway, when I let my aura out that day on the Boardwalk, he said she actually pushed it off and got pissed, really nearly homicidally pissed, and…”

I interrupted and said, “She almost came across the table to attack you, right? She and I talked about your aura after you left, and yes she was angry with you, she thought that whatever you were doing was an attack, an attack on both her and… me. That’s why she almost attacked you, because she thought you were attacking me.”

Vicky looked even sadder for a moment then said, “So Dean was right, then. But was he also right that as soon as she knew that I didn’t do it on purpose, that I was excited and happy, not angry, she calmed right back down to normal?”

I looked at Vicky, and tried not to snicker as I explained, “Vicky, you need to understand something, it’s something that actually gives me a lot of hope for Taylor and I actually building a good relationship. When your aura hit Taylor, you made her pretty much fall completely and totally in lust with you, when she was already my friend, and possibly starting to feel more. Which sort of made her feel like she was betraying me, betraying me with someone she had never met before, and when she realized it was from an external source, namely you, of course she was pissed. And rightly so.”

“Vicky, I’m your sister, and I love you, but you really need to learn how to actually control your aura, so it only comes on when you want it to, not whenever you get excited. If you don’t, I’m terrified that someday, your aura will affect someone badly and they will try to kill you for it. And don’t you dare say that you’re invincible, you know that your force field isn’t perfect, and you can be hurt. So Vicky, please, please be careful. Learn to control your aura, learn to control your temper. Please Vicky, I don’t want to lose you.”
By this time, I had started quietly crying, and was holding Vicky tightly, because just talking about some of my fears, made them seem more real, and more likely to come true.

Vicky was holding me tightly as well, and then said, “I’m sorry Ames, I had no idea that you were so worried about me. I’ll, I’ll try to figure out how to somehow control my aura, and I’ll talk to aunt Sarah about anger management training, maybe she knows someone discreet who can help, alright? I’ll try, I promise, I promise that I’ll be careful too. I never meant to frighten you like this, I never wanted you to be frightened at all.”

We sat there, just holding each other for a while, then Vicky sighed, sat back and then stood up, saying, “I guess that’s enough drama for tonight. I won’t tease you about Taylor so much, and I will try to work on the things that frighten you, but Ames, you need to take care of yourself, too. No more walking to the hospital in the middle of the night if you can’t sleep. If you absolutely have to go, wake me up and I’ll fly you there, and you will stay until it’s either daytime and safe to use the buses, or I can come and get you, alright?”

Amy giggled tearfully, and said, “You’re too late, Taylor already read me the riot act over that kind of behavior, and I already promised her I wouldn’t take those kinds of chances every again.”

Vicky had been getting up to head to her own bedroom when I said that and she turned to look at me so fast that she slipped and fell on her butt, with a stunned look on her face. “She did what? No, I don’t want to know. But I really want to meet her again soon, and get to know her better, ’cause anyone who can get you to do that is something special.”

With those last words, she went to her own room to sleep, and I did much the same, only taking a few minutes to send Taylor a quick email from my phone, explaining what had happened with the fire, and that other than that everything was going very well, before I went to sleep for the night.
Chapter 12

One of the first things I did the next day was finalize the two cape persona I had come up with; the first was going to be my public, Rogue mask: Pied Piper; the second was going to be my hidden, Hero mask, Legion. Pied Piper was going to be a flashy, somewhat silly, public Rogue who did parahuman pest control. I had picked up a decent set of pan pipes a couple of weeks ago that I found tucked away on the shelf in the back of a second hand clothing store.

I didn’t have any problems with learning to play a few songs, since mom had taught me to play both the recorder and the flute, before she had died. I looked on line and found some simple Celtic and German tunes for the recorder or pipes that sounded kind of haunting that I was going to use to pretend could call different types of pests to me, and into the sewers, or maybe into some sealed barrels if I could figure out how to make that work. I wanted to make it seem like I had a specifically limited power that was only good for pest control.

Legion on the other hand, was going to be an independent Hero. If I could pull it off, Legion was going to seem to be male, or at least androgynous. To that end I had started working on using my creatures to speak for me. I wanted to be able to combine the sounds of a swarm of bugs, and maybe birds, to emulate my speech. So far I had limited success, unless I had a truly scary amount of bugs working together; though adding even a couple of birds let me have a much larger variety of sounds. I also researched voice modulators, and finally settled on an inexpensive mechanical model that actually blended well with my voice swarm.

Amy’s suggestion that I use ants and beetles to build a lair in my back yard was a good one, and I had already started summoning several large nests of ants, queens and all to begin construction before we even started eating dinner. The logistics of keeping all of my work force fed was a bit daunting, but I thought I could handle it. I didn’t plan to bring in any Widows to spin and weave the cloth that I would use to make my costume until I had everything prepared.

Building the basic lair only took a week, but I ensured that the lair also had plenty of room for expansion so that I could have my Widows breed as soon as they settled into their individual chambers, even if it was very early for them to do so. That would hopefully provide me an immense work force, which would also allow me to create extra copies of our costumes.
I collected a couple hundred spiders while out running the next morning, using flies to carry them to me, and stored them in the empty backpack I was wearing, so that I could use them as ‘proof of concept’. I actually put them in the coal cellar for now, and brought them plenty of flies and other pests for food, and had them weave me a short length of cord that could support a lot more than my weight, even though it was less than 1/8th of an inch thick. I then had them weave me a piece of cloth, about 6 inches on a side, and 4 layers thick. When I tested the final product, I could only slice through the top layer with a knife, and could barely penetrate it at all, even with my full strength, when I laid it flat on a board and stabbed straight down.

I decided to use at least 6 layers, 8 in critical areas, when I built my costume, I would also have solid armor sections to help protect critical locations like the spine, kidneys, skull, etc. As I worked out my designs, I also planned on making both a body suit and robes for Amy so that she would be better protected when she was out as Panacea. If I could weave enough cloth, I would be able to sew her some normal clothes from Widow silk, that would be comfortable, stylish and extremely protective.

I had a series of experiments set up that I hoped would help me figure out the best combinations of treatments to ensure that my silk wouldn’t shrink and was water resistant once formed into costumes or clothing. I treated the experiments as if they were part of my Chemistry studies, using the scientific method to help me design the different experiments, and I kept full records of each experiment that I performed, including follow-up tests of strength and water-proofing after different elapsed times. I wanted to be sure that the treatments I came up with wouldn't have long-term weaknesses.

While I had the Widows working on my samples, I watched both of the martial arts videos I had checked out, then played them again while trying to follow along. I figured I would read the books next, then practice the video routines a couple more times before dad got home. I planned to practice the routines using multiple points of view and with bugs riding on my limbs so that I did it perfectly each time; I hoped that would be enough so that I could continue to practice on my own, as well as return the videos in a couple days, just like normally. The Tai Chi was interesting, I was doing it as a cool down routine after my normal exercise sets, at least twice a day, and I found that it was very calming, and actually helped me to expand my control range quite a ways, though as soon as I stopped doing Tai Chi, my range dropped back to normal. Once again, powers are weird.

I tried to add isometrics to my exercise routine; but found that the old Charles Atlas course was actually more effective for me, since most of the information on isometrics made it clear that it worked best in conjunction with working out with weights. Since I didn’t have any yet, I had to do it a different way. I really wanted to have Amy observe me as I worked out, so she could tell me if it was working the way I thought it was, right away, instead of a couple of days later.

My intention was to have most of my cape training and preps in the basement, out of casual sight. It didn’t matter if it was costume creation, physical or martial training, or weapons research and design, I was going to keep it down here, hidden from dad stumbling over it by accident, even if he came down here, which he seldom did, especially since I was now doing almost all of the house
work, and was also using the basement to do my school lab experiments.

I decided to use the coal cellar as a workroom for my spiders, as it gave me a lot of room for them to spread out and dad never liked going down into the basement anyways. I moved some things around in the basement so that an old wardrobe blocked the door. The wardrobe just had some old boots and coats in it, so it was easy to move into place. The lair I had started earlier was becoming quite extensive and complex, with a multitude of various sized chambers for all of my swarm.

The only problem I foresaw was creating a decent size opening for the cloth that my spiders produced, drilling a hole through the concrete was not going to be easy. Eventually I decided to drill a 1 or 2 inch hole in the wall in one of the corners, near the floor so that the ants could connect a tunnel to it so that the spiders could pass through to do their work in the coal cellar, sort of like commuting. I spent a few hours on the internet getting some designs for stretchers and frames that my spiders could use to weave on. I was already doing some experiments with waterproofing, and eliminating shrinking of the silk fabric, but I also needed to practice with dyeing and bleaching the spider silk before I settled on my final designs and processes.

I drew up some plans using some free software, mostly just to see if I could, then drew out some of my shrinking savings to buy the lumber I would need. I also got to use my grandfather's hand tools I had found when I was cleaning out the basement. My early work was a little shaky, but with practice I did get a lot better. Aside from the work in the coal cellar, I repaired and replaced the broken front step and some of the loose railings on a nice Saturday, so that I could also repaint the whole porch and set of steps. Dad was quite surprised when he came home later that afternoon to find that the front steps had been repaired and repainted.

The weaving frames were designed to let me weave cloth a bit over 3 feet wide, and 3 layers thick. I had to manually wind the completed cloth onto a take-up reel, and reset the reel so the weight of the reel and the finished cloth would maintain a light tension. I used some silk cord and improvised weights to create a counter-balance system similar to that used in the windows in older houses. I also created a thread spinning setup along one of the walls, that allowed the Widows to create a 5-ply thread of dragline silk. They walked around the inside of a circular frame, effectively braiding the silk into a strong thread that was wound onto a wooden spool by a group of beetles.

As my spider workforce increased, I eventually needed to enter the coal cellar once a day to switch spools and adjust the weaving reel. About every third day I needed to remove the silk fabric from the take-up reel and carefully wind it onto a cardboard bolt. I was actually hopeful that I would be able build up enough of a stockpile that I could use the silk for normal clothes in addition to our costumes.

Drilling the hole in the wall turned out to be very easy when I found an old electric drill and some rusty drill bits in a drawer in the workbench. When I finally broke through the concrete into the dirt on the other side, I measured the depth of the hole and found that I had drilled through 8 inches of
concrete. And I only broke three of the drill bits before I got the hole wide enough and drilled all the way through the wall.

When I brought my mom’s old sewing machine down from the attic, I had also found a couple of boxes of cloth, patterns, a huge variety of thread, and a decent collection of books and magazines about sewing and knitting. After sorting through everything, I added sewing and clothes making into my study schedule, as I would definitely need these skills to make our costumes. I had originally planned on setting up in the basement, but decided it would be better to use the guest room for my sewing. I would do the weaving, dyeing and chemical treatment in the basement, but all of my sewing upstairs. As long as I ensured that the costumes were well hidden, I could use making normal clothes for dad, me and Amy as the perfect cover for making the costumes. If this worked out for us, anywhere near as well as I hoped it would, I was going to need more room for everything we were trying to do anyways.

I got pretty good at finding used furniture and tools in the newspaper and online, that I could get even cheaper than at second hand stores or thrift shops. Brockton Bay’s depressed economy seems to have created a thriving economy for used goods that I took full advantage of. I had tracked down several sets of salt-water aquariums, 2 twenty gallon tanks and 2 fifty gallon tanks, with all of the filters, pumps, hoses and miscellaneous equipment. They came from 3 different sources, two of whom would deliver, when I explained that I didn’t have a car. My only problem would be the twenty gallon tanks, the seller didn’t have a car, but was willing to wait until I could get my dad to take me to pick them up. All told, I would be able to get them very cheap, since I was paying cash for them. A total of $120 for all of them.

Once I had them set up, I was planning on growing coral in them, as well as any exotic fish that we could get our hands on, or make, I wasn’t picky. These would be setup down in the basement, possibly in front of the coal cellar door, once I figured out the best way for me to get in and out, without disturbing the tanks. Well time would tell.

When dad was finally able to get me some free weights I was ecstatic, I had almost forgotten that I had asked for them, so was pleased to be able to start lifting weights at last. I realized, to my amazement that using a standard bench press I could lift just over 200 lbs, and that a standing lift over my head maxed me out at 285 lbs, and I think I could do more than that with practice. The set I had, could put a maximum of 365 lbs on the main bar, but I couldn’t lift that much. Yet. I put finding additional weights on my someday todo list, though I wasn’t going to ask dad for more if I could avoid it. I figured that if I couldn’t lift more weights, I would lift more times. Or maybe figure out how to do the same exercises with only one hand, effectively doubling my lifting limit.

Amy had been right about how my muscles would develop too; even though I was clearly getting stronger, I wasn’t bulking up like a body builder. My muscles were getting denser, and I was putting on weight, but I was starting to look more like a swimmer or gymnast than a weight lifter. Because I checked my stats every week, I knew that I was 5’ 8” tall, and currently weighed 143 lbs, though if you went by appearances only, I looked as if I only weighed about 120–123 lbs. In addition to my working out, the extra food I was eating and the healthy weight I had put on had
triggered a growth spurt; I was starting to actually develop a feminine figure; my legs and hips were no longer straight sticks, having developed some curves from my increased muscle mass, and my breasts were no longer flat and boyish, but had developed all the way up to an A cup. It may not sound like much, but I had long since despaired of ever looking like a woman, which had done horrible things for my self-image and self-esteem, even before I was mutilated in the locker.

I returned both my martial arts videos and books, though I had copied the DVD’s on to my computer, and scanned the kata pages and most helpful hints and notes as well first, and got some new ones. One of the books had a few chapters on related martial arts skills, like thrown weapons, using the environment for movement and evasion, and building training aids. This led me to parkour and knife-throwing videos, as well as using my wood working skills to build a knife target, a striking board and a wooden karate dummy. My martial arts training aids were designed to be hidden away when not using them, except for the dummy which I turned around and put in the empty space under the stairs. Again, out of sight, out of mind.

While I was still experimenting with developing effective treatments for my silk before creating my silk costume, I put together a generic, black and gray costume out of normal cloth, that while it was unarmored it was still good at keeping me unseen at night. It covered me from head to toe, and let me sneak out of the house late at night, after dad was well asleep, so that I could really work on my running and climbing skills.

I did have to do some work on my sewing machine before I could use it, but I was able to download a user and maintenance manual for that model sewing machine and that made it easy to disassemble it, clean it out and then lubricate and adjust it so that it worked just like it was supposed to, all of which only took me about two hours to complete. It definitely helped that in one of the drawers of the cabinet was a small toolkit, just for the sewing machine.

I washed some of the old fabric from the attic, dried it carefully and ironed it smooth; then used that to make dad three hand-made shirts, that fit him nicely, looked really good and only cost about $3 for the notions I needed but didn’t have. It took me about six hours of work, since I had only watched mom do this a few times, and I used fabric that was just going to waste, and followed one of the patterns she had left me. The books described the general process, and I watched some Youtube videos as well; you could find almost anything you needed there, it was really useful to be able to watch people making different kinds of clothes.

He seemed quite impressed when I gave them to him after supper, especially since I hadn’t measured him, but measured some of his other shirts. Or so he thought; I did take the initial measurements that way, but I actually used the measurements I got when I had some tiny spiders walk all over him while he was deeply asleep. Turns out that although using the spiders was far more accurate, the measurements from the shirts made allowance for movement and proper drape that the spiders didn’t. Who knew? Not me, that’s for sure.
On the physical training side, I also used a book on parkour I had ordered from the library and a bunch of youtube videos to begin teaching myself parkour. Although free running looked like it was a lot of fun; the focus on speed and efficiency of parkour was really appealing. My interim costume was designed to allow me to move and flex freely as I practiced running and tried to teach myself parkour.

I modified my daily routine to include an hour of weights in the morning and an hour of martial arts in the afternoon. Working on our costumes was during the hour or so right after lunch, although the Widows worked in shifts, around the clock, except when I was going to be out of the house. During those periods, they were blocked into their sleeping chambers with a captured fly or beetle for them to eat. I had to shift some of my study time into the evening after dinner, but I made a point of still spending a lot of time with my dad.

I could only spend a little time after school on Wednesdays with Amy, so I started to meet her right outside of Arcadia and we would walk downtown together. This allowed us to talk together and have a bite to eat before she went to work at Brockton Bay General at six o’clock. Sunday was still our big day together, with Amy spending most of the day at my house, from before lunch until after dinner. Sometimes dad stayed home, and sometimes he visited friends or worked extra hours at the union. It seemed like he was trying to both chaperone us, as well as giving us space and privacy. Parents can be weird sometimes.

I got the aquariums setup in the basement, next to the old workbench, instead of in front of the coal cellar, simply because I couldn’t figure out a way to move them safely once the tanks had been filled with sea water. All of the supplies that I had ordered came in and I setup the tanks as mini-corals farms, and planted the coral ‘seeds’ in each of the tanks. I had different species of coral, so I kept them in separate tanks. I couldn’t wait to see Amy on Sunday, since it looked like I would have a lot to show her, and I hoped to please her with my progress, and maybe amaze her.

I was right, too.

Sunday morning Amy came by on an early bus, getting to the bus stop at 10:15, and we walked back to my house, with her trying to get me to tell her what the surprise was, and I was refusing to tell her, but I would also keep giving her these little hints, just to tease her.

When we came in the back door, dad was sitting in his recliner reading the Sunday paper and sipping tea. When he saw Amy was with me, he checked the clock and raised an eyebrow at me, then asked, “So, you told me Amy was going to be coming by early, but I wasn’t expecting it to be this early. What’s up?”
I rolled my eyes at him and said, “I know I told you we were going to make a nice brunch this morning, and while I will admit that I’m good, but I still can’t be we, all by myself.”

This actually caught Amy by surprise, and she started giggling and had to hide her face in my side to keep from letting the cat out of the bag, so to speak.

Dad just smiled at her antics, and said, “Well, I guess you two have it under control then, so I’ll just go back to reading my paper in peace, while you and the giggle monster there can get started on brunch.” With that he shook his paper out and went back to reading, while I practically had to carry Amy into the kitchen, because she was pretty much helpless from holding her laughter in.

I set Amy down in what had become ‘her’ chair, so she could recover at her own pace, and I got started on our Sunday brunch. The first thing I did was put the breakfast casserole in the oven to bake, along with a sheet of bacon, while I started pan frying some sausages. As the sausages cooked, I diced up some potatoes, green peppers and onions for hash browned potatoes. By the time I had the potatoes diced, Amy had recovered enough to safely mix up the pancake batter, including whipping some egg whites into a nice fluffy meringue, which she folded into the batter to ensure the pancakes were nice and airy.

I used the bacon and sausage grease to fry out the hash browns, and turned down the oven to WARM, to keep the breakfast casserole, bacon, and sausages warm, and cleared the stove enough for Amy to start on the pancakes. The plan was to have some plain, some with blue berries, and some with strawberries, unfortunately they were still out of season, so they were too expensive to make whole batches of them, but we could use a few to spice up some of the pancakes.

While we were cooking, Amy and I were talking about the perfect kitchen we wanted when we had our own place and of course, if we could afford it. So we decided that money was no object, sort of like if we had won a huge lottery prize. The first thing I wanted was a six burner gas stove with an open grill in the center that I could cover with a huge griddle. Amy insisted on double wall mounted ovens, with TWO warming drawers to go with them; I countered with a full-size freezer right next to a huge refrigerator, maybe one with the freezer on the bottom. Amy then wanted a long island counter, with a double sink, and a six place breakfast bar on the other side, so we could make sure the kids had a proper breakfast before school. And lots and lots of drawers and cupboards to store all of the pots and pans and utensils we would need to cook in a kitchen that good. I wanted granite countertops and hardwood floors, and a walk-in pantry for storage so I didn’t have to leave the kitchen to get anything.

By the time we got to this point in our planning, everything was ready and was either in the oven to keep warm for when we had seconds and thirds, or was on the table ready to eat. I made more hot tea, while Amy served up orange juice for everyone, but milk for just me and her, since dad almost never drank milk, just his tea and juice.
When I turned to get dad to come eat, I found that he was leaning against the wall just outside the kitchen, with his arms crossed and a big smile on his face.

“Well, I have to admit that when you said you two were going to make a big Sunday brunch, you really meant it. Although I didn’t think that little Miss Giggle-Monster was ever going to stop laughing enough to help you.” Which just made Amy blush bright red, cover her face and start giggling again. At least this time she was sitting in her seat already, so I just started filling her plate, before filling dad’s and then mine. Eventually Amy calmed down enough to begin eating her breakfast, even if she would occasionally giggle whenever dad would make the most outrageous comments, especially designed just to make her giggle again.

Dad did get serious a couple of times, mostly to compliment us on how good everything was. I knew he meant it too, because he actually had a complete second plate, and thirds of a few things. I didn’t notice it at the time, but later on I realized that of all the things dad teased Amy about, our dream kitchen wasn’t one of them. And it wasn’t until I was on my way back from taking her home that I actually figured out why; we had both been talking as if it was our kitchen, and our children that we were feeding, and we didn’t even know it. Sometimes my dad can be pretty smart; and really, really kind.

But that was much later. After we had all had eaten our fill, even dad and Amy, because everyone expected me to be a bit of a pig, what with my boosted metabolism, dad kicked us out of the kitchen, saying that we had cooked, so it was only right that he do the cleanup and take care of the left-overs, not that there were many of them. We really did eat a lot of the brunch.

I took Amy upstairs to the guest room, and showed her some of the things I had been making, like shirts and pants for dad, and skirts and blouses for me… and for Amy. I had made her a light spring dress, and two professional looking pant suits, one gray and one navy, that I thought would be comfortable to wear when she was working at the hospital, out of costume, which she did occasionally. Unless it was a cape emergency that she had been called in for, she didn’t always wear her costume at the hospital for her routine healing visits; she usually did, but not always, sometimes she would just wear regular clothes with a lab coat over them.

“These are beautiful, Taylor. Where did you get my sizes? Never mind, come on, I want to try these on in your room, I know that your dad won’t walk in there by accident.” She was almost gushing as she ran her hands over the dress, both inside and out, before doing the same with the pant suits. Picking them up, she grabbed my hand and pulled me out of my sewing room and into my bedroom.

Closing the door, she carefully laid out the clothes on the end of the bed, pointed at the head of the bed and said, “Have a seat, I’m going to model all of them for you.” As I sat down on my bed, and
scooted back to lean against the wall, she kicked off her shoes, casually removed her blouse and slacks, leaving her standing there in her underwear, which rather stunned me, as it was obvious that she had been working out hard, with great results. She had slimmed down a bit and put on a fair amount of muscle at the same time.

She picked up the dress, and dropped it over her head and wriggled it down into place. Reaching behind herself, she buttoned it part way up the back, before walking up to me, turned around and asked, “Could you please finish my buttons for me, I can’t quite reach them?”

I swallowed and took my first breath since she had so innocently stripped off her clothes in front of me, and reached out my shaking hands and carefully buttoned up the last three buttons. When I had finished I said in a soft and slightly trembling voice, “All done now, Amy. There’s a full length mirror on the inside of my closet door, if you would like to see yourself?”

She looked at me over her shoulder and said, “Thanks,” as she opened the closet door and stepped back to see how the dress looked on her. “Wow,” she said softly, “I knew it looked good when I first saw this, but… this makes me look almost pretty.”

At that I snapped out of my daze and scooted forward and stood up from the bed. I placed my hands on her shoulders and said, “Amy, I’m glad that you like the dress, but in my opinion it doesn’t make you look almost pretty; you are always pretty, but when you relax, like you are now, you are stunningly beautiful. With or without the dress, you are beautiful. Please believe me, and believe in yourself.” I had been looking at her in the mirror, while gently holding her shoulders, so I could see her eyes as she realized that I was speaking the plain, honest truth, at least as I saw it.

She slowly nodded, and said, “Alright, for you, I’ll try, but now I think I want to try the pant suits, so take your seat and let me model them for you.”

I nodded at her and took my seat on the bed again and then watched as she gave me a short, impromptu show by walking back and forth and spinning both slowly and quickly, showing me just how well the dress fit her and how well it worked as she moved around. When she was done, I applauded for her, as she had shown off the both the dress and herself wonderfully. When I had finished applauding, she curtseyed very nicely, then calmly removed the dress and began putting on the first pant suit. It came with both a matching blouse and knee high stockings. Once the blouse was on, she removed her plain socks and put on the stockings, taking her time to smooth them down. She slipped on the slacks and put her shoes back on, even though they didn’t really match. At all.

As before, she carefully checked herself out in the mirror first, then gave me a short show. She walked back and forth, so that I could see her from every angle, then she took off her jacket and did
it again. As she was slowly spinning in front of me, I thought, *Amy, I don’t know why you think that you aren’t pretty, but you really are. Maybe I was right and it’s just a matter of getting you to relax.***

---Legion*** Amy ***Legion-----------------------------

As she turned around one last time, Amy looked at Taylor, and smiled a little satisfied smile, as she saw the stunned look on her face, with her eyes shocked wide open, and her mouth frozen partially open. *Well, I’d have to say that this little modeling show worked. And I still have one more outfit to go.* Walking to the foot of the bed, she first took off her shoes, then removed her slacks while standing at the foot of the bed, while keeping an eye on Taylor in the mirror. She carefully folded up the slacks, picked up the next pair and then slowly put them on. When she bent over to pick up her shoes to put them on, she heard a soft sound, almost a groan come from Taylor; when she checked the mirror, Taylor was a little pale, and slightly shaking. I decided to finish the fashion show, but that I had better not push Taylor as hard as I had been, because if I did, either Taylor was going to pass out, or we were not going to leave this room virginal. Which might not be so bad, but I really didn’t want my first time to be with my girlfriend’s father right downstairs. Especially since I hadn’t asked Taylor to be my girlfriend yet, and couldn’t until I could fix my issue with Vicky’s aura. That would not be right, as well as kind of putting the cart before the horse, as it were. So I carefully put the suit jacket on, checked the fit with both my hands and in the mirror. Once I was sure everything was just right, I gave Taylor her last show, just as thoroughly as the other two, but this time I didn’t remove my jacket, or tease her quite as much, which let Taylor slowly get herself back under control.

Leaving the pant suit on for the moment, I sat down next to Taylor and asked, “Would I be right in assuming that you have a few outfits for yourself that you could model for me? And would it be okay if I put the dress back on, because of the three outfits, I think that that one is my favorite.”

Taylor slowly nodded and said, “Yes, I do have some outfits that I wanted to show you. And of course you may put the dress back on, it’s yours after all.” With that, she carefully got up, went to the door and left saying, “I’ll be right back, I just need to grab the outfits I wanted to show you.”

I carefully put the Navy pant suit that I had modeled first back on the hangers, and took off my shoes and stockings in preparation of changing back into the dress once Taylor was back and the door latched. As I removed my stockings, Taylor returned with several outfits on hangers, closed and locked the door, hung her outfits up in the closet and started to remove her clothes.

At the same time I took off the Gray pant suit, hung it up and carefully dropped my new dress over my head. As my head came through the collar, I saw that Taylor had stopped moving and was staring at my now covered breasts, and her face was bright red. I very carefully didn’t notice where
she was looking, and just started buttoning up my dress.

After a moment, Taylor shook herself and finished removing her clothes, at which point the tables were turned and I found myself frozen, blushing and staring at her breasts. They weren’t nearly as big as mine, but in my opinion, they were just perfect. Even so, it still took me a moment to realize that Taylor had been sitting across from me all during breakfast, braless, and I had never noticed.

I abruptly sat down on the bed, my legs too weak and shaky to support me, as Taylor finished removing all of her clothes except her panties, put a low-cut bra on, and then put on a light-weight dress similar to mine, though in a different color and pattern, which matched her colors better than my dress would have. It was also clearly designed for an A cup instead of for a C cup, like mine had been.

As I sat there on the bed, wondering just when I had lost control of the little game I had been playing, Taylor stepped up to me and turned around, asking, “Could you please finish my buttons for me? Then I will finish you.”

I shook for a moment at the image in my head from Taylor’s comment, thinking, Get your mind out of the gutter girl!, but I still managed to carefully button up her dress. When I finished, Taylor turned around and grabbed my hands and gently pulled me to my feet and turned me around. Once I was standing, more or less steadily, Taylor finished buttoning my dress for me, and then just as gently moved me to the head of the bed and sat me down leaning against the wall for support, just where she had sat earlier.

-----------------------------Legion*** Taylor ***Legion----------------------------

After I sat her down, I began to give Amy her own, private fashion show, just like the one she had given me, this time with commentary. As I twirled around, I explained what I had been doing, using the making of the different outfits as practice for when I could make our costumes out of Black Widow spider silk. At this point, I stopped and walked back to my closet, saying over my shoulder, “Just a minute, I need to change into my next outfit.”

Taking an odd looking stick from the top shelf of my closet, I used it to quickly un-button the top five buttons of my dress, once again thanking the nurses who had shown me all the little tricks for compensating for my disabilities, before hanging it on the knob of my closet door and lifted the dress up and over my head. I took a few moments to carefully hang it up, teasing Amy just like she had teased me.

A moment later, I was dressed again, this time in a short, but still modest skirt and a sleeveless top
that buttoned down the front this time. I gave her another show with commentary, only this time rather than explaining how I had made this outfit, I was describing just how I was going to make her new Panacea costume.

Amy tried to protest, explaining, “But, Taylor, I have a perfectly good costume to use, I really don’t need another…”

I interrupted her at that point, softly but firmly stating, “Your current costume is simply cloth, which I find completely unacceptable. Your new costumes will be at least as good as the best Kevlar body armor, if not better. It will also have a silk body suit to go under it, to provide additional protection.”

When Amy tried to explain that she wasn’t a combat cape, and that she always stayed well back from the fighting, just acting to heal those who had been injured and so she didn’t need an armored costume, I dropped to my knees in front of her, and took both of her hands in mine.

“Amy, I know just how many crazies are out there, people who from either drugs, insanity or simple choice; don’t ever think about consequences, about what will happen to them after they do something like shoot you in the back or attack you with a knife.” I stopped and squeezed my eyes shut for a moment, before opening them and continuing, “If someone hurt you like that, I would probably go crazy myself, and go on a killing spree to destroy everyone who had anything to do with your death, including those people who decided that the best healer in the world, the one who CAN’T heal herself, only needed a cloth costume. And, and if you died, I truly don’t think I could live without you, because if you were gone, I think, no, I know that my crazy would be back and that the best thing for everyone would be if I just died with you.”

I let go of her hands, and wrapped my arms around her waist, and placed my head in her lap as I started to cry at the thought of Amy being hurt, or god forbid, killed. Amy started rubbing my back and shoulders, and then began running her fingers through my hair. I have to admit that I liked the feel of her fingers in my hair, and had been doing that to her as well. As she did so, I could feel my tears starting to soak through the thin fabric of her dress.

-----------------------------Legion*** Amy ***Legion----------------------------

I couldn’t really understand what she was saying through both her tears and my lap, but it seemed to be apologies for not being strong enough or maybe good enough to be my friend.

“Taylor, you are one of the strongest and best people I have ever known. Having you as my friend may not be easy, but it has certainly been wonderful and worthwhile. You are smart, strong, compassionate, and have shown me how to be a friend by your example, not just with cold words.”
“I know I’ve told you this before, and I haven’t and won’t change my mind. I will never leave you. You are my best and only friend; I am never going to abandon you like that bitch did.”

Taylor pulled one of her hands from behind my back and rubbed my leg and said, “Thank you. I guess then, we’ll just have to figure out a way to make sure that we can stay together, forever, so neither one of us ever has to be alone.”

She lifted her face from my lap and I could see for the first time, the ravages of her tears, that I had felt as she cried. “I want to show you one last outfit than put my dress again, is that okay?” she asked me.

“Of course it’s okay, and once your dress is on, we can get washed up and fix our faces, before we go downstairs and show your dad the dresses that you made, alright?”

She just nodded and pushed herself up, her hand running along my leg in an unintentional caress, a caress that made me shiver as she turned away to the closet. Again I got to watch her from behind as she carefully removed her clothes and pulled out another outfit, this one mostly skin-tight and dark gray and black. As she dressed herself, I saw that it was only appeared to be skin-tight but was actually loose enough to still be very flexible, as she demonstrated for me, by doing a quick set of exercises, gymnastic moves and stretches, before saying, “This outfit is what I use to go out at night and let myself really cut loose. Running, jumping, practicing parkour, really anything I can’t do here, and can’t afford to be identified doing. I don’t plan on doing anything dangerous or cape related, I just wear this for my night time training, that’s all.”

She removed this outfit, but instead of hanging it up, she knelt down and folded it up and put it in the bottom of a small gym bag, that she pushed to the back of her closet. Standing up, she took her new dress off of its hanger and put it on, facing me this time.

Yep, just as lovely from the front as from the back, I thought to myself. I stood up and approached her and as she lowered the dress over her head, I placed my hands on her shoulders and gently turned her around, and slowly buttoned her dress from the bottom all the way to the top. I at least had the satisfaction of seeing that she was just as affected by my touch as I was by hers.

Sitting back down on her bed, I said, “Taylor, one of my big problems is because of Vicky; every time I get close to her, her aura makes me lust after her, again.”

Taylor could obviously see the disgust on my face at the knowledge that just being near Vicky forced me to lust after her, when I had no desire to feel that way for my sister. Continuing on, I said, “Until we can figure out how to block at least her aura, I can’t really relax at home or school, really anywhere that Vicky might show up.
Taylor nodded her agreement and said, “Thank you Amy, for explaining that. What do you know about Vicky’s aura, how it works on people, or at least how it works on you? I can overpower her aura if I need to, with my own Master power, but unless I am there with you, you won’t to be able to protect yourself.”

I nodded, and said, “As far as I can tell, you were right; her aura is actually a form of a Shaker ability that changes the brain chemistry of everyone within her range. I’ve been watching and checking everyone that I can as soon as they come under the effect of her Aura, as well as after they are free of its power.”

“The specific effect seems to be variable, depending on 1. Her emotional state, 2. Her target’s emotional state, 3. How she feels about the target; positive, negative or neutral, 4. How her target feels about Vicky; positive, negative or neutral. Normally the effect only lasts while she is actively projecting her aura, resetting back to normal after a short period of time. However the longer and more often the target is exposed, the longer the effects last. In my case, until you broke her thrall, I had been effectively under her aura constantly. With long term consequences that include being extremely vulnerable to re-exposure, as well as some others that are common with addiction, such as withdrawal and cravings.”

Taylor nodded, and said, “I can see at least one possible solution; it will probably need to be adjusted on a daily basis until we get it just right. You can create a monitor in my brain that can detect when her Shaker effect hits, and then monitor for any changes to my brain chemistry that are externally imposed. If it has a recorder function as well, you can cross-check between us whenever we are both around your sister.”

“Once you are as confident as you can be, at least without having Vicky right here to hit me with her aura over and over again, that you are sure you can counter-act each change, then you install it in your own brain, using our ‘echo’ effect. You and I will need to meet after school each day, so that you can double-check the recorder and make any necessary updates to our monitors. Once we have that type of Mastering covered, we can then start working on my type of Mastering. Do you think that might work?”

My heart leapt at the thought of being free of Vicky’s aura at last. Even if it took a week or two, it would be totally worth waiting for. “Yes, yes. Oh my god, yes. Thank you so much Taylor. Please can we start on this right away?”

“Sure, just take your time and try to anticipate all of the possible variations of her power.” Taylor said with a little smile on her face.
When we came back downstairs, about 30 minutes later, we were both demurely dressed in our new dresses, stockings and sandals that even sort of matched either our dress or our hair color. I had grabbed the box of mom's shoes and sandals from dad's closet and we had searched through them, as well as my sparse collection to find a pair that would work.

And unknown to everyone but us, we each had a prototype, automatic defense to any Shaker-style Master effect.

We stopped off in the living room to show off our new dresses and invite dad to see the coral tanks and watch Amy work with them and speed up their growth, but he declined to come with them.

“You both look lovely in those dresses. Taylor, did you make those? I had no idea you were so talented as a seamstress, those are very nice designs.” He complimented them both.

I nodded and corrected him, “Actually, I just chose the pattern that I liked for the most part, I’m not really a designer; you had it right the first time, I’m a seamstress, I just followed the pattern.”

“Would you like to come downstairs and see my coral tanks, dad? Amy hasn’t seen them yet and if you’d like I can show them off to you at the same time.”

He shook his head, “No, I think that I’ll take a rain check on that, instead I’ll just relax and sleep off that amazing brunch you and the Giggle Monster made.”

“Daaad, are you ever going to stop teasing her about that?” I asked him, as Amy blushed and giggled again.

“Hmmm, no probably not. Not unless I can come up with a better nickname for her.”

I shook my head and pulled Amy by her hand towards the basement door, calling back over my shoulder, “Well, enjoy your nap, we are going to go downstairs and have fun instead.”

He just laughed and said, “Watching coral grow, that sounds a lot like watching paint dry to me.”

I responded in a most mature manner by sticking my tongue out at him as I lead the way down the stairs, making sure to turn on all the lights as I went down. The first thing I did was point out the coral tanks, which were each labeled with the type of coral that I had seeded in them. I had also
taped a color picture of what each type of coral looked like when it was full sized for comparison purposes.

The tanks were arranged with the larger, 50 gallon tanks on low shelves and the 20 gallon tanks on shelves above them. The pumps and filters were stacked neatly between the tanks, with the hoses running behind the tanks and out of sight.

After studying them for about 5 minutes, Amy asked, “Is it okay if I touch them?”

“Sure, just roll up your sleeves and let me get some towels and a stool for you.” I replied, walking over to the dryer and bringing back two folded towels and old garden kneeling stool for her to use. As I put the stool down in front of tank #1 she finished rolling her sleeves all the way up.

She stepped up on the stool and helped me remove the top of the smaller tank and while I set it aside, she reached in and touched one of the coral seeds. It was amazing, it looked just like time-lapse photography, as the small coral seed simply blossomed and grew. She worked her way through the tank, accelerating the growth of all the coral, and I would swear that she also improved both the shape and coloration of the coral as it grew.

Turning to me, she said, “That should do it for now, but I think I should increase the nutrients in this tank before we close it up, and the others as well when I work on them. Could you please bring me some insects that I can convert?”

I walked over to the other side of the basement and opened one of the windows so that I could bring some of my swarm inside; as soon as it was open, a column of insects flew over to the other side of basement, and slowly fed themselves into the tank, right where her hands were waiting in the water, disappearing, both visually and from my senses; with no pain or panic or anything at all; just gone, turned into the nutrients that the coral needed to survive, when she finally said, “This should do for now, I will probably only need to do this once a week, unless we are crafting a lot of items at once. Continue to use the nutrients that you already have, but only about a quarter of the recommended amount. That should cover any minerals that I missed when converting the insects.”

Amy stepped down from the stool, and accepted the towel I offered her, so I replaced the tank top and removed the other 20 gallon tank top. Once again, she performed her magic in the tank, but this time I had the insects ready for her without even being asked.

When she was finished with that tank, I removed the lid from the first of the two 50 gallon tanks so that she could work on it, but when she knelt on the stool and started to reach into the water she paused and stepped back, her brow furrowed in thought.
“Taylor, is there any chance that your dad will be coming down here soon?”

I shook my head, “He rarely comes down here at all, and,” checking with some flies to be sure, “besides he’s asleep in his recliner. Why?”

“Good, because I don’t want to wreck my pretty new dress.” As she finished speaking, she started unbuttoning the back of her dress and turned her back to me and asked, “Could you help me please?”

I froze for a moment, then put the towels down and started unbuttoning her dress from the bottom, working my way towards where her fingers were working down. Our fingers met just above the middle button and froze for a moment before she pulled her hands away to let me finish. When the last button was undone, she lifted her hands above her head and I carefully lifted her dress over her head and folded it neatly over my arm.

Giving me a quick grin, she took the dry towel and laid it on the stool to protect her knees and knelt down so she could reach all the way into the tank. Once again, I watched her perform her magic, growing the coral so quickly and smoothly, even as I fed her the insects that she was using to fuel the amazing growth. The second tank was finished just as fast.

When she stood up, I led her over to the sinks so that she could wash all of the salt water off her arms, to prevent it from drying on her skin and getting sticky and itchy. After she was clean and dry, I helped her put her dress back on so that I could show her the next surprise.

I took her by the hand and led her to back of the staircase, and pulled open the plain curtain; inside were several martial arts training aids; a striking dummy, a knife target, and some wooden weapons.

After she had examined them, I closed the curtain and carefully slid the wardrobe away from the coal cellar door, the casters I had installed on the bottom making it not only easy, but very quiet. Opening the door revealed a series of wooden frames and racks, as well as an old dressmaker’s dummy; but it also revealed over 500 Black Widow spiders spinning silk thread made of multiple twisted strands, that was being wound onto wooden spools or industriously weaving their silk into multiple layer cloth that would soon be treated and turned into our costumes.

“Oh my god, this is so beautiful!” Amy was practically gushing and squeezing my hand tightly as she examined the Widows closely, showing no fear or revulsion at being so close to so many deadly spiders, even reaching in and stroking a couple of them gently.
“This is just so wonderful, you’ve got them working full out, but I can tell that none of them are being overworked. And the way you have those beetles winding the thread onto the spools is really clever. And you have the next shift resting and eating so they will be ready to take over soon, right? While the ants and beetles are digging even more chambers, aren’t they?”

I nodded and said, “I have about 1,500 Widows right now, and I will be collecting more of them each night. The ones I currently have I’ve bred, and hope that the new eggs will be hatching in a couple of weeks. I hope to have about 10,000 of them by the end of the week, so that I can finish up our costumes soon. To get the total numbers that I expect to need I will need all of them to breed, but even that will be kept under strict control. No free breeding, just enough to reach and maintain the work force levels I need.”

“Do you think it would be okay if we did some brainstorming on the weapons we want to design upstairs, or do we need to go to your room?”

“Dad is pretty much out of it, so as long as we don’t get too loud, we should be okay. I have some designs in one of my notebooks that I want you to look over with me anyways. I’ll get my notebook and we can sit on the sofa, and I’ll know if he starts to wake up, so we can change the subject.”

Amy led the way upstairs, while I replaced the wardrobe and turned off the lights on my way up the stairs. We stopped in the kitchen and filled a plate with a variety of cookies and snacks, grabbed a cup for each of us and took the pitcher of strawberry-apple juice as we headed for the living room sofa.

Amy organized our snacks and got comfortable on the sofa while I fetched my notebook with some of my design ideas written and drawn out so that we could do some brainstorming.

Opening the notebook to a tabbed page, I pointed out two different designs for a collapsing baton. “Amy, assuming that you can use the coral as a base material, do you think that you could create a pair of batons, like these, only matte black, that I can open and close with just a flick. I have one I got at a surplus store if you need it as an example.”

Amy interrupted me, “Sure, I’ll take a look at it, but Miss Militia actually showed me how to use one of these a while ago, so I should be able to craft a working copy out of coral. The only issue is that I want to play with the details so that I can make it stronger and harder than basic coral, something that can really standup to the forces that I expect you, or even I to be able to apply. And that’s going to take some time, as I try out different options.”
“Okay,” I said, “But what about this one, the one I hoped would let you extend your power range?”
As I spoke, I pointed to the other baton, which also had a cut-away view showing some coiled tendrils, that I hoped would let her have physical contact through living material.

“Hmm…instead of coiled tendrils, I think that I’ll have channels of living tissue, similar to bone marrow inside the inner walls of the different tubes that will touch whether they are extended or collapsed. That should be stronger and less failure-prone, like a double tube of bamboo,” Amy said as she traced her finger along the drawings.

As she seemed to be done with the batons, I turned the page to show her some drawings of several different knives; I had copied 3 different throwing knives that were each double-edged, had simple shapes and had no protruding pommel or guard; in addition I had faithfully copied both the Fairbairn-Sykes and the Baby F-S fighting knives. The full sized Fairbairn-Sykes had a 7½” blade and the Baby F-S had a smaller, 4½” blade, more suited to hiding than all-up fighting.

The following pages had a variety of tools, ranging from a small sharp-toothed saw, to a collapsing crowbar, to simple hand tools that could be used to work with both wood or metal, I even had a scale drawing of the basic handcuff key. All of my drawings included dimensions and other important spec’s.

After paging through the hand tools and weapons, she turned back to the first page of knives than asked me a question, “Taylor, have you ever read a book called ‘Sten’?”

I blinked at that question, coming seemingly out of nowhere, but then said. “Not that I’m aware of. Why?”

“The book was written back in the 80’s I believe, but what brought it to mind is that the hero was able to create a very small blade, made of an exotic crystal that had an edge that was so sharp and strong, that it could cut almost anything. This blade was hidden in a surgically implanted sheath, sort of as a weapon of last result.”

I looked at her, then at the pages of drawings, and then said, “Okay, but how do you think that applies here? I mean, having a hidden blade is nice and all, but with your techniques, we could do that anyways, and not have an implanted sheath that could be detected, right?”

Amy smiled and said, “Oh, sure. But the point I wanted to make, is that if I take my time and experiment, I may be able to come up with a material that is almost as strong and hard as the crystal in Sten. Which, since it is still organic and growing, means that I can shape it into any form that we want. Batons that are unbreakable, thus able to hit MUCH harder, knives with edges that,
while maybe not mono-molecular, could still be far sharper and stronger than anything else out there. Except maybe TinkerTech, but I bet I could come pretty close. Unbreakable lockpicks. Collapsible crowbars that are stronger than the much larger and heavier ones available for sale.”

I nodded enthusiastically and turned the notebook to another tabbed page, “That would also help with some of my ranged weapon ideas. For example, I have a few ideas for non-lethal weapons, like this stun gun, or this taser, both of which would use an electric eel’s organic battery, possibly with an organic capacitor to store even more power. For lethal or possibly-lethal weapons I came up with dart throwers, both pistol and rifle style. Each of these can fire darts with a variety of payloads; paralytic, sleep, stun/pain/incapacitating, and…if necessary, even lethal payloads like Widow venom or even something worse.”

Amy frowned when I mentioned the last option, but nodded at the realization that as much as she didn’t like the idea, there were circumstances when it might be needed. And if not for us, perhaps for someone who did not have a Parahuman ability to depend on.

“All right, I think that I want to start with a baton for each of us and maybe the throwing knives, two of each type so that you can decide which one is your favorite style.” She sighed and started to get up, when I took her hand and pulled her back down to the sofa. “Hey! I need to go and work on the coral, remember?” she protested.

“Of course you do, and since today is all about experimenting, let’s try a new experiment,” I answered her with a little grin. “Follow my links down into the tanks and see if you can ‘echo’ in that direction, to touch the coral, since it is a living creature. If you can, then try to use your BioKinesis to make the changes you want as well as to use your Thinker power to observe the changes as you make them so that you can adjust as necessary.”

Amy looked at me for a moment, then asked, almost tentatively, “Do, do you really think that could work? To let me heal at range?”

I nodded and said, “Yes, I really think so. Although I suspect it will take time and practice before you can heal as easily at range as you do now at a touch. And in any case it may be that because of my limitations, for mass and brain complexity, that you will never be able to heal humans at range. Which doesn’t mean that the ability would be useless, because you are capable of much more than just healing. Even if we don’t let the general public know that.”

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Taking a deep slow breath, I set to work, first connecting to Taylor, then following her linkages
outward, specifically out and down towards the coral tanks. Once I found the correct linkages, which took a lot longer than I had expected, since the coral was so primitive, the linkage and echoes were both very faint, I began trying to force a coral budding along the base of the tank, approximately 8 inches long and 3 inches in diameter. This would hopefully become the cradle or incubator for the first throwing knife; I paused here long enough to ask Taylor for the dimensions we would need for the knives, as well as the approximate weight for each knife; studying the tank and the material I had to work with, I told her that I was only going to work on one knife per tank, partially to keep it hidden from casual view, but mostly to ensure that doing this wouldn’t damage the rest of the coral in the tank.

Once the two cradles in the 20 gallon tanks were finished, I took a break and returned my attention to the living room, where I found that Danny was still napping and Taylor had rearranged herself so that she was curled up with her head in my lap and her hand wrapped around my knee, while she was taking a nap just like her dad. As cute as it was, I was actually getting hungry, so I decided to steal a page from her own book; first I set the notebook aside, then I carefully took a lock of her hair and used the tip to slowly tickle her, just like she did to me a while back. Alas, unlike me, she didn’t make any cute noises or puppy growls, she just slowly opened her eyes and looked at me, with a soft, beautiful smile that was enough to almost make me cry. “Hey beautiful, think we could find some food to eat? Working remotely is hard work, and I’m getting pretty hungry now.”

Taylor blinked at that, and said, “Wow, you’re actually hungry? I’ll definitely have to feed you. I was beginning to think that it was only my powers that need food when I pushed them.” As she sat up and stretched, she asked, “Do you have any preferences, or should I just surprise you?”

I thought for a moment, and then said, “Surprise me, please.”

Taylor nodded and reached down with both hands to pull me up and took me to the kitchen. As I took my normal seat, she turned the oven on and pulled out one of the cookie sheets to set on the stovetop. Pulling a large bag of steak fries from the freezer, she spread them across the pan, then sprayed them lightly with some olive oil, and seasoned them with salt, pepper, garlic and chili powder and popped them in the oven to start baking. The next step was to pull a big package of thawed ground beef from the fridge, dump it into a large mixing bowl, then she started getting together the other ingredients she wanted.

Taylor mixed a bunch of finely chopped ingredients together and then carefully added them to the ground beef and worked them together.

She began forming and pressing the ground beef into nice, big hamburger patties, each of them just under a ½ lb. When they were finished, she had 10 big burgers, more than enough for lunch today, even with all three of us eating. While she had been preparing the burgers, I had found and organized all of the condiments that anyone could possibly want, and sliced up two big tomatoes and washed some leaf lettuce and put it all on a small platter.
She started the first three burgers on the griddle as I was looking through the fridge, and I turned back to her with 4 or 5 different types of cheese. “Okay, who likes what cheese on their burger? American, cheddar, muenster, provolone or cojack? What’s cojack?”

She laughed at me and said, “Cojack is Colby-Monterey Jack. I usually use it on Mexican food like tacos or enchiladas, stuff like that, but it is quite good. Anyways, I tend to like either American or CoJack on my burgers, dad likes Muenster, and you like…?”

I just giggled and said, “I’m spoiled for choices here, I don’t think I’ve ever had anything except American cheese on a burger before. Sooo, I think that I’ll try CoJack today, how does that sound to you?”

Taylor’s dad spoke up from right behind me and said, “Well, that sounds pretty good for a Little Miss Giggle Monster, on a Sunday afternoon.”

At the sound of his voice, I eeeped and jumped away from the fridge, and then turned and waved my handful of cheese at him, “And just what is the meaning of that, startling poor innocent young ladies who are just trying to figure out what to do with all of these different types of cheeses?”

He put on his best ‘who me?’ face and said, “I was just following the wonderful smells and silly sounds of the local Giggle Monster to see what was going on. And lo and behold, lunch is going on. So you see, I’m perfectly innocent here.”

I looked suspiciously back and forth between Taylor and her dad, then put the cheeses down on the kitchen table and asked Taylor, “And just how is it that you didn’t notice him sneaking up behind me, hmmm?”

She started to giggle, but I could see her trying to hold it in as she said, “But Amy, I was all busy making the burgers and stuff, and well dad is really sneaky and I guess he just used his super sneaky powers to sneak right up behind you, being so sneaky and everything. Right?”

I took one slow step towards Taylor, who was starting to look a little worried, and then said, “And you didn’t even notice him sneaking up behind me, so sneaky and quiet like. Even though you were facing the living room…did you?”

By this time, her dad had one hand stuffed in his mouth to keep from laughing out loud as Taylor put the spatula down and took a short side step towards the door. “Now Amy, surely you can’t
As she squawked, Taylor spun and ran for the back door, barely getting it open before I caught up to her.

I picked up the spatula to keep an eye on the burgers, but also so I could watch the girls running around the back yard, Taylor’s longer legs not helping much because of all of the turns and evasions she had to make to keep Amy at a distance.

It was wonderful watching them play, since it had been so long since Taylor had been able to just relax and play. Her pleas for mercy and claims of innocence were so over the top, that no one would have ever believed them, but they went well with her laughter and Amy’s giggles.

It took almost 5 minutes but Amy finally managed to trap her next to my hammock, and when she tried to climb over it, Amy just jumped on top of her and started tickling her. I don’t know if Amy was just better at it then me, or if she knew better tickle spots, but she had my poor daughter practically in tears of laughter and promising pretty much anything and everything if only she would stop.

Deciding to have mercy on my daughter, I called out, “Lunch is ready, come and get it or I’ll throw it to the pigs.” That seemed to stop the tickling, but they were both still out of breath, so they just lay in the hammock for a few minutes until they could safely get up and come in through the back door.

As they trooped in, they lifted their hands and said, “Wash first, eat second dad. Be right back.” With that, the two of them ran upstairs, still laughing and giggling as they ran to the bathroom to wash their faces and hands.

While we ate our burgers and fries, the girls were talking all over each other to describe what Amy had done with the coral seeds, growing them much larger and giving them what sounded like very beautiful colors. Clearly I would need to take a look at some point to see just what they had accomplished.

As we were cleaning up from our lunch, I realized that even with all of the running around and horseplay, neither of their dresses were so much as mussed, much less stained or soiled. I guess
they knew their limits when it came to playing around.

After we had picked up and put away everything from lunch, I asked them what they wanted to do now?

“So girls, what’s next? Would you like to do some shopping, or maybe catch a movie?”

The two of them exchanged a couple of looks, complete with raised eyebrows and tiny shrugs, then they both looked at me and Amy said, “If it’s alright with you, could we just stay here and watch a movie? A comedy or something like that?”

“Sure, I’m not quite sure what we have here at home, but if it’s here then you can watch it,” before I had even finished speaking, the two of them were going through the shelves and boxes of movies, setting aside a movie occasionally for their short list. Eventually, they settled on ‘The Princess Bride’ and a movie from Earth-Aleph called ‘Avatar: The Last Air-Bender, so they trooped upstairs and returned with just about every spare pillow and half a dozen quilts and blankets, so they could make a giant nest to watch their movies from.

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Even as they watched their movies, they were also working on their tools and weapons that were growing downstairs in the basement coral tanks. These were their first attempts at two sets of throwing knives and two different batons.

When the first movie finished, they took a break so they could make some popcorn, use the bathroom, and check the progress of the batons and throwing knives. The batons worked smoothly and easily, the color and shading were just as planned and Amy’s seemed to allow her to extend her ‘touch’ range out to the full extension of the baton. The knives in appearance seemed to meet the standards that Taylor had wanted, but clearly further testing would be needed. After dad went to work on Monday.

It was only the work of moments to feed more insects into the tanks, for Amy to convert to needed nutrients, as well as to add the extra minerals needed for the next set of tests. All of the completed weapons were hidden in the wardrobe, for now, as nothing more was really needed. Not yet anyways.

Trooping back upstairs, they collected the popcorn, juice and cookies for the next movie. Danny
had mostly worked on paperwork during Avatar: The Last Airbender, but he found that the next one was too funny to just ignore, so he ended up spending more of his time splitting his attention between the movie and the two girls. The more he watched them, the more he thought that they were becoming very good friends. And though he didn’t know much about Amy Dallon’s personal life, he did know a lot about his Taylor’s, and so far, it looked like they were really good for each other; Amy had already saved Taylor’s life, which earned her a huge amount of credit, but more importantly, she seemed to be able to help Taylor relax and just have fun being a young girl. No stupid teenage drama games, just friendship and fun. Something that he had thought that Emma Barnes had managed to kill off completely.

When the second movie ended, it was almost 8pm, and that gave him the perfect excuse to drive Amy home; of course Taylor would be sitting next to her, he wasn’t an idiot, he could see how that wind blew. Still, it would hopefully let me introduce myself to at least one of her parents in a fairly casual way. God knows it couldn’t be worse than when I met Annette-Rose’s parents, now there was a disaster. But in the end it worked out okay.

“All right girls, time to clean up this mess. Kiddo, you take the pillows and put them where they belong. Amy and I will start on cleaning up the snacks and drinks and we can all work on putting the blankets and quilts away together.” I clapped my hands sharply and said, “Let’s go, hop to it.”

Other than a moments shared glance, the girls did just as I asked, separating and completing their tasks just as quickly as I could have wanted, in fact the way they were zipping around the rooms was actually making me feel tired. When everything seemed to be finished I spoke up again, “Alright girls, get Amy’s new outfits together, and if you have them, cover them up with some of the dry-cleaning bags to keep them clean on the ride home. Amy, if you could give me your address, and directions as needed I’ll give you two a ride there. Much better than trying to take the bus with a bunch of dry-cleaning. Trust me I’ve done that before; using a car works a lot better. Okay?” Again, they exchanged a split second look, then Amy said, “If it’s not a problem for you Mr. Hebert, I’d greatly appreciate it.”

“Ahht! None of that Mr. Hebert nonsense, it’s Danny to you, alright?”

She slowly smiled back at me and said, “Alright then, Danny. Thank you very much for having me over today, as well as for the ride home.”

“Ha! Having you over is hardly a chore, with the way you and Tay can cook together, you’re welcome over here anytime. Anyways, get your stuff together and load up in the car.”

Running up the stairs, Taylor stepped into the guest room/sewing room and picked up a few dry-cleaning bags and the two of them carefully double covered her new outfits so they would stay neat and clean on the trip home.
As they covered the second outfit, Taylor asked Amy, “Would you like to borrow a sweater for the trip home? Or to install the climate control mod, instead.”

Amy stopped what she was doing, glancing out the door and then said, “Mod, please,” she reached her hand out to take Taylor’s, only to realize that both of her hands and arms were full of outfits, purses, and a backpack. Giggling, she simply placed her right hand on Taylor’s cheek and began to echo back and construct the entire climate control modification system, which would allow her to be comfortable at any temperature from about 85 degrees C, all the way down to minus 65 degrees C.

As she stood there, her hand holding Taylor’s cheek, both of them closed their eyes, simply enjoying the combined use of their powers as much as they enjoyed simply touching each other; neither of them really noticing when Danny came upstairs to fetch his car keys, or that he actually stopped to watch them just for a moment before smiling and leaving to finish his errand.

Less than 10 minutes later, the three of them were on their way, with Amy’s new outfits hanging neatly from the rear seat passenger door, while Amy and Taylor chatted about the movies that they had just finished watching. Other than a few directions at the very end, the trip was mostly quiet and easy, and over far too soon.

When they pulled into the driveway, Taylor got out first, and helped Amy collect everything and get it all organized. “Amy, do you need me to unlock the door, or should I knock or…?”

She grinned back at her and said, “Come on, I’m not sure who’s home right now, but my keys are in my purse, so if you wouldn’t mind getting them for me?”

Pulling the keys out of her purse, she held up what looked like the house key and raised her eyebrow in question.

At Amy’s nod, she used the key to unlock the door, and pushed it open so that Amy could enter the house first, and she called out, “Mom, dad, Vicky? Anyone home?”

“Hey Amy-girl, your home early, everything okay?” A man’s voice, presumably her dad, answered from another room. He stepped into the living room carrying a cup of coffee and a magazine, stopping short as he looked over Amy, the outfits she was carrying and the tall slender girl standing next to her.
“Well, Amy, do you think you could introduce us?”

“Of course, dad. Mark Dallon, I am pleased to introduce to you my very dear friend Taylor Hebert; Taylor, this is my dad, Mark Dallon, AKA Flashbang.”

“Well, I’m very glad to meet you Miss Hebert, I’ve heard a bit about you from Vicky and Amy’s conversations, but it is much better to meet you in person, and if you don’t mind my asking, what’s with the new outfits, Amy? I thought you had all the clothes you needed for now?”

“These are gifts from Taylor; she has been teaching herself to sew, and so her dad, herself, and I have been benefiting from her efforts.”

He nodded again, then stepped closer and inspected both of the dresses that they were wearing. “Well, if the other outfits look anything as good as these dresses, I’d have to say you have quite a talent there, Miss Hebert.”

Taylor softly cleared her throat, “Please sir, just Taylor is fine.”

He chuckled and said, “That’s fine Taylor, and you can feel free to call me Mark, alright?”

“Yes, sir…I mean Mr. … I mean Mark.” Taylor stumbled, trying to figure out the proper way to address Amy’s dad. Of course Amy’s giggles didn’t help.

She carefully laid everything on one of chairs, then wrapped her arms around Taylor and squeezed her tight, softly saying, “Shhh, it’s okay Taylor, you can call him whatever makes you comfortable. You know it took me almost three weeks before I could call your dad Danny, just relax and take your time, it’ll be fine.” As she spoke, she could feel the tension easing from Taylor’s muscles and back. Rubbing her back for a moment, eased out of the hug, but kept a hold of her hand and turned to face her dad. “Dad, I’ll show you what she made me later, all right. Maybe when Vicky and mom get home, if it’s not too late.”

Mark nodded and said, “Well it’s been nice to meet you Taylor, and I expect that we’ll meet again soon. Amy, don’t forget that you have school tomorrow, so you’ll need to say goodbye and let Taylor head for home, all right?”
Amy nodded, and still holding her hand, walked her back out the front door and half-way to the car, when she stopped and pulled her into another hug. “It’s still hard for you to meet new people, isn’t it, sweetie? I’m sorry for that, but I promise, you don’t have to meet them on your own. I’ll always be there for you, I promise.”

Taylor nodded jerkily, but didn’t say anything for a moment, before she said, “Thank you, Amy. Sometimes it catches me by surprise, and then I don’t know what to do. But you hold me and remind me that it will be okay, even if I don’t know how, yet.”

Amy smiled up at her, and stroked her cheek for a moment, “Time for you to go now. I’ll send an email after Vicky gets home to let you know if it worked the way we hoped. If so I may want you to meet me after school, if that’s possible?”

“Our course it’s possible. You know that if you need me there, I’ll be there as soon as school lets out,” Taylor exclaimed.

“All right, I’ll send you an email later, now scoot. Take your dad home and relax or something, okay?”

Taylor nodded at Amy and walked back to the car, keeping an eye on Amy as she did, not even bothering to use any of her creatures to do so. Amy, herself waited at the front door until their car turned out of sight, before she re-entered the house.

The ride home was quiet, an easy quiet that lasted all the way home. When we pulled into the driveway, I followed dad into the house and thought seriously about just going to bed, but in the end decided to start tomorrow’s dinner in the crockpot before emailing Amy to let her know that dad and I had gotten home safe and that I would see her tomorrow after school got out.

Starting dinner in the crockpot only took a few minutes, then I booted up my computer and logged into my email. As usual, the dialup connection took a couple of minutes to connect, but I was still able to email Amy before 9 o’clock. I let her know that I was home safe, and thanked her for coming over and told her that I had a wonderful time with her. She emailed me back almost immediately, just one of the advantages of an email enabled cell phone I guess, and asked me to meet her after school for a few minutes, which I knew meant that we needed to make some adjustments to our anti-master monitor, which was no more than I had expected. This was not
going to be an easy mod, and we hadn’t even started on the other part of it yet.

Taking one of the novels I had gotten from the library, I lay down on the sofa to read while dad watched some tv before we both headed to bed around 10 o’clock. I did set my phone for 2:30, just in case I wasn’t awake already.

As I had expected, I woke up before my phone had a chance to go off, so I quietly got up and changed into my night running outfit. Before I left, I went downstairs and took two of the batons and both of the throwing knives. I put both knives and one baton, along with my pepper spray, into the pouch I had built into the back of my belt and put the other baton into the belt holster that I had bought for my metal baton. As I got back to my bedroom, I settled everything so that they rode comfortably and wouldn’t make any noise while I ran.

After double-checking that dad was sleeping quietly, I carefully and quietly opened my bedroom window, slipped outside and closed it most of the way before dropping to the ground. Straightening up, I let most of my swarm stay where they were, only taking a few cats and dogs to flank me and a couple of owls to keep an eye out overhead. While I was still close to home, I stayed in the shadows and away from the streets, mostly crossing people’s backyards at a pace that would be considered a sprint for normal people, but felt like a slow jog to me. Once I was about a half mile from home I started working a bit harder.

The first thing I did was practice consciously reaching ahead for new creatures, and dropping them behind me. I was trying to push my range further ahead, while reducing it behind me, hoping that I could sort of shift my circle so that it wasn’t centered on me, but rather was pushed off-center. It didn’t seem to be working, but I kept at it anyways, figuring that even if I couldn’t push it off center, I would still be working to increase my range.

The second thing I did was practice my running on top of the fences, to improve my balance and speed. I had actually gotten the idea from a cartoon I had watched last week, the main character seemed to make big thing out of turning everything he did into ‘training’, I wasn’t sure how well it would work, but it seemed like a good idea to me. It didn’t take very long before I could maintain my balance easily, so of course I started speeding up. As I did so, I found that I needed to relearn my balance, because running fast while staying quiet was totally different from just walking. Oh well, at least I got lots of practice with falling, just like the martial arts books and videos recommended.

After about half an hour, I was far enough from home that I moved out to the streets, well sidewalks whenever possible, and really built up speed. I practiced sprinting, and when I started to get winded, I would slow down to a pace that felt like I could maintain indefinitely, at least until I caught my breath and then would sprint again. For tonight I was less concerned with how fast or how far I was going, and more with establishing what it felt like to do the two different types of runs.
When I reached the outskirts of the docks, I began my parkour practice, moving through the alleys and between the warehouses, using the dumpsters and other things as obstacles. I was also able to practice my wall running and climbing without disturbing anyone, well anyone important. As I ran through one alley, that had a high fence blocking it about half way down, I tried combining wall running with vaulting to get over the fence and landed right in the middle of a mugging. At 3:30 in the morning!

Three men had either cornered or pulled into the alley a nicely dressed couple and were threatening them with knives and demanding their wallets. Not having my armored costume, I decided to work fast, so I pulled out my baton and disarmed the three men by smashing the knives out of their hands by hitting their wrists. Because I wasn’t sure how hard to hit them with the baton so that I could knock them out without killing them, I used some basic grappling techniques to bounce their heads off the alley walls. All told it took a bit less than a minute to have all three unconscious and on the ground.

Once the immediate threat was over, I checked on the victims. Even though I wasn’t using my swarm, I still had the mechanical voice changer so I felt comfortable talking to them.

“Are the two of you alright?” I asked, and I could see that the distorted, almost mechanical voice had freaked them out. Maybe even more than the mugging had.

The man, who was at least 3 inches over 6 feet, was quite pale and had to clear his voice a couple of times before he could answer, “Ah, that is, um, yes thank you, we’re both fine. Umm, are…are you a cape?” he finally asked.

I shook my head and said, “No, it’s just easier, and generally safer to practice my parkour late at night. Fewer people on the streets to run into and usually a lot fewer gang members are out and about.”

Looking at the knocked out thugs, I asked, “Do you want to call the cops and press charges? Just so you know, I don’t plan on waiting around for them, so you’ll be on your own if you do. Personally, I wouldn’t bother; they’ll probably be out on bail by tomorrow anyways. You’d be better off just getting to your car and getting out of here, but it’s your choice.”

The man didn’t even hesitate, he grabbed his girlfriend’s hand and took off running, yelling, “Thanks again,” over his shoulder as he did.
I laughed as they ran down the alley and turned up the street, then looked down at the thugs I had knocked out. “Well, that was a lot easier than I had expected, but what the hell do I do now?” Not wanting to use my cell phone, I walked over to the nearest thug and started going through his pockets; I found another knife, a baggie of what I assumed was drugs and his wallet, but no phone. Dropping it all back on the man, I checked the other two. Again I found an assortment of drugs and weapons, but also two cell phones. As I started to dial 911, I stopped and looked at the wallets thoughtfully, then decided against it, I may have needed the money, but taking it from them would have been no better than mugging them, just like they had tried mugging that couple.

“Emergency services, what is your emergency, please?”

“Hi, this is a concerned citizen. Three young men attempted to mug a couple of people and got knocked out. You might want to send some cops and EMT's to come take care of them. They are in the alley just off of Jefferson, between the Morgenstein Shipping warehouse and the abandoned factory. I think they used to make AC’s or something. Anyways, send someone to pick ‘em up ok?”

“Will you wait for the police, please?”

“Yeah, lemme think about that, umm. Nah, places to go, people to see. Oh, I left their drugs and weapons and stuff on top of them, so if you hurry, you can probably bust ‘em for possession. See ya!”

With that I turned off the phone and dropped it back on top of the owner, and took off running, wanting to get at least another hour’s worth of running in before heading back home.
The next week was a busy one, I used my new running outfit every night to really push myself. Once I was well clear of our house, I started to run timed sprints and long distance runs, using pre-measured courses so that I could get a much better feel for how my strength, stamina, and speed were improving. On both the outward and return routes I would start fence running for the last half mile near home, and I quickly progressed to the point where I was just as fast on the fence as I was on the ground.

My parkour and roof running was coming along nicely, being able to move over and through obstacles easily, my improved balance and eyesight letting me chose and conquer my routes with few mishaps, none of them serious. Roof running was a bit tricky, since I needed speed, strength and agility in equal measure to jump the gaps between buildings. Maintaining speed was crucial to getting across full-sized alleys, while the shorter gaps could be crossed even from a standing start or a short run-up.

I was also meeting with Amy each day after school, and we talked over the weaknesses or openings in our Master defense against Vicky, though it was becoming much more impervious every day. It was nice to be able to have her walk right up to me and hardly feel her aura at all, but still be able to feel my creatures, and if I was holding Amy’s hand I could still ‘echo’ off of her and she off of me. But only if she allowed it, which was something that went both ways. We also planned out our training sessions for Sunday and what tools and equipment we wanted to make.

I took a detour in my studies on Tuesday while I was in the Library, and researched eavesdropping devices and counter-eavesdropping techniques. There were a lot of websites on both topics, and some of them had plans and instructions for constructing ‘bugs’ and a variety of detectors. I downloaded several different plans and then spent some time cross-referencing the parts I would need, I also checked out a couple of books on basic and intermediate electronics, including one on 50 different home electronic projects that looked very informative.

That night I made a point of running in the areas that had trash collection the next day and had my creatures, insects and rodents mostly, search the trash cans for any useful items, like MP3 players, DVD players, radios, really anything that looked like I could scavenge useful parts out of it. Because I needed to vary my route, I was also getting to see different parts of the city then I usually did, which would only benefit me when I started to patrol.
Wednesday morning I stopped off at Radio Shack and picked up the few components that I hadn’t scavenged like a couple of mini-meters, a soldering iron, some wire and two circuit board etching kits and put together a couple of bugs and a bug detector. I made it a little bigger so that I could increase the size of the antenna, hoping to increase the sensitivity and range of my detector.

That night, I ran a different route, in the district that still had working factories and shops, checking the dumpsters and alleyways for usable tools. I was actually quite surprised that in a 5 mile stretch I recovered over 30 lbs of assorted mismatched tools; wrenches, screwdrivers, sockets, saws, even a brand new set of metric and standard hex wrenches from the dumpster behind a gas station. On my way home that night I passed a storage warehouse for a national moving company, that had a very large infestation of Brown Recluse spiders, which surprised me since I had thought that they were more of a southern spider. Because my pack was full, I made plans to retrieve them the next night when I had an empty pack and had at least started on expanding the lair to hold them.

My studies were going quite well, based on the progress tests at the library as well as my practice tests for Linux and MS Product Specialist. My biggest issue was money; I kept having to buy things to complete my projects that depleted my savings. I knew what I wanted to accomplish, I knew when I would be ready, but I just wasn’t going to have the money to pay for the tests. And I didn’t think I could ask dad for any more than I already had, but I needed a legal way to raise money. I had hoped to be able to sell some of the coral online, and there was a market for it, but not a very big one. Some of the boutiques on the Board Walk sold coral, but it was already made into jewelry, and I suspected that a lot of it was fake. It just didn’t feel the same as my coral.

One option was the Saturday Free Market on Lord’s Street. I would need to check it out this weekend, but I might be able to rent a small table, if it wasn’t too expensive, and sell some of my coral that way. If I could sell even a few pieces, I might be able to pay for some of my tests, which would then let me offer paid tutoring on an after school basis; or even for one of the local homeschool collectives as a small class.

Another option was handmade clothing; I knew that the boutiques charged an arm and a leg for even a simple handmade skirt or blouse, so maybe I could sell some things at the Free Market? Again, I needed more information about what would sell, and for how much? This information was going to be essential if I was going to even attempt this. I had already figured out that most yard sales were a waste of time and energy; more a way to clean out an attic or basement, than an attempt to actually generate income.

My biggest concern right now was that I might get bogged down in too many choices, too many options and then fail to accomplish anything at all. I suppose this could be considered the downside of my enhanced multi-tasking, having to find a way to thin out my choices.
I finally broke down and asked dad for help, which was a lot harder than I thought it would be, my pride and desire to do this myself made me a bit hesitant to ask for the help I clearly needed; when I did, dad just handed me two books on project management and goal-setting, that turned out to be very helpful, once I put the team-based projects aside and concentrated on individual tasks and projects.

The biggest help came, not surprisingly, on the second Wednesday, from Amy when she was switching out the batons and knives. After quite a bit of trial and error, she had settled on a form of coral that was matte black and much, much stronger than steel. It was able to take and hold an edge that was sharper than the best steel razors, almost as sharp as her own fingernails. Rather than having a large stockpile of tools and weapons that didn't meet her standards, she actually had her coral pods absorb the unwanted tools and use the material for the next version. At this time she had crafted two sets of batons for each of us, so we had spares, as well as some clever belt clip holders that held the collapsed batons until we needed them. She and I had settled on a single design for the throwing knives that we both found comfortable to use, as well as reasonably accurate.

We didn’t get much practice time with the throwing knives, but even the short amount of practice we did get down in the basement was quite helpful. I had also discovered that I was almost as comfortable fighting or throwing with my left hand as with my right, and was getting better with practice. Amy wasn’t sure if it was due to all the mods she had installed or something else, so she was going to be looking at her patients to see if she could pinpoint what caused handedness, and especially ambidextrousness.

As Amy had already opened up all of her manufacturing pods and removed the latest set of knives, batons and other accessories, we stopped to decide what to make next. Amy spoke first, “Have you come up with any new ideas that might be helpful?”

I shook my head and said, “Not really, other than the Fairbain-Sykes knives, we have 2 full sets of spare weapons for both of us, so that’s good. Maybe some specialty tools? Maybe copy some of the ones I’ve scavenged into stronger materials? Possibly some SAR tools like a crowbar or Halligan tool. As for my other projects, I’m still stuck with not knowing how best to sell any of my work, or even what work I should try to sell. I did manage to sell 4 pieces of coral, for $80 total, which at least is in my PayPal account, so that’s a step in the right direction. But I’m torn between making some handmade clothes to sell at the Free Market, or coral jewelry to also sell there; the coral jewelry should sell decently, if what I’ve seen so far holds true. Unfortunately, I haven’t a clue on how to make jewelry. I mean I could get some books from the library, but even so, I don’t have the tools or accessories or whatever they call them…”

“Findings and mountings,” Amy said as she washed off the knives and laid them out to dry. “That’s the generic term for all the little things you need to put your jewelry together.”

I stood there and looked sort of stunned, then said, “You know how to make jewelry, don’t you?”
Amy grinned at me over her shoulder, and said, “Simple things, sure. Earrings, pendants, maybe some bracelets. I’m not some world-renowned jewelry maker, but when I was in the Girl Scouts, our assistant Troop Leader actually was a jewelry designer, and she used to bring stuff in for us to make for the Christmas Bazaar each year, as well as for fund raisers so we could go camping and sailing. It was a lot of fun, but Vicky got bored, so…Well, you can guess how that turned out once Vicky didn’t want to go any more.”

I slipped up next to her and placed my hand on her shoulder and squeezed it gently for support. “Sorry that it didn’t work out for you, Amy.”

Amy just nodded and said, “It’s in the past, so don’t worry about it. Besides, if you want, I can make you the most of the tools,” she gestured at the waiting tanks, “easily enough, and I’ll bring some books and stuff to school tomorrow, so you can bring them home to practice with a little bit, even if I can’t give you a lesson until this weekend, all right?”

“That would be wonderful, Amy! I’ve been sort of stuck, not quite sure what to do next, since I need to raise some money to pay for my exams, and I refuse to just steal it. Even from criminals.”

Amy looked at me, with a very weird expression on her face, “Taylor, you do know that it is legal to take ‘spoils’ when you arrest a criminal in the commission of a crime, right? It works out to about 10-15% of the value confiscated, but you have to fill out a bunch of paperwork to get your money.”

I shook my head and said, “No, I had no idea that was possible. Why?”

“It’s one of the ways that heroes can legally support themselves, without crossing the line and becoming a criminal out of necessity. I think it was called the Vigilante Support Act of 1994? I’m not sure of the year, but if you search for it online you should be able to find it pretty easily,” Amy explained as she went over to the 20 gallon tanks and reached in to separate some cuttings, and to start the new tool growths in the little pods. The cuttings were removed and placed in the 3 gallon buckets for sorting and hopefully sale. By the time she had finished trimming and pruning all four tanks; she had filled two buckets and sealed them up, leaving three largish clumps out.

“In fact, from what Aunt Sarah has said, both the police and the PRT tend to look the other way if an independent doesn’t bother to file the paperwork, and just keeps the cash, as long as they don’t get too greedy that is, oh and leaves all the drugs and weapons, too,” she explained, even as she was preparing the pods to grow the new tools and weapons.
“Taylor, because these tools will only take about two days to make, I’m making you a new control rod so that you can open and close any of the pods as soon as the tools within the pod are finished. All of the pods now have a red stripe across the opening that will turn green when it is ready, so that you can use the control tool to open it up and remove the tool.” She showed me the Control Rod, a black rod about 18” long, with 4 color coded buttons, and a three-prong gripper on the end that she had created out of the three lumps of coral that she had left on top of the bucket. “Just leave it in one of the 20 gallon tanks when you’re not using it, which will keep it charged and ready to go. The buttons are pretty self-explanatory, Red closes the pod, Green opens it, Blue starts a new seed, and Black will either pause the process or if you press it 3 times quickly it will cause an active process to stop and dissolve completely.”

I picked up the Control Rod and inspected it carefully, seriously impressed with the thought that went into this. “Amy, you said that Blue starts a new seed, right? Well, where do the new seeds come from? Right now, you design and make the seeds as we need them, but this rod seems to indicate another source of seeds.”

“Very true, at this time, you can restart any pod with the previous seed, a throwing knife for example, by touching the edge of the pod opening and pressing the Blue button. That will simply cause the process to restart again,” Amy picked up a note book and drew a quick diagram of another tank, with a series of square boxes with a different symbols on each. “I’m thinking that I could design something like this, with pre-designed seeds so either of us can quickly pick out the new tools or weapons, set them up to incubate, then just let them go, checking up on them every couple of days.”

“That sounds really cool, we can work up a set of common tools and weapons together, and I’ll get another aquarium that we can use as our library,” I checked the living room clock using some insects and announced, “Amy, it’s time to clean up and get ready to catch your bus,” as I began putting away anything that might look out of place in a normal basement, even one being used to grow coral and do high school chemistry labs. The knife target and striking dummy went under the stairs first, then I carefully placed all of the new knives and batons in a cloth roll that I had sewn, each item fitting neatly into its own pocket with a Velcro hold-down, rolled it up and tied the cloth ties to hold it together firmly.

The new tool roll went with the other 3 rolls in the coal cellar, with the bolts of raw silk and other silk materials I had stockpiled for our costumes. The Widows finished up their immediate tasks and headed back to their resting chambers, where the ants and beetles would take care of them until I returned. The Brown Recluse spiders that I had gotten from the warehouse had come with their egg sacks, and those were about ready to hatch, with the Black Widows not far behind. Fortunately my expansion of the lair should provide plenty of room for all of the spiders, as I had expanded underneath the driveway to keep plenty of separation between the species. They were proving quite useful, aside from their combat function, as I was using them to create webbing reinforcements for the tunnels and larger chambers, which meant that the Widows could put all of their web production into creating cloth, thread and cording.
“Alright, can I leave this notebook with your books upstairs, or should I put it in the coal cellar?”

“Upstairs, on the shelves is fine, there’s nothing particularly incriminating in there, right?” I asked.

She shook her head as she got to the top of the stairs, “Nope, not even real short hand, just some mnemonics that would only mean something to the two of us.”

“Okay, then. Left hand shelves, bottom on the right, please,” I called up as I turned out the lights on my way up the stairs. I closed the basement door, and ensured that the door was properly latched, as I passed through the living room and headed upstairs, Amy was putting her notebook away and looking through her book bag for a clean shirt.

Amy slipped into the bathroom long enough to wash her arms and face, before putting on the clean shirt, while I changed out of my sweats and into a nice skirt and sweater, appropriate for the nice sunny day. We met, as usual, at the head of the stairs; all cleaned up and ready to head off to Brockton Bay General Hospital, for Amy to begin her shift of healing.

-------------Legion*** Amy ***Legion-----------------

As we left the house, I watched Taylor lock up the back door, the front door having been locked from the inside, and waited for her to catch up with me by the sidewalk. I admired her skirt and sweater, yet another outfit that she had made herself, and I realized that her preference in clothing had come 180 degrees from when she attended Winslow; no longer was she hiding behind dark concealing clothes, like loose pants or jeans, hooded sweatshirts or jackets; she was now practically placing herself on display; rarely wearing pants unless the weather demanded it, preferring skirts and dresses, with tops that often had either short or no-sleeves, wearing her hair down and back away from her face. Taylor Hebert was no longer afraid and hiding from her tormentors, she was proudly showing herself for everyone to see; and damned to them if they didn’t like it. God knows that I’m proud of her, as I walked alongside of her and even wrapping my arm around her waist and holding her opposite hand.

When we reached the bus stop, I checked the time for the next bus, then asked her, “Sweetie, could you do me a favor, I need your help with something?”

“Sure, Amy, what can I do for you?” Taylor asked, a bit puzzled.

I pulled a brush, a comb and a little mirror out of my purse, turned my back on her and scooted
right up next to her, saying, “Do you think that you could fix my hair, at least a little, before the bus comes. I don’t have a spray bottle, but I do have a bottle of regular water if you need it, I hope that will be good enough.”

“Sure, I’ll see what I can do,” she agreed as she took the comb and mirror, and set them down on the bench. Carefully, she used the comb to gently untangle some of the frizziness, parting my hair right down the middle, and then using the comb and water to smooth out my hair on each side of the part, working from the center to the edges, until each side was as even as possible. She then created a French Braid on each side of my head, then she started working on rest of my hair, tying off the mass of hair in the back into a pony tail using some small silk cords that she had had her Widows make and groups of flies then bring to her, she then carefully twisted the braids around the pony tail to confine my hair into a modified French braid.

Since the bus still hadn’t arrived, Taylor took a few moments to carefully twist and hide the silk cords into the mass of my hair, helping to show my hair off to its best advantage as it hung down my back. Even as Taylor was finishing up, I saw the bus turn onto their street, so I said, “Thank you so very much, Taylor,” looking into the little mirror, I went on, “This is absolutely beautiful, Taylor, I can’t …” I gave her another big hug and said, “Thank you again, you are my best friend ever. Please don’t ever change.”

“I can’t promise not to change, but I won’t change away from you, Amy, that I can promise,” Taylor swore.

As the bus pulled to a stop, I got up first and held out my hand to help her get up and the two of us collected our hair things and boarded the bus, showing our priority bus passes. Mine was a gift from the city just because I am Panacea of New Wave, while Taylor’s was due to the horrible injuries she had suffered. Even though I had healed her, the city had not only refused to revoke her bus pass they had in fact up graded it to match mine, with a 3 year expiration date, which made me wonder if some people knew what had happened to Taylor, and they were doing what they could to make up for it.

I led the way to an empty seat, one with good lighting and offered Taylor the window seat, before sitting down and turning to face her directly. Before I could speak, Taylor spoke first, “Amy, what’s going on? I don’t mind doing your hair; actually I love to play with your hair, but why here, why now?”

I blushed and started to duck my face down, as I had done so many times before, but this time I resisted the habit and lifted my chin and said, partly to myself, “I won’t hide anymore, I have done nothing to be ashamed of and I have done so much to be proud of. I have people that I am proud to be with and proud to know; people like you, Taylor. I refuse to hide ever again.”
Taylor reached out her hand and laid it against my cheek, “What brought this on, and how can I help you Amy? Ask me for anything and I will give it to you. No matter what it is, no matter where it is, just ask and it’s yours.”

I stroked my cheek against her hand, and closed my eyes to just wallow in the sensation of my skin on hers.

I opened my eyes and stared directly into hers, her beautiful hazel eyes, the eyes that have seen so much pain and hardship, and yet can still show me so much kindness, compassion and love.

I struggled to speak, but the words that I wanted to say, it was still too soon to speak them. Instead, I slowly counted to ten, breathing in and out to slow my fast beating heart, finally I had calmed down to the point that I could speak clearly again. Licking my dry lips, I said in a soft whisper, “I decided today that I was going to follow your example, to refuse to hide in shame, when I have never done anything shameful. I will no longer hide behind my plain clothes, behind the curtain of my hair, or behind my robes. You have shown me just how beautiful you are, and when I look in your eyes, I can see that I am just as beautiful to you, as you are to me.”

“When I begin my shift tonight, it will not be as the New Wave Hero, Panacea, robed and masked. It will be as Amy Dallon, at least until I can find out my birth name. I want everybody to see my face, and I want that face to be one of kindness, compassion, and yes, love. I know that I don’t always have the best bedside manner, but lately it’s been a lot easier to take a few seconds to try and comfort my patients, to let them know that I will do my best for them. You’ve already helped me so much tonight, changing my hairstyle to one that I can work with for hours, staying both professional and comfortable. Now, if it’s possible, could you do a very minimal makeover, just enough to help make me approachable and human, I don’t want to be the unapproachable goddess Panacea anymore, I just want to be Amy.”

Taylor chewed her lip for a minute, before she whispered, “Amy, I don’t even have any makeup with me; well I have a little nude lip gloss, but that’s it,” she paused for a moment, then went on, “However, I do have an idea…and if it works…” Taylor stood up and guided me to the back of the bus, where the lighting was really bad.

“Come on, sit next to me and turn to face me, remember to speak very, very softly. Alright, I’ll ramp up my vision, and you reach out to my ‘echos’. Now, instead of using your eyes, try to use my eyes, feel through the ‘echos’ and find my eyes, just look through my eyes, you’ll know that you’ve got it when you can see those cute freckles…look for the one freckle just above your right eyelash…when you can see it…I see it now. Good, now that you can see the freckles, make sure that you leave them alone for now. Your cheeks are a little pale, so bring the capillary network just slightly closer to the skin, not everywhere, only in the center, separate the centers slightly, raise them up towards the cheekbones...good job. Lock that down.”
“Now we need to relax a bit before we can can can reeellaaaaaxx...Next I need to kiss your lips...just a tiny bit, if you could open them slightly Taylor then Ohgod, I’m sorry Amy I’m not sorry I wished you liked it like you don’t...I mean... I meant that we need to change them just a little...if we add just a little bit of glosssssssssssssssn Amy Taylor Amy Tamy Alor Help Me Help Me Ho Pe Amy Tay Alor Tmy Help Me.

“Amy/Taylor?” “What happened?” I/We was/were inside/Outside me you are you/we ok?

...

...

...

“Taylor?”

“Are you okay?”

“Yes.”

“Are we okay?”

“Yes.”

I blinked rapidly a few times to try to clear the gunk from my eyes, and saw Taylor, still sitting in the same position she had started in, her hands still holding mine, also blinking her eyes, just like I was. “Whoa... what just happened? Did that really happen or was that some kind of vision or hallucination?” I asked Taylor.

Taylor stared intently at my face for a moment, and then said, “I think it was some kind of vision, that allowed us to actually share thoughts or maybe images for a moment. Because, what I was hoping to do, you know, have you actually modify your appearance slightly, similar to using make
up, seems to have worked,” as she was speaking, she fumbled the little mirror out of my purse and offered it to me.

I accepted the mirror and checked out my appearance in the mirror. “Well, that’s…impressive. I’ve never been able to do my makeup that well before. It’s exactly how I wanted it to be though; minimal, just enough to let ‘me’ show through, my eyebrows trimmed just a little straighter and thinner, the lashes aren’t all covered and clumping, they’re just my lashes, it looks like I have just a touch of eyeliner under my eyes, my cheeks just slightly rosy, my lips are just slightly glossy, not some bright color that I can’t stand; my face is not all covered up and hidden, like when Vicky tries to do my makeup for me. Aunt Sarah or Crystal could maybe do my makeup this well, but I’ve never managed it myself.”

Taylor laughed softly and said, “Me neither, I always come out looking like a circus clown or I have to wash it all off and start again because the colors clash, or I manage to twitch and…” Amy broke in, “…eyeliner goes ‘weeeeee’ across my cheek.” “Oh god, you too?” Taylor asked and giggled at the same time.

I took one more look at my face in the mirror, and then handed it back to her and said, “Thank you, it looks just perfect to me, and I couldn’t have done it without you.”

Taylor smiled, looked around and said, “I couldn’t have done it without you, either. I think this is our stop here,” as she stood up and moved into the aisle so I could get up too.

We walked to the door and waited until the bus came to complete stop then exited the bus and took a look around, since we had at least 30 minutes until my shift was due to start. Taylor pointed out a fast food restaurant that had a decent salad bar to go with the burgers and grinders that made up the vast majority of its menu. “Sitdown or take away, Amy?”

The restaurant seemed to be mostly empty and the outdoor picnic just had a small family that was enjoying the nice Wednesday afternoon. “Take away, I’d like to sit in the picnic area and relax before my shift starts.”

“Sounds good to me, lets head on in and order, okay?”

I nodded and headed for the door, opening it and holding it for her as she caught up with me. As she entered, she rewarded me with a smile that just lit up her whole face and seemed to brighten the day for the tired-looking cashier manning the register. “Good afternoon, may I take your order today?”
Taylor looked at me and asked, “Do you know what you want yet? Or would you like me to order first?”

I was looking at the list of options that were available and said, “Order for yourself, I’ll be ready by the time you’re done ordering.”

Taylor nodded and spoke up, “I’ll have a large steak and cheese, with grilled onions, mozzarella cheese, toasted then lettuce and tomatoes added after the toasting, a large fountain coke, and regular salad bar please.”

The girl punched her order in and when finished, she looked up and said, “Your meal total is $8.97; cash or charge?”

Taylor handed her a ten-dollar bill and at the same time said, “Cash, please.”

A moment later she had her change and her ticket to pick up her meal, so she stepped to the other end of the counter while I stepped up and gave my order. “I would like a large Italian Club grinder, with oil and vinegar please. I would like a large fountain Sprite, and a regular salad bar, please.”

My order came to $8.55, and I used my personal debit card to pay for it.

While the grinders were being made, Taylor and I filled our drink cups and salad plates. When our numbers were called, we each took our tray and collected our grinders and head back outdoors to take our seats in the picnic/play area. As I had expected, Taylor chose a spot from which she could keep a close eye on the children playing and eating nearby. I on the other hand, took my normal seat directly across from her, where I could watch her and speak in normal tones on any topic that need discussing; even the ones that needed to be kept secret.

“Any eavesdroppers? Or paparazzi?” I asked quietly.

She took another bite of her salad and shook her head, “I’m pushing 350 feet, and I have a number of birds and cats that have decent long-range vision checking for anything suspicious outside that range, but it all looks clear.” She opened her purse and removed a small device with several colored LED’s and two tiny meters on its face; after adjusting its controls and studying it for a few more moments, she said, “And there doesn’t appear to be any electronic audio or visual devices nearby.”
I peered at the device for a moment, then asked her, “That’s new. Did you buy that online, or make it yourself?”

“I designed and built it myself, based on several designs I found online. The basic device is available for sale either as a pre-built unit or as working drawings, including full instructions and parts lists. I’ve tested it with several commercially available devices as well as with some I made myself, audio, visual and some with both audio and visual channels. It’s not perfect, and I’m sure that decent TinkerTech will be able to spoof it, but it is the best I can come up with.”

I smiled at her and her device, and then said, “Well, that’s good enough for me. You did good Taylor, both with this, and earlier. Thank you very much for the little makeover, as well.”

She waved that off with the grinder she was holding in both hands, while blushing lightly. Swallowing her mouthful of grinder, she wiped her mouth and said, “You’re welcome, but it really wasn’t hard to do. There are a lot of websites out there that provide information about surveillance and counter-surveillance tools and techniques, many of which anyone can build and use with only a minimal amount of education and training. It was mostly a matter of double-checking all of my references, and not simply accepting what the websites say as gospel truth.” She grinned at me as she took another bite of salad, before continuing, “The Central Library has some really good references in the restricted stacks, and they don’t mind if I take a couple of books to use as references while taking notes. This little thing was actually built by taking a couple of old radios, MP3 players and a CD player apart and reusing the parts, I just had to find a cross-reference catalog, also in the library, to make sure the parts would do what I thought they would and buy the meters and a few other things like the case from Radio Shack.”

I froze for a moment, then carefully put my grinder down and said, “Taylor, are you sure that you’re not a Tinker? Because being able to take stuff apart and put it back together so that it can do something else entirely, is a classic sign of a Tinker.”

Taylor shook her head, and explained, “If I understand how Tinkers work, they each have access to a ‘tech tree’, a group of related technologies that only they or another Tinker who’s ‘tech tree’ is similar enough that they can relate to it can understand. What I did is totally different; I researched eavesdropping and counter-eavesdropping devices and technologies, both online and in reference books, as well as did some intensive studying on electronics and electronic theory. I used some basic designs to make a couple of ‘bugs’ out of common materials for testing purposes; I basically used broken mp3 players, radios, cd players and a couple of DVD players with built in screens as a source of materials. You’d be amazed at what you can find in dumpster and trash cans the night before the scheduled pickup.”

I still looked puzzled, but asked her, “So you used regular science and skills to breakdown and recycle broken and thrown away electronics to design and build an anti-eavesdropping device? And you claim it’s not TinkerTech?”
“It’s not TinkerTech, in any way, shape or form; it’s simple science and engineering. The design is quite simple, I did make some changes, but those are to allow it to sense a greater range of frequencies so that it can detect more types of bugs. I can even show you the plans and procedures that I drew up, showing how I intended to remove and test the parts from one device, and then reuse it in another device. Honestly, if it’s anything, it’s simply because I can leverage my multitasking to learn about more things, faster and better. I don’t have a photographic memory, but I’ve found that when I study while linked to my creatures, I retain the information better than if I’m not linked to my creatures.”

I held up a finger, asking for a moment to think, before nodding and asking, “Okay, is it just electronics that you can do this in, or can you figure out mechanical stuff too? Because, I already know that you are picking up human anatomy and biology really fast, both from me and from your books, too. And I suspect that any form or type of biology will come easy for you, if only due to your linkages.”

She smiled back at me and said, “I’m pretty sure that mechanical tech is just as easy, or even easier than electronics. When I took my mom’s sewing machine down from the attic, I had to download the user and maintenance manuals for that model so that I could open it up, strip it down and clean and lubricate it, then put it back together so that I could use it. All told, it took me just over two hours. From the beginning to the end, which was when I started practicing sewing two pieces of cloth together.”

After listening to her explanation of why what she did wasn’t TinkerTech, we let the subject drop and finished our lunch in peace. As we ate, I watched Taylor as she watched the small children behind me, a soft smile on her face.

_I need to talk to Taylor about this; it’s becoming more and more obvious that she is fascinated by children of all ages, and especially newborn babies. And I’m starting to worry that her fascination may lead her to make a choice that she isn’t ready for yet._

Having finished both of our lunches, except for the drinks, we cleared our table and started walking towards the Hospital’s main entrance. As we approached, Taylor stiffened momentarily and said,

“Paparazzi in the silver car facing the hospital entrance.”

I looked at her and asked her, “Any idea who he’s waiting for?”
Taylor looked off in the distance for a moment, and then said, “He has a bunch of pictures of you and Vicky, laying on the car seat. Outside the hospital, school, your house…oh!”

She went silent, but then I noticed that it was starting to get darker. When I looked up I could see a swarm of insects forming in the sky. *Oh shit, what did she see?*

“Taylor, sweetie, look at me please,” Nothing, she was just staring at the car. Taking her face in my hands, I forced her to look at me, “Taylor, whatever you saw, let it go; you need to relax, if you don’t disperse your swarm, right now! You are going to end up killing him. Whatever he did, he’s not worth you getting in trouble, okay. Please, calm down!”

Finally, she nodded and closed her eyes, forcing the swarm to disperse, letting the sun shine through again.

When she opened her eyes again, I could see that her anger was still there, but that it was now under her control, not controlling her.

Sighing in relief, I asked her, “Can you tell me what you saw, and why it enraged you so much?”

She tensed up again, but then said, “You may want to call your mom first, and then the police. Because when I tell you what I saw, something will have to be done. If it’s not handled legally… Well, I suspect he won’t live out the week.”

*Shit, this is not good.* “Okay, as soon as you tell me what you saw, I’ll call my mom…Shit, I can’t tell her what you saw, if I do then I out you as a cape.”

Taylor just shrugged, “Better that I get outted as a cape, than this go on.”

I wrapped myself around her, making sure that I could rub her back, “Okay then, tell me what you saw.”

“I have four birds currently watching him, they can see into his front seat, even though the windows are tinted, the sunroof is open. He has a file folder of images that is open, he was looking through them, I thought it was so he would be able to spot his target. I told you about some of the photos, but he has others…from inside your house. Inside what I think is yours and Vicky’s shared bathroom. He has nude and partially nude photos of both of you. He also has photos of you in your
bedroom, getting dressed or undressed, I can’t tell which.” I was glad that I was holding her, because she was shaking like a leaf in the middle of a storm!

“Come on Taylor, let’s sit back down so I can call my mom, alright?”

I guided her to a park bench that was set well back from the road, shaded by some nice trees and out of sight of the silver car. As soon as she was sitting, I straddled her lap, glad that I was wearing slacks instead of a dress, so she could hold onto me as much as I was holding onto her, because she clearly needed some human contact, then I pulled out my phone and called mom’s cellphone, because I didn’t know if she was at work or home yet.

“Hello, Amy? Why are you calling me now? I thought you were at the hospital for your Wednesday shift?”

“Mom, are you driving right now?”

“Yes, why?”

“You need to find a place to pull over and stop. You need to NOT be driving, it’s really important, so let me know as soon as you’re safe.”

“What in the world are you talking about…right. Pulling over now.” There was a pause for almost two minutes, then “Okay, I’m parked away from the road. Now tell me what’s wrong.”

“Okay, I was just walking up to the hospital, when I was told that a paparazzi was parked facing the hospital entrance. When I…”

“Who told you this? Could it be a joke or a hoax?”

“Not important, mom; let me finish the story, okay? Anyway, I asked if they could tell who the paparazzi was waiting for, because I am not the only celebrity who could be here at the hospital. I was told that there was an open file folder on the front seat of the car, with pictures of both Vicky and I, mostly outside school, the hospital and home. However, I was also told that there were nude and partially nude photos of the both of us, in what appeared to be our bathroom and our bedrooms.” I paused for a moment to see if mom had any questions or comments.
“Are you sure of your source, can they be trusted? Any chance of a mistake or perhaps trying to gain your trust for some other reason, a long game maybe?”

I laughed at that, “Mom, my source is utterly trustworthy. They already have my complete trust, and as for a chance of mistake. No. Just no. The photographer is in his car, the folder of photo is on the front passenger seat, and the images are just as I described. I haven’t seen them yet, but I don’t need to.”

“Alright, I’ll get a hold of some of my contacts in the police department, including Vice, because nude photos of underage girls, in their own bedrooms is child pornography, which will almost certainly end up in a Federal Court as well as in the local and state…”

As she was speaking, Taylor stiffened and shook her head violently, I interrupted my mom, “Hold up mom,” Covering the phone with my hand I asked Taylor, “What’s wrong, sweetie? Did you see something?”

She leaned forward and whispered, “He has a police-band scanner or radio, I just heard a police car get an assignment, I heard it inside his car.”

I nodded and uncovered my phone, “Mom, the photographer has a police-band scanner or radio in his car, my source just heard it announce a police car assignment.”

“Well, that will make it a bit tricky, but it’s still doable. Are you and you ‘source’ in a safe place right now? Or do you need to move to a better or safer location?” mom asked me.

“We are almost 100 yards away from him, and currently out of sight. If that changes we have a couple of ways we can leave, that should keep us safe and unobserved,” I explained, even as I was checking out possible escape routes back through the little park.

“Alright, please stay out of sight, and safe while I make arrangements, speaking of which, I don’t suppose you have the make, model and license number for the car, do you?” Her voice was hopeful, but she seemed to think it unlikely that we would have that information. However, even as she spoke,

Taylor handed me a post-it note with all of the information written down, in Taylor’s much nicer handwriting.
“Of course we do, mom. Let me read it off to you, alright?”

“Let me get a pen first, okay, I’m ready,” she said, and I could hear her writing something down as I repeated the information that Taylor had given me.

“Alright then, I’m going to be talking to the police about setting this up and making sure that he can’t get off on a technicality, so I’ll be hanging up now. However, your number will always have priority, so if something comes up, anything at all, you call me immediately, and I will answer at once. Hopefully nothing will come up on your end, and we can get everything settled soon. Alright, Amy, just promise me that you and your ‘source’ will be careful, alright?”

“I promise, mom. We’ll be very careful and wait for you to call and tell us it’s all over. Oh, and make sure that Vicky stays home, don’t let her go out on patrol, because if she does, I can almost guarantee that if she leaves the house before this is over, she WILL show up at just the wrong moment. Murphy’s Law, mom,” I was only partly joking, for the most part it was the truth. She had a terrible habit of showing up in the wrong place at just the wrong time. It was a genuine gift.

After I had hung up, I called the hospital and let them know that I would either be late, or possibly not be in at all tonight. Once I was done, Taylor finally spoke up, “So, how bad is it that you can speak of your sister and Murphy’s Law in the same sentence; and your mom seems to agree? And is it just me, or did she have air quotes around ‘source’ at the end there?”

I giggled and said, “Oh, you have NO idea just how bad Vicky’s timing can be. Though I suspect you’ll get the full treatment before summer comes. And yeah, I heard the air quotes just as clearly as you did. Oh well, I guess I won’t be able to keep you all to myself very much longer.” I sighed, then said, “Such is life, well, I plan on enjoying our time alone together for as long as it lasts. I’d much prefer to leave my family drama at home, right where it belongs, rather than spread it all over.”

Taylor just said, “I’ll keep an eye on the pervert, and unless something changes, I plan on just sitting here and snuggling with you, even if I can’t afford to fall asleep.”

I smiled and shifted to a slightly more comfortable position and said, “I on the other hand, fully
intend to snuggle until I actually fall asleep, because you make a wonderfully comfy mattress and pillow, and I will take full advantage of you, I mean, that. Really. Honest.” I tried, but I couldn’t hold my giggles in, the look of betrayal on Taylor’s face was priceless.

Alas, I paid for my little joke with some expertly aimed tickles, which kept us happily occupied until mom called me to let us know that the paparazzi had not only been arrested, but that the photos he had of Vicky and I in three different locations and dates had just earned him three strikes as a pornographer, and since some of the pictures were taken when I was still 15 and Vicky 16, it was child pornography, with a sentence of up to 20 years per charge.

Even so, I still had a question for mom, “Mom, did he explain how he was able to get those pictures inside our bedrooms and the bathroom? TinkerTech or Stranger abilities? Either is scary, but if you can’t get a court order for an MRI, just let me touch him and I will be able to tell if he’s a cape. Which would change his sentencing, a lot and for the worse. Because if he used Stranger abilities to get those photos, between the bathroom and both bedrooms, that’s three strikes of using a Parahuman ability to commit a crime, at the very minimum.”

“Well, now don’t I feel like an idiot, I should have spotted that possibility right away, and the fact that no one else here did either is enough to order full Master/Stranger protocols on him.” She paused to speak to someone else in the room with her, and then I heard what sounded like several Tasers going off, as well as containment foam being used to bind someone.

“Good job Amy, it looks like you are right and he has some strong Stranger abilities. He was almost out of the room when the Protocols went into effect, and the door literally hit him in the face. Broke his nose in fact. Which also broke his focus and let us Taser him and seal him up in foam.”

At her description, I started giggling again, almost as much as I was when Taylor was tickling me earlier, “Heh, oh god, I bet the look on his face was hilarious. Anyways, it’s almost 8 o’clock, so I’m going to call the hospital and let them know that, barring a critical injury, I’ll be heading home now, instead of coming in to work a shift. I’ll pick up the hours another day. Is there anything else that I need to be aware of, that can’t wait until later?”

“Nothing that I can think of, except…will you be coming home alone, or with an escort?” mom asked me, I could even see her arched eyebrow.

I didn’t even bother to ask Taylor, I could feel it in the way she was holding me. Hell would freeze over solid, before she let me go home by myself.
“Don’t worry mom, I will have an escort all the way home. Trust me, I’ll be perfectly safe,” I told her before I disconnected the call, so I could call the hospital and let them know that I was fine, but that I wouldn’t be in tonight.

After calling the hospital and giving them a proper update, I called Vicky to let her know that everything was good from my end, but that as far as I knew, she still had to get mom’s permission before she could leave the house. I also turned down her offer of a ride home, telling her that I had already made my plans, and that I wasn’t changing them for her.

Taylor and I walked over to the bus stop by the hospital and took our seats, waiting for the bus headed towards my house.

After looking around, she asked, “So, did I hear that correctly, he was a Stranger? And they have him in custody appropriate to his abilities, right? So what does that mean for you and the rest of your family?”

I shrugged, then said, “Well, they will keep him isolated and under restraint, until his trial. As for us? I don’t know for sure, maybe we’ll end up getting an upgrade to the house security systems. I’ve no idea what that might involve, so I guess we’ll just have to wait and see. I do hope that they find out who else he’s been spying on, and why?”

She bit her lip and asked, “What if it isn’t just because he’s a pervert? What if he was planning something else, or for someone else?”

I leaned closer to her, and said, “I don’t know Taylor, I just don’t know.”

With that the two of us just waited in silence for the bus, a silence that lasted until we were sitting in the back of the bus, away from most of the other riders.

As the bus pulled away, I addressed Taylor with some of my concerns, “Taylor, I know you’ve been developing your strength and speed with exercise, but I would like to make some changes, if that’s okay?”

Speaking as softly as I had, she replied, “Sure, what did you have in mind? Because, I’m getting a lot stronger and faster, especially since I started running and doing Parkour at night.”
“Stamina, mostly. Specifically I want to greatly increase your lungs’ efficiency as well as boost your muscles aerobic and anaerobic capacity. The proportion of fast-twitch fibers in your muscles is ideal for balanced strength and speed, but even so you’re going to have problems with stamina with any prolonged exertion. This should fix that issue.”

She nodded agreement, but said, “Alright, but after you finish my upgrades, you need to do the same for you. And any sensory upgrades that you haven’t done yet, need to be done tonight. Afterwards, I have something else I want to brainstorm with you, but it will wait. So let’s go ahead and get started.”

I reached out and clasped her hand and began by carefully modifying her lungs to increase the speed and efficiency of the O2/CO2 exchange as well as increasing the interior surface area of her alveoli by creating tiny folds in each sac, than began by making a subtle change to all of her muscles that allowed a much higher aerobic metabolic rate, as well as increasing the efficiency of anaerobic waste product removal during extreme exertion. The last change was to her bone marrow so that her new blood cells would be slightly different, the new red cells could carry almost twice the amount of oxygen, while the white cells, when activated, would move much faster and attack toxins and pathogens much more effectively. This change would affect her over the next two or three days as her blood was replaced.

After about ten minutes, I said, “Okay, all done. I’ll need your linkages now,” as I spoke I could feel the number of linkages that Taylor was maintaining increase hugely. Curious, I looked out the window but could see no visible signs of her swarm, so perhaps she was able to reach out further. Echoing off of her linkages, I started making the same types of upgrades to myself, which I had just made to her. Though, because I hadn’t been exercising as hard as she had, I wouldn’t be able to achieve the same levels of strength and speed that she had, still I was already at almost twice the speed and strength that someone my height and weight could normally achieve and this should push me up to about three times normal. About Brute 2 and Mover 2 was my best estimate for my ratings now.

When I finished and opened my eyes, I saw that Taylor had a bottle of juice and a couple of granola and fruit bars already waiting for me. Giving her a wry look, I said, “You are too kind.”

She shrugged and said, “You know you need the calories, since you are doing all the hard work. Finish this and then we can talk.”

Knowing she was right I quickly ate the bars, washing them down with the juice. Once I was done, she spoke up again, “The first thing is this Stranger; I have two ideas to deal with people like him. The first idea is to create a monitor, similar to the one we use for Master effects, except that this one needs to monitor our sensory input, and test to see if our brain is responding to the input the way it should, and if it isn’t then force us to notice, an alarm or something. The second idea is going to be a lot harder; you need to create a biological jammer, one that can disrupt psionic
influence, such as what I use to control my creatures. I think that it will need to be very short range, with multiple jammers built into the skull that will create an interference field around our heads. I will either need to be able to turn it off so that I can still use my Master ability without the jammer interfering, or maybe it needs to have a frequency gap just for me. Plus, we still need to be able to share our powers even when the jammer is on.”

I whistled quietly, saying, “The monitor should be simple, and I can give it two modes, an awake mode and a sleeping alarm mode; but you’re right, the other one is going to be a bitch. I may need to use Gallant as a test subject, because he’s the only other person with an active Master ability, with his emotion blasts and empathy that I know of and can touch. And I think I’ll find a list of Master class capes and how their power seems to work, maybe we can do some tests?”

“That could be risky, but go ahead and get the list so we can look it over. Will you be still able to do the monitor on both of us before we get to your stop?” she asked.

“No problem, let me get started on you first, then I’ll install mine.”

Designing and installing the monitor only took a few minutes, as I could compare our sensory inputs and brain responses in real-time, and building a monitor to compare our actual response to what our expected response should be was easy. Creating the alert circuit was actually much harder, as it had to draw our attention to the blocked input, while preventing us from ignoring the alert, but without causing undo stress; fortunately, Taylor and I were both used to this type of experimentation and modification. The sleeping mode was an easy variant, and I decided to include a clock and adjustable alarm setting, which was easy to control with the mental switches I had already designed and built.

About ten minutes after I finished installing the monitors in both of us, the bus pulled up to my stop and we both got off and started walking towards my house. “Are you going to be okay heading home by yourself?” I asked, even knowing what she was capable of, I was still worried.

“Are you going to be okay heading home by yourself?” I asked, even knowing what she was capable of, I was still worried.

Taylor squeezed my hand and replied, “Don’t worry, I still have my pepper spray. And baton, if I need it, but usually the buses are fine during the week, until much later in the evening anyway, even down near the Docks. For the most part, E88 and ABB don’t tolerate any crap on the buses because it riles up the Protectorate and PRT too much. They even intervene if the Merchants or other gangs try anything; I’ve actually seen members of both gangs work together to throw obnoxious Merchants off the bus, then calmly take seats away from each other. It’s pretty funny to watch, because it’s obvious they don’t like or trust each other, but they really despise the Merchants.”
I just shook my head in amazement, and said, “Weird. Oh well, if you’re sure it’ll be okay?”

“I’ll be fine. And although I worry about you riding the bus, most sane gang members know better than to touch Panacea. Their own capes would probably kill them for just insulting you, never mind if they hurt you.”

I just gave her a look at that, because I couldn’t really believe that any of the E88 or ABB capes would even care if I was hurt, much less insulted, well Othala might, but I let it drop as we came up to my house.

As I pulled my house key out of my purse, I said, “Would you like to come in, just for a few minutes? Vicky and dad are home, and I’d like to introduce you to them properly.”

She paused for moment, and I could see she was still a little afraid of being in a new place, meeting new people, but then she took a deep breath and said, “Alright, but only for a few minutes, because I still need to get home before dad gets too worried.”

“Good, you can call him from here before you catch your bus,” I said as I unlocked the front door.

“Vicky, dad, I’m home, and I’ve brought a guest.”

As I followed Amy into her house, I held onto her hand like a lifeline. Until I had actually met her dad for the first time, I had no idea that meeting new people scared me so much; I think it was being in a new place, not at home or the library where I felt safe and unthreatened, or out in public where I could just leave. Vicky I knew from the Board Walk and from meeting Amy after school, but this time I didn’t feel any effect from her aura, so I assumed that the monitor Amy had installed was working fine. Or maybe she wasn’t using it right now. Her dad was sitting in a recliner, working on his laptop and as we walked into the living room, he set it aside and stood up.

“Amy-girl, your home safe, I’m glad. And hello Taylor, it’s good to see you again.”

I nodded to him and said, “It’s a pleasure to meet you again, Mr. Dallon.”
He smiled at me and said, “Please have a seat. Would you like something to eat or drink?”

As I sat down next to Amy, I said, “Water or juice, if it’s no trouble?”

Vicky jumped up from her chair and said, “I’ll get you both some juice, alright?”

Amy and I nodded together, and Vicky just laughed as she literally floated into the kitchen. A few minutes later she walked back out with a small tray with 2 glasses of apple juice and cup of coffee that was obviously for her dad.

As we took our juice and thanked Vicky, Mr. Dallon spoke up and said, “Thank you for staying with Amy while this Stranger situation was being handled, I’m glad that she wasn’t alone for that.”

I nodded and said, “It was my pleasure, there’s no way I would have left her there alone, not after I saw those pictures. At the time I just thought he was a pervert, but now…?” I shrugged and added, “Once Amy’s mom said he was in proper custody, all that was left was to bring her home.”

After that, Amy and her dad just exchanged some small talk which let me slowly relax and become a little more comfortable being around her family, but eventually it became time for me to leave if I was going to catch my bus.

“Amy, I…”

She smiled and interrupted me, “I know, you have to catch the bus. Dad, Taylor needs to leave if she’s going to catch her bus, alright?” Even as she spoke, she stood up, pulling me to my feet so that she could walk me to the door.

“Alright Amy-girl; Taylor, thank you again for looking out for my girl, I really appreciate it,” he stood as well and watched as Amy and I headed for the front door. Vicky, just as she had for most of my time there, just watched quietly and didn’t say much of anything.

At the door Amy gave me a hug, even with her family watching, she hugged me long and hard, and I returned it just as hard, “Be safe Amy, please take care of yourself, and I’ll email you as soon as I get home, okay?”
“I will, but you be careful too, and I’ll be waiting for your email.”

It was hard, but I forced myself to turn away and head for the bus stop, even if it was the last thing I wanted to do; when all I wanted was to wrap myself around her and keep her safe, but I knew I had to go.

Walking away, I thought about trying to find a way to program some of the more intelligent creatures to act as long-term sentries, even when I wasn’t in range. Yet another long-term project for Amy and I to work on, like so many others.

As I rode the bus home, I decided that I would be doing some serious running and parkour tonight, to test my new upgrades, and that I was just going to have to find a way to study more efficiently so I could spend more time working on improving my combat and movement skills.

-----------------------------Legion*** ***Legion-------------------------------

When I met Amy on Thursday, I made a point of bringing my backpack, empty except for some drinks and snacks, so that I could easily carry the jewelry books and stuff that Amy had promised me. We met in the little picnic area between the wings of Arcadia and she showed me the tools and books, giving me a quick explanation of each tool and its use while reminding me that the other tools were being grown and should be ready in a day or so, then telling me which book would probably be best to start with, before I put them away in my backpack.

We had finished that and were just sitting on the bench holding hands so that Amy could install our upgrades when Vicky and Dean came out of the school, she just rolled her eyes when she saw us and smiled as she pulled Dean back into the school. At the bewildered look on his face, both Amy and I started laughing.

“I guess she’s trying to give you some space and privacy since the Boardwalk, isn’t she?”

Amy shrugged and said, “Actually, I think it’s more that she’s trying to keep Dean away from us, rather than actually giving us space. She certainly asks me enough questions about you and the things we like to do, but then she is always interested in the latest relationships and gossip.”

I nodded doubtfully as she finished making the upgrades to her monitor, then I asked her, “How did the Stranger monitor work for you? Any alerts or issues that need to be addressed?”
Amy smiled and said, “It seemed to work fine, no alerts or problems at all. Although I’ve noticed that I’m now sleeping a lot less, just like you are.”

“Oh? And what have you been doing when you wake up at 3 o’clock in the morning?” I asked her.

She shrugged and said, “Reading mostly, though I have been doing a set of my exercises as soon as I wake up, so I’m up to 3 times a day now. Sometimes I browse PHO and some of the other cape sites, just to see what people are saying. Which isn’t much, really, usually just some incoherent ranting.”

I laughed at that, and her expression of disgust until finally she just huffed and said, “Fine, be that way,” which of course just made me laugh harder. Eventually I calmed down enough to apologize, “I’m sorry Amy, but the look on your face was really funny, anyways are you getting a ride from Vicky or would you like me to take you home?”

“Yeah, Vicky is driving today, so I should probably head over to the car now. Walk with me?” she asked hopefully.

“Of course I will,” I replied happily. Standing up I slipped my backpack on while Amy picked up her book bag and hung it over her shoulder before she reached out for my hand. I took it and let her lead me towards where the student parking was so that she could meet up with her sister.

Walking to Vicky’s car only took a few minutes, and it was easy to spot since she and Dean were leaning against it making out. I looked at Amy and asked, “Is this normal for them, the making out in public I mean?”

Amy just sighed and nodded, “Pretty much, unless of course they’ve broken up, yet again. I swear they do the whole breakup/makeup thing at least once a month, sometimes more. I wish they’d stop though, the tears and angst gets tiring after a while.”

I pulled her close and hugged her, then said, “Sorry, but I’m the last person you should be asking to explain how and why relationships work. I’ve never had one, and before now, the only person that I had felt close to ended up betraying and trying to kill me.”

She turned and pulled me into a full embrace, “Well you’ll never have to worry about that again, I’ll make sure of that.”
I returned her embrace and said, “Thank you, Amy. That means…everything to me.” After a few minutes of reveling in the wonderful feel of being held by her, I let Amy go and said, “You’re going to have to go now, Dean is heading away and your sister is waiting for you. I’ll email you later, alright? And see you tomorrow, after school.”

She stepped back and took a deep breath before saying, “Alright then, I’ll talk to you later.” Turning away, she walked over to her sister and said, “Well, now that Dean’s gone, are you ready to head home?”

I ignored Vicky’s response as I walked over to the bus stop I needed to catch my bus home. Taking a seat to wait, I pulled out the starter book that Amy had recommended and started to read.

A few minutes later, I was interrupted by a girl with a grating high-pitched voice, “So, just how do you know Panacea?” Looking up, I saw an older girl, maybe 17, dressed in the latest, most expensive fashions and heavily, but expertly made-up. Clustered around her were 3 more girls, similarly dressed, but obviously her minions. Oh hell, shades of Winslow, it’s Emma II!

After looking at each of them for a moment, I just sighed and went back to reading my book; ignoring rude interruptions is something I had a lot of practice at, though I doubted this girl would let it go; for whatever reason, she had decided to prove her dominance to her minions by demanding answers from me.

“I asked you a question!?” the girl demanded angrily.

“And yet, you didn’t notice when I ignored your very rude and personal question, did you?” I replied without taking my attention from my reading. Surprisingly, she wasn’t the one who responded, minion #1, the one on my left, reached out to knock the book out of my hands. I almost froze as the memories of Winslow came back even stronger, but I refused to give in and simply reached out with my left hand and grabbed her hand and twisted it just hard enough to force her to drop to her knees.

“Oooow…let me go you bitch!” she screamed.

I didn’t even look up when I said, “You don’t know me, I don’t know you, and I don’t want to know you; and yet you tried to attack me. Please go away now.” With that I released the girl’s hand and continued reading, while using some of the nearby birds to keep an eye on the girls, hoping that they would leave, but truly expecting them to escalate.
Before they could decide what to do, my bus pulled up. Gathering my things I stood up, but paused before I boarded the bus to say, “Knowing bullies like you, you will probably want to escalate. If you continue to target me, I will hurt you,” pausing for emphasis I added, “if you target Amy… they will never find your bodies.” Letting them think about that, I boarded the bus and watched them through my creatures as the bus circled Arcadia and headed back towards the docks.

I tried to listen to them, but I only caught a few words, but I think their leader’s name was Sally, or something like that anyways. I pulled out of range before I could hear anything else, but clearly I was going to have to warn Amy about those girls or she might get blindsided.

Checking my backpack, I found that I did bring my burner cell phone with me, so I called Amy’s phone. After only 2 rings Amy answered.

“Hello?” she asked with puzzled tone of voice.

“Hi Amy, it’s Taylor,” I said, knowing she didn’t have this number.

“Taylor? What’s up, you don’t normally call?”

“Umm, I know, but I thought that I needed to give you a heads up over something that just happened,” I said. “While I was waiting for the bus, some girls came up and confronted me about knowing you. One of them actually tried to knock the book I was reading out of my hands when I ignored them. I think the head girl was named Sally or something like that. She was about 17, tallish, light blonde hair, expensive clothes. I didn’t hear any other names. I, uh, I kind of threatened them, so I wanted to let you know.”

“Sally? I don’t know anyone… wait, could it have been Salamais?”

“Salamais? Maybe, I wasn’t real close,” I explained.

“Okay, wait, threatened? Taylor what did you do?” she demanded.

“I’m sorry but I, uh, I told them that if they targeted me that I would hurt them, but if they went after you, and Amy, you know that’s what bitches like that do, I, well I told them that no one
would ever find their bodies,” I said, almost cringing at the thought of how she was going to respond.

“Oh Taylor, whatever am I going to do with you? You can’t just do that, you know that,” she said quietly.

“I know, but it was just like being back at Winslow, and I’m not going through that again, not ever,” I explained to her.

“No you aren’t,” she paused and then continued, “you know what, you’re right, bullies always escalate, so I expect I’ll see her in a couple of days. I know how to stop her in her tracks, at least in school. And if she is stupid enough to start anything outside school…then I guess it’s just evolution in action.”

“Evolution in action? I like that, it’s very appropriate isn’t it?”

“Yep, anyways, I’m going to let you go for now, I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?” she asked.

“Sure, right after school, you take care of yourself, alright?”

“I will, bye now.”

“Bye Amy.”

I hung up my cell phone and started to pull out my book, but decided to just chill for the rest of the bus ride, I could read some more when I get home.

------------------------------------Legion*** Amy ***Legion----------------------------------------
I disconnected and slipped my phone back into my purse, before sighing and slouching back in my seat and covering my eyes with my arm.

Vicky glanced over at me and then asked, “So, what was that all about, it sounded kinda serious?”

I rolled my head across the headrest and looked at Vicky, once again appreciating the feel of nothing from her aura. Sighing I answered her, “Hopefully not too serious. Question for you; is Salamais Dane in any of your classes? I’m pretty sure she’s in your grade.”

“Sally, yeah why?” she replied, obviously puzzled by my question.

I straightened up in my seat and asked, “So how would you describe her, as a person I mean, not her appearance?”

Vicky snickered and asked, “Why, crushing on the older girl? Taylor not enough, are you looking to build yourself a harem?”

I paled at her, hopefully, bad joke, “God Vicky, don’t even joke about that; I’m serious, what kind of person is she?”

Vicky took another glance and could see how serious I was, so she said, “Okay, I never said this but she’s a bitch. She’s really good at being seen as sugar-sweet, but she and her little clique are pretty nasty, always within the rules and stuff, but still… Why, what did she do to you?”

“Nothing to me, at least not yet, but…how likely is she to get physical? I mean, outside school if she thinks she could get away with it?”

Vicky didn’t answer right away, chewing her lip in thought. Finally she said, “Maybe, if the odds were in her favor and she thought no one would find out, yeah she might try something. Not on you, she’s not that stupid, she has to know that even if you didn’t knock her out or something, that I’d break her in two.”

I snorted at that, half amused and half disgusted at the image of someone being broken in two, “I’m not worried that she’ll try anything physical with me, if she tries anything, she’s more likely to try something against me socially or emotionally. I’m more concerned that she might try something against Taylor than me; and that won’t end well. For Salamais I mean.” I sighed again and went
“She and her little clique tried to confront Taylor about being friends with me; Taylor basically told them that they were bullies and if they attempted to attack her, she’d break them. And if they attacked me, no one would ever find their bodies.”

Vicky’s head snapped over to look at me, making the car swerve dangerously, until I screamed, “Shit Vicky, watch where you’re going!”

She looked forward and straightened out the car, then said, “Sorry about that, but shit, did she really say that?”

“Yes, but god Vicky, watch where you’re driving, you’re going to give me a heart attack,” I said shakily.

“Pffffft…You can’t get a heart attack, you’re Panacea, remember?”

“Not the point, Vicky. I’m not invulnerable nor can I heal myself, remember that?” I asked rather pointedly.

Vicky nodded and said, “Yeah, sorry again; but what makes you think that Taylor would, or even could, do something like that? She’s not a cape is she?”

I gasped and sat up straight again at her question, “Victoria Marie Dallon, you did not just ask me that! Even if she was a cape, you know I couldn’t tell you something like that; that’s completely against the rules. Shame on you!”

Vicky actually cringed at that, since I was really channeling mom at that point, and she kind of whimpered, “Sorry, it just slipped out, I didn’t mean it.”

I huffed, “Well, I should hope not, that was completely out of line.” I sat back and after a minute to calm down, went on, “As for the other, yeah, I think she could if she got pushed hard enough; bullies are one of her hot-buttons.”

Vicky thought about it for a few minutes as she kept driving towards home, then said, “I can’t see Sally trying anything with you; anyway you look at it, it would only end badly for her.”
“Ha! I’ll bet you five dollars that she confronts me before Tuesday, her or her little minions.”

“Oh, you are so on! That’ll be the easiest five dollars I’ve ever earned!” Vicky said with a smirk.

I just smirked back and said, “And you can’t do anything to warn her off; completely normal behavior on your part.”

Vicky faux gasped and said, “I would never do something like that.”

I snickered at her and said, “Yeah right, is it a deal, then?”

She held her right hand out to shake and said, “Deal.”

I shook her hand and said, “Deal,” as well.

The rest of the ride was quiet, and even after getting home we didn’t do much except our homework until dinner time. Since mom was working late again, I think it had something to do with the Stranger paparazzi, Dad tried to make conversation during dinner. He actually did pretty well, Vicky making sure he took his meds every day, and the little changes I had made to smooth out his brain chemistry was making a huge difference in how much he was able to be in the same world as us, and actually interact with us normally. Though we both talked freely about school, neither of us mentioned what we had discussed in the car on the way home; that was a topic that wouldn’t end well, no matter what.

I did send Taylor an email before bed, letting her know that Vicky had confirmed that Salamais was a bitch, but very unlikely to try anything with me, since the consequences for that would extremely adverse, and that I was looking forward to seeing her tomorrow. After that I went to bed around 11:00 pm, after doing my exercises, setting my monitor alarm for 3:30 am.

When I awoke, just before my alarm went off, I did my exercises then pulled out one of my books on neurology, and read in bed until 6:30 when I finally got up and did my second set of exercises and took my shower. Before I went down for breakfast I sent Taylor a quick email asking if she had a good book on speed reading, and if so could she lend it to me?

Breakfast was quiet, as it usually was, though when I gave dad a good morning kiss, I was pleased to see that his brain chemistry was much better than it had been only 3 weeks earlier. The only
thing different was that Vicky asked me if I minded if Dean drove us in this morning.

“Hey Ames, do you mind if Dean drives us in this morning, because I want to go out with him to do some shopping and hanging out; you’re more than welcome to come with us if you want?” she asked as she was clearing her spot.

I

hardly had to think about that one, “No, I don’t mind if he drives us in, I’ll either walk to the hospital or catch a bus, so don’t worry about getting me home.” This would work out just fine, an extra 3 hours with Taylor would be nice, and Vicky would owe me for being so cooperative, heh.

The ride to school was no problem; I ignored Vicky and Dean in the front seat and just went over some of my homework, double-checking my work to ensure that I hadn’t forgotten anything. Once we arrived at school, I thanked Dean for the ride and went straight to my homeroom. My morning classes went well, and I collected the work assignments for the following 2 weeks, though most of it was already done.

When I went to lunch, I purposely chose a seat that was at my normal table, although I sat with my back to the wall, so that I could see who was approaching me. As I had more than half way expected, I was approached by Salamais Dane and one of her minions, each carrying their lunch trays.

“Hi Amy, is okay if we sit here today?” Salamais asked me in a perky voice.

I glanced up from my lunch of ‘meatloaf’ and … stuff, and said “Sure, it’s a free country, and,” looking around at the mostly empty table, I said, “it’s a mostly free table too.”

Sitting down, the two of them arranged their lunch to their satisfaction, and Salamais opened up with, “So just who was that girl I saw you with yesterday, I don’t think I’ve ever seen her here at Arcadia?”

I swallowed the food I was chewing, and replied, “A friend.” I planned to keep my responses nice and short, but at least minimally pleasant. Her face darkened, then she quickly got control of herself and said, “Just a friend, it certainly looked like something a lot closer than ‘just a friend’ to me.”

I slowly swept my gaze across the two of them, and then said, “And your point is, what exactly?”
Salamais had a flash of anger cross her face at my dismissive response, but she said sweetly, “Well, if you ask me, it looked a lot more like you two are ‘girlfriends’ which could cause you some problems here at school.”

I just smiled and said, “Homophobia? In this day and age? Shocking, absolutely shocking. Well, I guess I was right and Vicky owes me five dollars.”

Drawing herself with hauteur, she asked, “Just what do you mean by that, that Vicky owes you five dollars?”

I snickered and said, “Vicky said that you wouldn’t be stupid enough to confront me about my friends, and I bet her that you would be; guess who won our little bet?”

She gasped at that, clearly unused to someone calling her out, “Excuse me! Just who do you think you are?”

“Me? I’m just a girl trying to eat her lunch in peace and quiet. And the one who just won five dollars, because of someone else’s arrogance and stupidity,” I replied. I watched the two of them try to recover from that and just before Salamais spoke again, I said, “She told you right up front, no room for misinterpretations, what would happen if you did something stupid…and yet here you are.”

“That girl from yesterday? Who is she, what’s her name anyways?” she demanded, as if she was in any position to demand anything from me.

My face froze when she asked that, “You don’t get to demand anything from me, and you don’t want to know her. You really, really want to walk away and never, ever do anything to cross her, or me for that matter. You are completely outclassed and so far over your head, that you’re drowning and don’t even know it.”

Sally’s minion was looking around the cafeteria, trying to figure out if anyone was watching or headed our way, when she spotted Vicky, a couple tables over, sitting with Dean, but watching the little confrontation happening around me. As she saw Vicky, she paled and grabbed Salamais’ shoulder and said, “Sally, Glory Girl is watching us! Be careful.”

Salamais looked over at Vicky and paled a bit as well, then turned back and said, “Well, I don’t need to sit here and be insulted and threatened…”
“Heh, I haven’t even started on insults, and if I ever threaten you, you won’t have any doubts about it; don’t worry about what Vicky might do to you, worry about my friend and I, ‘cause Sally, she hates bullies, and I’m none too fond of them myself. Take my advice, stop trying to be the alpha-bitch of Arcadia, it won’t end well…for you,” I told her.

With that, I picked up my empty lunch tray, because I had kept eating during her little visit, scraped the excess trash off the tray and put it on the dirty dish conveyer belt, and left the cafeteria for the library to see if they had any good books on jewelry design and speed reading.
Chapter 14

When I woke up early Friday morning, it only took a single glance out the window for me to change my plans; it was pouring rain and it looked like it was only a little above freezing. It puzzled me at first that I was sure that the temperature was so low, and when I checked the thermometer outside the kitchen window I was right; the temperature was down to 35 degrees. A few moments of thought made me realize that it was my infra-red vision that had given me that information, which caused me to add a note to my long-term projects list about training myself to be very accurate in determining the temperature of what I saw.

Since I wouldn’t be running today, I decided to get ahead in my studies for Linux Admin and OOP. I opened the basement and called my cat up to help me do some reading, filling her water and food bowls at the same time. I set up my Linux Admin Study Guide on the book holder and directed her to eat and drink her fill before coming to read the book. This was part of my project to create long-term programming for some of my more intelligent creatures, so far I had only limited success, but I was hopeful.

While my cat read the Linux book, I opened up my linkages and began working on my OOP coursework. One nice thing that I noticed recently was that even as I wrote my programs, I was simultaneously debugging them, which greatly sped up the whole process. By 6:30 I had finished two separate projects, including testing and saved them for later review and submission.

Wrapping up my work for the moment, I sent my cat back to the basement to get some rest while I started on breakfast. Once I had things in hand there, I did my second set of exercises, though I wouldn’t lift any weights until after dad had left for work. Because of the weather, I made a point of making sure that dad’s lunch would be nice and hot. I pulled out one of the frozen lasagna pieces to thaw a bit, sliced up some of the bread, and buttered 2 slices and wrapped them, I also included a small salad, with the dressing in a small container to be added when he had lunch.

By the time he came downstairs after his shower, I had a nice ham and cheese omelet almost ready to eat, with his tea and toast on the table. When he saw what I had made for breakfast, he asked, “Wow, what’s the occasion? I know it’s not my birthday yet.”

I laughed and pointed out the window, “Have you seen the weather yet? It’s cold and wet, so I thought you might appreciate a hot meal to start your day. I know I will.”

I finished packing up his lunch then sat down to eat my breakfast. Almost as soon as I sat down I heard the morning paper being delivered, but before I could move to get it, dad said, “I got it, you finish your breakfast,” as he got up and fetched the paper from the front door. Sitting back down at the table, he separated the paper into its sections and handed me the local news section, while he started on the front page.

After dad left for work, taking his lunch with him, including written directions on how to reheat it
without burning it, I worked through my morning chores and then headed for the basement. I only needed about 20 minutes to remove the fabric that had been woven onto the reel and fold it onto the cardboard frames that fabric stores used for fabric and put it on one of the shelves I had built and then change out the latest thread spool for an empty one.

Pulling out my big plastic tubs, I filled them with water and the chemicals that all of my experiments had shown to be most effective for toughening and waterproofing my silk and carefully unwound one of my bolts for toughening and a second one that had already gone through that and was ready for waterproofing. I set out a third tub filled with just cold water that I would use to rinse the silk and made sure that the dryer was empty.

While the silk was setting, I started on my Tai Chi. Although I normally did this at a very slow speed, today I was trying something a little different. Each time I finished a set, I would start over, but at a faster speed; my goal was to maintain the precision and rhythm of the movements and double the speed with each iteration. Unfortunately, I eventually was moving too fast and began sliding across the floor, instead of maintaining my position. The good news was that I had been able to perform perfectly up to the point where I estimated that I was moving at about 64 times the normal speed of my routine, which is when I started to slide.

At about this point my timer went off, and I had to start the rinsing of the toughened silk. This was a bit time consuming as I had to carefully feed it from the chemical treatment tub into the rinse tub, I then emptied the chemical tub, rinsed it out thoroughly and then refilled it with cold water so I could again feed the silk fabric into the clean cold water. I should probably have used purified or distilled water, but I was going to have to be satisfied with having a simple filter on the water lines. Even buying those had made me wince, $45 for each water line was not something I enjoyed paying for. My pepper spray, baton and cell phone all together cost less.

I ended up rinsing the silk 6 times, before I was able to carefully take it from the last rinse tub and run it through the dryer, set on AIR, so that no heat would be added. Once I had that running, I checked the waterproofing tub and confirmed that I had another hour at least before I could take it out to dry.

In the mean time I worked through my Kenpo katas, doing the same thing I had done with Tai Chi, trying to double the speed with each iteration. Because of the greater amount of movement involved in performing the kata, I was only able to speed up to 8 times normal before I began losing traction and sliding. Since I couldn’t speed the entire kata up, I focused on increasing my hand speed, while maintaining precision. I set up the striking target so that I could practice stopping my strike just before it hit, even as I moved around, so that I would not get into a rut of expecting a certain distance, but would have to adjust each strike individually. Though tiring, it was a very productive exercise, as I reached almost 30 times normal speed, and could hear a faint ‘crack’ when I stopped my strike.

Before my second timer went off, I pulled out and set up the drying frame I had made, which was little more than a light hexagonal framework of dowels and cords that I hung from the ceiling so that I could carefully wrap the wet fabric on to it so that it could air dry and would allow for any shrinkage that might occur.

I only had the wet fabric hanging up and an old oscillating fan gently blowing air across it when the dryer went off. Clearly there was no rest for the wicked. When I checked the fabric, it was still a bit damp, so I carefully transferred it into one of the dry tubs and then re-fed it into the dryer, so that it would lay differently and ensure even drying. Before I left the basement, I rotated the drying frame about 120 degrees to ensure that the silk dried evenly.
Heading upstairs, I made myself lunch using some of the leftover lasagna and bread. Once I finished, I checked on dinner to make sure it was coming along and then started working on my high school courses and GED preps.

Stopping about every 30 minutes, I would go downstairs to rotate the drying frame and check on the dryer. Around 2 o’clock I carefully removed the silk from the dryer, re-winding it on the bolt frame and restoring it to the coal cellar. Although the waterproofed silk wasn’t fully dry, I still removed it from the drying frame and fed it into the dryer, and restarted it on AIR. I knew it wouldn’t be done before I left, but I had no fear that dad would come down into the basement; the smell alone would tell him that I had been doing my chemistry labs and he NEVER came downstairs until it had completely aired out, which usually took a full day.

Because the weather was still wet and cold, I changed into a warmer outfit, a pair of black slacks and pale yellow sweater, with a long raincoat on top and umbrella to cover my head and backpack. I packed some snacks, drinks, and some of my hair tools, in addition to the speed reading book that I had used; it had originally been my mother’s and she had sworn that it was the only thing that let her read some of her Freshman English papers, since it meant that she only had to suffer for a few minutes instead of ‘an eternity’; her words, not mine.

Locking up the house, I walked to the bus stop using the umbrella to block the worst of the rain and wind. When I boarded the bus, I found that it was a lot more crowded than usual, probably due to the weather, and I had to stand in the aisle for a while until enough people got off to open up a seat. Because of the crowding I didn’t bother to pull out my book, but just watched out the window and practiced increasing my range. Although it was slow, I was making progress and was increasing my range by 5 to 10 feet each week, which was increasing the numbers of creatures I could link to all the time.

Finally the bus stopped at Arcadia, about 10 minutes before school would let out, so I exited the bus and headed over to the picnic area where I usually waited for Amy. The shape of the building blocked most of the wind, and my umbrella took care of the rain, so I was reasonably comfortable as I waited. I had wiped off the excess water from the bench with my hand, and my raincoat protected me from the rest.

Right at 3:00 the bell rang and I could hear the students begin their stampede towards the exits. While I waited I saw Vicky and Dean leaving through the main doors and head for the student parking lot and a few minutes later Amy came out the side doors into the picnic area. It was easy to spot her since she didn’t have an umbrella, unlike most of the other students. I could only assume that she and Vicky had shared one this morning as I had seen Vicky using one to cover both her and Dean as they left.

Getting up, I met her half-way and covered her with my umbrella as she gave me a welcoming hug.

“Hi Taylor,” looking up, she said, “nice umbrella,” even as we started to walk away from the school, huddling close to stay covered.

“Yes it is, isn’t it,” I teased back. “It stops both wind and rain quite nicely.”

She giggled again, but asked me, “So, do you have any plans for today? My first idea of just walking to the hospital won’t work.”

I laughed back at her and said, “Maybe. I was thinking of going to the Central Library to hang out. At the very least, it’s dry.”

Amy wrapped her arm around me and tugged me towards the bus stop, “Sounds good to me, and
maybe if we’re lucky, we can sign up for one of the music rooms. They’re very nice and comfortable, and you can listen to albums, CD’s, tapes or even hookup an MP3 player to listen to your own music,” she wiggled her eyebrows at me, “and they’re priiivaaattte.” Dragging out the last word to absurd lengths.

She caught me by surprise with that bit of nonsense and I snorted out a laugh. “You’re bad, you really are,” I said between laughs.

“Yep, that’s me. Little Miss ‘Evil, Wicked, Mean and Nasty;” she said with a big smile.

I shook my head and said, “No, you’re Little Miss Giggle Monster, remember?”

At the reminder of my dad’s nickname for her, she pouted cutely at me, and said, “I am not a Giggle Monster, I’m Evil, Wick AACK!” She squeaked as I interrupted her with a quick tickle, that she felt even through her coat.

“Wickaack? What’s that, I don’t think I’ve ever heard of that before?” I asked her, faux seriously.

“Meanie,” was all she said as she pulled herself closer to my side.

“Yes. So, Central Library and then something to eat? Are you working at the hospital tonight?” I asked.

“Uh huh, I may end up working a few extra hours to make up for Wednesday. I suppose it will depend on just how many patients need my help,” she explained.

I nodded and said, “Makes sense. Just be sure to call for a ride from your family if you do stay late. No more unescorted late-night bus rides for you, Missy.”

“Yes, mother,” was her sarcastic reply.

“Ha! I am many things Amy, but I’ll never be your mother, that much I can promise you,” I said. Struck by another thought, I went on, “Speaking of which, how has she been lately? You had mentioned that she seemed kind of mellow lately, the last time you talked about her, but…?”

I could feel it as Amy stopped laughing and got serious, “It’s kind of weird actually, she’s been nice to me lately, it’s like she’ll start to say something mean or cutting, and then change her mind and say something nice or reasonable. I don’t know why, but she seems to be really trying to be fair and reasonable in the way she treats me. Not at all like she used to be, but honestly, I much prefer it this way, so I’m not going to make any waves.”

I thought about that for a few minutes, then said, “Okay, that’s definitely a change from how you described her old behavior; has her behavior changed in any other ways?”

Amy started to speak, but our bus pulled up, so we got out our bus passes and boarded and took our seats together. Because of the crowding, she shook her head and said, “Later, okay?”

I nodded and placed my backpack and umbrella on the floor between my legs, while she did the same with her book bag. Relaxing as much as I could in the hard plastic seat, I held my hand out for her to take, which she did. Just that little bit of contact greatly increased my peace and relaxation, and I could see that it did the same for her.

Even with the bad weather and extra riders, getting to the library only took about 20 minutes, which we spent just sitting together. Getting our things together and exiting the bus was the most exciting thing that happened during the ride and we entered the library, shushing each other to try
and keep our giggles down.

Once inside, we took a couple of minutes to shake the rain off of our coats, fold up the umbrella and hang our coats over our arms. Amy signed up for one of the music rooms, and we lucked out to get an empty one up on the mezzanine immediately, for the next two hours. Stopping only to quickly use the restroom, we unlocked the music room and hung up our coats before checking out the musical options.

Amy looked at the equipment, then said, “I know just what to get, I’ll be right back,” then darted back out into the library proper, coming back a few minutes later with 4 or 5 CD’s in her hands.

“Here, I picked out some music that I like, and hope that you will too,” she explained as she selected one and put it into the CD player and started it. “It’s by the Cruxshadows, and is called Ethernaut.”

She came back and joined me on the small sofa, one of the several comfortable places to sit in the room. Sitting on the sofa, cuddled up to Amy and listening to music I had never heard before, indeed I don’t think I’ve ever heard anything like this before, was wonderfully relaxing.

While we listened to the music, I gave her the speed-reading book and pulled out my brush, comb, water bottle and light brown elastics. Setting them on the floor next to the sofa, I asked Amy, “Would you like me to fix your hair again? Like I did on Wednesday?”

Amy smiled at me and replied, “Oh yes, if you don’t mind, I’d love it.” As she spoke, she turned around and slid back towards me; fortunately I was quick enough to turn and slip my leg out of the way so she could lean back against me.

Having more time and the right tools, I carefully re-did her hair into the double French braids that wrapped around her central pony tail. Truthfully, I took a lot longer than was strictly necessary, but I was enjoying playing with her hair, so I took my time.

I couldn’t honestly say that I liked every song on the first album, but they were different, interesting and well worth hearing. The second album was Fallen, by Evanescence, and I had actually heard some of these songs before, and liked them quite a bit. The third was kind of weird, but also hysterically funny in places, it had this one song called Vampire Club, that I made her play three times. It really was that funny.

By the time that CD was finished, our time was almost up, so we cleaned up and returned the CD’s before turning the key back into the main desk. After thanking the librarian, one of the few here I didn’t know by name, we got ready to leave. Fortunately the rain had stopped, though the wind was still blowing, so we decided to walk to the hospital, and planned to pick up something to eat on the way.

As we stepped out into the cold wind, Amy said, “Brrrr! I’m glad I installed that climate control mod, I suspect it would be almost painful to walk for any distance in this wind. But getting back to my mom; other than how she treats me, I really haven’t seen or noticed any changes. She still works long hours, plus regular patrols, she still seems really happy when Vicky comes home or tells her stuff. Which now that I think about it, is probably confirmation that Vicky’s aura has been affecting everyone in the family, not just me.”

I sighed in agreement, “Probably, but I don’t know what you can do about it. You can’t offer to install the Anti-Master mod because of the brains rule, even if it was fully complete, which it isn’t. So, unless Vicky learns to completely control her aura, I’m at a loss.”
She nodded and said, “I’d be afraid to even try to modify Vicky’s powers for her, even if she asked me to. Powers are weird; I can see when they are active, but not how they do what they do. Not yet at least. And until I understand how they work, I don’t think it would be a good idea to play around with them.”

I whistled and said, “Yeah, I think you’re right, I can imagine a bunch of ways that could go badly. That’s a Pandora’s Box that we don’t want to touch, much less open.”

Amy shrugged but said nothing more as we walked towards the hospital. After a couple of blocks, she spotted a familiar yellow and red sign and asked, “Hey, want to have dinner at Denny’s?”

I glanced at the sign, thought about what I could remember of their menu, and said, “Sure, as I recall, their burgers were pretty good. Not sure about the rest of their food, I haven’t eaten there since…yeah, it’s been a while.” Though I didn’t say it, the last time I had eaten at Denny’s was shortly before mom had died. We had gone to visit Grandma, and gotten a late start home so we stopped at Denny’s for dinner. Even though thinking about losing mom still hurt, it had been a good trip and good memories.

Amy looked over at me and asked, “Taylor, are you ok? You got real quiet all of a sudden.”

I shook myself and answered her, “Yeah, I’m ok. I was just remembering my last visit to Denny’s; it was shortly before we lost my mom. But the memories were of a good time, so … mixed feelings, you know?”

Amy sighed at my explanation and said, “Oh, believe me, if anyone knows about mixed feelings, it’s me.”

I laughed at that, “But it’s better now, right? Since we blocked her aura, I mean?”

“Oh, it’s definitely better now. Even though I still have occasional flashbacks, that just proves that her power has had me addicted ever since puberty. And I can deal with that just fine.”

“Oh man, I know you told me how long she’s been affecting you, but it only just clicked. If her power has been affecting you since puberty, do you think that’s why you’re attracted to girls? And will it change now that we’ve blocked her aura?” Even as I asked her this, I wasn’t sure what answer I wanted; was Vicky’s aura the reason or was it natural?

Amy just shrugged, “Statistically, it’s Vicky’s fault, but then I’ve always said that everything is her fault. Genetically or biologically, well, I’m not sure. Once I triggered, my DNA pretty much cleaned up and stabilized, no further changes allowed so there is no way to tell if I was predisposed to lesbianism. Personally, I suspect I was, which is why her aura hit me so hard; my mind and biology had no reason to fight it so I fixated on her as my ideal. Now that I’m shielded from her aura, I don’t have that fixation so I’m much happier and more relaxed. Although I seriously doubt I will ever find boys attractive, if only because of Vicky’s double-dates from hell.”

That made me laugh, because some of her stories about those dates had been hilarious, at least they were when I wasn’t the one having to go on those dates.

Entering Denny’s we were immediately shown to a booth near a window even though it was a Friday evening; I guess we were early enough to beat the dinner rush. Opening the menu I had been handed, I looked through it for a minute and then asked, “So, any idea what you’re going to have yet?”

Amy looked over the top of her menu and said, “Yes, I think I’ll have the Prime Rib Philly Cheese
melt platter with a large milk; you?"

“The Double-Cheeseburger platter, large milk and I think we should get at least one appetizer, the chicken and sausage quesadilla’s look good. You pick one too, alright.”

“Smothered cheese fries for me,” she said, without even checking the menu again.

When the waitress came by, we asked for ice water to start and gave her our orders. After she left we chatted about the music we had listened to at the library.

“So what do you know about the Cruxshadows?” I asked her, “Like where they’re from, stuff like that?”

Amy took a sip of water and replied, “Well, I know that they’re out of Florida and are an Alternative/Darkwave band, whatever that actually means. They’ve been around since the late ‘90’s and tour all over the world, especially in Europe. Clockblocker, of all people was the one who introduced me to them, and he apparently found out about them from Assault. Of course.”

I nodded and said, “Well, for a band I’ve never heard of before, I have to say I liked them, some of their songs were really good. Evanescence I’ve heard before on the radio, and Fallen is an excellent CD, but really, Voltaire is weird, true Vampire Club had me in stitches, but a lot of the songs don’t really make sense to me.”

Amy giggled and said, “Oh, you really need to hear some of his other stuff, if you thought Vampire Club was funny, wait until you listen to Worf’s Revenge or The Sexy Data Tango, you’ll be on the floor laughing.”

I looked at her in stunned disbelief, “The Sexy Data Tango? Like the Star Trek android Data? Really?”

She nodded her head and said, “Yep, the Star Trek Commander Data. The fully functional and anatomically correct …” at this point she broke down into her giggles again, and didn’t stop until our waitress brought our appetizers.

I thanked the waitress for our food, and pointed at Amy saying, “If you keep this up, I’m going to take a page from dad’s book and I really will start calling you Little Miss Giggle Monster too.” Alas, all that did was make her giggle even more.

I just shrugged and stole some of her fries to go with my quesadilla’s and watched her get herself under control until she could start on her food. I held out my hand and said, “You may want to boost your metabolism for dinner,” she looked over at me and smiled as she took my hand for a few seconds.

“Thank you Taylor, I should probably set that up with a trigger, like you have,” she said.

By the time our meals came, we had finished off both appetizers, and we’re ready to enjoy our food.

As I started on my double-cheeseburger, first cutting it in half, then into quarters to make it easier to eat, I thought about this weekend and asked, “Amy, if tomorrow’s weather is good, would you like to meet me at the Lord’s Street Free Market? I want to check out table costs, as well as the prices they are charging for jewelry and clothes. I’m not sure, but that might be an option for selling some of my work, so that I can raise the money I need for my tests.”

Amy raised an eyebrow and asked, “Are the tests you need that expensive?”
I waggled my free hand back and forth, “Not for any one test, but I need to take a bunch of them, and it all adds up. Plus, to prepare for some of them I need to buy some equipment and software, and it comes out to a pretty big total.”

“Huh. I didn’t know that. But, as for tomorrow, sure, I’d love to go to the Free Market with you. What time and where do you want to meet?”

I thought about it for a minute, and then said, “How about at the North end of the Market, at 10:00 am, which is when it’s supposed to open? Well, unless it’s raining like today, in which case we should probably just reschedule it to next week.”

Amy said, “When I checked the forecast this morning, it said that both Saturday and Sunday were going to be clear and cool, highs in the mid- to upper- 60’s, so I expect that I’ll meet you tomorrow morning.”

After a quick check of the time, we finished our meals, split the bill, and headed for the hospital. Although it was still overcast, the rain was still holding off, and the walk to the hospital didn’t take long at all. Because of the troubles on Wednesday, I made sure to keep a close eye out for any observers or other dangers. Fortunately I saw nothing either on our way or around the hospital that seemed dangerous or out of place.

I walked Amy all the way to the main entrance, where we stopped to make our farewells. She turned and gave me a hug and as she stepped back, she touched my cheek and said, “I had a very nice time today, and I’m definitely looking forward to tomorrow,” before she turned and entered the hospital. Just before she went out of sight towards the elevator, she gave me a last wave farewell, which I returned.

Taking a deep breath, I turned and walked over to the bus stop and double-checked the time for the bus I needed to take me back home. Surprisingly enough, I wouldn’t even need a transfer to get all the way home, and taking a closer look at the posted schedule, I saw that you could get to most areas of the city from here without a transfer, even though the main hub was a couple of miles away at the downtown plaza. Clearly someone had been thinking when they set up the bus routes, and had realized that everyone would need to be able to get to the main hospital in the city.

My bus was scheduled to arrive in about 20 minutes, and would get me home a little bit after 7 pm. The trip home was a bit crowded, but I was able to get a window seat near the back and was left alone for the whole trip. When I got home, dad had already eaten, and put his dishes in the dishwasher, and was finishing up today’s paper in the living room.

Before anything else, I checked my email and sent Amy a quick note, letting her know that I was home safe, and I was looking forward to meeting her at the Free Market at 10:00 tomorrow morning. Logging out, I grabbed my AP Pysch text book and lay down on the sofa to re-read it in preparation for my AP exam.

Dad ended up going to bed early, around 9:30 while I stayed up until 10:30 studying before I went to bed, planning on getting up around 3:00 to go running.

When I woke however, I found that I needed to change my plans because Dad wasn't asleep, instead he was downstairs in the kitchen. Forgoing my running outfit, I put on a comfortable pair of sweats and a tee shirt and headed for the kitchen.

Slipping into the kitchen quietly, I watched dad as he sat slumped in his chair holding a cup of tea, before I headed to the stove to pour my own mug of tea.
“Good morning dad, I didn't expect to see you up this early, are you feeling okay?”

“Gaah!” He jumped in his seat, but didn't spill his tea, then went on “I-what are you doing up at this time of the night, Taylor? Did I wake you?”

“I think I asked you that first, didn't I? But to answer you, I'm always up around this time; I know I told you that I haven't needed as much sleep lately, and no you didn't wake me up, you were very quiet,” I answered him as I took my mug and sat down in my seat next to him.

“Oh, good I'm glad I didn't wake you up … wait you're always up at this time? I thought that was just the once?” he asked worriedly.

I looked at him with a kind of puzzled smile and asked, “And just when was the last time you got up before me? Or when was the last time you came downstairs and I wasn't either making breakfast or studying? Besides, you never said if you were okay, are you feeling sick?”

He shook his head and said, “No, I'm fine, I just woke up restless, like I had a bad dream or something but I couldn't remember it. I just figured I'd have a cup of tea and head back to bed. What do you do when you get up so early, anyways?”

I had another sip of my green tea and said, “Study or exercise mostly, sometimes I just do some light reading. Then I get started on breakfast and make some of my dinner preps, basically getting a head start on the day.”

He smiled and finished his tea, putting the cup in the sink, “So, what are your plans for today? Anything special?”

I shook my head and said, “Dad, you need to go back to bed and get some more sleep, I told you last night that I was meeting Amy at the Lord's Street Free Market this morning, weather permitting. I know your memory isn't failing with the way you were counting card's on Amy and I last week, so it must be the lack of sleep.”

“Hey! I resemble that remark; the whole point of that game is to cheat without getting caught, I told you that,” he said cheerfully.

“Yeah, sure you did, after you won all of our chips,” I said, frowning playfully at him.

“And your point is … what precisely?” he asked with a little smirk on his lips.

“That you're a cheating cheater who cheats, of course, but then you knew that because you cheat. Cheater.”

He laughed at that and headed up stairs, saying “Well, with that eloquent description, I'm going back to bed. Who knows, I may even wake up before you leave in the morning. And I may not, because I, unlike you, have no plans for today and can sleep in. Muahahaha,” he gave a cheesy laugh as he went down the hallway towards his bedroom.

I smiled and shook my head at his antics, very pleased that he seemed to be so much happier lately, and considered what I would do since I didn't feel that going for a run when he was still awake, or even if he fell asleep, would be a good idea. Finishing the last sip of my tea, I got up and rinsed the mug and set it aside to dry then went down into the basement to do some exercises, not even bothering to turn on the lights, the dim glow from the coral tanks being more than enough for me to see clearly.

Taking a moment to ensure that everything was put away neatly I started on my standard exercise
set, choosing to use the jump rope instead of running in place simply because it was harder to coordinate it properly so that the rope didn't get caught up in the overhead pipes or cross-beams. After doing this for so long plus the upgrades that Amy had given me, I couldn't honestly think of this as anything more than a warm-up exercise so I continued with one arm pushups, 100 for each arm, 100 pull ups, and then another set of 200 sit ups.

Finishing up with my extra exercises I paused in dissatisfaction, even having done over 400 sit ups wasn't really causing any strain so I was going to have to figure out a way to make it harder, maybe cradling one of the free weights would help. As I walked over to the weight bench to choose one of the weights, a thought occurred to me…

“I wonder…” Turning back I jumped up to my pull up bar and pulled my feet up and hooked them around the bar then let go with my hands, keeping my feet hooked. I slowly let myself down until I was hanging straight down then slowly pulled myself up, doing an inverted sit up. I did 10 more and could actually feel the strain as I did them; it wasn't intolerable, but it was there. Actually the hardest part was that the bar was cutting into the tops of my feet and was starting to hurt. Pulling my self up for the last time, I grabbed the bar with my hands, slipped my feet free and let myself back down to the floor.

Looking back and forth between my feet and the bar I finally decided to pad the bar and try it again tomorrow. For now I would do one of my free weight sets, with an emphasis on being slow and quiet.

Because of my need to be quiet, my routine took me an extra 10 minutes to complete, which really made no difference, but the need to move a little slower and to put the weights down quietly actually made the workout a bit harder than I had expected. I made a point of recording all of the exercises, including my variations in my log book and put it back on the end the weight rack where I normally kept it.

As I headed up stairs, I took a quick look around to ensure that I hadn't forgotten anything and then closed the basement door. Checking the time in the living room, I decided to take my shower now before I made breakfast, since it was almost 6 o'clock.

Grabbing my robe and some clean undies, I slipped into the bathroom and turned on the shower. While our old water heater tried to push the hot water all the way upstairs, I stripped and grabbed a couple of clean towels and my shampoo and conditioner from the linen closet. Checking the water temp one last time with my hand, I stepped in and started getting cleaned up. Not having to share the hot water with dad was nice, I could actually relax and take my time soaking up the heat.

Eventually the hot water started to fade so I finished my shower, stepped out and got dressed for the day. Because it was supposed to be a bit cool today, I chose a denim skirt and a long-sleeved blouse to wear, intending to throw a light cardigan on before I left for the Free Market, I might not really feel the temperature extremes, but pretending that I did was just playing it smart.

Heading down to the kitchen, I made myself a large ham and cheese omelet and some French toast to eat. Hopefully this would last me until lunch time, and that lunch wouldn't be too expensive, because I had almost nothing left in my savings account, and only a little bit of cash left. Which just made this visit to the Free Market even more important than ever, unless I decided to take Amy's advice and start taking 'spoils' from the criminals and villains.

After breakfast, I sat down on dad's recliner and started reading a novel I had picked up at one of the used bookstores, it was an Elizabethan era romance, which was something new for me, but it did look interesting. Relaxing with the book, I read until 9:00 am when I needed to finish getting ready to go.
Picking out a comfortable pair of shoes, I transferred the contents of my daily purse into a somewhat larger denim shoulder bag I had made, put on the light cardigan sweater and headed for the bus stop.

Being so early on a Saturday the bus was mostly empty and the ride went quickly, dropping me off at the north end of the Free Market just before 10:00. I found a nice bench to sit on while I waited for Amy and took my book out to keep reading. It had turned out to be pretty good, although I wasn't sure how realistic the setting was, either physically or politically. I might have to do some research just to see how close the author came in her descriptions of Queen Elizabeth's court and the Hanseatic League.

Just after 10, I spotted Amy being flown in by Vicky from the West. Putting away my book, I stood up just as they landed right in front of me. Vicky was dressed as Glory Girl, while Amy was wearing a pair of tight jeans and a leather jacket with a logo on the right breast that I didn't recognize.

As Amy stepped away from her sister she said, “Thanks for the lift Vicky, have fun with your patrol. I'll talk to you later.”

Vicky slowly rose into the air while looking back and forth between us, before she said, “You take good care of Ames today, alright Taylor. And Amy, I'll see you later. Call if you need a lift, okay?”

I replied, saying “You don't need to worry about that, Vicky,” even as Amy said, “If I need one, I'll give you a call.”

Amy waved goodbye to her sister as she walked over and gave me a welcoming hug. “Ready for some shopping and research?” she asked me.

“Yes. Though I do want to get some prices for coral jewelry and handmade clothing, I mostly just want to explore the whole place,” I explained.

Amy nodded and turned towards the Free Market and said, “Then let the games begin!” Taking my hand she said, “Forwaaard March!” as she led me into the Market.

We spent the next two hours slowly working our way through the Market, first on the East side of Lord's Street and then back up the West side. I found several different merchants selling coral jewelry, most of which actually wasn't, but for what seemed like reasonable prices to me. The hand-made clothing on the other hand, was quite pricy for the quality of workmanship. Both Amy and I agreed that I could do much better work and easily undercut their prices while still making a good profit. Especially since according to the brochure we got from the organizer's booth, a standard merchant's table was only $75 for the day, and hand-made and hand-crafted items were free of sales tax.

Just after 12:00 noon, we started looking over the food offerings, most of which came from small trucks or trailers set up as mobile kitchens. It was mostly fast food such as burger and fries, sodas and water, with the occasional more exotic offering such as gyros, burritos and even a truck set up as a pizzeria.

For simplicities sake we ended up choosing to get cheese burgers and fries with a coke to drink. Finding two open spots at one of the picnic tables that had been set up for people to use, we took our seats and started on our lunches.
Popping open my can of coke, I asked her, “So, clothing or jewelry? Which do you think would be better?”

Amy paused to swallow her fries and said, “Both actually. With Summer coming soon, I think skirts and blouses, mostly short-sleeve would be the best clothing choices. As for jewelry, I think that earrings and simple pendants would be best.”

I thought about it for a minute before nodding and then said, “Simple to make and from what I saw, at least for the jewelry, they should sell pretty well.”

When I put my burger down to eat some of my fries, I found that almost a third of them were already gone, while Amy's hadn't even been touched yet. Even as I noticed that, Amy reached over and grabbed a couple more of my fries. “Amy, why are you eating my fries? Is something wrong with yours?” I asked.

She nodded and then said, “Yep, yours taste better.”

I arched an eyebrow at her and reached over and picked up three of her fries and ate them. “These seem pretty good to me,” I said.

“Nope, yours are much better, so guess what?” she asked with a cheeky little grin.

I tried to stop it, but reluctantly grinned back at her, “I guess you're going to eat my fries, right?”

“Yeppers,” she replied.

I shrugged and said, “Oh well, I guess that means I'll just have to eat yours instead.” Suiting actions to words, I stole some more of her fries, dipped them in her little cup of ketchup and ate them.

Amy gasped melodramatically, “Ms. Hebert, surely you didn't steal my KETCHUP!?!”

“Why yes I did, Miss Dallon,” I replied as I finished eating the French fries I had snatched.

At that point Amy couldn't keep it in any longer and she started to giggle uncontrollably.

Snickering, I stole some more of her fries, and said fondly, “Little Miss Giggle Monster indeed.”

---------------------------Legion*** Madison Clements ***Legion---------------------------

I had just sat down to eat my piece of pepperoni pizza after doing some shopping at the Lord's Street Free Market when I noticed a couple of girls on the other side of the street ordering some burgers for lunch. The short one I didn't recognize, but the tall brunet could only be Taylor Hebert, even if she had cut her hair. I was actually shocked when I realized that she wasn't wearing her usual loose jeans and hoodie, but rather had on a nice denim skirt and sweater.

As she and the other girl took their seats at one of the picnic tables, I saw that Taylor actually looked to be fine, not all messed up like the rumors had claimed. Keeping my face turned down, I tried to listen to what they were saying, but mostly they talked too quietly for me to understand what they were saying.

*What the hell is going on, everyone said that Hebert was too injured to come back to school. But she certainly isn't injured now, in fact she looks like she's better now than ever before. No glasses, decent clothes, I'd swear she's even taller and she's not as skinny anymore, she actually has a figure.*
I need to talk to Emma about this, something is wrong here. Did she...

All of a sudden I could hear them as they were speaking louder than before.

The short girl said, “Ms. Hebert, surely you didn't steal my KETCHUP!”

“Oh yes I did, Miss Dallon,” Hebert shot back at her.

At that point the shorter girl, Miss Dallon? Panacea!? began to giggle uncontrollably.

Still in shock from my realization of who Hebert's friend was, I heard her say, “Little Miss Giggle Monster indeed,” with an affection that was unmistakable.

Panacea, that explains why she isn't all fucked up. She must have been called in to fix the damage we...no, the locker caused. I really need to talk to Emma, this changes everything. And are they just friends, or maybe more?

Finishing my pizza with a couple of quick bites, I grabbed my purchases, cleared my plate and soda can and casually walked away, hoping to find a private place to call Emma from.

---------------------------Legion*** Amy ***Legion---------------------------

After Taylor and I finished our lunch, we continued on through the Free Market, but really didn't find anything exceptional for sale. A few good bargains, yes, but nothing that we needed or wanted, especially since we already had the information we had come looking for.

Just before we reached the end of the Market we came up to the Cineplex, “Hey, let's check out the showtimes,” I suggested.

Taylor looked up at the marquee and said, “Sure, anything in particular that you wanted to see?”

“Yes, actually, if it's been released by now. It's an Earth-Aleph import called the Lord of the Dance. I’ve heard the soundtrack and would like to see the concert version if possible,” I explained enthusiastically.

“Well, let's find out,” she said as she pulled me by my hand towards the Cineplex box office.

Coming to a stop in front of the doors, I could see that it was in fact playing here, and that the next show was in only 5 minutes. Before I said anything, I checked out the other shows, but none of them really looked very appealing to me. Turning to Taylor, I asked her, “Well, Lord of the Dance starts in about 5 minutes, do you see anything else that appeals to you?”

She shook her head, “Not really. In fact, if you hadn't suggested the Lord of the Dance, I'd have probably suggested we find something else to do.”

This time I led the way, tugging on her hand as I walked up to the ticket counter, “Hi, two for the Lord of the Dance please,” I said to the attendant.

“Certainly, that'll be $13.50 with tax,” he replied as he accepted my debit card. Processing it, he passed it and both tickets back to me.

Turning I handed Taylor her ticket and asked, “Would you like to get a large soda, I doubt we need anything else since we just ate?”

She looked over at the concession stand, then asked me “Pepsi or Sprite?”
“Pepsi, I think,” I answered.

“Cool,” walking up to the attendant, Taylor said, “One extra large Pepsi please,” and handed the teen behind the counter a five dollar bill. A minute later she accepted her change and dropped it in her purse, than took the large cup of soda.

Stepping away from the counter, she turned and asked, “Shall we?”

I smiled at her and said, “We shall,” and walked with her towards the theater where our show was playing.

-----------------------------------Legion*** Taylor ***Legion-----------------------------------

As we took our seats in the back corner of the theater, I smiled as I once again appreciated the way Amy had upgraded our vision and hearing. Being able to control our senses so completely let us take seats that would normally be considered too far from the screen, and yet too close to the speakers to be comfortable.

Amy and I took a few minutes to check all of our upgrades, especially the newest ones, while the upcoming attractions were showing. Amy spent most of her time going over the records from the Master/Stranger monitors she had designed. My linkages now extended out to over 380 feet in all directions which provided more than enough echo to let us read the monitors together as well as tweak the shields to be both stronger and cover a wider range of psionic frequencies. At least we hoped that it would. Only time would tell for sure.

The movie, or concert-movie I guess, was excellent. I had never seen a performance like that before and the combination of music and dancing was beautiful.

“So, back home?” I asked as we headed towards the bus stop.

“Umm, yeah … I need to show you some of the basic jewelry techniques and maybe setup some seeds for the different tools. I only have a few of the basics, but I think I can work from the pictures in the books or maybe even the online catalogs. I did take some pictures on my phone of the jewelry displays so I have some ideas that we can work with,” she explained.

I nodded in agreement and asked, “So what do you want to start with? Pendants or earrings?”

“Earrings I think. I have the findings to make a bunch of stud earrings, which are really the easiest, as well as some dangles. I have the bails for pendants, but no chains or cords for them. But we can pick some chains up pretty easily and cheaply online, or you can even make them out of silk, which might even be a better choice. Sort of set your own style.”

“That would work. I have a lot of thread and cording, but it's probably not the right size since I was making the cord to tie people up with or to tie things down, rather than to make a necklace or pendant with. What would you recommend for color and diameter? I could even make more than one and just spool it up and cut it to length as needed.”

Amy paused in thought, than said, “Probably 2mm diameter black cord. I would want to make a couple of necklaces first to check sizing, because we might want to use 1 or 1.5 mm to string the necklace beads. I'll have to check the books for instructions because when I was in Girl Scouts we didn't make any big projects, just earrings, pendants and some bracelets. Simple stuff mostly.”

“What about the color of the coral? I noticed that most of it seemed to be either pink or bright-red, but really I think some of the other shades are much prettier,” I asked her.
“Well, other than the fact that most of the bright-red, or Fire Coral, was fake, it seemed to be the most common shade. Maybe that's what people expect from coral jewelry?” Amy asked, a bit puzzled. “I have to agree that some of the other shades are much prettier, so maybe they are harder to come by or maybe it's because we can see in a wider range of light than most people?”

“Maybe, I hadn't even thought of that. I'll have to take a look at some of the coral with my mod's off and see what difference it makes, especially after it's been polished. I have an old rock tumbler from when I was in second grade, that I've got a few pieces of coral tumbling in it, but I've started making a larger one, that I think should work even better with larger loads of coral,” I told her as we took our seats at the bus stop.

Amy looked at me with a puzzled expression, “Why? You know I can make them any shape or size as well as perfectly polished with literally a thought, right?”

“Oh sure,” I took a glance around to confirm that no one was close enough to over hear us, even though I was keeping watch with the creatures of my swarm, “but remember that one of our goals is deception; the more evidence that I'm the one doing all the work and bio-manipulation, the less suspicion will fall on you. And it's the little things that will trip us up if we're not careful. Having and using a rock tumbler to polish the coral beads, even if you actually do most of the work, will just make our cover better in the long run.”

“Right, kind of forgot about that,” Amy replied sheepishly. “I got all caught up in what we could do, that I forgot about our deception plans. Though I do think that they may be putting you at greater risk.”

“Not really,” I disagreed, “I have no intentions of letting the PRT or anyone else ever putting me through full-scale power testing, and without that they will only have circumstantial evidence and guesses concerning what I can do. And after everything the PRT did to me, I suspect they will be told to handle me with kid gloves.”

“As long as I can keep 'Legion' separate from 'Taylor' then we're golden. What they will see is me mostly staying at home, cooking, cleaning, being terribly domestic. Even if or when they figure out that I'm making clothes and jewelry to sell, their own rules and regulations will keep them at a distance. No obvious Cape activities means they can't touch me. Rogues are left alone, unless their powers are exceptionally valuable, and mine are intended to seem VERY low key.”

Amy sighed and asked, “And if they spot your creatures around your house and try and get a warrant?”

“Not sure, but I suspect that I'll spot any such attempts at surveillance before they really get set up and I've been reading up on Cape law and unreasonable search and seizure cases. It seems to me that not only does it clearly break the unwritten rules that you explained to me, and are posted on PHO and the PRT's own website, but getting actual probable cause would be hard. And the PR fall out for attempting it would be catastrophic. I mean, first they let a Ward torture me, then the Protectorate causes my Trigger Event, then because I, quite reasonably, want nothing to do with them but to just get on with my life, they come after me with specious legal tactics? You know I'm quite willing to out myself if they go that far, and I think I can make it clear to them that if they want to play hardball, I can play a hell of a lot harder.”

She smiled and scooted closer, “Yeah, I know and that scares me sometimes. You are one of the sweetest people that I know, but you are also one of the most hard-core bitches at the same time. You need to work on your balance between sweet heart and bitch, save the bitch for when you really need her. Makes for a better surprise that way,” Amy shrugged and said, “Not that I have any room to talk, I can be a pretty vindictive bitch myself, you know.”
I laughed at that, even though I knew it was the truth, “Yeah, but you're my vindictive bitch,” I stood up and pointed at the oncoming bus. “That's our bus coming now.”

The rest of the afternoon was spent with Amy showing me how to use the different tools and findings to make a half dozen pairs of earrings and 3 pendants. I had my Widows make up some lengths of silk cord, in 1mm, 1.5mm and 2mm diameters. I didn't bother with dyeing them yet since this was just to get a feel for the size I wanted to use.

Amy finished off the tools she had started earlier and crafted some seeds for different tools, based on the pictures in her jewelry book. She also shaped, bored, and polished a bunch of different size coral beads, in a wide variety of colors, that we could use to make both earrings and necklaces. I made a point of separating them into ziplock bags with the size and type of coral listed on an index card so that I could find them easily when I wanted to make a new piece of jewelry.

While we worked on the jewelry making, we also talked about some of our other plans since dad was out for the afternoon, though his note didn't really say where he had gone, just that he didn't expect to be back until fairly late. I had brought up the possibility of crafting a stun gun or tazer using an electric eel as a basis, but Amy wasn't sure if she could without checking a sample first. Even when I explained how the specialized muscles acted as chemical batteries, she was hesitant. Finally she admitted that she was more worried about it being too obvious of a biological construct and that it might cause the PRT come down hard on me if they made the connection, then any actual difficulty in making it.

While we talked and organized our beads, I found a medium sized shipping box and used that to organize the beads and findings so that I could find what I wanted to use quickly and easily. I actually used the books that Amy had loaned me as dividers, though I planned on setting up a better system during the week. I knew where I could get smaller zip-lock bags pretty cheap and I had a multi-drawer tea chest that I could use as a pattern or even use as is to hold the beads. I also planned on checking out the online boards to see what people had on sale, maybe I could even use an old parts cabinet or work bench. I was going to want something that could not only hold and organize the coral, but the tools that Amy was making as well. If this worked out the way I hoped, then I might end up making another work bench just for jewelry making.

We finished up our downstairs work around 6 o'clock, so we cleaned up and trooped upstairs to eat dinner. Other than the salad, it was all what mom used to call 'must-go', which is when we cleaned out all of the left-overs from the fridge and freezer to make room for freshly made food during the next week. It ended up being a mix of chili, two different casseroles and the last of the chicken and rice stir-fry. Overall it was both tasty and filling, and pretty easy to clean up afterwards.

Because it was after 8 o'clock when Amy was ready to head back to her house, she sent her sister a text to see if she could pick her up, either by car or flying. Fortunately, Vicky was on the end leg of her evening patrol so she texted back that she would pick Amy up in the back yard in about 10 minutes. After Vicky and Amy had left, I did the dishes and cleaned up the kitchen before pulling out my book to do some leisure reading until dad got home.

My night time running exercises over the next few nights did lead to me taking action to stop a few muggings and one rape. The muggings were nothing much, I was simply too fast, and hit too hard for the muggers to handle. I did get used to using my batons though, taking care not to do too much damage, but rather using them to disarm the muggers and keep them from running away. I used the burner cell phone that Amy insisted I carry to call 911 and waited until just before the police arrived to leave, I did make a point of keeping the battery separate unless I was actually using the
phone to prevent possible tracking. The victims were all okay and willing to press charges so I didn’t see any need to do anything more than zip-tie them and keep them company until the cops arrived. I had priced actual zip-cuffs and there was no way I could afford them yet, so I just used some heavy-duty cable ties which worked just as well, if not quite as easily. I did get to practice some of the more unusual parkour climbing techniques when leaving so that was fun.

The rape was not. It was four, what I assumed were Merchants, based on a combination of blue and yellow, and their disgusting smell. I spotted them when I was jumping across an alley. The shadows and lack of lights didn’t hide the sight of three men holding a woman down, and the fourth on top of her. I slid to a stop on roof, turned back and did an active drop, bouncing from two windows to control my fall so that I landed right next to the woman. I punched the one holding her arms in the kidney just about as hard as I could, then threw him face first into the alley wall.

I kicked the one holding her left leg as hard as I could right in the shoulder joint, not only dislocating it but also obviously shattering the bones. The other leg holder had long hair tied up into a greasy pony-tail, which made a wonderful hand hold when I threw him into the side of the dumpster they had been kind of hiding behind.

The last one, the actual rapist I took my time with. No quick knockout for him, I used my fists and knees to pretty much destroy him. All four limbs were broken in at least two places each, I shattered both sides of his jaw, and kicked and stomped him in the groin hard enough that I was pretty sure I broke his pelvis.

I was ashamed when I told Amy the next day that I had lost my temper and seriously hurt all four of them. I had just been so pissed off that I forgot to use my batons, and simply broke them using my hands, feet and knees. At least I knew that my martial arts practice was somewhat effective.

Once I had finished with them I checked on the woman, finding that she had clearly been hit a few times and her clothing was badly torn. I called for a paramedic and police and told them where the attack had taken place, but told the police that I would not be there when they arrived, so they’d better hurry.

The woman was marginally mobile, so I helped her out into the open, sat her down and helped her cover up. After that I went back and checked on her attackers, which is when I realized how badly I had beaten them. Broken bones, shattered jaws and faces, with lots of bruising all around. Although I didn’t check him out closely, it was pretty obvious that the rapist wouldn’t be using that equipment ever again.

That had been on Tuesday night, so I saved my confession until I could meet Amy the next day and we met after school.

As I came out the side door, I could see Taylor waiting for me on the sidewalk. Even from a distance I could tell that something was wrong; Taylor was wrapped around herself, like she didn’t know what to do with her hands, and was afraid to let them move. Normally she would just be waiting at one of the tables, or walking up to meet me. This wasn’t good.

I walked up to her and grabbed her into a hug. Screw Arcadia’s PDA rules. “Hey sweetie, what’s wrong?” I asked her, as I turned her away from the school and started walking away with my arm around her waist, keeping her close to me.

She blushed and stammered, “No, nothing. Why?”
I knocked my head against her shoulder and said, “Because you’re wrapped so tight you’re about to explode, that’s why. Can you tell me what’s wrong?”

She nodded jerkily, and started explaining how she had gone out last night to practice her running and parkour, which I already knew she was doing several times a week. But this time she had literally run across a rape in progress, and in the process of stopping it lost control and seriously hurt the attackers.

“…and once the Paramedics and Police were there, I left through the alleyway. But Amy, I saw them after I took care of the woman, they were out cold, and I broke them so badly. There was blood everywhere, and, and I broke their bones really bad.”

I pulled her into a full hug and held her until she calmed down a bit; though she never actually cried, she did come close. After a few minutes I spoke again, “I know you feel bad for hurting them so badly, and I can understand that, but you need to try and step back a bit and put it in perspective. Yes, you used too much force when subduing them, but that was the first time you have every come across as assault like that, wasn’t it? I remember the first time I helped stop a rape. Vicky was the one who stopped me; I was enraged to the point that I threatened to turn him inside out. And I meant it too. Vicky broke a few of his bones and when I was asked to heal him up, by Armsmaster as I recall, I was pretty blunt when I told him no. I believe my words were, ‘no, he doesn’t deserve it, besides he’ll heal eventually’.”

She looked at me in surprise, and said, “Really? I can’t imagine you saying something like that.”

I smiled up at her and said, “Now? No I probably wouldn’t. But to this day, I still won’t heal a rapist, unless it’s necessary to actually save his life. And even then I won’t heal more than just enough to keep him alive. Which the PRT knows full well, so they don’t even bother asking anymore.”

She smiled a little at that, but then started to ask, “Do you, umm, am I …” then trailed off.

I squeezed her closer, and finished for her, “Do I hate you? Are you disgusting? No, not at all. I don’t hate you and don’t find you at all disgusting, quite the contrary. You matter to me, more than you realize. When you’re hurt, I cry. You made a mistake last night, but not because you hurt them, they deserved everything they got. No, your mistake was not in hurting them; it was losing control of your temper. What you did with that beating was a little over the top, but it could have been a lot worse. You could have swarmed them with wasps and Black Widows, true?”

She paused a moment, then nodded, “Yes, I had over a hundred wasps and bees with me; and yes I had both Black Widow and Brown Recluse spiders in the alley. But I chose to not use any of them. I wanted to use my hands and feet to hurt them. I think that using my creatures would’ve been too impersonal.”

“Perhaps it would have been, but it would also have been almost certainly lethal, which I think is something you would regret. Just remember this; both how it felt at the time, and how it feels now. Learn from this that your choices matter, to the world around you, and most importantly, to you. Don’t let it make you doubt yourself; if nothing else, I trust you to do the right thing. You’ve been through more than most people can imagine, overcome hardships that even most capes can barely comprehend; you can handle this as well. Besides, you aren’t alone, if you need to talk, I’ll listen; if you need me, I’ll be there. That’s what friends do. That’s what you do for me.”

--------------------------Legion*** Taylor ***Legion--------------------------

Waiting outside Arcadia for Amy to get out of school was hard; what would she think when I told
her about last night, what would she say? My thoughts kept running around in circles; what if, what if? I didn’t have any answers for my questions, my fears; just more worries. Finally, Arcadia let out and the students started leaving, I saw Vicky and Dean leave in the company of six or seven other students before Amy finally came through the doors. Having a chance to talk to Amy about last night was something I needed to do; I really needed to talk to her about it, even if it scared me to think about doing it.

Turns out I was right. I really needed to talk to her, and it was really hard. And scary. But it did help me to talk to her, and especially to listen. We ended up spending most of the afternoon sitting in a park next to the hospital just talking. After I got through my issues with last night we were able to move on to other topics, like the fact that I had finished our costumes, with spares, and wanted her to come by on Sunday for her final fitting and delivery. She updated me on her dad’s depression, which had been much improved in the last two weeks as well as some new mods she wanted to try out.

By this point she had almost the same mods that I did, with the addition of a number of implanted defenses and tools, though her strength and speed didn’t come close to mine. Her explanation made sense; she didn’t work out nearly as much or as hard as I did, so she didn’t get as much improvement as I did. The major mod she was currently working on was to develop some form of bioelectric sensing, like some sharks had so we could spot people trying to sneak up on us, hopefully bypassing at least some Stranger abilities.

She had already finished her own sensory upgrades, so we mostly worked on our Master/Stranger defenses and improving the sub-dermal armor, making it both stronger and faster to react. We had found that we could do our modifications in public with no one the wiser if we found a park bench off the main paths, sat with our arms around each other and held hands. We looked like any other couple enjoying a nice day and were normally left alone to get our work done. Occasionally, we had someone come up to thank Amy for something she had done for them or a loved one, but I could usually spot them in plenty of time for Amy to bring her attention back out to the real world instead of being focused inside me or herself.

We managed to finish all of the upgrades we wanted to do today, just in time for Amy to head into the hospital for work. This time, unlike all the other times, she asked me to wait a few minutes while she got something for me. When she came back she passed me four epi-pens, telling me to keep them with me whenever I went out, just in case.

Before I left her, I gave her a last hug, so grateful that she had come into my life and chosen to stay here with me. As I headed home, I was already looking forward to seeing her on Sunday; that I was missing just being around her.
When Sunday finally came, I had everything ready for Amy’s visit. I had two full costumes, with the classic Panacea robes, masks, and a skin-tight body suit to wear underneath. In addition, I had a full set of weapons for her; two batons, four throwing knives in wrist sheathes, two of the larger F-S knives in sheathes that could be attached at the hip or waist or discreetly under the armpit. I gave her the only stungun that was finished, it was good for at least 4 shots and would recharge in less than 2 minutes.

The taser was still being developed, as we had only completed the preliminary design this last week. It would have two barrels that used a variation of a pistol shrimp’s claw to throw a small capsule at a very high speed; upon impact the capsule would release an electric charge that should stun most adults easily, unfortunately the organic capacitor still needed a lot of tweaking. It worked, sort of, but didn't hold enough of a charge and it kept slowly discharging. The capsule had two spines on the tip to ensure the electrical charge actually reached the skin of the target. It should have decent accuracy out to about 25-30 feet, beyond that was pretty much luck.

Amy arrived in time for lunch with dad and I, and afterwards we spent the next couple of hours playing Monopoly. To the chagrin of both Amy and I, dad trounced us both. Twice. It was positively humiliating, and we both vowed horrible revenge. Alas, I suspect he didn’t take our threats seriously.

We retreated to my bedroom, supposedly to plot our revenge, though really to try on and model our new costumes. Amy was quite pleased with her new costume, especially since her old one had all of the protective value of tissue paper, and the new one should be able to stop at least knives and low caliber pistol bullets, especially with her sub-dermal armor backing it up.

Mine consisted of a silk body suit and a Renn Faire style jester’s suit on top for Pied Piper with a face mask that covered my face from above the eyebrows down to the nose and for Legion an almost military looking black and gray costume that had armor panels that covered critical and vulnerable areas, the armor panels were constructed of layered coral and insect shells glued together with coral cement and covered with Black Widow silk.

Instead of a mask, I had designed, and Amy and I had built, a helmet that provided full coverage, internal cushioning and well hidden vents that allowed me to use my enhanced senses to their fullest extent. Even with the helmet on and closed, I could still see perfectly well, hear better than any of my swarm, and my sense of smell wasn't inhibited at all, though I still needed to practice with it, as that had completely slipped from my training plan.

I had built a voice changer into the helmet face piece, just like the one I used when I was night running, with extra breathing vents built into the cheek sections. The eye pieces were actually the mirrored amber lenses from a pair of shooting glasses, and were supposedly nearly unbreakable. I had changed their apparent shape by building up the helmet around them so they appeared to be almost comma shaped, with the points going up and out. Personally, I think that they looked quite freaky and disturbing.

To help separate the two cape identities, Pied Piper was obviously female, with my hair running
free behind me, and my recently improved assets prominently displayed with a nice push-up bra. Legion on the other hand, with a simple voice changer to back up my ‘swarm voice’ and my modest A cups bound tight, seemed to be male; of course the armor panels help to disguise my gender as well.

Pied Piper was mostly unarmored, carrying only a single baton and some pepper spray. Legion, on the other hand, was carrying a wide variety of weapons, two batons on the sides of my belt, two combat knives in thigh sheaths, pepper spray and a small air horn in a pouch on the back of my belt, and two throwing knives sheathed on each forearm. Eventually I planned on carrying a stungun as soon as the second one was finished. Which didn’t even begin to count whatever swarm I had available.

I put my costumes away in the back of my closet, while Amy repacked hers into the shopping bag they had originally been in. Afterwards we just relaxed and listened to her music until around five o’clock when we headed downstairs to start making some pizzas. It was a lot of fun making small pizzas that had exactly the toppings we wanted, since we could make a different one each time. Getting creative got us some interesting combos, with a couple that were completely inedible.

When it was time for Amy to head for home, dad insisted on driving her, since it was quite overcast and looked like it was going to start raining at any moment. The drive was fairly quick, a lot quicker than the bus, but we really couldn’t talk freely with dad sitting three feet away. Even so I managed to let Amy know that I was going out later as Legion, just to give everything a test drive. When I walked her to her door, she wished me well and told me to be careful as she gave me a hug.

I watched through her cat’s eyes and ears for just a minute, before getting out of range, just long enough to hear Vicky tease Amy about ‘her date’ and to hear Amy fire back a comment about Vicky and Dean.

Dad was silent until we were about half way home when he asked, “So, are you and Amy serious or just friends?”

“Wha…Oh. Um…not sure?” His question was making me blush, but also made me think about this seriously, “Serious friends, definitely. I haven’t kissed her yet, but I do like her. A lot. I think that she and I will have to talk about that, cause I don’t want to assume something that might not be there; I do know it’s not some ‘Florence Nightingale’ thing. I mean, I’m grateful for all of the healing she has given me, but what I like about her, what I feel about her is not just superficial gratitude, it’s a lot more.”

“Well, just as an observation; you and she have gone out to eat how many times? How many times has she come over to our house to eat? How many times have the two of you gone out to see a movie and get a bite to eat? In the last two months? Just think about that and ask yourself this: If I’m not dating Amy now; do I want to?”

“Huh. Okay, thanks dad, I will.” I sat back and actually thought about what dad had said, the questions he had asked me, and I came to the conclusion that, No Amy and I weren’t dating, but that Yes, I did want to. At least I think I do. I’ve never actually wanted to date anyone before, boy or girl, so I’m not 100% sure.

When we got home I went to the kitchen to do some of my evening preps for the next day, then sat and watched some tv with dad. I headed to bed early, around 9:30 and set my burner phone to wake me at midnight.

I was woken by the soft chimes of my phone right at midnight, got up and dressed and armed myself as Legion. I kept a close ear out for dad, but his breathing never changed, and he seemed
sound asleep. Before I left, I faked up my bed to look like I was sleeping, with my back turned to the door, then carefully left through the window, leaving it slightly ajar, so that I could get back in the same way. The drop was easy and I already knew that returning later would be no harder.

I headed towards the Docks, figuring that there might be some ABB ‘bangers causing trouble, and if not the Merchants certainly would be. Tonight, wearing my costume for the first time; was liberating, although that might have been because I wasn’t wearing my usual 30 lbs of weights. I jogged quite slowly, taking the time to gather and sort a proper swarm, with stray cats and dogs actually carrying dozens and hundreds of my ground based insects, like Black Widow and Brown Recluse spiders, as well as a large selection of big fire ants; beetles, cockroaches and the like were everywhere and easy to collect as needed so I didn’t worry about them for now. Once I reached the Docks it didn’t take long for me to realize that it was a lot quieter than normal, even for a Sunday night; something was going on.

And then I found it, a group of men, Asian I thought from how their voices sounded, gathered in the street. I moved back into some shadows, where I wasn’t likely to be seen and moved a couple of cats closer, along the sides of the buildings, trying to keep them out of sight, much like me. As I watched another group, almost 20 strong poured out of a two story building, an abandoned office building it looked like, so I retreated down the alley looking for a way to get up on the roof, away from being seen and shot at.

Finding a fire escape towards the back of the building I jumped up and grabbed the rails and pulled myself up and climbed up to the roof as quietly as I could. Once there though I realized that the loose gravel and trash from all the people who apparently liked to hang out there would make it impossible for me to move quietly, so I carefully crawled along the raised parapet until I reached the front of the building and could observe directly.

**Damnit, it really is Lung, I had hoped I was just mis-seeing through the cat’s eyes.** I pulled out my burner phone, and ducking down out of sight scrolled through my contacts ‘til I reached the PRT hotline and dialed, As I did so I continued to listen to Lung making some sort of speech to his thugs, though his accent was really thick and it took a bit to really understand it, but when I did, I nearly froze, “…the children, just shoot. Doesn’t matter your aim, just shoot. You see one lying on the ground? Shoot the little bitch twice more to be sure. We give them no chances to be clever or lucky, understand?”

*He did not just say that!* Pulling the phone close, I said, “Lung is on Keller St. near Dobson, he’s got almost thirty ‘bangers and is ordering them to attack kids, get here ASAP. I’m attacking now.” Even before I started talking I was moving my swarm into position, mustering the dogs and cats just out of sight in the alleys, the owls, crows and two red-tailed hawks I had gathered on the edges of roofs, while my Widow and Recluse spiders began climbing up the inside of Lung’s pant legs, I had the fire ants climbing up the legs of everyone else in the street. I was doing my best to get them in position without touching skin, especially with Lung, who I had assigned half a dozen of each type of spider to each of his legs. By the time I finished talking, I was ready and started the attack with my 3 hives worth of wasps.

--------------------Legion***Street Level ***Legion--------------------

I aimed for the hands of the ‘bangers and Lung’s eyes, ears and throat for my first assault. It went quite well with everyone except Lung, I know I stung him at least 20 times, but it didn’t seem to slow him down at all, since he just flared a burst of flame around his head and killed most of the wasps instantly. While he was focused on the insects around his head, I sent the three biggest dogs I had at him from behind. Unfortunately he heard or sensed them somehow and turned and managed to hit one of the dogs before it could reach him, shattering its skull, which actually stung
me a bit, when losing the insects didn’t hurt at all. The other two dogs hit him, one on his wrist and
the other in the throat.

That pissed him off for sure. He positively exploded with flame and started to grow scales and got
even bigger than he had already been, reaching almost seven feet tall in a matter of seconds. My
timing was pretty good though because all of the spiders had hit him at the same time the dogs
attacked, injecting a lot of venom directly into any veins or arteries they could reach in his legs
while he was distracted by the more obvious attack to his face and hands. They only managed two
or three bites each before he killed them off, but I hoped it would screw his regen up, or at least
make it work overtime. By this point I would take what I could get.

Even as I attacked Lung, I was directing my wasps and bees to disable the gang-bangers by
stinging their eyelids, ears and hands. In addition, I had been summoning all the dogs and cats that
I could reach and used them to trip them and pin them down with threats to the face and throat.
Using my swarm voice to order them to lay in the street face down was amazingly effective, I
suspect that the sound of insects and animals talking to them was frightening them on a very
primitive level.

Lung pretty much ignored his thugs, looking around for the obvious cape threat, so I had the larger
dogs either lay on their backs or crouch next to their throats, in an obvious threat display. My cats
prowled around them, snarling and hissing at any sign of movement. Honestly, it seemed to be
remarkably effective at cowing the gang-bangers and keeping them quiet.

Lung looked at all of the animals threatening his men, and I could see that he was considering
attacking my swarm to release his people, when his head snapped around and he was staring right
where I was hiding.

-------------Legion*** Roof Level ***Legion-------------

I had hoped that staying down and out of sight would keep Lung from finding me, but I had
apparently missed when I tried to turn off my phone and the PRT operator was practically shouting.
I guess he really wanted me to talk to him, but Lung heard him based on his garbled shouts and the
impact on the front of the building just under where I was lying.

“Great, pyrokinesis, turns into a giant dragon, and super senses too! That’s just not fair.” As I
complained I rolled away from the edge and to my feet, dropping the phone rather than taking the
time to try and turn it off and put it away, backing towards the middle of the roof, to give myself
room to maneuver.

As I got into position, he pulled himself over the edge of the roof which is when I hit him with one
of my owls. It hit him, talons first, right in the eyes, I wasn’t sure if I managed to completely
destroy the eyeballs, but his scream was quite gratifying, even if the owl didn’t survive it’s attack.
While he was reeling from that attack, I pulled one my batons with my right hand and snapped it
open and dug my pepper spray out of the back of my belt.

“M’afucke’, g’na ‘ill you!!” He snarled; his mouth had already morphed enough that he was
having trouble speaking clearly.

I thought about keeping silent, but realized that I had no chance of that on this roof, between the
gravel and trash he would be able to track me whenever I moved, so I might as well see if I could
piss him off. Some of my books had mentioned that angry people fought stupid, so they
emphasized the need to maintain calm. Fortunately I didn’t seem to have any problem with that,
since I could off-load my more volatile emotions into my swarm.
“Yeah, good luck with that, so far you don’t seem to be doing too well. Except at losing.” I retorted, using both the voice changer and my swarm-voice to scatter the sound of my voice as I prepared to avoid either a direct attack or his fire. And fire it was. I took a step to the side, avoiding the burst of flame, and said, “Oooh, so close, and yet so far. Better luck next time.” This time I ducked and moved a bit closer to him, using a couple of rats and a squirrel to make noise by scratching the gravel and knocking over some beer cans off to my right, and went on, “Or not. Just to let you know, you really suck at this throwing fire thing, you might want to try something else.” I used my swarm voice alone, to pretend to be over near where the noise came from. I dodged to the side again as he launched another wide-angle burst of fire; even though I was caught by the very edge his fire burst I couldn’t even feel the heat through my armor. “Like surrendering, I think you might be able to get that one right.”

As I had been hoping, he stopped throwing fire around, although there was plenty on the roof, here and there and lunged at me to physically attack me. Even as he did, I could see that he was still growing, although slower than he had in the beginning, and scales were covering more parts of his body. As he got close I first gave him a solid shot of pepper spray right into his visibly healing eye sockets, no pun intended. As he screamed from that, I quickly spun 360 degrees to build speed and momentum and hit him as hard as I could across the side of his head with my baton.

I think he felt that one. There was no way I could match his strength, but I was a lot faster than he was and it seemed to make up for the difference. It flipped him off his feet and sent him rolling a dozen feet towards the edge of the building. I took the opportunity to put away my pepper spray and draw my left hand knife, then waited for him to get back up.

“You wanted to kill some kids, huh? How’s that workin’ out for you?” I asked as sarcastically as I could manage.

As he got to his feet he snarled, “’ill oo!!” As he turned towards me, I could see that where I had hit him on the side of his skull had been crushed, but it was visibly healing as I watched. That level of regeneration was just unfair, and I was going to have to figure out a way to trump it or I was going to be toast.

Yeah, I’ve heard that before. So you want to dance with me? Then let’s dance, bitch,” I bit out.

As he charged me, I used the flies and ants I had managed to place on him since he was no longer completely covered in fire, to track and anticipate his movements, since he seemed to now be limiting himself to covering his hands and claws with blue flame. Ducking down and to the left, I got out of the path of his attack so that I could shatter his knee as he went past and the flying blood and scales as he tripped and went to his hands and knees proved that, armored scales or not, he wasn’t invulnerable.

Unfortunately, neither was I. As I moved away from him, his continual growth caught me by surprise as he backhanded me, his left hand claw catching my right arm and breaking it in at least two places before I could get away. The impact sent my baton flying across the roof and knocked me rolling. Even so I was able to get up before he did, which only let him slash me with his tail, the sharpened scales actually cutting through my costume and leaving a shallow cut on my lower leg, before being stopped by the shin guard armor and my sub-dermal armor.

I decided to take advantage of his vulnerable position and stabbed him in the upper left thigh from behind, then slashed straight across to the right, severing both of his femoral arteries and utterly emasculated him in the process. Even from behind it worked just like the book I had studied said it would. That was enough to make him scream in pain as he grabbed for his missing body parts with both hands and rammed his face into the roof.
Before he could rise, I repeatedly stabbed my knife into his left kidney, using the speed technique that I'd been practicing to effectively shred the organ. With the last stab, I plunged the blade all the way to the hilt and twisted it around. Amy's work was amazing, the knife went through his scales as if they weren't even there, even slicing through them as I twisted the knife.

Before I stepped back, I pulled the knife out of his kidney by twisting it back and forth and then slicing it across his spine, dropping him back to the roof again, even as he had almost gotten back up and said, “Actions have consequence’s, asshole. You don’t attack children, ever.”

I pulled the knife all the way out, carefully lined it up and slammed it between his C2 and C3 vertebrae as hard as I could and left it there, with his spinal cord severed and his brain stem nicely pithed, just like a frog ready for dissection.

Stepping back to catch my breath, I watched him slowly reduce in size and his scales and other draconic features begin to fade away. Fortunately, I could just make out his faint heartbeat which indicated that his regeneration was keeping him alive, though only just barely. As I observed him carefully, I also started to realize just how much I hurt from the two times he had successfully hit me.

“Shit, my arm hurts,” I carefully moved it and could tell that although I wasn't bleeding, he had clearly broken my arm in at least two, maybe three places. My leg stung, but the cut was actually minor. The sheer impact from his tail on the other hand, made moving around quite painful.

I started to look around for my pepper spray which had fallen out of its pouch at some point, and my baton and phone which I had dropped earlier, when I sensed three huge animals approaching my roof top really fast, jumping thirty or forty feet with each bound. When I turned around I could see that they were some kind of dinosaur-monster hybrid, with spikes poking out all around. There were also four people riding on them. Capes.

“Oh, fuck meee.” I looked up at the sky and said, “Really, Lung wasn’t enough for you, now I have fight his back up, too?” I looked at them as they landed on my roof, pulled out my only remaining baton, checked my other knives and started to gather the remnants of my swarm together, getting the birds into the sky and circling the building and my bugs around me. Who knows, maybe I can intimidate them into not fighting. It might work; I did just finish off Lung after all.

“Oh goody, the second-string. I didn’t know the ABB was recruiting outside of Asia now.”

One of the capes slid off of her mount, and said, “No please, no fighting. In fact you saved our lives tonight. We had heard Lung was coming for us and kind of freaked. We finally decided to throw the dice and attacked. We drove Oni Lee off, and headed to where we had heard Lung was gathering his forces to attack us. And now we found you already took him down. So, thanks for that.”

I looked them over and realized that they were my age, give or take a year or so, but I doubted if any of them was eighteen yet. I placed some tiny flies on each of them so I could keep track of them then said, “Okay, no fighting. That works for me. Mind helping me find my other baton, pepper spray and phone then, I lost track of them during the fight?” As I asked them for help, I put away my baton and then carefully used my left arm to lay my right arm across my chest and had a couple hundred spiders start to web it into place, ignoring the slice on my shin, since the bleeding seemed to have stopped already.

The big guy in black motorcycle leathers nodded and said in a kind of weird echo-y voice, “Sure, it’s the least we can do. Tattletale, any ideas?”
The blonde with the domino mask bent over and said, “Yep. Pepper spray’s right here,” she said as she held it up in her hand.

I had walked to the front of the roof and found my phone, picked it up and saw it was still on. “Shit.” I held it to my ear and said, “You still there?”

“**Yes sir, are you okay? Do you need any medical help?**”

“Nah, I’m good. Lung’s going to need a lot of Black Widow and Brown Recluse anti-venom and some time in a hospital though, his regeneration is overloaded. Be sure to send a lot of cops and paramedics to pick up his ‘bangers down on the street, some of them may need an epi-pen or two and some first aid.’

“**Do you need any assistance; can you tell me who else is there?**”

“Nope, it’s all good.” I disconnected the phone, then flipped it over, pulled the battery out and put all the pieces in one of my pouches. “And another one gone.”

The one who looked like a Renn Faire reject laughed, and finished the line, “And another one gone, and another one bites the dust.”

The first girl and Motorcycle Man both laughed, though the last one, in the cheap plastic dog mask just looked puzzled then ignored all of us to walk over and nudge the unconscious Lung. She then shrugged and leaned on one her dogs. I could tell that they were actually dogs now, deep inside the giant monster body.

Motorcycle Man walked up to me, held out his left hand and said, “Hi, name’s Grue,” he pointed at the others in turn and said, “Tattletale, Bitch and Regent.” I shook his hand as he went on, “We’re the Undersiders. Seriously, thanks for taking out Lung,” he looked down at the bloody Lung and at me, compared our sizes and said, “If you don’t mind, how in the hell did you do that, anyways? Everyone knows he gets stronger the longer the fight goes on. He took out all of the local Heroes when he first got here, hell they say he even went toe-to-toe with Leviathan, and drove him off. So how…?”

I pondered on what if anything to say, and decided to keep it simple, and misleading, “Name’s Legion, and I cheat. A lot.”

Tattletale looked at Lung for a long moment, then at my bugs, and the birds that I had still circling, and said, “No kidding. Oh shit, PRT inbound.” At that they scrambled back onto the dogs and Grue offered, “Want a lift? PRT can get pissy when two villains fight, sort of arrest ‘em all, let the judge sort ‘em out philosophy.”

I had my head cocked, listening to the sound that was approaching as well as watching from some of my birds and said, “No thanks, it’s just dickhead. I’ll answer a few questions, make sure they know what anti-venoms Lung’s going to need, and then split.”

Regent just laughed and repeated, “Dickhead, holy shit, I think I want hang around and watch the fireworks.”

Tattletale, sitting behind Regent, smacked the back of his head and said, “No you don’t, he’d just try to arrest you. Legion, talk to you later.” As she finished speaking, the dog masked girl whistled and the dogs turned and leapt off the roof and left the area at a very high rate speed. I watched them for a moment then went over and checked on Lung. His pulse and respiration were both slow and weak, but at least still there. I dragged him across the roof by his arm and carefully dropped
him down to the street, before I trotted over to the fire escape and carefully climbed down until I
reached the street level and walked back out into the open. Checking out the rest of the ABB first
to make sure that they weren't trying to escape, I then double-checked Lung's vitals, left my knife
sticking out of the back of his neck and dragged him further out into the open.

------------------------------Legion***Street Level ***Legion-------------------------

I watched Armsmaster pull up on his big motorcycle, pull his halberd from his back as he stepped
down, and looked around at all of men on the ground. He then asked me, “Villain or Hero?”

I looked at him in disbelief, “Really, that’s the first thing you ask? Let’s go with Hero. You can
call me Legion.” I could see that my swarm voice disturbed him so I pointed at Lung and said,
“That’s Lung. He was telling the rest of these assholes to go and kill some children. I explained to
them just how that was unacceptable behavior, and that actions have consequences. All of them
have been stung multiple times by fire ants, bees and wasps. Lung has also been bitten by both
Black Widow and Brown Recluse spiders, approximately 15 to 20 times for each type. He will
certainly need extensive anti-venom treatment, because his regen is pretty screwed up right now; I
expect it to fail shortly without treatment, which I already explained to the PRT operator, so the
paramedics should be able to treat him until he gets to a hospital.” I tried to keep my voice even
and not let my distaste for Armsmaster leak through.

He frowned at me and said, “I should arrest you for the use of excessive force and attempted
murder. You went too far against Lung.”

I could hear more vehicles coming and watched several other capes coming across the roof tops
through my swarm, and I just said, “Really? Because I stopped Lung and the ABB from attacking
and killing children, you’re going to arrest me. For ‘excessive force’? Against Lung? Mr. ‘I can
beat Leviathan and the Protectorate’. What the hell have you been smoking? Because its got to be
some seriously good shit. Lung is a menace, he wanted to kill children, I stopped him. This is
called ‘A Good Thing’.” You could hear the sarcastic air quotes as I spoke.

I pointed down the street and then up to the rooftops. “The police are here, your backup is here,
and I am no longer going to be here. Is this in any way unclear?” I had most of my swarm disperse,
except for my fliers and the few Widows and Recluses still left alive. The flying insects clustered
around me while the birds circled overhead and I had the spiders climb up and settle on my
shoulders and the face of my helmet, just to unsettle him, which I’m pretty sure it did.

As soon as they settled, I walked over to Lung, put my foot on the back of his head and pulled my
knife out of his neck with a nasty sucking sound and a spray of both arterial blood and what had to
be spinal fluid. I ignored the gasps from some of the other capes as I did so, wiped it off on his
back, sheathed it and then walked past Armsmaster and headed towards one of the alleys so I could
work my way home.

As I was walking past him, Armsmaster reached out to grab my right arm, no doubt intending to
’detain’ me, but my swarm thickened between us and I slide-stepped away from him and kept
walking away at the same even pace.

As I did so, I spotted one of the male capes laughing, though the female, Battery I think from the
lights on her costume, just elbowed him. I guess that made him Assault. A little further back was
another pair, that I think was Kid Win and Vista; couldn’t be sure it was Vista, but she was a lot
smaller than Kid Win, so I thought that only left her. At least in the Wards; if she was an
independent or new, she could be anyone.

I spread my fliers wide, waited ‘til I was out of sight, then took off at my fastest sprint, trying to get
some distance between me and the Heroes. I ran through the shadows for a full twenty minutes, then pulled up and scanned my surroundings carefully, looking for any sign that I was being observed. I kept walking slowly until I had recovered and with no indication of being observed I started running again, this time at my long-distance pace, again keeping to the alleys and shadows.

I gave some serious thought to doing some exploring of the sewers and storm drains, if only to let me break contact after a fight or something. Maybe I could find some maps or plans at the library, if not I would have to see what I could come up with by using my swarm to map them out.

It took me less than an hour to get home, climb up to my bedroom, and change for bed. Dad was still in bed, sleeping peacefully as far as I could tell. I checked my costume for damage, and decided to wrap it up and put it in a plastic bag to keep the smell of burnt silk from spreading, and I would start the repairs in the morning as well as start designing a new and better armored version. I carefully undid my temporary splint and checked to see just how bad the breaks were. Luckily, it looked like the bones were still in the right places, though the radius seemed to be cleanly broken, but held in place by the ulna. My humerus was only cracked. Painful, but still usable. I just washed up quietly and planned to grab an actual shower right before dad got up. The cut on my leg was closed and had stopped bleeding, but it was still pretty nasty, so I taped a gauze pad over it and went to bed.

Interestingly enough, where Lung had hit still hurt, but there was no swelling or visible bruising. As far as I could tell, any damaged capillaries had already healed and the excess blood and fluid had been reabsorbed into my body. Amy hadn't mentioned that happening, but she clearly did good work so I wasn't really surprised. Although I did wonder if it was an intentional feature or just serendipity.

I could wash my costume and start on the repairs I needed to make after dad left for work. I also needed to let Amy know what happened and that I was mostly alright. His fire didn’t get through the spider silk, and the enhancements she had given me meant that the two times he had actually connected, just knocked me away and didn’t hurt me too badly.

-----------------------------Legion***Taylor ***Legion-----------------------------

I sent Amy a short email after breakfast that simply said: Lunch? My treat?

She replied: Sure. You good?

My reply was even shorter: All good.

With that I pulled out my costume, took it downstairs, separated it into it’s component pieces and hand washed it all. I did use the dryer, but I did it on the AIR setting, with no heat, so I wouldn’t damage the silk. While washing it I could see that I would need to do some extensive hand-sewing to one of the leg pieces and replace a couple of layers in two places from the damage caused by his fire, not his claws, as well as some minor damage to one of my armor panels that had been hit by his tail, which would only take a couple of hours for my Widows to repair.

After I got dinner started, I checked the forecast and decided on a picnic lunch, since it was supposed to be sunny and warm. I made an egg and potato salad, three different types of sandwiches, an apple pie for dessert and some fruit juice and hot tea to drink. I have to admit that being functionally ambidextrous was a big help today, as even though I could use right arm, it did hurt quite a bit to do so. I used the picnic basket in the attic, which we hadn’t used since the summer before mom died, but I like to think she would have approved of Amy and wouldn’t mind if I used it again. I decided to take advantage of the nice weather and changed into a nice skirt and
sweater combo that I had made since the cut on my left leg had already healed into a simple scratch, and tucked a blanket across the top of the basket before I left to catch my bus.

As I rode towards Arcadia, I noticed two people get on. They kind of stood out, because the girl was an attractive blonde with a band of freckles across her cheeks that reminded me of Amy's, and the boy, young man really, was a very well built black man. I couldn’t blame her for being with him, he was definite eye candy, but in this town they had better be careful, or damn good at fighting, because the E88 was likely to explode if they noticed them together.

I got off at Arcadia’s stop, and as I passed their seat the girl spoke up, “Good luck, I hope you enjoy your picnic.”

Startled, I looked over at her and saw that she was smiling at me, nicely, not at all like I was used to from Winslow, so I smiled back and said, “Thanks,” and got off and walked towards the little park area between the wings of the school, were I usually waited for Amy, ever since she had explained to me that they were allowed to eat their lunches outside there. As I walked away I was puzzled by the girl, she seemed familiar somehow, but I couldn’t remember ever seeing her before, and with her sharp features and fox-like grin I was sure I would have. Just before I got to the lunch area at the school it came to me. “Tattletale. Damnit, I think she knows who I am, too. I really hope she doesn’t live up to her cape name.”

Shaking my head, knowing that I couldn’t do anything about it at this time, I found a bench that was visible from the doors and sat to wait for Amy. Just as the lunch hour began I turned my phone on long enough to send her a quick text: Picnic area. Then turned my phone off again and removed the battery. I would have to get another prepaid phone on the way home, and destroy this one completely. Or maybe disassemble it so I could reuse the parts for something else.

Less than 5 minutes later, Amy came bursting out through the doors, and ran over to me, she grabbed my left hand and pulled me up saying, “Quick, before Vicky finds Dean and crashes our picnic.” Even as I reached for the basket with my other hand she blocked my right hand and picked up the basket herself and led me out of the picnic area, around the corner and across the street into a small wooded park at a run. We were laughing as we ran to the other side and found a clear dry area to put down the blanket. We both dropped down and eventually caught our breath and stopped laughing.

Before I could even start on our lunch, Amy reached out and held both of my hands. “Oh, Taylor you really did a number on yourself this time,” before she started repairing the damage that Lung had inflicted on me the night before. “Even with the subdermal armor and enhanced bones, he still managed to break your arm in three places and cut your leg in one.” After only a couple of minutes she had finished the majority of the repairs and said, “Let’s leave the rest for your normal healing to handle. It should only take a couple of days to finish.” I took that as my signal to open up the basket and started setting out the place settings and then the food.

“Wow, are you sure there’s enough here? It’s just the two of us, right? Oh, and that's a nice dress, you look really pretty today,” she teased me.

“Thank you,” I blushed at her comments, and added, “Hey, you know how much I can eat, and I suspect you could stand a few good meals,” I poked her in the stomach, “you’re starting to waste away there, I think I need to fatten you up a bit.”

She laughed and grabbed my finger, and shifted it around until we were holding hands properly, than grabbed one of the turkey sandwiches with her other hand, “Fatten me up indeed, I’ll have you know my BMI is just about perfect for my age and activity level. Umm, this is good.” She set
her sandwich down to accept the cup of juice I was holding out to her. “Thanks.”

She took another bite and then asked, “So, what really happened last night, PHO and the Ward rumor mill are going crazy, did you really take down Lung? By yourself? And in all the names of god, Why?”

I put down my second half-sandwich, wiped my mouth and said, “In order, Yes I did; By myself, with my swarm of course; And because he was ordering the ABB to kill children.”

“Children? Is he insane? That’s pretty much guaranteed to bring both the Triumvirate and the Guild down on him. What was he thinking?”

I nodded and answered her, “I agree. It turns out the ‘children’ he was talking about is a group of minor teen villains called the Undersiders. Have you ever heard of them?”

Amy frowned in thought, “I’m not sure, something about giant dog-monsters? Maybe. I’ll have to look it up.”

I smiled and said, “I already did, there’s four of them, Tattletale, Grue, Regent and Bitch, known as Hellhound on PHO. I met them after I took down Lung and they introduced themselves, they were pretty grateful, since they had heard that he was coming after them personally. Aaannnd, I think I may have run across them this morning on the bus, in civvies. Tattletale for sure, Grue possibly.”

“Are you sure? What makes you think you saw them?” she asked.

I smirked at her and said, “Tattletale lives up to her name, I think her power pushes her to prove how smart she is, she greeted me on the bus and wished me good luck on my picnic. It took a few minutes but I’m pretty sure that I recognized her voice, and the guy with her had a similar build to Grue. Tall and muscular.”

She smirked right back at me and teased, “Oooh, Tall and Muscular, pray tell, do I have competition now?”

“Nope, he’s definitely eye candy, but I think that I’m doing pretty good right here.”

She squeezed my hand and said, “Me too,” and held out her cup “Juice please.”

I freed my hand, took her cup and refilled it, and I was handing it back when I said, “Uh oh. Vicky and Dean incoming.”

“Why am I not surprised, do we have enough to share?” she asked.

I glanced into the basket and said, “Sure, I made plenty since I know our appetites can get pretty big, but there should be more than enough, even for dessert.”

Amy raised an eyebrow at that, “Really? What did you bring?”

“An apple pie.”

“A whole apple pie? You really are trying to fatten me up, aren’t you?”

“Weeeell, maybe just a little bit,” I teased back.

“A little bit what?” Vicky asked from behind me.

Amy just smiled and said, “A little bit hungry. How about you two, are you hungry too, or did you
“I could eat,” Vicky said, at the same time Dean replied, “No, we’re fine.” That mistimed comment got him a gentle elbow in the ribs.

I just laughed at them and said, “Sit, please. I made plenty so just enjoy.” I handed them plates, forks and cups and then offered the sandwiches and salad. I just pointed to the juice and tea containers and said, “Strawberry/apple juice, hot green tea,” then went back to eating.

The two of them dished up some potato salad, and chose different sandwiches, well actually Vicky took tuna and Dean chose turkey, then they each swapped half of their sandwiches with each other. Amy and I just smiled at their antics and went on with our own food.

Because of our audience, we kept to light topics like movies we had seen recently, and what we still wanted to see, and what Amy and I were going to do on Sunday. Vicky did bring up Lung’s capture, and complained that PHO didn’t have any details about the fight; it just said that an independent cape had fought Lung and a number of ABB and defeated them all.

“It’s kind of worries me, there’s someone out there who can take down a cape as dangerous as Lung and we don’t know anything about him.”

I laughed at her and said, “Well apparently you know it’s a guy, what more do you need to know; are you recruiting for a teammate or a harem?”

“What? What do you mean, harem?” She stammered, blushing quite red.

At the sight of that, both Amy and I just started laughing. Laughing so hard we had to put our food down until we could finally calm down.

Vicky just crossed her arms and pouted at us, which was almost as funny as her first expression.

Finally Amy calmed down enough to apologize to her sister, “Sorry, but your expression was absolutely hilarious. I just wish I had a camera so I could have shown you. You’d have laughed too.”

Dean nodded agreement and said, “Very true, Amy. Vicky, don’t get mad, but you really did have the funniest expression.”

Vicky frowned for a second, then shrugged and said, “Meh, you’re probably right. It just caught me by surprise, that’s all.” As she finished, she smiled and asked, “So, is there any dessert?”

Which cracked us all up again.

After we had all finished eating, including the entire pie, we packed everything up and headed back to Arcadia. As we walked back, Amy and I led the way, holding hands like we seemed to do almost constantly lately, though I made sure to hold the basket in my left hand, even after Amy’s healing my arm was still a bit sore. Vicky and Dean followed us, holding hands as well. They stayed far enough back to give us some privacy as we slowly walked back to the school, but not so far that I couldn’t keep an eye on them.

I decided that this was as good a time as any and looking at her asked, “Amy, can I ask you something?”
She looked back at me and said, “Sure, ask away.”

“Are we dating? I think we are, but just wanted to be sure, because I’ve never dated before so…”

She shifted closer, and slid her arm around me, “Yes, Taylor we’re dating. I’m not quite sure when we started, but we are definitely dating. Okay?”

I pulled her even closer and said, “Very okay,” as we continued our walk.

When we got to the walkway leading to the front doors of the school, I stopped and Amy swung around in front of me. She reached her free hand up, cupped my cheek and gently pulled me down and kissed me.

I froze for a split second and thought *Weeee, my first kiss!* while returning the kiss with untutored enthusiasm. We didn’t stop until Vicky walked up to us, leaned close and said, “Damn, and I thought Dean could kiss, I think he needs more practice.”

Amy slowly pulled back, smiling at me, and said, “Wow. That was definitely worth waiting for.”

I just smiled back at her and nodded. Reluctantly, I let her step back, as I could hear a bell inside the school ring, and Vicky said, “Sorry love birds, you’ll have to pick this up another time, school's back in session.” She tugged Amy towards the school, as I stood there watching her walk towards her school, her head turned back so she could watch me as she went. Dean just shook his head and said, “Congratulations, she’s a wonderful girl, so be sure to treat her right.”

I ignored him for a second, not realizing what he had said, than answered, “Oh, right. Yes she is, and you’ll never have to worry about that, I’ll keep Amy safe.”

“Good,” was all he said as headed into the school.

--------------------Legion***Brian Laborn/Grue ***Legion--------------------

Brian kept an eye on Lisa as she watched the tall girl carry her picnic basket off the bus and towards Arcadia. As far as he could see, there was nothing special about the girl to draw Lisa's attention, but then again she tended to see a lot more than most people.

“So, what's up with her? Nothing special that I could see?” I asked.

Lisa smiled back at me and said, “Couple of things, but that picnic basket? Pretty sure she's going to ask her girl friend to be her *girlfriend*, if you know what I mean? Seems like a nice girl, but really shy, so it's a big step for her.”

“Huh. Hope it works out well for her, because the world could use a bit more happiness. But you said a 'couple of things' so what else caught your eye?” I asked her as I double-checked to see if our stop was next.

Lisa shook her head and said, “I'll tell you as we walk to your place, 'cause this is our stop.”

Getting up as the bus pulled to a stop, we got off the bus and headed up the street towards my new apartment. Once we were away from other pedestrians, Lisa continued.

“Her right arm and left leg are injured, a lot worse than it appears, but she is good at dealing with pain, so it isn't obvious. I suspect, and Brian, even if I'm right, you need to keep this seriously down-low, that she *might* be Legion.” Lisa explained as we walked, after checking to ensure that no one was close enough to overhear us.
“Because of her injuries? That's it? Even for you, that's a stretch.” I demurred, having a hard time picturing a slender teen like that girl being able to take out Lung.

“Brian, come on, you know I work with the total package, not just a couple of incidental things. Height, build, arm-length, body language, yes, her injuries too. It all fits into a complete picture. And that picture matches, at least somewhat, with the one we met last night.”

“Somewhat? Not completely?” I prodded her gently, “Usually you don't have any reservations when you describe something like that.”

“Yeah that's true. Normally. But, one of the big difference between last night and today is that … well, last night when we showed up, she was looking at us and deciding the most efficient and easiest way to disable all of us. And Brian, she could have done it. No problem. You did see all of those birds and bugs, right? Between them and her own skill at fighting, our only chance would have been to run away. I doubt that she would have followed us if we left, but in a straight up fight? She'd have won.”

That made me stop and think. I know that we specialized in hit-and-run heists, but we had a lot of tricks and skills to bring to a fight, and Lisa knew them all. If she was that sure we'd lose …?

After a minute I asked her, “So what do you recommend we do then?”

Lisa bit her lip in thought, then said, “Make nice with her. I'll put together a nice thank you gift for Legion, and at least make an offer to recruit her. I'm pretty sure she'll decline, but it will at a minimum let us be seen as 'friendly' rather than as a threat of some sort. Based on what she said about Armsmaster, and wasn't that interesting, she's very unlikely to join the Wards, and will stay independent.”

I nodded and than asked worriedly, “What if the E88 tries to recruit her? You know independents don't last long, and they can be pretty 'persuasive' when they want a useful cape.”

Lisa giggled, actually giggled, at that and said, “That would be funny as hell, she'd fucking destroy them if they ever tried to pressure her to join. Remember what I said earlier? Going to see her girlfriend? They might be able to take her down in the end, but it would cost them at least half of their capes, maybe more.”

She sobered up and went on, “Brian, all joking aside, there are some people that are crazy, we both know that, sociopaths and psychopaths that like to hurt and kill because they can, because it's fun. Alec has a little bit of that, but he knows it and doesn't like it, so he sublimates it into his video games and into just being a bit of an ass.”

“That girl isn't like that, though. I think that she is a genuinely nice and sweet girl, who doesn't particularly like to hurt people. I mean, come on, she makes a picnic lunch to share with her girlfriend during a school day? I doubt that you noticed it, but that outfit she was wearing was made by hand, I'd guess she made it herself because she showed a lot of pride in what she was wearing. A nice girl … but hurt or even threaten her loved ones and she'll kill you without a second's thought. And that's one of things that makes her so dangerous: you may never realize it when you cross one of her lines, not until it's too late.”

I nodded and held the outer door to my apartment building open for Lisa, as she walked in I punched in the security code to open the inner door and pointed to the elevator. “Fourth floor, I'm going to check my mailbox, alright?”

She glanced over at the wall of old-fashioned mailboxes and said, “Sure, I'll hold the door for
It only took a minute to open my mailbox and retrieve what turned out to be mostly junk mail, with some fliers from the tenants' association.

“So … ?” she asked.

“Mostly junk mail. As for the other … yeah, go ahead and put together a nice thank-you gift. Figure out how to get in contact and let's all be friends. Team mate would be nice, but you're probably right about the chances of that, so I'll settle for not being enemies. Didn't work out too well for the last guy in that position, did it?”

As I opened the door to my empty apartment, she said, “No it didn't, which tells me that he crossed one of her lines without realizing it. I just wish I knew what that line was, it would probably tell me a lot about her.”

I shook my head at her and said, “I can't believe you actually said that out loud. You know the old saying, 'Be careful what you wish for … you might just get it.'”

Lisa stopped as she was putting her shoulder bag on the kitchen counter and said, her face pale, “Yeah, good point. Don't let me push like I usually do, okay? I'd rather not find out the hard way what one of her lines is.”

I nodded my agreement and said, “No problem, just pay attention when I do, okay?” As I spoke, I pulled a large toolbox out from under the kitchen sink and set it down on the counter. “The first set of deliveries is supposed to arrive at 1:00 pm, and is mostly boxed furniture that needs to be assembled. The beds and mattresses are coming between 2:00 and 3:00, so I want to be able to sort and place the boxes where the assembled furniture will go before then. That should make it easier to get everything done.”

Lisa nodded and pulled out her iPod and a triangular speaker block and plugged them in and set them up on the counter before starting one of her less strident playlists.

Once that was done, I showed her around the two bedroom apartment, and we ended up just sitting on the floor of the living room listening to her music and chatting to pass the time.
Sitting at my laptop, I checked myself as I once again started to look around for Sophia, even if she had been gone for almost two months. Taking a moment to calm myself before starting my patrol, I logged into PHO to see what the latest gossip was.

Welcome to the Parahumans Online Message Boards

You are currently logged in, Vista (Verified Cape) (ENE Wards) (Veteran Member)

You are viewing:

- Threads you have replied to
- AND Threads that have new replies
- OR private message conversations with new rep’lies
- 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: Lung's Beatdown?**

**In: Boards ► Brockton Bay ► Cape Doings ► Villains**

**Lurker** (Original Poster) (The Guy In The Know) (Veteran Member)

Posted on April 12, 2011:

So yeah, my sources tell me that Lung and a bunch of ABB got curb-stomped by some indie Hero. All I've got is a name, Legion. Anyone heard anything more?

**(Showing Page 1 of 1)**

**Bagrat** (The Guy In The Know) (Veteran Member)

Replied on April 12, 2011:

Whoa, this is the first I’ve heard of that. Lung? The Dragon of Kyushu got beaten? By a single Hero? Since when did Eidolon come to town incognito? Cause I can't really imagine anyone else pulling a curb-stomp on someone like him.

**Lurker** (Original Poster) (The Guy In The Know) (Veteran Member)

Replied on April 12, 2011:

Well, like I said, last night. Supposedly Lung and about 30 of the ABB were getting ready to attack
somebody, only this Legion dude showed up and said 'Naughty naughty' and left the ABB lying in
the street with Lung bleeding out beside them.

**GloryGirl** (Verified Cape) (Cape Daughter) (New Wave)

Replied on April 12, 2011:

Holy …. Well, that's a thing. I haven't heard about any A-class capes showing up here in town, so
maybe a newbie? Anyone know who might have more info? Protectorate, Wards?

**Lurker** (Original Poster) (The Guy In The Know) (Veteran Member)

Replied on April 12, 2011:

Supposedly Armsmaster talked to him, for all the good that did. Assault & Battery were on site,
too. Don't know about any Wards though.

**ArcticWolf** (Veteran Member) (Power Guru)

Replied on April 12, 2011:

Depending on the time it happened Vista and Kid Win should have been out on patrol.

**Lurker** (Original Poster) (The Guy In The Know) (Veteran Member)

Replied on April 12, 2011:

How the hell would you know when they're supposed to be out on patrol?

**ArcticWolf** (Veteran Member) (Power Guru)

Replied on April 12, 2011:

Maybe because Vista actually talks to people when she's out on patrol? And she has a lot of fans
who like to keep an eye out for her. Nothing against KW, but he's new and up on his hover board a
lot, so not nearly as approachable.

**Lurker** (Original Poster) (The Guy In The Know) (Veteran Member)

Replied on April 12, 2011:

Actually, that's a good point. Maybe they need to randomize the patrol patterns or something,
cause being that predictable can't be good.

**Bagrat** (The Guy In The Know) (Veteran Member)

Replied on April 12, 2011:

Okay, so any other details? Appearance? Powerset? Tactics? Anything at all?

**Lurker** (Original Poster) (The Guy In The Know) (Veteran Member)

Replied on April 12, 2011:

Dark costume, blacks and grays. No pictures sadly. No word on powers or tactics yet.
Hodor
Replied on April 12, 2011:

I heard that a lot of the ABB needed epi-pens due to insect stings, so a Master who controls bugs?

ArcticWolf (Veteran Member) (Power Guru)
Replied on April 12, 2011:

Bugs? How the hell do you beat 'Lung!' with bugs. I can't see that happening. Gotta be something else.

Regent (Unverified Cape) (Villain)
Replied on April 12, 2011:

Yeah, we caught a little of the aftermath before the Heroes and PRT showed up. Not much to say about the fight, but it mostly looked like Legion took Lung on in HTH and kicked his ass. While capturing the ABB soldiers at the same time. I say again; Legion was the one who walked away while Lung lay bleeding out on the ground.

ICanHazKitty (Cape Groupie)
Replied on April 12, 2011:

You were there for the fight? Bullshit. You and the Undersiders are all about getting away, not fighting someone like Lung.

Regent (Unverified Cape) (Villain)
Replied on April 12, 2011:

At what point did I say we fought Lung? Aftermath, remember? Sheesh. Though Legion did call

Regent (Unverified Cape) (Villain)
Replied on April 12, 2011:

Sorry about that, Tattletale pointed out, quite forcibly, that I really don't want to piss Legion off by saying too much. Soooo, not gonna finish that last comment, even if you ask. But it was funny as hell. Still, the wrath of Tattletale is not to be risked lightly. Anywho, back to Halo. TTFN

Hodor
Replied on April 12, 2011:

Took Lung out in Hand To Hand? Captured the ABB at the same time? Maybe Legion's a duplicator or something. Creates clones of himself so he can fight multiple opponents, that might explain the Legion name.
XxVoid_CowboyX

Replied on April 12, 2011:

Creates shadow clones? Legion is a super-ninja!

Bagrat (The Guy In The Know) (Veteran Member)

Replied on April 12, 2011:

Super-ninja? Really? That's the best you could come up with?

Hodor

Replied on April 12, 2011:

I don't see Legion being some sort of super-ninja who decided to hunt down a Dragon. Besides, epi-pens and insect bites sounds a lot more like a Master who controls insects than some kind of ninja.

End of Page. 1, 2

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Lurker (Original Poster) (The Guy In The Know) (Veteran Member)

Replied on April 12, 2011:

True that. But until someone provides more info we're just spinning our wheels here.

ArcticWolf (Veteran Member) (Power Guru)

Replied on April 12, 2011:

A bit off-topic, though not really, but do you think they'll 'Cage Lung this time?

Bagrat (The Guy In The Know) (Veteran Member)

Replied on April 12, 2011:

Hard to say, no question that he's a BAMF, but not sure he actually meets the criteria for the Birdcage.

XxVoid_CowboyX

Replied on April 12, 2011:

Super Ninja

Lurker (Original Poster) (The Guy In The Know) (Veteran Member)

Replied on April 12, 2011:

Good point, he really doesn't seem to be into random killings like the '9 or some others I could mention, seems to be more about running his gang. And you have to admit, he even keeps Oni Lee
under control.

**Bagrat** *(The Guy In The Know) (Veteran Member)*

Replied on April 12, 2011:

Not to depress anyone, but I've heard rumors that Lung recruited another cape from out of state. Any ideas who it is?

**Hodor**

Replied on April 12, 2011:

No, that's news to me.

**Lurker** *(Original Poster) (The Guy In The Know) (Veteran Member)*

Replied on April 12, 2011:

Wonderful. I guess we'll have to wait and see then.

**End of Page. 1, 2, 3**

Sitting back, I closed up my laptop and thought about what I had read on PHO. As usual, it was all speculation, but with some gems buried in there. *But Regent, now that was interesting, what were the Undersiders doing there? Even if it was just for the aftermath. And another ABB Cape? Not good.*

Standing up, I put my laptop into my bookbag and dropped it on my bed before I walked out into the passageway and began working with my new technique which had me bouncing up and down the passageway without actually walking, using my power to move me even more than usual without adding normal movement on top of my space-bending.

-------------------------Legion*** Dean Stansfield ***Legion-------------------------

Okay, I wasn’t expecting that, any of it. But Amy sure did look happy. But what did Taylor mean when she said, ‘I’ll keep Amy safe’ does she think that she is in some sort of danger?

I pondered that as I attended my afternoon classes, paying only enough attention to not get noticed. I finally decided to do some discreet checking on Taylor Hebert while on Console duty this afternoon, because something was definitely off. The first time I met her I could read her emotions easily, just like everyone else I've ever met. A little dulled after Vicky smacked her with her aura, but still there. But now, she was almost unreadable, only very faint tints, not really enough to read well, just enough to see that the emotions were there. And Amy was just the same, and had been gradually becoming so for the last few weeks, though it was obvious she was happier than I've ever seen her, clearly because of Taylor; but something had changed. And that worries me. I like Amy, and had nothing but respect for what she did, and how hard she worked, and didn’t want anything bad to happen to her.

After school let out Carlos, Dennis and I headed to the PRT building in my car, Chris had a late night patrol last night and was off this evening, so he was staying to get some extra help with his math. We pulled into the parking garage a block away from the PRT building, drove down to the second from the bottom level, that was as usual, almost completely empty, triggered the remote opener, and went through to another, hidden garage and parked my car with the dozen or so other
cars there.

We had to each pass the retinal and palm print scanners, before we could enter the passage that would take us to the lower levels of the PRT building, while keeping us completely out of sight of everyone who didn’t have the appropriate clearance. Once in the Ward’s section, we got into our costumes and sat down to have a bite to eat before our shift started. Before I had even gotten my food, Missy bounced in, literally, she was apparently trying out a new technique that had her standing still, but bouncing down the hallway, into the common room and over to the buffet.

“Hi!” she said, her smile reflected in her voice.

“Well, you look happy today, what’s up?” I asked. She was usually in a pretty good mood, taking things serious but happy. Today though, it was all happy.

“What’s not to be happy about? Sophia has been gone TWO WHOLE MONTHS, and Lung got the beatdown of the century.” She picked up a plate of sandwiches, added some crackers and cheese and then literally twirled over to the table. “I’m HAPPY!” she sang.

Dennis flinched back and said, “Oh god, she’s going to sing that song, that horrible, horrible song.”

Carlos dope-smacked him on the back of the head, “I like that song, and her voice is a lot better than yours. Believe me, I know. Besides, she’s right; Sophia gone, Lung gone. It’s all good.”

Dennis just hunched down and whimpered, “But that song…”

Missy just laughed as she sat down and said, “That’s okay Dennis, I won’t sing it…right now.”

Dennis had looked up hopefully, only to drop his head to the table when she delivered her punch line.

I just snickered and high-five’d Missy, “Flawless…Victory.”

Even Dennis laughed at that.

I finished my food quickly and headed over to the monitoring Console and took a seat next to Browbeat. “How’s it going Jake? Any issues this afternoon?” I asked.

He shook his head, “No it’s been quiet. But Miss Militia stopped by earlier and told me that everyone’s to keep an eye out for E88 or the Merchant’s to try to move in on ABB turf since Lung was captured. Personally, I think they need to keep an eye out for the guy who beat him down. I read the report, but it doesn’t really say much about the fight or that cape, Legion, other than he solo’d him and only took minor injuries. I couldn’t find anything at all on him; he’s either new, or rebranded. No idea which.”

I nodded, thinking that he was probably right, then just went over who was currently out, what patrol patterns they were on, then went over the projected patrols for the next two shifts. Missy and Carlos had the first shift, and Dennis and I had the second shift. Carlos had Monitor duty after me, while Missy would get a ride home from one of the on-duty PRT agents who usually drove her home.

Once Jake had left, I made sure everyone knew I had the Console, then opened up a secondary search window and started looking into Taylor Hebert. As soon as I did, I hit an access block. I pushed back in surprise, thought about it for a moment and decided that the changes I had seen in her emotions, did in fact justify looking further. I input my ID and Clearance Level and waited to see if I could get in, or if I would need to call Miss Militia and justify it in person. Because there
was no way I was going to ask Armsmaster to let me look into someone, based on just a hunch.

Fortunately, I got past the block and could start looking deeper. The first thing I saw was that she had been in the hospital twice since the New Year’s. When I pulled her medical records, I only got the redacted summary of course, due to privacy issues, but even so it was shocking to read. Her original set of injuries were beyond gruesome, massive scarring of her entire body, a missing eye, her leg partially eaten away? What the hell happened to her? Multiple unknown infections. Christ, what could do something like that!? Admitted three weeks later for massive heart attack. Okay that’s a linked note, ID and Clearance, and in; you have got to be kidding, had a heart attack while Armsmaster was questioning her!? What did he do, terrify the poor girl into a coronary? Okay, Panacea healed her. Four days? It took four days!? That’s not possible; she heals people in minutes, not days. Christ, she must have been in really bad shape. But, I guess it does explain how they know each other; I guess you would get pretty close to someone who spent four days healing you.

Okay, moving on. Homeschooled, used to go to Winslow. Winslow, that’s where Sophia used to go, wonder if she knew her? Grades, whoa those are pretty bad, what’s up with that? She sounded pretty smart to me, when I talked with her. Let me see if I can … okay no middle school records, any notes? What the…!? A full academic scholarship offer to Arcadia? And she didn't take it?!

I turned my attention back to the Monitor map, and verified that everyone was moving on schedule and still pinging like they should. Once finished with that, I checked on Dennis, who had his homework spread out on the table and was actually working on it, without being nagged. Going back to Taylor’s history, I tried to find anything that would explain the weirdness about her emotions, but nothing jumped out at me. I was going back, closing out my searches in reverse order when I accidentally followed Sophia’s name through a link that led to her assignment away from Brockton Bay. To advanced training in Arizona? What in the world is that? Then I saw Taylor’s name again listed as a Person Of Interest in a current investigation, and as I kept reading, I started to get sicker and paler, until finally I threw myself out of the chair, grabbed the trash can next to the Console and started vomiting.

Dennis came running over and said, “Shit Dean, what’s wrong, do I need to call for a paramedic?”

I gasped out, “No,” and went back to emptying my stomach. Finally I sat back on my heels and accepted the bottle of water Dennis handed me, rinsing out my mouth I spit into the trashcan, and then went on, “Sorry about that, I read something really vile.”

“I'm guessing you did, if it was enough to make you toss your cookies,” he replied.

I got up, a bit shaky, but managed to pick the chair up and sit down in front of the Console. I pointed at the other seat and said, “Sit down Dennis, I don’t think you should read this, but I will give you the high, no the low points. First, Sophia didn’t just get transferred; she’s in Arizona undergoing 'Advanced Training', whatever that means. And personally, if my suspicions are right, I think she got off easy.”

Dennis whistled and said, “Holy shit, what the hell did she do?”

I grimaced and said, “Not 100% sure, but if I'm reading the files right, it's vile. At a minimum she broke her probation. Completely. Pretty much tortured a fourteen year old girl in her school for about a year and a half. It ended with the girl in the hospital, permanently crippled and disfigured, half blind.” I paused, gritted my teeth, and went on, “she was partially eaten. Alive. She spent months, in and out of the hospital, had at least one major heart attack, and I think, several smaller ones. I only had the summary, but it looks like she flat-lined at least three times. Fortunately, Panacea healed her up. And it only took her four days to do it.”
Dennis just sat there and said blankly, “What?”

“Four. Days.” I repeated.

“No, not that … well yeah, that too. But she tortured a girl, in school, for a year and a half, to the point of hospitalization and near death? How the hell, did the school miss this?”

I covered my face, and mumbled, “I don’t think they did; based on some of the things that were mentioned in the file, I think they helped to cover it all up. All I’m sure of, is that there is an investigation going on, and it involves Sophia’s old High School. But, I think that they knew what Sophia was doing, and made sure she could keep doing it.”

Dennis sat thinking for a few minutes, then asked, “Who else knows this, and should we tell anyone?”

I shrugged, “Miss Militia and Armsmaster know for sure, no idea about the rest of the Protectorate. None of us Wards know; I only know because I was looking into something completely different, and the records intersected. I’ll talk to Miss Militia as soon as I can; I need to give her an update about what I found and how I found it anyways. Do not let this out to anyone, especially Missy. It’s beyond disgusting. I’ll have to tell her that you know, but only because I got sick at what I read, and you found out while helping me. I’m covered because I went through proper channels, you’re covered because it was an accident. No one else is covered. And it needs to stay that way, that girl has been hurt enough; I do not want to be responsible for hurting her again. If I did, I doubt I’d survive it.”

Dennis blinked at that and asked, “What, did she trigger? I wouldn’t be surprised if she had.”

I shook my head, “No idea about that, but her girlfriend would turn me inside out, and my girlfriend would probably rip my legs off.”

Dennis just shook his head and said, “Dude, that is just uncool. Your own girlfriend? You really expect me to believe that?”

I grimaced, “If I ever did something that hurt her like that, I wouldn’t even bitch. I’d deserve everything I got. There are some things you just do not do. Lines you don’t cross. And that’s one of them.”

“Okay, close up all of your searches, make sure you’re completely logged out, then go see MM, I’ll take the Console. Is everything logged? Then just go, but hurry back.”

I nodded; made sure my search was completed, closed out and logged off. I transferred the Console over to Dennis and headed off to find Miss Militia.

--------------------Legion*** Amy ***Legion-----------------------

After the wonderful picnic lunch, the rest of the day was just a happy blur. I did manage to take some notes during my classes, but I was glad that I was routinely a week or more ahead of the rest of class.

Vicky drove us home, throwing odd looks at me, before she finally asked, “First kiss with Taylor, or first kiss ever?”

I blushed and covered my face with my hands, and mumbled, “Ever.”

“And…” she asked, wagging her eyebrows at me.
“It was wonderful, definitely worth waiting for,” I answered her unspoken question.

A few minutes later she said, “You know you’re going to have to invite her to formally meet the family, probably for dinner. And both mom and dad are going to give you the third degree about her, right?”

I just sighed and said, “I know, not really looking forward to that. Dinner will be fine, as long as dad cooks, I’ll probably tell them about Taylor at dinner tonight, as long as mom isn’t in a bitchy mood, if she is I’m putting it off until later. I might even ask Aunt Sarah for advice on breaking it to her if she’s really bad. I do not want her to get all pissy, and start with her ultimatums.”

Vicky glanced at me and said, “Yeah, good idea. I’ll back you up if you need it, I’ve met Taylor, and she seems like a really nice girl. Even if I did kind of piss her off with my aura the first time I met her. Which, I’m still sorry about.”

I replied, “Thank you. And don’t worry about the aura thing, you just surprised her, we talked about it, and you’re forgiven. We all know it was unintentional, and accidents happen. She didn’t look upset at you today, did she?”

Vicky shook her head, “Nope. Also, did she actually make the picnic from scratch? Especially the pie?”

I giggled at that, Vicky won over by Taylor’s apple pie. “Yes, she did. She is mostly self-taught, but she is a really good cook. Better than most restaurants, and far better than mom.”

Vicky snorted, and said, “I’m a better cook than mom. I at least follow the recipe.”

I just laughed at that because it was so true, mom always had to tweak the recipe she was using, with mixed results. As we pulled to a stop at home, I grabbed my book bag and followed Vicky into the house. Dad was in the living room, reading a book, but he looked a lot more engaged than he used to be. I was really hopeful that the changes we had made to his routine and the small changes I had made to his brain chemistry would continue to stabilize and improve his depression. Maybe in a month or so, we could look into getting his doctor to adjust his dosage and possibly recommend some therapy. I could only hope that it would work out the way Taylor and I had planned.

I went through my school work, double-checking all of my notes to see if I needed to change anything I had already completed. It all looked good, so I sat down with the syllabus and began working ahead again. I started with math, doing the even problems for homework and the odd problems separately for practice, which was a trick Taylor had taught me, because a lot of the tests either used the odd problems or very similar ones. Laziness on the teacher's part I guess. History was just a paper I had already finished and some more reading. I saved Biology for last; it was just some reading and prepping for the lab on Thursday.

I had everything done well before dinner, so I sent Taylor an email, thanking her for the wonderful picnic, and the kiss. I asked if she was okay with my telling my parents that I had a girlfriend, and warned her that she would almost certainly be invited to dinner.

Her reply came almost immediately, that she had enjoyed the picnic just as much as I had, that she was proud and happy to be my girlfriend, and that meeting the parents had to be some kind of rite of passage that everyone has to get through. She also said that she was going to tell her dad that we were now officially dating, which would not be much of a surprise for him, because he had made some comments about us being good together. So it was all good.
Dinner was actually pretty good, relaxed and without any stress, mom seemed pretty calm, even a little happy when the topic of Lung’s defeat and capture came up. Though she didn’t seem to have any more details about fight, just the fact that he was off the streets was a good thing. I had to keep my smile hidden, because even though Taylor hadn’t had a chance to give me many details, I knew her, I knew what she could do, so I had a pretty good idea of how the fight went. It was nice having a leg up on everyone else for once.

Mom did have a piece of interesting news for both Vicky and I.

“Girls, I wanted to let you know that on Monday the Stranger, Stephan Delos, will be going on trial. Because of his high level Stranger ability, the trial has been fast-tracked and the venue shifted to New York City.”

I exchanged looks with Vicky than asked, “Are we going to need to testify at the trial?”

Mom shook her head and said, “No, there’s more than enough evidence that shows a long term pattern of criminal activity, including a great deal of various types of pornography, so neither of you will need to testify at the trial. Nor will your ‘source’ need to testify or even provide a deposition.”

At that I let out a soft sigh of relief, which I think only Vicky noticed.

Once everyone had finished, but before we scattered, I spoke up again, “Um, I have some news too. As of today, I officially have a girlfriend.” Vicky reached over and high-fived me. Dad just smiled at me, but mom looked a little shocked.

Finally, she asked, “Really, do we know her? Does she go to school with you?”

Vicky spoke up first, “I know her, she’s homeschooled. And a good cook if the picnic she made for us today is anything to go by.”

I picked up from there, “No, you’ve never met her as far as I know. I met Taylor, Taylor Hebert, a couple of months ago and we’ve become really good friends.”

Mom seemed to have calmed down a bit, though she hadn’t really gotten upset, just surprised. “What can you tell me about her? Or her family?”

“Hmm, her mom was killed in a car accident a few years ago, so it’s just her and her dad, he’s an HR Manager and accountant for a union, not sure which one. She lives not far from the boardwalk on the edge of the docks. She had a very bad time in high school, so she is homeschooling herself now. And no, I won’t give you any details about high school, that’s private. I know and that’s enough.”

I paused for a moment in thought then went on, “Vicky’s right, she is an outstanding cook, not fancy, but really good. She’s amazingly domestic in a lot of ways, she does all of the housework, the cooking and baking, laundry and cleaning plus she can design and sew her own clothes.”

Mom frowned at that, and asked, “What about her education? Does she intend to go to college?”

I just laughed at that and replied, “Mom, she’s only fifteen, sixteen this June, and will probably have her GED before summer starts, and is also studying for several AP and CLEP exams. Oh, and several computer certifications as well. Taylor is really smart, and education is something she takes very seriously. I think she mentioned once that her mom was an English professor.”

Dad finally spoke up, “She sounds very nice. Do you think you could invite her to dinner, perhaps
Friday night?”

I just smiled and said, “Sure, I’ll send her an email and firm up times and stuff, I’ll let you know what we settle on, okay?”

Mom and dad just exchanged a look, and then mom said, “That sounds fine. And it reminds me that I need to have Alan Barnes and his family over this coming Saturday. It’s just another one of my work social obligations. It will probably be from about four o’clock and then dinner at seven. It’s a pretty standard dinner party and so should be over by 9 or 9:30, I expect.”

Vicky and I nodded, this type of thing was fairly common, and usually no worse than a bit boring, since neither of us had any interest in legal or business issues, all we had to do was be polite and wait it out. Most of the people involved were far too well mannered to geek out over the fact that we were both Heroes, so they didn’t usually ask rude questions or pry into other cape’s lives.

It wasn’t until I was almost finished clearing the table when it hit me, Barnes. “Um, mom? Alan Barnes, does he have a daughter named Emma?”

She paused as she was loading the dishwasher, and said, “I believe so, yes. Why?”

I grimaced and replied, “Yeah, that may be a problem for me. If she’s the Emma Barnes I think she is, than I should probably not be in the same house, much less the same room as her.”

Mom stood up straight and faced me with a frown, “I think I’m going to need more than that, Amy.”

I paused in thought, then said, “I need permission to say any more. But, is Emma a pretty red-head, 15/16 years old, maybe does some modeling?”

Mom nodded and said, “Possibly. She has red hair, and I believe that she is 16. I’m not sure about the modeling, though.”

I took a deep breath, let it out and said, “Okay, I’ll see if I can get permission to tell you more. I’ll be back soon.” With that I left and went upstairs to my bedroom, closed the door and called Taylor’s home number. Hoping that they had finished dinner by this time.

“Good evening, Hebert residence, may I help you?”

Taylor answered the phone, and I relaxed at the sound of her voice.

“Hi, Taylor, how are you?”

“Amy! I’m doing fine, thank you. And you?”

“I’m good, but I do have a couple of questions for you, if you don’t mind?”

“Duh. Just ask already.”

I giggled at her tone, and asked, “Okay, first can you come to dinner on Friday, maybe meet at school and then to my house?”

“Yes, I’d love to come to dinner. How dressy should I be?”

“Yes! Thank you. And how you were dressed today would be perfect.”

“Easy-peasy. Next question please.”
I laughed again, this time at her game show over-the-top voice. “Okay, this one’s a biggie. Mom has to do these social dinner things for work, and Saturday she has to have another lawyer and his family over. This time it’s Alan Barnes and his family,” I paused a moment and heard her response, “Shit.”

“Yeah, that’s kind of what I thought; I told mom that I should not be in the same room as Emma, but not why, and she wants to know more. So, how much, if anything, can I tell her?”

Taylor was silent, for almost a full minute, but before I could get worried, she finally replied, “Full disclosure, other than my trigger … well, even that if you need to. As much as you are comfortable telling her, I’m fine with. Well, maybe not our kiss, but everything else is okay.”

I giggled again, this time at her priorities, “Okay, I’ll tell her what I know about school and your medical issues, but not the trigger and not the kiss.”

“Especially not the kiss, that’s between you and me, and nobody else’s business.”

After a few more minutes of talking about much less consequential, though happier things, I hung up and went to find mom. She and dad were sitting in the living room, and I could tell that Vicky was in her room either talking to Dean, or listening to her music. Both probably.

I took a seat across from the two of them, and said, “Okay, I talked to Taylor and I can answer your questions, so fire away.”

Mom raised an eyebrow and asked, “So Taylor is why you have a problem being around Emma Barnes?”

I sighed and said, “Yes and no, because I’d have the same problem no matter who it was. Emma Barnes and two other girls orchestrated and headed an 18 month campaign of bullying, harassment and torment that ended up with Taylor in the hospital for over a month. She had been attacked and stuffed into a school locker, a locker that had been partially filled with toxic bio-hazards consisting of rotting garbage, tampons, and maxi-pads, right before that big storm in January. She spent three days and nights in there before she was rescued.”

“She was in a coma, with multiple infections; she had part of her leg, one of her eyes, and a lot of skin, literally eaten away. By insects. When she woke from her coma, she was crippled, partially blinded, and severely scarred across most of her face and body.”

Both mom and dad were starting to look sick, so I stopped and waited for them to get back in control before I continued.

“She was finally released from the hospital, withdrew herself from Winslow, and started homeschooling herself. About three weeks later, another student was injured, and accused Taylor of using a Parahuman ability to attack her. Just as an aside, she didn’t Trigger in the locker. I have no idea why she didn’t, but she had never used any parahuman abilities. Because of the possibility of Parahuman involvement, the PRT had jurisdiction and Armsmaster and Miss Militia went to question her. As best I can determine, during the questioning, she provided a record of her bullying, a stack of papers at least two inches thick, and then she realized, based on their reactions, that the girl who had been attacked, one Sophia Hess, was a Ward. I think you may know her as Shadow Stalker.”

Mom interrupted me to say, “Amy! You know you can’t just reveal a cape’s identity!”

“Mom, if I ever come across Hess, it’s a lot more likely that I’ll kill her than out her. And I am not
kidding. It took me over four days to heal all of the damage that had been done to Taylor. Four. Days. So, as far as I am concerned, Sophia Hess aka Shadow Stalker, is a dead woman walking. In any event, during Armsmaster's questioning, Taylor had a PTSD flashback that caused a massive coronary and she ended up in the hospital again.”

Mom and dad exchanged concerned looks, and dad spoke up this time, “Amy-girl, just because she hurt your girlfriend…”

I interrupted him, “No dad, not because I'm dating Taylor; I made that decision long before Taylor ever woke up, before I knew who had done this to her. Anyone who could do something like that would fit in just fine with the Slaughterhouse Nine, and isn’t fit to live.”

Mom spoke up this time, “Amy, you can’t just decide that someone isn’t fit to live, and then kill them.”

“Sure I can. I mean, it’s not like I’m going to hunt her down or anything, because; hello, healer here. But I still despise her, and I can and will refuse to ever heal her. My power, my choice. But the same goes for the other two leaders, Emma Barnes and Madison Clements. They did just as much as Hess did to torment an innocent school girl, so they’re just as guilty.”

Dad just sighed and looked a little sad and said, “Yeah, been there, done that. It really sucks, too.” He paused in thought for a minute, and then said, “Okay, you’re excused from the Saturday dinner, you and Taylor can go on a date or something. Be gone by noon, and back by eleven. And stay safe, please.”

I jumped up and hugged dad, and then mom, “Thank you so much, and I promise to stay safe. I’ll let you know our plans when we have some,” just before I ran upstairs to my room. As I left, I could hear dad comment, “Well, that’s a lot more energetic than she’s been in a long time,” before I closed the bedroom door.

I wrote Taylor a long email, letting her know everything I had mentioned to mom and dad, that Saturday was date night for us, and that I was really looking forward to seeing her on Friday for dinner.

-------------------Legion*** Madison Clements ***Legion-------------------

Monday morning I sat down next to Emma in homeroom and quietly said, “We need to talk somewhere private. It's important.”

She glanced over at me and nodded, “No problem, Music is next and we can grab one of the practice rooms for a few minutes. Any clues?”

I looked around at the other students and the substitute teacher we had had for the last week while Mr. G was out sick. “Not here, just wait, okay?”

She nodded again and sat back while we both listened as he took roll and then covered some upcoming events for the week. As I sat there I thought about Hebert, and compared her to Emma. And Emma wasn't coming out so good lately. Sophia moving away had really hit her hard and she was having to make a serious effort to look even sort of okay. It was only recently that she seemed to finally be sleeping enough to get through the days without a lot of makeup. Whereas Hebert seemed to be doing just fine, now that she was out of Winslow. Not that I could really blame her for that; who wouldn't do better out of this cesspool?

Finally homeroom was over and I grabbed my book bag and followed Emma to the music room
where we grabbed one of the smaller practice rooms so we could have some privacy.

“Okay, so what's so important that you couldn't tell me in homeroom?” Emma asked me.

“Well, you know how I was going to the Free Market this weekend?” Emma nodded her agreement. “Well, when I stopped for some lunch I saw two girls across the street getting something to eat. One of them was Hebert.”

Emma got a positively evil look on her face, one that actually frightened me a bit, and she said, “Really, she actually went out in public all scarred up and crippled? I didn't think she had it in her.”

“Yes, I'm thinking that being out in public isn't a problem for her, seeing as she isn't scarred or crippled anymore,” I replied. I hesitated than continued, “Which probably shouldn't surprise either of us, since the other girl, the one she was having lunch with? It was Panacea.”

“Panacea! Why in the hell would someone like Panacea be having lunch with Hebert?” she screeched.

“Like I would know? But, I'll tell you this much, if their little game of stealing each other's fries is any indication, they're friends. Good ones, too,” I explained. “But that probably explains why Hebert is looking so good now. Not all scarred up and crippled.”

Emma sat back and sighed, “Yeah, of course she looks okay, if Panacea healed her up. So now what do I do?” she asked herself.

I started at that, “Do? Why in the hell would you want to do anything? Especially if Panacea is her friend. Do you really want Glory Girl to find out that you're causing problems for Panacea and her friend? 'Cause I've never heard that 'Little Miss Anger Management' responded well if Panacea's in trouble or danger.”

Emma laughed a little at that comment, then said, “Yeah, good point. But still, I wonder why Panacea would even want to be around a loser like Hebert? She could do so much better than that waste of space. Oh well, time for class.”

As we left the room, and I pulled my violin case from my instrument locker, I thought about the way Emma described Hebert, the way she had always described her, and I had to wonder if maybe Panacea was seeing something that Emma had once seen but rejected after she became friends with Sophia.

Personally, I had no illusions about Sophia; she was dangerous and more than a bit twisted, what with her Predator/Prey world view and how much she liked to hurt people. Being known as one of her little minions was a hell of lot safer than being her prey. Her moving out of state was one of the best things to happen since I started High School and I prayed she didn't ever come back. Because if she did, I had a feeling that she was going to want to push the limits a lot farther than before. And I had no desire to be either a murderer or her next victim.
After Amy’s phone call and email, my day ended on a huge high. I did tell dad that Amy and I were now officially girlfriends, and that apparently we had been dating for a while, but that I hadn’t noticed.

Dad just laughed and said, “Yeah, social obliviousness, you get that from me. Sorry about that. So how did the dating thing come out?”

I blushed and said, “I uh, took a picnic lunch to Arcadia and Amy and I ate lunch together. Afterwards, I just asked her outright ‘Are we dating? I think we are, but I’ve never dated so I thought I’d ask…’ She was very nice about it, just said ‘Yes, we are dating’ and then kissed me.” As the last slipped out, I turned bright red and covered my face with one of the throw pillows.

Dad just smiled, and said, “Social obliviousness. My fault,” he got up and headed upstairs calling back, “Let me know when you have any date plans, alright?”

I just sat on the sofa, with the pillow covering my red face, trying to recover my lost dignity; I had it just a minute ago, it must to be around here somewhere, right?

I eventually decided to call it a day and go to bed. Maybe tomorrow I would look into creating my cape PHO accounts for both Pied Piper, and Legion. But those would definitely be done from the library.

Tuesday was a pretty good day; I was originally going to create both accounts, but decided to hold off on Pied Piper for a bit, at least until I actually debuted. My paranoia had kicked in again and warned me that creating both accounts so close together would be a big red flag that they were related, which would kind of defeat the purpose of having separate cape ID's in the first place.

I actually used my new pre-paid phone to create my Legion account, even though I was at the library I wasn't going to take any unnecessary chances by using one of the library computers, since you need to use your library card to login. I used two images that Amy had taken of me in my Legion costume, in the basement, against a light blue sheet. There were no identifying clues, so I posted those images to the account and the moderator told me how I could get it verified, using a local landmark and an obvious use of my power, which I promised to provide as soon as I could.

Once I had finished that, I started some more research, this time looking for local pest control companies, maybe something small or family owned. I also did a bunch of cross-checking on Nazi and white supremacy websites, looking to see if any of them were advertising on them or recommended by the sites. I tried to do the same for ABB links, but if there was anything similar to Stormfront for the ABB, I couldn't find it. The search and cross-checking actually eliminated over half of them, which was depressing. I did pick out three that looked like they might work, so I wrote down all the contact details so I could chose one later.

The next step was going to be putting myself out there, doing some 'pest control' at a hospital or school, so my name would get up online. I was hopeful that a couple of public visits like that would be enough to get a trial as an independent contractor.
I did find out where the plans for the sewers and storm drains were kept, but I had no way of getting a look at them as they were kept in the Dept of Public Works office, and only city workers or contractors with a 'need to know' could see them or get copies. It looked like they weren't even kept online for convenience either, so I couldn't even sneak in somehow and download them.

This left the hard way; tracing them out with my swarm, probably during my night runs. Joy. This was not only going to be time-consuming, but mind-numbingly boring. I think I was going to have to actually take the time to make up my own drawings of the drains, sewers and utility tunnels though, just in case I ever needed to show someone else around the underground world of Brockton Bay.

The last thing I researched was how much custom made Hero costumes cost. Depending on the material and armor value and how much Tinker-tech was incorporated in them, they could run from $10,000 to over a quarter of million dollars. My best guess was that a costume made like mine would run around $20,000 to $25,000, while Amy's would probably cost about $15,000. With even more charged for any repairs or upgrades. It was insane, since we could craft one like mine in about two weeks, even with the limited facilities we had, that meant we were looking at an income of around a half million a year. Minimum.

I really needed to talk this over with Amy, since if we went that route we were going to need to find a way to a way to deal with our finances without outing ourselves, though that wasn't much of a problem for her.

Although, I still wanted to start making more jewelry and clothing to sell at the Free Market, partly to have an obvious source of income, but mostly because I liked to make clothing, and making jewelry with Amy was a lot of fun. Plus, learning how to sell stuff at the Free Market and keep proper records would only benefit us in the future.

Shortly after the Legion account went up, my defeat of Lung was posted to my account, though with no real details, and I got a PM from All_Seeing_Eye. Context said it was Tattletale and she wanted to set up a meet, in civvies or masked. She left the location of the meet up to me, so I replied that we would meet masked, tonight at midnight, and at a U-Store-It just outside of the docks; I gave the address, to which she agreed.

I was able to finish most of the repairs to my costume before dad came home from work, and had started my Widows on making the materials for my spare costumes, while I would be using up some of the material we had on hand to get started. I could see that even if I kept it in good repair, sooner or later I would need to replace it, so it would be better to get started now. I also had them spinning large quantities of thread, and twisting it into cord for later use. I built a separate track to make jewelry cord, starting with the 1mm size, and was planning on treating and dyeing it by the spool to save time. Black first, in all three sizes, then bright blue and then crimson.

I also used the control rod to retrieve the tools that had been growing in the tanks; another set of four throwing knives and the second stungun. I then restarted the pods growing some knives and another stungun. I really needed to get another coral tank started so that Amy could set up the seed library she had been talking about, because being able to select from all of the different items Amy had designed and grown would be great, rather than just repeating what had been grown last time.

I also really needed to start earning some money, because I had a bunch of ideas for improving our equipment and supplies, and they all cost money. More space for weaving, terrariums for more exotic bugs, more aquaculture tanks for coral and jellyfish, things like that. I couldn’t keep doing everything in the basement, even if I wasn’t worried about dad finding out about my being a Cape, so Amy and I were going to need a place of our own that we could use for our crafting. And I
couldn't imagine that was going to be cheap, even here in Brockton Bay.

For my outing tonight, I didn’t even bother going to sleep, but just went to bed at my usual time of 10 pm, and quietly read for an hour using the ambient light coming in through my window, by which time dad was sound asleep, so I changed, checked my weapons and left through my window. The run to the meeting site only took 25 minutes, which let me select and gather a nice swarm on my way. Getting onsite a little early, let me continue to gather and position my swarm so they were available, but mostly out of sight. I did keep a couple of owls circling above me, and stationed cats on all the roofs. I was ready for a peaceful meeting, or a fight, their choice. I took a seat on the roof of the office building, just sitting on the edge with my legs dangling over the side, trying to project an image of casual unconcern.

Partly because I wasn't sure where else to keep them, and partly because PHO had mentioned that Bitch, or if you were being PC, Hellhound, had some sort of control over dogs and would dish out some serious hurt if they were mistreated, I had a selection of 12 large dogs that I'd picked up on my run here laying down in front of the office building.

Ever since my fight with Lung, the upper limit of the animals that I could gather into my swarm had increased, so I was no longer limited to about 35 lbs and my hope was that with some larger dogs she'd see me as the Alpha of my own pack, and no threat to hers, yet still worthy of respect.

A few minutes later, I spotted them through one of my owls, and tracked them all the way to where I was waiting. It looked like Tattletale had spotted my cats and owls, and a few seconds later, the other three were looking around as well, trying to spot my creatures. The dog monsters slowed before reaching me, so that they approached at a more reasonable pace, trying to be non-threatening I guess.

Pushing off the edge of roof, I dropped to the ground and absorbed the impact without needing to roll or anything more than bending my knees and then straightened up in front of the office, right in the center of my dogs. The two largest dogs, one a classic American mutt with no readily identifiable breed, and the other a Leonberger that was obviously someone's prized pet, stood up and flanked me while the others stayed laying down.

The Undersiders all dismounted and while Tattletale approached me with a box held out towards me in one hand, Bitch stepped away from her dogs and intently surveyed all of the dogs I had. I had four of them sit up and watch her, while the rest stayed down and watched the Undersiders.

Tattletale, her trademark grin across her face, addressed me first, “Hi Legion, we really wanted to thank you again for stopping Lung, so here is little token of our appreciation.” The box was a lunch box, an Alexandria lunchbox, just like the one I used to have when I was much younger, but in better shape and blue instead of red. I took it from her and said, “Thanks, I think? What’s in it?” I asked as I hefted the weight.

Tattletale just grinned and said, “Go ahead and open it.”

When I did, I was surprised to see that it was full of money, stacks of twenties apparently, as well as two pre-paid smart phones, still in the packaging. I asked her, “How much?”

“Two thousand dollars. Either as a one-time thank you or as a monthly retainer.”

I raised an unseen eyebrow at that, “Retainer? For what? And far more importantly, from whom?”

“For joining the Undersiders, we could definitely use some heavy firepower, other than Bitch’s dogs, and you more than qualify. We mostly do theft or corporate espionage, preferably with
limited violence, but sometimes things don't quite work out the way we would like. And our boss wants to stay anonymous. At least for now.”

I have to admit it was tempting, I could certainly use the income, but I really didn't want to step out as a 'villain', and I could probably make as much or more as Pied Piper. And that didn't even count what we could make if Amy and I started making costumes to order. “Hmmm, no, I don't think so. Nothing against you, but I have some anti-authority issues. I don’t think I would do well with someone trying to give me orders. It would probably conflict with your limited violence stand. So again, thanks but no thanks. Is there anything else?”

Tattletale looked at the other three and then said, “Not really, though I’d like to keep in touch, if you don’t mind?”

I shook my head and said, “No, I don’t mind at all, you can PM me anytime, though it may take me a while to get back to you. Just try to keep off the ABB and E88’s radar. Without Lung around, things are probably going to heat up.”

Tattletale's grin disappeared entirely and she said, “You're probably right, especially if the rumors are right and Lung has already recruited another cape for the ABB.”

I cocked my head and asked, “Do you know who he recruited?”

She shrugged and said, “Not sure, but the Tinker who held Cornell hostage with bombs has dropped out of sight, and I'm pretty sure she was Asian, which would make her a prime prospect for Lung to recruit.”

“A Tinker. Joy. I don't suppose you know her specialty, do you?” I asked her.

“Bombs or explosives, probably. At least, that's my best guess so far,” she explained.

“Wonderful. Would you be open to an exchange of information on this topic? I suspect that as a group, you are all well informed on the villain side of things, and while I'm not personally well connected with most Heroes, I know a few people who are, and can at the very least make them aware of the possible danger. In addition, I'll keep my eyes and ears open for rumors or facts concerning the ABB capes. If you're right about an explosives Tinker, one who has already used wide-scale terrorist tactics, the whole city is at risk, more than if Lung was still around.”

Grue chuckled and said, “Eyes and ears, well you certainly have plenty of them, don't you.” He looked at the other Undersiders and asked them, “Sounds like a limited alliance of convenience to me, any one have any objections or problems with this?” The others shook their heads, indicating no objections and he went on, “Alright then, Tattletale will keep in touch with you and pass on anything we come up with, and if you could do same for us that would be fine.”

Tattletale grinned and said, “Great! I'll start compiling everything I can and get it to you ASAP.”

I nodded and said, “Same here, when I have anything I'll pass it on to you.”

With that the Undersiders turned and started mounting up on the dogs, Bitch didn't. She stepped forward and looked between me and the dogs, then said, “Your pack is strong. Dog fights,” with a scowl that was obvious even under her mask.

I froze for a moment, confused at her statement, then it hit me. The dog fighting rings that the E88 ran. God knows I saw a lot of them advertised on Stormfront affiliate websites earlier and she would hate that. I nodded and pointed at Tattletale, “Let her know when and where. She'll contact me and I'll help with getting the dogs free and delivered wherever you want them.”
The Undersiders exchanged looks as Bitch turned and mounted up, while Regent just said, “Holy shit, he speaks Bitch!” Once again Tattletale smacked the back of his head. I was getting the feeling that she did that a lot, it certainly seemed like he was used to it, and even expected it.

With that they mounted up and left, after a few minutes I left as well. I headed home on a roundabout path running along the fence tops between the houses, using my owls to keep an eye out around me so I was unlikely to be surprised. I had dogs and cats flanking on parallel streets and leading me for the same reason, though I was dropping off some of them as we got close to their homes.

When I was about halfway home I spotted a small group of people outside a house in a nice neighborhood. As I got closer I could see and hear what had to be a group of E88 thugs hurling anti-Semitic slurs at the family that they had pulled out of the house. It looked like some sort of initiation, as one of the skin heads was doing most of the talking while the others just held the mother and kids as he yelled and kicked at the father, who was on the ground.

As I closed in I started pulling most of my swarm closer. I didn’t have many spiders, but I lucked out by having six bee hives and two wasp nests close by. I took control of all of them and brought them in close, but spread out in a circle and had them land on the roof tops, so the noise wouldn’t warn the E88.

It wasn’t until I was less than a block away that I realized that they had two capes with them, one was flying and had on a stylized tiger mask, and the other was dressed in leathers and wearing some kind of metal cage around her face and head as her mask. I began putting ants and small flies on everyone, especially the capes so that I could keep track of them and not get blindsided. As soon as I had everything in position, I attacked. Wasps to the hands to force them to drop their weapons, bees in the face to blind them and distract them, while I pre-positioned my cats and dogs to do the actual takedowns. It worked pretty well on the thugs, not so well on the capes. Once the stinging insects had everyone thoroughly distracted, I had my dogs and cats begin the takedowns, the cats distracting them by leaping at their faces and the dogs taking out their legs and knocking them to the ground.

I was able to sting the capes several times on both hands, but the man seemed to explode with wind, driving the bees away from his face while the woman did something else, screamed or something really high pitched that hurt both mine and the dogs’ ears and killed a lot of the bugs. In fact, it was bad enough that I actually had to turn down my hearing quite a bit, which was more disorientating than I had expected. I wasn't used to having normal senses anymore and it showed.

She also pulled out two kama and headed towards the dogs, so I had a small flock of crows dive bomb her. She was able to dive out of the way which suggested she had some sort of sonar, so I sent a staggered swarm of flying bugs all around her and had the crows try again.

The flying cape, whom I was almost certain was Stormtiger, had risen to almost thirty feet and was throwing these explosive bursts of air at my dogs that killed three of them, though fortunately not the Leonberger or the giant mutt, so while I had 3 separate swarms of bugs trying to get close to his head as a distraction, I had two hawks suicide him from almost 400 ft up. The combined impact to the back of his head and neck knocked him clean out of the sky, and it looked like he broke at least one arm and maybe a leg from landing badly, even so he was still conscious and able to fight.

Although I tried, I couldn’t get any of my creatures to successfully attack him, he was just too quick with his air blades and explosions and I think he must have enhanced senses too with the way he seemed to spot every attempt to attack him, even from behind or above. The woman was getting insanely frustrated, based on her garbled cursing, as my bugs kept interfering with her vision and
sonar and the birds were keeping her dodging all over the place. I had discovered that her sonic scream was very effective against the insects, but that by having small flocks of birds circling her, it shielded the insects partially.

As my swarm kept the capes busy, they had also finished immobilizing the thugs. Apparently there were a lot of pet dogs and cats in this neighborhood, and I was able to position 3 or 4 dogs and/or cats on or near each thug. They quickly learned to stay facedown and quiet, as any attempt to speak, move or fight was met with first a threat from a large dog, followed by either a nasty slash from one of cats or a bite from a dog. Sometimes both.

Which just left the capes, and if Lung was any indication, I was going to have to face them personally to finish this. I worked my way around the house until I was behind Stormtiger, pulled my stun gun and one baton, and then worked as close as I could along the edge of the house before I rushed him at my full sprinting speed.

As I had expected, he spotted me as soon as I got in the open and sent one of his wind blades at me, I simply had to trust my costume to protect me, which it seemed to do just fine, since the blade felt almost gentle as it hit me, and barely even cut the outer layer of my armor. I dropped to my knees and slid up to him and stabbed him in the neck with the stun gun while I smacked his good arm right on top of the his ulnar nerve, an easy target because of the mosquito I had sitting directly atop of nerve as it crossed the hard bone of elbow. I hit it hard enough to paralyze that arm, though I didn't break the bone. When I hit him, he actually spoke for the first time, shouting, "Foda-se!" I had no idea what language he was using, nor what it meant, but I suspected it was quite rude.

I pulled the trigger of my stun gun three times, severely draining the capacitor, before he seemed to finally go down hard, while the break in one arm and the paralysis of the other seemed to keep him from trying any more attacks while I stunned him. Once he was out, I holstered the stun gun to let it begin to recharge, pulled my other baton and got to my feet. I had a group of dogs hold him down by the wrists and ankles and my big mutt ready to go for his throat if needed.

Which just left the fast one, who was already on her way to attack me. I could tell that she was almost certainly a better fighter than I was, if the way she moved and the scars on her body were anything to go by, and I think she might even be a touch faster than me. Fortunately I still had my swarm to help distract her, including the Leonberger, although I made a point of keeping him just far enough back to be safe from her kamas. Between my swarm senses, and the insects that I had hidden on her costume I should be able to match her speed and experience. I hope.

“I’ll kill you, you mother-fucker,” she screamed almost incoherently as she swung her kama at me in a blindingly fast and very confusing combination. Her voice was very rough and hoarse, even worse than my swarm voice. Fortunately, the insects on all of her limbs and joints let me follow and anticipate her attacks enough to keep up with her. As I blocked the few attacks that would have hit me I said, “Yeah, that’s what Lung said, too.” I did manage to slip a head strike past her kama, though her cage-mask blocked most of the blow, but it still ended up badly dented, “I doubt you’ll do any better than he did.”

The fight went on that way for a few minutes, with neither of us getting any real advantage until she managed a combo that pulled both of my batons up high to block her attacks at my neck and eyes. Unfortunately that let her snap kick me right between the legs. Let me tell you, it isn't only boys that hurt from that.

I managed to break contact and roll back to my feet, using the Leonberger to stall her, and shifting as much of the pain as I could into the parts of my swarm that were farther away, while she laughed at me. “Fine, I guess expecting anything more than cheap shots and gutter tactics from
Nazi scum is unreasonable. So then, shall we dance?”

This time when she tried to disarm me, I let her succeed, my batons flying off to the sides, even as they landed I tasked two of my dogs to pick them up and stand by to return them later. As her arms went off to the side, it opened her up for me to grab her head cage in both hands and I twisted around as I leveraged my strength to pull her up and over my head as hard and as fast as I could. Unlike most normal throws, I wasn't counting on technique to ensure my success, I used sheer brute strength to slam her onto her back as hard as I could. I could hear the breath forced from her lungs and what had to be at least two ribs cracking, not that I let that stop me. Picking her up again by her mask, I spun and slammed her stomach first into a tree that was growing in the yard. Between the two attacks, I managed to force her to drop both of her kamas, which would hopefully make the rest of the fight less lethal.

I switched my grip from her head to her ankles and replicated an old Saturday morning cartoon I used to watch and hammered her hard into the ground twice, just like Bam Bam would do in the cartoons. I have to say that she was one seriously tough woman because after the second time I slammed her down she managed to pull out a small pistol and shoot me in the chest and face four times, luckily she missed my eye, and the bullets didn't penetrate my armor, before I slammed her face down even harder and shifted grips yet again, this time to do a shoulder dislocation. At least, since the big warning about this technique was that the risk of dislocating the joint was quite high, I figured it would work that way.

I was right. Her shoulder popped out the socket just as easy as you could imagine. She dropped her pistol when I did that so I rolled her over and pinned her down with one knee on her right wrist, and my other on the center of her chest. I then said, “You have one chance to surrender before you get seriously hurt … take it now.”

All that got me was spit on as she hoarsely said, “Fuck you.”

“You're not my type, too short and clearly you've forgotten how to bathe.”

With that I sat back and punched her good shoulder as hard and as fast as I could, just about as hard as I had kicked that rapist. Once again I got to watch as someone's shoulder joint pretty much shattered and they passed out screaming from the pain.

I turned my hearing back up to what I considered normal, and could now hear that her heart and breathing were fine, so I pulled out my knife and the spool of Widow cord and tied her hands behind her back, not really caring if it hurt her or caused more damage to the joints. Once that was done I tied her feet together and got up.

I walked over and checked on the wind cape and confirmed that he was out cold and had broken his arm, though I think his leg was only dislocated at the hip. I tied him up just like I did the woman, and decided to double-check my guess as to their identity on PHO before I called the PRT. It only took a couple of seconds to confirm their identities as two of the E88 capes, Stormtiger and Cricket, just as I had thought. Appropriate names really.

While I was doing all of that, I had the dogs holding my batons bring them to me and then find Cricket's kama and pistol and set them all down next to me. Taking my batons, I snapped them back to storage size and returned them to their belt clips.

I checked on the family that had been assaulted, and confirmed that, yes they were Jewish, and that no, other than the dad, none of them were injured, just frightened and upset so then I asked that they call Police, while I called the PRT.
“PRT hotline, state your emergency, please.”

“This is Legion, I have Stormtiger and Cricket ready for pickup. Both have broken bones, and Cricket has a shattered shoulder and may have a couple of broken ribs. Both are breathing fine at this time, and are restrained until transport can arrive. There are eight skinheads also in custody, multiple bee and wasp stings, so bring some epi-pens. The address is,” I turned to confirm the house address, “…3844 Langston. The family living there was pulled out of their house and assaulted. How long until pickup?”

“Sir, I have notified the Police Department, and two protectorate capes are enroute, ETA is…about 4 minutes, will you be present?”

“Probably, barring another emergency. I don’t plan on leaving until these skinheads and capes are arrested,” I replied. As I spoke I was watching as the mother was using a first aid kit to treat her husband’s injuries, the kids had seemed mostly unharmed, just scared and had been taken inside by the mother when she got the first aid kit.

“Alright Legion, police and paramedics have been dispatched, ETA is between 10 and 15 minutes. Please call back if there are any problems.”

“Fine,” then I hung up. I checked on Cricket again, and she was seemed to be having some problems breathing, but her color was still good; Stormtiger however, seemed to be completely out.

About a minute later I spotted two capes approaching rapidly down the center of the street, one bouncing and the other glowing and zipping, stopping, zipping, stopping; so they were probably Assault and Battery. I waited in the open as they approached, and Assault spoke first, “Damn, first Lung, now Stormtiger and Cricket, who’s next, Skidmark and Squealer? You’re gonna put us out of job at this rate.” Battery smacked him on the back of the head, to which he just said, “What? I’m just saying.”

“Don’t. Good evening Legion, can you tell me what happened here?”

“Sure, I was headed home for the evening when I spotted this family being dragged out of their house, I closed in to investigate, realized it was E88 attacking a Jewish family, likely an initiation of some sort, so I intervened. The thugs went down quickly to a few bees and some dogs, but Stormtiger took to the air so I had a couple of hawks knock him out of the sky. He broke his arm and dislocated his leg at that time, and I tased him three times before he went out.”

“Cricket was harder, her ultrasonic scream kept most of my creatures at a distance so I had to take her in melee, she is one very tough woman too, at one point she pulled out her little pistol and shot me. In the end, she refused to surrender, and with that damned cage she wears as a mask I really couldn't knock her out. That ended up costing her the other shoulder. I'm pretty sure that I broke at least two of her ribs, and possibly punctured a lung, though no blood has come up yet. I secured them, and called it in and here we are.”

Assault looked down at Cricket and asked, “Any particular reason that you didn't taze her like you did Stormtiger?”

I laughed and said, “Yeah, I used up most of the charge on him and it takes a while to recharge fully. With his ranged attacks, I considered him the greater threat to the civilians, so I took him down hard and fast.”

Battery checked both of the capes, especially Cricket, and then straightened up and came back. “Right on both accounts, they’ll need some time in the hospital, but nothing life threatening. I do
I snickered, “Zip-ties are easy to break out of, Black Widow spider silk cords? Not so much. If you can’t untie them, you’ll need sharp bolt cutters or a plasma cutter. High end Brutes might break those cords, but nothing lower. Even most knives or razors will take a lot of time and effort.”

Assault nodded his agreement, “Most new capes take a while to figure that out, and usually some embarrassment or a beating to drive it home. So how do you cut this stuff to length, ’cause I don’t see a set of bolt cutters on your belt?”

“No, no bolt cutters, but my knives are really sharp.” I pulled one of my combat knives and showed it to him before using it to pry the bullets out of my armor. As they popped out, I caught them in my hand until I had all four of them. Reaching over, I handed them to Battery, “Here, chain of custody, you saw me remove them from my armor, three from the chest and one from the face of my helmet, and now I've turned them over to proper Law Enforcement. Proof of attempted murder, I'd say. Oh, and her gun is over there.” I pointed to where her pistol and kamas lay on the ground.

Assault pulled several plastic evidence bags and black markers out of a belt pouch, handed one of each to Battery for the slugs, and then bagged her pistol and kamas, logging date/time and item description, while asking, “Can I ask what that knife is made out of, because it sure doesn’t look like steel?”

I shrugged and replied, “It’s not so much made as grown, like most of my equipment,” I pointed at my costume, “Layered Black Widow spidersilk, the armor panels are layered organic compounds, all told it’s quite a bit stronger than commercial body armor, and it’s much more comfortable.”

Both of the capes looked at each other for a moment, then back to me, and Battery said, “No wonder you could survive going against Lung, unless he had completely transformed he probably couldn’t get through your armor, could he?”

I shrugged, “Partly, the other part is he’s an idiot. He couldn’t hit me with his fire, mostly because I ripped his eyes out, and I hit him harder and faster than his regen could keep up with, especially since I had flooded him with massive amounts of Black Widow and Brown Recluse spider venom. That and I managed to sever both his spinal cord and brain stem with one of my knives, which I then left in place, which overloaded his regen to the point that he went unconscious and returned to normal.”

“I suspect that the venom was also slowing his transformation, either that or for some reason he couldn’t see me as a danger or threat, so his power worked slower. Don’t know which.”

The two of them shared another look and Battery asked, “You think that he was slower to transform because he didn’t see you as a threat? Even with all the damage you had done to him?”

I nodded and said, “Based on what I’ve read of his previous fights, when he’s faced off against multiple opponents, or a single high end opponent, he supposedly transforms really fast. During our fight, he was transforming, but other than his scales, he really didn’t grow that much. When I finally got him to his knees, he still hadn’t reached eight feet tall, although he had grown his tail.”

Assault nodded and said, “Makes sense, I guess. Bet he doesn’t make that mistake again.” He looked around at some of the animals of my swarm that had died during the fight for a moment than back at me, “I have a couple of questions, if you don’t mind…?”

“You can ask, if I mind I won’t answer,” I replied.
“Fair enough, you said you left your knife in his brain stem to mess up his regeneration, why would that matter, wouldn’t his regen just fix everything else?”

“Not really. Everything I’ve been able to find out about regeneration, says that it deals with the most critical damage first. That means that when you fight a regenerator, there’s only a couple of ways to get past the regen; either turn off their powers or overload their regeneration, and to do that takes a lot of non-stop damage, very high end damage. Shattered skulls, sliced kidneys, punctured hearts, things like that; if it’s not lethal damage, it doesn’t even count. Never hold back against a regenerator, you’ll lose if you do. By leaving the knife in place, his regen kept trying to heal that damage, which was critical and possibly lethal, so it was a high priority, but it couldn’t because the knife was in the way.”

Battery flinched at my description of the type of injuries I was willing to inflict, but Assault just said, “Brutal, but definitely effective. The other thing I was curious about was the animals that have died? Can you tell when the die?”

I looked at him for almost a minute before I spoke, weighing whether or not to answer him. Holding out my right hand, palm up in a weighing gesture, I said, “Yes. Doesn't matter what type or size, I always feel it when they are injured or die. That level of feedback is just one of the reasons that I'm so grateful that I can't even sense humans, much less control them.”

As I finished speaking, the police and paramedics pulled up, so I scattered my swarm, releasing most of the dogs and cats after ordering them to return home and wait for their owners. Turning back to the Protectorate Heroes, I said, “Well, it's been real and it's been fun, but it hasn't been real fun, so I'll see you later,” and left at a run, not rising to a sprint until I was out of sight.

I carefully maneuvered my way between houses to keep my course unpredictable as I ran for home. As I ran along the fence tops whenever possible, I used my swarm to begin tracing the sewers and storm drains, there were plenty of insects and rodents already in place, so it was easy to explore the underground as I ran. Especially since I wasn't sprinting, keeping my pace down to one I could maintain for hours.

As I made my way home, I built a mental map of all of the underground ways within my range, overlaying the normal streets so that I would be able to reproduce what I was sensing onto either a regular street map for a quick reference or into a mapping program for a better, more detailed reference.

I returned home without any problems or being spotted, and dad was still asleep as I got myself ready for bed, putting the lunchbox in my bottom drawer, under some tee shirts. Instead of using my phone, which was off with the battery removed, I set the alarm that was part of my Stranger monitor for 5:30. This was the first time I had actually used it this way, so it was a good experiment. I planned on looking for a good mapping or graphics program I could use to record everything I learned about the storm drains and sewers after breakfast. Hopefully I could find something free or really cheap; otherwise I was going to see if I could write an app that would work for me.

------------------------Legion*** Assault and Battery ***Legion------------------------

They watched as Legion took off at a run and turned a corner, then Battery spoke up over Assault's snickers, “So what do you think of him? Hero or Vigilante?”

Assault started to speak, paused a moment to collect himself, then said, “Her. That weird voice from all the bugs and birds and stuff makes it hard to tell for sure, but based on body language, I think that Legion is a girl, probably less than 18. I wondered Sunday night when she was talking to
Armsy, but tonight, talking to her personally, I’m sure. She despises him, and its personal, he did or said something that hurt her or someone close to her, but she doesn’t seem to hold it against anyone else. As for the other; Heroic tendencies with a hardcore Vigilante attitude. Cross some lines and she’ll put you down hard and fast, otherwise she’ll leave you alone and even protect you. I mean, just look at what happened here, especially to Cricket. Definitely NOT Ward material; she’s more likely to gut Armsmaster than take his orders or if I’m right, anyone else’s orders.”

Battery nodded thoughtfully as the police formally arrested the thugs and the PRT agents put both of the E88 capes on stretchers, strapped them in and carried them into a secure van to transport them to PRT headquarters for treatment and detention. Finally she spoke up, “You might be right, I certainly wouldn’t bet against either her gender or attitude, those I agree with. Smart, too. Good analysis on the fight with Lung and on how to fight regenerators. However, looking at all the animals that she was controlling, the numbers as well as the types, she is clearly a very powerful Master class cape, one who has no fear about entering melee with Brutes, Blasters, and really fast combat Movers. That’s not the norm; most Masters are pretty squishy, and can’t control their puppets and fight at the same time, while she clearly excels at both.”

They took a few minutes to speak with the family, ensuring that they were okay, then left to continue their patrol. As they moved away they picked up the conversation where it left off, “So, Master 6, Thinker 2 for multitasking, Mover 3 or 4 to be able to match Cricket in hand to hand, Brute 4 for the damage she inflicted and absorbed, I mean, did you see what Cricket's shoulder looked like? and those weapons that she grew, some sort of biokinesis for Striker 2 or 3?” Assault offered.

Battery thought about it, and said, “Possibly a point or two higher on Thinker and Brute, say Thinker 4 and Brute 5; it’s hard to say without full power testing, can’t really tell how much is her armor and how much is her, but she did solo Lung, as well as these two. And she did it the hard way, up close and personal. Might qualify for a couple of levels of Tinker instead of Striker for her weapons and armor, depending on just how she 'grows' her equipment. Depending on her range, possibly Master 8, and none of this takes into account her obvious skill and possible training.”

“Good points. Also, what she said about Mastering people? Being grateful that she couldn't senses much less Master them; do you think she's telling the truth? And why? Most capes seem to want to be more powerful, not happy to be limited in some way?” Assault asked with an unusually serious and concerned voice.

Battery thought about it for a bit, then said, “Maybe she was Mastered at some point, or suffered abuse and that Triggered her as a Master in self-defense. That might explain why she doesn't want to be able to Master other people; it may even be something as simple as being raised with decent morals and ethics. You know, simply valuing freedom and freewill. Unless she opens up and tells us, I doubt we’ll ever know for sure.”

“As for training, I'm thinking either military or LEO, maybe both; possibly a parent or older sibling instead of some organization. Reminding you about chain of custody is something a cop might do, and that saying about 'real fun' is one I've only heard military or ex-military types use. So do I file the report or do you?” Assault asked.

“I’ll do it, otherwise your speculation on her issues with Armsmaster will be included, and I’d rather not have you doing extra shifts; I prefer you at home with me, where you belong.”

“Ahh puppy, you still love me,” he quipped.

“Only sometimes, only sometimes,” she quipped back.
My alarm woke me just at 5:30, so I got up and took my shower, not even bothering with my normal exercise routine, figuring that the fight with Cricket more than made up for it.

Breakfast this morning was a large batch of oatmeal, with walnuts, cinnamon and maple syrup. One of the advantages of living in New Hampshire was that we could get real maple syrup in bulk and at very low prices. At least if you stayed away from the tourist traps, you could.

Dad came into the kitchen just as I finished serving up my oatmeal, and as I sat down, he pulled a bowl from the cupboard and dished up his breakfast and took his seat.

“So, how did you sleep last night?” he asked me.

“Eh, actually didn't fall asleep until quite late, so I got up around 5:30, grabbed my shower and started breakfast,” I replied between bites of oatmeal.

He raised an eyebrow and asked, “Any problems? You usually fall asleep a lot earlier, and then get up early.”

I shook my head and said, “No, just wasn't tired until later is all.”

“Oh, okay. Still beat me getting up, though didn't you?” he teased me as he ate.

“Well yeah, of course I did. I'm still young and energetic, not all old and decrepit like some people I could mention,” I teased back as I finished my first bowl of oatmeal. As I stood up to refill my bowl, I heard the morning paper as it got slid into the front door, so I set my bowl on the counter and fetched the paper back before I dished up my seconds.

“Here, go ahead and get started on the paper. I've got my Linux Network Security book to study, so I can wait until your done with it,” I explained.

Dad smiled at me as he started with the front page of the paper. After a few minutes he said, “Well now, isn't this an interesting piece of news.”

I looked up from my book and asked, “What is?”

He smiled at me and said, “Looks like the E88 is down two of their capes. It seems that the cape who took down Lung took down Stormtiger and … Cricket? when they got caught harassing a Jewish family. What kind of a name is Cricket anyways, especially for a Nazi cape? I thought they were all about the Norse mythology and tough sounding names?”

I just shrugged and said, “Maybe he has some sort of jumping powers?”

He shook his head and said, “She. Apparently Cricket is a woman.”

I shrugged again and said, “Oh. Well than, I've no idea why she calls herself Cricket if its not because she can jump really good.”

Dad chuckled at that and kept reading the paper in between eating his breakfast.

After that little diversion, we both went back to eating our breakfast and reading quietly. After I finished my third bowl, I put together dad's lunch from left-overs while he finished getting dressed for work. Once that was done, I got started on the dishes and my dinner preps.

After dad left for work, I went downstairs to do my morning exercises, taking the time to first put
two thick and soft pads around the pull-up bar. Most of my exercises went as usual, but when I started my inverted sit-ups, I found that I couldn't even do 50, much less the 200 I had been doing, in fact I had to stop after only 38 sit-ups, although after I had finished the rest of my routine I was able to do another 35. I set that as my new base-line, with the intent of reaching 2 sets of 100 by the end of April.

Once my morning workout was finished, I took another shower and settled down to working on my GED preps, while searching for a usable free-ware or share-ware mapping program that I could use to record my explorations of the Brockton Bay underground.

Breaking for lunch, I finished off the Shepard's Pie and last night's meatloaf as sandwiches. Checking the time, I set up dye tubs for my silk cloth, one Black and the other a Medium Gray, so that I could really get started on my next costume. Which was going to have a bit more covered with armor, even if it was actually lighter than the armor panels I was using now. Maybe a form of coral chain mail over the areas that needed to move and flex would provide increased damage reduction, and if we placed the chain mail in between a couple of layers of Widow silk, no one would know it was there, so they wouldn't know to use Armor-Piercing attacks.

Humming the melody to Bring Me To Life, I set the timer for my dyeing session and pulled out two more tubs to use to set the dyes before rinsing the silk and drying the bolts.

Just before the timer went off, I filled the setting tubs with extremely hot water and transferred the two masses of dyed cloth into the setting tubs and reset the timer. I emptied the dye tubs carefully into the sink, then rinsed and bleached them to remove all traces of the dye, before rinsing them again and then setting them up as cold water rinse tanks. If everything worked as it should, I would have plenty of time to meet Amy after school like I usually did, though the second bolt of cloth would still be in the dryer when I left.

I had to take a break from my silk working to go upstairs and set another book into the reading stand, as Thora, the cat I had taken in and was using to read for me when I was otherwise occupied was unable to swap out books by herself. Still, having her read for me while I did other things was really helping with my studying and retention.

One of the other benefits of using one animal repeatedly, like I had been doing with Thora was that she seemed to be developing a much higher awareness of her surroundings, being able to spot and classify an amazing number of people, items and events, even when I wasn't actively controlling her, but just keeping a light monitoring touch on her. I don't think she was actually getting smarter, but she was definitely becoming more aware of what was going on around her and focusing and retaining the information very much better than normal cats.

Shifting the dyed and set silk fabric into the cold water rinse tanks, I used my heavy dowel to gently agitate the fabric, ensuring that it was thoroughly rinsed. Like always, I used the other tubs for a second cold water rinse cycle, being sure to carefully wash the tubs between uses.

As I did when I was doing the initial treatment of the Widow silk, I used the drying frame while the first bolt of cloth was in the dryer, so I would save time over all. After all, even if dad came down to the basement, which he almost never did, the fact that I had something, even a bolt of cloth, in the dryer wouldn't be a problem. He was fully aware of how much I was sewing, so me dyeing or washing fabric wouldn't be a surprise.

Once I had one load in the dryer and the second on the drying frame, I washed and rinsed all the tubs and stacked them next to the deep sinks, before mopping and drying the basement floor to ensure that all traces of dyes and chemicals were removed from the floor. I did make a point of mopping the entire basement so that it stayed evenly clean.
Just around 2:00 I took yet another shower, this time to wash the worst of the smell of the dye and setting chemicals away before I got dressed to meet Amy at Arcadia. The last thing I did before leaving was to transfer the Gray fabric to the dryer, after removing and re-winding the Black fabric on the bolt, and setting the bolt on the shelf in the coal cellar and putting away the drying frame.

Grabbing my purse, I took one of the bundles of twenties that the Undersiders had given me in my purse, along with the small notebook that I had been using to jot down some ideas for Amy and I to work on. Only a couple of them were actually cape related, most of them were ideas that we might never do, or at least if we did, we wouldn't let anyone know that we were responsible for them.

Stupid PRT rules on self-reproducing life forms and what Tinkers could make. All they seemed to be good for was to make things worse for the world, even if they claimed it was to prevent uncontrollable damage to the ecology or the building weapons of mass destruction.

Riding the bus to Arcadia had become a routine for me, so I pulled out the Linux Network Security book that I had been reading at breakfast and kept studying. I attempted to map out the underground as I rode the bus, but even with stops, it was just too fast to do a decent job of mapping. I barely had time to find the insects underground when I was already losing contact due to my limited range. Clearly I was going to have to find a better method.

When the bus reached Arcadia, I put the book back into my shoulder bag. Thankfully, I was finding it a bit annoying that all of the books that I needed to study from were so big. Maybe I could find ebook versions and get a decent book reader that would fit in a normal size purse instead? Yet another thing to look into, because having to use a fairly large shoulder bag or back pack all the time was a pain. Exiting the bus, I walked over to the picnic area and took my usual seat.

Instead of pulling my book back out, I started mapping out the entire area, both underground and within the school. My range had increased enough that I could reach almost all of the school, except for a couple of rooms in the far back of the building. Interestingly enough, it appeared that there was a connection from the mechanical room down into the storm drains. At least there was a set of stairs leading down there, even if there were two heavy doors blocking each end of the staircase.

A few seconds concentration showed me that Amy was still busy writing something, even after the dismissal bell had rung, so I kept my seat and waited patiently.

Not even a minute later Vicky and Dean came out the side door and headed for where I was sitting. I looked up from my book as they approached and said, “Hi Vicky, hi Dean,” I looked past them as if searching for Amy and then said, “Amy not out yet?”

Vicky turned and looked back at the door then turned back to me and said, “Nope, she should be coming along in a minute. Anyways, you're coming over on Friday for dinner, right?”

“Of course, I wouldn't miss it for anything,” I cheerfully replied.

“Excellent, so what do you and Ames have planned for today?” she asked with a little grin on her face.

“Well, I'll have to check with Amy, but its a nice day so we may just walk to the hospital. Or possibly take the bus to the library, that's always a lot of fun.” I spotted Amy coming towards us, shaking her head and smiling at her sister's antics.
Both Vicky and Dean looked a little shocked at that statement, and Vicky asked doubtfully, “The library? Fun!?”

From directly behind her Amy spoke up, “Hey, I'll have you know the library is a lot of fun.” Vicky started and spun around just in time to see her sister wriggling her eyebrows at her suggestively.

“Amy! Don't do that,” Vicky exclaimed.

“Do what?” she asked innocently.

“Sneak up on me, you know I hate that,” Vicky said.

“Sneak up on you? I'm shocked, shocked I say, that you could even think such a thing of me.”

“Yeah, right. You love doing that, admit it,” Vicky demanded.

“Moi? Well perhaps, but really Vicky, you need to work on your situational awareness. Me surprising you is a little embarrassing, an enemy could be a serious problem,” Amy said as she walked around the two of them to give me a hug.

“Hi Amy, missed you,” I told her as I returned her hug.

“Missed you too, so library or walk?” she asked as we separated.

“Walk I think, it's a nice day and we should take advantage of it, after all you never know when we're going to have another rainy day,” I said as I leaned down to get my shoulder bag and book.

“Sounds like a plan to me. Vicky, Dean see you later, Taylor and I are going to walk to the hospital. I'll grab a bus home later, all right?”

“You two are nuts, what with all the walking you do, but whatever makes you happy, I guess,” Vicky said as she exchanged smiles with Dean before heading for the student parking lot.

Amy and I both laughed at that, then walked away, heading towards Brockton Bay General. As we reached the sidewalk, and turned left, I saw that girl from last week, Sally something, watching us as we walked together. I tasked a couple of birds to keep an eye on her and her friends, while moving some bees and flies into close proximity so that I could listen in if they talked.

As we walked, Amy reached over and took my hand, which just made me smile again, something I did a lot around Amy.

“So how was school today, I noticed you stayed behind for a bit? Any problems?” I asked her.

“Nope, I was just writing up some notes for things to talk to you about, that's all. I've got some ideas for new mods for both of us, as well as some other ideas that I really need to bounce off of you,” she explained before adding, “I think that they're good ideas, but they might be a … ah, bit iffy, if you know what I mean.”

I smirked at her and said, “Nooo, I can't possibl y imagine us ever coming up with any ideas that might be a bit iffy. Or, you know, get us in trouble. Not us, we're sweet, innocent, girls who'd nev …. oooof!” I let out a grunt as Amy smacked me in the stomach for my over-the-top sarcasm.

“Behave, you,” she said, then paused a moment to look around casually, and said, “But seriously, I do have some ideas to discuss with you. Some are mods for us, and some are, well, ideas I've had
that could maybe help make things better, you know,” she gestured wildly with her free hand, “for everyone.”

“Well now, isn't that interesting, I've been having some ideas along those lines as well. Including some possible contingency plans,” I told her with look of intense interest.

Amy looked at me seriously for a moment than smiled, “Cool, do you want to go first, or should I?”

I shook my head and said, “You brought it up first, so you go first, then I’ll follow-up with comments and my ideas.”

“Alright, well the first idea has to do with your multiple ID's; first and easiest is to change your voice, so that instead of using the mechanical voice changer its natural when you're Legion, if that's the right word, and then when you're Pied Piper you will have another voice, that sounds nothing like your voice. If we use the same type of switching that we've used in the past, you can change almost instantly. Certainly faster than you can change costumes. In addition, I was thinking that we can make a couple of other changes to your Pied Piper ID, specifically blonde hair and possible a slightly different body shape. No major changes, but enough to defeat any form of ID software.”

“Holy … you figured out how to create a Changer rating didn't you?” I asked her with a mix of astonishment and pride. “How in the world did you figure it out, anyways?”

“Pretty sure I did; it's not going to be a high rating because the alternate shapes are going to have to be pre-set, and it's going to cost a decent amount of metabolic energy for each change. Precisely how much is going to depend on just how extensive the change is,” Amy explained. “As for how to do it? You showed me how when you helped me make those alterations on the bus instead of using makeup.”

“I did? Huh. Nevertheless, this is going to be big, and it plays into one of my contingency plans perfectly.” I paused in thought for a minute and then went on, “When we get this right, I want you to setup at least one additional ID for yourself, one that will let you fade away if you need to.”

Amy looked pensive for a moment, then said, “Contingencies, right? Okay, once we figure out how to do it, I'll create my new ID, as long as you take care of background part, especially putting the right information in to the right places.”

“I don't know how yet, but I'm learning, and I'll figure it all out soon enough. Can you create new fingerprints, and maybe new retinal prints as well? Ones that are unique to each ID and that we can replicate at will? That would make things work a lot better, since people trust fingerprints.”

“Fingerprints are no problem but retinal prints, that may be a problem. I can certainly change them, I'm just not sure that I can change them back perfectly. Eyes can be a bit tricky, so I'll just have to try and see if I can do it or not,” Amy said thoughtfully.

“Well, that's a good start so what are some of your other ideas?” I asked her.

“First off, I've been doing some basic research and concept development for two new senses, electro-location and a form of passive sonar. Aside from their obvious uses I think that they might help getting around most Stranger powers. The next thing that occurred to me was to develop some new food plants, ones that won't spread freely, but with only a few plants a family could keep themselves fed, even in a hostile environment, like a desert or a tundra.”
I winced at the last item, “Yeah, the new senses sound like good ideas, but as much as I like the
idea of the food plant, I'm afraid of what the PRT would do if you made something like that.
Everything I've been able to find online says that it's almost a knee-jerk reaction to say no to
anything that can reproduce, no matter how useful or safe. Which is just stupid of them, even a few
items like that would make the world so much better than it is now.”

“Even a hint of something like that and they scream NILBOG!! and shut down whoever came up
with the idea. I actually found two Tinkers and a Striker that ended up disappearing when they
proposed something like what you're talking about. I don't think they're dead, or at least I hope not,
but I can't find anything new about them anywhere.”

Amy frowned and said, “Well that sucks, I've got a bunch of ideas for working with plants, from
food to potable water, to bio-diesel fuel or high proof alcohol, to shelters and even producing a
bunch of different medicines.” She paused for a moment then said, “Oh, that reminds me of the
other thing I thought of, I'd like to work with you to increase your effective range with your
swarm.”

“Oh, like an amplifier? That might work, especially since I've been working to boost my range all
along,” I said.

“No actually, I was thinking about modifying some bugs, cockroaches probably, to act as relay
boosters. But now that you mention it … figuring out how to give you an internal amplifier is a
good idea too.”

“Yes it is. Those all go well with some of my ideas, I think. The first one is some form of
communication between us, radio or cell phone or something like that. I have to do a lot more
research on our options, but one thing I know already is that we are going to need a source of
power, probably electrical, to power anything like that. It will come in handy for some other things
that we may create, like flight or forcefields or energy attacks,” I told Amy as I expanded on our
topic.

“If I am right in my understanding, our kidneys have a lot of redundant capacity, especially with
the improvements you've already made. So what if we use two thirds of each kidney’s volume as
electrical generators, and install organic capacitors, like you are developing for the tazer, to store
the extra power, we should then have plenty of power for those mods that need a lot of electricity.”

“Ooooh, yes! We'll need to develop some good organic conductors and insulators to carry the
power where we need it, but I think that we can put the capacitors on the inside of the ribs, or even
replace the core of the ribs, so that the capacitors are centrally located. Oh my god, the possibilities
this would open up; wireless tazers, lasers, maybe even arc-throwers!” Amy was actually skipping
with her excited words. “And when we figure out other abilities that need lots of energy, we'll be
ready to able to power anything we can emulate!”

“Alright, I have some extra cash so I'll pick up some specialty items that we can use to test the
power generated, the conductors, the insulators and the capacitors properly. I'm going out
tomorrow to do some shopping, so I'll stop at the library and pick up some reference books on
communication to see what we can work with,” I said.

“Cash? How did that happen, I thought you were running short?” Amy asked.

“Oh, I was, however I met up with the Undersiders last night and they gave me a 'Thank you' for
taking down Lung. They also asked me if I would like to join up with them. I accepted the gift, but
turned down the job. Not really my cup of tea. The gift was $2,000 and 2 prepaid smart phones,” I
explained.
“Was that when you met up with Stormtiger and Cricket?” she asked.

“No, I ran across them on my way home. Stupid Nazis had pulled a family out of their home and were beating the father, while verbally abusing the mother and children. No way I was going to let that slide, so I took them down and called the PRT to pick them up. I got to meet Assault and Battery, too. Is he always like that, sort of a joker? Umm, I also sort of got the impression that those two are in a relationship, possibly even married?” I diffidently asked her. “If that's okay to ask about?”

“Eh, borderline okay. It's kind of an open secret that they are married. As long as you don't look for any other information, no one will care if you know. Just don't broadcast it,” she explained to me.

“Ah, that may be a problem. Um, have you been doing any testing with your senses, especially the sense of smell?” I asked her.

Amy frowned, “Sort of, but nothing with smell, I usually leave it turned down. Why?”

“Because people have unique scents, and so far I haven't forgotten a single one that I can tag to an individual. And whenever I pick up the scent again, I have no problem telling who it is, no matter what they are wearing or even if they are out of my immediate sight, like around a corner,” I explained to her.

“Hmm, well as long as you keep anything you figure out to yourself, it shouldn't be a problem. So, can you track older scents as well as fresh ones?” she asked curiously.

“Sort of, but I'll need a lot more practice to be any good at it. The scent trails that I've tried to follow seem to be easy to follow for a couple of hours, but longer than that and I have problems. In fact, I get better results by using a dog's nose instead. I think that their brains are wired to be able to identify the fainter trails better than I can.” I shrugged and then went on, “I may never be as good as a dog, but I hope that I can learn how to emulate the way their brains handle scent information so I can improve.”

“Interesting. I'll have to try that out sometime. Any suggestions on how to start?” Amy asked me.

“Sure, the next time we go to a park, we could practice together following the different scent trails,” I suggested.

“That sounds like a lot of fun. Maybe this Sunday, if the weather is good?” she asked hopefully.

“That sounds like a lot of fun. I'll find a good park and bring my picnic basket, all right?”

“That would be wonderful. Hey, want to get something to drink?” she asked, pointing at a little corner market that we were approaching.

I looked over at the market and nodded, “Definitely.”

Amy opened and held the door for me, and I rewarded her with a smile and a curtsey, as I entered. We headed to the coolers in the back and picked out a cold drink for each of us. Amy beat me to her wallet and ended up paying for both drinks, which just amused me, because it had become a game for us to see who could pay first. So far we were about evenly matched, both for number of times and amount paid. As I opened and held the door for Amy, a group of teenaged skin heads, Nazi tattoos prominently displayed, swaggered in. Amy quickly stepped to my side, letting them pass by. Unfortunately, one of them stopped right in front of us.

“Hey girls, wanna hang with us, we're heading for a cool party,” he cockily asked. Amy and I just
exchanged looks and rolled our eyes.

I answered him, “Thanks for the offer, but no thanks,” I gestured with my hand, asking him to move. “Excuse us, we'd like to leave now.”

“Well, what if I don't feel like letting you go yet?” His macho posturing was starting to annoy me. Just more bullying.

Before either of us could say anything, one of the other skin heads spoke up, “Ja c k, back the fuck off, and get your ass over here, NOW!”

The boy in front of us, turned to look at his friend and said, “Huh? What's up, I'm just talking to these fine specimens of …” I was starting to get pissed, but really wasn't interested in fighting him if I could avoid it, when his friend ran over and yanked him away, saying “Sorry about that ladies, he's a moron.”

I just guided Amy out of the store ahead of me, and nodded my thanks to the other boy. As the door closed we could both hear him say, “Ja c k, you moron, that was Panacea. If you even laid a finger on her Kaiser would have the shit kicked out of you, if you were lucky. You know Victor passed the word about her. Nobody touches her, nobody harasses her. She's completely off-limits.”

“Well, what about the other girl, she was pretty hot too. She's not off limits is she?”

What was said after that was too faint to understand between the closed door and the distance. I smiled over at Amy and said, “Told you so. Anyone in E88 touches you and they'll answer to Kaiser.”

“But why?” she asked, the confusion apparent in her voice.

I explained my reasoning, “Well for one thing, doing anything to upset or anger the best healer in the world is usually considered a bad idea, because they may need your healing in the future. For another, most of the other capes around here would probably be righteously pissed at all of the E88 if one of his people hurt you. And that could be very bad for his business.”

Amy just said, “Oh,” obviously still confused and puzzled. I just smiled, sometimes Amy just didn't get how much other people cared about her.

After that we just chatted as we walked, talking about a variety of topics. Amy insisted that I give her full descriptions of my fight with Lung as well as the fights with Stormtiger and Cricket. After that I gave her a complete breakdown of everything that I had discussed with the Undersiders, my opinions of each member, and my tentative agreement to help Bitch take down dog-fighting rings.

But most importantly, I explained my agreement to exchange information concerning the possible new Tinker cape for the ABB, as well as why I agreed to do so. “Amy, if you could pass on this information to the rest of New Wave, and maybe have Vicky pass it on to her friends in the Wards and/or the Protectorate, maybe we can avoid what happened at Cornell. If in fact, the new ABB cape is the same one that bombed the university.”

Amy frowned and asked, “Everyone's going to want to know how I came by this information, how am I supposed to explain that?”

I paused than asked, “Have you ever had someone that you've healed before, offer you information or gossip, simply because you've healed them?”

“Oh sure, it's usually nothing major, and certainly nothing about ID's, but I've had them tell me
little things all the time. And yes, sometimes they've asked me to pass it on quietly if it's important enough," she explained.

“So, tell it to Vicky, making sure she knows that it's okay to pass on to the Wards or Protectorate, but that you can't say who told you because it would compromise a cape's civilian ID,” I said.

After that I also gave her an almost verbatim replay of my conversation with Assault and Battery, which only made her raise and eyebrow and say, “I'm kind of surprised you said so much to them, so why did you?”

“Disinformation of course. Everything I said was more or less true, but implied that I was the one who was growing my equipment,” I explained, “rather than by someone else.”

Amy thought about that for a moment, then said, “Ah, that makes more sense now. So, do you have any other suggestions for us to work on?”

I started in surprise, as I had actually forgotten two of my ideas until just now, “Yes actually. The first is to modify my gloves into gauntlets with retractable bone spikes over the knuckles, and some sort of pepper spray built into the underside, and secondly, I was wondering if it would be possible to craft coral chain mail that we can layer between the silk layers around the joints, to increase the armor value of our costumes.”

“The last one is kind of a biggie. I was doing some research and I found that a costume like mine or yours would normally run between $15,000 and $25,000, possibly more. And since I can make one in about two weeks or even less …” I paused to let her think about that, then went on, “and even with just the spiders I have now, I can still stockpile a lot of material while I make each costume. If we get a secure facility that has more space for tanks and equipment, I can increase my productivity by quite a bit, in many ways.”

Amy looked at me wide-eyed, “Are you serious? That's almost a half million dollars a year!”

“Yep. At current productivity levels. Once we have an established cash flow, that will only go up,” I said cheerfully.

Amy frowned in thought and said, “What about your other plans, you know jewelry and clothes?”

“Oh, I am still going to do those since I really enjoy making clothing, and making jewelry with you is a blast,” I said before continuing to explain, “Besides, me having an obvious cash flow from hand-crafted clothing and jewelry will be more deception and disinformation.”

“Oh, all of that makes sense. Though I'm still kind of stuck on half a mil a year from making costumes. The very idea is pretty unreal, you know.”

By this time, we had reached the general vicinity of Brockton Bay General, and I was looking for a place that we could eat. I kind of liked trying different restaurants instead of always eating at the same place. This time Amy pointed out a small family owned Greek restaurant that neither of us had eaten at before.

Once again, I gave silent thanks for the metabolic and digestive mod that Amy had given me. It allowed me to try making and eating so many different cuisines and dishes that I would never have tried without having that mod.

We shared an appetizer platter before our entrees were brought to us. Amy had a chicken and shrimp over penne, while I had a lovely moussaka. For dessert we had vanilla ice cream and baklava. This place definitely deserved another visit; the food was excellent, the service was fast
and friendly, and the prices seemed quite reasonable, considering the size of the portions. As usual for us, we split the bill down the middle and I made sure to leave a large tip. They had definitely earned it.

As we walked to the hospital, Amy went back to our earlier topic of new ideas for us. “I'll need to check my notes, but one thing that occurred to me is that with the insects and spiders you use in combat, some way to deliver appropriate anti-venoms would be useful. And since you may have noticed that I am a bit of a sci-fi geek, I…”

I interrupted her with a melodramatic gasp, “No! Really!? I hadn't noticed.”

Amy hip bumped me, and said, “Meanie. But yes, I really am a geek. And my geekiness gave me an idea. The Star Trek original series had a lot of spin-off material, books and things, and one of them was called the Star Trek Technical Manual. It provided technologically feasible explanations for most of the equipment used on the show, and I think that we can replicate a couple of medical items, sort of anyways. The most important one is called the Hypospray, which I see as an Auto-Injector that is pre-loaded with several different medicines that the user can choose between.”

“I'm pretty sure I can make several different ones that will give you a choice of emergency first-aid options, such as an Auto-Injector that can allow you to choose between Black Widow anti-venom, Brown Recluse anti-venom and epinephrin. A second one that would allow you to select between a paralytic, a sedative, a local anesthetic and a powerful antiseptic, with antagonists for the paralytic and sedative in case of problems. The last one would allow you to rinse out cuts and punctures and then seal them up until an actual doctor can fix it properly,” Amy continued thoughtfully.

“I'll need to figure out a good way to keep them fully charged, but that shouldn't be too hard. In fact, I wonder if they can manufacture the needed medicine on demand, rather than being refilled after use. Perhaps I can design a hip pouch that they can be stored in, that actually has a large reservoir of the base materials, as well as a power supply like you mentioned turning our kidneys into,” she suggested, “that can power everything and keep it all charged and sterile.”

I wrapped my arm around Amy and pulled her into a hug, “I was planning on carrying a small first-aid kit, but something like those Auto-Injectors would be even better. How many doses of each medicine do you think they could hold? And on the same topic, would it be possible to design something like a medical tri-corder? Only biologically based?”

Amy shrugged, “Won't know for sure until I make them, but I would think the Auto-Injector would have at least a dozen doses of each medicine. As for the medical tri-corder, I’ve got no idea if that is even possible. And if so, just what it's capability and limitations would be. We just need to make sure that the PRT never gets their hands on any of them.”

“Very true, and I have some thoughts on how to prevent that from ever happening. Self-destruct modes that activate if anyone other than you or I tries to use or examine them, or if they are away from us for more than a few minutes. Except when recharging,” I told her, “because at some point we'll have to refill and recharge them, no matter how we go about it.”

Amy smiled and said, “I love the way your mind works, constructive paranoia is a beautiful thing to see in action. I'll need to look up some specifics and get some samples before I start on these things, like getting samples of the medicines I want to use and chemical notation for the medicines I can't acquire. I may also need to take a day off next week to really work on these things; I've covered for Vicky often enough in the past, so I doubt she would have any problems covering for me if I skip a day.”
I just shook my head and said, “I guess I really have corrupted you to the Dark Side. Oh well, at least we have cookies.”

Amy giggled and said, “Oh, you definitely have the best cookies. And pies, too. Just ask Vicky! She adored your apple pie.”

I smiled at that, and said, “I'm glad, even if I didn't make it with her in mind. Let me know which day you want to come by, and I'll make sure we have all the materials we need ready to use.”

Even as I finished saying that, we stopped just outside the entrance to the hospital. Amy gave me a strong hug and a chaste kiss, and said “Well, I guess it's time for me to go. I wish I didn't have to, but I've made commitments that I want to live up to.”

I sighed and said, “I know, at least I'll see you on Friday, instead of having to wait until Sunday.”

Amy hugged me again, and said, “Very true. Oh well, I'll take what I can get, and then connive for a little more.”

I hugged her back and giggled at her words, “Yep, definitely corrupted to the Dark Side.”

With that, Amy let me go and headed into the hospital. Once again I just stood there until she went out of sight, turning to wave at me before she went around the corner. Sighing, I turned and headed for the bus stop to wait for my bus.

As I walked around the corner I headed for the employee locker rooms to change before starting work. When I opened my locker, I paused in thought for a few moments; should I just use my lab coat, as I had done the last few times, or should I use my costume, one of which I kept in my locker. It wasn't one of my new, armored ones, but it was still perfectly usable. Finally I nodded and took off my jacket and blouse and carefully hung them up, before taking out my costume and putting it on. I left the mask in my locker, because I almost never used it except during Endbringer attacks, when I used it as a breath filter.

As I closed my locker I froze, then opened it up and dug out my notebook. I wrote my self a quick note; Sinus filters, tracheal filters, self-cleaning, particulate and gas sensors, based on scent and taste? Nodding in satisfaction, I put away my notebook, locked up my locker and headed for the ER, always my first and last stops for the day.

Walking into the ER, I headed to the central desk and asked the duty nurse for the triage list, “Good evening Amanda, how busy is it tonight? Triage list, please?”

“Good evening Panacea, it's moderate tonight, only a few really bad cases, but quite a few that are moderately serious. Here you go.”

“I accepted the list with a smile, and started to go through it. Seeing two major heart attacks, I decided to start with them. The first was in room 26, and the second was in room 28. As I headed towards the first one, I caught a familiar costume out of the corner of my eye. Startled, I stopped and turned to confirm my first impression; yes it really was her.

Walking over to where she was talking with one of the residents, I said, “Good evening Othala, fancy seeing you here. What's up?”

She turned and smiled at me, “Good evening Panacea, I've decided that I wanted to do more than just the Endbringer attacks, so … I made arrangements with the Mayor's office, the police and the
PRT so that I can volunteer at the clinics and hospitals without any problems. Sort of a mini Endbringer Truce.”

I smiled back at her and said, “Well, that’s just brilliant. First night here?”

She nodded and said, “Yes, in fact I only just introduced myself to the doctor here, we were discussing were I should start working.”

I turned to the doctor and said, “Doctor, Othala and I have worked together many times before, so if you don’t mind, I’d be happy to take her around and explain how things are done here. I already have the triage list and was planning on starting with 26.”

He looked startled, but pleased at my offer and said, “Certainly, if anyone can help a cape get acclimated to our routine, it would be you. If you need anything, just let one of the nurses know.” Turning to Othala, he said, “Again, thank you very much for coming by tonight. We can use all the help that we can get.”

Othala nodded at him and followed me into room 26. Handing her the clipboard with the triage list, I double-checked the patient’s chart and addressed her, “Good evening, Mrs. Johnston, my name is Panacea. Do I have your permission to scan your health and heal you?”

The elderly woman smiled weakly at me, and said, “Of course my dear. Anything that you could do would be greatly appreciated.”

Reaching out, I took her hand and started scanning her, significant arterial blockage, badly weakened heart, incipient kidney failure. Okay let’s get started, the heart first, I observed the heart being rebuilt, stronger than ever, kidneys now, left first, wait for it … done, right kidney next, start dissolving the plaque and absorb it for repairs. I ran another scan and fixed her cataracts and near-sightedness, as well as the minor hearing loss.

Letting go of her hand, I smiled at her and said, “All done Mrs. Johnston, I think that you'll feel much better in a few minutes and once the doctor checks you over they should let you go home.” With one last squeeze of her hand I left and headed to room 28.

Looking at Othala I said, “Normally I like to get verbal consent from the patient if I can. However, I always check the patient's chart to see if they've signed a Consent for Parahuman Healing release. As long as one or the other is given, you're covered. In addition, if the patient is completely unable to give any form of consent, and no next of kin is available to do so, simply get a nurse or doctor as a witness and declare that the patient is unable to consent and in your professional opinion parahuman healing is necessary, after you do that go to work.”

Othala nodded her understanding and paused at the entrance to room 28, and asked, “Is this room next?”

I nodded my agreement and said, “Another cardiac patient. Oh, if there is anything your regeneration won’t work on let me know. Also, would it be okay if I monitor how your regen works? I’ve seen more than a few other capes use regeneration on others and there are some minor differences between them, I’m just curious how yours works.”

She laughed and said, “Not a problem, personally I've never noticed anything that it can't work on, but most of the time I've used it to fix combat trauma, not illness. It would be nice to be certain that it will work properly on everything.”

With that she opened the sliding door, and picked up the patient’s chart, the elderly black man
watched as Othala read his chart for a couple of minutes. Putting it back down, she stepped up to the side of his bed and took his hand in both of hers. I stepped up to the other side of his bed and just watched as she addressed him.

“Mr. Harris, I am Othala. May I have permission to heal you?” she asked him.

He nodded weakly and said, “Yes please, it hurts really bad.”

“I know, but the pain should ease shortly,” she gently told him. I reached out and took his other hand and watched as Othala gifted him with regeneration. Within five minutes, his heart was completely healed and the regeneration started on his other health problems in order of severity. After about 15 minutes, the regeneration faded and as I scanned Mr. Harris, I could see that all of his physical problems had been healed, but his age related issues like hearing loss and near-sightedness had only healed a little bit. I did take a few seconds to fix those back to normal, but didn't do anything else.

As I stepped back and picked up the triage list, Othala was talking to her patient, “I hope that the pain is gone now, Mr. Harris. Please listen to your doctor so that you don't develop heart disease again. They really do know what they're talking about.”

Mr. Harris laughed, already sounding much stronger than when we came in, “I'm 89 years old, miss. The healing you just gave me has made me feel like I'm only 60 again. But, sure I'll talk to my doctor and follow his advice. I wouldn't want to waste your hard work.”

Othala and I headed for the next most serious patient, who was all the way across the ER in room 5. As we walked I explained a few concerns that I had, “Othala, be sure to check if there is any history of cancer before you gift them with regeneration, if there is get a hold of me first. Some types of regeneration have very adverse effects on cancer; it can make the cancer go absolutely insane, to the point of seeing the tumors visibly grow. Hopefully yours won't, but until we can check to be sure, lets not take any chances, alright?”

Othala turned pale, and said, “Seriously? I've healed a lot of people, especially at Endbringer attacks and nobody ever said that I had caused any problems.”

“Well, that's good to hear, but for now, better safe than sorry. Let me monitor any cancer patients and I'll be able to tell you for sure.” I said as I pointed out her next patient. “I'll be in room 12 if you need me. Here, I've got the most serious ones memorized, so you keep this copy. If I have any questions I'll find you and ask.”

Othala smiled and said, “Alright, I'll call you if any of my patients have a history of cancer. Good luck.”

I smiled back and said, “Good luck to you too,” before heading off to room 12.

After 45 minutes, Othala and I had worked our way down the triage list, including dealing with the new patients that came in while we were working. Rather than wait for more to appear, we headed upstairs to the ICU/CCU to see what we could do there.

Even with the two of us working from each end of the ward, it still took almost a full hour to heal every patient, simply due to the severity of the injuries. When we finally finished with the last one, I returned to central desk and waited for Othala to join me there.

As she walked up to the desk, I asked her, “Othala, are you up for just one or two more patients tonight?”
She arched an eyebrow and replied, “Certainly, what did you have in mind?”

“A quick trip up to the pedi ward on 6, and a couple of cancer patients. Since it didn’t come up yet, I thought we should take a few minutes to test your regen against a couple of different types of cancer. Hopefully that will let us know that your version plays nice with cancer,” I explained.

Turning to the nurse, I said, “We’re done here, so we’re going up to 6 for a few minutes. If anyone needs us before 8 o’clock that’s where we’ll be.”

Five minutes later, we walked into the Pediatric ward on the 6th floor. Stopping at the ward desk, I asked the nurse for names of two of their cancer patients, preferable one with leukemia and another with some form of sarcoma.

Looking surprised, the nurse, her cheerful name tag said that her name was Alice, looked back and forth between us then said, “Okaaaay, well Angela Nieland in 22 has a cute myeloid leukemia and Jason Wyndham in 14 has osteosarcoma, in fact he’s scheduled for surgery on Friday. If you can help them, that would be greatly appreciated.”

I smiled at her and said, “That’s why we’re here. Othala has started doing some volunteer work and I want to be sure that the regeneration she grants to her patients won’t have any adverse effects.”

The nurse looked surprised at my words, “Is that possible? I thought that parahuman healing worked on everything.”

I shook my head and said, “No, twice I’ve run across regeneration that reacted badly with cancer, although I will say that most of the time it works just fine. But, better safe than sorry.” Turning to Othala, I said, “Well let’s head to 14 first, and see if you can help Mr. Wyndham. After that we’ll take care of Miss Nieland in 22.”

“Lead on, and I’ll follow you there,” she replied as she stepped up next to me.

Walking into room 14, I could see that both of his femurs were badly misshapen from the osteosarcoma. “Mr. Wyndham, my name is Panacea and this is Othala who is going to be healing you today, I will be monitoring to make sure everything goes well. I know that your parents have signed a consent form allowing us to perform parahuman healing, but since your awake, I’d like to ask you if that’s okay with you?”

The boy, wouldn’t be more than 8 years old, looked back and forth between us and said, “Wow, I get to meet Panacea and Othello? I don’t think I’ve ever heard of Othello before?”

Othala laughed and said, “O-thal-a, it basically means my home, or the home I inherit from my parents. Othello is the name of a very famous play, as well as a cape who lives down in Boston.”

“Wow, that’s cool. But sure, if you think you can make my legs better, I’d really like that, please,” he said calmly.

This time we each placed our hands on his legs, and I watched again as Othala gifted her regeneration to the little boy, and saw that his tumors were quickly receding, and no new ones were appearing. 15 minutes later, all signs of his cancer were gone, and I took a moment to tweak his DNA to ensure he wouldn’t get this form of cancer ever again.

Miss Nieland in room 22, went much the same, we introduced ourselves, asked her permission to heal her, and 20 minutes later it was finished. After the regeneration had run its course, I again tweaked her DNA to prevent any reoccurrence of her leukemia, especially since she had already
entered the final stage of the disease once.

Once we had finished with Miss Nieland, I led Othala back to the desk and said, “Well, I've got good news and bad news for you. The good news is that your regeneration works just fine with cancer, the bad news is that your regeneration works just fine with cancer.”

“Excuse me? Why is being able to heal cancer bad?” she asked curiously.

“Because now, you get help heal any cancer patients, and far too many of them are small children, which can be heart-breaking, even when you heal them,” I explained to her.

“Ah, good point. Is that why you limit your time at the various hospitals?” she asked me.

“Partly, the other part is that you're not the only one who's been telling me to cut back and take some time for me. So I have, and it's helped a lot.” I told her.

Othala smiled at that and said, “I'm glad, then. So, how often do you come to heal now that you've cut back?”

“It varies, but I try to spend an average of eight hours a week at the three main hospitals. I also occasionally stop by some of the rehabilitation centers to help the patients recover, many of them are recovering from major surgery and orthopedic repairs. The major exceptions to that is that I still heal the local Wards and Protectorate when they need it, and attend Endbringer battles and natural disasters, which can lead to extended hours,” I explained.

“That's still a lot of healing, even if you've cut back. I'm glad that I can help pick up some of the difference now. I've got plenty of free time since I've finally got my Masters in Psychology, so I'm not in school anymore and doing this just feels good.” Othala replied.

I grinned and said, “I know and I truly appreciate your help with this, besides it's a lot more enjoyable to do something like healing with someone who understands that it's all about the helping. Anyways, I'm done for the night, so I'm going to change and head home. School comes entirely too early, even if I'm caught up with all my assignments. Speaking of which, have they assigned you a locker yet? If not, I'll make sure they do, since especially during the winter, having a place to keep my coats and boots is nice.”

She nodded and said, “Yes, I was assigned one already. I don't expect to use it much, but you're right, it will be nice during the winter, or if it rains. Anyways, have a nice night and I expect that I'll see you around here or the other hospitals.”

“I'm looking forward to it, so good night and be safe, Othala,” I said as I headed for the elevator. Once down to first floor I headed for the locker room, where I changed out of my Panacea costume, carefully hung it up and redressed in my school clothes, ensured that everything was in my school bag and headed for the bus stop.
I looked up from the reports I was reviewing at the sharp knock on the frame of my open office door. Gallant was standing there, rocking back and forth as he waited. I glanced at the clock and saw that he was supposed to be still manning the Console. “Can I help you, Gallant?”

He stepped into my office and said, “Yes ma’am. I was doing some background checks on someone I had met, a Ms. Taylor Hebert and stumbled across some extremely disturbing information. I felt I needed to speak with you about it right away.”

I frowned slightly at the name, and asked, “May I ask how you met Ms. Hebert, and why you felt a need to look into her background?”

He nodded and answered, “Yes ma’am, I first met her while on the Boardwalk with Vicky Dallon. Ms. Hebert and Amy Dallon were on what I assume was a date. At the time I noticed nothing unusual, except that when she was hit with Vicky’s aura, she seemed to throw off the effects almost immediately; even before Vicky pulled her aura back in. The next time I met her was this afternoon, when the four of us shared a picnic lunch outside of Arcadia. At that time I noticed that her emotions were extremely faint, I could barely see them at all. It is something I have noticed about Panacea as well over the last two weeks.”

This was definitely a concern, “Has Panacea’s behavior changed?”

Gallant cocked his head in thought then replied, “She has seemed happier, ma’am, and more, energetic? Vicky did tell me that she has taken up a daily exercise program, as well as running a few times a week. As far as I know, she is still spending the same amount of time healing at the hospital and there's been no indication of any problems with her schoolwork.”

I sighed, “This is not to spoken of to anyone, do you understand?”

He nodded and said, “Yes, ma’am. I understand.”

“Very well, Ms. Hebert has in fact triggered, we have no idea what her powers are, and she has good reasons not to trust the PRT or the Protectorate, so I can’t really just ask. Nor are you to do so; unless she does something illegal she is to be left strictly alone. It’s the least that we can do.”

“Yes ma’am, I fully understand and agree. I also found the link to what happened to her, ma’am. I did not handle it well, I uh, I lost my lunch when I saw some of the pictures ma’am, and Clockblocker came over and helped me. I wasn’t thinking clearly and I told him about what had happened to her, at least in general terms. I didn’t let him read the records, but he does know what Ms. Hebert suffered, at least in general terms, though he doesn't know her name. He also knows that Shadow Stalker was assigned to 'Advanced Training', whatever that is. He is covering the Console for me, and I told him that none of the information is to be passed on.”

I checked the system and saw that he had correctly followed procedure to gain this information, but
that as Console operator, his clearance was high enough to access all of it. I input a couple of changes so that it would now require my specific permission before Console operators could access any of her files, or Shadow Stalker’s again. I looked back at him and said, “Very well, go ahead and fully inform him of the circumstances, but let Clockblocker know this is not to be spoken of without my specific permission, understand?”

“Yes ma’am. May I ask how we know she triggered, if we don’t know her powerset?” he asked.

“Because I was there when she Triggered. Both Armsmaster and I were there; the effects are unmistakable.”

He frowned and asked, “I thought she had a heart attack? Was her record falsified to cover up her Trigger?”

I shook my head, “No, she had a heart attack, she just also happened to Trigger at the same time.”

“Ouch, that can’t have been good,” he commented.

“No, it wasn’t. Fortunately, Panacea was able to heal her, though it took a lot longer than I had expected,” I replied.

“Four. Days. Though it does explain how they met; I had wondered,” he added.

I nodded and dismissed him, saying “If there is nothing else, return to the Console, and brief Clockblocker. Including no speculations on powers or Cape ID.”

He answered, “Yes ma’am,” before turning and leaving me to my own thoughts and speculations.

I took another look at the report of the First Contact with Legion that Armsmaster had submitted after Lung was taken into custody, as well as the forensic’s report of the rooftop where the actual battle took place. She should have triggered with a Brute or Mover powerset, she was desperate to escape us, not control us, or anything else. Legion is a fairly high-level Master, with a grab-bag assortment of other powers, but still…Master just doesn’t make sense for Ms. Hebert; she didn’t look or feel out of control, she was terrified, physically terrified. That would normally cause a physical powerset to develop, not a Thinker or Master powerset. If she had triggered in January, when she was put in that locker, Master might make sense, trying to control the animals around her, but...her injuries were too severe, and I felt her trigger, so I know when it happened.

Useless to speculate without more information. Ms. Hebert has shown no signs of Cape activity, she seems to be mostly staying close to home, except that she is now dating Amy Dallon. And isn’t that a surprise?

Legion on the other hand seems to be very active, over a wide area, and with little or no hesitation about going head-to-head with other Capes or gangs. For a newcomer, that’s pretty risky; he seems to be able to handle it though.

I sighed, and forced myself to stop speculating and went back to my never-ending paperwork; even without taking time to sleep, it was hard to keep up with it all.

---------------------Legion*** Gallant and Clockblocker ***Legion---------------------

(Monday evening, ENE Ward’s quarters)
I walked back into the Ward’s quarters, set the privacy notice and asked Clockblocker, “Anyone else here?”

He looked up from the Console and said, “No, Jake went home, and no one else is here, I checked earlier, why?”

I sat down next to him, and said, “I talked to Miss Militia, and she confirmed some things, and I reported my observations. I can brief you on some things, but if I do, it stays only between us, nobody else. Okay?”

He looked back, a seldom seen serious expression on his face, “Absolutely. What else do I need to know?”

I sighed and scrubbed my face, “Okay, you will almost certainly meet her sometime soon, since she and Amy Dallon are now dating, and she meets her after school regularly. Her name is Taylor Hebert, and according to Miss Militia, she did not Trigger when she was left in the locker. She is certain of this because she witnessed her Trigger a couple of months later. This part is absolute, no exceptions: do not speculate on her powers, or Cape ID. Personally, I don’t think she has one, but that’s just my opinion. She is to be treated as a normal civilian, unless or until SHE says otherwise.”

“I’ve met her a couple of times; she seems to be a very nice girl, however, she is also devoted to Amy, and if anyone were hurt to her, I think she would probably try to kill them. And no, I am not exaggerating. I caught her emotions once, when she thought Amy was being threatened; seriously scary. As in, wish I had been in my armor scary. With backup. But on the plus side, she was not berserk or out of control.”

Clockblocker had rocked back in his seat at my words and was uncharacteristically silent, after thinking things over for a few minutes he eventually spoke up, “Okay, so Panacea is now dating a girl; what does her sister think about that, do you know?”

I just laughed at that, typical Dennis, ignore the important facts and focus on Panacea dating another girl. “Actually Vicky thinks it’s great, she just wishes that she knew her sister had liked girls, so she could have picked better people for our double-dates.”

He frowned some more in thought, then asked, “Panacea pretty much saved her life, and put her back together after she had been crippled and disfigured, right? So is this just some sort of ‘Florence Nightingale’ thing, where she, like, imprints on the person who saved her?”

I raised an eyebrow at that, Dennis was being unusually serious and perceptive, “No, that’s not it. You know how I can ‘see’ emotions, right? Well, both Amy and Taylor are seriously into each other, and I don’t mean sexually. I mean, it’s like the other person is truly the most important person in their world; they interact just fine with other people, but there is only one person who really matters to them. It’s actually nice to see, compared to most other couples around.” Even though I now have to do it the hard way, without my power to help me see their emotions, it’s still painfully obvious how they feel about each other. That hasn’t changed since the first time I saw them together, if anything I’d say it was even stronger and they’re closer than ever.

He nodded, and said, “Okay then, no speculation, and treat her as a normal, non-cape if I ever meet her. Speaking of that, how will I recognize her anyway?”

I just laughed, “Just look for the girl holding Amy’s hand, with the adoring look on her face.”

“Taylor or Amy?”
“Both, actually.”

At that, he reviewed what little had happened since I left, and turned the Console back over to me and went to finish his homework before we needed to head out on patrol.

----------Legion*** Amy ***Legion----------

(Wednesday evening)

While riding the bus home, I spent some time thinking about what Taylor had told me about the Undersiders, and the possibility that Lung had already recruited a new cape for the ABB. Especially a Tinker, one who might have an explosive specialty. I finally decided to pass this rumor on to Vicky to pass to the Wards, and mom and dad so they could tell the rest of New Wave; probably at breakfast, unless everyone was at home tonight when I got home.

Getting off the bus at my stop, I took a moment to stretch then opened all my senses to the max, especially my sense of smell. Taylor was right, it was amazing as well as a bit over-whelming, as I started to sort through and identify all of the different scents that I could detect. All of the different meals that had been eaten along the street that night, the trees and flowers, the people who were out for a walk or had passed by recently, even the trash that was bagged up and waiting for pickup.

I stood there for a couple of minutes before I headed for home, still parsing all of the different scents as I slowly walked down the street. As I approached my house, I could scent mom, dad, Vicky and … Aunt Sarah? I wasn't certain that it was her, but I could tell that there was someone else in the house who had a similar scent to mom's. That was when I realized that I was also using my hearing to listen for clues to help me sort the scents, actually integrating and combining all of the input into a coherent whole.

Shaking my head, I dialed all of my senses back to a more comfortable level and stepped into the house, greeting everyone.

“Hi mom, dad, Vicky,” seeing Aunt Sarah sitting on the sofa with Vicky, I greeted her too, “Hey Aunt Sarah, what's up?”

Vicky was looking over a city map, so I assumed that she was planning out patrol routes, either hers or Dean's, but Aunt Sarah wasn't paying attention to the map, instead she had her feet up on the coffee table and was reading a small tablet. At the sight of her feet on the table, I glanced at mom and saw that, yep, she was gritting her teeth again. Mom hated it when people put their feet on the table, and Aunt Sarah did it all the time, just to get a rise out of her.

I tried not to grin too much, but instead hung up my coat and set my book bag next to the stairs and headed over to the sofa. I didn't know what was going on, but aside from the rumor I needed to pass on, it looked like something was going to happen, and I didn't want to miss it.

“Vicky, budge over,” I said as I nudged her foot with mine. She looked up from her map, smiled at me and slid over next to Aunt Sarah. Sitting down, I looked at everyone in turn then asked, “Okay, what did I miss? New patrols? New villains? Hot gossip? Come on, spill.”

Aunt Sarah laughed at me and said, “Nothing quite that good, just some routine news that I wanted to pass on, that's all.”

I stared at her for a moment, then looked at her feet on the table, “Right. Routine news. Now I'm really curious. So, what's the news? Unless you already covered it, then I'll just tease it out of Vicky later.”
She smiled and said, “It's mostly an update from the PRT about what happened to Lung, Stormtiger and Cricket. Officially, all three were taken down by the same Hero, Legion, so they've designated him as high B-rank, low A-rank. Approach with caution, extremely dangerous, but unlikely to attack other Heroes. He's been spotted a few times at night, never during the day, moving across the rooftops.”

At that Vicky looked up from her map, “Extremely dangerous? I thought that was only used if a cape had used lethal force or weapons? Not just because they beat someone, even someone like Lung?”

This time mom answered her, “It's because of how Legion defeated Lung. Not just that he did.”

Vicky and I exchanged looks, then Vicky asked, “So what exactly did Legion do that's freaking everyone out?”

Aunt Sarah sighed, then said, “As best I can tell, from the official reports, he took Lung down with knives. Basically, he inflicted so much damage that Lung's regeneration couldn't keep up and he went unconscious and reverted to his human form.”

Vicky looked a bit stunned and just said, “Oh.”

I frowned in thought, trying to decide if I should speak up, then said, “Not buying it. There had to be something else going on. Lung's regeneration is the most powerful I've ever heard of, bar none. Aside from the adaptive aspect, not even Crawler's regen is as strong once Lung gets going. Unless Legion was continually cutting off both of his arms and legs and probably doing a lot of other damage, Lung should have been able to come back from that without too much difficulty.”

Dad gave me a weird look and asked, “Amy-girl, how do you know that? You've never even met Lung OR Crawler, right?”

I shook my head and said, “No, but I've dealt with a lot of regenerators over the years, and well, regeneration is weird so I've read up on it as much as I can. I've even gotten access to some classified PRT reports on both Lung and Crawler, they covered a number of fights, as well as an analysis of their regeneration levels. Based on who Lung's fought, and the amount of damage he's been able to deal with, he should have been able to take any amount of knife damage and heal it instantly.”

Mom and Aunt Sarah exchanged a funny look, then Aunt Sarah asked me, “Amy, just how many regenerators have you dealt with, and where?”

I paused for a moment's thought, then said, “207, not counting the ones that Othala helped. And at Endbringer fights, of course. I've attended 10 of them since I triggered, and a lot of the capes that I've healed have had varying levels of regeneration. And although every single one of them has had some sort of difference in how their regen works, …” I paused for emphasis, then went on, “each and every one has focused on the most critical damage first, and then heals in descending order of damage. Some faster, some slower, some have trade offs or limitations, but it all seems to work about the same. Which tells me that something else was going on with Lung.”

Mom sighed and said, “You're right. We left out a few details.” Vicky just rolled her eyes and snickered, but mom went on, “First, Legion is a Master who can control small animals and insects, and he apparently used them to extensively poison Lung. Second, he is, in addition to being a Master, both a Brute and a Mover, and he used his knives to, ah, unman Lung, then he apparently pithed him.”
“Ewww! He peed on him!?" Vicky asked in disgust.

At that I lost it, and just fell back on the sofa laughing, as I realized that Vicky had no idea what pith meant. The adults in the room gave me the weirdest looks as I laughed at Vicky's misunderstanding. Finally, I calmed down enough to say, “Vicky, don't you remember dissecting that frog last year? When you stuck the needle in the back of it's skull, that's called pithing, it's a way of paralyzing and humanely killing the frog.”

Vicky looked a bit sheepish, as she admitted that she hadn't actually done that part of the assignment. “Um, well Jessica wants to be a doctor, so she did that part. I just kept all the records.”

I tried to restrain my giggles, with limited success and asked mom, “So, Lung survived right? I didn't get a call to help heal him, so I have to assume that his regeneration managed to keep him alive and repair the damage?”

Mom sighed and said, “Yes, he's apparently fine now, though he's in a maximum security cell at PRT Headquarters, awaiting trial.”

Aunt Sarah spoke up, “Right now, they're trying to figure out just what to charge him with. He does have a number of charges that were previously filed against him, but most of them are actually fairly minor; assault and battery, property damage,” I elbowed Vicky at that one, making her jump in surprise, “racketeering, and so on. No capital crimes, so even though a lot of people want him in the Birdcage, they may not actually be able to send him there. We'll have to wait and see.”

Dad looked around the room and asked all of us, “So other than Lung, is there anything else we should know about?”

We all looked back and forth at each other, but no one seem to have anything to say, until I spoke up, “I have a couple of things that came up; first off, Othala has made arrangements to be allowed to heal at the various hospitals and clinics without interference from anyone; Police, PRT or Heroes, so if you see her at any medical facility, or on her way to or from one, leave her alone. Secondly, and this is still a rumor, but supposedly Lung has recruited a new cape for the ABB. It may be the Tinker who tried to hold Cornell hostage, and blew up all those bombs.”

Dead silence. Vicky was actually the first to respond to my news, “Holy fu…” The look on dad's face was enough to make Vicky clap her hands across her mouth and mumble, “Sorry.”

After giving Vicky a long, hard look dad spoke to me again, “How did you find out about this, Amy-girl?”

I smiled, partly at Vicky's faux pas and partly at how aware and in-touch dad was today, and said, “Oh, Othala was in the ER when I got to the hospital, so we split the ER and ICU between us, then I verified that her regen was okay to use with cancer. After that I came home.”

Again, the adults exchanged looks and this time mom spoke up, “Where did you hear the rumor about the new ABB cape, Amy?”

I just arched an eyebrow like Aunt Sarah did, and said, “Lot's of people that I've healed have told me things, usually gossipy tidbits, but sometimes it's things that are more important. This time I was asked to pass it on, so that everyone has a heads up. A bomb Tinker sounds pretty scary to me, and I suspect to the one who passed me the word as well.”

Dad had a concerned look on his face and asked me, “Backing up for a moment, Amy-girl, are you sure Othala's not going to let her ideology get in the way of her healing people? You know that the
Empire is pretty virulently racist.”

I just giggled at his question, “Othala? Ideology? Pffft. She's no more racist than I am; people are people, we all bleed the same. Besides, I've never seen her even hesitate to heal someone, white, black, brown, yellow, rich or poor, it's all the same to her.”

Mom looked conflicted for a bit, then asked me, “Can you tell us who gave you the information about the Tinker?”

I shook my head, “Possible Tinker. They weren't sure about that. And no I can't; this isn't the first time I've been given tips for the PRT; I just usually pass them on to Battery or Miss Militia directly, because people trust me not to talk out of turn. This one though, it affects us all so I thought you should know first. I can pass it on, or any of you can. It doesn't matter to me, one way or another. If I get any more information, I'll be sure to pass that on as well.”

Aunt Sarah was the one who answered me, “Yeah, you're probably right; a reputation for discretion is a lot more important than knowing who asked you to pass the word. They're probably only passing it on for someone else, anyway. If no one objects, I'll contact Miss Militia and let her know what the latest rumor is, I'm sure that'll make her happy.” She glanced at Vicky and I, then stood up. “I'll head home then and call the PRT from there. You two take care now, and keep safe.”

We both stood up and hugged her goodbye and watched her leave by the front door, and then leap into the sky as she headed home.

After a moment, I walked over to where I had left my book bag, picked it up and headed upstairs. “Mom, dad, I'm going to check over my homework, unless you need something else?”

Mom shook her head and said, “No Amy, that's fine…oh, do you need anything to eat? Or did you grab something at the hospital?”

“No, I'm fine. Taylor and I had some Greek food for dinner before I started my shift. It was pretty good too; if you'd like I can point it out the next time we're near the hospital. I'm looking forward to trying the moussaka next time, though the penne with shrimp and chicken was very good,” I explained as I started up the stairs.

Vicky headed into the kitchen, calling back over her shoulder, “Anyone want something to drink? I'm getting some water.”

“No thank you,” mom replied while dad asked, “A tea if you don't mind?”

I could hear Vicky as she acknowledged mom and dad's requests even as I walked into my room. I unpacked my school books and notebooks and did a quick check to make sure I had everything ready for tomorrow, repacked them and changed into shorts and a sports bra so I could do my exercises in comfort.

Before I was even half-finished, Vicky came into my room and flopped down on my bed. She lay there watching me quietly until I started my one-hand pushups, and then she spoke up. “Since when can you do one-handed pushups? Those are supposed to be really hard.”

I looked up at her and smiled at her in between push-ups, “Two. Weeks.” As soon as I finished that
set of exercises, I started on the next which were my situps. Again, I did the full two minute set rather than counting them off like we had to do in gym; using my internal clock was also much easier than trying to keep an eye on my alarm clock while exercising. Finally, I was able to start on my running in place. I would have preferred that Vicky not be watching me, but really it wasn't like it actually bothered me. Not anymore.

At last I finished, and said, “And done!”

Vicky just laughed at me and asked, “That looks pretty intense, but how come you don't do more? I mean most of the people who work out during gym, seem to go a lot longer than that, and they all seem obsessed with being able to do high numbers of each exercise.”

I opened my dresser drawer and got out clean undies and my pyjamas, while answering her. “Remember what I said about how I was my own personal trainer? I know exactly how to do each set to achieve the maximum result. I don't need to go for high numbers of reps, that only cause damage rather than improvement, and I'm not a guy who's trying to impress the other guy's with how 'strong' I am.”

As I finished speaking, I slipped into the bathroom and started the shower. Turning back to Vicky, I went on, “anyway, I'm going to grab a shower and then get some sleep. Unless something big comes up, I'll see you in the morning, all right?”

Vicky nodded as she rolled off my bed and slipped through the bathroom into her bedroom, “Yeah Ames, I'll see you in the morning. And who knows, maybe I'll figure out a way to actually exercise too, then we can do them together.”

I laughed at that as I climbed into the shower and said, “Sure, just as soon as you figure out how to turn your powers off long enough to actually do the exercises.”
often, but you're right, I can't remember a time when she made a mistake like that.”

I smiled at him, then went on, “The bad news that Amy brought up is that there is rumor that Lung has recruited a new cape for the ABB, and it may be a Tinker, possibly the same Tinker who held Cornell University hostage with all those bombs.”

Once again this news silenced the room. After almost two minutes, Neil dropped his face into his hands and said, “Wonderful. That's just what this city needs, a Tinker who's also a terrorist bomber.”

I sighed my agreement, and continued, “Anyway, that's the important news that I have, and I will be calling Miss Militia to pass the news on. Does anyone have anything they need to talk about before we call it a night?”

Crystal looked at Eric for a moment, then said “Well, since we're talking about Amy, I've got some good gossip about her. If anyone's interested, that is?”

Neil snorted and said, “Go ahead Crystal, I can tell that you're dying to tell us, so…”

Crystal actually bounced on the sofa in excitement, “Well, Vicky's diligent efforts at trying to find Amy a boyfriend notwithstanding, Amy has managed to get herself a girlfriend all by herself.”

I laughed at Crystal's enthusiasm and said, “That's actually not much of a surprise dear, but if I may ask, her girlfriend? Is she tall and slender, with dark curly hair?”

Crystal looked stunned for a moment, “Uh, yeah she is, how'd you know?”

“Possibly because I suspect that I met her before they became girlfriends. Her name is Taylor, Taylor Hebert, and she seems to be quite nice.”

Crystal pouted at that, and said, “Well pooh. I was hoping to surprise and amaze you with this gossip, and now you tell me you knew about it before I did.”

“Suspected Crystal. I didn't actually know until just now.” I stood up and clapped my hands together, “All right, normal night time routine, I'll be in my office talking to Miss Militia, so if you need me for anything, wait until I'm done, alright?”

My family answered all at once, “Yes dear.” “Sure mom.” “No problema.”

Smiling at my family's antics, I closed the door to my office and sat down at my desk before calling Miss Militia.

“Miss Militia, how may I help you?”

“Hi Miss Militia, it's Lady Photon.” I said.

“Good evening, Lady Photon, how can the Protectorate help you tonight?” She asked me, her smile obvious in her voice.

“Actually, I have some information that Panacea asked me to pass on to you. Specifically, that Lung may have already recruited another cape for the ABB, and it's believed to be the Tinker who exploded all those bombs at Cornell earlier this year.”

I could hear as Miss Militia drew in a deep breath, “Oh dear, that's not good. Did she have anything else to say about this cape?”
“No, just that the rumor was out there. She did say that if she hears anything else she'd pass it on as soon as she could.”

“Of course, Panacea has always been very conscientious about the tips she passes on to us. Very well, I'll be informing the Protectorate and PRT about this and asking them to keep an eye and ear out for anything more about this new cape, and I'll be sure to pass it back to you ASAP.” Miss Militia said.

“Thank you very much, Miss Militia. I hope that the early warning and working together will let us minimize the threat of this new cape, and if there's nothing more I'll let you get on with your evening.”

“And you as well, good night Lady Photon,” Miss Militia replied.

“Good night,” I said as I hung up the phone.

---------------------Legion***Miss Militia ***Legion--------------------

( Thursday morning, ENE PRT HQ)

After a long night researching the Cornell bomber and contacting some of my more reliable contacts in the Brockton Bay underworld, I had at least a start on gathering any available information about the new ABB cape. I had also gotten two confirmations that Lung had in fact recruited a new cape, though no one knew who it was yet.

At 5:30 I wrapped up my work, checked the current patrol status and headed up to the helo pad on the roof to fly out to the Rig for breakfast and the morning briefing.

The vehicle I was using was a prototype that Dragon and Armsmaster had collaborated on, that was apparently based loosely on a small VTOL design from the '90's that had never actually been successfully flown, mostly due to poor management rather than bad design. It was only a two seat craft, but so far it had performed quite well, at least during all the trials, and I had approval to use it locally for rapid deployment within the city as part of the Testing and Evaluation for general deployment. I was especially pleased with the Auto-Pilot, which was remotely monitored by Dragon, which allowed me to debark and send it away until I needed it.

Pre-flighting the VTOL took less than 10 minutes, and could be reduced to less than 2 by using the onboard computer to perform most of the needed checks. However, doing so when there was no pressing need was foolish, especially considering that it was still a prototype; I had a life-long belief that Murphy's Law could only be countered by careful attention to detail, and never depending on luck if I could possibly help it.

Flying out to the Rig took me just over 15 minutes, as I kept my speed down to barely 110 miles an hour and mostly followed the roads, so that I could test some of the sensors to look for street-level incidents. To date I wasn't satisfied with the results, as the sensors depended on too much computer support and displayed far too many false-positives and missed too many actual incidents. Armsmaster claimed that further improvements to the sensor suite would fix the problem, but Dragon and I disagreed, feeling that at this time, proper utilization required a trained and experienced operator dedicated to only working with the sensor suite.

Landing on the Rig was easy, the semi-automatic controls ensuring a nearly perfect landing, with no bounce or delays. Taxiing over to one of the smaller parking spots, two of the PRT troopers chained the VTOL down while I went through the shutdown checklist. Once finished, I debarked and left the troopers to handle the refueling and connect the external power cable.
Heading into the Rig, I made my way to the cafeteria to get some breakfast before the morning briefing. Picking up a tray, I got in line and started selecting the food I wanted to eat. A couple pieces of fruit, a vegetable omelette and an english muffin joined my large mug of tea. Looking around for an empty seat, I saw no one that I felt like sitting with, so I simply chose an empty table off to one side.

Due to the early hour, only a few other people were eating at this time, mostly troopers who were coming on shift and a few maintenance types on break. When I finished, I scraped my tray, placed it on the conveyer, refilled my mug with fresh tea and headed for Conference Room 2 to get ready for the morning briefing.

I sat down in my usual seat and looked through my briefing notes while I waited for the rest of our team to arrive. The first to arrive was Velocity, with Dauntless and Triumph right behind, two minutes later Assault and Battery walked in and took their usual seats. While we waited for Armsmaster to show up, quiet conversations started up with Ethan trying, and succeeding, to make Dauntless blush with his repertoire of off-color jokes.

Exactly at 7:00 am, Armsmaster walked in and took his seat. With no more than a cursory greeting, he started the briefing.

“Good morning. The first item to be addressed is the patrol schedule,” he handed a list of the new patrol routes, times and personnel to Velocity who passed them on to Triumph; as they were handed around the table, Armsmaster continued, “as you can see, personnel and times are still the same, but I've modified the patrol routes to reflect new crime data and projected trouble spots. Be especially vigilant for any movement across the normal territorial boundaries, any one of the big three gangs could be tempted to move against any of their rivals.”

As he went over the new routes, explaining which locations were most likely to be sources of trouble, I tuned out his voice, knowing that I would be able to recall his words whenever I needed to, so that I could consider the ramifications of the new ABB cape, including the meeting with Director Piggot I would need to have after this briefing finished.

Finally, Colin finished covering the new patrol routes and the updated threat rating for Legion and had answered the few questions that had come up. When he looked to me for my input prior to closing the briefing, I nodded and spoke up.

“Last night I received a call from Lady Photon, she was passing on a tip that had been given to Panacea yesterday, presumably while at the hospital. Please understand that this is still a rumor, but I have confirmed that the rumor is out on the streets with two of my own informants. Apparently Lung managed to recruit a new cape from the ABB. It is possible that this cape is a Tinker, and the fear is that it is the same Tinker that tried to hold Cornell University hostage.”

As expected, Ethan responded first, slamming his head onto the table and saying, “Great! And since Lung is in custody, there's no one to keep the Tinker under control.”

Velocity sighed and said, “Okay, I've got patrol at 8 o'clock, but I'll make a point of talking to a few of my more reliable contacts and see what they can come up with.” He looked around the table and went on, “When you talk to your contacts, make sure that they know to be very, very discreet. With Lung in custody, you know the ABB is gonna be on edge and looking for a fight.”

The rest of the team nodded agreement and stood up to leave and start their day, or head to bed as the case may be.

As I followed Colin out the door, I told him, “I'll take care of briefing the Wards this afternoon
when they start arriving; I'll ensure that they are clear that they are to only listen, not ask any questions either in or out of costume.”

He paused and turned to face me, “Thank you Hannah, I appreciated it; if you need me I'll be in my workshop until noon, then I'll get some sleep before this evening.”

I smiled at him and pulled my scarf up over my face and said, “You're quite welcome Colin.” Well, that's a surprise, he almost never says please, thank you or apologizes; not unless someone reminds him, that is. I wonder what brought that on?

--------------------Legion*** Taylor ***Legion------------------------

(Wednesday evening through Friday evening)

The rest of the week went pretty quick, with very little action during my nightly runs; I spotted a few other Capes patrolling a couple of times, but didn’t interact with them, nor did I spot any criminal or cape activity.

Thursday afternoon I went out and did some shopping and other errands, I picked up some patterns, fabric and notions so that I could do some sewing as practice for designing and selling costumes to other Capes, as well as selling hand made clothing at the Free Market. I also shopped at a few electronic and hardware stores and picked up a good digital Volt Meter, a MegOhm Meter and a compact O-scope. I picked up each of them at different stores, including Sears and Wal-Mart. I paid cash for everything, and picked up a large plastic tool box and some basic tools to fill in the gaps from my salvage runs and what dad had at home.

After that, I had my hair trimmed and styled and bought a new pair of shoes to go with the outfit I was planning on wearing to dinner Friday. Even with running all of my errands, I was still home well before dad got off work, and had the roast ready to eat by 6 o'clock, with all of the fixings that should go with it.

The more I considered starting a business to make and sell armored costumes, the more I thought I would stick with Heroes and Rogues for now. I might even sell to the Protectorate, though I was going to run that idea past Amy to make sure I didn't shoot myself in the foot. I definitely wanted to have some practice before trying to sell anything unique; the costumes I made for Amy and I really didn’t count; I copied hers, and both of mine took several attempts.

We still hadn’t decided on what we were going to do on Saturday, but I was checking out advertisements in the weekly Phoenix and Bay Happenings, as well as online to see if anything caught my eye.

Finally, Friday afternoon came. I was once again waiting for Amy outside Arcadia, trying not to pace around, so I did some Tai Chi meditation to help me calm down. At last, a couple minutes after kids started rushing out, Amy and Vicky walked through the doors, surrounded by a small group of friends; at least they were all talking together. Amy smiled and ran ahead of the group and hugged me.

“Hi Amy, I missed you,” I said as I returned her hug. As she released the hug, we both slipped our arms around each other and waited for Vicky and the others to catch up with us.

“Hey Taylor, are you two walking, or do you want a ride?” Vicky asked us. I looked at Amy and she just said, “It’s a nice day, I’d rather walk home, just let dad know we're on our way, alright?”
Vicky just smiled, shook her head and said, “I have no idea where you get the energy these days, you are either running or walking everywhere it seems.”

I answered her, “After the winter we've had, it’s nice to be able to get outside and enjoy the sunshine; besides exercise is good for you, Miss ‘I can benchpress a truck’, some of us need to keep active, you know.”

She smiled at us and said, “Yeah, I do know. Sometimes my powers get in the way of doing things normally, so I guess you’re right, enjoy it while you can.”

I exchanged concerned looks with Amy, and she reached out and placed her hand on Vicky’s arm and asked, “Vicky, is everything alright? Did something happen in class?”

She shook her head, and said, “No, just thinking some deep thoughts, that’s all. Anyway, enjoy your walk; I’ll take the car home. Just give me a call if you want me to pick you up, okay?”

Amy nodded and said, “Alright, we’ll call if we need to be picked up, you drive safe, okay?”

Vicky just waved her agreement and headed towards the Arcadia parking area, while we started our walk to Amy’s house. It was only about six miles, so wouldn’t take that long, and we would be there by 4 or 4:30 at the latest. We spent most of the walk, just holding hands and discussing the different topics that we were studying.

I told Amy about the tests that I had scheduled, that I was hoping to take my GED at the end of April and the SAT and ACT in May and June. My first computer certification tests were scheduled for April 24th, for MS Word, Excel, and Powerpoint. I planned an all day marathon, with the goal of achieving Expert in all three. I fully intended to achieve a wide base of computer certifications, and these were just the start.

“Wow, I’m starting to feel like I’m falling behind here, you’re really pushing this aren’t you?” she said worriedly.

“Yes and no. I really want to learn as much as I can, and computers and software is something I really enjoy, as well as being good at. Look at you though, you may be working mostly with a high school curriculum, but I’m well aware that in biology and medicine, you’re working at well beyond college level. I’ve seen the books you read, and the material that you're studying is med-school and beyond. I checked.”

She blushed and tucked her face against my shoulder, like she always seemed to do when she felt embarrassed. “I don’t want to just be defined by my power, I want to really understand what’s going on, and to be able to discuss it with the doctor’s I work with. I hate it when one of them treats me like I’m an idiot and worthless without my power.”

I stopped walking and wrapped my arms around her and said, “I know exactly how you feel. Some of them probably do think that, that without your powers you don’t know anything, but really, that just proves their ignorance. I will admit that having powers does give some advantages, but without studying and really thinking about the material, it would be meaningless. It’s our brains that make the difference, not our powers; I mean, think about what we’ve accomplished together in the last two months, both of us together planned out the enhancements, designed a whole series of biologically-derived weapons, created defenses that have never even been imagined before, much less created.”

“And you know that we haven’t reached our limits yet, that’s why learning is so important, the knowledge in non-bio fields has paid off how many times when developing our mods? My armor,
your hidden built-ins, the weapons, our mental shields; all of them needed knowledge that did not come from our powers. I sometimes think that you and I together, are teaching ourselves how to be Tinkers, without the normal limitations that Tinkers have, needing to work only in their specialty and stuff.”

Amy looked up at me and said, “Thank you, thank you for reminding me that I’m more than my power. That learning is important, and why it is. Which reminds me; we've talked about this before, at least a little, but I’m not sure how to carry it out. A lot of capes can fly, some with technology and some with their powers, and I want to figure out a way for us to do it too. Do you have any ideas on discreet ways to study it, without breaking cover, so to speak?”

I smiled and bent down and kissed her, we hadn't kissed a lot yet, but that definitely deserved one. “Maybe, let me think about it,” With that we continued with our walk, only with our arms around each others' waists now. “You get carried by your family, right?”

She nodded and said, “Yes, usually Vicky, but Crystal and Aunt Sarah as well sometimes, Eric really isn’t that strong of a flier; wicked good with his force fields though.”

“Okay, then try this out, whenever one of them carries you, and you need to try to switch it up, really try and watch their power from before takeoff until after landing. See how it effects their bodies, what changes when they start flying and what changes when they stop, and then later we can compare and contrast between each flier and maybe develop a way to create or modify structures to emulate it.”

“Energy will be an issue though, because we won't be using the normal source of parahuman powers; if we can do this at all, we'll need a separate energy supply. I can’t imagine it’ll be cheap in energy terms, so even the idea we came up with to use the kidneys as generators may fall short of what we need. I’ll start a brainstorming list that we can work on this weekend, okay?”

Amy smiled and said, “That sounds like a wonderful idea. I've already started a list of possible Changes for us, depending on our needs of course, but I have a set of Changes for both Legion and Pied Piper that should make discovering your civilian ID nearly impossible. And speaking of wonderful ideas, do you have any for tomorrow?”

I laughed and said, “Actually I do. Do you like basketball? Or going to concerts?”

“Yes, very much so, to both. What kind of music did you have in mind? And where; details dear, details are good, I like details.”

“Lord’s College is hosting the first game of the Northeast playoffs, the game starts at 2:00 pm, and should be finished by 4 or 4:30. We can have an early dinner, and then back to the college for a concert at 6:30. It’s supposed to be a mix of classical, jazz and contemporary, including vocalists who are supposed to be quite good according to the reviews I’ve read. How does that sound to you?”

Amy positively glowed, “That sounds absolutely perfect. But dinner is on me, alright?”

“Sure, you can make the reservations tonight for 5:00 pm tomorrow, if you know where we are going.”

We continued with our walk, stopping only once to get some drinks and as we walked I noticed some more overwritten gang tags on the buildings along our route, away from the main street, most of them for gangs that I didn’t recognize, but E88 seemed to be covering many of them. I was a bit concerned, mostly for Amy, but when I asked, she explained that for the most part, the E88
thugs stayed out of sight during the day, but after dark it was another story.

I decided that I wasn’t willing to stop holding her hand because a group of bigots had issues with who I loved, and publicly showing it. Other than some mean looks, no one said or did anything about our holding hands.

We walked up to Amy’s house a little before 4:30 pm, and taking a deep breath, I went in to ‘meet the family’.

Amy’s mom was still at work, and I had already met Vicky and her dad, so I hoped that it wouldn't be too stressful. After everything those bitches had put me through, even with time to heal and Amy's help, I was still finding things and words that triggered flashbacks, and I was really hoping to avoid having one tonight during dinner.

Amy did the introductions again just like the first time, “Dad, I’d like to introduce my girlfriend, Taylor Hebert; Taylor this is my dad, Mark Dallon, also known as Flashbang.”

I held out my hand to Mr. Dallon and said, “Mr. Dallon, thank you for having me to dinner. It’s a pleasure to meet you again.”

He smiled and said, “We’re pretty informal here, you can call me Mark if you’d like. We’re having a roast tonight and dinner will be at six if that’s alright?”

I nodded and said, “That’s fine, would you like any help? With anything really?”

“No, I’ve got it under control, it’s Vicky’s day to set the table, so have Amy show you around and just relax until dinner time.”

I nodded and Amy took my hand, and we both followed Vicky as she proceeded to give me a guided tour; we started by going upstairs and she showed me the four bedrooms plus the master suite, and the two bathrooms that were between them, each of the bathrooms even had a door into the hallway, and were quite well laid out, with a small closed off toilet, a large enclosed shower and two large sinks. It was almost like having two master baths. At the opposite end of the hallway from the master suite there was a small sitting room with a nice view of the backyard, with a small sofa and two stuffed chairs; there was no TV, but it did have a nice built in sound system.

Back downstairs, the living room was fairly large and looked like it was used as much for formal entertaining as it was for the family, there was a small half-bath, another small sitting room with a TV and stereo, a home office, the kitchen and dining room. Surprisingly, considering how formal the living room was, the dining room was actually quite large and very informal, with a rustic, country style that blended well with the adjoining kitchen.

Vicky then led us down to the fully finished basement, which had a large family room with two sofas and a couple of recliners, a home theater at one end, and a nice stereo in an entertainment center and shelves full of books, board games, and old toys, likely from Amy and Vicky’s childhood. She showed me the laundry room which also had the furnace and central A/C, there was also a full bathroom, a guest room and a short set of stairs that led to the backyard.

She led us out into the back yard to the patio, grabbing the cushions for her chair out of a large plastic chest as she walked by it. Amy grabbed the cushions for the loveseat, handed them to me and then picked up some small pillows to go with the cushions. We put them on the loveseat, tied the little corner ties and made ourselves comfortable, cuddling up close.

Vicky headed into the kitchen to help her dad with dinner preps and to set the table while we were
getting settled, she came back outside as we finished, so she sat down and asked, “How was your walk, did you have any problems on the way?”

I answered her, “No, it was really nice, one section was a little sketchy because of the E88 tags, but Amy was right, no one said or did anything. It gave us a nice way to have a conversation while enjoying the good weather.”

Amy spoke up, “We talked a lot about our studies, what we liked and disliked about how schools teach, and Taylor’s upcoming tests. It was just nice.”

Vicky blinked a few times, then asked, “Tests? I thought you were being homeschooled? You still have to take tests if you’re being homeschooled? That bites; you probably have homework too, don’t you?”

I laughed at her, “Yes, Vicky, I have homework. I also have to take tests, and complete my assignments, I even have to write essays and papers. Just because I’m homeschooling, that doesn't mean that I still don’t have to do the same types of things that you have to do. I just don’t have to put up with the public school…crap, that I used to. It requires a lot of self-discipline and organization on my part, but really I much prefer it.”

She frowned in thought then asked, “So…who grades your homework and reads and grades your essays, if you don’t have a teacher to turn them into…what do you do?” It was obvious that she was very puzzled and confused with the idea of what I did, not having a teacher to turn to.

“Well Vicky, it depends. For example with Math, I have teacher guides that have the correct answers already worked out, so once a week I go through all of my Math work and check it all at a one time. Most of my other work is done with essays and papers, and I usually have my dad read through them to give me feedback and his opinion.”

“The state Department of Education has tests for homeschooled children that cover all of the curriculum standards, so I go to the Central Library every two weeks to take proctored exams to check my progress, which the state maintains a record of, as well as providing me with a report on each test. At home I keep all of my work organized by course, including my essays, papers, assignments and test reports, so that if I need to, I can literally ‘show my work’ to the Board of Ed.”

“I am also studying for computer certifications, which requires taking tests at Certified Testing Centers. I plan to take most of the advanced education tests and professional Certification Exams at Lord’s College, which is close by, and keeps everything simple. Once I can afford it, I plan to go to college there; it has a decent CS program, and it’s History program is outstanding. Their science department isn’t the best at the post-grad level, but is considered above average for New England at the undergrad level. It’s local, it’s a decent undergraduate education, and as a local resident I should be able to afford it.”

Vicky just stared at me in shock, while Amy just giggled at her expression and I waited for her to continue. Eventually, she said, “Wow, you really have it all planned out, don’t you? Umm, if you don’t mind me asking, how old are you, what grade are you in?”

“I don’t mind you asking; I’m 15, my birthday is in June and I am in 10th grade officially. However, I’ve pretty much completed all of the state requirements for graduation, and plan on taking my GED at the end of the month. My pre-college testing, SAT and ACT’s are in May and June, and once I’m actually accepted at Lord’s college I’ll be able to take my AP and CLEP exams, so I can get some of my core requirements out of the way.”

Vicky just sat there with her mouth open, like she wanted to say something, but couldn’t find the
words. Finally, after a couple of minutes of silence, during which Amy and I began having a thumb war to wile away the time, she said, “Holy shit! You’re going graduate before you’re even 16!? And you’re teaching yourself? I wonder if you’d be ready to graduate college already if you went to school and had teachers to help you?”

When she said that I flinched as images of Sophia knocking me down the stairs while Gladly watched and then just turned and walked away, of Blackwell’s look of contempt and disdain as I tried to file a complaint against those bitches, and so much more filled my mind and forced me to remember what I had endured at Winslow, until finally Amy pulled me into her arms and held me close as I shook and tried desperately to hold back my tears, stroking my hair and she just **GLARED** at her sister. “Drop it Vicky, Winslow screwed her over and I will never let anyone treat her like that again!”

Vicky softly said, “I’m sorry. I don’t know what I said, but I’m really sorry for it, and I’ll try not to do it again.”

Still shaking, I turned to face Vicky and said, “It’s not your fault, you had no way of knowing, but…sometimes I still have nightmares about that place.” I took a few slow, deep breaths, trying to calm myself, then said, “Amy, could you explain it to Vicky? She should probably know, just so she doesn’t ask the wrong questions or say the wrong thing.” I then mumbled quietly, “PTSD sucks.”

Amy kissed the top of my head and said, “I’ll explain it to her, don’t worry, okay?”

I just nodded and let Amy hold me tight as I tried to bring my shaking under control.

-------------------------Legion*** Amy ***Legion------------------------

“Okay Vicky, you may have actually heard about some of this, so I’ll try to fill in the blanks, however, I need you to promise me not to shout or even raise your voice, and no matter what, you can’t take any action about this. And keep your aura under control, I really don’t want dad to notice and come out while I’m explaining this. It’s being handled by the legal system, and we do not need anyone screwing up the case with good intentions. Alright?”

Vicky nodded, looking at Taylor who now seemed so small and helpless as she was held protectively in my arms and said, “I promise, no shouting, no flying off the handle. I’ll keep my aura dampened and I’ll let the lawyers handle it.”

I took a deep breath and began, I tried to remain calm and professional, but it was really hard. I began with how it had started almost 2 years ago, being very careful not to name any names, explaining just how small her locker was, and just how toxic and deadly the waste that filled it had been, and then how the snow storm trapped her there for 3 days while no one had bothered to even make an anonymous call, her coma and just how horrific her injuries had been. I made a point to say that the school administration had completely ignored Taylor’s plight, and many of them were facing serious legal consequences because of it.

I was very clear on how terrible her condition was even after being released from the hospital the first time, and then what she had done to pull herself back together until Armstmaster basically terrified her into having a massive heart attack. I reminded her about me being in Canberra for so long, and the stand down that mom had insisted on, and how it basically took me four full days to heal Taylor and restore her to her pre-locker condition. It took me about 20 minutes to tell the whole story, and by the end of it Vicky was in tears, her hands covering her mouth to hold her crying inside.
While I waited for Vicky to recover, I just held Taylor in my lap and rubbed her back and stroked her hair to calm her down and relax her. At some point during the telling of her story I had pulled her completely into my lap so I could comfort her properly without even realizing it. It took Vicky almost ten minutes to pull herself back together by which time I had Taylor calmed down completely; it definitely helped that I could touch her properly and we had our link to help.

Vicky had gone into the rec room to wash her face, and she brought a couple of warm, damp wash clothes, a hand towel and a small mirror to help us wash our faces and repair our makeup. Fortunately, neither of us wore much makeup beyond lipgloss and Vicky had gotten both of our purses, so Taylor and I had what little we needed.

After the revelations, the three of us just sat quietly until I heard mom’s car pull into the driveway, “Damn, mom’s home,” Vicky looked around, puzzled by my statement, “Taylor sweetie, time to move, let’s not shock mom too much the first time she meets you; come on sit down next to me, okay?” Taylor nodded and smiled a bit shakily as she stood up, straightened her skirt and blouse, then sat down next to me, looking as if butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth. I kissed her cheek gently, and said, “You look beautiful, just like always.”

Vicky cleared her throat and changing the subject, asked, “So, do you have any plans for your date tomorrow, or are you going to wing it?”

Taylor leaned against me for a moment, then straightened up and said, “Yes we do, we are going to the first playoff game at Lord’s College at 2pm, an early dinner that Amy is keeping a surprise, then a musical evening also at the college until around 9pm, after that I’ll bring her home, then head home myself.”

Her eyes widened and she said, “Whoa, that sounds like a really good date plan, much better than what Dean usually comes up with; he’s going to have to up his game if he wants to keep up.”

About then Mr. Dallon called us in to the house to get ready for dinner, I started to pick up the cushions intending to put them away, but Taylor stopped me saying, “No, leave them out please, I’d like to come back after dinner and enjoy the evening, alright?”

I smiled at her and said, “That sounds like a really good idea, so let’s just go inside.”

Once inside, I introduced Taylor as my girlfriend, I think she really liked hearing me say that, just as much as I liked saying it.

“Mom, I'd like to introduce my girlfriend to you; Taylor this is my mother, Carol Dallon, also known as Brandish. Mom, this is my girlfriend, Taylor Hebert,” trying not to be too formal.

Mom smiled and held out her hand for Taylor to shake, “I’m very glad to meet you Ms. Hebert, I’ve been looking forward to meeting you ever since Amy told us about you. If you would like, you may call me Carol.”

Taylor carefully shook mom’s hand and said, “I'm very happy to be here, thank you for having me over to dinner, Mrs. Dallon… I mean, Carol.”

Once the introductions were over, mom headed upstairs to get changed for dinner, since she hated to eat in her business clothes. I stepped over to Taylor and gently rubbed her back to try and help her get rid of some of her tension from being around new people.

While Vicky helped dad serve dinner to the table, we went upstairs and used my bathroom to wash up for dinner, then came back down to the dining room and sat down to eat.
Other than a little tension, just from Taylor meeting mom for the first time, dinner went well. Dad had made a nice pot roast with garlic mashed potatoes and glazed carrots. After we had finished, Vicky served us a tasty peach cobbler with vanilla ice cream for dessert. While we enjoyed our dessert, Taylor and I explained our plans for our Saturday date. I think both mom and dad were surprised at the dichotomy of going first to a college basketball playoff game, and then to a classical music concert. I think Taylor and I confused them a bit.

After dinner, we again surprised both of my parents by simply standing up, clearing the table and doing the dishes, all without saying a word and with perfect coordination. It was something we did regularly at her house, and out of habit, we had just started doing it here, that and because Vicky had set the table and helped dad with getting dinner ready. When dad started to protest, saying that Taylor was a guest, we just laughed and said that we were used to doing the dishes together at Taylor's house, and we saw no reason not to continue our routine here, since it worked so well.

Once the dishwasher was running, the big pans soaking and everything wiped down, Vicky asked if she could start a fire on the patio as that was where we intended to relax and invited mom and dad to join us if they liked. Mark gave his permission, and said that they might join us later.

Once Vicky had the fire started, which was an actual wood fire, and not gas, we settled back into the seats we had used earlier, and started talking again, only we stuck to much safer topics; movies, music and dating. Vicky kept trying to get us to blush, and succeeded more than once, but it was all in good fun, and then we started swapping dirty jokes, but in the end both Vicky and Taylor agreed that I had the best selection of good dirty jokes, most of which I had gotten from the doctors I worked with, many of which I used to make Vicky blush.

Eventually I explained where I had gotten all of my jokes from, telling them that when they let their hair down and thought they couldn’t be overheard, doctor’s told the best jokes, rough but funny.

We were having such a good time, that it was almost 11 o’clock before we realized it. Taylor started to panic, because she had planned to be home by 11, but there was no chance of that now, most of the bus routes were already closed, and she could never make her transfer to get home, much less get home on time. Vicky however, had a couple of options ready for her; first, Taylor could call home, let her dad know that she’d be late and that Vicky would drive her home and second, Vicky could carry her and fly her to her house and have her home on time. Taylor was very obviously torn about what to do.

-------------------------Legion*** Taylor ***Legion------------------------

I didn’t want to be late, but I also didn’t want to just leave Amy here. I turned to Amy and asked, almost plaintively, “Amy, what should I do?”

She smiled at me and said, “Just call Danny now, ask him which he would prefer, if you were driven or flown, let him decide what he wants you to do.”

So that’s what I did, after apologizing for the late call and explaining my options, I asked him if he had a preference. It didn’t take more than a few seconds, before he said, “If she doesn’t mind, have Amy’s sister drive you please, I’m not sure if I’m up to you flying tonight, besides you’re wearing a skirt.”

I laughed, thanked him and promised that Vicky would drive safe. Hanging up, I gave Amy her phone back and the three of us went back into the house. When we went into the living room to get our purses, Mrs. Dallon was still up, reading through some files from work; she looked up from the
papers in surprise, checked her watch and said, “Oh dear, it looks like we all lost track of time, let me get my keys and I’ll give you a ride home.”

Vicky spoke up quickly, “Don’t bother mom, I’ll take Taylor home with Amy, then we’ll come straight back, you can keep working on your files while we do that, it’ll be easier all around.”

She looked torn for a moment, then said, “Very well, all of you, stay safe, don’t be in too much of a hurry, I’d rather you took a little longer and stayed safe, alright?”

We all nodded in agreement and getting our purses, we trooped out to Vicky’s car, an older sedan, that was a soft gold color, Amy and I sat in the back, with her in the center so that we could stay very close. Vicky just smiled at us, asked for directions to start with and headed towards my house. She turned the radio on, searched for a few minutes to find a classical station, turned the volume on low and left us in peace.

Amy and I didn’t say much, just held hands and enjoyed being together, Vicky only had to ask for directions at the very end, since she had been to my house before, both by car and by flying. When she pulled to a stop in the driveway, Amy got out with me, and walked me up to the front door.

“I had a wonderful time, Amy, thank you very much for dinner and be sure to let your parents know I had a very good time.”

“I will Taylor, I had a wonderful time too, and I am definitely looking forward to our date tomorrow.” As she finished speaking we both moved at the same time and shared our first real ‘goodnight kiss’. It finished far too soon for my taste, but I had high hopes for tomorrow.

I asked her, “Please send me a quick txt when you get home, I’ll turn my phone on until then, alright?”

She nodded, gave me another quick kiss and got back into Vicky’s car, in the front seat this time, and waited until I had closed the door before they left.

I leaned against the door, closed my eyes and sighed, “Wow…”

“I guess dinner went well, then didn’t it?” Dad asked from the sofa he had been sitting on when I came in.

I slowly smiled and said, “Oh yes, very well indeed. I’ve met Vicky and Mr. Dallon before, but this was the first time I met her mother and she seems to be nice, too. And I am definitely looking forward to tomorrow. Though I do expect to be home earlier then today, we had all lost track of time while we were talking. We were out on their patio and they had a really nice outdoor wood fireplace for atmosphere; it was quite nice.”

He laughed and asked, “Any problems with bugs?”

I laughed back and said, “Not really, it’s too early for many bugs, and I really didn’t notice any around to bother us. Later in the summer may be another story.”

I helped dad close up the house and we both headed to bed. I had no intention of going out tonight or tomorrow night either. My attention and focus was strictly on Amy for now. I found it amusing, that I, who had always assumed she was straight, was so utterly drawn to another girl. I still didn’t think of myself as gay, because I wasn’t particularly attracted to other girls, any more than I was attracted to boys. Only Amy had my attention; I wasn’t homosexual, I wasn’t heterosexual, I was simply Amy-sexual.
With that thought, I set my alarm clock and went to sleep.
Chapter 19

Author's Note:

A few things to cover here. First, I apologize for the delay, but between a new clinical trial, two hospitalizations and a VERY nasty chest cold, I'm having problems with reading, much less writing. Second, I try to answer all of the reviews that are submitted, but I can't if they are submitted as 'Guest' reviews. Please sign in so that I can answer them. Third and specifically, TJG, please, please, please login for your reviews! I would love to PM with you about your ideas, but sadly, I cannot. You have wonderful ideas and it is almost painful to not be able to respond to them. Another option is for you to PM me directly so that we can talk, even if it's only to exchange email addresses if you don't want your FFN account to have PM's normally active. Lastly, this is a longer than normal chapter, with lots of character development, but very little action; partly from what I wanted to cover and partly from how much time I spent on it in bits and bobs. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

----------------------------------Legion*** Taylor ***Legion----------------------------------

When I woke early Saturday morning, I dressed in my running clothes and went for a long run, keeping to the quieter sections of the city, intentionally avoiding trouble. I headed for the beaches, intending to map the underground tunnels and drains, starting at the coast and working my way inland.

As I ran through the streets, keeping to a normal running pace, instead of my usual speed, I used my swarm sense to locate all of the underground passages within my range and built a mental map as an overlay to the actual streets and buildings. As I had hoped, my multi-tasking allowed me to keep an image of everything I sensed in a several block-wide swath as I ran. The only real question now was whether or not I could maintain this information until I had a chance to input it into a mapping program. I had a couple of freeware mapping packages that I was going to try to use, though I wasn't confident that they would be able to do what I wanted so I was open to purchasing a more sophisticated one if necessary.

I ran for over two hours, being very careful about being home by 5:15 so that I could avoid the sunrise. Even so, the twilight before dawn caught me by surprise almost 20 minutes from home, so I focused more on spotting anyone who was awake and in a position to see me while I ran. Just before I entered my neighborhood, I found a well-hidden spot, and removed my mask and hood so that I appeared to be an early morning runner, not someone trying to hide their identity.

Checking to be sure that dad was still asleep, I quietly slipped into the house and into my bedroom to change into some comfortable workout clothes. Stashing my running clothes in my laundry hamper, I headed down to the basement to do my morning exercises.

Running through my morning routine took me until about 6:30 to finish, so I went ahead and shifted the take-up reel for the silk cloth and swapped out both of the spools of cord that my Widows had finished and set them to spinning regular thread that I could use for sewing. Weeks of doing the same tasks seemed to have given my Widows a new set of instincts that not only made them stay on task when I was out of range, but vastly reduced their territorial aggression so that they very rarely engaged in fratricide while unattended.
Putting everything away so that even if dad came down here, he wouldn't find anything out of place, I closed the window that I had used to allow some of my more disposable swarm to enter so that I could feed the coral growing in my tanks. The changes that Amy had made to the coral so that they could feed directly on insects were amazing; I just had to make sure to provide a good variety of insects to meet all of the their needs, which wasn't hard with Spring well underway.

I stopped in the kitchen to make my breakfast, intending to shower and change afterwards. I made a large ham and cheese omelet with english muffins, and snacked on some fruit while I cooked my breakfast. Once I had finished eating, since dad was obviously not getting up yet, I went ahead and did all the dishes and cleaned up the kitchen before going upstairs to get cleaned up and changed into some comfy clothes until it was time to get ready for my date with Amy.

Once I finished my shower and dressed in a loose and comfy set of sweats, I headed downstairs to do some computer work. As soon as my system had booted up, I checked my email first, as I always did, but found nothing other than some spam. After I had my inbox emptied, I opened both of the freeware mapping programs that I had downloaded and began working through the tutorials simultaneously. Using a split screen and two mouse inputs was actually easy for me, as between my multi-tasking and ambidexterity using two different software applications at the same time posed no problems. It did remind me that I still needed to at least begin designing an insect controlled keyboard and mouse that would speed up my work.

Around 9:30 dad finally wandered downstairs, looking for something to eat. I had to stifle my giggles as he shuffled into the kitchen without even noticing me as I sat in front of my computer in the living room. After a few minutes of grumbling and odd noises, he shuffled back into the living room with a bowl of cereal and a mug of tea and slumped down in his recliner. I waited until he had put his tea on the side table and had finished about half of his cereal before I spoke up.

“Good morning, dad.”

“Gaah! Where did you come from?” he asked, looking up from his breakfast.

I just smiled and said, “I've been down here for hours, you just never woke up enough to notice me.”

Dad grimaced and said, “Yeah, sorry about that. I guess I kind of overslept this morning, and I'm still not awake yet. Let me finish my breakfast and get cleaned up and dressed and then we can talk about your plans for today. To be honest, I'm not sure how well I'll be tracking until I take my shower.”

I smiled and shook my head at him, “Not a problem, I'll just keep working on my programming while you wake yourself up for the day.”

Dad just sort of grunted as he went back to eating his cereal, so I left him to it and saved my mapping work and started work on building a scheduling database and necessary forms in C for one of my assignments. I had been working on this, off and on, for about a week and was just adding the finishing touches before I did the final compile and started testing it on the different VM's.

A couple of minutes later, dad stood up and took his dishes to the kitchen and rinsed them off in the sink and then headed up stairs to take his shower. I figured it would take him about 15 minutes to get back downstairs, ready for his day, so I made sure that I had everything wrapped up by the time the shower stopped.

When dad finally came back downstairs, I had finished my computer work and logged out and shut
down the computer and was lying on the sofa reading a book on the history of hacking, hoping that a historical perspective might give me some ideas about creating false ID's and backstopping them so that if the authorities every checked them, they would come back as valid. So far, it seemed that most of the techniques mentioned were almost certainly obsolete and unusable, but just knowing what wouldn't work was useful.

Sitting down in his chair, Dad asked me, “Alright Taylor, tell me what your plans for today are?”

I sat up and put my book away, “Well, I plan on meeting Amy at her house around noon, then the two of us are heading over to Lord's College to catch the playoff game. We'll probably grab some lunch on the way, though I don't know what it'll be. After the game is over we're going out to dinner, Amy has the reservations for that already, then we're heading back to the College for a concert. That should finish up just around 9 o'clock, so I'll take Amy home then catch a bus back here. I should be home before 10:30 tonight.”

Dad sat quietly for a couple of minutes, then nodded and said, “Sounds like you have a full day ahead of you. Would you like me to give you a ride to Amy's house?”

I glanced at the clock and said, “Thank you, that would be great. I'll go up and start getting ready so we can leave around 11:30, if that's alright?”

“Sure, I'll just wait for you here, since I'm ready to go now,” dad replied.

With that I went upstairs to actually get ready for my date. I changed into the green sleeveless dress that I had made just for today, brushed out my hair and used two hair clips to hold it back from my face. I packed my purse carefully, putting the ASP that I had bought and a new pepper spray into the little elastic pockets that were normally used for makeup, I also put two sheets of black silk that we could use to sit on if the stadium seats were dirty. In addition to my school ID, bus pass and $100 in cash, I ensured that the tickets for the game and the concert were in separate envelopes. I also put the two jewelry boxes with the earrings and pendants that I had made for Amy and I, just for today.

The last thing I did before leaving my room was to put on my new shoes and text Amy to let her know that I was going to be dropped off by my dad. Not even two minutes later Amy texted me back to let me know that she was ready to go as soon as I arrived. Because of the nice weather, I didn't bother with a sweater, only taking a white knitted shawl that my mom used to wear when she went out with dad.

-------------------------Legion*** Amy ***Legion------------------------

Once I got the text from Taylor, letting me know that she was on her way, I finished getting dressed, making sure that my wallet had both of my ID's, my bus pass, debit card and plenty of cash for the day.

When I was sure that I ready for our date, I walked downstairs to face Vicky's inspection.

Vicky looked up from her seat on the sofa and whistled in admiration, “Well, you look really good for your date. Though I have to admit that I wasn't expecting you to wear such a … sharp outfit. I honestly thought you were going to wear one of the outfits that Taylor made you. What made you choose to wear black and white today, especially slacks and a vest? It looks really nice, but sort of business-like.”

I blushed lightly and said, “It's just that lately, I've been more comfortable in jeans or slacks than in skirts or dresses, and … well, Taylor likes to dress up a bit, so I'm trying to complement her
Vicky stood up and slowly circled me, checking out my outfit carefully as she did so, finally asking me, “When do you expect Taylor to get here?”

I checked the wall clock and said, “In about 15 or 20 minutes. Why?”

Vicky grabbed a comb and spray bottle of water from the end table and said, “Grab a seat, I'm going to redo your hair so that it works better with your outfit.” As soon as I sat down, she quickly undid my French braid and carefully brushed out my hair. Once she had finished that, she pulled my hair back into a tightly twisted bun at the back of my head, pinning it into place very thoroughly with several hair pins. For the final touch, she used two black lacquered hair sticks to hold everything together very elegantly.

Standing up, I walked over to the bathroom and used the mirror to check out what she had done. It was amazing. She had tamed my hair better than I had thought possible; it was pulled back evenly from my face and ears, with no frizzy wisps like I usually had to deal with. The hair sticks were crossed in the bun, but didn't overwhelm my hair, simply complementing it very nicely, being neither too long or too short.

Walking back out to the living room, I gave Vicky a big hug, wordlessly thanking her for what she had done. Sitting down next to her on the sofa, I started to thank her when she interrupted me. “You told me what your plans for the day are, but you didn't tell me what you were going to do for lunch, because you know that you really need to eat before the game.”

“Well, we were just thinking of grabbing something to eat as we walked to the Arena, it would sort of depend on what looked good,” I explained.

Vicky shook her head, “Nope, that's no good. Either you can have some sandwiches here, and I'll drive you to the Arena or I'll drive you to a restaurant close to the Arena and you can walk from there after you eat. I know it's only a couple of miles, which is nothing for you two health nuts, but I want to make sure that you have plenty of time for yourselves.”

Once again, Vicky had managed to surprise me. Everyone seems to think that she's a stereotypical blonde, self-centered and oblivious, when she's really much sharper than most people realize. I sometimes think she does it on purpose, pretending to be an air-head just to make people underestimate her.

“All right, I'll ask …” even as I spoke, I heard a car pull into the driveway, which was almost certainly Taylor and her dad. Jumping to my feet, I forced myself to walk normally to the front door, opening it just in time to greet Taylor. She had turned back to wave goodbye to her dad, who was pulling out of the driveway when I greeted her. “Hi Taylor, you look …” I froze as she turned back and smiled at me. She was dressed in a sleeveless, knee-length emerald green dress, with a white shawl and medium heeled shoes, which made her close to 6 feet tall. God, she's so beautiful …

Even as I stood there, momentarily stunned, she reached out and held my cheeks as she leaned down and kissed me gently. As she backed away, I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her in tightly, “I've missed you so much, Taylor. You look so beautiful today.” As I spoke I could hear Vicky taking pictures with her phone, but even as shy as I usually was, I didn't even care.

Releasing my tight hold on her, I took her hand and led her over to the sofa and sat down next to her. Once we were settled down, Vicky took her seat in dad's recliner and asked us, “So, I know your basic plans, but I thought I'd offer a bit of an alternative; if you'd like you can have lunch here
and I'll drive you to the Arena, or I can drive you to a restaurant near to the Arena right now. Either way it'll make having lunch and getting to the game a lot easier.”

Taylor and I exchanged quick smiles and an arched eyebrow then I said, “Thank you Vicky, we'll have lunch here than you can drive us to the game.”

Vicky giggled at my answer and said, “You two are as bad as Aunt Sarah and Uncle Neil what with the talking without talking trick. Alright, lets go make some lunch and then I'll drive you to the game.” Turning to look at Taylor she went on, “Are sandwiches and soup okay? I figure that will be the simplest and fastest lunch we can put together.”

“Certainly,” Taylor replied. “Really, anything will be fine, I'm not a very picky eater.”

With a laugh, I pulled Taylor to her feet and led her into the kitchen, with Vicky following right behind. While Vicky and Taylor pulled an assortment of cheese and deli meat out of the fridge, I started a large pot of chicken noodle soup. As it heated up, they started making sandwiches, taking suggestions from each other as well as me. Within about 10 minutes the soup was ready, so I turned the stove to LOW and filled three large mugs and brought them to the table. Sitting down next to Taylor, I started on the two roast beef sandwiches that were on my plate, adding some chips on the side.

As we ate, we chatted about school, music, and of course one of Vicky's favorite topics, Dean. Between the three of us, we finished off the large pot of soup and almost a dozen sandwiches, leaving only two turkey sandwiches as left-overs. Vicky volunteered to clean up the kitchen while Taylor and I got washed up from our lunch. Meeting in the Living Room when we finished, I was surprised when Taylor pulled a small jewelry box out of her purse and made me stop in the middle of the room.

“Amy, I have a present for you, I hope that you like them.” Turning the box to face me, she opened it and showed me a set of Fire Coral earrings and a branching pendant of the exact same shade.

Taking the first earring off of the holder, she held the box out to me and asked, “Hold this for me please?” As soon as I took the box, she very carefully inserted and clamped the earring into place, a moment later the second one was securely clipped into my other ear. Taking the pendant, she gestured for me to turn around and fastened the pendant around my neck.

“Holy crap, those are beautiful Ames. Where did you get them?” Vicky surprised me as she walked back into the living room.

“Taylor made them for me. They are beautiful, aren't they?” I replied to her. Turning back to Taylor, she took the empty box from me and handed me another one, this time filled with iridescent green jewelry.

“Could you put these on me, please?” she asked as she set the empty box on the coffee table.

“Certainly.” I replied as I took the first earring out of the box and passed it back to her. Standing on tip-toes, I carefully put both earrings in the holes I made even as I touched her ears. Once I had them in place, I put the pendant around her neck and then stepped back to admire her artistry.

“Thank you Taylor, these are beautiful, and work perfectly with our outfits.” Before I could kiss her, Vicky spoke up.

“Okay you love birds, let me get a couple of pictures, then we can head for the Arena. I'll get you there in plenty of time to get to your seats.” Pulling out her phone, she suited her actions to her
words and after gesturing us to stand closer, took at least a dozen pictures before she put her phone away and grabbed her purse and keys and led the way to her car.

About twenty minutes later Vicky dropped us off at the main entrance to the sports Arena, just after the box office and main doors opened. As we walked up to the box office, Taylor pulled an envelope out of her purse and handed it to me. Opening it, I found two printed out tickets for mid-court seats, about 20 rows up. Showing them to the box-office attendant, she stamped them with today's date, validating them for our use.

On our way into the Arena, we stopped and bought two large Pepsi's and a program then made our way around the interior of the Arena and up to our seats. Taylor checked out the seats carefully before sitting down. When I asked her what was going on, she explained.

“I've been to a lot of sporting events, and often the seats are pretty nasty, so I brought a couple of silk squares in case we needed them, however these seats are practically spotless and smell like they were scrubbed recently.”

Taking a moment to ramp my sense of smell up, I could clearly spot the cleaning compounds that had been used to scrub not only the seats, but the floor as well. I nodded my agreement and said, “Yeah, I see what you mean. So, do you leave your senses ramped up all the time? Or just when you want to check for something specific?”

She smiled and took my hand in hers then said, “Actually I usually keep them at least partially ramped up, unless something is overwhelming, as a form of training so that I can improve my comprehension with using all of them.”

I just shook my head and said, “I'm definitely going to have to up my training and exercises. Speaking of which,” I took a quick look around to make sure no one was close enough to eavesdrop before continuing, “do you think that running to school everyday would help with my strength and stamina? Or will the mods make it too easy for me?”

Taylor pursed her lips, then said, “Well, going with how it's worked for me, unless you seriously up your speed and distance, the mods you have will make it far too easy. However, I've been thinking about that for both of us, and I was wondering if we could devise some sort of 'isometric' mode that would allow us to use our muscles to create resistance to our movements. If I'm right it would greatly increase the benefit we get from not only our exercises, but from even normal activities like walking or doing house work.”

I thought about her words for a couple of minutes then said, “I think we can do this, I'll want to set it up with a variable control, as well as with automatic cutouts if we are attacked or suddenly stressed, so that we can respond with our full capabilities.”

Taylor smiled and said, “Well, we've got almost 30 minutes before the game starts. Want to get started on it now? I've got some other ideas that we can look at after the game, and plenty of linkages for you to echo off of while we are here.”

For this I was going to need the finest control that I had, because I was going to be crafting a series of cascading control elements to balance the resistance of each muscle group against its counterpart in a variable yet controlled manner since the opposing muscle groups didn't have the same strengths or stamina. I started low, with the feet and ankles and carefully worked my way up, while Taylor slowly and carefully flexed each of her muscles and muscle groups so that I could test and correct the mods I installed. By the time we reached her abdominal muscles, I had to stop and re-organize the entire control array to handle a greater series of interconnecting muscle groups. Nothing I hadn't expected, yet still a bit annoying; I had hoped I had a better grasp of how Taylor's
body worked by now, even if we were designing it to work in a totally different way than normal.

I managed to finish most of the modifications before the game started, though I still wanted to design and install a more advanced set of controls and monitors for the mod, allowing her to see precisely how much extra energy using the mod was costing her, as well as how much wear and tear was being done to her muscles, both individually and collectively.

As Amy began working on my new modification, I watched her closely, amazed as usual to see the subtle changes she created. This time I was more actively involved as I triggered different muscles and muscle groups to test each change as it was implemented. It actually reminded me of a relaxation exercise mom had taught me when I was six and suffered from horrible growing pains, especially at night. She would have me start with my toes, flexing and extending each of them in turn, then letting them relax. I would carefully work my way up my legs and body until I was tensing and relaxing my jaw, assuming I was still awake by that point, which was rare, as I usually fell asleep somewhere around my forearms.

Amy finished up with the basic mods as other spectators took their seats and the opening ceremonies began. I finished my Pepsi and about half of Amy's to provide at least some of the calories I needed to pay for the mods. Fortunately, most of the new growth was in extremely fine changes to my nervous system and didn't require a lot of large scale changes. Just before the tip-off, I leaned over and whispered to Amy, “Hey, make sure your speed is ramped up and shift your distance vision as needed to keep a close eye on the action. It'll be good practice using our senses and will give us a great view of everything that's going on.”

Watching the game was a lot of fun, although I actually practiced observing all of the players simultaneously using my swarm senses in addition to my eyes which allowed me to see the game as an ever-changing pattern of motion that let me anticipate who would make an attempt to score. I had never played much basketball after middle-school, but I still had a decent idea of what was going on and double-checking the program let me figure out which players were playing which position so my understanding of how the game was going grew with every play.

Unlike Amy, who was clearly a fan and supporter of the local team, I found that I could care less who scored or even won, but was far more interested in who could pull off the best plays. Fortunately for me, the visitors from Vermont, the Lyndon Hornets, seemed to be quite strong on defense though pretty weak on offense, unlike the local team, the Lord's College Lynx, who seemed to be quite strong on both. By half-time, the Lord's Lynx were up by fourteen, having found a hole in the Hornet's defense that they were exploiting for all it was worth.

Walking out to the main concourse it was pretty obvious that just getting into the restroom would take most of the half-time period, not leaving much time to get any snacks. Turning to Amy I asked, “So, should we split up for the restroom and snacks?”

Amy looked back and forth at the two long lines and then said, “Actually, I think I have a better idea, 'cause I'm never going to make it through that line,” taking my hand she tugged me towards the concession stand and said, “You know what they say about 'necessity being the mother of invention'? It may sound a little icky, but in the end it's all bio-mass. I can convert it into useful food reserves if you'd like?”
I actually froze for a moment at the very thought, then started moving again as I fully processed Amy's offer. “To be honest, that never occurred to me, I mean I thought that our digestive tracts were already fully optimized. Aren't they? Is there even any significant amount of nutrition still left?”

Amy giggled and explained, “Oh they are, they are running around 95% efficiency right now. I can still convert what's left into useful material, specifically I will turn it into the normal fat that our bodies will use as a long-term food reserve. I'll then spread it evenly around our bodies. It'll take about 30 seconds and be totally unnoticeable. It's not something that our bodies can do normally, but my powers can handle it easily.”

“Huh, learn something new every day. Sure, go ahead and do it, then you can use my echoes to take care of yourself. God knows there's plenty of swarm around here to use,” I told her.

As we got into the line at the concession stand, I took Amy's hand in mine and watched as she converted pretty much everything in my digestive tract and bladder into useful fats and scattered them evenly around my body. Less than a minute later, she was done with me and starting in on herself. Even as she worked we chatted about the game, Amy excitedly recalling some of the better plays that the Lynx had made as well as chiding me when I pointed out some of the excellent defensive plays by the Hornets.

“You just like them because of their name, not because you like the team or anything, right?” she teased.

“Ha! I don't like either team that way, I just like watching to see if they can pull off any good plays. Besides, this way I'm not disappointed at the outcome, no matter how it turns out.” I teased back.

Amy gasped in faux outrage, “But then you miss out on all the joy of watching your team win! The excitement! The passion! The …”

I interrupted her, “The agony of defeat?”

She hip bumped me and said, “Philistine! Next you'll say that you don't even like the Olympics or the Superbowl.”

I smiled down at her and said, “I like the Olympics quite a bit, and I suppose that the Superbowl commercials are pretty good.”

She gasped again and slumped against me wrapping her arms around me, clinging to me and tearfully said, “Oh the shame of it! My girlfriend doesn't like football, whatever am I going to do?”

I giggled at her over the top performance and said, “Oh, I like football just fine, it's just that most Superbowl games are over-hyped and unless the Pat's are playing, I just can't get worked up enough to care about them.”

Amy straightened up, keeping her arm around me as we moved closer to the counter and said, “Well, that's okay then, if you're a Pat's fan I guess I'll keep you.” She looked up at me slyly and asked, “So are you hungry yet? What are you in the mood for?”

I smirked at her and said, “The classics of course; hotdogs, fries and Pepsi. That will probably tide us over until dinner time, at least I hope it will.”

“That works for me. Plain fries or cheesy?” she asked me.

“Plain, the cheese topping is basically Cheese-Wiz. I'll make you some proper bacon cheese fries
the next time you come over, not the crap they sell here. Also,” I gave her a stern look, “this one is on me, since you're paying for dinner. I know you don't get that much for your allowance and I've got my windfall.”

“Fiiine,” she huffed, not really bothered by my wanting to pay for our snacks since we generally split our expenses pretty evenly and we both knew that dinner was going to be fairly expensive.

As we stepped up to the counter, Amy ordered our food; 4 hotdogs, a large fry and 2 large Pepsis to drink, while I pulled 2 twenties out of my purse to cover the high price of concession stand food. As I had expected the final cost was just barely covered by the money I handed to Amy, only leaving $1.75 in change.

Stepping away from the counter, we moved over to the condiment counter and grabbed a couple of handfuls of ketchup, mustard, relish and salt & pepper. Fortunately the tray that had been provided was quite sturdy and easily held all of our food and both drinks quite safely as well as a large handful of napkins.

Walking back to our seats, I noticed Dean and a couple of his friends heading towards some seats in the Section next to ours, but much higher up. I knew that Dean could afford better seats than those so I assumed that he was trying to not rub his family's money in his friends' faces. Which was both nice and quite thoughtful, not what I would have expected from most boys his age. As we took our seats I leaned closer to Amy and said, “Dean and some friends are in the next section over, about three quarters of the way up.”

After she had put the drinks into the built-in drink holders, she looked up to where I had said Dean was and once she had spotted them, turned back in her seat and said, “Yep, that's Dean and some of his friends from school. Normally he and Vicky try to make Saturday their 'date night' but with her being stuck at home today I guess he's making the best of it.” After that we just salted the fries, added ketchup to them and fixed up our hotdogs with the condiments of our choice and started eating.

We managed to finish our hotdogs and about half of the fries before half-time ended and the game restarted. Interestingly enough, the Hornets had made several changes to their line-up as well as changing their overall strategy and did quite a bit better in the second half. Unfortunately, it wasn't enough to let them win, as the Lynx were just overall the better team, and the game ended with a final score of 70-64.

Once the game was over, rather than fighting the crowd, we stayed in our seats and sipped on the dregs of our sodas and let most of the spectators exit the Arena before we stood up to leave. Stopping only to drop our trash into one of the many trashcans in the main concourse we slowly made our way to the main entrance and exited out into the afternoon sun and headed to dinner.

--------------Legion*** Dean & friends ***Legion--------------

After we worked our way out of the Arena, Carlos, Dennis, Chris and I followed the crowd out into the parking lot until we got to my car. Rather than try to get out of our spot right away, we simply sat and talked about the game until enough cars had left that we could back out and work our way towards the exit.

As we came to a stop just before the turn towards the exit, Carlos spoke up, “Hey, is that Panacea? And who's the girl she's with? I don't recognize her.”

Turning to look in the same direction as Carlos, I could see that it was in fact Amy and Taylor walking down the far sidewalk near the exit. “Yeah, that's Amy and her girlfriend, I had no idea
that they liked basketball.”

Clearly startled, Chris spoke up, “Girlfriend!? When did that happen?”

Waiting until I had made the turn towards the exit, I answered him, “A couple of months ago I think, not sure exactly when.”

Sitting back in his seat he said, “Huh, I had no idea she was gay. Does her girlfriend go to Arcadia?”

Pleased that Dennis hadn't added anything, I shook my head and said, “No, Taylor is homeschooled. She's smart though, I've only met her a couple of times and she's impressed me both times.”

Chris nodded and said, “Well, if she doesn't go to Arcadia, I guess that's why we've never seen her before.”

I shook my head again and said, “Not quite. She meets Amy almost every Wednesday after school and walks with her to the hospital for Panacea's shift at healing. She also comes by on other days to meet her, Wednesday is just the most common.”

Turning out the exit, I headed away from Amy and Taylor and drove towards T'ang So so we could get some Chinese takeaway to eat before we headed into the PRT building to do our shift of patrols and console monitoring.

-------------------------Legion*** Vicky ***Legion------------------------

After dropping Ames and Taylor off at the Arena, I drove straight home. As I turned into the driveway, I saw that mom and dad had beaten me home. Oh well, I guess that I'd help with getting everything ready for our dinner.

Closing the front door behind me I called out, “Hey everyone, I'm home!” as I walked into the kitchen.

Dad looked over his shoulder from where he was preparing the dessert that we were going to have tonight and said, “Welcome back Vicky, are Amy and Taylor at the game now?”

I nodded and said, “Yep, we had soup and sandwiches for lunch and I drove them to the Arena. Ames said that she should be home by 9:30 tonight but will call me for a ride if they need one. So, is there anything I can do to help?”

Dad nodded and said, “Sure, set the table with the good china for six people. Oh, and use the blue table cloth and placemats from the linen closet, if they are creased go ahead and iron them on low heat to remove the creases.”

“Okay, see you in a few.”

When I pulled the table cloth, placemats, and napkins out it was obvious that they would need to be ironed before I could use them. Taking them downstairs to the laundry, I tossed them into the dryer on MED while I got out the iron and ironing board, set everything up and warmed up the iron.

I gave the dryer another five minutes to get everything warmed up, then took out two of the placemats and restarted the dryer so it would run while I got started on the ironing. In the end it only took me half an hour to get everything properly ironed and de-creased so that I could start setting the table. I made a point of taking my time and ensuring that everything was 'just so' and
that there was plenty of room for all of the serving dishes to be on the table at one time.

Once I was finished I checked with dad to see if I could help with anything else, but pretty much everything that could be prepared ahead of time was done, and those things that needed to be cooked later were set aside until needed. It was nice to see dad so engaged these days, it was a wonderful improvement from even a few months ago. Amy's idea to have me make sure that dad took his meds every morning had worked like a charm, that and the latest change to his meds had dad pretty much back to the way he was when I was a little kid. Checking the clock, I saw that it was a little after three, so I found mom and let her know my plans.

“Mom, I'm heading up to take my shower and get dressed for dinner. Do you need me to do anything first?”

She called out from her office, “No, I think everything is ready to go. I'll be heading up to get changed shortly. Remember, they will be here around four, so be downstairs well before than.”

Shouting back over my shoulder as I ran upstairs, I said, “Got it, I'll make it quick.”

Suiting action to words, I took a fast shower and got dressed in the white dress I had laid out previously. The metallic gold sash and shoes provided a nice accent to break up the pure white dress, it was a bit reminiscent of my costume but a completely different style. I re-did my makeup, aiming for the minimal look that Amy had been using lately, since I wasn't planning on going out this evening unless it was to give the girls a ride home.

Since it was only 3:30, I did a quick walk around the house to make sure everything was ready for our guests and for dinner. Other than straightening a few magazines and wiping down the sink in the downstairs bathroom, the house was ready to go. Dad had cleaned up the kitchen as he made his preps and it was ready to go, with coffee and tea prepared and standing by, as well as an assortment of soda waiting on the counter.

I took a seat on the sofa to wait and was joined by both mom and dad almost as soon as I sat down. Mom took a few minutes to describe our expected visitors; Alan Barnes, a divorce lawyer from mom's firm, his wife Zoe, and their youngest daughter Emma. Zoe was primarily a housewife, although she was apparently a painter of some note. Emma was a year or two younger than me and did some modeling locally.

Mom looked back and forth between dad and I and said, “One more thing, if anyone asks where Amy is, just say that she had a prior date and couldn't break it. Please don't go any further than that; the fact that she's dating a girl, and who the girl is, is for Amy to bring up,” mom bit her lip in indecision than went on, “in fact, because of an ongoing investigation at Winslow High School, don't mention Taylor at all, and try to avoid talking about Winslow in any way.”

I cocked my head to one side and looked at mom, then said, “No problem, I expect I can keep Emma entertained if you can handle the adults … in fact, I think they just pulled up, so showtime everyone.”

----------Legion*** Emma Barnes ***Legion----------

Settling into the back seat of dad's Cadillac, I had hopes that this business dinner would be better than most of them, I might only have to attend them every couple of months but they were usually quite boring. This one though, this one was at the Dallon's, a family of capes, including Glory Girl and Panacea, heroes that were my age might actually be interesting.

I wondered if Maddie was right, and Panacea and Taylor were friends, or maybe even dating, and if
so, should I bring it up? No, better not. In fact, if Taylor's name came up, I'd just pretend that we used to be friends, but once we started high school we just grew apart.

With that settled, I just watched out the window as dad drove us to the Dallon's house. Once we arrived I followed mom and dad up to the front door, where Mrs. Dallon, aka Brandish, met us and invited us inside. As the introductions were made, I looked around but didn't see Amy Dallon anywhere, but then Mrs. Dallon explained that she was out on a date that couldn't be rescheduled.

Glory Girl, no Victoria, slid over next to me and asked, “Want to get something to drink?”

I nodded and said, “Yes please, Miss Dallon.”

She smiled back at me and led into the kitchen. “God no, just call me Vicky. We have coffee and tea if you'd like, as well as an assortment of soda. What can I get you?”

I looked over the different bottles of soda and said, ‘Then call me Emma, please. I'd like some root beer, please.”

She pulled two glasses out of the cupboard and opened the bottle of root beer, “No problem. Would you like ice with your soda?”

“I'd like some root beer, please.”

She filled my glass about a third of the way with ice, then carefully topped it off with root beer, taking care to not let the foam rise above the top of the glass. Once it was full, she handed it to me and got her own glass of Coke.

“So, do you want to stay here with the 'rents or head down to the family room?” she asked me.

I laughed and said, “By all means, let's escape to the family room, please.”

Vicky led me down a set of stairs to a fully furnished basement, and over to some comfortable looking chairs and sofas where we both sat down.

Vicky spoke up first, “We have cable tv, a huge selection of music and dvd's and an older game console, or we can just chat if you like.”

I thought about it for a second then said, “I think I'd like to chat for now, and then maybe watch a movie until dinner time.” And maybe I can find out if Hebert and Panacea really are friends, and if so, how close. It could make a big difference in how I handle Hebert.

Vicky smiled at me and said, “That sounds good to me. I'll go first. I'm in the 11th grade, I like History and Math, can play the piano but don't like to, have been learning to play the lap harp which I enjoy very much. I miss playing basketball, but enjoy watching the games, either live or on tv. Being a Hero is a lot of work, but its also a blast. Your turn.”

“Alright then, I'm in the 10th grade, I do some part-time modeling for local stores and would like to move up to doing magazines but probably won't be able to because I've got the build of pin-up girl not a catwalk model. C'est la vie. Oh, I speak decent French, because my mother is from France and insists on speaking it at home. I've been learning Spanish since I started High School so I can speak it a little bit. Um, not really into doing sports, though I do jog and do aerobics. I used to want to be a Hero, but I had a cape explain to me just what it takes to Trigger, and I'm not sure if I could face it. Instead, I'd like to be able to provide support and assistance so that the Heroes can do their jobs more easily. I've started to look into what it takes to work for the PRT and I know that I will
need at least my BS, and probably a MS to really make a difference.” As I finished speaking I realized that I had actually spoken about more than I had planned, though nothing incriminating.

Vicky looked surprised at what I said for a moment, then said, “Well, that's a lot better life plan than most of us highschoolers have. Do you know what you want to study for in college?”

I shook my head no and said, “Not yet. I've got decent grades, but I know that I'll need to really crack down on my studies over the next two years to get into a good college, but I'm honestly not sure what I want to major in. I'm doing okay in my science classes, but really I think that I'll look into either Psychology or Parahuman Studies. Right now those are the two areas I think I could do well in and would be helpful to the PRT and the Heroes.”

Vicky sat back in her chair and looked thoughtful for a few minutes, then said, “To do well in Parahuman Studies you're going to need a solid background in a number of sciences. I'm actually taking an intro course in PH Studies and both the teacher and the textbook recommend taking biology, physics and possibly genetics to complement and expand the basic curriculum. Parahuman Studies and Psychology is not a specialization that I've heard of, which means it may be wide open. God knows Capes could use some good shrinks; Trigger Events are horrifically traumatic, and the fights aren't much better. Having someone who knows how to help with all of that would be a godsend. Well, this got awfully serious, way too quick. How about a movie until dinner time?”

I smiled back at her and said, “Sure, what have you got here?”

Vicky got up and led me to a large cabinet next to the wide-screen tv on the wall. Opening the door, I saw a huge selection of DVD's on six shelves. As I walked up to the cabinet, I could see that they were divided into labeled sections. “How about a comedy?” I asked her.

“Sounds good to me, anything catch your eye, or should I make a suggestion?” she replied.

“Hmm, actually I'm not sure. Is this one any good?” I held out a DVD called Blazing Saddles, which I had never heard of before.

“Blazing Saddles? You've never seen this before? Then you definitely need to watch this. It's a classic that parodies all of the old spaghetti westerns and I think you'll love it.”

Taking the DVD out of the case, she inserted it into the DVD player and put the case down on top of the player before closing up the cabinet and returning to her seat. Instead of returning to the sofa I had been sitting on, I sat down in the other recliner and got comfortable while Vicky started the movie.

--------------------Legion*** Vicky ***Legion--------------------

Once the movie started, I split my attention between watching one of my favorite movies and studying my guest. Because I knew that having to come to these dinners several times a year quickly taught you to wear a mask to protect yourself, I was certain that Emma was wearing a mask. Mom did it, I did it, even Amy did it and she hated everything to do with these dinners. Not that you could tell during the dinner; but afterwards, whoosh could she vent about how pointless it was. At least where mom couldn't hear her.

Emma's mask was very good, but the movie was making her laugh and let me see behind her mask, even if only just a bit. Those bits were odd, though, because it wasn't what she laughed at that surprised me, but rather when she didn't laugh and should have. One of the things I hadn't told her was that in addition to Parahuman Studies, I was in my second year of AP Psychology, and I was carrying a 4.0 for both years. That, plus a lot of time dealing with criminals and victims had given
me a good feel for each, and Emma felt like a victim, one that was desperately trying to hide from and forget whatever had happened to her. I didn't know what had happened, but it had broken her up pretty bad and I was afraid that she hadn't gotten the help she desperately needed to actually heal.

As we walked down the street towards the restaurant that I had reservations at, I took her hand in mine and asked her about the game.

“So, are you glad that the home team won? Or were you secretly rooting for the evil visitors?” I asked her, frowning up at her while wriggling my eyebrows at her.

Taylor just laughed at me and asked, “How can you even do that? I can do the frowny bit, but not the eyebrows. At least, not at the same time.”

I dropped the frown and said, “Sheer natural talent of course. And lots of practice. I can wriggle my ears too, which still makes Eric freak out. I used to stand in front of my mirror and practice every night, just so I could spring it on him when no one else was looking. Good entertainment at boring family dinners, as long as no one else notices.”

She giggled again and asked, “And did anyone ever notice what you were doing?”

I nodded and said, “Uncle Neil did, but he used to do the same kind of thing to me when I was little, which is why I tried to learn how. Now I get to do it to Eric as a kind of payback, plus it's a form of concentration and exercise in fine motor control.”

Taylor smiled at me then asked, “Amy, what about your implanted mods? Have you been practicing those as well?”

“Oh yes, every morning while the others are asleep. I don't actually extrude my knives, I just manifest them under the skin and then reabsorb them. I have been using my lockpicks to open and relock all of the locks in the house, but I need to work on some different types of locks to get better. I will say that ramping my sense of hearing and touch up really helps a lot.”

“Cool. Have you tried to pick the locks on the family cars yet? Or are they alarmed?” Taylor asked me.

“No I haven't, and yes they are. I'll need to look into bypassing the car alarm before I can try that. Although I bet I can use a Slim-Jim to pop the door lock and then pick the ignition lock. That might let me get to the alarm fuse first and give me time to pick the lock. I'll do some research first, and have the keys with me just in case.”

“That sounds like a good plan. Oh, by the way, do you have a mod to form a handcuff key? I know you made some in the tanks, but it might be useful to have it on hand, so to speak.”

I frowned in thought then said, “No, as a matter of fact I don't. I've got a variety of lock picking tools, but creating a mod for a basic handcuff key never occurred to me. I'll have to fix that and see if I can create a mod that will let you extrude one at need. I wonder if there are more than one type of handcuff key? Maybe the PRT uses a different style because they need to use heavier duty cuffs or specialized cuffs to negate parahuman powers. Oh well, research is clearly needed on this but I can at least make the basic key.”

While we chatted we had continued our walk and were now approaching the door of the Kobe Japanese Steakhouse, where I had made reservations for 5:00 pm. Entering, I gave the lady
greeting us the name that our reservation was made in and she seated us right away.

She handed us our menus and said, “Your server tonight will be Hana, and she will be here momentarily.” With that she bowed and left to return to her station at the front doors.

Looking through our menus we quickly settled on some shrimp tempura and two orders of Yakatori for our appetizer and Filet with chicken for me and Filet with lobster for Taylor for our main course. Our waitress brought us ice water, green tea and miso soup before our appetizers arrived, and while we started with those, we watched the chefs prepare the main courses for some of the other patrons.

When we were a little more than half done with our appetizers, an older man set up at the grill next to our table and began preparing our meal. It was part cooking and part live entertainment, and very well done.

In between an amusing patter he juggled and tossed his tools, lit parts of the food on fire and cooked a wonderful egg and rice dish, a variety of vegetables and noodles and finally our steak, chicken and lobster. As enjoyable as the show was, the smell of the cooking food was even better. I found that holding my sense of smell about half way ramped up worked best, as I could enjoy it without being overwhelmed.

After about 10 minutes the chef started serving us, starting with the rice dish as a base, the veggies and noodles on the side then with a quick smile he asked us “So, who wants chicken and who wants lobster? Or would you rather share?”

Taylor arched an eyebrow at me and I smiled back then said to the chef, “We'd like to share it all please.”

He smiled back at me and said, “Wonderful!” then quickly and efficiently divided up the meat on top the rice in three equal areas.

Once he had finished serving us, he cleaned up his grilled, bowed to us and with a big smile said, “Enjoy your dinner, and have a nice night.”

As Amy and I started in on our dinner, I quickly decided that as much as I liked the food, I probably wouldn't want to make it myself. Too much investment in the grill and accessories for my house for only an occasional use, I'd rather work with menus that I could cook in my kitchen now and save the fancy stuff for another day.

Glancing at Amy, I copied the way she was using her chopsticks to carefully eat her dinner. I did much the same, though I was very careful to take only as much as I could safely move from my plate to my mouth, so that I didn't drop any on my dress.

“Getting back to the game, was it as good as you had hoped it would be?” I asked Amy as I paused in my eating.

“Oh yes, very much so. As much as I'm a Lynx fan, I have to admit that the Hornets did make a valiant comeback, but it was too little, too late. I really think that their biggest problem is that although they have a decent starting lineup, they don't have a very good bench, so fatigue and injuries hurt them more than they should have. The Lynx have more depth to their team, but realistically I doubt that they will make it past the semi's; too many other teams are just better and stronger. I do hope that they at least make it though the regionals this year.”
“I guess we'll just have to wait and see how they do as the post-season wraps up. Although I personally prefer to watch individual sports like gymnastics or the individual track and field events, some of the winter teams sports can be pretty exciting like hockey and speed skating,” I told her.

“Hockey? Seriously? I would never have picked you as a hockey fan in a million years, way too violent,” Amy replied in shock.

I laughed at her and explained, “Oh I don't like the fighting that seems to have become such a part of professional hockey lately, but the speed and power of sport is quite exhilarating. If I still had cable, I would be happy to watch college hockey all the time because the players are almost as good as the pro's, but not nearly as inclined to fighting. It's the best of both worlds for me.”

Amy looked thoughtful and said, “Huh, you're right, we learn something new everyday. So any other guilty sport secrets?”

I blushed and said, “Well, I like ice-dancing a lot, singles or pairs. Figure skating as well. And I mostly prefer men's gymnastics to women's, especially lately, if you know what I mean. The power and strength they show doing their routines is quite impressive.”

Amy paused in her eating and then said, “I think I know exactly what you mean, and I have to say that I agree. Too bad the next Olympics is in London, in 2012, I bet if it was closer to home I could get some tickets, but I can't see being allowed to go overseas to watch them.”

I shook my head and said, “No, probably not, but at least we should be able to watch them by then, especially if we can get some of our business ideas up and running.” With that I double checked my internal clock to make sure we had enough time to finish eating without having to rush, then went back to enjoying our dinner.

After we had finished eating, Amy paid for our dinner with her debit card, including a generous tip due to the excellent entertainment and service. We used the restroom and then left to walk back to the college, though we would need to walk to the other side of the campus to reach the auditorium for our concert.

Once we had left the restaurant I checked with my swarm to ensure that no one was close enough to eavesdrop and broached a new topic. “Amy, I've been looking into ways we can keep in touch discretely, and I've got a few ideas that I would like to research, the first is simple FM radio, like walkie-talkies, but that will have a relatively limited range and I suspect most Tinkers can routinely intercept that so I'll be looking into ways to make it harder for them. The other option I've thought of is to tap into the cell phone network. That one I've got no idea on how to do yet, so I'll need to do a lot of research. Even then it'll take both of us to get anywhere with either option, because I suspect that we'll need a lot of trial and error work before we succeed. Beyond that I'm open to any suggestions.”

Amy squeezed my hand and said, “Well, I don't know if it is even possible without using Tinkertech, but one of the games from Earth-Aleph that I like to play uses something called Quantum Entanglement Comms, which basically ties two devices together in an unbreakable linkage that is unlimited by distance or anything else because it sort of works by poking a hole in space-time between the two units and creating a link between them. I have no idea if it is even theoretically possible, much less if it can be done organically, but it's the only other thing I can think of.”

I smiled back at Amy and moving closer, I wrapped my arm around her waist, “I'll look into power requirements and such for the basic radio comms first, then how to tap into the cell phone network, I think I'll look into cloning cell phones as my starting point, since it should let us stay safely
Amy squeezed me back and said, “I’ll do some tests on interfacing any of our comms into our mods. It would be simple to build sub-vocal throat mic’s and tiny speakers in our ear canals, but I suspect that I can tap into our speech and hearing centers and keep them completely undetectable by either CT or MRI’s. That might let us also exchange visual signals as well, so that you can see what I see, sort of like what you do with your swarm sense.”

I nodded and as her suggestion sparked a thought, I expanded on her idea, “Actually, within my normal range, I bet we can learn to do that even now. Remember what happened when I helped you do that makeover on the bus? I bet with some practice, okay with a lot of practice, we can learn to communicate and share our senses without any other mods.”

Amy giggled and said, “I bet you’re right, but I want to have some privacy as well as peace and quiet when we start to practice that, because it was pretty trippy when we did it on the bus, and we lucked out that no one noticed. Probably be best to do it at your house when your dad isn't around or is napping.”

“Would you like to come over tomorrow and try it out?” I asked her hopefully.

“Yes I would, but I doubt that I will be able to. Mom is pretty much against two dates in a row, so since we had today as a date day, tomorrow will be family time, even if it's just doing housework and catching up on any homework. Especially since dad has been improving so much lately, she has been trying really hard to get us all to spend more ‘quality time’ together. It actually hasn't been too bad either, she's a lot less judgmental and critical, although she has been very insistent that I significantly cut back on the time I spend at the hospitals. Which I still find weird, but definitely an improvement over how she used to act.”

“What about Wednesday, can you come over after school? We could get in at least a couple of hours before you went into the hospital.”

“Actually, this Wednesday is a Professional Development day, so we get out at 11:00 am, which would give us about 5 hours before I have to head to the hospital. I'll put together some new mods as well as start on the seed bank idea for your coral tanks, even if you don't have an extra tank I can still create at least a dozen seeds for you to use.” Amy paused in thought, then nodded before continuing, “That should only take about an hour at the most, which will leave plenty of time to practice sharing senses through our echoes.”

I nodded seriously, then said, “Alright then, I'll plan on getting to the Central Library as soon as it opens and get started on my research. Hopefully, I can find enough to help you with at least the basic radio comms, as well locate some sources of info on phones and cell phones in particular. I may need to locate some ‘crackers' and ‘phreakers' to really get into the nitty-gritty of what I need. And that could be a bit risky to do, because both of those types are going to be extremely shy and hard to find. Not to mention a bit risky as well since I want to keep both Legion and Panacea well clear of those types.”

“No kidding, which actually brings me back to one of the mods I wanted to build for you, the minor Changer features. You know, different appearance, different voices, fingerprints, etc. In fact, I've been doing some research into how biometric ID's work and it's pretty scary. I originally thought that retinal scans were how most worked, but I found out that they actually scan the iris instead. And that can be done passively and from a distance, possibly from as much as 15 or 20 feet away, without any indication that it's being done,” Amy explained worriedly.

I flinched at her words, my paranoia hitting me hard. “Amy, can it work through goggles or tinted
lenses? If so, I have my doubts that even the unwritten rules you told me about would be enough to protect us from unscrupulous Tinkers or Law Enforcement. Like the PRT perhaps.”

“I don't think so, it seems to be pretty dependent on the specific color patterns of the iris, so even sunglasses seems to be enough to stop remote ID'ing of people. What I was thinking of was that I could create internal seeds with different iris patterns; your normal hazel iris, a solid black one for Legion, and one with a light blue or green iris for Pied Piper. In addition, I would like to give you two different voices for Legion, a male tenor voice as well as a variant of your swarm voice. This would let you continue to confuse people as to your gender while Legion.”

“If I can do it, I want to give you a complete makeover for Pied Piper, with blonde or red hair, and a higher pitched voice, different fingerprints and even a different body type. Perhaps a little shorter as well as a bit more bust. Not much, just a couple of inches and maybe a cup size larger. A completely different costume style to emphasize the alterations would be enough to completely confuse any attempt at biometric ID matching,” Amy explained her intentions in greater detail than I had expected, but the idea was quite intriguing.

I nodded my agreement, then said, “If you can do it so that I can make the changes at will that would be great, though I will definitely need to practice in both forms because the difference in size and center of gravity is going to be confusing I bet. You will too, because I still want you to have a bug-out form if things go to hell. In fact, we may need to look into changing our scent as well, because I'll tell you right now that I can spot and track you by scent easily. And I bet that there are others out there who can do the same. If we have to run, I want to be able to fool everyone to make a clean break.”

Amy sighed, and leaned into me and said, “I know that's partly your paranoia speaking, but I can't say that you're wrong either. Alright, I guess we have another full Wednesday ahead of us this week, so plan on lots of food for the afternoon, because we're both going to need it.”

By this time we had arrived at the auditorium and joined the line leading up to box office. I once again pulled the ticket vouchers from my purse and handed them to Amy to exchange for our actual tickets. Unlike at the Arena, no refreshments were allowed in the actual auditorium, so we would have to wait until the intermission to get any drinks or snacks. We did share a lemonade as we waited until shortly before the concert started, and actually finished it before the 10 minute warning bell.

Finding and taking our seats only took a couple of minutes and we settled into the remarkably comfortable seats and waited for the lights to go down. We didn't have the best seats, but being able to ramp our distance vision up allowed us to have a wonderful view of the performers.

Checking the Program guide we had been given we settled back and enjoyed the varied music that the students produced. Classical, Jazz, Modern, some of what the Boston Pops had created, Classical Gas, as well as some truly outstanding vocal performances. We were given a 15 minute intermission to use the restrooms as well as get something more to drink. Unlike at the Arena, the lines weren't as long and the people were much politer, so we were both able to use the facilities as well as getting some more lemonade to drink. It had been quite a bit better than I had expected, being a mix of pre-made and freshly squeezed lemonade that tasted very good.

Once the concert was finished it was easy to leave because the patrons were so much more polite than at the basketball game. We were able to make our way out of the auditorium and then make our way to the bus stop without being crowded or pushed around.

Double checking the posted schedule, I saw that Amy had a straight ride home, while I would need to transfer downtown to get home at a reasonable time. My bus was due shortly, but Amy was
going to have to wait at least another 10 minutes after mine, which I didn't like, however that was the schedule we had to deal with.

“Will you be okay waiting here for your bus alone? If you want, I can catch the next bus downtown or you can give Vicky a call?” I asked her softly.

“No it's okay, it's still early and the area is well lit. Besides, I have my baton if I need it, and if things actually get dangerous, which I doubt they will, I won't hold back. After all I can fix them up afterwards if I need to. God knows I've done it enough for Vicky when she loses her temper,” she replied.

I sighed and pulled her into a hug, “I know you're right, but I still worry.”

Amy smiled at me and reached up and pulled me down for a kiss, “Me too, but I think we'll be fine getting home. Anyway, thank you very much for a wonderful date. I had a lot of fun and would like to do it again, soon.”

I smiled down at her and said, “I'd like that a lot. Besides, I'll see you on Wednesday which will be nice,” turning I saw my bus approaching so I went on, “I'll text you once I'm home to let you know that I'm okay, alright?”

“No problem, now scoot that cute little butt of yours on to your bus, and be safe, okay,” she said, reluctantly letting me go so I could board the bus.

--------------------Legion*** Amy ***Legion------------------------

I watched Taylor board her bus and take a seat near the rear doors as the bus pulled away and headed downtown.

Sighing softly, I took a seat inside the bus shelter and waited patiently for my bus to come. A few minutes before the bus was due to arrive, two couples, probably college students, walked up to the bus stop, and based on their dress and conversation I suspected that they had been to the same concert as Taylor and I had attended.

When the bus arrived, I let the others board first, and took the empty seat behind the driver for the short trip home. Other than a few stops to drop off and pick up new passengers, the ride went quite quickly. Getting off at my stop, I ramped my senses back up to mid range and walked around the corner towards my house. Once it was in sight I paused to make sure that our guests were gone before I continued on my way.

Checking one last time before entering, I ramped my senses back down to normal and opened the front door and called out, “Hey everyone, I'm home safe.”

Dad called from the kitchen, “Hey yourself Amy. How was your date?”

I walked into the kitchen to see dad loading the dishwasher with the last of the dinner dishes, so I took off my vest, rolled up my sleeves and grabbed a wash cloth to start wiping down the counters, since he had the pots and pans soaking and the table was completely cleared.

“My date was wonderful. Taylor planned out a really nice day for us, other than dinner which was my treat. She got us tickets to a really good basketball game, and then after dinner we went to a great concert at the college. It finished only a little while ago, so we each caught our bus home, unfortunately she has a transfer downtown so it'll be a while before she gets there,” I explained to dad.
“Sounds like you had a good day, then. Vicky and your mom are upstairs and getting ready for bed, so you may as well head upstairs and get yourself ready for bed too,” he said as he started the dishwasher. “I'll take care of the pots in the morning. I'd just as soon go to bed early tonight, these business dinners are always way too stressful for me.”

I smiled at him and agreed, “Me too, which is only one of the reasons that I'm glad I got to miss out on this one to go on a date with Taylor instead. I'll head up now and get cleaned up and then chat with Vicky, because we both know that she's going to want to hear all about how my day went.”

Picking my vest up from the dining room table, I walked up to my bedroom and pulled out a clean set of pj's and undies then got undressed and headed for the shower. I could hear that Vicky was in her room so I wasn't worried about walking in on her, not that either of us worried too much about that kind of thing.

After showering and getting dressed, I pulled my hair back into a simple pony tail and opened Vicky's door and took a seat on her bed next to her.

Vicky looked up from her book and smiled at me as she said, “So spill, how did your day go? Was it all that you had hoped for? Details sister, give me details.”

I smiled back and started giving her the rundown of my day. “The playoff game was great; the home team won which makes me happy, but both teams played really well so it was an exciting game, especially the second half. Vermont came back strong, but they just couldn't keep up. Oh, we did see Dean and some of his friends at the game, though I don't think that they noticed us, because they were higher up in the next section.”

Vicky looked intrigued by that and said, “I'll give him a call tomorrow and ask him about it; he's got patrol tonight so I don't want to disturb him now.”

“After the game I took Taylor to the Kobe Steakhouse and we had a great dinner. The food was excellent and the preparation was super entertaining. The chef had a really funny patter to go with cooking on the grill. It's a bit expensive but it was worth it both for the food and the fun. Afterwards we went back to the College and attended a long concert featuring mostly, if not all, student performers that put on a wonderful show, very much worth the money,” I told her.

“What kind of music did they perform?” she asked me.

“All kinds really; modern, classical, jazz, really you name it and they played it. Vocals too, but they blended all of the music together so that none of it clashed or sounded odd. It was almost two hours long with a short intermission so we could stretch our legs half way through. I have a program in my room if you want to take a look at it later,” I explained.

I paused a moment then went on, “So how was your evening, boring as usual?”

Vicky looked a bit pensive and said, “Mostly. The parents were about what you would expect from lawyers, superficial and non-controversial. Basic current events, sports, nothing too exciting.” She stopped and thought for moment, then went on.

“The daughter though, Emma is her name, I'm a bit worried about her. I think that something happened to her, something bad, something really traumatic. I don't know what it was; rape, assault, loss of a close friend or family member, but something happened. She wears a mask, just like we all do at these stupid dinners, but I think she's hiding something bad behind hers.” Vicky shook her head sadly and went on, “I think she needs help, professional help, but I doubt that she'll ever ask for it. Way too stubborn.”
I snorted and said, “From you? That's the pot and the kettle talking.”

She laughed at me and said, “Well, yeah that's true. It's always easier to tell other people that they need help then to accept that we need it ourselves. Speaking of which, Aunt Sarah found me an anger/stress management class for Capes, cops and other high-stress jobs. It is supposed to be one-on-one at first, then group sessions later. She swears that it's completely confidential, so if it works out for me, would you consider it to help with your stress from healing? Although you've been a lot better since you met Taylor, I think that she's really been good for you. You've been more relaxed and a lot happier lately, and I like that.”

I looked at her carefully, surprised that she was actually willing to do this, then said, “Maybe I will. I'll have to see how it works for you first, then we can decide if I would benefit from it. I do have to agree that cutting back on my hospital hours has helped a lot. That and spending time with Taylor, she's really good at letting me talk and or vent when I need to, so I don't bottle stuff up as much. The exercises that she got me to start doing have helped as well, I feel stronger and more centered than I used to.”

Vicky smiled at me and said, “Actually, I think that the two of you are good for each other. That damn school of hers, Winslow, seriously messed her over, but you seem to be able to calm her down when she gets upset, and the way she has de-stressed you is pretty damn cool, too. Anyway, Mom's gonna want us up tomorrow to do some 'family time' and we may be going over to the cousins in the afternoon, so try and get some sleep tonight.”

“Alright, I will.” Standing up I went back towards my room, before turning back for a moment, “You too Vicky, sleep tight,” before I went through our shared bathroom, closing the doors behind me and climbing into bed and setting my phone next to me to await Taylor's text message.

--------------------Legion***Taylor ***Legion-------------------

Riding the bus downtown only took about 10 minutes, with a short wait for my transfer. Only a few others were waiting to catch the same bus, none of whom seemed troublesome, being mostly well-dressed people heading home after an early evening out or just getting off work.

Boarding my bus I took an empty seat just past the rear doors and spent a few seconds to tag everyone with a couple of small flies on their clothes or hair so that I could track them. I wasn't actually worried but was doing it more for the practice, especially in trying to interpret any speaking that they might do, though most of the people were pretty quiet, rather than ramping my hearing up.

A few stops after the bus left the downtown terminal a few young men boarded in a group. At first I thought that they were just typical punks, but as soon as I landed some of my swarm on them I could practically taste the drugs. Merchant's. Just what I needed to ruin my perfect day, and with my abysmal luck I could almost certainly count on them starting something. While they made their way down the aisle I took out my Asp and pepper spray then set my purse on the seat next to the wall. Hiding them in my hands I waited to see what would happen.

A couple of people turned to watch them as they walked, but no one made the first move. Listening to their crude comments as they approached, I sighed and started planning for the worst.

Merchant #1 stopped right next to my seat, while the other two kind of squashed up next to each other, blocking the aisle. “Well shit girl, ya'll dressed up just fine for a party, whyyncha come with us, can damn sure show ya a good time, ya know.” As he spoke he reached out like he was going to stroke my cheek.
Before he could touch me, I stood up and moved back slightly then said, “Only one person is allowed touch me like that, so do everyone a favor and find an open seat and sit down.”

His face twisted into an angry snarl and he shouted at me, “Fuckin’ bitch, you don' talk to me like that!” He raised his hand to hit me so I struck first.

A quick shot of pepper spray from my right hand to his eyes made him scream in pain, while I snapped open my Asp with my left. When his hands tried to cover his eyes I snapped my baton into his elbow hard enough to at least crack the bone, if not break it cleanly. As his hands dropped I brought my baton back across the side of his head, dropping him into the seat opposite me, stunned or possibly unconscious.

The skinnier of the two remaining Merchants moved first, probably less drugged out, pulling out a cheap Bali-Song knife and flipping it around in an attempt to intimidate or frighten me. After fighting Cricket, this idiot was moving like he was in slow-motion. I fired another shot of pepper spray to the eyes, though he turned enough that I actually only got one eye and his nose instead of both eyes as I had planned.

Before I could hit him with my baton, the moron managed to stab himself in the cheek because he couldn't even manage to drop his knife before he grabbed his face. I think it was actually a mercy when I hit him hard enough to drop him in his tracks.

The last Merchant was taken out by one of the other passengers, a skinhead in a brown leather jacket, who grabbed him in a sleeper hold that put him down in less than a minute. Dropping him to the floor of the bus, he looked at me and asked, “You okay miss? They didn't hurt you did they?”

I shook my head and collapsed my baton and said, “Not at all. Irritated me yes, but they didn't touch me,” looking down to check on the Merchants, I looked back at him and said, “thank you for the assistance. Now all we need to do is toss them off the bus.”

One of the other passengers, this one in ABB colors pulled the stop cord, and said, “No problem with that, we'll get rid of these assholes at the next stop,” he stepped up and looked at me and then the downed thugs and said, “Good job with them, I'm hope they haven't ruined your night have they?”

I grinned and said, “No, my date is over, I'm just headed for home now,” feeling the bus start to slow down I picked up my purse and put away my Asp and pepper spray before grabbing the overhead rail.

When the bus came to a stop, they opened the rear door and literally tossed the Merchants off the bus and out on to the ground, taking a moment to punch the one that had been choked out a few times first. They also removed the knife from the one guy's face first, before tossing it into the gutter.

Once they had finished, the two of them nodded at me and then each other before heading back to their seats. Before they could sit down, a big guy with a shocked look on his face turned and spoke up, “That's it? You beat the shit out of those guys and toss 'em off the bus? Aren't you going to call the cops or something?”

I sat back down in my seat and placed my purse on my lap then said, “What's the point of that? They're only Merchants, the police probably wouldn't even bother to arrest them. This way when they wake up they'll know that they got pounded and tossed for breaking the rules. The lesson will last longer this way.”
One of the older passengers, a lady around 50 or so spoke up, “You must be new to the Bay sonny. Rules are clear; no fighting on public transport or around hospitals. That was Marquis’ rule and Allfather agreed with him. Butcher and the Teeth didn't, but Marquis drove those pieces of shit right out of town. Later on Lung and Kaiser agreed and put the same word out too. Keep the peace on the buses and in the hospitals, or everyone comes down on you hard. Most people got no problem with those rules, 'cept for those stupid Merchants. They seem to think that the rules don't apply to them.” She laughed harshly and said, “Someday they’ll figure out that we like those rules, and aren't about to let some drugged out idiots ruin things for us.”

The man shook his head in confusion and said, “Wow, nobody told me anything about these 'rules', I guess it's just something you know from growing up here? Sort of like the 'unwritten rules' for capes, I guess. I'll ask around at work and see if there are any other local rules that I should know about, but don't. I don't want to make a fool out of myself just riding the bus or something, and I expect my co-workers don't want to either.”

I sat back and relaxed as the bus continued towards home, just watching and listening to the other passengers chatting. I was pretty sure I recognized the skinhead who helped me out from Winslow, I think he was a grade ahead of me, John or James something. Never had anything to do with him, or any of the other gangers while I went there, those bitches were bad enough, I didn't need to get the attention of any of the other gangs at school.

The big guy, who looked a bit military, maybe a new cop in town, got off in one of the nice parts of town, just outside a decent apartment complex about half a mile from the docks, safely outside most of the gang territories. Given his age and the ring on his finger, he probably had a wife and maybe kids, too. That might explain his obvious interest in finding out more about our local 'rules'; more than just to help with his job.

The rest of the ride was quiet, people getting on and off occasionally until it was my stop. Leaving the bus I walked home quickly, getting home just after 10 pm, plenty of time before I had promised dad that I'd be home.

Opening the back door, I called out “Hey dad, I'm home safe and sound. I'm going to get changed and will be back down shortly, okay?”

Looking over at me from where he was watching the news, he said, “Not a problem, Taylor. Your date went well I hope?”

I grinned as I headed for the stairs, “It went very well dad, I'll tell you about when I get back downstairs.”

Getting to my room, I sent Amy a text letting her know that I was home safe and sound, and that I would talk to her tomorrow before noon. She texted me back, thanking me for a wonderful date and told me to sleep well.

I changed out of my dress, hung it up and then grabbed a robe and some undies and took a quick shower, though I didn't bother to wash my hair, figuring that I could do that in the morning after my exercises. Walking down the stairs, I took my seat next to dad on the sofa as he turned down the volume on the tv.

Smiling at him, I leaned over and hugged him. “I had a wonderful time today with Amy. We had lunch with her sister and she drove us over to the Arena for the Playoff game, which the Lynx won, then walked to a really nice Japanese Steakhouse for dinner. Afterwards we walked back to the college campus to attend a student performed concert, a really good one too. We got a lot of time to just be together and talk, so it was a lot of fun.”
Dad smiled back and asked me, “Any problems coming home?”

I shook my head and said, “Not really. A couple of Merchants got uppity, but they got tossed off the bus without any hassle. You'd think that they'd have learned by now that nobody causes trouble on the buses in Brockton Bay. Oh! There was a new guy, cop or security guard or something like that on the bus tonight; it kind of blew his mind to see E88 and ABB working together to keep the peace on the bus.” I giggled a bit at the memory of his face, then went on, “Some of the passengers gave him a quick history lesson about Marquis’ Rules and how they work, so he'll probably do okay around town. At least if his co-workers point out the safe areas and gang territories to him so he doesn't make any stupid mistakes.”

Dad laughed at my description of the bus ride then asked me, “So what are your plans for tomorrow? Seeing Amy again?”

I shook my head and said, “No, she's got family time tomorrow, so I'm going to do some research at the library and work on making some clothes and jewelry if I have enough time. We are planning on meeting up on Wednesday because she has a half day due to Professional Development. Not sure what we'll do, but I'm sure we can come up with something.”

“I'm sure you can. Also, if you don't mind, could you write up a grocery list for me? I figure I can do the shopping while you're at the library and then maybe we can order pizza for dinner and watch a movie together.”

“That sounds really good to me. Would you like me to pick out a movie at the library or did you have something in special in mind?” I asked him.

Dad looked thoughtful and then said, “Surprise me, why don't you. I haven't been to see anything at the theaters for a while so just about anything will be good, you know the kind of movies that I like.”

Getting up, I gave dad a kiss on the cheek and walked up to bed. I didn't bother to set an alarm, figuring that I would wake up when I was ready. I did set my phone to vibrate and put it in my drawer, thinking that if Amy needed to contact me that I'd hear it just fine before I turned off the lights and went to sleep.
As I had expected, I woke up a little after 3:30 am even without setting either my phone or internal alarm. Getting up, I got dressed in a pair of shorts and tee shirt and went downstairs to grab a quick bite to eat before starting my day. While eating my muffins and fruit I planned out my day, deciding to get my weaving work out of the way first and then start on doing the layout and cutting for some of the summer blouses that I hoped to sell at the Free Market.

Before getting started I stood and set my resistance to 25% and did a slow set of stretches and my Tai Chi routine. It wasn't hard, but I could feel that I was having to push myself just a little bit harder than normal. Just like we had hoped. Leaving it set at 25%, I headed downstairs.

In the basement it only took 15 minutes to shift fabric, cords and thread and set up the next set of spools. I did take a few minutes to carefully check my Widows and Recluses, especially the egg sacs because once they hatched I would be in a position to really pick up my production rate. I set my ants and beetles to building more sleeping chambers and storage rooms for the different types of food my swarm needed.

So far, the local insect population was enough to keep my swarm fed and healthy, but once the new generation of spiders hatched, I was going to need a lot more food. Fortunately, Spring was well underway and more and more insects were available every day. Next Fall and Winter was going to take some planning to make sure I could keep my working swarm well fed.

Taking a last look around to make sure everything was properly put away, I checked the freezer to see what we were running low on then turned off the lights and headed upstairs.

Going into the sewing room, I pulled out 3 different blouse patterns that I thought I would be able to successfully sell, laid out my cutting mat and started pinning the pattern to the fabric I had chosen. I was planning on doing each pattern at least four times, using different fabric only when I needed to so that each style and fabric combination would be available in different sizes. Hopefully the sizes I had chosen from my day at the Free Market and online research would sell well.

The whole process of laying out, marking and cutting out the fabric was time consuming, but kind of restful. I had to focus on what I was doing, but it wasn't actually hard to do it right. Once I had a blouse cut out, I carefully collected the pieces and put them into a clear plastic envelope, with a note specifying exactly which pattern and size was inside.

I finally finished up around 7:30, having layed out and cut an even dozen blouses, though I still had to pick out the buttons I would use for each blouse. I'd need to check mom's button tins and see what she had, but I was planning on buying at least some of them as the last time I had checked, mom's collection had a lot of 2 and 3 buttons, but very few larger sets and I needed at least 8 for each blouse. Cleaning up and putting everything away only took a few minutes as I had no plans to start sewing until either this evening or tomorrow. For now, it was breakfast time.

Checking on dad, I saw that he was still sound asleep, so I quietly went down to the kitchen and started to make breakfast. Since dad wanted to go grocery shopping today, I simply emptied the fridge and upstairs freezer of what remained of this weeks left-overs, put them into the oven to
reheat while I started writing my grocery list. As usual, I used the Sunday paper to find the best sales and put together a good list, coupons included, for dad to use when he left to do the shopping.

By the time I finished writing my list, the food was ready to eat and I started dishing it up; chili, beef stew, roast pork, chicken and dumplings and the last bits of 4 different casseroles. None of the dishes were very big since dad had left-overs for lunch almost everyday, and I ended up throwing the casserole leftovers into a single large bowl, but between them I managed to get completely full. Rinsing out the dishes, I left them to soak while I took a shower and got dressed for the day.

Because it was overcast and looked like it might rain, I decided to dress casual but when I put on a pair of jeans I found a problem: they no longer fit me. The waist and hips were okay, a bit snug maybe, but they still fit; the length however was almost 2 inches too short. I knew that I had grown, but sweats and skirts had kept me from realizing just how much. Setting them aside, I started trying on all of my clothes, especially my jeans and slacks and found that I had out-grown them all. Even a few of my tops were too small … well they fit, just really snug and were short enough that they tended to show part of my tummy.

I finally settled on using the cargo pants from my running outfit, which still fit okay and one of the blouses I had made for myself. Clearly I needed to do some shopping because I really wanted some jeans, and my sewing machine wasn't strong enough to handle denim. Tops I could make for myself, though some tee shirts would be nice, and I would have to make some slacks as well.

Sighing sadly at all of the clothes that I could no longer wear, I carefully folded them up and set them in piles. I would ask dad to take them to the Association and see if anyone could use them, times were hard and I wasn't going to just throw them away; I would rather people that I knew used them instead of strangers.

Pulling my backpack out from under my bed, I emptied it of most of the school stuff, put $200 in my wallet, to add to the $60 left over from our date and took it downstairs to the kitchen. My pepper spray and ASP fit nicely in my cargo pockets without being obvious.

Double-checking the cupboards and fridge, it was obvious that I really didn't have a lot to work with if I wanted to pack a lunch, so I decided to eat out today. Cleaning the dishes and putting them in the dishwasher only took a few minutes so I did that and left dad a note telling him that I was heading out to the library and would see him later this afternoon, probably around 5 or 5:30.

As I waited for the bus, I decided that getting at least some new clothes was a priority and that the library could wait if necessary. Checking the routes again I decided that I could walk to a Wal-Mart easily if I got off the bus early.

I pulled out my phone and sent Amy a quick text, letting her know that I was going to do some shopping and after that would be at the Library all afternoon. A few minutes later she texted back and let me know that her 'family time' today meant she was stuck planting flowers in the front yard beds, instead of doing something fun like shopping or going to the library. A minute later she sent another text telling me that she was going to be at the Pelhams this afternoon and hoped that I had fun at the library because she was hoping for a cookout. If it didn't rain.

Boarding my bus when it arrived, I took a seat near the rear doors and watched closely as we got close to where I would need to get off. Eventually, the bus stopped at a busy intersection from which I could see the Wal-Mart about half a mile down the road. Pulling the stop cord, I exited as soon as the driver opened the doors and waited patiently at the crosswalk until I could start on my way to the store.

Even though it was Sunday, the store was fairly busy, and I had to be careful not to knock against
people as I made my way to the women's clothing section and started looking for some jeans that would fit and allow me at least a reasonable amount of movement. After trying on a few pair, I found two that met my requirements; decent fit, wouldn't rip if I tried to kick or run and wouldn't cost an arm and a leg. Next I picked out some plain colored tee shirts to replace the ones I had outgrown as well as some socks.

Once I had all the clothes that I would need, I headed to the back corner where all of the sewing and craft stuff was. Finding a dozen sets of buttons and a few spools of thread that would match the fabric I was using was easy; besides, having some extra choices would be nice. I also looked at some of the fabric tags that they had, but decided to pass on that for the moment. Maybe I could use the sewing machine to make them or find a place to order them online.

Taking all of my shopping to the front, I found a short line and paid for my purchases and packed them all into my backpack before leaving the store and heading back to where I could catch a bus to the library. When I got to the bus stop, I checked the time and decided to eat before continuing on to the Library. Looking around I decided that the Wendy's would do, especially since they had a nice salad bar that you could refill from as often as you liked. Given how much I could eat, it was probably the most cost-effective lunch I would find.

Ordering a large combo and salad bar, I took a seat near the windows and proceeded to stuff myself, in the most lady-like fashion. The restaurant was fairly busy, with most of the customers being either families or people my age so I don't think that anyone noticed how much I actually ate. I took my time to eat, refilling my salad plate three times, although salad plate wasn't quite accurate since they had both chili and taco options in addition to the normal veggie choices.

After finishing my lunch, I cleared my trash and walked to the bus stop. Checking the schedule, I saw that the next bus to take me to the library would be by in just a few minutes so I just stood there, patiently ignoring the other people waiting to catch a bus.

When it arrived, I had to take a seat up front and share with an older woman, but we both minded our own business, neither speaking to the other. Shortly after I boarded the bus, it pulled up across from the Central Library and I was able to finally begin doing the research into communication systems that I had been looking forward to.

Signing on to one of the internet computers, I was able to find some general information, as well as a number of recommended books on each topic. After writing down the titles, I quickly read through the basic information on radios, cell phones and Quantum Entanglement.

Holy smokes! I know I'm not a math major, but I don't even know what some of these symbols mean! I'm going to definitely need a better background in math and physics, this stuff is way over my head.

Shaking my head, I opened up the online Library Catalog and started looking for titles that would help me learn the background material. Picking out 3 math books and a physics textbook that looked useful only took a few minutes, although the selection available was huge.

Before I logged out and headed for the stacks, I took a moment to look online for anything related to Vigilante Support like Amy had suggested, and found it under the US Code. The Vigilante Support Act of 1995. The legalese was a bit confusing but it seemed to say that a hero could turn in all 'Weapons, vehicles, illegal substances, cash and miscellaneous hardware' and receive 15% of the assessed cash value. Another option seemed to be to take cash and leave everything else for the police. You couldn't take personal money, like their wallets, and you needed to tell the police how much you took, at least in general terms. You could also take specific pieces of equipment, which was clearly aimed to help Tinkers, if you gave the approximate value and listed what it was.
Anytime you did that, you had to leave everything else and the police, or PRT I suppose, could challenge your choice and it would end up in arbitration, however it specifically stated that the assessed cash value was irrelevant.

After that, finding the books I wanted, including some of recommended readings, took me about 10 minutes and I was shortly seated at a table in one of the back corners of the library. Skimming through the Tables of Contents of each book gave me a good feel for which ones covered what, and which one I wanted to start with. Setting the math books aside for later, I started with the book on radio communication because I thought that we could put this type into use most easily.

An hour later I was almost half-way through the book and absolutely sure that I was going to check this one out. I might even look into buying a copy of it because it not only covered the theory in great detail, but also had actual schematics and circuit diagrams for a variety of radio building projects. Pausing a moment, I set that one aside and slid the book on Quantum Mechanics in front of me and opened it up and began reading.

“Um … Taylor? Taylor Hebert? Is that really you? Wow, it's great to see you again, where have you been? I missed you at school, did you transfer or something?”

Shocked at the interruption I looked up and saw someone I was not happy to see. Greg Veder, my very own creepy stalker. As I sat there surprised that I hadn't noticed his presence, he pulled out a chair and sat down across from me, not even bothering to ask if it was okay.

“So, it's lunch-time, how about we go and get a bite to eat. There's a MacDonald's just down the street.” He looked at my books and went on, “Don't worry about the books, the librarians will put them away.”

I took a deep breath and slowly and carefully let it out. “Mr. Veder, I am quite busy and do not appreciate being interrupted …”

“No, problem. In fact, it's my treat, just for old times sake,” he said, clearly ignoring me in favor of listening to his own voice.

I put a slip of paper in the book I was reading to mark my place and closed the book. “Mr. Veder …”

“Greg, we're old friends so just call me Greg,” he interrupted me again to say.

I angrily hissed at him, “Be silent! We are not friends, at the most we are acquaintances. Distant acquaintances who will never be more than that. You are not welcome at this table and I would greatly appreciate it if you would leave … now!”

He actually had the gall to look hurt when I said that, “But Taylor, you know I've always liked you, and now that Sophia has moved away we can be together openly.”

I stared at him in shock. “What? You want to be with me? Are you insane!? I wouldn't be with you if you were the last human on the planet! At what point did you ever do anything that might cause me to think of you like that? You never spoke up to Blackwell about what those bitches were doing, you couldn't even be bothered to call 911 anonymously when they left me in that lo, locker. For three days. Three. Fucking. Days. Before the janitor found me, because of the pool of blood on the floor. You, like every other person in that cesspool, saw nothing, heard nothing, knew nothing. Well fine, if nothing is what you like, nothing is what you will get.”

I paused to breath, “Mr. Veder, you are dead to me. If you are hit by a car, I will walk on by,
because *nothing* is happening. If Bonesaw is cutting you apart and giggling as she does so, I will turn away. Because *nothing* is happening. Get up from this table and walk away. Walk away and never approach me again.”

When I finished speaking, I sat back and opened my book and began reading again. After a minute I heard him snivel and could actually smell what had to be tears.

_Unbelievable. He's actually crying. Does he think that his worthless tears would magically make me change my mind, that they would miraculously make things okay? Moron._

Finally he pushed back his chair and walked away, still sniveling. When I finally looked up, he was gone, although I did see a couple of girls about my age a few tables away who were looking at me with a mix of shock and amusement. Clearly they had heard at least some of what I had said to Mr. Veder, and wanted to know more. I shook my head and went back to my book, though I did ramp my hearing in case they had anything interesting to say.

Eventually they packed up and left, either to find a more private spot for gossip or out of the library entirely I didn't know. Or care to be honest. Setting the book on Quantum Mechanics aside to be checked out, I chose the Particle Physics book to read next. Before I started, I thought about my high school math courses, even AP Calculus, and realized that I might not be able to really advance until I could take some college level math. Although I had every intention of doing my best by studying on my own.

As I read through the book, I decided that I was going to need a better foundation in general physics as well, so I set that one aside and went back to the 530 section to find one or two good intro to physics books. Even just a few minutes of browsing showed me half a dozen books that might be helpful, so I pulled them out and walked back to my table and started working through the Table of Contents to try and find the most useful books.

Choosing the best two, I collected all the books I wanted to check out into a single pile and moved the ones I wouldn't check out onto the reshelving cart and headed to the video section. Once there it didn't take me long to pick out two DVD's that I would enjoy watching with dad; Taken with Liam Neeson and Sherlock Holmes with Robert Downey Jr.; both of them looked good, and hopefully dad would enjoy them. Taking all of my selections to the checkout desk, I pulled out my Library Card and started using the self-checkout line to save the librarians some time. As I finished and started loading the books into my backpack, Mrs. Hendricks finished checking out the family next to me and said, “Hi Taylor, more science books today?”

I smiled back at her and replied, “Of course, and math too. I found a really good one on radio communication that even has schematics and projects so you can try and build a variety of radios, sort of like the one on basic electronics projects I checked out a while ago. It looks like a lot of fun, though some of them do look really hard. But I'm still going to try.”

She laughed at me and said, “Of course you are. You're always willing to try, aren't you? Let me know how it turns out, alright?”

“You bet. I'll even bring my first successful radio in for you to see,” I told her before taking my backpack and heading out to the bus stop to catch my bus home.

----------------Legion***Danny ***Legion------------------

Since it was Sunday, I took my time getting ready for the day and heading downstairs to make myself some breakfast. In fact, by the time I got to the kitchen it was almost 11:00 and Taylor was
long gone. She had left me yet another very comprehensive grocery list as well as a short note saying that she needed to do some shopping before heading to the library.

Making a bowl of oatmeal, I sat down at the table to eat and read the Sunday paper. By the time I finished my breakfast I had skimmed most of the national and local articles and was entertaining myself with the comics. Rinsing my dishes, I added them to the dishwasher and left it for later, since it wasn't even half full.

I picked up the grocery list and with a glance saw that Taylor had organized it so that each store had its own list with the coupons I could use in separate groups. I folded the list around the coupons and after getting my check book and wallet, left the house and drove off to Best Buy for my first stop.

Three hours later I returned with a car full of groceries, and no daughter to help put them away. Oh well, I knew where she kept most things so I expect that I could manage well enough.

After I finished putting away the groceries, I settled down in the living room to read while I waited for Taylor to get home. Just before 5 o'clock she returned, coming as usual through the back door.

“Hi dad, any problems while I was gone?” she asked as she came into the living room.

“Nope, picked up the groceries and even put them all away. Did you have a good time today?” I asked her.

She slipped her backpack off and sat down on the sofa, “Yes I did, although when I went to get dressed this morning, I found that I had a growth spurt and I only had one pair of pants that actually fit, the others were too short. Same for most of my old shirts, so I stopped at Wal-Mart and picked up two pairs of jeans and three tee-shirts. Nothing fancy, just something that looks okay and fits me.”

She opened up the backpack and set the library books on the table so she could get to her purchases. Pulling out the bags, she showed me what she had bought, “See, just a few shirts and pants. Oh, and some socks too. On a related topic,” she smiled at me as she used one of Annette’s favorite catch phrases, bringing a pang of bittersweet memory to me, “Do you think that anyone at the Association could use my old clothes? They're are in decent shape, but since they don't fit me any more I thought it would be nice if someone we know could use them, rather than throwing them out or selling them to a thrift shop.”

I sat forward and looked at Taylor more closely then thoughtfully said, “Probably. I'll take them in tomorrow and put the word out that you want them to go to someone who can use them, not just sit in someone's dresser. Just off the top of my head I can think of two or three people who would appreciate them.”

After a moment's thought I frowned and asked, “How can you afford to buy clothes, I thought you needed your savings to pay for your tests?”

She nodded at me and said, “I do, but I've sold a few pieces of coral, and hope to start selling the jewelry and clothing that I've been making at the Free Market. I've got enough saved up to cover my tests and still have some for clothes. Not much more than that so far, but enough for now. Once I do my first sale day I'll have a better idea of how to set my budget, and may even be able to help out with at least the food bill.” She giggled at me, which was nice to hear again, it had been so long since she had been happy like that, not since Annette died; and it was really only since Amy had showed up that Taylor had gotten better, and then she went on, “God knows I eat enough for two or three, you can't tell me that it wouldn't help if I could contribute towards the groceries.”
I sighed at that and said, “Of course it would help, but it's not your responsibility, it's mine. Yes, money is a bit tight, but not so much as you seem to think. The house and car are paid for so we have no monthly payments, just taxes and utilities. Yes, you eat a lot, but all things considered I count that as a blessing, not a curse; besides, with you doing all of the cooking and baking from scratch our food bill is probably half what it would be if we bought the usual prepared meals. Not to mention the way you plan out the shopping to take advantage of sales and coupons saves us a lot of money too.”

She blushed at my words, but I meant them, they weren't just empty compliments, and then she changed the subject, “Well in that case, should I order the pizzas so we can watch our movies, or would you rather I made them, it wouldn't take much longer than having them delivered?”

I chuckled at that and said, “Go ahead and order us some pizzas while I take a look at the movies you brought home,” getting up from my chair, I took the two DVD's from her as she went into the kitchen to order our dinner.

While I read the back of the DVD's, I could hear her on the phone ordering the pizzas. It sounded like she was getting at least two large pizzas, though I couldn't hear exactly what she had ordered.

I brought two plates and a handful of napkins from the kitchen and gave dad his before setting mine down next to my glass, which dad had already filled and then left the bottle for me.

Dad looked over at me and said, “If it's all the same to you, I'd like to start with Taken, the writeup sounds good and I kind of sort of remember seeing the trailer a while back.”

I shrugged, “Sure, that works for me, I haven't seen it and it does sound good. Anyway, I had a thought on the way home, do you think we could put in a garden in the backyard? It wouldn't be very big, but it would be nice to have some fresh tomatoes and stuff. I don't want to go overboard in case I don't like gardening, but on the plus side it would stretch our food budget a bit and let us have fresh veggies.”

“I've never put in a garden either, well other than some flowers for your grandmother, so we'll have to do some research into what we need and the best way to do it,” dad admitted.

I laughed and said, “Hey I'm the research girl in this family! I bet I can find out a lot of that stuff online, and whatever else I need I should be able to get at the library. Say, have I ever told you how much I love having good public libraries? ‘Cause I really, really do.”

Dad shook his head and chuckled at me, “I'm glad you like the libraries, but are you ready to start watching or do you want to wait until the pizza gets here?”

“Lets start watching now, we can always pause it when they arrive.” I replied.

With that dad started Taken, which he had already cued up for us.
The rest of the evening was nice; dad and I really hadn't done something like this in a long time, not since mom died to be honest and I had missed it. When we finished with Sherlock Holmes we cleaned up the living room, added our dishes to the dishwasher and ran it. I combined what little pizza was left into one box and put it into the fridge, figuring that dad could have some for lunch if he wanted and I would finish the rest off as snacks.

Because I planned on patrolling in a new direction, from the docks down to the Boat Graveyard, I went to bed as soon as I could, right around 10 o'clock so that I could get an early start.

--------------------Legion*** ***Legion-------------------

When I woke up just a little before 2am, I checked to ensure that dad was sleeping deeply and then dressed in my Legion costume. I had made a few changes when I repaired the damage from my fight with Stormtiger and Cricket, adding 4 more throwing blades, a spool of Black Widow cord in a belt mounted dispenser as well as a holster for the tazer and a pouch that held 8 additional cartridges.

The changes I wanted for my gauntlets would have to wait until Amy and I had some free time for experimentation and testing. Any other changes were of a much lower priority and could wait as I continued my 'field testing' of my costume and weapons. I was keeping a notebook in shorthand down in my workroom of my ideas as well as how well things worked in the real world.

Carefully and quietly I left the house and headed towards the docks, beginning the process of gathering my swarm. I stayed out of sight as usual, but focused on finding and gathering a swarm of rodents and insects in the underground drains and tunnels as part of my mapping project. Though I had this area well-mapped, I used it as a starting point as I headed towards the docks using a different route. I needed to keep my speed down from my normal pace so I had time to gather my swarm and map things out properly, but I was still moving along as fast as a good long distance runner, at about 14 or 15 miles an hour.

Once I was into the Docks, I paralleled my previous mapping course as I headed towards the Ship Graveyard. Even though I considered mapping to be a priority I still kept an eye out for any signs of criminal activity, with little success. I was beginning to think that I would need to patrol earlier to find most crimes, that I was simply missing a lot because I was active too late in the evening.

Even as I thought that, I sensed through my swarm a woman on a bike two streets over get pulled down by a couple of men and dragged into a nearby alley. She only cried out once before they silenced her and then held her down and pulled her coat off. I couldn't tell precisely what they were doing as they leaned over her, even with several birds overhead, but I changed direction and sprinted towards her anyway.

Easily jumping from building to building, I soon arrived at the edge of a roof overlooking the alley hiding the men and woman. Looking down I saw them remove a syringe from her arm and heard the talking.

“Good, this shit'll calm da bitch right the fuck down, an' it's real good at bringing 'em back for more, too,” the man giggled obscenely and said, “now get 'dose jeans off'a her an' we can have a little fun to go wit' our bidness.”

With that I realized what had happened. The two men were almost certainly Merchants and were attempting to addict the poor woman with one of their drugs, designer drugs according to some rumors I had heard while still at Winslow, that were supposed to be super addictive. And now they were going to rape her as their 'reward' for another successful 'recruitment'. Or so they thought.
Because this was only a second story roof, I didn't even bother to slow my descent and simply dropped straight down into the alley behind the men. Grabbing the first man by the nape of his neck and belt, I tossed him face first into the alley wall. The second looked up in shock just in time to take a baton strike across the jaw that knocked him away from the poor woman with a shattered jaw.

I spent the next few minutes administering a painful, but not permanently crippling beating to the two men. I made a point of breaking a number of bones as well as at least one groin kick each, but I avoided going to the extremes like I had last time. Although this time I ensured that I thoroughly broke both of their hands and legs, as I decided that I would do that anytime I caught someone drugging a victim.

After carefully checking the woman for any injuries, I checked the Merchants as well, removing everything from their pockets and piling it on top of their semi-conscious, but thoroughly broken, bodies. I pulled out my burner cell then changed my mind and used one of the cell phones I had found on the Merchants and called 911. Cheerfully ignoring the low moans of the beaten men I patiently waited for the call to go through.

"Emergency services, how may I help you?"

"Hi, this is Legion. I just stopped a couple of Merchants from raping a young woman after they injected her with some sort of drug; she's stable right now but she definitely needs to get to a hospital. Actually, so do both of the Merchants, they seemed to be suffering from multiple contusions and possible broken bones. Please send some police and an ambulance to this location. It's an alley off of 3rd Street near Smith Ave. Her bike is leaning up against the building next to the alley," I explained to the 911 operator.

"Yes sir, police and rescue have been notified and will be there shortly. Will you be there when they arrive?"

"That's the plan. I don't want to leave her unattended until help arrives, so I'll wait and give the police my statement when they get here."

"Very well, if there's anything else, please call at once."

"I will. Also, I'm going to leave this phone on so you can trace it if you need to," I said as I dropped the phone back on top of its owner, and waited until the police and rescue arrived to take over the scene. Looking around to make sure everyone was okay for the moment, I walked out into the street and picked up her bike and leaned it against the building where it was plainly visible.

Walking back to the woman, I tugged her pants up properly and put her coat back on so that she would stay warm until the rescue arrived. After that I just waited more or less patiently until either the police or the rescue arrived.

Somewhat to my surprise, the rescue actually beat the police by almost 5 minutes. As the EMT's came into the alley I pointed to the woman and explained what they had done to her, and then told them that the men were not bleeding out, were still mostly conscious and could probably wait for a second ambulance or even ride in with the police.

Both of them looked quite disturbed by my swarm voice, but the older of the two EMT's recovered quickly and gave me an odd look before he bent over and checked the two men while his partner finished prepping the woman for transport and then said, "Yeah you're right, they can wait for the next bus, she's a lot more critical," he stood and looked at me a moment then said, "I have to say, that was a professional beating; maximum pain and minimum permanent damage. Lots of p
I shook my head, “No really. I simply decided to make a point tonight; normally they’d just make bail and be right back on the streets doing the same shit in a few days. This way, it’ll be months before they can do anything like this, and hopefully the memory of the pain will be a deterrent.”

The EMT laughed and said, “Yeah, like my old man used to say ‘pain is great motivator’; who knows, maybe it’ll motivate them to stop using drugs and doing evil shit like this. At least we can hope so.” He turned towards the street as a police car pulled up, then said, “Alright, we’ll get her to the hospital and another rescue should be here soon. Be safe Legion, and keep up the good work.”

“I will.”

As he headed towards the Rescue, he stopped a moment to speak to the police that had just arrived before getting behind the wheel and driving off. A moment later the two police officers walked up to me and asked, “Hi, um do you mind if we ask you some questions?”

I shook my head and said, “Not at all, however it might be faster if I tell you what happened first, and then you can ask any questions you need for clarification.”

The smaller cop nodded and pulled out a digital voice recorder and asked, “Is it okay if we record this?”

“That’s fine,” and with that I began my statement, first identifying myself and then giving the date and time, before explaining the entire sequence of events from first noticing them attacking the woman all the way up to when the police arrived. I did kind of gloss over exactly what I did during the fight, but made it clear that I tried to use minimal force to completely subdue them, but they continued to resist, possible due to whatever drugs they had been using. I knew that they had been using something just from the way they smelled and how fast their hearts were beating, though I wasn’t going to mention that to the police.

About the time I finished with my statement, another, even larger Rescue arrived and the Merchants were prepped for transport. While that was happening the police asked me a few more questions and then restated the date and time and stopped recording.

“Thanks Legion, this will make our job a lot easier. Having your statement recorded means we can use it when they go to trial, which means getting a conviction will be a lot easier. Because honestly, most capes are too hard to get in touch with so we can't get them to testify, so a lot of perps get to walk,” he explained as he put his recorder away.

“Glad I could help, but if you don't need anything else I've a patrol to get back to.”

“That's fine, we have everything we need, so enjoy the rest of your night.” With that all of the cops headed for their cars, taking the woman's bike with them, while I vaulted my way from wall to wall, using a couple of window sills to help me get up to the roof of one of the buildings.

Taking a moment to spread my swarm out to allow me a good view of my surroundings as well as to restart my mapping, I continued on my way towards the Boat Graveyard. Shifting closer to the shore line I settled down to a steady pace that let me map the underground while keeping a close eye out for any signs of trouble.

After about 20 minutes I came up to the only working section of docks in Brockton Bay, located right at the southern edge of the Trainyards, it handled what little shipping was still able to make it through the bay. This included about a dozen fishing boats, mostly family owned, and a few
sailboats that were still in their cradles waiting for the weather to warm up enough for their owners to have them relaunched. The main reason this section of the docks was still active, other than a rather winding and narrow channel out to sea, was because of the Dockworker's Association.

It might be a fading union, but it's members had a serious reputation for dealing with the gangs harshly. Even the neo-nazis had learned that trying to muscle into this area only ended in pain. In fact, if I remembered some of mom and dad's conversations when I was younger, the union had put a number of their thugs and capes into the hospital with crippling injuries on more than one occasion.

I guess it just went to show that even racist bigots could learn if you hurt them enough. I would have to keep that in mind the next time I found E88 being naughty, or doing something terminally stupid like shooting up a neighborhood. Or holding another one of their initiations, like that one I stopped that Stormtiger and Cricket had been at.

As I worked my way through the Dockworker's territory, I was pleased to see that there were no visible gang tags, the streets and sidewalks were in good repair and the buildings looked to be well cared for, even if they needed a fresh coat of paint. I hadn't actually been down here since before mom died and it was nice to see that it was in better shape than a lot of the areas that I patrolled through.

I stopped when I reached the river that divided the city and after checking the time, I paralleled the river for a couple of miles before turning back and heading for home. I planned on being home by 4:30, well before dawn.

As I ran, I kept my swarm spread as wide as I could, trying to push my range as I did every day. I had noticed that after my two cape fights that my range had jumped noticeably, especially after fighting Lung, while fighting normals did nothing of note, though I had no idea why. I had also noticed that along with the jump in range, I had a significant increase in the size of the animals I could pull into my swarm. Currently, my range was up to just over 600 feet, including the two big jumps in range and I could control animals up to about 100 pounds or so. Just practicing daily allowed a fairly steady, if slow, increase in my range so I made that a part of my everyday routine.

When I reached home, dad was still asleep so I quietly entered the kitchen and headed downstairs to change. I put my costume in the gym bag I kept under the stairs and put on a pair of shorts and a big tee shirt that I used to use as a nighty but that now actually fit me as a shirt, if a bit loosely.

Heading back upstairs, I booted up my computer and started both of my mapping programs and continued entering the data that I had gathered during my patrol. As I worked with the programs, I made mental notes about how it could be improved to work faster or at least easier. Both of them were under the Open Source License, so I could modify the programs if I downloaded the Software Developers Kit. One of them was free and the other was only $20, so I had a feeling that I might be doing that for one or the other eventually.

After I finished updating my maps I saved my work and closed the programs out. I then checked my mail and continued with the testing I had started on the database that I had written. I had finished basic functionality testing on about half of the Virtual Machines I was using and hoped to finish the rest of the VM's by lunch time. Even when that was done I still needed to really stress the program and see if I could break it by being stupid. It was tedious but necessary work, but it was the only way to be sure I had done my programming correctly and hadn't allowed any OS specific bugs to sneak in.

Around six o'clock I wrapped up work and sent Amy a quick email asking her if I could meet her after school, as I had some stuff I wanted to talk about. As usual, she sent me a reply almost
immediately saying she was looking forward to seeing me and that we could walk to her shift at one of the other hospitals. Once we finished exchanging emails I logged out and shut everything down for a while since I had a busy morning ahead of me.

Walking into the kitchen I started a large batch of bread dough and set it aside to rise, then began making breakfast for dad and I. Once that was started I made his lunch; since I had no leftovers I made him a salad and two sandwiches. I could hear him getting ready for work so I knew that I had at least 20 minutes before he would be down to eat, which was plenty of time to fix and eat my own breakfast.

By the time I finished eating, dad still hadn't come down but I could tell he would in a few minutes so I made him a nice omelet with toast and sausages that was ready just before he sat down. Once he took his seat I headed back downstairs and pulled fairly large roast out of the freezer and set it aside to start thawing.

As I started prepping the veggies that would go in the crockpot with roast, I decided that I was in the mood for garlic mashed potatoes, so I prepped some extra carrots and onions to cook with the roast, and planned on making the potatoes after lunch, this afternoon. Dumping everything in the crockpot, I turned it on low and left it to do it's thing.

Once dad had left for work, I made a couple of pies and two large batches of cookies, oatmeal raisin and chocolate chocolate chip. Once the pies were in the oven I started on my clean up, which let me finish loading the dishwasher and starting it. Boring, but a lot easier than doing them all by hand. The pots and pans were bad enough.

I did notice that by keeping my isometric mod active all night I was actually a bit tired and definitely still hungry. Looking through the fridge, I decided that I would just make another breakfast, this time extra-heavy on the calories. Hopefully that would be enough to tide me over until lunch-time.

Checking my pies, I slid the first batch of cookies in the oven, setting a kitchen timer to let me know when they were done before heading back out to the living room to start my school work. I double-checked my progress towards my GED and began studying while I also worked on testing my scheduling database. God, I loved multitasking and Thora was a big help with doing two completely different things at once.

Although it was a bit inconvenient, I kept a constant stream of cookies going in and out of the oven while the pies finished baking. Looking over my baking pans, I decided that I really needed to get some more baking sheets and bread pans, and maybe some cake pans too, since I didn't have any. I would keep my eyes open online and in the paper to see what was available.

For lunch I made a batch of tacos just because it was quick and easy. Filling too. I made sure that all of my baking, including a double batch of dinner rolls, and cooking was done by 2 o'clock so I had time to shower and change before heading out to meet Amy. I put the rolls in a large basket, well wrapped in towels, and the potatoes in the dutch oven, loosely covered. I then put a deep pan full of water in the bottom of the oven with a towel folded up to help wick the moisture into the oven when it was turned on.

I emptied out my backpack again, put in a thermos of juice, some cups and napkins, a box of my fresh-baked cookies and one of my library books before grabbing mom's compact umbrella and tucking it in the side pocket and then headed for the bus stop.

Riding the bus was uneventful, leaving me plenty of time to read and work with my swarm. When the bus pulled up outside Arcadia I debarked and headed for my usual seat inside the H. Taking out
my book I settled back to read while scanning through Arcadia.

Because of the warmer weather I had a nice large selection of insects to work with so I carefully began landing at least one of the smaller insects, like gnats, on every person in the building. Although I really couldn't see anything, I was able to tell the difference in gender, and surprising enough, age, just from the pheromones that were given off. I did make a point of putting enough insects in each room so that, with concentration I was able to make out what was being said so I could figure out what was being taught in each classroom.

As soon as I landed a gnat on Amy, she took control of it away from me than gave it right back. As an experiment, I had the gnat tap her once with its foreleg and then wait. A few seconds later, the gnat used the same leg to tap twice. We spent the next few minutes playing around with the gnat, which gave me some ideas for undetectable comms between us that I really wanted to talk to Amy about. I also put learning Morse code at the top of my 'must learn' list.

I have to admit I was also impressed at the amount of control that Amy had over the insect; she could remove it from my control completely, let me have full control, or take just enough control to ensure I knew what she doing. It was amazing to feel someone else controlling the gnat at the same time as I was; it felt sort of odd, but mostly very intimate.

About 10 minutes later the dismissal bell rang and I felt the student body begin to migrate towards the exits. Amy paused by her locker and then headed towards where I was waiting. I smiled as I watched her slide around the other students on her way to the exit; it looked like she was almost dancing as she walked through the halls. I looked up from my book as a thought occurred to me, I might need to caution her about demonstrating just how quick and agile she was, because while I doubted that most of the student body would realize what was going on, the Wards might, especially if she made a habit of it.

A moment later Amy and Vicky exited Arcadia and headed towards me. Smiling, I marked my place with my bookmark and set my book aside. Standing up I let Amy wrap me in a warm hug, that I returned with interest. Sitting back down, Amy sat next to me and said, “Vicky, have a seat. Well, unless you're in a hurry?”

She sat down and said, “Nope, I'm good. I've got no plans today, well other than homework. How about you two?”

While Amy explained that we were going to head over to St. Joseph's for her shift there, I put my book away and brought out the box of cookies and the thermos of fruit juice. Opening the box I offered Amy the first choice, then leaned over and offered the box to Vicky.

“Cookies? Fresh baked this morning,” I jiggled the box and went on, “guaranteed to be fattening or your money back.”

That made her laugh while Amy leaned up against me and giggled. However she did take one of each so I pulled the box back and set it down on Amy's lap so I could pour a cup of fruit juice for each of us. When I offered Vicky a cup of juice she just shook her head and held up her bottle of water.

The three of us sat there for a few minutes, quietly eating cookies and enjoying the lovely Spring day. Eventually though, Vicky finished her cookies and stood up and stretched, I watched her for a moment, amazed at how flexible she was, then I looked around to see just how many people were watching her. A lot. In fact, it seemed that just about everyone who had a line of sight to Vicky had stopped and was watching.
I leaned down and whispered to Amy, “Is it always like this?”

She looked around and then said, “Yeah, pretty much. When she doesn't pay attention her aura can really get out of hand,” she sat up straight and said, “Yo, Vicky! Turn it down, you're making a spectacle of yourself.”

She jumped a little and looked around, “Crap, I did it again.” Even as she spoke I could see people begin turning away, some blushing, but most just laughing.

“Oh well, thanks for cookies Taylor, I'm heading home now, Amy. Can I assume the two of you are walking to St. Joe's?”

Amy nodded and said, “Yes, that would no doubt be a safe assumption,” trying very hard to project a serious and strait-laced image. Her giggles at the end kind of ruined that, though.

I started to repack my backpack as Vicky gave Amy a hug, and then to my surprise, gave me one too. Turning away, she headed to the student parking lot, calling back over her shoulder, “I'll see you tonight Amy, and you whenever Taylor. Have fun you two.”

--------------------Legion*** Amy ***Legion-------------------

After waving good bye to Vicky, I helped Taylor finish putting away the cookies and juice, sneaking a raisin oatmeal cookie first. Once everything was ready, I took her hand and started walking towards St. Joe's.

I didn't want to make any modifications while walking, so I concentrated on my multi-tasking … if that isn't a contradiction in terms. While Taylor and I talked about school, our date and things like that, I designed the sensory nodes I wanted to use for electro-location and mapped out where they would be placed on Taylor. As soon as I finished the placement map, I echoed and mapped out myself. All told it took me about 45 minutes of our walk to finish, though I suspect that it would have gone much faster if I had been making the actual changes instead of just simulating them.

I tried to access Taylor's swarm-sense at the same time, but really couldn't do it. After I was done with my mapping though, I found that I could use the echoes to sort of feel the entire swarm, I wasn't able to access their senses the way Taylor could but I was able to feel where the individual creatures of her swarm were located. I thought that I might be able to use that as a 'mapping' sense if Taylor and I practiced enough. I did find that if I focused on a single animal and a single sense, then I could 'piggy-back' on Taylor and actually see or hear remotely. Either sense would work, though I suspect that I would get more use out of sight then hearing, since it was my primary sense.

It was pretty clear that when I was linked with Taylor, my ability to multi-task was improved to the point that I could handle three separate tasks with my full attention, but trying to move up to four wasn't possible. Yet. Trying to remote sense through Taylor's swarm worked, but I could only handle one additional sensory input at a time, even if I dropped my other actions. Maybe with time and practice I would be able to improve my multi-tasking ability enough to use more senses at the same time, and maybe even be able to multi-task when I wasn't linked to Taylor.

I took a casual glance around the neighborhood we were passing through, a rather nice suburban area; the lack of any gang tags pretty much confirmed that it was probably unclaimed or neutral territory. I waited until Taylor finished telling me about the movies she and her dad had watched and then asked, “So, are we clear to talk about 'stuff'?”

She smiled at me and said, “Oh sure, unless someone has a really long-range parabolic mike or super-senses, no one is in range to listen to us neither is anyone paying obvious attention.”
“Okay then, I'd like to pickup some food for dinner, and then eat at the park across from the hospital. I can install the electro-location mods there and we can cover some of our plans for Wednesday afterwards.”

“Sounds good to me. Any preference for food? I'm sort of in the mood for burgers and fries, especially if they're well made.”

“Oooh yeah, there's a hole-in-the-wall diner close to the hospital that's open both early and late, that makes really good food. They do a lot of takeout for the workers at the hospital and they always give big servings too. I'm pretty sure that they don't buy the patties, but make them right on site because they taste really good. It's not cheap, but I think it's worth the money.”

“Cool. I've got a few things to let you know too. I've been studying physics and quantum entanglement and I'm seriously behind on math for what I'm reading now, so that's going to be one of my big areas of study. Aside from that, I've read up on a bunch of radio communication devices like short-wave, AM and FM radios. I suspect that those will be fairly easy to implement, but when it comes to cell-phones, I have to admit that I'm at a complete loss.”

I frowned at that and asked her, “Why is that? I thought that cell-phones just used super high frequency radio to connect, right?”

She grimaced and explained, “Sort of. That part is easy'ish, the problem is that making the connection to the cell-phone network and then being able to call out and receive calls requires having an authorized connection to one of the phone companies. And that's completely trackable. Maybe using a prepaid phone as the source would work, but I have no idea of even where to start doing something like that. And it's just like figuring out how to backstop our new ID's; with all the Thinker and Tinker support that the government has it's incredibly tricky and dangerous to even look into it.”

With that we just walked for a while in silence, thinking about the problems we faced to implement the mods we wanted. Finally I spoke up, “Taylor, would it help if you had someone who already knew this kind of stuff agree to teach you?”

She turned and looked at me quizzically and asked, “Sure it would, who did you have in mind?”

I took a deep breath and said, “Über and L337.”

I could tell that I had shocked Taylor because she actually stumbled before she caught herself.

“Seriously!? They're villains. And a bad joke, why would you … wait a second, how do you even know they? And why do you think they could be trusted?”

I nodded at her and explained, “I'm very serious; I know that they're villains, but they aren't as bad as most people make out. I've known them for a couple of years now, in fact I met them right after that stupid GTA episode. In the hospital, where I treated them for a nearly fatal dose of poisoning from a hallucinogenic gas. They owe me, big-time.”

She looked pensive then asked, “Gas poisoning? How in the world did that happen?”

I sighed and said, “Yeah, just … don't admit you know about it, okay? They aren't proud of what happened and would rather pretend that it was intentional then admit it was an accident caused by not understanding how L337's power worked. The car they used for GTA was powered by a tinker-tech engine and fuel combo, and the exhaust leaked into car before it could all be neutralized and released into the open air. It was a nasty hallucinogen and they both got a nearly
lethal dose of it, before they realized what had happened. They got to the ER as quick as they could, and fortunately I was there.”

I laughed and went on, “What most people wouldn't believe, even if they saw it with their own two eyes, is that they both have jobs, not your normal 9-5 jobs maybe, but still regular jobs. Their video exploits are a hobby, not a vocation. Über is a certified bio-medical equipment tech among other things, but as an independent contractor who is called in when the locals can't fix the problem. And believe me, they pay through the nose for his services. And you'll never guess what L337 does.”

“Umm, if Über does the technical work, then maybe L337 … teaches martial arts? Ballroom dancing? Cordon Bleu cooking?”

I snickered and said, “Close but no cigar; he's a freelance writer. A good one too, he has articles all over the place on a bunch of different topics, under a few different names. They also talk to me every now and then, often to pass on important street gossip, which I then pass on to the Protectorate.”

“Besides, if Über doesn't already have the skills needed, he can learn them to master level overnight and I know that L337 is damn good hacker, not even counting his Tinker abilities. And while I mostly trust them, I intend to make sure that you never see them as either Taylor or L. I think that the mods for PP will be the perfect disguise, a little known rogue with a totally different appearance learning to crack commercial and government systems should stay well under the radar. Especially since PP will have no obvious tech skills, just 'pest control'.”

Taylor laughed at my last comment and asked, “So is that on our todo list for Wednesday?”

I smiled back at her and said, “Sort of. I hope to take care of some simple mods today, with the majority waiting 'til Wednesday afternoon. As for fingerprints …” I paused in thought for a moment, then asked, “What would you think of plain skin instead of prints, at least until we have our 'runaway' ID's?”

She blinked at that then said, “Actually, that's a good idea, though I plan on NOT letting anyone take my fingerprints, since they would get a sample of my DNA just from the skin oils. I think.”

She looked down at me and asked, “They can right?”

I shrugged and admitted that I didn't know. “I can do it, but I don't know what Tinker's can do with just that little bit, though hopefully the 'Unwritten Rules' will keep them from trying unless they're going to press serious charges, but, well who knows for sure?”

“’I guess I'll have to put criminal forensics on my todo list for after my GED, along with finding a really good criminal lawyer, one who routinely pisses the feds and PRT off, just in case.” She looked ahead and then said, “I think we're getting close to the hospital, so where's this diner of yours?”

I looked around then said, “About two more blocks. It's on the other side of the street and not well marked; you kind of have to know about it to spot it. I think they get most of their business from repeat customers, at least if the number of takeout bags I see around the hospital mean anything.”

Not five minutes later I led Taylor through a plain door, with a small sign that said 'Mike's Grill, Open Daily 6AM to Midnight'. The windows were mostly covered with posters for different local sports teams and charities, all of them current and in good shape.
As I followed Amy into the diner, I did something that I did anytime I entered a restaurant these days; I checked for insects throughout the building and was quite pleased to see that they had significantly fewer than most restaurants; and since I wasn't smelling any excessive use of insecticides that meant that they worked hard to keep it clean. It also meant that I could smell the food properly, including the ingredients they used, most of which seemed to be fresh rather than frozen.

Taking a look at their menu, and considering what we had planned, I asked Amy, “Do you want to combine our orders into one large order or keep them separate?”

“Combined, definitely. I figure 6 burgers with everything, 4 fries and 2 large drinks should be enough. Especially with your cookies for dessert.”

I laughed at that and pulled my wallet out of my pack. Taking another look at the menu I took out $40, which should cover most of the bill, and handed it to Amy. I kept my backpack open, since I figured that I could carry the bags in there easily.

Amy looked puzzled for a moment, then put the money in her wallet and pulled out her debit card before giving the boy behind the counter our order, paying for the whole thing with her card instead of cash.

While we waited for our order to be filled, I picked up copies of the local sale papers, curious to see what was available that I might find useful. A quick check of the short index on the front pages gave me hope that I would be able find a bunch of bicycles and hopefully another aquarium or two.

Loading the bags of food into my backpack only took a couple of minutes, and Amy and I left to finish our walk to the park she had told me about. When we got to the park, we found a relatively secluded picnic table and set our food out so we could eat while we worked on our mods and talked.

After a few bites of a very good burger, I sipped some of my coke and said, “So, have you got everything for the electro-location sense mapped out? And can I at least finish this burger first, cause the isometric mod really burns calories, even if it's only at 25%.”

Amy nodded as she swallowed a bite of her burger and replied, “Oh sure, I'm pretty hungry too, though I've only got mine at 15% because of school. I wanted to be sure that I didn't over do it before I could get more food. That mod won't take long, 5 minutes or so is all. After that I want to start on some defensive mods, and that's going to take a bit longer, as well as more food. I'm also thinking about creating some very high-density fat reserves to help power the changes that the Changer mod will be making, although it won't actually be simple fat. That may take some trial and error to get the composition just right for maximum energy and balanced nutrition.”

“Speaking of which, if you haven't boosted your digestion to the max, you should do it now, it'll help with the mods.”

Nodding, I said, “Already done, I figured we'd need all we can get just to eat what we ordered before you have to head inside. I also dropped my iso mod back to zero so the new food doesn't go to waste while you're making the new mods.”

“True, besides these are too good to let get cold, especially the fries,” she said as she poured salt over one of the cups of fries and emptied several ketchup packets onto one corner of her burger wrapper. Laughing I did the same, though I just added some ketchup to her pile and shared it with her.
Taking a few minutes to finish off two of the burgers each and most of the fries, I wiped off my hands and offered her my left hand as I sipped some Coke. Amy began by creating the new sensory organs just under the surface of my skin, then splicing the connecting nerves in parallel with my existing skin nerves. Once they were all in place she installed the normal on/off and sensitivity controls that I had for all of my other senses.

“Alright, let's test this a bit and make sure it works the way I hoped it would,” Amy said as she stood up from our picnic table.

I nodded and followed her as she stepped away into the open. “Okay, I can definitely feel something, almost like a gentle breeze on my skin, so let's test it a bit. I'll stand here while you walk away and then back towards me.”

Amy smiled and slowly walked away from me, and when she was about 10 or 11 feet away the sensation on my skin finally faded to nothing. “Stop. Okay that seems to be as far as it reaches, even at maximum sensitivity. Turn around and slowly walk towards me until we're touching, okay?”

“Sure,” she said as she turned and walked slowly towards me. At about 5 feet away I asked her, “Okay, can you raise your arms?”

When she did as I had asked I said, “Oh, that's cool. I can actually sense your arms moving. Try some slow punches, okay?” As she did so, I concentrated on the new sensations I was feeling and realized that I could not only sense her movements clearly, but as she got within about 3 feet I started to sense something new. Closing my eyes, I focused all of my attention on my new sense and tried to identify what the sensations meant. Eventually, Amy's hands touched my shoulders and I said, “Okay that's different. I think that when you're really close I'm able to feel when your muscles begin to fire. If I'm right, with our speed, we may be able to learn to actually anticipate our opponent's actions and we'll have a form of combat pre-cognition.”

Amy laughed and said, “Well, not really pre-cog, but it would still be a nice edge. Let's sit down and do mine now, then I want to start on some of the defensive mods I've thought of.” Leading the way back to the picnic table she sat down and took my hand as I sat. Echoing off of my swarm, it only took her about a minute and a half to install her electro-location mod and then run a basic set of tests using the squirrels I pulled down from the trees around us.

“That's definitely different, but cool. I think we'll need a lot of practice with this to be able to anticipate our opponent's actions, but it'll be a lot fun to do. Also, I have a question for you; all of the different controls for your mods, how do you perceive them? Because when I installed this mod? In addition to the individual controls for each mod, it got added into my control panel.”

“A control panel?” I asked her, quite puzzled. “What kind of panel?”

She frowned and then tilting her head replied, “I noticed it for the first time this morning, it’s sort of like an outline of my body, with pushbuttons and dials all around the body … Oh, that makes sense. The dials show the sensitivity or amount of usage, while the buttons are on and off switches. My brain is weird.”

I smiled at that but concentrated on viewing my own mods. After a minute I shook my head and said, “All of my controls are there, and I'm completely aware of each setting, but they're not visible in any way. I still need to use the mnemonic switches we developed originally.”

“Actually, I think that makes perfect sense, because I have quite a few more mods installed then you do, what with my finger and toe claws, the ketamine spikes, lockpicks and wrist blades. If I'm
right, and I think I am, then once you reach a certain number or complexity of mods your brain will create some sort of interface for you, one that you're comfortable with,” she explained.

“Really? Okay then, what's next?”

“How about I add the mods that you don't have yet; claws, spikes, the lockpicks and stuff like that. After that's done there's a couple of simple ones that we should both have; a set of filters in our sinus cavity and throat and then a nictating membrane for our eyes. It will add another layer of protection for both of us. I had been thinking about starting the Changer mods, but instead I want to do these mods instead.”

I paused a moment in thought, then settled down next her and said, “Alright then, let's get started,” I held out my hand to her and watched as she started adding the new mods. The first to be added was the lockpicks and knives that I could extrude at will, it only took a few minutes for the installation and testing, then she went on to modify my toe- and finger nails. It actually took longer to test those then to install them as I played with the different colors and designs that I could add to my nails.

The ketamine spikes were a bit different, because instead of forming when needed, they were permanently imbedded in the finger bone at the tips of my index fingers, with a tiny gland that could produce the ketamine compound on demand.

Amy nodded and said, “Alright, let's finish our fries and burgers before the next step because we're going to need it to grow the new structures I have in mind.”

Pulling out the last two burgers, I handed one to Amy and unwrapped mine and began eating; it only took about five minutes to finish all of our food and clear our trash away. Taking a sip of soda, Amy then said, “The next mod is a set of clear nictating membranes for our eyes, these will be both strong and tough, so that they can protect our eyes from most environmental threats; not enough to handle a bullet maybe, but anything less than that should be stopped just fine. If I do it right then no one will be able to tell its there without a full eye exam.”

Twisting in her seat to face me, she took my hands and began building the membranes. I could actually see as the new muscles and nerves were grown to control the membrane and then again as the membrane was grown. She also modified the eye socket to allow the membrane to lock into place with an air-tight seal. Once mine were complete and tested she echoed and installed her mods as well.

“For my next trick,” she said with a grin, “I'll be modifying your sinuses and nasal passages to include a series of filters and screens to block out any noxious gases and particulate matter such as smoke or ash. Under normal conditions the filters will be bypassed to allow maximum air flow, but whenever a problem is detected or when you want to, the bypass will close and all airflow will have to go through the filters. It will require a little extra effort to breath through the filters, but your diaphragm and lungs should be able to handle it just fine, but I won' t be installing the throat filters until we've tested this for a while, to make sure.”

“So what's going to trigger them in automatic mode?” I asked her.

“Your sense of smell to start with, possibly some dedicated sensors later. That's why I included manual controls as well. If you're going to enter a smoke filled building, shift to the filtered mode first. Oh, and our extra eyelids will activate at the same time as the filters, since pretty much anything that would be a problem to breath would be a problem for our eyes.”

I nodded my understanding and replied, “Alright, let's do it and then,” I paused as I checked the
time, “it'll be time for your shift.”

Taking a breath, Amy started on the next set of mods. Again I could feel it as the changes started, and I watched in fascination as my sinus cavities and nasal passages were expanded slightly and rebuilt with a complex series of filters and airway bypasses, as well as several air tight valves that would direct the airflow where it needed to go. As soon as she finished I shifted to my filtered mode and watched as my nictating eyelid snapped across my eye and the valves opened and closed to force air through the filters. A couple of breaths showed that Amy was right as usual, it really was just a bit harder to breath through the filters but that my lungs could handle it easily.

“How does it look, is it very obvious?” I asked after activating and deactivating my filter mode several times in a row.

“Umm, just a bit; if you're watching really close you might see something as it snaps across. From a distance and if you're not expecting it, it's not really easy to see,” Amy explained as she leaned in for a closer look, “and once it's in place you can't really tell that anything is different.”

Sitting back, Amy started echoing to make her own mods, starting with the nictating membranes and then finishing up with the filters before she sighed and let go of my hands so that she could stretch to release the tension from installing and testing all of our mods.

“Damn, it's getting late; walk me to the hospital?” she asked me.

“Of course,” standing I slung my backpack over my shoulders and held my hand out for her. We took our time walking to the hospital, not speaking and just enjoying the evening and the cool weather.

As we walked up to the main entrance, Amy pulled me to a stop and hugged me before kissing me good bye. “I'll probably be a bit late tonight, so I've asked Vicky to pick me up when I finish. I'll email you once I'm home, alright?”

“Certainly, I'll check around 10:30 before I head for bed.”

“Are you going out tonight?” Amy asked as she reluctantly stepped out of our embrace.

“Nope, I'll be patrolling more towards downtown tomorrow night, I don't like to cover the same area too often; I don't want to become predictable and changing my patrol pattern helps with my mapping project too,” I explained.

“Alright then, just be safe, okay?”

“I will if you will, promise.”

With that we went our separate ways, her into the hospital and me to the bus stop to catch my ride home.

---------------------Legion*** Danny ***Legion---------------------

It was just three o'clock when I got down to the Trainyard to see how the transfer to the local trucks was going. The groceries and frozen food had already left on the trucks for the local stores and warehouses, which for today left only the Wal-Mart containers and two cars of miscellaneous fishing supplies and equipment for the local lobsterman, fishing boats and ship's chandler shops.

It only took me 15 minutes to finish my walk-around, checking that the gates and fences around our section of the Trainyard were all secure, and that the guards were all alert and watching for any
signs of trouble. Lately it had been the Merchants that caused the most problems, usually drugged out of their minds and looking for something they could steal easily or just destroy if they couldn't take it away.

Dave had been a god-send in training our members in proper security techniques and how to use the billy clubs that he had 'found' somewhere, not to mention providing State certified training with the shotguns. His time in the Navy had taught him a lot of skills, that he was more than willing to pass on to others in the Association.

Kurt had gotten city carry permits and range time at a State Police gun range so that our members could legally carry the shotguns while we unloaded and loaded the trains and trucks on Monday s and Thursdays when the goods came in. It wasn't much, but even a small contract like that helped, and soon the lobstering and fishing would be picking up as well, which was another source of income for the Dockworkers.

If the city government would ever get their heads out of their collective asses and put the ferry back in operation, that would help even more. And not just for the Dockworkers, but for everyone; being able to move across the bay without having to drive an extra thirty miles around the bay would be a big boost to employment and help improve the overall economy. But no, they had better things to spend money on, like the Country Club and different PR stunts to help with their re-election campaigns.

On my way back to the office, I swung down by the piers and saw that most of the fishing and lobster boats were tied up with the crews doing repairs and maintenance after the winter season, though two of the boats were coming back in after spending the weekend out on the fishing grounds. Seeing how low they were riding, it looked like they'd had a profitable trip.

I'd check with Mary to make sure the reefer trucks were on hand to move the catch over to the little processing plant, and that the captains had called ahead to make sure the plant was ready to handle their catches. The plant may have been collectively owned by the eight fishing boats that still sailed out of Brockton Bay, but the Union provided the manpower to actually run it for them and scheduling workers could be tricky at times, depending on the day of the week and how busy the little fleet was.

Once I was back in my office I called Mary in, “Mary, are the trucks and plant ready for the Congo Bongo and Cherie? They're about 30 minutes out and riding low.”

“Yeah Danny, I called Phil about 20 minutes ago to bring his team in by four o'clock to process the catch. I let him know yesterday that we'd need them sometime today and that they were to wait for my call to come in, but that it would probably be late. Mark went over and made sure that freezers and such like were turned on and working properly right after lunch, so there should be no holdups.”

“Excellent Mary, I've got a few calls to make before I'll be able to head out myself. The train cars should be empty by now, and once the trucks are gone those guys will be locking up and then coming back to clock out right on time. Unless something critical comes up I'll see you in the morning, alright?”

She looked at the wall clock and nodded and said, “Sounds good to me, I should be able to finish up everything and clock out shortly. You'll lockup the office on your way out, right?”

I waved her out of my office and said, “No problem,” as I started shuffling through the papers on my desk to make sure that I hadn't missed anything that had to be finished today. Other than a few job orders that were still open and awaiting final approval and signing, and two purchase orders
that I needed to verify in the morning; my day was mostly finished.

I might not hold any elected position in the Association, but as the head of HR and Accounting I did more to keep the members regularly employed than the President or Vice-President did. On the other hand, they had to deal with the local politicos and CEO's to negotiate new contracts for the Dockworker's Association, while Mary and I worked behind the scenes to make sure that they had all the information they needed to negotiate from a position of strength. That's actually why they kept getting re-elected; they were good at dealing with people like the Mayor and even the local gangs, while I wasn't; I was more likely to take a swing at them then to calmly deal with their stupidity.

One of the things that we did different down here on the docks was that our elected officials didn't get paid extra for their position; they clocked in and out just like everyone else did, and they had to work fewer hours just like everyone else when times were tough. The only benefit that they got was that when they had to act as an elected Union official, they got paid for their hours just as if they were unloading a ship or train car. It was the same for Mary and I, we were the only two actual 'white collar' workers in the Association since we handled all of the paperwork that needed to be done, but we weren't on salary, we still got paid by the hour and clocked in and out just like everyone else, and we worked fewer hours when cutbacks were needed.

Picking up my phone, I dialed a number from memory, a number that I had been calling for the last couple of months, at least once a week.

“Protectorate ENE, Miss Militia speaking, how may I help you?”

“Good afternoon Miss Militia, this is Danny Hebert. How are you doing this fine Monday afternoon?”

“Quite well, Danny. I do have some good news for you today; the Police Department and DA are planning to drop the hammer on Winslow next Monday morning.”

I smiled as she told me that, “That's very good news indeed, Miss Militia. Is there anything that I should do, or not do as the case may be?”

She chuckled and replied, “Just continue to be patient, that's all. Everything is progressing quite nicely and all we need to do is wait while the final preparations are completed. All of the warrants are ready to be signed, though neither the judge nor any of his staff know anything except that sometime in the next two weeks a major case will be closed and that a large number of warrants will need to be signed at the last minute. Which is not uncommon these days, since keeping things well compartmentalized is the only way to prevent leaks that can destroy a case completely,” she paused for a moment and then continued, “if you feel it necessary, you may tell Taylor what is going on, although I would prefer that you not give her any details until after the arrests have been made.”

I nodded, even though she couldn't see me, “I will, and hopefully Taylor won't get impatient, though so far she's been really good about waiting for this to be dealt with by the authorities. Surprisingly so to be honest; I worry a bit that she isn't actually being patient, but simply doesn't think anything will be done and is just getting on with her life.”

We talked for a few more minutes, during which Miss Militia described in more detail how the arrests were going to be made, and what was going to be done to try and keep the students safe and educated while a very comprehensive set of changes were put in place. Eventually the call was finished and I was able to lock up the office and head home to see Taylor and have dinner.
When I got home, I found that Taylor wasn't home yet, but she had left me a note on the refrigerator explaining that she was walking Amy to work and expected to be home by 6:30 pm. The note also directed me to turn the oven on at 5:30 at 175 degrees so that garlic mashed potatoes and dinner rolls would be properly warmed up by the time she got home and was ready to eat dinner.

Since it was almost 5:30, I went ahead and turned the oven on then went out to the living room to watch the news and finish reading the paper. Not a whole lot was going on locally, but apparently a bunch of child Capes in Las Vegas were causing a bit of chaos along the strip; nothing too dangerous but annoying and a bit humiliating for the cops and casino security forces. It seems that they were using their powers to raid the buffets and arcades, giving out the game tokens and meal coupons that they stole to homeless people and other kids that were living on the street.

It was just 6:30 when Taylor finally walked in the back door, calling out to me as she checked the slow-cooker and took the rolls and potatoes out of the oven. “Hey dad! Let me get washed up and then we can sit down to eat, alright?”

I turned off the TV and walked into the kitchen, “No problem, I'll set the table while you put your stuff away and get washed up.”

After dinner, dad and I put away the left-overs, cleaned the kitchen and started the dishwasher. Dad went back out to the living room to finish reading the paper while I went upstairs to work on the blouses I had cut out and prepared.

Having everything prepped and organized let me start sewing right away and I finished 3 of the blouses by the time I was ready to quit for the night and go to bed. Because I didn't plan on patrolling tonight, I was able to work a bit later than normal, even taking a break to chat online with Amy for a while before going back to finish the third blouse. I wrapped up my work and sent Amy a final email around 11:30 before heading off to bed.

I slept in a bit, getting up around 4 a.m., and set my iso-mod to 50% to see how well I could do my normal work at this setting, as well as to see how much extra food I would end up needing. What was really interesting was that I now had an interface to control and monitor all of my mods, much like Amy had, although mine was quite a bit different from how she had described hers.

Mine seemed to be a set of interactive menus, menus that were controlled by my thoughts and intentions, but looked like a faintly glowing screen set off to the right and slightly above my normal visual range. In fact, it sort of reminded me of the Heads-Up-Display’s I had seen in video games, like a mix of the best features from Halo, Mass Effect and Star Trek Online. It was always there, but if I wasn’t using it for something it would shrink down into a tiny icon that didn't block my vision at all.

I could still control my mods with my mnemonic triggers but using the interface gave me much finer control and a digital display for sensitivity, power settings, and energy usage. I wasn't sure how accurate the digital readouts were, but I was definitely going to play around with this interface and see just what I could do with it, and work with Amy to test its accuracy. Maybe we could even figure out ways to monitor our normal biological and metabolic functions in addition to the
installed mods. The possibilities seemed to be limitless, especially if we could figure out how to emulate other powers and abilities.

Because I had spent Sunday afternoon in the library and had plenty of books that I needed to read, I decided that I would spend some extra time today finishing up the blouses and then build up a stockpile of jewelry to sell. Today was going to be mostly a stay-at-home day, though I did intend to do a patrol tonight closer to downtown then I usually did. After all, the better I knew the streets and neighborhoods, the more effective I could be; and it would help with mapping the underground too.

Picking out the Physics book that I hoped would be a good introduction and foundation, I set it up in the book holder and brought Thora upstairs to start reading while I made myself some oatmeal for my first breakfast. I also put a couple of flees on top of dad's blanket so that I would know as soon as he got up so that I could make sure that Thora wasn't caught reading. Once I finished eating I sat down in the recliner and started reading the book on radios, taking notes on which projects I wanted to make, in which order and what I was going to need to complete them.

As I worked through the book, I could see that a lot of components were common between the projects and that I would end up needing to buy more than a few of them. Unlike when I made my bug detector, I wasn't going to be able to use salvaged parts to build the radios because I wanted to be able to document that I was building from existing plans. Just more deception for later, if I ended up needing it. I was also going to look into buying at least some of the things I needed online, both to save money and to create a paper trail.

Thora finished the book she was reading for me before dad woke up, so I put that book away and let her out to run around for a bit to get some exercise. After that I sat back down to finish my book, though I was more convinced than ever that this book was a definite keeper that I wanted to have as a reference.

When dad finally woke up and headed for the shower, I marked my place and put the book and my notes aside and started making breakfast (second breakfast, just like a hobbit!). Checking my new interface, I could see that even just sitting around reading was burning calories a lot faster. The actual effort involved was almost imperceptible when sitting around, and even when I was up and moving it didn't seem to be too bad. I guess I'd see what happened when I did my morning exercises.

Dad was a bit quieter than usual this morning, but it didn't seem like he was upset, just thoughtful, so I mostly left him alone except to ask if he had any preferences for his lunch.

After dad left for work, with a nice lunch made up of leftovers from last night, I finished my dinner preps before cleaning up the kitchen and then went up stairs to collect all of our laundry. Sorting and starting the first load only took about 10 minutes after which I started my morning exercises. I started off with my iso-mod set at 50% and slowly increased it up to 80% which made all of my exercises extremely difficult, but I just slowed down a bit and forced myself to carefully finish everything.

When I started lifting my weights though, I found that I had to drop my iso-mod back to 25% before I could continue with my normal routine, and I was able to lift my maximums with a bit of extra effort.

Once I had finished with that I transferred the laundry and started the next load. Dropping the resistance down to 50% I went back upstairs and stripped the beds and collected all the towels from the bathrooms and kitchen and brought them downstairs to be washed.
After a few minutes of thought, I started my Tai Chi katas, and slowly increased the resistance back up to 80% while maintaining my normal speed. One of the things that I noticed, and would be talking to Amy about tomorrow, was that I needed to breath a lot faster than I was used to. In fact, I was breathing almost as heavily as I did while running, not as much as when I was sprinting, but pretty close.

When I started on my Kenpo katas, I started off at 80% but monitored my vitals as closely as I could using my interface, especially when I started to increase my speed. I wasn't able to move nearly as fast as I normally could because of the extra resistance and I seemed to be very short of breath by the time I was moving at 8 times my normal kata speed.

My first impression from using my iso-mods was that for now I was going to keep it set at 50% for most situations, dropping down to about 25% for patrolling and weight lifting. As for my katas, I thought I would run through them twice, once at 80% and the second time at 25% so that I could both build strength and speed, yet still maintain proper control during an actual fight.

I paused several times to transfer and start laundry and managed to finish both my exercises and laundry at about the same time, so I dropped the clean laundry in the living room, set Thora up with the other Physics book, and then went upstairs to take my shower and clean up.

By the time I was cleaned up and the laundry was all folded, it was definitely time to eat again, even if it was only 11:00 am. I made a large batch of tuna sandwiches to go with the steak fries I had started earlier as well as a garden salad, and at my early lunch while studying physics.

After lunch I took the folded laundry upstairs, made the beds and put all of the clean laundry away. Rather than going back into the basement to work on my jewelry or other projects, I went ahead and finished making the blouses that I had prepared earlier. My only break was to change out the book that Thora was reading as soon as she finished the first one.

The new book was actually the GED study guide put out by the state, and I had the reference materials that the state provided on my computer in ebook format so Thora could go back and forth as needed for me to study. I had found that I needed to change my display settings a bit so that she could read the ebooks properly, and I figured that I would set up a macro to change the settings easily when Thora was using the computer.

Once I finished working on the blouses, around 3 o'clock, I checked on dinner and then headed into the basement to work on making some jewelry to build up a stock pile. I also shifted spools for the different cords being made and adjusted the take up reel for the cloth that was being woven.

Working from the coral pieces that Amy had made up the last time she was here, I was able to make almost 2 dozen pairs of stud earrings and 8 long drop earrings out of fire coral. I also made 6 pendant necklaces, 4 of fire coral and 2 of a nice blue-green coral, and started laying out a necklace that would need four pieces of bright blue coral and a large oval piece of fire coral. That was going to have to wait until tomorrow when I could ask Amy to bud the pieces I wanted.

I put all the completed pieces into small ziplock bags and set them aside for later sale. As I was cleaning up and putting away my tools, I spotted dad driving up our street so I had Thora close out the e-reader and shut down the computer and monitor before she came down stairs.

Taking a quick look around the basement to make sure that I hadn't left anything suspicious out in plain view, I listened as dad came in the kitchen door and called out for me.

“Hey Taylor, you in the basement?” he called as he saw the open basement door.
I yelled back up at him, “Yeah dad, I'm just putting away my tools and stuff. I'll be up shortly.”

Surprisingly enough, he actually came downstairs. As he got to the bottom of the stairs, he paused to look around, and then said, “Well, I see you've really changed things down here. I didn't realize that you'd settled in down here so well.”

Puzzled, I looked around the basement, then asked him, “What do you mean, it's just the basement?”

He laughed at me then said, “Well, you've got your chemistry lab here, your jewelry workbench there,” pointing at each as he spoke, then he turned to the other side of the basement and went on, “all of your coral tanks over there, with your exercise equipment and weight bench on the other side. About the only thing that's mine is the freezer and the washer and dryer; and we both know that those are really yours. So I'd have to say that you've pretty much taken over the basement and are putting it to good use; certainly a lot better use than before.”

I blushed as I looked around and realized that I really had taken over the basement as my own, and dad didn't even know about the stuff that I had hidden away from view.

I really need to make some money and get a workshop of my own set up somewhere; somewhere that was hidden and secure. Great, now I'm planning my own secret lair, the next thing you know, Amy will be making mutant monkeys to provide security. Gah!

“Uh, sorry dad, I didn't realize that I had sort of taken over the whole basement,” I apologized, “do you need me to move my stuff?”

He smiled as he walked over and gave me a hug, “No Tay-Tay, I've no use for the basement and you do. You cleaned it out, you're putting it all to good use now, whereas all I was doing was letting it get more and more cluttered. It's yours now, do with it as you please. If I need anything down here, I'll just ask you for it; I know that I'd never find what I was looking for anyway and I don't want to wreck anything you're doing.”

Pulling me around towards the stairs, he went on, “For now, let's get cleaned up and have some dinner. I've some things that I want to talk to you about after we eat, and then you can tell me your plans for the selling the jewelry and clothes that you've been making.”

--------------------Legion*** ***Legion-------------------

After dinner, dad helped me clean up and do the dishes, before I served up some ice cream and apple pie that we took to the living room for our talk.

As we settled down to enjoy our dessert, dad spoke up, “Well Tay-Tay …”

“Daaad! You haven't called me that since I was six, why now!?” I asked, as I realized that he had called me by my old nickname downstairs as well.

“Not sure, but it seemed appropriate somehow. I suppose it's the contrast between how you were as a little girl compared to what it was like the last year or two, and how you are now that brought it back to me. I'll stop if you don't like it …”

I shook my head and said, “No, I don't mind. In fact it's kind of nice, brings back some good memories. But you seemed to have something serious to talk to me about, more than just my old nickname, so go ahead and talk.”
He took a deep breath and said, “I talked to Miss Militia yesterday and she had some news for me, good news I think. Firstly, the Police Department and the DA will be executing a series of warrants at Winslow next week, probably on Monday morning. I don't know who they are going to be arresting, nor what the charges are going to be, but since one of the things that they needed to do first was to work with the School Board to arrange replacement teachers and staff, I expect that a lot of people are going to be arrested.”

“Well, Sophia Hess is already under arrest and in PRT custody and will be charged as an adult. I wasn't told what charges she would be facing, but Miss Militia gave me the impression that they were dropping the hammer on her hard. Apparently they've found evidence of several suspicious deaths, in addition to everything she did to you, so she may end up in the Birdcage.”

“Third, she said that you will definitely have to give depositions, and considering the number of people they are charging, you may have to give quite a few of them. Because of your age you probably won't need to testify in open court, but you may have to testify on video. That's all up to the lawyers, so we'll just have to wait and see.”

“Lastly, and this is just for you, you need to make sure that you keep away from anyone from Winslow, especially Emma Barnes, Madison Clements and any faculty and staff. Once the warrants are served, the DA plans to hit each of them with a restraining order to keep them away from you and me, but if anyone approaches you about Winslow, just say 'No Comment' and leave. If someone tries to serve you with papers or claims to be a lawyer, say the same thing and then leave. You're a minor and, legally, they can't approach you without me or your lawyer present. But we both know that some people think that the law doesn't apply to them and they might try to approach you for some reason.”

I sat there for a minute, stunned by what he said, “Wow, I had kind of given up on the police doing anything, it just seemed like it was taking forever and I thought that they had given up on it. It's good to see that I was wrong.”

“So, is there anything else that I should be doing while we wait? I still have my notes, should I turn them over to the police?” I asked.

Dad shook his head and said, “No, actually the police have a notorized copy of all of your notes, so just leave it alone for now. You can put it in a big envelope if you want, but you shouldn't need it for anything now,” he chuckled and went on “although if you have it available to show during your depositions or testimony, I suspect that it might influence any jury that sees how thick the stack is.”

I watched my daughter carefully as I explained what to expect when the arrests were made, and was relieved that she smiled when I told her to show the jury how thick her stack of notes was.

I gave her a few minutes to think about my revelations before I changed the subject and asked her how things were going with her.

“So, I know you've been working on making clothes and jewelry, how are your plans for selling that coming along?”

“Pretty good actually, I've been working on making some clothes in a variety of styles and sizes, as well as building up a stockpile of simple coral jewelry. I plan on building enough of an inventory so that I can rent a table at the Lord's Street Free Market in about 3 weeks to see how well I can do. In addition to that, I've found a website that specializes in handcrafted art and other handmade items such as clothes, jewelry and similar items. It's free to set up your gallery and you only have to
pay a small listing fee, and then a very small percentage of the sale price for any items that you actually sell through that website."

“That's one of the things I plan on talking to Amy about when she comes over tomorrow, since she's been helping me with the jewelry, I plan on splitting any profit that I make with her. Fair's fair after all.”

“Amy's coming over tomorrow? I thought she had work on Wednesdays, that's why you normally meet her at school, right?” I asked, a bit puzzled because I couldn't remember anything about this.

Taylor had an odd look on her face when she said, “Normally, yeah, I meet her at Arcadia and walk with her to Brockton General. Tomorrow is a half day at Arcadia because their having a 'Professional Development Day' so I figured we could work on some of our jewelry and clothing projects together. I thought I told you about this last week when she told me about it, if I didn't then I'm really sorry.”

I shook my head and said, “No, you probably told me and I let it slip my mind. It's not a problem either way, just don't burn down the house and I'll be happy. Do you have any other plans yet? Another date perhaps?”

“Not really, although we'll probably get together on either Saturday or Sunday, depending on her family's plans. I'll ask her tomorrow so we can do some brainstorming. Speaking of which, I've been looking at used bikes and if I can find a decent one cheap, I'll probably buy it so we can go bike riding together; is that okay?”

“Sure, especially since the weather's been getting nicer. In fact, if you'd like, I can ask around work if anyone has one that they're not using anymore and would like to sell.”

“Sure, if it wouldn't be too much trouble. I mean, you got me that freezer and those weights already, so I don't want to take advantage of anyone.”

“Don't worry about that, Tay-Tay, nobody's going to sell something they still need, but we all try to pass on the things we don't need to those who do. It's just one of the ways the Association works together to help each other,” I explained to her.

“Sort of like with those clothes that I outgrew?”

“Exactly like that. You aren't the first to donate out-grown clothing, and I doubt that you'll be the last. We have a bulletin board in the office where people post for things they need or that they want to get rid of. If you'd like, I can bring you down one day so you can look at it, get an idea of what people post there. I do know that people trade babysitting and similar services sometimes; it's a way to let families do things together without having to spend too much money, it can also help getting some trustworthy chaperones so they take their kids to the beach or amusement parks. Plus, they can often ride-share or get bulk discounts on tickets to save money.”

“That really sounds cool, dad,” she turned to check the time and then said, “I'd like to get some more studying in tonight, since I've got my GED in a couple of weeks and I want to be ready for it,” she stood up and picked up her plate and held out her hand for mine, “so after I start the dishwasher I'm going grab my book and read down here. If you want to watch TV it won't bother me, I promise.”

I handed her my plate and fork, then turned the TV on to watch NCIS, with the sound turned down a bit so I wouldn't disturb her studying.
While dad watched his cop shows, NCIS and NCIS:LA tonight, I started studying my GED notes, then switched to my AP Psychology textbook, since I figured that dad wouldn’t notice just how fast I was reading, so I could get a couple of hours of reading in before I went to bed.

Dad turned off the TV at 10 and headed upstairs while I collected all of my books and put them away properly before I emailed Amy to let her know that I was heading to bed, and that I was looking forward to seeing her at lunch time. In her reply she told me that she was going to ask Vicky for a ride to my house, and that she was planning on taking the bus to the hospital when we finished, and that she was looking forward to seeing me for most of the day.

Once I had closed up the downstairs and shut off all the lights, I headed to bed myself. I set my internal alarm for 2:00 am and dropped my iso-mod from 50% all the way down to 0%; I planned to start my patrol with my iso-mod set at 25% to see how much it slowed me down, though I hoped to bring it up to 50% if I could. I might end up leaving it completely shut off during my patrols for safety reasons and especially to save energy, since it would be a bit hard to bring a bunch of food along while I was on patrol.

When I woke at 2:00 am, I checked on dad, and saw that he was deeply asleep so I quietly changed into my Legion costume, double-checked all of my equipment and weapons and quietly slipped out the kitchen door and headed towards Downtown while I gathered a decent swarm and began mapping as soon as I approached the limits of my previously mapped territory.

Because of the direction I was headed covered not only new territory, but was mostly residential neighborhoods, I ran along the fence tops as much as I could, since using the roof tops around here would disturb far too many people. The fences, on the other hand, were much quieter and provided good training for balance, stealth, and agility.

Because I wasn't finding much action this late at night, I focused primarily on my mapping, plotting my course more by where I needed to map than by the neighborhoods I was traveling through. I found, based on the gang tags that I was seeing, that I was actually running along the border between ABB and E88 territory, with the occasional Merchant tag that had been overwritten by one of the other gangs.

I stayed on the streets and sidewalks even when I could have used the roof tops, partly because of how quiet it was, but mostly because doing so let me use the shadows more effectively. Because of my swarm, I could keep a close eye, and a bunch of other senses too, out for any signs of trouble all around me, even though my personal senses were much keener than those of any of my creatures. If I felt I needed a better look, I would just move an owl closer or in some cases I would climb up a convenient building to reach a better vantage point.

Shortly after I reached the Downtown area, I spotted what could only be Purity flying overhead. At least I think it was Purity; Lady Photon's glow was supposed to be a bit bluer and not as bright, if PHO was accurate. At any rate, she was headed north towards the Trainyard while I was headed south-west for now, I'd probably turn around in another mile or so unless I found some action.

Although doing the mapping was a bit boring, each swath was almost a quarter of a mile wide, so I really was making pretty good progress each night. And I was getting quite a bit quicker using the mapping programs, having developed several very useful macros to speed up my work. I still hadn't chosen one over the other, as they both had useful features, but I was probably going to get one of...
the SDK's and see if I could copy the features that I liked from one application to the other.

*Oh wait, we weren't supposed to 'copy' features from one program to another, I would be 'developing a useful function, that was only coincidentally similar' to another program.*

Eventually, I went as far south as I was going for the night, and headed west until I reached where the next swath was going to start. Because of the layout of the streets, I was going to have to occasionally make a jog to the east for a block or so to make sure I was still overlapping the previous swath.

It was around 3:20 as I was approaching a small park that was in a mixed business and residential neighborhood, that I spotted at least 30 people moving around the park.

I moved up to the roof of store that was across the street from the park and took a closer look while I moved my swarm closer in case of trouble. I had plenty of insects and birds, but only a few cats and dogs, as most of the pets were either inside or tied up. I had some strays that I had picked up along the way, but I was mostly using them to carry my spiders and to let my wasps and bees rest periodically.

Watching and listening carefully, I realized that it was a gang fight, a 'rumble' like in West Side Story, between the ABB and E88. It appeared that no capes were involved, and so far it was limited to a lot of verbal posturing and shoving. So far, there appeared to be no guns being waved around, just some clubs and a knife or two.

*Well, as long as they keep it low-key and an even fight, I think that I'll just let them smack each other around. They're all big boys, and if they want to pound on each other that's just fine with me. As long as no one tries to kill someone while they're helpless ... I'm just going to watch.*

And that's just what I did, sitting on the edge of the roof, for the next ten minutes or so as they fought … sort of. Honestly, it was kind of pathetic, they seemed to almost take turns as they fought, 4 or 5 from each side would punch, kick and grapple with each other until they got tired, then someone fresher would step in and the tired ones would step back for a while. Even the ones with clubs or baseball bats always seemed to match up with someone from the other side who also had a club of some sort.

Eventually, someone on the E88 side got tired of it all, or maybe just pissed off, and he pulled out a gun. It was a big one, big and shiny, but when he fired it he completely missed his target and hit the apartment building across the street from the park. I've heard more than a few guns over the last few weeks and this one was loud, really loud, and it seemed to stun everyone in the park into immobility for a few seconds. Unfortunately, it also seemed to be the signal for everyone to take the fight much more seriously.

Even as I came to my feet, I sent some insects to check where the stray bullet went, and I saw four more pistols drawn, and it looked like everyone without either a club or a gun now pulled out a knife. I sent my swarm, at least the insect portion of it into the melee, targeting the hands of those with guns with my wasps and bees first. The rest of the fliers were concentrated into the faces of the gang members to distract them while I hopped down and began to methodically disable and subdue them. I had the few cats and dogs available retrieve the knives and guns that had been dropped and take them off to the side next to a large oak tree while I targeted those who were still armed first.

I didn't use any of my weapons, afraid that if I got rushed while in the melee, I might strike too hard and kill someone by accident. Instead I worked in a pattern; disarm my target, a hard strike with...
either a fist or a knee to the stomach to knock the breath out of them, followed by a measured palm strike to the temple to knock them out. Unfortunately, one of the gunmen was wearing leather gloves that protected his hands, so I went straight for him as soon as I noticed.

When I worked through the mob enough to see him directly, I was pissed to see that he was the one who had fired first. Though my wasps couldn't sting his hands, they did just fine stinging his face, especially around his eyes. As soon as I reached him I disarmed him with extreme violence, twisting his hand up and backwards until his wrist snapped and he let go of the gun. Catching it with my other hand, I used fast snap kicks to painfully drop him to his knees and then punched him quite hard in the side of the head.

I passed off the pistol, which was positively huge, to one of my dogs and went back to disabling the rest of the mob. A couple of them got kicked instead of punched as I worked, but I made sure that any strikes to the head were carefully controlled to prevent unintended damage. Once they were down and out, I had a small swarm of insects land on them just in case they recovered and began to move.

As I worked my way through the gang-bangers, I came to the realization that I was becoming very dependent upon my swarm during my fights; I was counting on them to blind, distract and confuse my opponents, as well as using them to track their movements and to determine where any weapons were located and aimed. I was going to need to work on fighting without my swarm, as well as with it to ensure that I didn't become helpless if someone used insecticides or an EMP Bug Zapper against me.

The only exception I made to how I took down the 'bangers was for those who possessed guns, and had fired them. Each of them also had their wrist broken, the wrist that had held a gun that was fired in addition to the 'normal' takedown. Interestingly enough, one of the E88 fighters had a Glock holstered at the small of his back that he had neither drawn nor fired, choosing to continue to use his club instead. In his case I simply removed the gun and tied him up.

My swarm made the whole process quick and easy and after the last one was down I began tying their hands together behind their backs. I started on one side of the downed group and planned on working my way around them, not really caring if they were ABB or E88, but just restraining them as quickly as I could because I wasn't sure when any of them would begin to recover.

By the time I had finished tying up the third man, I noticed a brightly shining cape slowly fly down and land about twenty feet away. Straightening up I addressed her, “Good evening Purity. What can I do for you?”

“Nothing really, I spotted you watching them fight until someone started shooting, and came over to see if you needed a hand,” she looked down at the fallen gang members and then said, “would you like some help restraining them? I have some zip-cuffs that I’d be happy to use on them.”

I looked straight at her for a moment, even though I couldn't make out any details through the glare of her powers, then nodded. “I'd be glad for the help, getting them all restrained before they recovered might be a bit tricky.” With that I bent over and tied up yet another member of the ABB as she pulled out a set of zip-cuffs and quickly and efficiently cuffed one of the E88 members.

I kept an eye on her with a couple of cats that I had circling the group while I carried on with my work, not quite sure if I could trust her to handle the Neo-Nazi thugs, even though I had heard that she had left Empire and was now an independent vigilante. I was quite pleased to see that she was securing them properly, not leaving any slack that they could use to escape later.

As we worked our way around the group, I took a moment to give her a heads up, “You'll find that
some of them have broken wrists; those are the ones who fired their guns. Being that stupid deserves at least some consequences, this one especially,” I said as I yanked the arms of the one who had fired the first shot behind his back and tied him up quite firmly.

Purity looked at me as she finished using the last of her zip-cuffs and asked, “Why him especially?”

“Because he fired the first shot, and he completely missed his target. Unfortunately his wild shot hit the apartment building across the street,” I pointed at the building that now had lights on in most of the windows, “and the bullet went through the wall, through the footboard and headboard of a crib, and only missed the sleeping baby by an inch or so. His other two shots went up into the air and I have no idea where they ended up. That’s why I broke both of his wrists.” Which I had done as soon as I found out how close he had come to killing the baby, going back to break his other arm.

She stared down at the unconscious man, her body language making it clear that she was seriously pissed off. Of course the extremely bright glow around her fists was a big clue, too.

“The baby's okay, though?” she asked me.

“The baby's fine, slept right through the whole thing; the parents are pretty hysterical though. Not that I can blame them for that, I'd be pretty upset too if some idiot shot up my baby's crib in the middle of the night.

She gave me an odd look when I said that, but didn't say anything more, just went back to work making sure that they were all secured and disarmed, so we finished up in less than ten minutes and I was ready to call the police to come arrest them.

Checking them over to make sure we hadn't missed anyone, I said, “I'm going to call the police to come pick them up now. You're welcome to go if you don't want to deal with the police tonight, but it might be a good opportunity to make your independence clear; it's your choice though.”

I think she smiled at that before she said, “I'll stay and wait for them. I didn't get here in time to help with the takedown, but I did see it and I'll give them my statement to go with yours.”

“Alright then,” picking up one of the phones from the pile that I had collected when I searched the gang-bangers, I dialled 911.

“Emergency services, how may I help you?”

“This is Legion, I'd like to report 31 ABB and E88 gang members have been subdued and restrained. They are in the little park on Genesee near 13th street. You may have already received reports of shots fired, because the idiots started shooting around a couple of apartment buildings. As far as I know there are no injured bystanders, but you'll want to double check on that.”

“31 perps? By yourself?” the operator asked me, sounding surprised.

“No, Purity flew in and lent me a hand, so please remind the responding units that she's present and not to get over excited, alright?”

“Aah, yes sir, I'll be sure to remind them to be careful and polite. Do you need PRT response to the scene?” she asked me.

“No, other than Purity and myself, there is no cape involvement.”
“Alright sir, units are responding now, the first units should be there within 4 minutes.”

“Excellent, I'll let you go then,” I said before I disconnected the phone and returned it to the pile. Turning back to Purity, I let her know what to expect.

“The police should be here shortly, 4 minutes according to the 911 operator. I warned them that you were here so nobody should get too excited, but keep an eye out anyway. I'm not sure if they have anything for transporting this many suspects, but I suspect they'll come up with something, maybe grab a school bus or something if they don't have anything purpose-built to handle a large number of prisoners.”

Purity laughed and said, “I know they have a couple of large panel vans that they use at riots or gang fights like this one, they can carry 10 or 12 prisoners at a time so I doubt they'll need to borrow a school bus … although that would be pretty funny to see.”

“True … and two patrol cars are almost here, flashing lights, but no sirens so far,” I pointed towards the other side of the park and said, “and they're coming from that direction.”

A minute later the two cars came to a stop right next to the park and four officers got out of their cars and approached us. One of them stayed back a ways and kept a close eye on the restrained gang members as well as an occasional eye on Purity while the other three came up and introduced themselves to us. I was pleased to see that they treated Purity professionally, without referring to her past history as a member of the Empire Eighty-Eight.

After taking a long look at the prone gang-bangers, the oldest officer pulled out a digital voice recorder and asked, “Is it alright if we record your statements to be presented as evidence when these young men come to trial?”

I nodded and said, “That's fine with me; how about you Purity?”

She nodded and said, “I would be happy to let you record my statement; because I only arrived for the aftermath, I'd prefer to go after you finish yours, if that's alright with you?”

Both the cops and I nodded our agreement and Officer Blane turned his recorder on and began by listing who was present, the date and time and then I picked up from there.

Giving both of our statements took almost 20 minutes, what with the clarifying questions that the cops had as well as the need to go back and match up the guns with the gang members who had used them. The police pulled their wallets out and matched names to faces once I had matched the guns to the users, then we had to verbally state the user's name and the description of the gun so it was all recorded for posterity.

While this was going on, four more patrol cars showed up as well as two large panel vans, modern day 'Black Maria's', to take all of the prisoners to jail for processing and arraignment. As they started loading them up, the extra police officers headed over to the apartment building to check for injuries and damage, as well as to get their statements.

Purity left shortly after we finished giving our statements, while I stayed until the last of the prisoners had been transported away before leaving to finish my patrol and head home for the night.
I got home just a little before 5:00 so I quietly changed out of my costume into my pyjamas and went downstairs to start updating my maps and wait for dad to wake up.
Chapter 21

Author's Note: First off, I apologize for the excessive delay in getting this chapter out but the nasty cough I've been fighting for the last few months blew up to a wicked case of pneumonia plus the flu. And that's with having gotten shots for both of them last fall. The combo landed me in the hospital for over a week and a half before the doctors would let me escape. Even now I'm on a bunch of meds to keep my lungs clear and hopefully out of the hospital, unfortunately they are also keeping me tired and off my feet for the most part.

A couple of points that I should have mentioned in the last chapter; whenever I used an actual business name, it is without the permission of the owners and done without expectation of profit or gain of any sort. I have done it before and will no doubt do it again, because while Earth-Bet is different from our Earth, there are a lot of similarities.

I say again that this story is AU, some things are different because of how Taylor's Trigger Event came about, but some things changed long before that.

For example, Sam Walton did not die in 1992; he was in the final stages of his cancer when he heard one of his children talking with some of his Board of Directors about what their plans for his company were once he died. He was so disgusted and angered by what he heard that he Triggered, manifesting several minor Thinker powers and a strong Regeneration ability that effectively cured his cancer.

After that he took control of his company back and reorganized it so that it was partly owned by the employees through profit-sharing, eliminated excessive Executive compensation and sold only products made in North America. He had predicted the rise of the CUI and the effect that Leviathan would have on shipping so he used most of his personal fortune to help fund many small and local companies and farms that could supply Wal-Mart's needs, while providing more local employment in manufacturing and industry. When he died in 2004, Wal-Mart was considered one of the most profitable companies in the world, as well as one of the best to work for. His children and other descendants inherited only restricted trust funds, and very little control of the company.

He was never a Hero that fought against the Villains, but he made a huge difference nonetheless.

There are a few other early changes that have had similar effects, making Earth-Bet a little less Grim-Dark than in canon, but it's still not a great place to live. Like in canon, both civilization and humanity are living under a doomsday countdown timer. Sucks to be them.

--------------------Legion*** Taylor ***Legion-------------------

I finished updating my maps around 6:30, making a note to focus on the downtown area because of some oddities that I had spotted, so I saved my work and checked my email one last time before going to make breakfast. Amy had sent me a short email, letting me know that Vicky was definitely dropping her off, probably by 11:30 or so, my reply was equally short, just letting her know that I was very much looking forward to seeing her.

Just for a change, I decided to make waffles, scrambled eggs and sausages for breakfast. I figured that dad would be down pretty quick once he smelled the waffles cooking.
Setting the oven to WARM, I started making the waffles and placing them on a cookie sheet covered by a towel to stay warm while I cooked the sausages and got ready to make the scrambled eggs as soon as I heard dad get out of the shower and start getting dressed.

As I had hoped, dad was quite pleasantly surprised at the breakfast that I was making, since I didn't normally make a large breakfast except on the weekends. In fact, he even set the morning paper aside until he finished eating, rather than eating and reading at the same time.

Once he had left for work, I started my dinner preps, making 3 large shepherd's pies that I could pop in the oven whenever we got hungry, as well as around 5:00 for a normal dinner time. I put them in the fridge to keep them fresh than headed downstairs to do my morning exercises, including adding a staff kata to my workout.

The library was an excellent source for both books and videos on most of the martial arts that I was interested in, especially since I could order books and videos from any of the city libraries as well as from around the state, though those took a while to arrive; but for the unusual or rare styles I was finding more useful information on the internet. Unfortunately, loading the videos was quite slow on my dial-up connection, and until I had a legitimate source of income large enough to cover my expenses with more left over, I couldn't see dad letting me get a faster connection.

After showering and getting dressed for the day, I started a large batch of pizza dough, enough for 4 large, thick crust pizzas and left the dough to rise in the oven with the light on to provide just the right amount of heat.

I set Thora up to work through my GED review materials while I studied some of the advanced math books that I had gotten from the library. In addition to reading the material, I conscientiously worked through all of the sample problems and end of chapter exercises to ensure that I thoroughly mastered the material. I was very pleased when I realized that I rarely had to use a calculator to check my work; although I didn't have the savant ability to perform math functions instantly, I was able to memorize things quite easily, and having memorized my log tables out to 10,000 and both square and cube root tables out to 1,000 was a huge help. I also discovered a bunch of websites that showed me a series of techniques for doing math quickly and easily in my head, some of which worked remarkably well.

Even with my swarm to help with the multi-tasking, learning the material to build the foundation for my advanced studies in biology, physics and chemistry was time-consuming; although it was essential since it was obvious that they were all needed to understand how to adapt modern technology into organically based modifications. To say nothing of trying to figure out how to do something for the first time ever.

Although Amy had an innate understanding of biology, not to mention a wonderful imagination for ideas and concepts for new mods, what she didn't have was the background in the hard sciences to complement her bio sciences. And that's where I was hoping to come in.

Around 10:30 I started a batch of pizza sauce and let it simmer while I punched down the pizza dough, covered it and set it on top of the stove to rise the second time. I also sliced up some Italian sausage and pepperoni as toppings, to go with the left-over ground beef from this morning, while planning to cut up the veggies once Amy got here so they would stay nice and fresh.

While I waited for Amy, I wiled away my time by making a batch of fruit juice for lunch, and to be honest probably for most of the afternoon. I'd found that while I enjoyed drinking soda just fine, I actually preferred to drink fruit juice, the fresher the juice, the better I liked it. I think that it was because I gained a lot more nutritional benefit from fruit juice than from the soda; I would definitely ask Amy if she'd noticed anything along those lines too, and if so did it apply to food as
well. Maybe fewer preservatives and other artificial supplements were more appealing and beneficial to us? Something to look into, anyway.

As soon as Geometry let out I headed for my locker, grabbed my backpack and went out to meet Vicky so she could take me to Taylor's.

Looking around, I couldn't see Vicky anywhere, so I took a seat where Taylor and I normally met and pulled out my iPod and got comfortable while I waited.

“Hey Ames, ready to go?” Looking up from picking out the playlist I wanted to listen to, I sighed softly and put it way then stood up.

“Sure thing Vicky, thanks for the lift, I really appreciate it,” I replied.

Moving closer, I stood on her foot while we wrapped our arms around each other before Vicky lifted off in one of her patented high-speed take offs. As she climbed for altitude I closed my nictating membranes which made the whole flying thing a lot nicer. Normally I had to either look away or keep my eyes closed or least squinted while being carried, but now I could actually watch where we were going, as well as try to monitor just how her flying worked.

As she headed towards Taylor's, I watched how her flying power worked, at least as much as I could. I could see her Gemma activating and shifting as she flew and changed course, but I couldn't actually see what made her fly. It seemed to be coming from 'outside' of her, not actually something that her body was doing. Almost like someone else was lifting and moving her, but under her unconscious direction.

Only a few minutes later, Vicky started descending into Taylor's backyard I could feel her Gemma start to relax until as she landed most of the activity ceased, with only a tiny amount of energy seeming to move between the Gemma to the Corona Pollenta and back again. I suspected that it was just enough to keep her forcefield and Aura active, without being pushed to accomplish anything.

As I stepped away from Vicky I said, “I'll probably catch a bus to the hospital, so I'll be home sometime after 9 o'clock tonight.”

Vicky nodded and called out to Taylor as she opened the back door, “See ya later! Call if you need a lift Ames,” she said as she lifted off into the sky.

I gave Taylor a hug as I walked up to the back door and followed her into the kitchen, closing the door behind me. I dropped my bookbag off on the living room sofa and walked back into the kitchen as Taylor pulled some veggies out of the fridge and started cutting them up into small, thin pieces and putting them into small bowls.

“Can I help?” I asked her.

“Sure, set up the pizza stones and start spreading the dough while I finish cutting up the toppings and grate some cheese,” she replied.

Nodding, I pulled the two pizza stones out of the cupboard, spread a little cornmeal on them and placed them in the oven to pre-heat. While they heated up, we carefully spread some dough on wax paper, and got ready to start our pizzas. Once everything was ready, and the oven and stones hot enough, Taylor carefully transferred our pizzas crusts to the oven with the big wooden spatula,
why she insisted on calling it a peel I had no idea.

We let the crusts bake partially while we got everything else ready to go. I checked the sauce Taylor had made and after removing the crusts, I started carefully spreading it across the dough. By the time I finished that, Taylor had all of the toppings ready so we finished topping our pizzas and popped them back in to finish cooking.

Taylor checked the oven temp and set the timer before saying, “I've got some ideas that I would like to work on today, can I show you them downstairs?”

I looked up from covering the bowls of toppings and said, “Sure, just let me finish this.” Even as I spoke, Taylor started moving the covered bowls to the counter and when I finished the last bowl, she led me down into the basement to where she had a small piece of plywood set up on two 4x4’s next to her chemistry workbench.

Looking down at it I could see that it had been divided into 6 equal sized sections, each of them numbered and about a foot square, with a black marker. “Okay, what's this for?” I asked her.

She knelt down next to it and started pointing to each section in turn. “We've been talking about making some serious mods and I think that we're going to need to do some trial-and-error on each before we get it to the point of being ready to install,” pointing at number 1, she said, “This is for power generation, we can try out a bunch of different options and check to see how much power they produce and check for breakdown and stability,” continuing she said, “this one is for trying out different power storage options, number three is for testing organic conductors and insulators, number four is radio reception and transmission, numbers five and six are for testing different weapons and defenses.”

I knelt down next to her and thought about what she had described and then said, “Yeah, that makes sense. Can you start bringing in some insects so I can build the basic structure? I'll finish it up after we eat.”

She smiled over at me and a small horde of insects started flowing in through two of the open windows. The flying creatures swarmed around my hands as I held them over the plywood and the crawlers skittered down the wall and across the floor towards me.

I built a solid foundation first, almost 2 inches thick that replicated most of the systems and organs needed to support life, then started building separating walls, also about two inches thick, though these were actually more armor than anything else.

It took me barely five minutes to finish the first stage of construction and I asked Taylor to hold the rest of the swarm until needed. “Okay, that'll do for now. I think we should go eat and discuss what we want to do first,” I turned back to look at the platform and went on, “that reminds me, the base structure is designed to consume food and use it to maintain all of the sections over time. They should be mostly self-repairing once finished, so you can just send insects to the mouths on the base and it'll do the rest on it's own.”

Taylor took the pizzas out the oven and sliced them up, so I got out a large serving tray to hold the slices and set the table for the two of us. While I got everything ready to eat, Taylor quickly made up the next two pizzas and popped them in the oven.

Sitting down to eat, I started explaining what I wanted to do first, and some of the different mods I wanted to upgrade or install.

“The first thing I want to do is create the 'seeds' to hold the data to let you Change back and forth
between your different ID’s and then create the mechanisms that will let you do the work with out me. After that I want to create a subcutaneous layer of high-energy fats, that we can use to drive some of the new features that I want to install. Specifically the ability to make Changes to our appearance. I'm not sure how much energy will be needed for each shift, so I don't know how many times we can shift before needed to eat to refuel and restore those reserves. I'm hoping for at least 3 full changes, possibly more, we'll just have to see how it goes. Did you come up with the appearance you want for each form?"

She nodded and slid a folded piece of paper across to me. Opening it up I read the descriptions she had come up with for Pied Piper and Legion. I arched an eyebrow at her and asked, “Seriously? You're practically making Legion a Case 53, are you sure that's what you want to do?"

She smiled at me with a positively evil look in her eye, “Absolutely. Legion is my primary Form and if I have a 'wardrobe malfunction' I want to make it obvious that Legion is different. Pied Piper as well, but in a totally different way.”

I sighed and said, “Okay, it's not actually any harder to do but it will surely put the cat among the pigeons if anyone sees you. Especially the E88.”

“Screw 'em. People like that deserve to be poked.”

“Alright then, after that I want to upgrade our lungs and bronchi so that using the filters is easier, by modifying the alveoli with some of the constricting fibers we use for our sub-dermal armor to increase the air flow. Normally that's all handled by the diaphragm but with the flow restriction from the filters some extra power is needed. The diaphragm will handle breathing under normal conditions, but when the filters are used the restriction will cause the extra feature to kick in. It'll compress and expand each alveoli individually to increase air flow. This will of course require more energy, but hey, TANSTAAFL, right?”

I paused in thought, then went on, “Finally, I'd like to practice that sharing of senses that we stumbled onto on the bus. I don't know how it works or if we can do it again, but I'd like to try.”

Taylor paused to swallow her pizza and said, “That sounds good, afterwards I'd like to work with the platform and try out some concepts that I've read about, I figure that we can setup and test quite a few options really fast. I'd like to see if we can develop some power generation and storage options first, then on some conductors and insulators. If we have enough time I'd like to work on some different radio systems, too.”

I started to reply but the oven timer went off, so we paused to take out the two pizzas and cut them up and stack them on the tray. “So, after we eat, should we go to the living room to get started on our mods? We can bring the tray with us and snack as we work, sort of keep our tanks topped off.”

Taylor nodded, “Sure, that'll be perfect, I'll bring a pitcher of juice to go with it as well.”

We took a few minutes to carry everything out to the living room and put the dishes in the sink. Getting comfortable on the sofa, I took Taylor's hands and said, “The first thing I want to do is get ready for the Changes. I'm going to be setting up 'seeds' to hold the default information for each set of Changes, starting with you as you are.”

Even as I spoke I created the first seed, an armored capsule about ½ inch wide and 1 inch long right behind Taylor's sternum. It was firmly attached to the bone and had the normal nerves and blood vessels needed to get an organ healthy. Internally it was filled with a shock absorbing gel and a relatively large complex of DNA/RNA strands. These strands had not only Taylor's base DNA but additional data on all of her modifications and upgrades, including some extremely specific data on
things like her finger- and foot-prints and her retinal and iris patterns. I also included data on the
indices used by the Bertillon system of anthropometry, just in case.

The DNA/RNA complex I created was redundant, having 4 separate sets of data stores that I could
compare as needed, with the nerve connections that could actually read all of the data stores. Even
with all of that redundancy I wasn't using even 2 percent of the possible data storage available, so I
left the rest for later use, figuring that I would be using at least some of it for future modifications.

I created additional 'seeds', much smaller and dedicated to just the data needed to create the
cosmetic changes between each Change; things like skin color and complexion, hair color and
length, fingerprints and retinal/iris patterns as well as vocal changes. I left lots of storage room for
future modifications to each Change, thinking that I might want to tweak them as I learned more
about biometric identification techniques.

Each of these 'seeds' was less than 1/10th of an inch in diameter, even armored, and held all of the
data that Taylor would need to Change between each of her planned ID's.

Once I had the seeds completed and ready for use I got started. First I carefully made the Changes
for her Pied Piper ID, which led to the first problem; the Changes meant that her clothes no longer
fit. Especially her bra.

Taylor just laughed and unhooked her bra and unfastened her jeans before taking my hands again
so I could continue.

"Sorry about that," I said before continuing with my work. Making the Changes only took a few
minutes, though encoding the data about the Change took almost 10 minutes by itself. Once that
was done I began the hard part, designing and installing the capacity for Taylor to make those
Changes on her own, without my power to help. I very carefully created tiny organs and systems
that would use her metabolic energy to drive the physical Change from her base, Taylor form, to
her new Pied Piper form. Even as I worked on this, Taylor was periodically eating and drinking to
make sure that she had plenty of energy for me to work with, which was especially helpful when it
came to creating the subcutaneous fat layer she would need to drive the Changes.

Getting each set of Changes to work individually and together took almost an hour, but when I
finished it was now time for Taylor to try it on her own. I reverted her to her base form, using her
'seed' to double-check the process, then stood up.

"Okay, now it's your turn to do this. I've setup the Change with your standard mnemonic controls,
though I expect them to be added to your control system tonight, so now let's see you make the
Changes on your own. I'll supervise and make sure nothing goes wrong, but you're going to be
doing all of the work."

Taylor and I stood up, still holding hands and after taking a couple of deep breathes to calm herself,
she triggered the Change.

---------------------Legion*** Taylor ***Legion---------------------

Watching Amy work her magic on my body was just as amazing as always, seeing the 'seeds' grow
inside my bones was pretty cool, but as she encoded the data into the DNA/RNA complexes I
realized that I might be able to use the extra storage for other purposes. I was getting good at
programming and I could see some fascinating possibilities that having that kind of storage opened
up, I was definitely going to be talking to her about this later.

When she started making the Changes to my body for Pied Piper, I had to laugh; we had
completely forgotten that the differences were going to be a bit significant in a couple of areas. Specifically my breasts and hips.

Eventually she finished all of the mods and it was time to put her work to the test. Taking a couple of deep, calming breathes I triggered the Change into Pied piper.

This time the Change took longer, almost 2 minutes, and felt very weird, unlike when Amy made the Changes.

When all the Changes had finished I stood there as a completely new person. I was almost 4 inches shorter, the height lost coming from both my legs and torso. I had long, straight red hair, bright green eyes, a pale complexion with a dusting of freckles. I also had a completely different set of measurements, my hips were a couple of inches wider and my bust was an easy 34C. Overall I had a much curvier figure than normal, but was several inches shorter. I could tell just standing there that I was going to need a lot of practice before I could move naturally in this Form.

Looking at Amy I asked, “Did everything work okay? Eyes and fingerprints in the new patterns?”

Amy took a moment to look me up and down as well as scanning me with her power. She then pulled a small mirror out of her pocket and handed it to me.

I looked at my new Form in the mirror, and was amazed at how I looked. I looked a bit softer than normal as well as both prettier and cuter. Especially cuter, I think she was trying to make me look as harmless as possible and she had definitely succeeded.

As I studied my new appearance, Amy said, “Yep, all the Changes we wanted have been made, just as the data in the ‘seeds’ specified. Now it's time to Change back. I'm monitoring how much energy the Change takes and your fine for now.”

Nodding, I triggered the Change back to my base Form. As before, it took about 2 minutes, but the sensations were much more tolerable. When I was back to normal, Amy scanned me again to be sure that everything had worked as it was supposed to, then said, “Perfect. Everything went back to baseline with no errors. I also think that with practice you'll be able to shift between Forms faster; just like any other skill, the more you use it, the better you become with it.”

Sitting back down on the sofa, we took a couple of minutes to finish off the pizza and juice. While we ate we chatted idly about our school work and plans for the rest of the week.

When we had finished the pizza, Amy took another look at my description of how I wanted Legion to look and sound, then started making the Changes. Once she had everything just the way she wanted it, she programmed the 'seeds' with the new data and connected the 'seeds' to the Change mechanisms and tested the connections and process before installing the new set of controls.

Because she had already crafted the Change mechanisms, the whole process only took about 10 minutes from beginning to end. This time, instead of Changing in the living room, I wanted to do it upstairs in my bedroom where I could watch the whole process in my full length mirror.

“Come on Amy, I want to watch the Change this time,” I said as I stood and pulled her up to follow me to my room.

Turning on the overhead light, I carefully closed my curtains to make sure that no one could see in my room. “Have a seat Amy, while I get everything ready.” I pulled the mirror from the sewing room into my bedroom and set it up near the door, before starting to undress. I stripped down to my underwear and stood facing the mirror.
Taking a deep breath, I said, “Okay, here we go,” then triggered the Change. Watching in the mirror, I saw my skin slowly darken until it was pitch black. Not African-American black, but no-color black. My eyes darkened until they were a shiny black, with the pupil actually being a slightly lighter shade. My hair shortened and lightened until it was a closely cropped helmet of pure-white curls. My breasts shrunk until they barely qualified as an A-cup, much like they had been before the locker. Between them was the upside down Omega symbol that all Case 53’s had somewhere on their body.

Taking a moment to twist and stretch, I realized that other than my breasts, my balance hadn’t changed at all, and the difference between the A- and B-cup size was insignificant.

Turning my head I looked at Amy and asked, “Can I Change to Pied Piper from Legion?” As I spoke I switched from my swarm voice to a normal voice, though my new normal was actually a man's Tenor voice, which went perfectly with my new androgynous appearance.

Amy blinked at me for a moment, then said, “Uh, y-yeah, you should be able to shift from any Form to any other Form at will.”

I nodded and turned back to the mirror then triggered the Change to Pied Piper. This time the Change seemed a bit easier, if no faster, and I saw my body begin to shift.

All of the changes to my appearance happened simultaneously, not one after another, and I watched as my skin lightened to a pale complexion, as if I needed more sun, my hair lengthened and darkened to a nice red shade and came down below my shoulders. My eyes lightened to a pretty green color while my height dropped and my figure grew.

When the Change was finished I could see that I was barely 5'6” with a much curvier figure than I was used to. Overall, I now had an appearance that was completely different from my normal one or Legion’s. No one who knew me would ever connect Pied Piper to Taylor Hebert, which was perfect for how I planned to use this Form.

Taking a breath, I started to twist and stretch like I had as Legion, only with far different results. As I tried to turn towards the bed, I actually managed to trip myself on nothing and ended up falling on my butt.

Amy, that traitor, just laughed at me, although I did have to admit it was pretty funny to trip on nothing.

“Great, it's going to take me forever to learn how to move in this Form,” I complained as I carefully stood up.

“I doubt it, a few days, a week at the most and you'll be moving just fine. Just make sure you do all of your katas in all three Forms until it's completely natural for you and you don't even notice when you Change,” she said.

I slowly turned around again to face the mirror and triggered the Change back to my base form and watched as my body grew and shifted until I was once again my normal self. Twisting and stretching, I then did a short Tai Chi kata to make sure I was back to normal.

I nodded to myself and started redressing myself while I spoke to Amy, “It's your turn to create a new Form; do you know what you want to look like?”

She smiled and said, “I've got it all planned out, but it's going to take a bit to install all of the modifications. I'm definitely going to need some more food first, because I have to install
everything you have, including the sub-dermal fat reserves, so I can trigger the Change without echoing off of you.”

“Okay, what would you like to eat? Anything in particular or just some sandwiches?” I asked her.

“Sandwiches are fine. I just need food so I can install my mods.”

I thought about putting my shoes back on, but decided that I didn't need them in the house. “Sounds good to me, let's head back down to the kitchen so we can get something to eat, because I'm kind of hungry too.”

--------------------Legion*** Amy ***Legion-------------------

I followed Taylor down to the kitchen and while she put one of her shepherd's pies in the oven, I got out the sandwich fixings and started making a variety of sandwiches for us to eat to restore our reserves. While I was doing that, Taylor made some more juice since we had finished it earlier.

As we ate our second lunch, I laughed and said, “I'm glad Vicky has no clue how much we actually eat, she'd be totally jealous. Sometimes I think that we eat more than Hobbits do, especially when we're working on our mods or working out. That's another reason I want to have the extra fat layer for both of us, over and above driving our Changes, it will help us get through the day when we can't stop to eat another meal. I swear I've got to find a way to extract more energy and nutrition from our food, because we can't always eat a half a dozen times a day, not without being obvious about it.”

Taylor snickered at that and said, “You may be shorter than me, but not that much shorter; no way are you a Hobbit. Truthfully though, I'm not sure how much better you can make our digestion and metabolisms; they are already running at what, 90% efficiency? Maybe tweak our muscles to do more with less energy?”

I shook my head and said, “Yeah about 90%, that's as high as I can take it and keep it stable; I can't tweak it any higher unless I'm constantly adjusting it. As far as the muscles go, I'm tweaking those every time we meet to improve strength, speed and energy efficiency, which is a careful balancing act so that all aspects work together evenly. I'm only getting tiny, incremental improvements now, so I've been working on the other organs to improve their energy efficiency as well, figuring that any improvements can only help. One change that I'm considering is to modify our digestive tracts so that we can eat pretty much anything organic, though I may set that up as a Change instead, that we can activate in an emergency to let us eat whatever is available.”

Taylor cocked her head to one side and asked, “So what, we could eat grass and leaves?”

“More than that; wood, lichen, fungus, all the parts of an animal. I mean literally the skin, bones, horns, hooves, everything; if it's organic, we'd be able to eat it. Heck, we might be able to digest even things like coal and other fossil fuels. Our bodies are already functionally immune to just about every possible organic poison, and we can isolate and expel most inorganic toxins and heavy metals, either that or break them down and use them. Both of our liver and kidneys are a LOT more efficient at dealing with toxins of every sort, so with that Change we could live and thrive in just about any conditions.”

Finishing my last sandwich, I started clearing our dishes and loaded them in the dishwasher while Taylor put away the perishables. Returning to the living room, we took our seats on the sofa and began again.

I carefully created the layer of concentrated fat under my skin and then began installing the 'seeds' I
would need to control my Changes when I wasn't able to echo off of Taylor. Once that was complete I installed all of the mechanisms I would need to implement my Change whenever I wanted. Before I started to make my first Change I paused and asked, “Taylor, do you think we could link up like we did on the bus? So that I can see myself through your eyes and other senses?”

She frowned in thought and then said, “Maybe. I'm willing to link up, but if we go this route, we need to take it slow and make the changes one at a time so that you can be sure it's what you want and you get it loaded into the 'seed' properly. Double check yourself constantly, because this is going to be a big step for you.”

I nodded in agreement and looked her in the eyes. Just like the first time, I reached out to her echoes and instead of using them to look inside of me I used them to connect to her, especially to her senses. After a few seconds I could feel myself hearing and feeling what she was hearing and feeling and then I could see through her eyes as well.

Taking a slow, deep breath, I relaxed into her even as she did the same so we were each using the other's senses. A few seconds later I could feel everything she was feeling and that even our breathing and heartbeats were synchronized.

Are you ready to begin?

Yes, let's get started. Okay, hair first …

I could see my hair shortening and darkening until it barely touched my collar and was a little wavy, but not curly.

Eyes next …

and my eyes lightened until they were a nice soft shade of blue.

Skin now …

my freckles disappeared and my skin darkened into a gentle olive shade.

Now for the hard part, we'll need to stand up so I can see the Change as I shift my height and build.

Okay, let's do this slowly so we don't lose our grips or balance.

I let go of one of Taylor's hands and we slowly and carefully rose to our feet, once standing we shifted until we were facing each other again and holding both hands.

Using what I had learned from creating Taylor's Forms, I began lengthening my leg bones and adjusting my spine to add 3, almost 4 inches to my height even as I slimmed down my figure, reducing my chest and hips until I was about a 32C, with a couple of inches removed from both my waist and hips. I needed to add a slight amount of length to my arm bones to maintain the proper proportions, while lengthening my muscles and tendons for all four limbs to make sure I had the same amount of movement and strength as before.

Looks good Amy, are you ready to move yet?

No, I need to finish loading the new Form data into the 'seed', that'll take a few minutes to finish up, especially the separate biometric 'seeds'.

With that I began loading the data that defined my new Form into the 'seed', as well as loading the
data into special purpose 'seeds' that would hold a copy of the specifics of the form that might be used for a biometric ID check. Things like my new voice, iris and retinal patterns, and finger and foot-prints.

While we are linked like this I want to upgrade our air filters and lungs, if possible I want to do us both at the same time. Are you okay with this?

A pause and then Taylor answered me,

Alright. Just make sure to take your time until you're comfortable with that level of multitasking.

Looking at both of our lungs, I started changing each of the alveoli in our lungs so that each was able to be expanded and compressed to a much greater degree so that air could be pulled through the filters more easily. I than added a second set of filters and bypasses in the trachea just below our voice boxes and into the bronchi to improve the filtration. I also changed the bypass valves so that exhalations would not normally go through the filters, but around them, making breathing a bit easier.

Contrary to my expectations, working on us both at the same time was no harder than working on Taylor alone. Certainly it helped that I was making the same type of mods to both of us, but even so, my relatively minor multi-tasking ability was more than up to the task. I easily handled all of the work, even intentionally working on different areas so I could practice under harder conditions. At least a little bit harder.

When I had finished my work, I took a few minutes to update the main storage 'seed' with the new mods. Pausing in my work, I carefully checked over both of us, looking for any missed work or areas that needed to be tweaked. Finding nothing I asked Taylor,

Are you ready to test everything?

Sure, time for you to try moving in your new Form. We'll test the breathing mods afterward.

Okay, I'm going to try to turn around now.

Unfortunately, that didn't turn out well for us.

As I slowly turned, I released one of Taylor's hands and shifted my feet, but when I did my jeans slipped off my hips and slid halfway down my legs. The problem with that was that I reflexively grabbed for my waistband, letting go of Taylor's hand in the process.

When we lost contact with each other, we both cried out in pain as our linkage collapsed and our thoughts were ripped away from each other. When I had recovered from the shock and pain, I found that we were both lying on the floor, curled up into the fetal position.

Eventually, Taylor was able to do more than just moan and said , “Mother of God, Amy, let's not do that again, please. Break off the connection first, then let go; that's the plan.”

I laughed, then moaned in pain, “God, don't make me laugh, it hurts too much. But yeah, linkage first, then let go.”

We lay on the floor for another ten minutes as we slowly recovered from our mishap before we were able to sit up and lean against the sofa. I eventually was able to pull my jeans back into place, but was in no way ready to do more than that until my headache managed to recede at least a little.

Finally, around 3:30, we had both recovered to the point of being able to stand and slowly walk
around. Taylor was up first, and supported me as I shakily got to my feet and started moving around. My extra height was just as disconcerting for me as it was for Taylor when she was shorter than normal. Fortunately I was able to adapt enough to walk on my own in only 5 minutes, though I wouldn't want to run around or try any quick movements just yet.

After I had succeeded in walking to the bathroom unattended, I decided to test out my Changing mechanism.

“Taylor, I think I'm ready to Change back now, so keep a close eye on me, but don't touch me unless I screw up or start to fall, alright? I want to verify that the Change mechanism isn't tapping into my powers at all.”

“Alright, go ahead and Change,” she said as she stood close by, ready to grab me if anything went wrong.

Taking a deep breath, I triggered the Change back to my baseline Form. Though I didn't have a mirror to watch with, I could still feel the Change and even see some of the Changes to my body, the way my skin changed shade, and I slowly shrank and my figure returned to its original shape. The whole process took a little under two minutes and I could feel it as the Change between forms was powered by my concentrated fat reserves instead of my biokinesis. Fortunately, there was also a clear conservation of Mass so I could see my fat reserves being used up, so I had another piece of proof that it wasn't my powers driving the Change.

When the whole process was finished, Taylor held out her hand and said, “Okay, now it's time to verify that everything went back to baseline like it is supposed to. Double-check with all of your 'seeds' and then we can call this a success.”

I nodded and took her hand and reached out to her echoes and verified that I had correctly returned to my baseline, checking that all of my 'seeds' had the same, and correct data; once I finished that, I double-checked Taylor's 'seeds' for the same thing, and found everything was okay.

Once Amy finished checking on her work, I checked the time and thought about our planned work for today, then decided to make a quick change.

“Amy, I think we should do some work downstairs on our test platform, rather than do any more work on ourselves right now. I suspect we might want to let our bodies rest a bit from all the Changes before we make anymore,” I explained.

Amy touched the side of her head gently then nodded at me, “Yeah, that's probably a good idea. My headache is definitely better, but let's not take any chances. What did you want to do first? Power generation or make some coral pieces for jewelry?”

“Power generation, then power storage. Coral after that, if we have the time,” I decided.

As Amy headed down the basement stairs, I checked the shepherd's pie and turned the oven down so it wouldn't over-cook. Following her down the stairs, I found her kneeling next to the test platform we had built earlier. I started pulling some swarm into the basement to give her some biomass to work with, sending them to the back of her hands to make her work easier.

She smiled up at me and said, “Alright, I'm going to start with the basic electric eel type of biological battery first, once that's done, you can test it for voltage and stuff. After that, we'll work on tweaking it for increased power and efficiency, testing each iteration as we go.”
“Alright, let me get my meters while you do that. Do you need anything else, like copper wires or anything?” I asked her.

“Some water and salt is all, and I can skip the salt if necessary, there should be enough metallic compounds and salts in the insects for what I’ll need.”

“No problem, just give me a minute,” I said. I pulled a small bucket out from under my chemistry work bench and filled it at the deep sink. I then opened up my chemical storage cabinet and found the box of Epsom Salt as well as the one of pure, non-iodized sea salt. Carrying them over to Amy, I set the bucket down and knelt down next to her, still holding the two boxes.

Amy glanced over at what I had brought her and said, “Perfect,” then poured some of the water into the section she was working on. Setting down the bucket she took first the box of sea salt and poured some in, then added just a bit of the Epsom salts. As she continued to grow her organic battery, the water started to swirl around the battery, mixing the salts thoroughly into the water.

“Alright, that’s done. You should be able to test the output through these two studs here on the top,” she said, pointing at two shiny posts on top of the battery.

“Do you know which is positive and which is negative?” I asked her as I hooked up the Digital Multi-Meter to the two posts.

She looked at me and frowned, “Of course not; I'm a healer, not an electrician.”

I giggled, and said, “You will be when I'm done with you.”

“We'll see about that. Anyway, let's go with the first test,” Amy said.

Watching the meter, I was amazed to see it register just under 2000 volts, and Amy kept it running for over a minute before stopping the discharge.

“Wow, that's a lot of power. Amy, how long could you keep it going like that?” I asked as I disconnected my DMM and hooked up power bridge to help me test its amperage and power output.

“At least 5 minutes at that rate, on its own it would need about an hour before it could do another discharge at that level,” Amy explained.

I nodded and finished my new hookup, then said, “Okay, I'm ready for the next test. Do it just like the first one.”

This set the pattern for the next 30 minutes of testing and modifying. We finally ended up with a battery that could output 1000 volts for over an hour, producing 5 full amps the whole time, under a very large range of loads. Once Amy was happy with the basic form, she recorded it in both of our main 'seeds' so we wouldn't have to redo this research at a later date.

As soon as I had finished disconnecting my test rig, I set it aside and ran upstairs and grabbed one of my binders from the bookshelf next to my computer station and ran straight back downstairs, actually jumping from the top and landing without so much as a stumble. Sitting back down next to Amy, I opened my binder to the section on capacitors and super-capacitors.

“This is the basic information on capacitor-based storage. What they are made of, how they are constructed, their advantages and limitations. Hopefully, this will give you enough to work with,” I explained.
Amy took the binder and quickly read through my notes and closed her eyes and thought for a few minutes.

“Alright, I'll need more biomass to build this and some cabling to carry power from the battery to the storage cell. Jumper cables or something similar will be fine,” she said as she settled more comfortably on the floor.

I thought for a moment, then got an old extension cord off of the wall and cut off both ends and stripped the insulation off of the copper conductors so that I could attach them to the posts.

“I don't have any large clips, so could you modify the posts on the battery so that they have a built-in clamp, then do the same for the storage cell?” I asked her.

“Not a problem, just let me get started and then we can start testing it for real.”

I smiled and started feeding her some of my swarm while I refilled the bucket, assuming that she would need some water to make it work correctly.

Even though we had a decent capacitor within 5 minutes, we kept working at it until we had created a hybrid organic storage cell that combined aspects of both capacitors and super-capacitors that could store 1000 volts, and could discharge at either 220 volts, 440 volts or 1000 volts. It could also output 10 amps for an extended period; if I had calculated it right, when fully charged it could maintain that output for at least two hours, though I would be testing that carefully.

Because of the time, I decided that was going to have to be it for the day, since I wanted to make sure Amy had a chance to eat a good dinner before she left for the hospital.

“Okay Amy, that's going to be it for today. I want to have a bite to eat before it's time to head for the hospital, so we need to wrap it up for now. I'll do the extended storage and output tests on both systems and let you have the results on Sunday, alright?”

She stood up and said, “Works for me. I'm going to make up some coral pieces while you put your tools away, then we can wash up and eat dinner.”

It only took a few minutes to put away my meters, cables and the rest of the testing rig, then I carefully slid the platform under my chemistry work bench and covered it with an old sheet, before heading over to the deep sink to wash my hands. Amy, on the other hand, carried what looked like a double handful of polished coral of different colors over to my jewelry bench before joining me at the deep sink to wash up.

Once we were cleaned up we went upstairs to the kitchen and served up the shepherd's pie and milk and sat down to eat. While we ate, we talked about some of the local goings on as well as some ideas we had for future modifications we wanted to test and install.

Amy had two specific ideas that she wanted to be able to implement; a high powered laser and a wireless Tazer. Both were going to require a lot of preparation and thought before we could do those. My ideas leaned more to communication and moving, specifically, flight and teleportation. I had a couple of ideas for both, but I could see that I needed to do a lot more research, research and studying.

My communication ideas were much as I had discussed with her earlier, but she had a few really good twists for me to think about. The first one was a sub-vocal microphone coupled with a tiny speaker inside our ears; a variation of that would be to couple directly into our speech and hearing centers and bypass the need to sub-vocalize at all.
The other idea had a lot of versatility to it; some sort of booster for my powers so that my range could be vastly increased. As we talked about that idea, we cleared our dishes into the dishwasher and set the casserole dish to soak in the sink. I also placed the other two shepherd's pies in the oven and turned it on so dad could eat around 6:00.

--------------------Legion*** Amy ***Legion-------------------

Though Taylor wanted to go with me to the hospital, I managed to convince her that she should spend the time with her dad. She did get her way on walking me to the bus stop though.

“Could you get me a couple sets of spiders before we go? I’d like breeding pairs of Widows, Recluses and those Golden Orbs if you have them. I want to play with them a bit before Sunday to see what I can do with them.”

Taylor looked a little puzzled, but less than a minute later, several spiders were flown into the kitchen and landed on my hands. I looked them over, both with my eyes and my powers, then carefully lifted them up to the back of my neck and let them climb into my hair until they were completely hidden.

Taylor just shook her head and picked up my book bag, handed me my jacket and headed to the kitchen door.

As we started down the sidewalk I asked, “Can I have a couple of large beetles, please?”

Less than 10 seconds later they landed in my hand. “I want to try to make a booster bug to increase your range, so …” and with that the beetles melted together and I combined them into a single, larger insect, one with a much larger brain, though no reproductive system. Most of the extra brain was dedicated to duplicating Taylor's ability to contact her swarm.

Tossing it into the air, Taylor took control of the new bug and sent it ahead of us at a fairly high rate speed. A few seconds later, she said, “I can sense it, and … my range is definitely greater in that direction … but, I can't … no, I can only sense insects and smaller creatures, no birds, no mammals. At least not at the extended range.”

I sighed, “I was afraid of that. Bugs are just too small, not enough brain to drive the booster, even though most of that one's internals is brain. Maybe I can use birds or squirrels or something.”

Taylor nodded, not looking particularly discouraged by the failure. “Perhaps birds, I'll land a couple of seagulls near the bus stop for you to work with.”

“Yeah, that should work,” I looked at the covered bus stop and almost stumbled as I had a thought. “Hey Taylor, think I could build a booster into a tree?”

“Say what, a tree?” She looked at me and then at a large Elm tree next to the bus stop. “Oh yeah, that might work. You'd have plenty of mass to build whatever kind of organ you need. Just try with the birds first, mobility being quite useful.”

“Especially for the testing phase,” I took my seat, still holding Taylor's hand and reached out to her echoes and quickly found the two gulls that she was bringing in to our bus stop. As soon as they landed, I started working on them. First I gave them a complete tune-up, removing any parasites and boosting their immune systems so that they were much less likely to get sick. Next I began slightly changing their brains, using the little bit of redundant capacity to build the booster, one that should be able to handle Taylor's full scope of power.
Two minutes later, they were both done and Taylor sent them off in different directions. Less than a minute later she said, “Yes! Each one adds almost 500 feet to my range and I can scan and control my full range of creatures.”

To my slight shock, and happy surprise, Taylor pulled me into a kiss, a full-on, passionate, toe-curling kiss. When she finally let me go, I shivered and said, “Wow! Tell what I did to earn that kiss, ’cause I sure want some more.”

Taylor giggled at me and hugged me close, “You just doubled my effective range, that’s all. And I suspect we’ll be doing more of that, won’t we?”

I hugged her back and said, “Oh yeah, you can bet on it. In fact, I think I’ll see if I can upgrade the Elm tree right now.”

Standing up, I led her over to the Elm tree and leaned up against it and pulled her up to me and kissed her myself. After a few more minutes of toe-curling kissing, I took a break and started to modify the tree to have a booster organ. I made sure it was deep in the core of the tree, and included some extra pockets of nutrients so that it could stay active, even during the depths of the winter. I also made sure that the tree was healthy and unlikely to fall to any high winds or storms.

Just as I was sure that everything was working perfectly, Taylor initiated the next kiss. This one wasn't as passionate, but it was definitely sweet and wonderful. Surprisingly, even while kissing, I noticed my bus when it came into Taylor's range. I hadn't been trying to use any of her swarm to remotely look for it, I was just aware of it. I had to wonder if Taylor and I were linking on a low level whenever we touched … not that I minded the idea, in fact I sort of wished we could do it whenever we wanted to, no matter the range.

Deciding to take advantage of the last little bit of time, I kissed her again, until my bus pulled to a stop. Sighing, I picked up my book bag and headed for the bus. Turning back just before I boarded, I said, “I had a wonderful day today, and not just this last little bit. I'll email you when I get home tonight, alright?”

“Of course. I always look forward to your emails,” as she finished speaking, she leaned forward and gave me a last gentle kiss before letting me board my bus. As it pulled away, I could see her standing there until we turned out of sight.

--------------------Legion***Taylor ***Legion-------------------

Once Amy's bus was out of sight, I sighed again and headed home. I pulled the booster-gulls back together and moved them out in a straight line until my range in that direction was about 1500 feet, then had them fly in a large circle so that I was aware of a much larger area than normal. I wasn't expecting to find anything out of the ordinary, I was just enjoying the extended range and extra swarm. When I reached home I took the time to bring them both inside my normal range and then let them fly free as long as they stayed fairly close.

I checked on the shepherd's pies then started preparing for my GED. I was pretty sure that I was ready, but I was also working on writing essays on a variety of topics, because I knew I was going to need to do that a lot with all of the AP and CLEP tests I was planning to take over the summer. The standardized portions of the tests, true/false, multiple choice and short answer would be a snap, but the essay portions needed to be spot-on perfect. Fortunately dad had agreed to check any essays or papers for me which had been a big help, he was a much tougher grader than any of the teachers at Winslow and it had helped me get better. Of course having practically memorized both the APA and MLA style manuals didn't hurt either, since most essays and papers had to be in one of those
two formats.

I called up a randomly generated topic from a free GED prep site and started to write an essay on the topic: **Is the current high school system sufficient to educate our country’s youth? Describe what is valuable about our country’s system or what might be changed in order to produce better results.**

Wonderful, all I had to do was NOT traumatize my dad with my actual opinion on American high schools. Well, I had 45 minutes to write this and that would be just about when dad got home, so I might as well begin.

I finished my essay, 5 decently long paragraphs, with enough time to spare that I could even review it and copy it over very neatly in pen for dad to read.

I set it down at his seat and set the table so that we could eat shortly after he got home. I turned the oven down to warm and removed one of the shepherd's pies and left the other to stay warm. Because Amy and I had finished the juice (again), I made another batch and put in the fridge to chill.

Dad managed to get home just before 6 o'clock, so after a quick wash up, we were able to start dinner right at 6 o'clock, just the way I had hoped. While we ate, dad did a quick read through of my essay, then set it aside until after we finished eating.

Even though I hadn't been patrolling today, and wasn't planning on going out tonight, I was still very hungry from all of the work we had done this afternoon, especially the Changes. Of course that was on top of my iso-mod which I had left at 50% all day, though I was planning on dropping it down to 0% for the night. This meant that in the end I probably ate 3/4's of the shepherd's pie and was still a bit hungry.

I decided to just turn the oven off for now and have some pie and ice cream for dessert, but would save the leftovers for a late night snack or early breakfast. I might have to actually cut back on my use of the iso-mod simply on the grounds of how much food it made me eat, at least until I could figure out a way to increase my intake without freaking out dad.

Once I had everything put away and the kitchen cleaned up I started working on some of my blouses, finishing another 3 of them before it was time for bed. Dad did interrupt me at one point to return my essay, which only had a couple of minor suggestions. When I finished sewing my blouses, I took the essay back downstairs and filed it with my other GED preps.

---Legion***Amy ***Legion---

Getting home from the hospital, I found that mom & dad had already headed up for bed, though Vicky was watching TV in the family room.

Leaning down the stairs a bit, I called out to her, “Hey Vicky, I'm home. I'm gonna grab a snack, you want anything?”

“Nah, I made some popcorn, so I'm good,” she called back.

“Okay, talk to you later,” I replied before closing the door and heading for the fridge. I lucked out when I found a covered plate made up from dinner, with my name on a sticky note. Clearly dad was feeling a lot better than he used to; he'd been making me dinner plates on my hospital nights lately, even though he knew I usually grabbed something to eat before my shift.
After eating and cleaning up my dishes, I started rummaging in the cupboards until I found what I was looking for; a set of small plastic snack cups with sealable lids. I punched several small holes in their lids and carefully transferred the spiders into each cup, making sure to separate the males and females. I figured that this way I could work on them at my leisure while ensuring that they didn't kill each other.

Since I couldn't remember the last time we used these for anything at all, much less to store food, I figured nobody would notice or even care if they did notice. Since I didn't have anything like Taylor's control over bugs unless I was touching them, I figured that these would work until I was ready to work on them.

Walking upstairs, I changed for bed and then carefully transferred the spiders into their new, though temporary, homes before hiding them in my underwear drawer.

Taking a last look around, I turned off the lights and went to bed, planning on getting up around 2:30 or 3:00 to start my day

--------------------Legion***Taylor ***Legion-------------------

Waking up around 2:30, I got dressed and headed downstairs to start my day. I shifted spools and adjusted the silk reel and got the spiders back to work before I headed back upstairs to study some more. I set Thora up with one of my library books on physics and started reviewing American History again for my GED.

_God, I can't wait until I finish that test and can be considered graduated._

By the time dad got up and started his shower, I had finished the American History text book and was looking forward to hitting the supplemental text next. Putting it down for now, I got up and checked to make sure we had enough bread, then decided to make French toast and bacon for breakfast.

Once I had the bacon started and batter ready, I made up dad's lunch from left-overs and a small salad. I followed dad's morning routine by sound and started the French Toast in plenty of time so he had a plate of breakfast by the time he got downstairs, as well as mine ready to move to the table.

Because today was my baking day, I started a large batch of bread dough rising before I headed downstairs to start my workout. I started on my katas, doing a full set with my iso-mod set at 25% and shifting between forms after completing each set. My baseline and Legion forms were no problem, but I found that while in my Pied Piper form I had a lot of issues with balance and reach that I would need to work on. I ended up doing extra set as Pied Piper and I added in a long set of weapons work as well, though that was a half-speed to make sure I was doing it right.

When I finished that workout, I headed upstairs to start on some pastries and pies for our desserts. Once that was at a stopping point, I decided to simply skip my weight lifting this morning since I would be running my iso-mod at a high level and already needed a lot of food just to support my Changing.

I took a quick shower and then turned my iso-mod up to 75% and made my second breakfast, which included a large stuffed omelette. Once I had the kitchen cleaned back up, I started a chicken stew that would end up being Chicken and Dumplings tonight before I went back to my studying.

I had Thora work on my supplemental American History text while I worked on some advanced Excel and Access techniques that I would need for my MS tests. I then reviewed for my Linux
Admin test, as well as for the Linux Network Security test. Though there were a lot of other certification tests for Linux, it looked like these vendor neutral tests were my best bet, though I would probably need more in the future. CompTIA was another good option for a number of vendor neutral certifications, though I planned on getting my Linux certs first and then my MS certs for Office and after that .Net and Access programming.

As I worked on my GED and Computer studies, I kept up with my baking, using my internal alarm to ensure I didn't burn any of my pastries or pies. Just before noon I had a large lunch of shepherd's pie before heading out to check on a couple of possible second hand bikes.

---------------------Legion***Amy ***Legion---------------------

I woke up around 3:30, and got dressed in my work out clothes and after cranking my iso-mod up to 75% started my workout routine. No one in the family had any idea just how intensive it was, nor that it included both armed and unarmed katas. Because I had to practice in my alternate Form, it took me longer than normal and I finished up with my workout around 5 o'clock and headed back upstairs to take my shower and get dressed for the day.

Before I started my shower, I turned my iso-mod back down to 20%, which is where I planned on leaving it for the day. Once I finished, without waking Vicky, I got dressed for the day. Unfortunately, I had gym today so I needed to pack my gym clothes and remember to hold back to just a bit better than normal; maybe I'd just increase my iso-mod to 50% or even higher during gym to slow me down.

Knowing I would need a lot of calories for the day, I decided on oatmeal since we had almost a dozen boxes in the pantry, because someone whose initials were VMD decided that it was healthy before remembering that she hated to eat oatmeal. I ended up making two large bowls of oatmeal, using 4 packages each time, with lots of milk and honey, which filled me up for at least a little while. Though I was still planning on eating with rest of the family at the regular breakfast time. I also grabbed a handful of PowerBars that I could snack on between classes to keep me from starving.

After I had eaten and gotten ready for school I found that I had half an hour before our normal breakfast time, so I decided to see if we had the makings for a decent breakfast because I was already getting hungry.

Checking the cupboards and fridge didn't give me a lot to work with, but I did have 2 dozen eggs and two packages of maple breakfast sausages. I might not be the cook that Taylor was, but I could easily handle this. I started the sausages first and then set the table before beginning with the eggs, figuring that I would just make scrambled eggs with onions, ham and cheese. Omelets I wasn't sure I could pull off, but slightly enhanced scrambled eggs I could do.

The sausages were finished but staying in the covered frying pan while I buttered the toast and the eggs finished cooking when Vicky, mom and dad all came down stairs.

They all kind of froze as I started dishing up breakfast onto plates then called out to Vicky, “Hey Vicky, come and get these plates for me, I need to finish the last two.”

She hesitantly walked over and took the two filled plates and carried them to the table for mom and dad then came back as I finished loading up the last plate. “So…what's with cooking the big breakfast? And when did you learn how to do this anyway, you've never shown much interest in cooking before?”

I smiled at her and said, “What, you think I could hang out with Taylor this long and not learn how
to cook at least the basics? This is all pretty simple, just need to watch your timing is all,” I explained.

As I sat down to eat my second breakfast, I watched as dad took his meds that Vicky had organized for him and listened to mom and dad talk about their plans for the day. I have to admit that I was paying more attention to my food then the conversation when I heard mom talking about needing to get to the bank.

“I have to be in court today, and Judge Carmicheal is notorious for 30 minute lunches so I don’t know if I can get to the bank today,” mom explained after dad mentioned that he had an appointment at 11:30 down in Boston, so he'd be gone most of the day.

I thought about it for a moment and realized that since I had gym first period and study hall right after lunch, I could easily take care of the banking, especially since I wanted to shift some of my money into my checking account for the weekend and I didn't like doing it online.

“Mom, I have a free period right after lunch, so I can walk over to the bank and drop off your checks if you fill out the deposit slip and sign them all 'Deposit Only', I'll have plenty of time to get there and back without missing any of my classes,” I offered.

“Oh? Are you sure that it will be okay if you leave school?” she asked me.

“Sure, I'm about two weeks ahead in all my classes and they know that; if I need to be absent during lunch and a free period to take care of personal business, they'll give me permission easily,” I explained.

“Well then, if you don't mind, I'll fill them out and sign them for you. Just be sure to be back before your class starts, alright?”

“That won't be any problem, promise,” I said.

-------------------Legion*** ***Legion-------------------

As Vicky and I walked into Arcadia, I took a quick detour and let the Vice-Principal know that I needed to be out of school for lunch and my following study hall, and as I had expected, he wrote out a pass for me on the spot while reminding me to sign out and back in when I returned.

My first class today was Gym, so after putting my book bag in my locker, I took my little gym bag and got changed and waited for class to start. Apparently, today was going to be preps for the Presidential Fitness Test, so we had to stretch out as a group, then separated into boys and girls, then again into pairs. Ms. Delmonica passed out forms that we would record our results on and then started working through the exercises. Even with my iso-mod set at 75% I had no problem exceeding the standard and approaching the maximums in each category, though I did have to carefully pace myself achieve that goal. Surprisingly enough the hardest event was the one mile run; because of all the running and walking I had been doing lately, I had to really hold back so I didn't break or even approach a world record pace.

While I was sitting in class, waiting for Trig to start, I played around with the two Black Widows I was hiding under my French braid. Mostly I tweaked the silk glands, trying to increase the production rate as well as the silks strength and toughness. I did come up with a nice variant but at the cost of a much reduced stretching capacity.

I modded the venom so that it had a reduced lethality, but increased speed of effect and a strong paralytic. The venom included a variation of DMSO that not only made it effective even without
penetrating the skin, but helped the venom spread throughout the body much faster. I considered a second set of venom glands so it would have the option of a highly lethal venom, but decided to talk to Taylor about that first.

Once class started I made sure my mods were stabilized and let the Widows rest for a while. Math had never been one of my favorite subjects but I wanted to be able to handle what math was needed for biology and genetics, which was a lot more than you would think.

AP Biology was a snooze-fest as usual, but the arrangement I had with the teacher helped; I just had to look like I was paying attention and I could work on the research papers that I turned in instead of the normally assigned homework. I still had to take the regular tests, but that wasn't a problem for me since I was studying Biology at the post-grad level and just needed to review the material before the test so I didn't get surprised by something simple.

Eventually the lunch bell rang and I collected my books and headed for my locker. I dropped them off and collected my purse, verified that I still had mom's banking envelop and left the school.

Walking to the bank only took about 15 minutes so I figured that I would have plenty of time to do my banking and then grab some food on the way back to school.

Entering the bank, I saw that I was far from the only person who needed to do their banking during lunch, so I got in the line to wait as patiently as I could. I checked my phone and saw a text from Taylor letting me know that she was checking out a couple of used bicycles and hoped to buy one of them today. I texted her back, letting her know that I was taking care of some banking and wondered if she would like to meet after school tomorrow.

I had only just put my phone away when an inky black cloud flooded into the lobby, filling the room and not only blinding me, but blocking my hearing as well. It wasn't just dark, this cloud of darkness was utterly complete; I ramped all of my senses up as high as they would go and I was still utterly blind. Fortunately I could hear a just a little, and my sense of smell was barely affected; my brand-new electro-location sense was completely shutdown but I was pretty sure I could feel the air move as people screamed and huddled on the ground and tried to take cover behind desks and planters.

I stayed up and slowly turned towards the back of the bank as I heard a person or maybe more than one person move into the lobby. As I moved, the cloud of darkness felt odd, sort of thick and dense, almost like I was underwater.

About then, the darkness began to lift, literally, covering the windows and door and most of the ceiling, leaving gaps for the lights. As it did, I could see a group of costumed capes standing in the lobby, having obviously come from the back of the bank. Apparently leading them was a tall man in black motorcycle leathers with a skull decorated helmet, he was flanked by slim young man about Taylor's size, dressed in a poofy white shirt and a white ceramic mask with a silver crown and holding a scepter.

On the other side was a stocky young woman in a leather jacket and wearing a cheap plastic dog mask. The scary part was the two very large … monsters? dinosaurs? They seemed to have sharp spikes and blades growing out of their skinless bodies and jaws big enough to swallow a man's leg. I wasn't sure what they were, but looking at their huge jaws and teeth, I really didn't want to get close enough to find out.

There were two more capes even further back, but they were mostly out of sight in the hallway leading to the back offices. I couldn't get a good enough look to identify them, but the ones in the lobby made it clear that the Undersiders had come calling.
The cape in the motorcycle leathers spoke up in a very eerie and echoing voice, “Fifteen minutes, that's how long we'll be here. After that you can carry on with your day, safe and sound. Unless someone gets stupid. Try to fight, run away, call for help, try anything at all and it will end in pain … your pain.”

That was when he realized that I was still standing up, and not cowering on the ground. “Are you stupid? Get your ass down on the floor with everybody else … NOW!”

Okay Amy, let's see if you can make this idiotic idea work, hopefully without anybody getting hurt.

I swallowed and said, “If it's all the same to you, I'd rather not. Instead, how about we parlay? I don't want any of the customers or staff to get hurt and you don't want to get hurt or captured either. Let's see if we can't find a way to make that happen, 'kay?”

Even as I was speaking, the two that had been in the hallway disappeared back towards the vault area. The leader stepped towards me, darkness starting to boil off of his body, and said, “Do what you're told, on the ground now, or you're the one whose going to get hurt.” As he was speaking, I could hear a voice, probably a girl's, call out, “Bitch, come on, we need you back here.”

“Regent, check the front. Miss, I don't know who you think yo--” He stopped speaking for a moment, then said, “Shit. Just what we didn't need. Good afternoon Panacea, what a surprise to see you here today.”

I smiled and said, “Isn't it just. Grue, right? I'm serious about keeping the civilians safe if at all possible.”

Regent called out, “All clear out front, at least for now.”

“Good, empty the registers while Bitch and the others get the vault,” Grue said as he kept his eyes on me, his darkness flowing off his body and pooling around his feet. “As for you, fine. You want a parlay, then start talking.”

I took a quiet, slow breath and said, “I don't know how much time you're planning on to complete this job, but I doubt you're going to get it. It's lunch time for the Wards, which means all of their phones work, as does the internet, so they already know what's happening here. And I'd bet good money that my sister does too. Which means she's gonna be heading this way, and she's gonna be pissed.”

Grue looked over at Regent, who was using a small pry bar to pop the drawers open and filling a small duffle bag, then back at me. “So what do you suggest?”

“Wrap it up now, cut your losses and leave. In return, I'll make sure that Glory Girl doesn't hit you on the way out, nor will she follow you. Nobody gets hurt, so no harm, no foul,” I explained, hoping that he'd agree to my suggestion.

As I finished speaking, one of the capes who'd been in the back, walked into the lobby carrying two full duffle bags, and not small ones like Regent's. He, or maybe she, was dressed like a circus ringmaster with a blue mask and white and gold facial makeup and a top hat.

What the hell? Male? Female? If I had to guess, I'd say female based on body language and voice … and pheromones. I'm pretty sure that this is the cape called Circus, and she looks pissed, too.

“What the fuck is this shit? We don't have time to screw around with this bitch, just smack her down and let's get this job over with,” Circus said as s/he dropped the duffles next to the counter and headed for me.
Grue tried to intercept Circus, but s/he sort of skated out of his reach and stopped right in front of me. I raised both of my arms and showed my empty hands, but from the look on Circus' face that didn't matter, “I don't want to fight yo–” was all I managed to say before Circus threw a quick punch at my face. Sadly for Circus, I've been sparring with Taylor for several months, and we had been steadily increasing in both strength and speed, so what once I would have considered a blindingly fast punch was now quite slow and easy for me to avoid simply by side stepping and turning away.

“Hold still you stupid bitch so I can hit you,” Circus snarled as s/he tried to snap kick me in the stomach.

I used a simple guide parry to prevent the kick from connecting and toss Circus off-balance, hoping to cause her to fall. Unfortunately, Circus simply cartwheeled away and landed in the perfect position to continue to attack, which of course s/he immediately did.

If I thought that Circus had been angry before, now that I had avoided her attacks twice, s/he was incandescent with rage; from some sort of pocket dimension s/he pulled out a large mallet and swung it overhead at me.

Oh goddamnit, fuckin' Circus is insane! I don't dare get hit by that thing; enhanced or not that'll break my bones. I really wanted to hide my mods, but I don't know if I can. Screw it, I'll just work in close and knock her out, without using my powers, and pretend I used the self-defense training that my family insisted on.

As the mallet came down, I carefully watched for the sneak attack, possibly from one the Undersiders; they are villains after all, but none of them interfered; although Grue was still yelling at he/r to stop attacking and get back to work in the vault.

I sidestepped the mallet strike and grabbed Circus' right elbow in a painful nerve hold, kicked he/r right ankle hard enough to hopefully break it and pulled the off-balance cape to he/r knees. Once I had he/r down and in a painful submission hold I said, “Stop fighting me, it will only cause you more pain.”

He/r response was obscene and nearly incoherent and drowned out Grue's attempts to get her to stop fighting. S/he surprised me by pulling a knife out of her 'pocket dimension' and swinging it at my leg while continuing to yell at me.

I was forced to release he/r arm, but I temporarily paralyzed it with my power as I stepped away from he/r. Circus pulled another throwing knife from her pocket dimension and tried to throw it at me, only she missed me and hit one of the security guards instead.

That just pissed me off, so I modified the sweat and dead skin cells in the palm of my hand into highly concentrated capaiscin and slapped he/r across the eyes and nose. He/r scream reached an amazing pitch, between the pepper juice and squashed nose, as I said, “Fine, if you won't calm down, I'll calm you down,” and with that, I hammered her hard in the temple, hard enough to instantly knock he/r out, but not hard enough to do permanent damage. Just one of the perks of being Panacea that let me know precisely how much force to use to get whatever result I want.

Dropping he/r, I stepped back as Grue finally reached the two of us and said, “Sorry about that, but s/he didn't give me any choice,” I looked between Grue and Regent and it appeared that neither of them was looking to continue the fight.

Grue checked Circus' pulse, then pulled he/r hands behind her back and started tying them together with some paracord. “How the hell did you do that? You're a healer, not a combat cape, and Circus
is pretty damn good in a fight, so how …?” he asked as he stood up from tying he/r hands.

I snorted and said, “What, you think my parents didn't make sure that I had self-defense lessons? Good ones? You're right, I'm a healer and there's more than a few people and groups that would be happy to 'recruit' me. Willing or not. So, lessons, lots of them, so I could protect myself in a way that they wouldn't expect.” I noticed for the first time that Grue had placed a cloud of darkness between us and the customers on the floor, so I was pretty sure that most of them had no idea just what was going on.

“Here, let me fix he/r nose; though I can't do anything for he/r concussion.” While I fixed he/r nose, I also neutralized all traces of the capaiscin juice so that there would be no evidence of me using my powers in new and different ways. I also eliminated as much of the redness in he/r eyes and drainage from he/r nose. While I healed he/r nose, I studied he/r powers as best that I could, especially he/r 'pocket dimension' hoping to gain some clues as to how it worked so I could duplicate to process for Taylor and I; I could see the 'pocket dimension' and even what was contained inside of it, but because it was an aspect of h/er power I really couldn't figure out how it worked. Yet.

Once I finished healing Circus, I knelt down next to the injured security guard and said, “Sir, do I have your permission to heal your wound?”

The pale and sweating guard carefully spoke without moving his body, “Please do, it really hurts a lot.”

“I know sir,” gently touching his neck I blocked all of the pain from the knife embedded in his chest, then removed the throwing knife and began repairing the damage. Repairing the subclavian artery wasn't hard as it was only a small slice, but there was a lot of collateral damage to surrounding nerves and muscles. Especially the Vagus and brachial plexus nerves which seemed to be suffering from a neurotoxin rather than cutting or slicing damage.

Taking a minute to be certain that I hadn't missed anything, I finished all of the needed repairs than spoke to Grue, “Grue, you really need to have a word with your teammate; he/r knife is coated with a nasty neurotoxin that untreated might lead to death. It's a very strong paralytic and over time it will kill the affected nerve cells, and depending on which ones are affected…”

He slapped his hand to the front of his helmet and said, “That stupid … I can't believe s/he'd do something so moronic! S/he's a mercenary Cape, s/he can't afford to get a rep for using lethal force. We hired he/r for her skill in cracking locks and safes, and because s/he's good in a fight, and especially because s/he's NOT a loose cannon.”

He went on, “None of this makes any sense to me. For now though, thank you very much for fixing h/er fuck-up, so do you think we can just move on to your suggestion? Oh, wait a second. Regent, take Tat's place and get her out here.” As he spoke, Grue shifted his darkness so that the civilians were isolated from the rest of the bank, but not completely embedded anymore.

Regent laughed and said, “Do I have to? Looks like all the fun is happening out here.”

Speaking from behind him, the cape called Tattletale said, “I'm already here Grue so Regent, go help Bitch while we figure out what's going on.”

Grue turned to Tattletale and gave her a quick rundown on everything that had happened in the last couple of minutes, then asked her, “Any suggestions?”

Tattletale grinned at me and said, “Sure, why shouldn't we take another 10 minutes or so to finish
I looked her over very carefully and said, “First, if you wait that long, I suspect that the Wards will be here and the Protectorate will be along soon after that, assuming they aren't already here by then. And second …” I paused for a moment and Tattletale asked, “Second?”

I reached up under my French braid and then held out my closed hand before saying, “Because of this,” while opening up my hand and showing her the large female Black Widow spider standing calmly on my palm.

Grue took a half step backwards and Tattletale turned so pale I was afraid she might actually faint before she whispered, “Oh fuck me rigid!”

I just couldn't resist that obvious of an opening and gave her a slow look, blatantly checking her out, being as obvious as I could to show that I appreciated the view and then said, “Well, while that's a very tempting offer, I'm afraid that I'll have to decline as I'm already quite taken.”

Grue coughed to cover his amusement while Tattletale turned bright red in embarrassment, but then she shook herself and turned to Grue and said, “We need to accept and leave, right the hell now.”

“Yeah, I'm thinking you're right,” turning to face the vault area, he shouted in his odd echoing voice, “Regent, Bitch, wrap it up, we need to leave. We're aborting right now, before the Wards and Protectorate get here,” he listened to Regent saying “What? Why?” before he shouted again, even louder, “NOW!”

He turned back and addressed me, “Okay, we're doing our part, now it's your turn.”

I nodded and pulled out my phone and called Vicky. She answered on the second ring, “Ames! Where are you? Are you okay?”

I sighed in relief, I could tell from the wind sounds that she was still flying, so I had time. “I'm at the bank and I need you to do something very important for me, oh, and yes I'm fine, the civilians are fine and I really want it to stay that way.”

“Yes, what do you need me to do?” she asked me.

“Do not, I say again, do not storm the bank. I've convinced the bank robbers to cut and run, rather than stay to finish looting the safe deposit boxes or anything else. They'll take no hostages, nor harm anyone on the way out; but in return I need you to not confront them or try follow them. What the Wards do is up to them, but you need to stay completely out of this one.”

“What!? Are you serious? You actually want me to just stand aside while the villains get away!?” she squawked in surprise.

“Yes I do. It's the best way to make sure no one gets hurt here. If it turns into a cape fight in the confines of the bank, a lot of innocent people WILL get hurt, maybe even dead, and I can't fix that,” I explained. While I was working on convincing Vicky to do as I asked, Bitch and Regent had come into the lobby with three of the big monsters, which I suspected were actually dogs that Hellhound, or Bitch rather, had enhanced somehow. They were loaded down with duffle bags full of money, and the Undersiders started climbing on like they were big, monstrous horses, with Grue pulling Circus up in front of him.

“Alright, fine. I'll be on top of the bank and I want you to stay on the phone with me so I can be sure they don't try anything stupid at the last minute. If they want any chance of avoiding the PRT
and Wards, then they better leave right now.” Vicky said stubbornly.

I turned back to the Undersiders and raised an eyebrow, silently asking if that was good enough for them. Grue and Tattletale both nodded and Grue said, “Thanks, so rrry for the all the trouble we caused you, especially with Circus; Bitch, time to go.” As he spoke, he was pulling back the cloud of darkness that covered the windows and the tellers and other staff members.

As soon as the windows cleared enough to see the street, Bitch gave a sharp whistle and led the way out of the bank, smashing one of the windows as her monster leaped out into the street. As they left, the cloud of darkness continued to dissipate and the customers and staff started to stand and talk as they realized that the danger was gone.

I carefully watched the customers, especially the group of elderly men and women that had been in line ahead of me, as several of them looked to have serious health issues. Deciding to look into checking them out when everything settled out, I put my Widow back into my French braid as I watched an older man in a very nice suit, probably the bank's Manager, approach me.

“Um, Panacea right? Could you tell me what happened out here? They had started to pop the safe deposit boxes and that cape in the purple costume was hacking my computer to get account data or something when they took off running.”

I looked at him for a moment, then turned back to observing the people that I suspected were ill or at risk as I waited for the darkness to finish fading away, and explained, “Basically, I asked them for a truce and then convinced them to leave immediately, without taking any hostages or taking the time to finish looting the bank.”

The manager frowned and complained, “But they got away with most of the cash in the bank, which with the cash drop off for payday tomorrow, will end up being quite a bit; couldn't you have forced them to leave the money behind?”

“Sir, correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't it bank policy to NOT resist if faced with armed robbers, especially Capes?” I politely asked him.

He coughed sheepishly and agreed, “Well, yes it is, but … you're a Hero!”

I sighed and said, “I'm a healer sir. I had less than no chance of defeating an entire team of Super-Villains or forcing them to leave the money they had already collected. My only concern at the time was to keep the civilians safe and unharmed, not whether they escaped with some cash, cash that I couldn't stop them from taking anyway .”

I turned and gestured at the customers that were starting to rise from where they had huddled on the ground, “Three infants, two pregnant women, at least six senior citizens from a local Assisted-Living facility. All of them are at extreme risk during a Cape battle so I simply did the best that I could by reducing and eliminating the danger that they would be facing. Your insurance will cover the cash loss far more easily than I can repair any injuries to the innocents.”

Using my experience at triage from all of the Endbringer attacks that I had attended I began sorting the pregnant women first, ensuring that both they and their babies were fine, then setting the infants and their mothers aside while having the very elderly men and women who had been brought to the bank as a group take their seats until I could get to them.

“First up, I need to check out any women who are pregnant or have recently delivered. Your babies are at the greatest risk from stress, even if they've suffered no visible injuries,” I explained. “If someone is bleeding or having symptoms of cardiac arrest, please let me know immediately,
otherwise I must ask you to be patient until I have seen to the others who are at greater risk…”

--------------------Legion***Aegis ***Legion-------------------

I landed in front of the broken window of the Brockton Bay Central Bank, with the rest of the Ward's taking up position around me. Console had let us know that the perps, most likely the Undersiders, had already escaped and that Glory Girl and Panacea were on site.

“Kid Win, if you could run a spiral pattern with Clockblocker around the bank's area, I'd like you to see if you can see any signs of Grue's darkness or Hellhound's monsters. Gallant, I'd like you and Browbeat to scout the perimeter at ground level looking for any evidence of how they got here or possible exit plans. Vista, you're with me inside the bank,” I led Vista in through the Bank's door, rather than climbing or flying through the broken window.

Glory Girl was hovering over Panacea as she worked on what appeared to be the last of several elderly civilians.

I addressed Glory Girl first since Panacea seemed to be too busy to question just yet. “What can you tell me about the robbery Glory Girl?”

She shook her head and said, “Not much really, Amy was in the bank, depositing some checks and doing some other banking when the Undersiders broke in and started robbing the bank. I flew towards the bank from school as soon as I got word of the robbery, but Amy called me before I arrived and requested that I not storm the bank due to the number of at risk civilians. I agreed, under protest, and watched the Undersiders leave heading south-east.”

“All done,” Amy interrupted, “I'll take it from here. Vicky, if you could let the school know that I'm okay and will be back as soon as I'm done giving my statement here, I'd greatly appreciate it.”

Turning to me, she went on, “Aegis, I was in line to do both family and New Wave banking when Grue blacked out the room and the rest of the Undersiders stormed into the lobby. Grue and Regent stayed in the lobby and stripped the registers while the rest of them went back to the vault area. Because of the number of high-risk civilians in the lobby, I decided to try to convince the Undersiders to leave quickly without a Cape battle. I used the threat of my sister's imminent arrival, as well as the hoped for arrival of both the Wards and the Protectorate to convince them to leave without finishing the looting of the bank.”

Vista looked at me in shock, “And that worked?!?”

Amy smiled back at her and said, “Well, sort of, after a bit of trouble anyway. Speaking of which, they had hired Circus for some extra muscle and for he/r skill with locks and safes, but I don't think Grue will be doing that again. S/he was pretty much out of control and wouldn't listen to him and tried to attack me; s/he also threw a knife but missed me and hit one of the security guards. I healed him up okay, but h/er knife was coated with a very nasty neurotoxin, both paralytic and potentially lethal.”

I took a half step back in shock and asked, “Seriously? Circus has a rep for violence, but nothing about using lethal force.”

Panacea nodded and said, “That's exactly what Grue said, too. He said that s/he's a mercenary and couldn't afford a reputation for using lethal force or s/he wouldn't get hired.”

Vista reached out and touched Panacea's shoulder and asked, “Are you okay? She didn't hurt you did she?”
She smiled back at her and replied, “No, I'm fine, s/he didn't lay a finger on me, though I did break h/er nose.”

I blinked at that, Panacea broke Circus' nose?! How the hell did she do that, she's a healer, not a fighter like her sister?

Vista spoke up before I could and asked her, “How did you do that, she's supposed to be really fast?”

Panacea nodded and explained, “S/he is, but I've had a lot of training over the years, training that most people don't know about, and s/he underestimated me. And if you don't mind, I'd kind of like to keep it that way, so please don't spread it around that I'm pretty well trained in martial arts. Anyway, once I broke he/r nose I hammer fist ed he/r in the temple and knocked he/r cold. Grue had been trying to stop he/r so he didn't hold it against me; in fact he tied he/r up and kept he/r that way until they left.”

I exchanged a long look with Vista, saying without words that there was more to Panacea than most people realized. Clearing my throat, I said, “Well, if you're certain that all of the civilians are alright, and if you wouldn't mind repeating what you just told me to Agent Parker, I'll let you get back to your business and then back to school.”

“No problem, I've already checked them all out and they're doing just fine. If you point out Agent Parker for me I'll give him a quick report of what happened here. As far as my banking goes, the bank manager took care of my deposits for me while I was healing everyone, so I'll have Vicky give me a lift as soon as we're finished here.”

I shrugged and said, “Since it looks like everything was already taken care of before we got here, I think that you're free to go as soon as debriefing with Agent Parker is done. We'll finish up with the bank and the police as soon as we can.”

Grue pulled up to the back of the bank in the large white panel van that we had 'jacked early this morning, and I led the way to the back entrance and used the PRT override code to let us in without triggering any alarms. While I was doing this, Bitch was enhancing her dogs enough to be intimidating without getting too large to move easily through the bank.

We moved quickly, but quietly through the bank, zip-cuffing and duct-taping the workers' mouths shut as we went to prevent anyone from triggering the alarms or calling for help. When we got to the lobby, we split up as we had planned earlier, with Grue and Regent handling the lobby while Circus, Bitch and I headed for the vault.

Because the vault door was open, Circus only had to open the cage door so they could start filling the duffels with the cash from the payday drop off. I pulled the manager back into his office and started to crack his computer open so I could download account info and hopefully get into the central files.

A few minutes later Circus carried the first two filled duffels out to the lobby and then I heard some sort of scuffle; shortly thereafter I heard Grue call for Regent to take my place in the vault, but I had already left the manager tied up in his office and was heading into the lobby.

Looking around I saw Grue tying up Circus as a short woman watched.

*Normal? No a cape, threat? No, unknown cape, no...Shit! That's Panacea, what the hell is she*
doing here? Attacking? No, negotiating, doesn't want a fight

Speaking from behind Grue, I said, “I'm already here Grue so Regent, go help Bitch while we figure out what's going on.”

Grue turned to me and gave me a quick rundown on what had happened, then asked, “Any suggestions?”

I grinned at Panacea and ran a quick bluff, “Sure, why don't we take another 10 minutes or so to finish looting the bank before we take you up on your kind offer, hmmm?”

Panacea looked me over and then said, “First, if you wait that long, I suspect that the Wards will be here and the Protectorate will be along soon after that, assuming they aren't already here by then. And second …” She paused for a moment and I tried to get a read from my power, but my headache was starting to build from using it so much while in the bank, so I just asked, “Second?”

Panacea reached up under her nice French braid, new hairstyle, and then held out her hand before saying, “Because of this,” and showed me the large female Black Widow spider standing calmly on her palm. Legion?!

Grue took a half step backwards and I almost fainted at the thought of having to fight Legion in these close quarters, with no way to escape. I couldn't believe how badly our luck had turned and whispered, “Oh fuck me rigid!”

Panacea obviously couldn't resist that, and gave me a slow, lascivious look, blatantly checking me out, clearly not worried about being outed as gay, and then said, “Well, while that's a very tempting offer, I'm afraid that I'll have to decline as I'm already quite taken.”

Grue coughed to cover his amusement while I couldn't keep from turning bright red in embarrassment, but I managed to force myself back under control and told Grue, “We need to accept and leave, right the hell now.”

“Yeah, I'm thinking you're right,” turning to face the vault area, he yelled back at them, “Regent, Bitch, wrap it up, we need to leave. We're aborting right now, before the Wards and Protectorate get here.” I heard Regent protesting, “What? Why?” before Grue shouted again, even louder, “NOW!”

He turned back and addressed me, “Okay, we're doing our part, now it's your turn.”

Panacea nodded and called her sister, Glory Girl, and convinced her to let us go, I think mostly because of the danger to the civvies, so we loaded up on Bitches dogs and as soon as we had a clear view through one of the front windows, we left as fast as we could.

Heading south-east, we galloped through the streets and alleys, covered by Grue's darkness until we reached the mini-van we had pre-positioned. While Grue and Bitch kept moving to the next vehicle, Regent and I loaded Circus and all of the duffels into the back of the mini-van, changed into civies and drove off to where we had planned on dropping off Circus under the fast fading cover of Grue's darkness. Hopefully she'd be awake enough to handle her own driving, but that was really her problem, not mine.

Luckily for her, she woke up a few minutes before we reached her car and had no real problems changing into her overalls and domino mask before transferring between vehicles. After that, Alec and I calmly and carefully drove to the warehouse that we used as our headquarters and pulled into the side alley and started transferring the duffels inside the warehouse.
Once we were done with that, I left Alec to keep an eye on things and I drove the mini-van away for proper disposal. Brian and Rachel would keep the old station wagon until later this evening when we were going to drop off the bank loot for our boss.

I parked the mini-van in the mall parking lot, right where it could be picked up, left the keys under the seat, locked it up and headed into the mall to get a bite to eat and some quick shopping. The boss would have it picked up, sterilized and sold out of state by dinner time, and then do the same with the station wagon later tonight.
Chapter 22

Taylor frowned as she boarded the bus, a bit annoyed at how poorly her first stop to find a used bicycle had gone.

’I can't believe how bad that bike was. Not only rusted and scraped up, but the wheels were warped and loose and only half the gears worked from frozen cables; it was nothing like the photos he had posted online. And he wanted $120 for it!’ She huffed in disgust and continued pondering, ’Hopefully the next one will at least be in working order, though since she only wants $80 for it, I don't have high hopes’

She sat back in her seat and double-checked the directions she had written out to the next possibility for getting a used bike. Checking where the bus was currently at, she figured that she had about 20 minutes until she reached her destination, or at least as close as she was going to get while riding the bus.

Finally the bus pulled up at the bus stop nearest her destination and she walked off and headed to where she was meeting the seller, Mrs. Jenkins, to check out the bike. The branch library was only a few minutes walk from the bus stop and the bright blue Ford Explorer was parked outside the library, with the bike strapped to the rack on the back.

“Mrs. Jenkins?” I asked politely.

“Yes, Taylor, right?” she asked in turn.

“Yes ma'am,” pointing at the bike I asked, “and this is the bike?”

“Yes it is, let me get it down for you.” Walking to the back of the Explorer she quickly unstrapped it and set it down for my inspection.

Even at first glance I could tell that it was in much better shape than the previous bike, having been obviously well-cared for. When I took a closer look, the bike, a Peugeot men's 10-speed that looked to be at least 10 years old, was bigger then I had expected but I thought that it would fit me fairly well.

Turning back to Mrs. Jenkins, I asked, “May I take a short ride to test it out?”

“Certainly, the seat and handlebar are adjustable, just release these levers,” she pointed out two flip levers that allowed the seat and handlebar to be raised or lowered as needed, “and pull them up or push them down until they fit you just right.”

Thinking back to the research I had done on checking and adjusting a bike for a perfect fit, I raised the seat and handlebar a couple of inches before I took off for my test ride.

After a couple of laps around the parking lot, testing the brakes and shifting through all of the gears, I stopped and dismounted next to Mrs. Jenkins. “It rides just fine and I would like to buy it,” I said.
Mrs. Jenkins smiled at me and said, “Great then, as I said when we spoke on the phone, I'd like $80 for the bike. I know it's not much, but we're moving down to Providence, so I'm thinning out our possessions before the move and Jack, my husband, doesn't ride anymore.”

I smiled back and picking up my back pack I pulled out my wallet and counted out $80 and handed it to her. After putting the money in her purse, she opened the back door to the Explorer and handed me a box filled with an assortment of bike parts and accessories. A quick look showed me a battered helmet, a fabric roll of tools, a water bottle, compact air pump, a couple of inner tubes and loose assortment of bike parts and other things.

Looking at her in surprise, I asked, “What's this for?”

“These all go with the bike and without it they're useless, so I thought that you might like them,” she explained.

“Well, thank you. These will be a big help,” I looked through the box again and found some bungee cords that I could use to tie the box to the rear luggage rack.

Mrs. Jenkins smiled at me again and said, “Well then, I'll leave you to enjoy your new bike and I'll get back home,” as she got behind the wheel and started to pull out of her parking spot.

After she left I set the box down and looked through the extras she had left me and put those that belonged on the bike, like the pump and water bottle, in their brackets and attached the tool bag to the back of my seat. I put the roll of tools and one of the inner tubes in the bag and carefully packed the rest into my back pack, then crushed the box and threw it away before strapping my backpack onto the luggage rack and putting my new helmet on and starting my ride home.

Spreading my swarm widely, I used my two booster-gulls to increase my range both ahead of me as well as to each side so that I would have enough time to properly map the underground on my way home. I did take care not to go too fast, even though I felt like I could have easily run most of the cars on the road, so as not to draw any attention to myself.

Getting home only took about an hour, partly because of dealing with the afternoon traffic and partly due to keeping my speed down to a pace that let me map the underground efficiently. I parked my new (used) bike in the backyard, and decided that I would need to get a decent bike lock and chain before I could really use the bike much, and went inside to get ready for dinner.

After taking a quick shower and changing into fresh clothes, I started studying again for my GED next week, only in addition to studying from one of my books, I also used my multi-tasking to review for my history and chemistry AP exams from memory. I worked to recall the actual review questions, just the way they were written in the book and then mentally wrote the answers. The whole process was a bit cumbersome, but when I checked the book after I finished each section I found that I was correctly recalling the questions and had answered them correctly. It was nice to see that even though I didn't have an eidetic memory, it was still much improved from before, and was more than good enough to let me study and review without the book being in front of me.

Once dad got home I served up our dinner and spent a quiet evening studying while he watched tv. I also tested myself with the books I had recently gotten from the library and found that although I remembered the material well, it wasn't as good as the study guides that I had read several times. I decided to use Thora to read and re-read the library books as a test to see if I could memorize them that way.

I did exchange a series of short emails with Amy as she explained about her adventure at the bank, especially how she took down Circus. Hopefully she hadn't aroused too much interest in her
unexpected skill in hand-to-hand combat.

--------------------Legion*** ***Legion-------------------

That night I went to bed fairly early, around 9:30, as I planned on hitting the streets at an earlier time which would hopefully let me find more crime to stop. I set my internal alarm for 11:30 and made sure I had some discreetly placed insects so that I could keep an eye on my dad and make sure that he was deeply asleep when I woke up and got ready to patrol.

Waking up to my internal alarm was as easy as it always was, no loud sounds or disturbing sensations, I simply woke up and reached out to my swarm to check on all of my surroundings. Dad was resting in bed and when I had a couple of flies land on him it was quickly apparent that he was asleep, though not deeply yet.

I quietly got up and chose my usual burner phone, a fresh pepper spray canister, and two epi pens then threw on my robe and headed down to the kitchen to get a snack before leaving for my patrol. I kept a close eye on dad and sensed him easing into a deeper sleep while I fixed and ate a couple of large sandwiches and a glass of milk. When I finished I cleaned up my mess and headed into the basement to get changed for my patrol.

Putting on my costume, I loaded all the sheathes and pouches with my assorted weapons and tools, put the battery into the burner phone while leaving it off and then stored it in the armored pouch. Once fully dressed I checked my stockpiled cloth and armor panels to verify I had enough to make a second costume because I had found that even without combat, just making regular patrols caused enough wear and tear, that I was going to need a second and probably a third costume, as well as needing to make some changes to my Pied Piper costume to account for my different body shape.

'I'm going to need more room soon, my hives are reaching max capacity and if I'm going to even think about making costumes for sale I'll need a lot more space and equipment. The sewing machine I have now is only barely able to handle working with the silk layers I use, and even so I have to do a lot of it by hand. I'll keep my eyes open while on patrol to see if I can find any good sites for a proper lair.'

'Maybe I'll find something attached to the storm drains, or near one of the Endbringer Shelters that I can convert to a lair. Building something like that would have to be hidden during construction and that can't be easy, but it's still better than just squatting in an abandoned office building or warehouse. I'll need to check the other side of the river as well, so having my bike will really help with that. I'll see if Amy can modify some more sea gulls as well, those and maybe some crows would probably be the best choice to stay unnoticed during both the day and the night.'

Before closing up my work room, I grabbed two of the silk squares I had made before our date, then I turned off all the lights and quietly headed upstairs. I checked the broom closet and took the mini first aid kit and tucked it into one of the pouches under my back armor. Once I had finished with all of my preparations I carefully checked throughout my full range to be certain that no one could see me and then left through the kitchen door.

I reviewed my mapping and decided to head up through the docks and trainyards and then west along the river towards the US-1 bridge and then back home along the same general route, just on an adjoining swath. Between mapping and looking for any trouble makers I figured that I could be done by around 3:00 am or so. That would leave me plenty of time to update my maps and write some more essays for dad to look over. After breakfast I would need to go through my files and make sure everything was ready to submit once my GED results came back.
Even as I headed towards the docks, I pulled together a small but fast swarm of birds and a few of the larger and healthier strays that I came across. I used them to ferry some spiders, ants, beetles and even a large number of wasps and yellow jackets. I made a point of choosing biting and stinging insects as they were more combat effective, but I also made sure to kick the breeding instinct into high gear as well as not taking more than half of members of each nest so that their numbers would be replenished and the nest would still survive and rebuild. As the dogs and cats began to tire from the extended running, I rotated new animals into the swarm and used the fliers to help shift the crawlers to their new mounts.

With a little trial-and-error I developed a relatively seamless routine that kept a decent sized swarm close by and ready to use while letting me continue to patrol at a decent speed. Even as I worked out my new technique, I continued mapping the underground as I reached a new, unexplored area.

As I ran through the western edge of the Docks, I stayed on the ground, mostly in the shadows of the side streets and alleys rather than on the rooftops. I found that I didn't really need the elevation to spot any trouble because my birds and cats were more than capable of doing a thorough search of the area I was running through. In fact, I think that by staying on the ground I could actually use my own senses better, integrating my sense of smell and hearing with that of my swarm to give me a clearer sense of what was going on around me.

I didn't spot any active criminal activity during my run; in fact it seemed to be quieter than it usually was, even though it was a bit earlier than I normally patrolled. Maybe it was because everybody was resting up for the weekend, or maybe this was normal for mid-week in the Docks. Or maybe I needed to expand my definition of 'criminal activity' to include non-violent crimes like possession of drugs or weapons, but I wasn't sure that I could legally do that without actually witnessing a crime in progress.

While I pondered this and what my options might be if I decided to expand my patrolling I left the Docks and was approaching the Trainyard when one of my owls spotted an odd colored flash of light, followed by a sudden drop in the air temp.

--------------------Legion***Undersiders ***Legion-------------------

Lisa concentrated on her running as she half-carried Alec through the narrow twisting passages between the storage lockers, trying to ignore the blood that was dripping from her left hand. Unfortunately, Brian couldn't help Alec because even injured, he was still their best fighter right now and needed to be free and unencumbered.

'Damnit, Über and L337 were just annoying, but now that Bakuda is here things are getting nasty.' Glancing down at her phone again, she cursed at the sight of the 'NO SVC' icon. 'Unless we can find Bitch soon to get us the hell out of here the ABB is sure to corner us eventually.'

“Grue, can you spread your darkness on a diverging course? Maybe have it billow above the lockers so that crazy bitch goes the wrong way? We need to find Bitch and get the hell out of here!”

Grue cursed softly and then said, “Yeah, I think so. I don't know if it'll fool her, you know Tinkers are bullshit, but give me a direction to send her and point me towards Bitch.”

Lisa stopped and leaned against a locker to catch her breath, then said, “Send your diversion off to the right and towards Beacon St., we'll have to circle back towards where we fought Über and L337. Bitch is almost certainly stuffed in a locker somewhere near there, I doubt those two would have wanted to waste time moving her too far,” she shook herself and pushed herself back up, still
supporting Alec. “Their snitch is still orbiting around back there and I bet she's still close by.”

Alec straightened up and asked, “Hey Grue, think you can wrap a bandage or something around my leg? It's not bleeding too bad, but this running isn't helping.”

Grue nodded and unzipped his jacket and pulled out some wrapped gauze pads and a bandana with his good hand and started to clumsily treat the worst of Regent's injuries from one of Bakuda's bombs.

While he was doing that, Alec asked, “So, T, any chance you can get the boss to pull off a rescue? Or anyone else? At this point I'm willing to take help from the PRT if they can deal with that nutcase.”

Lisa shook her head and said, “No chance. Bakuda's got cell jammers running around here and I can't get any service. Well, it could be L337, but I doubt it. He wouldn't care if we called for help, this was supposed to be a quick and easy game for them, Über looked shocked when Bakuda attacked.”

Finished with Regent's bandages, Grue asked, “So do you have any idea what their theme was tonight? I mean, they were throwing those old-fashioned bombs and bouncing around like crazy, I don't remember any games like that.”

Lisa just shrugged as she started down one of the many cross passages and said, “No clue. It's probably an old game from the '80's or early '90's based on the props, but I think they chose it because it was something they could put together quickly. I suspect that they stumbled on Bitch by accident and just took advantage of a quick windfall to make some money and try to build some rep against us.”

Regent smirked and said, “Yeah, I don't think that's working out so well for them. We kicked their asses and then Bakuda blew them up like they were nothing.”

Grue snorted as he peered around the next corner and then said, “She's all about the bombs, so I bet she got all insulted that a Tinker like L337 was using her specialty.”

Regent and I both laughed at that, though he gasped in pain as soon as he started to laugh and said, “Ow, shit Grue, don't make me laugh like that, it hurts too damn much.”

We made it about half-way down the passage when an older asian man, probably in his 50's turned the corner ahead of us. He stopped for second then lifted the bat he was holding and ran at us, shouting “I'm sorry, I have to, I'm sorry,” before Regent tripped him and made him run into one of the lockers.

Grue walked over and picked up the bat and told the man, “Just stay down dude, you've got less than no chance to stop us; I can't imagine why you even bothered attacking, you'd have been better off running for help instead.”

The man lay on the ground with a helpless look of despair on his face saying over and over again, “I'm sorry” and “It's not my fault”. As Lisa watched him her power kicked in, feeding her very unwelcome insights. *Helpless, doesn't want to be here, not actually a member of ABB, conscripted ... coerced by threats, threats are ...* “Shit! Grue, get away from him! Bakuda implanted some kind of a bomb inside of him. Move it!”

Grue turned and looked at me for a second then nodded and took off running towards the end of the passage while Regent and I followed as fast as we could. I had just reached the end of the
passage and was turning to follow Grue when there was a soundless flash of white light and half of
the passage was filled with ice. The ice was centered where the old man had lain on the ground,
confirming my intuitions about what Bakuda had done.

“Well that explains how they got so many people running after us; if Bakuda's been planting
bombs in civilians, she could force them to do anything, up to and including kidnapping more
civilians for implantation,” I explained.

Grue swore and said, “The PRT is gonna put a kill order on her for that, I doubt they'll even bother
with the 'Cage for her.”

Regent broke in at that, “I doubt it, they'll probably lock her up and force her to make bombs to
order for them; she's a psychopath, but she's also a damn powerful Tinker. Someone will figure
that they can control her with threats and promises of good treatment and that she'll do what she's
told, which is stupid because she'll think she's smarter than everyone else and that she can escape
and do her own thing.”

I nodded and finished for him, “You're probably right, but that's a problem for later, for now we
need to find Bitch, and our money if possible, and get the hell out of here.”

--------------------Legion***Taylor ***Legion-------------------

I moved back up to the roof tops so I could get a better direct view of what I was heading into, and
saw that one of the cheaply built storage yards was being torn apart by a series of explosions and
more exotic effects; ice, weird gravity effects, ball lightning, pretty much anything and everything
was going off there. Most of the effects were limited in size, but the cumulative effect was pretty
bad. I couldn't be sure yet but I hoped that this storage yard had been cleared of squatters recently.
That was the only hope to keep the number of casualties down.

My swarm was falling behind but I had been calling in all that I could find and directing them
towards center of the storage yard. Hopefully that would be enough to give me the numbers I
needed. There weren't a lot of bugs to work with in the immediate vicinity of the yard, but my range
was long enough with my two booster gulls to reach into areas that had both bugs and birds in
decent numbers. I also started bringing in some of the larger animals nearby, though I hoped that I
wouldn't need to use them up. At the very least they were good for ferrying the crawlers and slower
fliers to me.

As I reached the edge of the storage yard I could finally clearly see what was going on; the ABB
was out in force, more 60 of them, with at least two capes that I didn't recognize. I also spotted the
Undersiders, at least some of them. I couldn't see Bitch or her dogs anywhere within my range.

Grue was generating a large cloud of darkness that was sort of heading away from me, while the
Undersiders were trying to get back to the southern side of the storage yard. I started to intercept
them when three rockets launched from where a jeep was parked between the rows of storage
units.

The rockets landed around the Undersiders and split them up and forced them to run in different
directions to avoid the follow up explosions. A moments observation let me know that I could
intercept Tattletale before any of the ABB mooks would be able to interfere.

Settling most of my swarm on the intact roofs of the many storage units, I used field mice and rats
to monitor the ABB rank and file, while I kept a couple of owls orbiting high above the two capes I
had spotted. While I moved my swarm into place, I did my best to stay out of sight of the ABB and
ran to intercept Tattletale.
Coming up behind her, I leapt to the ground and as she turned in response to the noise of my landing, I scooped her up into a fireman's carry and accelerated to my top speed before running sideways along and up one wall before I pushed off and leapt to the opposite wall where I pulled the two of us up onto the roof and dropped down out of sight.

“Well, fancy meeting you here Tattletale. Care to explain just what's going on?” I asked her quietly.

She gasped and said, “Shit! How the fu– Never mind. Bitch disappeared somewhere in here, pretty sure Über and L337 caught her by surprise. They also snatched a pretty large chunk of cash that we had stashed here for transfer and laundry services. Then that psycho Bakuda showed up with all her conscripted ABB thugs. Since then we've been trying to work our way out of here, preferably with Bitch.”

I frowned behind my helmet and asked, “Conscripted? How does that even work for a villain gang?”

Tattletale shook her head and said, “She implanted bombs inside of them. Nasty ones too; I saw one guy get, well, dissolved and another one turned into a block of ice the size of a minivan. She no doubt used the first ones she implanted to kidnap the rest and just assembly-lined the process. She could have a couple hundred conscripts by now.”

“Did she do the same thing to the regular ABB members? And how does she control who gets blown up? Does she have a remote that we can get away from her?”

Tattletale shook her head and said, “No, I think she uses a heads-up-display in her mask to select who she wants to kill, then uses toe rings to trigger the detonation. No obvious tells, so it looks like she controls them with her mind. It's just another way to crank up the fear, gives her a thrill to scare people before she kills them. She's a complete narcissistic megalomaniac that's in it for the power.”

I sighed and said, “And I suppose that she's rigged up some sort of deadman switch to detonate everything, hasn't she? She sounds like the type to break her toys rather than lose.”

“Uhh … yeah, probably. I'm not sure about that, but it sounds about right.”

“And the other cape? What do you know about her?” I asked after a moment.

“Umm, she's an aerokinetic, kinda like Stormtiger. But she's young, maybe 10 or 11 years old. And I don't think she's here of her own free will. She sounded scared when she spoke the one time, and she's got half a dozen older ABB members around her, all armed with shotguns or rifles.”

I sighed at the thought of a little girl forced to work with the ABB just because she had the misfortune to trigger. Concentrating for a minute, I found Bitch's dogs first and then her. She appeared to be gagged and bound inside one of the more intact lockers and her dogs were in another locker in the next row over.

“Alright, let's see about freeing your friend and then shutting Bakuda down. Grue and Regent have joined back up and aren't too far from where Bitch is hidden; hopefully we can gather them up on our way.” Standing up I pulled Tattletale to her feet and then said, “The fastest way is over the rooftops, can you jump between them on your own or do you need me to carry you?”

She looked at the distance between the rows, about 10 or 12 feet, and said, “No way, I don't have any extra strength or Mover powers, I'm just a normal teen.”

I huffed and said, “Even normal teens can jump those distances, it's not actually that hard. And as a
villain you should be prepared to handle all sorts of problems. Running away is supposed to be the
Undersiders’ specialty and you obviously can’t depend on Bitch’s dogs all the time. Take up free-
running and parkour as a hobby, it’ll only help you.”

Tattletale gave me a weird look and asked, “I thought you were a hero? Why are you giving me all
this advice? And which way are we heading?”

I pointed off to the east and said, “You may consider what you're doing to be some sort of a game,
but people like Kaiser and Bakuda don't. They'll kill you and not lose a moments sleep over it.
Either get your head straight or get out of the business. Take your money and disappear somewhere
far from here, you'll live a lot longer.”

She got a bleak look on her normally cheerful face and said, “I wish I could, but it's not so easy to
just disappear.”

I looked back at her and then said, “Whatever, it's your life, not mine. Do you have any weapons or
useful tools?”

“Oh. Umm … it's a Glock 26,” she said, clearly chagrined to have been caught out.

I looked her over again and then said, “With just the one magazine, right?”

She blinked and said, “How’d you know?”

“It's not that small, and the gun oil smell is obvious,” I explained.

I studied her for a moment, with both my eyes and nose and then asked, “And your pistol?”

“Wonderful, 10 rounds. Save them for any ABB's with guns, use center-mass shots only.” I tapped
her between her breasts. “Right there. And don't shoot Bakuda. Except in the foot; that ought to
stop her from detonating any of her bombs.”

Alright, here's how we're going to do this; we'll run along the roof aiming for the edge about 30
feet before the end, then we'll curve straight towards the edge and you'll place your left foot on the
parapet and without slowing leap for the next roof. I'll run alongside you and make sure you don't
fall short, but I think you'll find that you can do this with no problem.”

Once I had explained the process, we started running. Tattletale quickly settled into the routine and
didn't slow me down much at all; the only problem was that she was a lot louder than I had
expected. Finally I had to bring us to a stop when it was time to drop to the ground.

Alright, we're going to drop down in the next row and free Bitch. Then the two of you can get her
dogs, they're in 1421, next row over. Pick the locks and stay quiet. I'll be trying to intercept
Bakuda, but she's been circling around in a jeep, so wish me luck.”

With that I grabbed her under her arms and dropped us to the ground, pointed at a locker with a
shiny new padlock and said, “Bitch is in that one, then go left to the next row to get the dogs,”
before accelerating away at my top speed.

I pulled out both of my batons, since I knew that I would be passing a number of ABB on my way
to Bakuda, and I didn't want to slow down while dealing with them. Batons would be the fastest and least lethal method of taking them down as I ran.

Sure enough, two turns later and I found three of the ABB standing around as I came around the corner. Unluckily for them I was not surprised, and I simply ran over the first one, hitting him in the face with my knee as I ran over him. The other two were standing fairly close to each other and I was able to hit each twice, once in hand holding their weapon and once in the temple. Both went down instantly, more stunned than unconscious, but that was acceptable for now.

For the moment I was holding my swarm in reserve, using them only for information and surveillance. Once I intercepted Bakuda, I'd use my swarm to simultaneously attack all of the unpowered ABB members. If they were counting on the insecticides that they had sprayed themselves with to protect them they were in for a bad surprise. To be strong enough to stop my swarm from following my commands, the insecticide would have to be strong enough to sicken or kill the gang members. Though that didn't rule out some sort of TinkerTech solution. Which was why I was saving them to attack when I attacked Bakuda, which should be in the next 20 seconds when she came around the next corner.

I timed my run so that I was moving at nearly my top speed as the jeep crossed the opening when I hit Bakuda with a flying tackle that snatched her out of the jeep and to the ground with me landing first then rolling on top of her, knocking the wind completely out of her. I let myself roll forward to my feet and spun back to where she was laying on the ground, trying to catch her breath. At the same moment I launched all of my insect swarms and most of my dogs and cats at the other ABB members. I concentrated on doing the most damage to the ones that seemed to be actual members, while only harassing the ones that seemed to be conscripts.

I kicked the grenade launcher a good 40 feet down the road and readied one of my throwing knives for when the driver came back into view. I had several gnats on his body as aiming points so I wasn't worried about missing him, just that I'd be able to disable him without killing him. Reaching down, I flipped Bakuda over on her face and pulled her gas mask off of her face to remove her HUD. As I did, I also used my ketamine spike to inject her with the custom knockout drug Amy had come up with.

Just as I stood upright, the jeep started to turn into the row we were in so I flicked the throwing knife at him hard and fast, to be certain that I hit my target at the long range. To my surprise I heard a loud crack before it hit the driver in his left arm, causing him to lose control and run into one of the storage units.

Ignoring him for a moment, I whipped out one of the black silk squares from one of my pouches and made a quick blindfold/mask that I tied tightly around her face, blinding her and protecting her secret ID at the same time. Once that was finished I used one of my knives to slice her boots off, quickly removing the toe rings on her right foot. Once I had her boots off, I rolled off of her and began removing any obvious weapons or TinkerTech.

When I was certain that the ketamine cocktail had her completely unconscious, I used my knife to rapidly remove her costume along with the large and varied selection of tools, electronics and weapons she had concealed and built-in to her costume. Less than two minutes later I had her stripped to bra and panties and was tying her hands and feet together behind her back. All of her clothing and other equipment was piled off to one side and I was seriously impressed by her level of paranoia, having found weapons or tools secreted in nearly every piece of her clothing, and a few glued to her scalp under her hair.

-------------------Legion***ABB ***Legion-------------------
When I sent my swarms after the ABB, most of them went down quickly, especially the ones that I thought were conscripts. A few of them pulled out cans of insecticide to try and drive off the swarm, to no effect; unfortunately two groups had some sort of Tinker device that acted like a wide area bug zapper, killing all of the insects and most of the birds within 50 feet. Sadly for them I still had plenty of swarm in reserve and I sent my dogs and cats at those two groups as a distraction, then hit the people who had the Tinker devices with dive-bombing birds that knocked them to the ground. Once down, two of the larger dogs grabbed the devices and ran off towards me, after that the stinging insects in my swarms were able to disable them quite nicely.

Instead of forcing them to the ground, I had my swarms drive them towards where I was waiting to bind them. The first groups to arrive didn't resist when I ordered them to the ground and began binding their hands behind their backs. The second wave of ABB attempted to flee, but my dogs and birds turned them back almost instantly; after that none of the groups tried to resist. Especially since the majority of them were obviously conscripts.

--------------------Legion***Legion ***Legion-------------------

While I concentrated on disarming Bakuda, my swarm had finished taking down all of the local ABB, with the exception of the other cape and her escorts. The Undersiders were closing in on my location, including Bitch's three dogs, rapidly growing in size. Thinking about her dogs gave me an idea, so I had three of my healthiest dogs come running to me and then lay down around Bakuda. I took a moment to cut up her sleeve into a gag and used it to keep her quiet if she awoke before Grue and the others got here. I also kept a close eye on the other cape and tried to eliminate at least some her escorts. Unfortunately, she was just too powerful and skilled with her powers, and kept all of my swarm at a distance.

I finished double-checking Bakuda's restraints as the Undersiders arrived, so I stood up to greet them.

“Good evening. Are you all relatively unscathed?” I asked them.

Grue carefully lowered Regent to the ground leaning against one of the storage lockers and said, “Yes, pretty much. Thanks very much for the assistance, it's much appreciated. Über and L337 weren't much to speak of, but Bakuda and the ABB are more than we could easily handle. At least with the advantage of surprise and pre-planted mines on top of everything else.”

I nodded and said, “That's good, but it's not over yet. There's one more cape and half a dozen gun armed thugs to deal with. Which with a little assist from Bitch, won't take but a couple of minutes.”

Bitch looked at me with a frown, but one of puzzlement not anger and asked, “How can I help?”

I pointed at the dogs lying on the ground and said, “Two things, first if you give them a quick boost like you do for your dogs, I can use them to take down the last of the ABB and the other cape. Then we can disarm them, tie them up and leave them for the police and PRT while you go your merry way. Second, once that's done, if you could fetch the driver of that jeep,” I pointed to the crashed jeep, “I'll take care of him from there.”

Her face cleared up with my explanation and she knelt next to the dogs and ran her hands along their backs and legs before nodding and said, “Good dogs, I'll do it, but it won't last more than 15 or 20 minutes without a recharge.”

I smiled inside my helmet and said, “That should be plenty of time, as long as one of you calls the PRT as soon as you leave the range of Bakuda's cell jammers.”
Grue nodded and told Bitch to do it, while he helped Regent up behind Tattletale, then trotted down to the jeep and brought the driver back in a fireman's carry. Setting him down, I shook my head at the damage my knife had cause. It had done a lot of damage to his arm, in fact the knife wasn't even there, just a slim entry wound and a much larger exit wound. Although he was a bit banged up from the crash, the knife wound was the worst, so I carefully bound it up so he wouldn't bleed out.

As the Undersiders mounted, I carefully ignored the bags of money that were tied to two of the dogs, and watched as my three dogs quickly grew into monsters the size of a car. At no time did my control of them waver, just as I had hoped. Bitch's power was purely physical, her control over dogs came from her innate understanding and amazing training and discipline.

As Bitch climbed onto one of her dogs, I sent my three running towards where the second cape and her escort were trotting towards us, and then asked Grue, “What about Über and L337?”

He turned back to me and asked, clearly surprised, “They're still tied up? I figured they'd be free long before this. Huh. Well, I guess we'll cut one of them free on our way out of here, no point in leaving them to get picked up. They tried something with us and got their asses kicked. Far as I'm concerned we're even.”

They all nodded agreement, except for Bitch who just shrugged as if she didn't care one way or another, then left at a fast trot on Bitch's dogs.

As they left, my three monster dogs ambushed the cape and her escort. The largest carefully and as gently as possible knocked her down and then held her in place with a giant paw while the other two quickly disarmed her escort. None of them lasted more than 10 seconds before having their gun arm broken and their bodies thrown against a locker hard enough to knock them cold. The monsters carefully draped the unconscious thugs on each others backs, while a small swarm addressed the young cape.

“Stand up miss, follow the dogs and you will be safe. Try to escape and they will run you down and drag you to me.”

She gulped and stood up and followed the dogs as they led her through the storage yard. After only a few minutes she arrived at a crossroad that was partially filled with bound thugs.

I looked at the young girl, obviously frightened but still standing as tall and firm as she could, then said, “Thank you for your cooperation. As I promised, you will be unharmed as long as you don't resist or try to escape,” I pointed to the pile of hog-tied thugs and Bakuda's stripped, unconscious and bound body and went on, “which would be unsuccessful I might add.”

I tied her hands firmly behind her back and gently set her down against a storage locker a few feet away from Bakuda. At the same time the dogs roughly dumped the unconscious thugs and took off to fetch the few stragglers from the ABB and the involuntary conscripts from around the storage yard.

I watched remotely as the Undersiders cut Über and L337 free and roughly shook them awake before leaving at a run. As my dog monsters began finding and fetching the ABB, I finished tying up and stacking the thugs that had been driven to me. The whole process continued more or less without pause for the next twenty or thirty minutes as the monster dogs and my swarms scoured the storage yard, which was good because Bitch's estimate of how long the monster boost would last was right on the money.

I was almost out spider silk cord when four of the PRT's heroes showed up, Dauntless and Velocity
came in from the west and Miss Militia and Armsmaster arrived in a rather unusual aircraft of a type I had never seen before.

Dauntless landed next to where I was tying up the last of the ABB and addressed me, “Good evening Legion. Could you tell me what happened here? And maybe why so many of these people aren't in the ABB's colors?”

Making sure that my voice was set for 'swarm', I said “Certainly, record this please so I don't have to repeat myself.” I waited a minute while he pulled out and turned on a digital voice recorder before continuing, “I was on patrol when I noticed some exotic explosions coming from this storage yard. Upon investigating I found Bakuda and a large number of ABB and conscripts chasing down and attacking the Undersiders. I intervened by snatching Tattletale out of one of the roadways and questioned her for some background on what had happened. I dropped her off near one of her friends so that she could help render medical assistance while I took out Bakuda and the ABB.”

“Once Bakuda was subdued, I completely disarmed her and bound her. She was using a HUD in her mask in conjunction with toe rings to control the bombs she had planted around this yard as well as inside the conscripts. Her eyes and face are still covered and I've removed all of her tools and equipment, which required stripping her of her clothing. She will still require cavity searches and medical intervention to deal with her dead-man's switch.”

Dauntless broke in to ask me, “Why did you let the Undersiders escape? You could have taken them into custody easily, especially after the beating they no doubt took from Bakuda.”

I looked at him with my head tilted to one side a bit to display confusion, “Because I didn't see them commit any crime and I don't attack without cause. They were the victims here, not the aggressors so I didn't care if they stayed or left; either way it's not my problem. Yet.”

“Yet?” he asked, seeking clarification.

“Yes,” I replied. “At some point they'll be committing a crime when I run across them, at which point I will take them down and capture them. Until then I'm pretty much neutral. I'm not a cop or deputy of any sort so I'm pretty limited in what I can do without clear cause.”

Miss Militia was clearly watching, but not saying anything as we spoke, but Armsmaster interrupted us. “The Undersiders are known villains and can be detained by any registered hero…”

I interrupted him in turn, “No, YOU can detain them. YOU are a member of the Protectorate, which is seconded to the PRT as a law enforcement arm. YOU can detain them on suspicion, I cannot. I have neither the legal nor moral authority to do so. As an independent vigilante, I am strictly limited in when I can intervene. I need personally witnessed criminal activity or 'hot pursuit' conditions. Unless, of course I accept deputization for a clearly defined operation.”

I waited a moment to see if anyone else had a question, “Continuing on, I rounded up the various ABB and conscripts and have them bound. Someone will have to sort them out and get those bombs out of them, as well as any others that Bakuda may have planted; Bakuda will surely know where they are as well as how to remove them, though you may have 'convince' her to help. The other cape, the little girl over there is an aerokinetic, though I have my doubts about how willingly she joined the ABB. I would hope that her situation is carefully evaluated and that she not forced into ANY group or organization against her will.”

Miss Militia spoke up now. “If as you believe, she has been coerced into the ABB, we will do our best to find her family, and if we can't we'll get her into a stable family. As far as the Wards go,
that would be up to her. It can be a good place to start from, even if it isn't for everyone.”

I nodded, accepting her assurances about how the girl would be treated. “If nobody has any further questions, I've got a patrol to finish before I get some sleep.” Looking at the assorted heroes I nodded and turned away and ran along the roadway then leapt to the roof of one of the storage units and headed out to finish my planned patrol, even if it was an hour later than I had expected. I had most of my swarm disperse except for a few dogs, including the one that was bringing me my throwing knife.

--------------------Legion***Protectorate ***Legion-------------------

Velocity was the first to speak up. “Well, damn Armsmaster, Legion sure told you. Is he always like that?”

Armsmaster sighed and replied, “Pretty much. A vexing combination of extremely competent and extremely irritating. No one can deny that Legion's very good at fighting, but his refusal to register or join the Protectorate makes it hard to work with him. We can't count on him in any way, because he seems to patrol on an irregular schedule and only intervenes when he finds a crime actually being committed.”

Dauntless spoke up from where he was checking the bindings of some of the ABB. “He's right you know. As an independent vigilante he's very limited in what he can do. Just like you know that the PRT has used vigilantes exceeding their legal limits to 'convince' them to join the Protectorate or Wards before. Legion clearly knows about that and is making sure we know that he's legally untouchable for now. Damn smart of him.”

Miss Militia spoke up from her seat in the aircraft, “The police will be here in about 20 minutes to begin processing the normals. The PRT is sending two vans to collect the ABB capes. One of us will need to ride in each van as escort, and I will bring Bakuda's equipment in separately. As for Legion, I prefer to believe that independent or not, he will step up when needed. No doubt we'll know for sure with the next Endbringer attack, until then let's give him the benefit of the doubt, since no one can deny that he's been making a big splash.”

Velocity spoke up worriedly, “Yeah, against the ABB, but he hasn't done much about E88 has he?”

Dauntless gave his friend an odd look and said, “Well, no not much … if you ignore Stormtiger, Cricket and about two dozen of their skinheads. How in world did you miss that?”

Armsmaster grunted and said, “That's right, you were down in Houston assisting them with that operation against the Fallen. You probably just haven't caught up with all of the mission reports yet. Assault and Battery dealt with him over Stormtiger and Cricket and I know that their report was pretty in depth. Take a few minutes to read it after your shift, it's pretty interesting, though I don't agree with some of their conclusions.”

Miss Militia laughed and said, “That's because you don't think Assault's right about Legion being a girl, an underaged one at that. Not sure I agree with that either, but it is possible. Legion's armor is pretty complete and about as gender-neutral as it is possible to make.”

At that moment the two PRT vans pulled up and they got busy transferring and securing the two capes for transport to PRT HQ. Armsmaster rode with Bakuda and Velocity rode with the young girl, while Dauntless and Miss Militia provided flying coverage.

Taking a few moments to make sure she was properly belted in place, Velocity remembered what Legion had said about her being possibly conscripted to serving the ABB and decided to see if she
would be willing to talk to him. Discreetly turning his voice recorder back on, he settled down into
the seat across from her and asked her, “So, could you tell me your cape name? You don't need to
tell me your real name if you don't want to, I just want to know how to address you.”

The girl swallowed and softly said, “My name is Arashiko; it means little storm.”

“Arashiko, that's very pretty. Are you willing to tell me what you can do? Legion told us that he
thought you might have been forced to aid the ABB, but didn't say much about your powers.”

“He? You think that …? Huh. I can control air; I can throw sharp blades of air and create small
explosions. I can also generate a field of hardened air around me. Given enough time I can change
and control the weather, though it's a slow process.”

Velocity blinked and leaned back in surprise, “Wow, that's pretty impressive, especially being able
to change the weather, that's very uncommon. How long have you been a cape? If you don't mind
telling me, that is.”

She shook her head, “I do not mind. I was caught outside in the snow storm in January, I received
my powers in time to save my life. My parent's gave me to the ABB in return for permission to
leave Brockton Bay. I do not know where they are now, perhaps in New York City or Baltimore.
Both had been mentioned as possible destinations.”

“Allright, I suppose that's enough for now, though there will be others who will want to speak with
you about your powers and how you ended up with the ABB. Probably Miss Militia; if I know my
M&M she'll be down to see you as soon as she get's off duty. She's got a bit of a soft spot for kids,
ot that she's alone in that.”

“I understand. I will cooperate, especially since Legion is clearly taking down the ABB. With them
gone I might even be able to rejoin my family so that no one knows about my powers and I can be
normal again,” she explained.

--------------------------Legion***Arashiko ***Legion--------------------------

I didn't tell the nice hero about all of my powers, I kept my electrical powers and enhanced senses
to myself, just in case.

I managed not to giggle out loud, though I smiled a bit as I stepped out of the truck. *They actually
thought Legion was a man, when it was obvious she was a girl, only a few years older than myself.
I would have to be careful not to let that slip to the heroes, it was clearly her choice to be seen as
male, and far be it for me to give up her secrets. Especially since she had been so nice to me when
she captured me.*

I walked alongside the nice hero, Velocity if I remembered correctly, until we reached the small
conference room. Once there he cut my bonds off and had me take a seat while he offered me a
soda and some simple snacks to eat. After finishing my drink and snacks I lay down on the sofa
and quickly fell asleep while waiting for whoever would be speaking to me next.

--------------------------Legion*** Taylor ***Legion--------------------------

I continued until I reached the river and turned west, paralleling my previous path and carefully
mapping the underground sewers, tunnels and random chambers. I had found a number of spaces
that had probably been hidden lairs or maybe even bomb shelters that were partially or completely
filled with ground water from the high water table.
When I reached the bridge, I paused and thought about making a run across the bridge, possible over the weekend, to begin mapping that side of the river, over by the quarries and mines, as well in the expensive suburbs.

Turning back, I traced a new path on my way home as I continued my patrol. Given the late hour and all of the earlier excitement, things were very quiet as I headed home. Reaching my neighborhood at around 3 am, I carefully checked for any observers and silently re-entered my house and slipped downstairs to change out of my costume and shifted back into my base form before slipping into clean clothes. Once I had everything put away I headed back upstairs with Thora to do some more studying for my GED, tedious, but very necessary if I wanted to start college in the Fall.

As I started to read my study guide I realized that I had basically memorized it, including the questions and practice problems and answers, so I set it aside and began working my way through all of my needed text books to test my level of recall on them as well as to test myself with problem solving. I had Thora carefully access some math study sites to get new problems to work through and I found that using the different mental math techniques let me solve them correctly only a little bit slower than with a calculator and much faster than working them out on paper.

That set the pattern for my studies for the rest of the night; randomly checking my retention of the material in my books while at the same time working through more and more complicated math problems. Just before breakfast I took a break to make a breakfast casserole then I set Thora up with the latest math book from the library and let her read through it for me while I started making breakfast for dad and I and ran through another review of my books. God I loved multi-tasking, especially the way I could do it.

When I heard dad start to move around his room I let Thora out for a while as I put my books away until after breakfast. After dad left for work I would put together yet another costume for Legion and refit Pied Piper's before making a second one for her. Eventually I would need at least three costumes for Legion, just to keep up with the wear and tear of normal usage, not even counting battle damage. I had to wonder how other heroes managed without access to some sort of safe and secure costume maker.

I was also looking forward to some more staff work as part of my work out, hopefully I would be able to design a functional, collapsible staff that Amy could grow in our tanks.

I made dad his lunch while breakfast cooked and set it aside on the counter before getting the morning newspaper. When dad finally came downstairs ready for work, I had already served up some of the casserole for both of us and had tea ready to go. I also grabbed the local news and comics to read while we ate our breakfast.

After dad finished eating, but while I was still eating another helping of the casserole, he spoke up, “So kiddo, what're your plans for today? Anything special?”

I swallowed my bite of food and answered, “Nothing special, just some laundry and some sewing, then I plan on meeting Amy after school for a few hours. I'll probably be home by 6:30 or 7:00 at the latest.”

“That's fine, be sure to let me know before you make any plans for the weekend, I may want to do something as a family. We'll have to see how things go.”

I nodded at dad as he put his dishes in the sink and picked up his lunch before heading off to work. Once he had left I finished eating and put the leftovers in the fridge for lunch. I started a nice chili and did the dishes and cleaned the kitchen before going upstairs to collect the bedding and towels.
to start doing the laundry.

Once the washer was running I turned my resistance back up to 75% and started my morning work out routine. After my weight lifting was finished I worked on my close quarters staff kata, but by the time I finished I decided that I was going to need to take a full size staff out on patrol so that I could find some open yet isolated spots to practice the full range of staff kata. When the washer stopped I transferred the laundry and went and fetched the dirty laundry from our bedrooms and the bathroom and sorted it into proper loads.

I spent extra time working on my speed katas, hoping to be able to significantly improve my speed. To date it had worked somewhat, but there was clearly room for improvement.

With my morning workout complete, I turned my resistance mod down to 50% and took a shower and got dressed for the day.

In between doing the multiple loads of laundry, I worked some more on my sewing projects, refitting Pied Piper's costume to fit her new size and made a couple of minor color changes to go with her hair color. I also worked on making more of the clothing that I would be selling at the Free Market. I had a large enough selection of tops so I started working on shorts and skirts. I didn't have enough fabric for the selection I wanted to make so I just laid out and cut the pieces for two pairs of shorts and one skirt. I would have to pick out some decent fabric either this weekend or on Monday. Hopefully I would have enough money to buy what I needed.

At lunch time I checked on my chili and then had left-overs to eat. Because I had run out of fabric, I decided to spend a couple hours working on some jewelry that I wanted to sell. Earrings and necklaces mostly.

Just after 2 o'clock I wrapped up my jewelry tools and findings and went upstairs to put away my books. I did take two library books with me in my shoulder bag to read on the bus and while waiting for Amy.

Unlike my earlier attempts, having the two booster gulls allowed me enough range to actually partially map the bus route. I wasn't able to make it as wide as normal, but I did manage to link it up on one side with my earlier mapping efforts.

Once I got to Arcadia, I took my normal seat in the picnic area and pulled out my physics book to read while I waited. I also used my booster gulls to help me carefully search the surrounding area, including all of the underground spaces. I had done this a bit before, but now I really stretched myself to thoroughly and completely scan the area.

The underground area directly under Arcadia appeared to be a Cold-War era shelter, not even close to being as strong as an Endbringer shelter, but much larger. If I was sensing it correctly, there were large storerooms with supplies of preserved food, water in cans, medical supplies and even clothing. Probably enough for 300 or more people to live on for weeks. I found 4 large military style barracks and a small hospital. All of it was dry and clean, with power and ventilation running at low levels, everything in standby I guess.

My best guess was that it was an old nuclear bomb shelter that had been repurposed as an Endbringer shelter. Maybe they planned on using it as a command center in the event of an Endbringer attack on Brockton Bay, though I wouldn't want to be stuck in there during an attack. I would much rather take my chances outside where I could run away.

Other than that, the underground was much like the rest of the city. Sewers, utility tunnels and storm drains. Lather, rinse, repeat.
I finished my lunch and pushed my tray back and pulled out my phone to surf PHO before my next class.

Welcome to the Parahumans Online Message Boards

You are currently logged in, Adallon (Verified Cape) (Cape Daughter) (New Wave)

You are viewing:

AND Threads you have replied to

OR Threads that have new replies

OR private message conversations with new rep’lies

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: More ABB Fireworks**

**In: Boards ➤ Brockton Bay ➤ Cape Doings ➤ Villains**

**Synod** (Original Poster) (The Guy In The Know) (Veteran Member)

Posted on April 22, 2011:

Big lot of explosions and gunfire last night down by the docks and at PRT HQ. Anybody got the straight skinny?

*(Showing Page 1 of 1)*

**Lurker** (The Guy In The Know) (Veteran Member)

Replied on April 22, 2011:

Not yet, though I did hear that the ABB has, oops had, two new capes. Both captured.

**Synod** (Original Poster) (The Guy In The Know) (Veteran Member)

Replied on April 22, 2011:

Damn, looks like the ABB is fading fast. This makes what, three major outings in the last three weeks that ended in getting the i r ass kicked? First Lung, then that normal gang fight with the skinheads last week, and now this? Not looking good for them. It was bad enough when it was just Purity hunting them down, but now Legion too?

**Hosteen** (PRT Agent) (Veteran Member)
Replied on April 22, 2011:

Shit, looks like Legion's got a hardon for the ABB. All three of those got shut down by him, though he wasn't as lethal against the two new capes as he was against Lung. 'course Lung is a certified BAMF and could clearly handle it.

**ArcticWolf** (Veteran Member) (Power Guru)

Replied on April 22, 2011:

Names of the new capes? Anyone?

**Bagrat** (The Guy In The Know) (Veteran Member)

Replied on April 22, 2011:

No names yet, but I'm pretty sure one of them was the same Tinker that tried to hold Cornell hostage. A bomb Tinkker.

**ArcticWolf** (Veteran Member) (Power Guru)

Replied on April 22, 2011:

Found another link [here](#) that claims the bomb Tinker was implanting micro bombs in civilians to forcibly conscript them. Any confirmation out there yet?

**Hosteen** (PRT Agent) (Veteran Member)

Replied on April 22, 2011:

Yeah, that much is true, we're working on getting the bombs out of them as we speak. They've brought in 4 Tinkers from out of state to help, one or two healers as well. Even Panacea would be swamped to handle all of this crap by herself. We have almost a hundred civvies to process, plus at least 30 veteran ABB mooks. Personally, I hope they fry that bitch; the Birdcage is too good for the likes of her.

**Bagrat** (The Guy In The Know) (Veteran Member)

Replied on April 22, 2011:

Damn, that sucks.

**Synod** (Original Poster) (The Guy In The Know) (Veteran Member)

Replied on April 22, 2011:

Check out U&L's latest webshow. Apparently they jacked the USiders' loot from the bank job yesterday, or at least tried to. It was fairly even 'cause Hellhound wasn't there, but Bakuda stepped in with a bang. She apparently planted a bunch of bombs around the storage yard, as well in the gang members. U&L pixillated at least 4 killings, though supposedly they forwarded the raw footage to the PRT.

**Hodor**

Replied on April 22, 2011:
Holy crap! Check out 6:32. Legion comes out of a side road like he's flying and snatches Bakuda out of her jeep, like taking candy from a baby. Anyone got a guess how fast he was moving?

End of Page. 1

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Hosteen (PRT Agent) (Veteran Member)

Replied on April 22, 2011:

No idea, but he beat her like a drum, then stripped her down to her undies to get rid of all her gear. Looks like he skirted the rules a bit by pulling off her mask, but had her face down and covered her eyes and face with a bandana or something. Nothing visible on the webshow.

Regent (Verified Cape) (Villain)

Replied on April 22, 2011:

Fun times for all last night. NOT. Bakuda's a psychopath, and believe me, I know one when I see one. Bakuda killed at least 6 people that I know of, HER people, or at least ones she had impressed into her service.

Legion would have been well within his rights to have shanked her right there, but Tt said she had a DM switch hooked up to blow all her bobms at once. Maybe yes, maybe no, but Legion choose to keep her alive, so cut him some slack, he didn't break the rules, he was just disarming her, 'cause we all know that Tinkers are bullshit.

ICanHazKitty (Cape Groupie)

Replied on April 22, 2011:

Are you, like, the Undersiders' spokesman now? Oh, and 'grats on getting Verified.

Regent (Verified Cape) (Villain)

Replied on April 22, 2011:

Nope, just bored is all. Thanks.

Regent (Verified Cape) (Villain)

Replied on April 22, 2011:

In all seriousnessness, though, Bakuda's bombs are crazy; explosive, singularity, ice, sonic attack, big ass ball of lightning. You name it and I think she could make it. Bullshit Tinkers.

Bagrat (The Guy In The Know) (Veteran Member)

Replied on April 22, 2011:

Friend of mine did some calculations from the video; she said that Legion was moving at between 37 and 42 miles an hour when he hit Bakuda. Bet that hurt...a lot.

XxVoid_CowboyxX
Replied on April 22, 2011:

Looks like he was flying to me.

**Bagrat** (The Guy In The Know) (Veteran Member)

Replied on April 22, 2011:

Nope, she said that he was on a flat ballistic arc, not flying level. Acrobatic as hell though, snatched Bakuda out of the jeep and made sure she didn't get fatally injured when she hit the ground. Kudos dude.

**XxVoid_CowboyxX**

Replied on April 22, 2011:

Yeah, I took another look at the video. You're right, Legion is fast, strong and very gymnastic. Olympic competitor maybe? Grab bag Cape?

**Tin_Mother** (Moderator)

Replied on April 22, 2011:

XxVoid_CowboyxX that's another infraction for you, STOP trying to figure out Capes identities. One more and it's at least another week suspension for you; I'm about out of patience with you; read the TOS… again… and FOLLOW them.

End of Page. 1, 2

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**ArcticWolf** (Veteran Member) (Power Guru)

Replied on April 22, 2011:

Damn, TM sounds P.O'd.

**Bagrat** (The Guy In The Know) (Veteran Member)

Replied on April 22, 2011:

Do you blame her? Void keeps pulling the same shit, every time a new cape appears or an older one does something new. He keeps it up, and TM will be the least of his worries; some cape's gonna track him down and stomp him for breaking the unwritten rules.

**XxVoid_CowboyxX**

Replied on April 22, 2011:

Waita minute! The unwritten rules only apply to capes, not norms!

**Hosteen** (PRT Agent) (Veteran Member)

Replied on April 22, 2011:
Don't be stupid, those rules apply to everyone … if you act like they don't apply to you, then oh well, sucks to be you, cause now you aren't protected by those same unwritten rules. Capice?

And Legion's a Master class Cape, with ratings in Brute, Mover, Thinker and who the hell knows what else. I wouldn't actually call him a grab bag Cape, he's too damn good. He's a pro, the BBPD think he walks on water; any time he makes an arrest, it sticks. He gives really precise audio records for use in court, and said that if needed he WILL show up in court, but only if needed. Man's got a life, you know.

XxVoid_CowboyxX

Replied on April 2 2, 2011:

Oh

Bagrat (The Guy In The Know) (Veteran Member)

Replied on April 2 2, 2011:

Yeah, oh. Wise up before it's too late.

Synod (Original Poster) (The Guy In The Know) (Veteran Member)

Replied on April 2 2, 2011:

If anyone can find a link to how Bakuda's victims are doing, that'd be great

Lurker (The Guy In The Know) (Veteran Member)

Replied on April 2 2, 2011:

Bet the PRT has something up by lunch time.

End of Page. 1, 2, 3

I grinned as I logged out and carried my tray over to the conveyor.

'I'll have to ask her what happened last night, I didn't get a call so I guess the PRT has it under control. It's kind of nice to NOT be the one they call on in the middle of the night, even if I can handle it better now.'

'Wonder if she has plans for this weekend, or if I should plan something, since she planned our last date?'

Heading to my locker, I grabbed the folder for Trig and my math book for my next class, as well as my notebook for AP History, fortunately, I had everything turned in and would just need to take notes.

--------------------Legion*** Othalla ***Legion-------------------

BRINNG!

“Hello?”

“Is this Othal speaking?”
“Yes, who is this, is there a problem?”

“Yes ma'am. This is PRT Agent Stevens. If you could come down to the PRT HQ, we have a mass casualty situation that we could use your help with.”

I paused to yawn and then asked the PRT Operator, “Could you give me some details on the injuries,” I asked as I started to get dressed.

Victor rolled out of our bed and began putting on his clothes while I put on my costume.

“Yes ma'am. Bakuda implanted micro bombs in over a hundred civilians, we have surgical and EOD teams to remove the bombs, but we desperately need healers to deal with the damage Bakuda caused. We do have some coming in from other regions, but probably not for at least another 5 or 6 hours. And if we can avoid calling on Panacea tonight that would be great, since she's doing one of her out-of-state marathon healing sessions tomorrow.”

“Not a problem, I'll be there as soon as I can get a ride,” I replied before hanging up my cell. Quickly explaining what the call was about, I dug under our bed for my boots.

Victor looked at me with his little grin and said, “Kaiser's gonna flip when he finds out you went to the PRT HQ in the middle of the night to heal 'chinks',” he made air quotes as he spoke.

“Screw him, it's just a power trip for him, you know that just as well as I do, besides, I can always claim to be building up the Empire's PR image. God knows it can use all the help I can give it.”

He laughed as he grabbed his wallet and keys and said, “All too true, try to check in on the even hours. Just a speed text will do until you need a ride. If I don't get one, I'll wait 30 minutes then call the PRT to make sure your not under a Faraday cage.”

Following him down to the garage, I got in the passenger seat of the black sedan and buckled in as he started the car and backed out to the road. On our way to PRT HQ we pulled through a Dunkin Donuts and grabbed a couple of coffees for the ride.

Ten minutes later Victor flicked a switch that blanked out the license plates and pulled up just outside the PRT HQ, leaning over I gave him a soft kiss and said, “I'll let you know how it goes. Wish me luck.”

He looked grim for a moment then said, “Good Luck. And don't forget to text me, alright?”

“I won't, get some sleep, I'll probably be here for hours.”

Settling my mask into place, I exited the car and walked up to the front doors and pushed the call button.

“Yes, can I help you?”

“Certainly, this is Othala, I've been called in to assist with healing Bakuda's victims.”

“Yes ma'am, we'll have an agent open the door for your immediately,”

“Thank you,” I replied, stepping back enough to let the door open freely.

The agent that came running into the lobby looked to be barely 21 or 22, far too young for the job he held. Once he had the door unlocked he let me in and relocked the door and led me to the elevator. While we waited for the elevator to arrive, he spoke into his helmet mic.
“Console, I have Othala in the lobby. We're heading down to Triage One. I'll report when we arrive.”

“Roger.” was faintly heard from his helmet, I suspect he didn't have it fitted quite right or I wouldn't have heard a sound.

The elevator took us down 3 levels based on the indicator, though I couldn't feel any motion at all. TinkerTech of course.

Once the doors opened I could see Armsmaster and Kid Win standing in front of a corridor leading off to the right. To the left was a huge crowd of people, mostly though not all Asian, sitting quietly on floor next to the walls. Some of them had been crying, and most of them looked like they were hovering on the edge of shock.

I quickly walked up to Armsmaster and said, “Good morning, how can I help and where do I start?”

Kid Win looked shocked at my words, but Armsmaster simply said, “Thank you for arriving so quickly, we have two EOD/Surgical teams standing by to begin removing the bombs. We will hopefully have more teams in a few hours to assist us. Each team will have a Tinker assigned to double check for any traps, though Bakuda swears that she has given us all the needed information to safely remove them.”

“I see, so you want me gift them with regen after the surgery is complete, correct?”

Armsmaster simply said, “Yes.”

I thought about it for a moment then asked, “And how can you be sure that Bakuda was telling the truth?”

By the time I had finished asking my question, Armsmaster had already turned and started walking away, so Kid Win answered me.

“Ah, well Assault told her that if she lied to us, he'd turn her back over to Legion and let him deal with her. She added three more types of traps at that point and swore that that was everything.”

I thought about that for a minute, especially everything that Legion had accomplished in the short time that he'd been active and nodded, “Yep, that would do it alright.”

With that I followed Kid Win to where the 6 operating rooms were, though I took my place in the recovery room so I could treat each patient as them came out of surgery. Just after 5 am the first patient was brought out to the Recovery room.

Around 9:30 two more Tinkers and EOD/Surgical teams showed up and got to work. Dealing with each victim took about 30 minutes, and we had 131 implanted bombs to remove before we would be finished. Even with the best of good will, this was going to take all day, literally. Hopefully the PRT could find a couple more teams to help speed up the process, and maybe another healer, because keeping up with four teams was starting to tire me out and I didn't know how much longer I could keep it up. In a lot of ways it was like dealing with an Endbringer attack, just non-stop healing, only I didn't have another healer to give me a temporary boost to my energy levels.

At 1 pm, two more teams arrived, still without another healer. At least now the surgical teams could take a rest break without slowing the whole process down too much. Finally, I asked one of the nurses if they were going to be getting another healer in to help because my fatigue levels were climbing and I was going to need a break pretty soon since I'd been going since 5 in the morning.
Eventually she came back and said that they expected another healer by 3:30 to help pick some of the load.

Just at 3 o'clock, Arcadia let out and as usual, Amy came out the side door to meet me. We had barely greeted each other, not even having time to decide how we were going to get to the hospital when her phone rang.

She pulled her phone out and looked at and said, “PRT? I wonder what they want now? They haven't called on me in a while,” answering the call, she said, “Amy Dallon speaking,“

“Ms. Dallon, would it be possible for you to assist the PRT this afternoon? We are removing the micro bombs that Bakuda implanted in civilians and we only have one healer available. Unfortunately she has been working non-stop since very early this morning and she could use a break.”

Amy looked at me apologetically, but I just shrugged and smiled at her. She took a deep breath and said, “Okay, can you provide transport or should I try to get a ride?”

“We have a car already en route to Arcadia, it should be there with in a few minutes.”

Amy covered her phone and asked me, “Come with?”

I nodded yes and she said, “Transport for two, see ya on the flip side,” as she hung up her cell, she started to giggle. “God, can you imagine his face? I bet it was priceless.”

“Probably. I won't be able to stay with you, will I?” I asked her.

“Almost certainly not, but at least we can be together for a little bit. The lack of privacy is disappointing, but what can you do?”

I nodded agreement and said, “Needs must when the devil drives.”

She laughed at that and asked, “What does that even mean? I've heard it before but …”

I smiled, remembering my mom explaining it to me a long time ago, “It's from Shakespeare, 'Alls Well That Ends Well' I think. Basically it means that you have to do what you have to do. Just more poetically.”

She looked pensive for a bit, then said, “I guess that pretty much describes Cape life then. We all do whatever it takes to get through the day. Like now; Bakuda implanted a bunch of micro bombs in civilians to force them to join the ABB and now the PRT is working to remove them safely. I'm pretty sure they called Othala in to heal them up after the surgery, but that was probably really early this morning so she's got to be exhausted by now. Normally, during Endbringer attacks, we can give each other a boost every now and then so we can keep going, but if she's been alone this whole time …” she just shook her head sadly.

I started to reply, but a white sedan with the PRT seal on the door pulled up. The driver stepped out and asked, “Miss Dallon, I'm to bring you … and your companion to PRT HQ.”

Amy looked closely at him for a moment, then smiled and said, “Sargent Nichols, it's good to see you again. I just wish it was under better circumstances. Oh, this is my friend, Taylor Hebert. Taylor this is Sargent David Nichols; he's been my driver a couple of times; taking me to the airport, picking me up. Things like that.”
As I buckled my seatbelt I asked, “Why would the PRT be taking you to an airport? Why not your mom or dad?”

She twisted sideways a bit so she was facing me and said, “Oh, that's for when I fly out to other cities to work their oncology wards. A lot of people can't afford to come to Brockton Bay, so the PRT helps organize a once a month field trip to other cities so I can share my healing with people who would normally not be able to receive it. Speaking of which, tomorrow is the first one since Canberra that mom is letting me go on.”

I felt a bit sad at the thought of Amy being away, even for a short while and asked her, “How long are you gone for?”

Amy reached over and grabbed my hand and squeezed it, “Just for a day, though it's probably going to be a long one. Dragon provides the transportation, so that's always quick, and usually a member of the Protectorate and the Wards travels with me, supposedly for security, but it's always been more for company.”

“Oh, well then, where are you going tomorrow?” I asked her.

“Atlanta, Georgia. I haven't ever been there before, so I've no idea how many patients I'll have.”

“So how do you make sure that everyone gets healed?” I asked her.

“I don't, the hospital is required to schedule the patients on two criteria; age and severity of the cancer or disease. It's really the only way to be fair,” she explained as the car pulled up to entrance to PRT HQ.

Getting out, I walked around the car and took her hand as we walked to the front doors. “Has anyone ever tried to use bribery to get preferential treatment?” I asked.

Amy frowned as she pulled the door open, “Once that I know of. When I realized the problem, I finished the healing and reported it to my Protectorate escort. In the end, two of the hospital administrators ended up being charged with fraud and racketeering. I think they each ended up with 15 years in prison. Since then, everyone has been scrupulous about following the listed priorities. If there is any question, then they ASK me. Works out very well for me.”

I raised an eyebrow and asked, “Oh, how so?”

She snickered and said, “Mom arranged a special deal for me. The hospital pays me 5 dollars an hour for my normal visits, but anytime I heal a cancer or otherwise terminal patient, $500 is deposited into a special fund that I use for charitable donations, and with parental permission, I can use it for other things as well. The hospitals handle the finances and bill whatever Health Insurance the patient has to recover the cost, assuming they have any, if not the state picks up the tab. It works out well for me right now, and it only applies until I turn 18; once I'm an adult I'll have to renegotiate my rates, but even then there are precedents set by other healers that I can use as an example.”

“Sounds like you've got a pretty good deal than. Anyway, I'm going to have to let you go now,” I said as we reached the elevator. Amy rose up on her toes long enough to give me a quick kiss, and then smiled and turned to enter the elevator.

I sighed and turned and exited back out of the PRT HQ. I was going to sit and wait for the next bus when it occurred to me that I'd never patrolled in this area yet, so I had no idea what the underground looked like. Taking a moment to gather a subsurface swarm, I plotted out a path that
would take me through most of downtown and lead me back to where I could catch a bus home.

When I reached the street I paused a moment to finish my initial plotting of as much of the PRT HQ as I could sense, then turned right to walk along the eastern edge of the Downtown area. It was mostly filled with office buildings and apartments, with a few retail stores and restaurants at street level. I spotted 4 Endbringer shelters just along that one 2 mile swath, which was a much higher number than we had down near the docks and the trainyard. Probably because it was more industrial/commercial down there and had faded a lot in the last 20 years.

I had overestimated how much time it would take me to walk home, so I ended up not bothering with bus and just walked all the way home and still got in by 5:30, in plenty of time to clean up and get dinner ready.

Once I had the table set I sat down and started updating my maps with the new information for downtown area. By the time dad pulled up I had finished my inputs and was just looking at the whole map to see where I needed to fill in the missing information. I decided that I could use my bike tomorrow to fill in some of the 'safer' areas during the daytime since Amy wasn't going to be home.

Logging out of my mapping programs, I left the various ebooks still open, and turned to greet him as he came in the door.

“Afternoon dad. How was work?” I asked him.

“Good Tay, it looks like the fishing is picking up for the season. The boats are planning to go out in pairs, every other day or so. Might spread it to three days if they need the extra time to fill their holds, but the captains are working together to share the fishing grounds evenly. Finally. Took us forever to get them to agree to the plan, but it should work out a lot better in the long run. Especially if the feds can keep the big factory ships out of the local fishing grounds.”

I got up and smiled at him, happy that he was so pleased with the success of working with the fishing fleet. “I'll start serving dinner while you get cleaned up, alright? It's chili tonight, with rice and a garden salad.”

He nodded and headed upstairs, saying, “Sure, I'll be back to in a jiffy.”

I checked the rice then dished up some on our plates and then ladled chili on top before putting them back on the table. I pulled the salad I had made out of the fridge and put a pitcher of juice on the table.

Dinner was quiet, just a few comments about how our days had gone, though dad did sympathize with my disappointment that the PRT had called Amy in. On the other hand he was quite pleased to hear that the ABB had suffered yet another defeat. Anything that reduced the crime and despair in town had to be a good thing.

After cleaning up the kitchen together, dad settled down to watch tv, while I did some more studying. Eventually though I put my books aside and paid attention to dad's show; he was working his way through a boxed set of Profiler that he and mom used to watch when I was younger. I did still work on my test reviews, using my memory and multi-tasking, but it allowed me to sort of watch tv with dad at the same time.

Dad headed for bed around 10:30 while I stayed up to watch the Late Show before heading to bed. I prepped myself to get up at 4 o'clock since I wasn't planning on patrolling until probably Sunday.
Waking up right at 4 am, I got up and dressed in comfortable sweats before heading downstairs to start on my morning workout. I set my isometric mod at 75% resistance before starting and worked carefully and quietly to complete everything, including my kata by 7 am, figuring that dad wouldn't be up before then.

Imagine my surprise when I heard dad's alarm go off at 5:30 and he started moving around, getting dressed and ready for the day. I dropped my iso mod back to 25% and put all of my weapons and weights away before heading upstairs.

Stepping into the kitchen, I closed the door behind me and prepared myself to be surprised by dad when I met him in the living room.

“Oh! What are you doing up so early?” I asked dad, jumping slightly in faux surprise.

“Hah, I guess I did surprise you, didn't I?” He asked me, a big smile on his face.

“Well, yeah. You're never up this early, certainly not dressed and ready to start your day, what's up?” I asked him, honestly curious to know why he was up so early and clearly happy about it.

“Well, first thing is; did you have any plans for today?”

“Well really, since Amy is going to be busy today I was thinking about going for a bike ride; no where in particular, just around town. Why?”

“Then how would you like to go on an outing with the Association? We've been doing well this year and last month we voted on a family outing, something nice that hopefully everyone will enjoy.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“We've chartered two fishing boats out of Boston, they came in last night and are ready to start taking on passengers starting at 7:15 this morning. The plan is to stay out all day and return around 6 tonight. Sound interesting?” he asked.

I only took a moment to decide that, yes, spending the day on a fishing boat with my dad sound like a great idea. “Actually, it sounds wonderful! Is there anything I need to do to get ready? Snacks? Drinks?”

He shook his head and said, “Not really, all of that's provided by the charter, just dress comfortably and bring sunglasses and a hat. Everything else is covered.”

I smiled and asked, “When do we leave? At the very least I need a shower and to change before we leave.”

Dad pointed up the stairs and said, “We need to leave no later than 7, so scoot. I'll make up some left-overs for breakfast while you get ready. I'm already dressed and have a small bag with a change of clothes packed and ready to go.”

I nodded my understanding and ran up stairs to start the shower and grab some clean clothes.

Even taking the time to pack a swimsuit, towel and clean sweats after my shower, I was still sitting down to eat the left-over chili and rice by 6:30. Dad had already started to eat so he finished first and went upstairs to get his bag while I finished my second helping. While he was doing that, I also
grabbed a box of power bars and added them to my bag, just in case.

As he came down with his bag in hand, I gave him mine and started clearing up. The little bit of food left was sealed up and put in the fridge, and the dishes were rinsed off and left in the sink for later. Because I wasn't going to be around all day, I sent all of my Widow's back into the lair and had them eat then sleep until tomorrow.

I made a quick run though the house and made sure to turn off all the lights and computer equipment. I had already made sure that nothing was on downstairs, so I locked up the house and joined him in the car to drive down to meet the boats for our excursion.

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Twenty minutes later, dad pulled into his parking spot at the Dockworkers Association and we grabbed our bags and started walking down to the pier where the two large white fishing boats waited. They were larger and neater than the fishing boats that homeported here, clearly intended for charters and day-trips, not as regular working boats.

As we headed to the boats, dad greeted a lot of the other workers and their families; I recognized some of them but only a few of them were close to my age, most being either 5 or 7 years younger or adults. I didn't see anyone from Winslow that I recognized, so I considered it to be a clear win for me as I wouldn't have to deal with any pitying looks or nasty comments.

I followed dad onto the boat on the left, I looked over the boat, admiring it's lines and the way it was clearly designed to make the passengers comfortable during their trip. Once on board, dad greeted his friends while I climbed up to the upper deck to see just what the boat was like.

The fore deck had some cushioned benches for sight-seeing for non-fishers, while the large after deck was set up for 16 to 20 people to fish at one time, so I assumed that once a fish was caught, someone else would get their turn to fish. There was a two large coolers in middle of the deck, one of which was labeled 'DRINKS' and the other was labeled 'FISH'. The upper deck that I was on had a partial sun canopy and bolted down tables and benches, another large cooler for drinks and two large gas grills, probably for our lunch. At the forward end of the upper deck was an enclosed cabin that was the actual bridge for the boat, though it appeared as if no one other than crewmembers were allowed onto the bridge.

For the next half hour people arrived and boarded the two boats, until just before eight o'clock, several crewmen started giving a quick overview of the boat, the plan for the day and what behavior was expected along with the safety precautions. There was one on each main area, fore deck, top deck and after deck, so everyone got the same lecture without having to shout. Once that was finished the boats got underway and followed the pilot boat through the bay and out into open water.

Transiting the Bay without the pilot wasn't impossible, but the graveyard did make it tricky getting in and out of the Bay unless you really knew where all of the wrecks were and how they twisted the currents. By 8:30 we were clear of the bay and headed out to the fishing grounds. We had definitely lucked out with the weather today, as it was sunny, but not too hot, and there was a nice light breeze.

Once the fishing started, I grabbed a bottle of fruit punch and wandered around the after deck to see how people were doing. I monitored how the fishing was going on my boat and helped to make sure that at least the children were able to catch a fish, but the other one was too far away, even with my booster gulls, for me to do more than send some fish in the general direction of the other
boat and try to trigger their feeding instincts. Hopefully that would be enough to make the fishing on the other boat at least enjoyable.

I did swing down below decks both to use the bathroom and to check out the interior of the boat. The main room was quite comfortable, with sofas and tables on both sides of the room leaving a wide passage that led to steps to the lower level that had two bathrooms and a large kitchen, plus private rooms for the crew and several storerooms. At the far back was a soundproof door that lead to the engine room according to the sign on the door. The whole below decks area was compact but efficient and very neat; the crew clearly worked hard to keep even the areas away from the passengers neat and clean.

Coming back up I settled down on the upper deck and did some review while practicing using the fish as my swarm, I also found that I could 'map' the sea floor quite well using the different crustaceans and fish, though the different senses and ranges took some getting used to.

I was joined by some of the younger kids after they caught their fish and they roped me into playing some games with them; Mad Libs, charades, telephone, things like that. When that started to bore them I offered to tell them a story, one I had read many times as a child, both with mom and on my own, and that I could remember perfectly with my expanded memory. I had always enjoyed the Redwall books by Brian Jacques, and decided to start with Redwall, as it was probably my favorite one.

I was up to chapter four, when we were interrupted by a loud cry from behind us.

“Aisha! No!”

Turning around I could see a head of black dreadlocks rapidly falling behind the fishing boat, even as I stood up I watched a tall, well-built black man kick off his shoes and drop his jacket to the deck before diving into the water after the girl who had fallen overboard.

Taking a quick look around, I could see that no one was doing anything to help the two in the water so I moved to the aft railing and unlatched one of the life rings waiting there. Shooing the kids away from the railing, I took a moment to boost my speed while dropping my iso mod to zero then with a couple of spinning steps I threw the life ring just to the side of where they waited in the water. My throw was a little short, but the young man easily pulled the girl over to where the life ring was and they grabbed on while the boat finished turning around and slowly approached to rescue them.

Two of the crewman and several of the dockworkers cleared a section of the side rail and dropped a rope ladder over the side during the approach. While they did that I remembered the safety brief and started checking under the bench seats and had the kids do so as well until we found some plastic wrapped blankets. I opened two of them, ordered the kids to wait up here until I got back, then slid down to the after deck to wait as they pulled them out of the ocean. The first one up was a pretty black girl with nice dreadlocks; one of the dock workers plucked her right off the rope ladder and hugged her tight, most likely her father while the other swimmer was helped aboard. Based on appearances, I would guess that they were all related.

Stepping up, I draped one of the blankets over the girl’s shoulders and handed the other one to the young man. Now that I had a chance to see him out of the water, I could see that he was younger than I had thought, only 2 or 3 years older than me, not yet fully grown, but definitely getting there.

As I watched them, dad stepped up behind and rested his hand on my shoulder, saying, “Good job, kiddo; it may be a nice day today, but that water is still pretty cold and those blankets will help. Would you be willing to help Aisha get changed?”
I looked at him, puzzled at who he was talking about for a moment, then he went on, “Dave Laborn's daughter, Aisha is the one who got pulled over board and his son Brian is the one who dove in after her.”

I nodded my understanding and said, “Sure, let me grab my backpack, just in case she doesn't have a change of clothes, she can borrow my sweats.”

Dad smiled and let go of me so I ran up to the upper deck and grabbed my bag, stopping only to tell Demi, the oldest and most level-headed of the kids up there, “Keep an eye on the rest of kids for me please, I'm going to help Aisha get changed, okay?”

Demi smiled and said, “Sure, maybe I can read some of my Harry Potter book to them until you get back.”

“Sounds good to me. Hey! The rest of you behave for Demi, alright? I'll be back as soon as I can, so be good and I'll finish telling you about Redwall.”

With that I slid back down the ladder and went to see if Aisha wanted some help getting changed. Walking up to her I said, “Mr. Laborn, if you'd like I can take Aisha down to the bathroom and help her get changed into some dry clothes,” turning to Aisha I went on, “If you don't have a change of clothes, I've got some clean sweats you can borrow.”

She looked up at her dad and asked, “Dad?”

He nodded and said, “Go on Aisha, Taylor's a nice girl, she'll be able to help you more than I can right now,” he looked over at me and said, “I really appreciate this Taylor, thank you.”

I just smiled at him and said, “It's my pleasure, sir. Aisha, if you can point out your bag, we'll …” even as I spoke, her brother, Brian I think dad had said, handed me a bright purple and pink backpack with a lot of buttons decorating it. I nodded and said, “Thank you. Aisha, this way.”

I led her through the inside lounge to the stairs and down to where the bathrooms were, saying “I didn't see a shower, but you can use the sinks to rinse off most of the salt. I've got a plastic bag you can put your wet clothes into once you're dressed. Speaking of which, do you have a change of clothes, or will you need my sweats?”

She shook her head and said, “Just my swimsuit is all.”

“That's fine, get rinsed than put on your suit and you can wear my hoodie over the top, as tall as I am that should cover you down to almost your knees. If you get cold you can slip the pants on as well,” and as she stepped into the bathroom, I handed her the plastic trashbag and my hoodie.

A few minutes later Aisha's brother came down to change as well and I squished up against the wall and pointed him to the unused bathroom and said, “Aisha's getting cleaned up right now, but when she comes out you can use the plastic bag I gave her to hold your wet clothes too, well, assuming you have a change of clothes in your bag,” pointing at the shoulder bag he was carrying.

He smiled at me and said, “I do, and thanks for helping Aisha out, Miss.”

I snickered at that and said, “Miss? Hardly,” holding out my hand, I said “Taylor Hebert, call me Taylor. Our dad's work together, and that's good enough for me.”

While I was waiting for them to finish getting cleaned up and changed, the captain of the fishing boat came down to check on us. “Good morning miss…? How are your friends doing?”
“Okay Captain. They're getting cleaned up right now, though I expect them to be done pretty quick. Um, I was wondering if I could get something hot for them to drink; tea, coffee, hot chocolate?”

He chuckled and said, “No problem, Miss,” he pointed to the kitchen and said, “follow me to the galley and I'll show you what you're looking for.”

Once in the little kitchen he pointed out a built-in hot water dispenser, a cupboard with heavy, white china mugs and another one with a wide selection of coffee, tea and hot chocolate. “Show them their options and get them a hot drink then bring them up to the upper deck for lunch, if you don't mind,” he explained.

I nodded and said, “No problem, Captain. We should be up pretty soon, oh and what time does lunch start anyway?”

He checked his watch and said, “We'll start cooking in about half an hour or so, but if they want something to tide them over, there's a variety of snacks in that cupboard next to the stove, alright?”

“Perfect. Thanks again,” I said as he headed back upstairs.

A few minutes later Aisha stepped out of the bathroom and joined me in the kitchen, or galley as it was apparently called, and I offered her a hot drink. “Aisha, you should probably have something hot to drink after that dunking. Your choices are basically coffee, tea or hot chocolate; however that cupboard has a huge selection of flavors so go ahead and pick out something that you'd like,” as I spoke I got out a mug and opened the cupboard for her to look through. After a quick look see she picked out a hazelnut hot chocolate and I showed her how to use the hot water dispenser to make her drink.

As she finished, her brother stepped out, holding his wet clothes, now dressed in a pair of running shorts and a muscle shirt. Aisha turned and whistled at him and said, “Damn bro, your gonna give all the ladies hot flashes and palpitations looking like that. Oh, the bag for wet clothes is in my backpack, okay?”

He actually blushed at his sister's words, but simply opened her bag and put his wet clothes in the plastic bag before asking, “Seriously Aisha, how are you doing?”

She sighed and said, “Mostly okay now. It really happened too fast for me to get too scared when I lost my balance and got pulled into the water, and you got to me so fast that I didn't really get a chance to lose it,” she raised her mug and went on, “getting clean and dry with something hot to drink has helped a lot too. Speaking of which, grab yourself a mug and fix yourself something too. There's a big selection in the cupboard, so go crazy.”

He smiled at her and fixed himself a coffee before we collected our bags and headed back upstairs. I lead them to the upper deck, explaining that the crew would be starting lunch soon and that I had promised the kids that I would finish telling them the story I had started, so it was probably the best place to wait.

Once we settled on the upper deck, Demi brought me an Apple juice and asked if I would start telling them the story again, because the kids had been enjoying it.

I explained to Brian and Aisha that I had been entertaining the kids by telling basically reading them Redwall from memory, and that I wanted to pick it up where I had stopped when Aisha went overboard. Brian looked amused, but Aisha asked me, “From memory? What, you memorized the whole book?”
I shrugged and said, “Pretty much. It's probably my all-time favorite book and I've read it at least a dozen times, not to mention having heard the audio book and seen the anime version. If you get bored, feel free to leave, I won't be offended, I promise.”

With that I started reciting the story again, though I did go back a little so I was actually starting at the beginning of chapter four.

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When lunch was served, the kids and I took over one corner of the upper deck so we weren't in anyone's way and the crew made a point of serving us first so we wouldn't bother the rest of the passengers while they ate. More than a few new kids ended up joining us to eat their lunch and listen to Redwall.

Although I didn't notice it at first, Aisha made a point of bringing food for both Brian and I whenever our plates got empty, and she also brought a platter of burgers and hotdogs for the kids, so they could have seconds while listening to the story. Brian sort of did the same thing, only with a bag of cold drinks to pass out while collecting the empties for disposal.

Every now and then, various parents would come by and listen and watch the kids for a while, then either do some more fishing or hang out on the fore deck and enjoy the day. Mr. Laborn came by a couple of times to check on how Aisha was doing, but after the second time, he would just stand and watch her for a few minutes, usually with one or another of the parents. Dad and Kurt came by twice, but Lacey actually took a seat on the deck with the kids and listened for most of the afternoon.

The crew shut down one of the grills after the lunch rush was over, but they kept the baked beans warm and would grill up something on request, though they didn't keep any of the meat drying out on the grill, but would pull it out of a cooler whenever someone asked to eat. They passed out drumsticks and ice cream sandwiches after lunch, but they kept a close eye on the kids and only let them have one of each so that they didn't get wild on too much sugar.

By 4 o'clock, just about everyone had managed to catch at least one fish that they could take home, each of them appropriately labeled so that they could be sure to bring 'their' fish home with them. While the last few people tried to make their catch, the crew brought out some kites for anyone who was interested to put together and then fly them from the after deck and the rear of the upper deck. The variety of types and colors was very beautiful, though some of the younger kids had problems with two of the older kids who actively tried to foul their kites. Fortunately a number of the parents noticed quickly and intervened and stopped it before it got out of hand.

I lucked out on my timing, because I managed to finish Redwall just as our boat began it's entry into the Bay, so we all had plenty of time to gather our belongings before the boat docked and we had to leave for the day.

I waited with Brian and Aisha until the majority of the families had gotten off of the boat before we joined up with dad and Mr. Laborn, collected our fish and started walking towards our cars. As we approached the Dockworkers building, Brian diffidently asked me, “Taylor, could I ask you a question?”

I looked at him, puzzled by his hesitancy and said, “Sure, what did you want to know?”

“Well, I can't actually remember meeting you before, but you do look familiar; have we met somewhere?”
I looked at him carefully and thought back. I also cranked my senses higher, having left them fairly low all day, due to the rather strong smells of the ocean, fish and large number of people in moderately close quarters. Finally I nodded and replied, “Yeah, I think you're right; about two weeks ago, on the bus heading to Arcadia? You were riding with that pretty blond girl and I had a picnic basket? Does that sound familiar to you?”

He looked shocked for a moment, then laughed and said, “Yeah, it does. Lisa thought you were going to have lunch with a friend and wished you good luck, right?”

I smiled and said, “Yep, that was a really good day; Amy and I had a wonderful picnic lunch and agreed to start dating. So, if it's not too personal, are you and Lisa dating? Or just good friends?”

He looked shocked again and then said, “Me and Lisa dating? She's a nice enough girl, and certainly pretty enough for anyone, don't get me wrong, but she's way too smart for my taste, I'd prefer someone that I can hold a conversation with and feel like we're on the same wavelength.”

About then we had to separate to get to our cars and I waved to them as they walked away.

Getting into dad's car, I waited until he was buckled in before I said, “Dad, I had a really good time today, well other than Aisha falling overboard, and even that turned out okay. So, thanks for arranging all of this and inviting me along, it was a lot of fun.”

He glanced at me as he started the car and asked, “Even though you didn't catch anything? And spent most of the day entertaining the younger kids?”

I nodded and said, “Absolutely. I don't actually like fish that much, though I do like watching others as they fish, and I loved taking care of the kids.”

He smiled and patted my leg as he said, “I'm glad you had fun, it's something we've both been lacking for a while now, and it felt good to just have a nice day out.”

It was just after 8 o'clock in the evening when I finally finished up at Grady Memorial, even though I had started early that morning. It had been painfully obvious that the vast majority of my patients were not wealthy enough to travel to another facility for care and had been waiting a long time for a parahuman healer to show up.

I stretched and looked around for Weld and Dauntless, my escorts for the day. Looking down the hall to the left where the waiting area was, I saw Weld leaning up against the wall. Walking towards him I called out, “Hey, are you guys ready to call it a day?”

Weld waved a hand at me and turned to speak to someone out of sight in the waiting room. By the time I reached him, Dauntless had gotten off the sofa and was stretching in preparation of leaving.

Dauntless was the first to speak, asking, “So is this a normal day for you, Panacea?”

I shrugged and explained, “Well, yes and no. It's very busy for my usual day at the local hospitals, about normal though a bit long for my 'road trips' and light for an Endbringer attack.”

Weld looked surprised at my explanation and asked, “Endbringer? You've attended Endbringer attacks before?”

I exchanged a sad look with Dauntless and and replied, “Yes. Canberra was my tenth Endbringer attack. I've been attending since shortly after I Triggered, since I'm one of the better, if not the best,
Parahuman healer around. My powers can make a huge difference in the survival rates for capes and non-capes alike, so to NOT attend would be unconscionable. The PRT works hard to ensure that all of the healers are kept out of danger, but it's impossible to protect us completely. And simply dealing with the sheer number of injured and maimed is horribly traumatic.

Weld nodded slowly, and said, “Canberra would have been my first Endbringer attack, but I wasn't allowed to attend because I'm too slow and heavy for SAR, and there's no way I could hope to hurt the Simurgh.”

Dauntless sighed and said, “Yeah, Simurgh attacks always have the lowest turnout, partly because the Protectorate tries to send only those who pass special psychological screening and have either Mover or Blaster powers that might be effective, and partly because the Simurgh scares the bejeezus out of most of us. Having our minds turned against us isn't something to look forward to.”

I frowned at his comment, thinking *That's a good point. I wonder if the mods that Taylor and I developed could provide a defense against her Scream? Or maybe we could even heal the damage? Though I'm not sure how we could do either without outing ourselves to the PRT and Protectorate.*

I followed the two of them to the elevator and then down to where a large van waited to take us to the airport for our flight home. As I walked I considered different options that could be used to create mental defenses for capes who had to face the Simurgh or other Masters, but I kept getting stuck on how to do so without compromising myself or Taylor.

By the time we reached the airport and had pulled up next to Dragon's transport, I had decided to just let the whole idea go until I could talk to Taylor about it. Brainstorming together with her was always more effective than doing it alone, for both of us.

Boarding the craft, I buckled into my seat and waited until we reached cruising altitude before slipping to the back where Dragon always had food and drink waiting at the end of the day.

“Hey you two, there's fresh food and drinks if you'd like some,” I called out to them as I pulled out a Coke and a small meat-lover's pizza from the hot-box.

Dauntless got up and headed towards me, saying “Yeah, that sounds like a great idea.”

As I headed back to my seat, Weld spoke up, “Thanks, but I don't actually eat food, but an assortment of different metals instead.”

I shrugged and as I took my seat said, “That's fine, you should check the cabinets back there anyway, Dragon may well have included something for you. She usually does for those of us who have unusual metabolic needs.” I pulled open my seat tray and set my pizza down while putting the bottle of Coke in the drink holder built into my armrest.

The first leg, to Boston, was long enough for me to have a second pizza, pepperoni this time, before I needed to get cleaned up and buckled back in for our landing.

Weld was met by one of the Boston Protectorate members, though I didn't actually recognize her. They drove off in an open top HummVee that had been modified for Weld, with a much larger seat and what looked like rubber padding on all of the normally exposed metal surfaces.

The flight to Brockton Bay only took about 20 minutes, and even with traffic, the PRT had me home by 10:30. A long day, but a productive one, especially with never having been to Atlanta before.

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When I reached home, I thanked the PRT driver and walked up to the house. Stepping in I called out, “Hey all, I'm home!”

Vicky looked up from the sofa and smiled before jumping up and hugging me. Once again, it was wonderful to be able to hug my sister without feeling the unwanted emotions her aura could generate.

“Ames, your late! Did you run into problems with your flight or something?” she asked, holding me at arms length and checking me out for any injuries or problems.

I shook my head and said, “No, just a lot of patients who really needed help. I didn't finish up until around eight, and we had to stop in Boston to drop off Weld, my Ward escort for today.”

She let me go and picked up the Maggie Holt book she had dropped and asked me, “Weld? He's the metal guy, right?”

I nodded and said, “Yep, 100% metal, inside and out. But still alive.”

Vicky smiled and just said, “Powers are weird. I've said it before and I'll say it again; Powers are weird.”

I giggled and said, “This is a first, you and Clockblocker agreeing on something.”

“Hey, he has to be right at least once in his life, right?”

“True. Anyway I'm gonna let Taylor know I'm home than grab a shower and get some sleep, alright?”

“Sounds good to me. Mom and dad are already in bed, so try to be quiet when you go upstairs, alright?”

I waved at her as I turned towards the stairs and said, “I will. 'night Vicky.”

“'night Ames,” she said as she sat back down on the sofa to read her book.

Once I got to my room, I pulled out my phone and sent Taylor an email letting her know I was home safe and giving her a quick overview of how my day went.

Not even 2 minutes later I got a reply from Taylor, thanking me for the email as well as telling me about the outing that the Dockworkers Association had taken today. I had a moment of jealousy about the difference between our days before I shook myself and admitted that I had actually enjoyed going to Atlanta and providing the healing to all the people there. Which was a big improvement over how I had been feeling before I met Taylor.

I took a moment to collect my thoughts then sent a reply letting her know that I thought her day sounded like a lot of fun, and that we'd have to do something together soon, perhaps another date. Though I did make it clear that I was going to do the planning for our next one.

Over the next ten minutes we discussed, in oblique terms, what we would like to accomplish tomorrow and that I would come over for an early breakfast and we'd go for a bike ride together after lunch.

Once we had that all settled, I collected my night clothes, took my shower and went to bed.
Chapter 23

Chapter notes: Mental Communication

texting – *AMY: It looks like this*

voice – “*It looks like this.*”

voice with emotional overtones – confusion “*It looks like what?*”

I awoke a little later than normal, just before 4:00 am, when I would normally wake up an hour earlier. The long day in Atlanta had tired me out more than the actual healing had, but I was still very much looking forward to spending the day with Taylor.

Sitting down at my desk/vanity I brushed out my hair and pulled it back into a single, long braid that when I had finished, fell down to the middle of my back. I stood up and walking over to my closet, I quickly picked out a comfortable pair of jeans and a light green tee shirt and quietly got dressed for the day.

Picking up my school bag, I emptied the contents out onto my bed, and put my hoodie and the containers with my modded spiders inside before silently heading downstairs.

Once in the kitchen, I poured myself a bowl of cereal, the first of four, and sat down to eat an early breakfast. While I ate, I used my phone to send Taylor an email letting her know that I was going to be coming over on my bike in about an hour and that I was wondering where she planned on us riding for the day.

After I finished eating, and still waiting for her reply, I pulled the spiders out of my pack and put a box of power bars in the bottom with 4 apples and 2 bananas wrapped in a dish towel, then placed the spider containers carefully around the fruit with a couple of bottles of juice and closed up the pack.

Before I left, I wrote a note explaining where I was going to be for the day, and taped it to the fridge. Picking up my pack, I headed to the backyard, quietly closing the kitchen door behind me before wheeling my bike to the driveway. I did take a minute to empty my water bottle and refill it from the outside tap before I climbed on my bike and started riding to Taylor's house.

Even as I started riding, my phone beeped, letting me know that Taylor had emailed me back. It was quite short, simply saying that she was looking forward to my arrival and that we could make breakfast together before we left on our ride. As for our itinerary, she said that it was a surprise. Using the voice-to-text app made it easy to send a reply even as I sped down the road.

I made a point of turning my iso-mod down to zero so as to not burn too many calories on my way, then carefully picked up speed on the empty streets. Though my bike didn't have a speedometer, it
I did have an odometer on the front wheel, and using my internal clock, I figured out that I could cruise at about 40 miles an hour without straining myself.

Even taking a bit of a roundabout path to avoid road repairs from Oni Lee's attack on the PRT in one area and one of the E88's strongly held neighborhoods in another, I still got to Taylor's house just before 5:00 am. She was waiting for me in the driveway as I turned in, having no doubt spotted me a while ago.

Parking my bike up against the house I shrugged off my pack and carried in my hand as I walked up to Taylor and slipped into her embrace.

After a few minutes of just quietly enjoying being together, Taylor eased back, took my hand in hers and led me into the kitchen. Setting my bag on one of the chairs, I fetched a pitcher of juice from the fridge and poured us each a large glass of orange juice, setting the glasses on the table. While I did that Taylor checked on the large skillet of sausages she was frying and sliced open half a dozen extra-large english muffins for our breakfast.

The last of the sausages were done, so I transferred them to a side plate, drained the skillet and poured the egg mix into the hot pan. Buttering four slices of english muffin, I placed them butter side down on the square griddle that I had found in the thrift shop over on Benson; it had been tucked away at the back of a shelf, and only cost $2.50, which was insanely cheap for an old cast iron griddle. A new one would have cost me at least 10 times that much, probably more; I sometimes wondered if people didn't realize how much they could save by seeking out second hand shops and thrift sales, or if it was just that I had the freedom and time to look around until I found the bargains.

Within 5 minutes I had the first 2 breakfast sandwiches finished and the next two cooking. Placing them on our plates, Amy tucked them in the warm oven so that I would have the time to finish all of them before we actually sat down to eat our breakfast. While I worked on that, she selected some fruit from the bowl on the table and cored and sliced two apples for each of us into bowls, then set a banana down next to the bowl.

Finishing the last two sandwiches, I transferred all of them to our plates and carried them to the table.

“Bon appetite,” I said with a smile as I sat down next to her.

Amy smiled back at me and said, “Very nice. These should do us well for at least a while, and I have some power bars and fruit in my pack for snacks later.”

I nodded around my mouthful of breakfast sandwich, swallowed and said, “There are several nice places to eat along the route I wanted to take; both sit-down and take away, so we have options for lunch.”

“Cool, if it's nice when we decide to eat, maybe we can make it a picnic lunch,” she said with questioning tilt her head.

I paused in thought, running through the street maps I had memorized, especially across the river, looking for parks and deli's or restaurants that might sell us a picnic lunch, then nodded and said, “I'll need to check the phone book to be sure, but yeah, I think that's a great plan. There should be at least a few places that we can buy a picnic lunch from and then head on to a nearby park.”
Amy put her sandwich down and said, “That reminds me, I've been working on a couple of mods that I'd like to install before we go; a set of linkages to Broca's Area that would let us interface with any number of comm's and then the booster relay for your power.”

I thought about that for a couple of minutes while I finished my last sandwich and nibbled on the apple slices, then said, “Yeah, that will work, just make sure the relay is connected to Broca's through the new linkage because I think it'll let us speak at range, well at least short range. And silently as well.”

Amy started to smile, then said with a shocked look on her face, “Holy Shit! I bet that I can make yours a secondary control node for your power … one that Trumps can't Nullify!”

“That's not possible … is it? I thought that Power Nullifers always worked, well if you're within their range, right?”

“Yeah, they do. But if I'm right, then HOW they do it is important. See, ever since we started developing our Master defenses, I watched how Vicky's Aura worked, but also the rest of New Wave's powers as well when I could. It's well known that the Corona Pollentia and Gemma have something to do with powers, but no one really knows how or why that's so. One thing that I'm certain of is that the Corona is how our brains interface with our powers, how we do what we do and I'm equally certain that the Gemma is the actual connection to the source of our powers … OWW! Damn it …” the last was said in a pained whisper.

“Amy? What's wrong?” I asked worriedly.

“Ow, ow, ow. Damn migraine. It just hit me out of nowhere,” she explained with a look of pain on her face.

Reaching over I took her hand in mine and said, “Amy, use our link to check your brain for swelling or damage or really anything that's not right.”

She squeezed my hand but didn't say anything before she started echoing to perform a self-check. A few seconds later her face relaxed and she said, “Good call; the Gemma had released a flood of neuropeptides, assorted neurotransmitters and nitric oxide that forced a migraine. I've cleared them out and reduced the inflammation so my head feels a lot better.”

I frowned in thought, then said, “Negative reinforcement and conditioning. My psych books are clear that extreme pain will tend to make you avoid thinking about whatever triggered said pain, even if you know that it's to force that behavior, in fact, that repetition can sort of force you to create pain yourself, instead of being externally applied. In this case that triggering has to be more than just thinking about the source of our power, but actually being on track to figure them out, otherwise it'd be too frequent and ineffective.” I paused again, then slowly said, “We may want to modify our Master defenses to include detecting and reversing that kind of thing; 'cause it's definitely an attack, even if we don't know by whom or why. Yet.”

Amy squeezed my hand and said, “Three mods, then. Upgrade the anti-Master monitors and repair mechanism, the Broca's Area connection and then the booster-relay,” she took a deep breath and I saw her begin to upgrade her defenses and then immediately add the other two mods. All told, she completed not only her mods, but mine as well in less then 5 minutes.

Once she was completely done, I released her hand and scanned my control system to verify that the new and upgraded mods had been added like they should have. A moments concentration let me check the upgraded defense before I shifted to what appeared to be an entirely new section that controlled communications. The screen seemed to allow the selection of who to speak with,
sending and receiving text messages and as well as an option to shut down my power temporarily so I could use the booster-relay that Amy had created.

Selecting Amy's name on my screen, I sent her a text:

*Amy, can you read this?*

Almost instantly a reply appeared on the screen, right below what I had written:

*Oh yeah, this is great! I wonder what our max range will work out to be?*

*No idea yet, depends on whether we can access any other booster nodes. If not we'll need to work on modifying them so we can.*

*AMY: Hey, try setting up a default so message ID's are including.*

*TAYLOR: Oh yeah, that's easy. I wonder what else we can make it do? In fact, let me drop my power out of the circuit and just use my secondary …*

A few seconds thought allowed me to shift to the secondary mode and test that I still could connect to my swarm. I seemed to have a much shorter range, and it was quite a bit harder to sense and control my swarm, as if my multi-tasking wasn't as easy to do, nor as efficient without my normal powers, but I suspected that with practice I would be just as good either way.

… *Yep, works fine. A bit harder without whatever is the actual source of my powers … ow … oooh that's cool. A migraine started to trigger and then immediately faded away.*

*AMY: Awesome. Range?*

*TAYLOR: About 300 feet or so. I don't have any boosters in range, so we'll have to check it later.*

*AMY: Cool. I'll try voice next, okay?*

*TAYLOR: OKAY … oops, sorry about that.*

A few seconds later I heard a soft chime and Amy's name flashed on my screen. Mentally pressing it, I heard a click and then said, silently, “**Hello?**”

“*Hey sweetie, how's this sound?*

“*Just like your voice normally sounds, how's mine?*”

“*The same. I wonder if our Broca changes the incoming data to match our memories and expectations or if it comes from the sending side?*”

“*Hmm, not sure. I suspect that we change the data to match our expectations, since our voices never sound the same to different people. Heh, I learned that in first grade at the Children's Museum. God, I haven't even thought about that place in years, I had a lot of fun there.***

“*Me too. Hey, take my hand, I want to see if your migraine was just like mine, and how well the upgrade dealt with it.***
I reached out and took her hand again and watched her as she sifted through my brain and check for any changes or damage. Just before she pulled back, she modded my monitor and then hers.

“Okay, that should do it. I just tweaked it a bit to make sure it would look for any variants in case our Gemma's try something a little different to get around our defenses.”

“Good idea, see ya.”

Letting go of her hand, I stood up and said, “Outstanding work, Amy. Let’s take care of the breakfast dishes and then we can head out for the day, alright?”

Amy giggled, and said, “That sounds like a plan to me. I'll start on the pans, you clear the table, alright?”

I sighed dramatically and said, “Of course, O' Giggle Mistress, I but live to serve.”

She tilted her nose in the air and said with an over-the-top faux-royal tone, “As is only right and proper,” of course she then broke down into giggles again.

I just shook my head with a smile as I rinsed our dishes and loaded them into the dishwasher and then wiped down the counters and table while Amy cleaned out the skillets and griddle and dried them off on the stove. While she finished that, I fetched my backpack and put my picnic blanket inside with some disposable dinnerware for our picnic; I also added some snacks and a thermos of juice for lunch.

I wrote Dad a quick note telling him our plans, and left it on the table for him to find before looking around one more time to ensure we'd left nothing out of place.

I locked the back door behind us before we mounted our bikes and headed out for the day.

--------------------Legion*** ***Legion-------------------

We reached the Old North River bridge around 9:30, and stopped for a quick snack break, since we needed to go another 15 miles west to come to the US-1 bridge which was still in service and allowed pedestrians and cyclists to cross over. The next bridge was 5 miles further west, and since it was the I-95 bridge it was off limits to all but motor vehicles, so getting across the river was quite time consuming, even by car.

The Old North River bridge had been built during the Great Depression by the WPA and had stayed in constant service until '98 when the original plans for its replacement had been brought up. Sadly the contractor absconded with almost every dime of the money that had been raised and had been supposedly held in escrow. Even today no one was really sure how he'd managed to get all of the money out without anyone catching on until he was long gone to South America. Looking at the decaying remnants of the old bridge just reminded me of how things had been slowly changing for the worse these days.

Between the slow economy and Endbringer damage siphoning public funds into relief efforts instead of infrastructure repairs, we couldn't even afford to have the condemned structure removed, much less replaced. That was one of the reasons dad was so fixated on getting the ferry running again, it would be a significant boost to the local economy, and yet be at a reasonable cost considering the benefits.

My readings in American History had brought up some interesting and frightening corollaries between America and the world during the Great Depression and World War II, and what
Brockton Bay had been going through ever since the advent of parahumans. The reduction in jobs, scarcity of resources, the increasing concentration of wealth, and the rise of polarizing groups; The Axis Alliance and E88/ABB; The Grand Alliance and the PRT/Protectorate/Guild; the many criminal Parahuman 'gangs' here and overseas, were just some of the examples that I saw in the news every day.

Roosevelt had created a number of agencies and organizations to provide assistance, often by creating jobs that helped to feed these families while also providing improvements to the cities or infrastructure.

The Works Progress Administration. Rural Electrification Administration. The Civilian Construction Corps. The Public Works Administration. All of them had been designed to provide jobs, poorly paid jobs maybe, but jobs nonetheless that let men feed and care for their families, and also improved the state of the country.

Sadly, we had nothing like that now; I suppose the PRT came close in size and scope, but it was focused on keeping Capes from causing too much damage and preparing for the next Endbringer attack, not on actually making things better.

I passed Amy a bottle of juice and a couple of my home-made powerbars, even as she passed me a couple of her fruit powerbars, before sitting down with my own snack.

Opening her bottle, she took a sip then asked, “Can we do some experiments while we rest here?”

I nodded and said, “Sure, what did you have in mind?”

“I'd like to mod some of the gulls around here and then start on the trees. If possible, I want to work through my relay organ to see if I can work at greater ranges.”

I gave her idea some serious thought, then said, “Alright, but first let's do the gulls the normal way for practice and then drop back to using both of our 'relay organs'. If that works we can have you try it on your own, without me to help with the multi-tasking, that should give us plenty of data to evaluate how effective the relays are and if any changes are needed.”

Scooting even closer to me, Amy took my hand and reached out through my links and found the group of gulls down by the river's edge. There were over 60 of them within a couple of hundred feet of where we sat, so she quickly skimmed through them to find the healthiest gulls. Once she spotted the ones she wanted to mod first she nodded and went to work.

Unlike the first time she modded a gull, the process only took about 30 seconds, even including a full health tune-up and modifying it's DNA and reproductive system so that its descendants would be born with the mod and upgraded immune system.

After the first gull was finished, she went ahead and did two at once, adding an additional gull with each attempt until she reached the max that she was comfortable with, 7 at one time.

While she finished with that group of gulls, I brought a large selection of small fish to the surface of the river, as well as bringing a small swarm of insects for the gulls to feed on, knowing that they would definitely need the energy after being modded so extensively.

“Very nice work, Amy. Do you feel up to trying the same with the trees? Or do you want to try working through the booster-gulls on your own?”

“Hmm, I think I'll try connecting through the gulls, adding an additional gull each time for
extended range. If possible I want to echo through the links without your direct aid.”

I cocked an eye at her and asked, “Do you want me to drop out of the linkage completely, or just be passive?”

“Drop out completely, please.”

I leaned over and kissed her on the cheek, then let go of her hand so that she had to use her own relay-organ to connect to the swarm.

Amy started in surprise as I let go of her hand, then grinned and said, “Okay, this is wicked cool! I can still feel the swarm, but the booster-gulls are sort of, brighter? Louder? Something like that, anyway. I can't really use their senses nor does it feel like I have any real control, but …”

I watched her closely, though I refrained from using my connection to the swarm so as to not interfere with her efforts. My patience was finally rewarded when, after a little more than five minutes she spoke up.

“Done! One of the trees had a gull in the branches, so I was able to use that contact to modify the tree successfully. I'm fairly sure I can't use anything except a booster-gull to modify the trees, at least not without your help, but even that is a big step in the right direction,” she excitedly explained.

I smiled back at her, and said, “Then let's try something else. I'll fully connect to my swarm, without holding your hand, and you try to mod that oak down by the corner.”

Amy looked down the street and nodded, “Let's do it.”

I fully connected to the swarm, and highlighted a squirrel running up the oak tree for her. As soon as I did, Amy froze it and started modding the tree, and the squirrel at the same time. This time it only took about a minute to do both mods. Continuing with the experiment I spread the gulls wide and began highlighting animals in different trees up and down the road for her to mod.

It took less than ten minutes to cover a two mile stretch of the road with modded trees and another dozen assorted birds, mostly crows with a few owls.

Standing up, I gave Amy a hand up and we quickly stored our trash in our packs and started riding again. This time I carefully spread all of my booster-gulls ahead of us, intending to give Amy plenty of time to make her mods, even if she was limited to only three at a time without physical contact with me. Even so she was fast enough that we were able to maintain a decent speed, about 14 or 15 miles per hour. That was slower than we'd been going but was still pretty good considering the work Amy was accomplishing, and how much she was multi-tasking.

One advantage of our slower speed was that I was able to extend my range quite a bit to the sides to map a much larger swath of the underground. Of course that meant much longer to input the data into my programs tonight, and probably tomorrow as well.

Before we turned north on US-1, we stopped at gas station and bought a bottle of soda and some snacks to tide us over until lunch time. Riding over the bridge was actually easy for us, another advantage of our mods, so we made good time over the bridge and then east again on US-1A.

The scenery was beautiful even if the road was a little rough and damaged in places, and we had to stay off the shoulder, since it was really nothing more than loose gravel and large pot holes. It was pretty obvious that the winter had been hard on this road and it didn't look like anyone had the funds to do proper road repairs, just a quick fill-in of the worst of the pot holes on the road, and
There were quite a few tiny villages and towns on this side of the river, though most of them were back away from the river about half a mile or so, being bedroom communities that sprang up during the '70s and '80s, and were still doing fairly well, even with the depressed economy.

Even though it was approaching lunchtime, the traffic was very light since it was a Sunday so we made good time on our way to our next stop. There was a little wide spot in the road called Kinsey Inlet that had a small Market/Deli that had good reviews online and was open 7 days a week. I hoped to buy a nice picnic lunch there for us, especially since there was also a nice little park nearby that overlooked the river and had real restrooms and picnic tables.

Pulling up to the entrance, we parked our bikes in the bike rack and locked them in place. Taking Amy's hand I walked with her into the Market and looked around for the deli section, grabbing a handbasket on my way by.

“So what are you in the mood for, Taylor?” Amy asked me as we headed towards the back where I assumed the fresh food and deli would be located.

“Not sure, at least a couple sandwiches or subs, something substantial anyway. Maybe some potato or pasta salad to go with it. How about you?”

“I'm thinking … a meatball and an Italian sub, with some chips. Potato salad sounds good too. Maybe some hot tea it that's an option. We'll have to decide when we see what looks good.” Even as she spoke we turned at the end of the aisle and saw the fairly large deli, especially considering the overall size of the store.

Stepping up to the counter we checked the posted menu sign as well as checking out the covered food display. Amy grinned and pointed to a rich looking red potato and egg salad and said, “Me want.”

“Of course you do, what else looks good to you?” I asked her.

“Lots of things, but the meatballs smell really good, so a large meatball with mozzarella and a large Italian with provolone and oil and vinegar,” She squeezed my hand and went on, “I'll go get some chips while you order for us, okay?”

I smiled at her and said, “Sure, go crazy, I'll take care of things here,” I turned to the waiting attendant and said, “Good morning, I'd like to order some stuff for a picnic, alright?”

She pulled on a fresh pair of disposable gloves and said, “It's a nice day for it, so what would you like first?”

I pointed to the red potato salad and said, “I'd like a pound of the potato salad please, and a half pound of the pasta salad next to it please.”

She nodded and quickly filled two containers, labeled them and set them on top of the display case before asking, “What else?”

“I'd like two large meatball subs, with mozzarella cheese melted on top. In addition I'd like a large Italian with provolone cheese, oil and vinegar, the last one is a large tuna with lettuce, tomato and provolone cheese. Oh extra mayo please.”

She raised an eyebrow, but simply nodded and started making the tuna sub first, then the Italian and finally the two meatball subs. She carefully wrapped the meatball subs in foil then in paper
before putting them all in a heavy paper bag that had the prices taped on the side.

“Here you go, anything else?”

I looked around for hot drinks, but didn't see any so I asked, “Do you sell hot drinks, like tea or coffee here?”

She nodded and said, “Yes to both, there's a kiosk up by the registers with a nice selection of tea and coffee both.”

“Thanks, we'll get some on the way out then,” I said as I put our food into my basket and went to find Amy.

Something I hadn't noticed before was that Amy showed up in my swarm sense even better than my booster-gulls, but now that we were inside without much swarm nearby, it was extremely apparent precisely where she was. I also noticed that I could access her senses just as easily as I did any other member of my swarm, though it was very clear that it was senses only, without any control at all.

Walking up to her I saw that she was paying for two large cups of tea, honey lemon green for me and a rich ginger green for her, if I was not mistaken. Looking in her basket I saw a bag of Ruffles and a bag of whole grain pretzels, good snacking choices. There was also a bag with a couple of muffins, though I couldn't tell what kind through the plastic bag.

“Got everything?” I asked her.

She gave me a grin over her shoulder and said, “Sure did, you need anything else?”

“Nope,” I said, “let's hit the checkout and then have a bite to eat. I'm starved.”

“Hah! You're a bottomless pit is what you are, I've no idea how your dad can afford to feed you,” she teased me.

“I am an amazing shopper and a better cook. He can't afford to not feed me, he'd starve if he had to eat his own cooking.”

“Hey! Those burgers were really good, he's not completely hopeless you know.”

“Amy, I prepped them and I cooked them. The only thing he did was take them off the stove and put them in the buns. That doesn't count as cooking. If it was up to him the only appliance that would ever get used would be the microwave; he can't even use the toaster without burning everything. Even if it's set on one he'll still manage to burn the toast … somehow. I swear it's like a curse or something.”

At that she started to giggle again as we walked towards the checkout register, prompting me to say, “There's the giggle monster I know and love, I was beginning to think that I'd tired you out or something.”

She bumped my shoulder and said, “Nope, plenty of energy left for the rest of our day. Speaking of which, how far did you plan on going this afternoon?”

“Not sure, at least up to Ocean Drive, possibly all the way to Kingston if things go well, but that's the limit so we can get home at a reasonable hour. By seven at the latest is my plan,” I explained as we placed our purchases on the belt and Amy pulled out her debit card and paid for our lunch.
Stopping by our bikes, we transferred most of our purchases into our packs, though we'd have to carry our tea for the short distance we would need to ride to the park.

When I looked over at Amy, I saw that she had put her cup of tea in wire cup holder attached to her handlebars. “Oh, now that's just cheating!”

She giggled and said, “Nope, that's called planning ahead, not cheating.”

“Hah! Planning ahead, is it? And did you plan for my revenge? Because it will be terrible and swift, and you will never see it coming before it strikes you down.”

Alas, all that did was make her giggle again as she rode off towards the park. Carefully holding my tea, I followed her to the park, not spilling a drop, even as I rode with one hand.

One of the two tables had been taken by a family of locals, since I had seen them as they walked through the park carrying their food and drinks. Deciding to leave the other table open in case they were joined by any others, Amy led me closer to the river's bank where we spread out my blanket and set out our food and drink.

Sitting down next to her, I pulled out a couple of bottles of juice and the dinnerware I had packed and passed her a plate, cup and fork before setting out my own utensils. I separated our sandwiches, giving her the Italian and one of the meatball subs, and setting mine down next to my plate. I opened both the pasta and potato salad containers while she opened the potato chips, but left the pretzels for letter.

We sat next to each other at a slight angle so that we could lean up against each other for support and started to eat, taking our time to enjoy the quite tasty sub sandwiches and salad. While we ate we quietly discussed some of the things we had seen, though much of it was still beyond her sight, since she really couldn't access the swarm's senses easily, certainly not as easily as I could. She did find that with a little practice she could access my senses quite easily, as easily as I could use my swarms senses; I suspected that with time she would find that the greater the intelligence of her target, the easier it would be to use it's senses, much as I had.

The family using the picnic table was joined by another shortly after we sat down and they started using one of the large grills to make burgers and hotdogs to go with the other food they had brought. While the grill heated up and the food was cooking, the younger kids started running around with a couple of frisbees, looking to enjoy the nice Sunday afternoon.

Amy and I had finished almost all of our food, except for the last bit of potato salad and some chips when she spoke up.

“Taylor? I've been watching some of the insects down by the river, and I had an idea. Can you discreetly bring some of them to me?” she asked quietly, “Grasshoppers and dragonflies if you can find some?”

I swallowed my bite of potato salad and said, “Sure, hold out your hand, okay?”

Holding out her left hand, I had one of the grasshoppers land in her hand. A few seconds later she flicked her hand and it flew away towards the river. A small line of dragonflies and grasshoppers, most of them from similar, though different species, discreetly landed on her hand, then moved off when she was done analyzing it. I had no idea what she was looking for, but it was definitely intriguing Amy.

A couple of minutes later I heard her speak silently.
thoughtful “Taylor, I realized that I’d never looked at grasshoppers and dragonflies before, and I wanted to see if they might have some useful differences. And boy do they. Some of the muscle cells are a lot stronger and more efficient than any I’ve seen in mammals; even ours. I’d guess they’re at least five times stronger and faster than ours, and ours are already about four times better than a normal person’s. So, interested in another upgrade?”

excited confused “Are you serious? I thought our muscles were already maxed out?”

pleased “Heh, so did I. I never even thought of building muscle tissue like this. If you’re interested, I’ll set it up like last time, where it will transform over the next five or six days, rather than all at once. That should give us a chance to get used to the changes without ripping the doorknobs off of the doors.”

thoughtful “Well, if it provides the kind of upgrade you think it will, we’ll be looking at what, Brute 4?”

thoughtful “Brute 5 maybe even 6, especially with the defensive mesh upgrade. Because I’m switching to the new type of actuating cells and upgrading the mesh with a new, laminated chitin-like surface, based on the wings of dragonflies, the mesh will be at least twice, possible three times as strong as before.”

I nodded and started to pick up our trash to throw away.

determined “Definitely go ahead with the upgrades, do you need me to touch you to do this or can our new linkage support echoing?”

thoughtful “Hmm, probably, but it’d be really slow. At least 30 minutes just to do one of us; with contact it should be done within ten minutes or so. For both of us.”

determined “Alright then, let me throw this trash away and then we’ll stretch out for a few minutes while you make the upgrades to both of us.”

I picked up my bag of trash and dropped it into the trash can near the picnic tables then dropped down next to Amy, stretching out on the blanket next to her, using my pack as pillow. She managed to surprise me by not taking my hand, but rolling over until she was laying partly on top of me, with her head laying on my shoulder and her left hand holding my right. I used my left arm to pull her even closer, holding her around her waist before closing my eyes and relaxing to take a nap.

Or so it appeared to any external observer. I kept a close eye on our surroundings, especially the people in the park, but used my birds to extend our range quite a ways ahead of where we rested. While I worked at my mapping, I also watched Amy work on our upgrades; she first setup the changes to our muscle tissue, so that it would take a nearly a week to completely change over our muscles. That only took a minute or so for each of us, so she then started to mod all of the connective tissue, the ligaments and tendons and then finally all of the mesh sheathes she had created around our organs, blood vessels and under our skin.

Having already done this once before, and only needing to make some subtle changes to the mesh, it ended up taking a bit less than ten minutes or so to finish upgrading both of us completely. Once she finished that, we both began working on modding the trees along US-1A and for about a half mile inland while we lay there on the blanket, apparently napping after our lunch.
With my help managing the multi-tasking, Amy was able to finish a full 10 mile stretch, plus almost 300 more birds, most of them booster-gulls, with a mix of owls and crows to fill out the numbers in just over half an hour. Most songbirds ended up being too small to be really worth the effort of modding, only allowing an additional 150 feet of range, compared to the 350 feet for a gull or owl. Crows were only good for about 200 to 220 feet, which was about all a tree was good for, so we tried to mod trees every 100 to 150 feet to ensure full coverage, with plenty of overlap.

When we had accomplished as much as seemed possible at that time, Amy started to stretch and sat up as if she had just woken up. I followed suit, sitting up and twisting to stretch out my back before standing up to fold up my blanket.

Packing it away in my backpack, I offered Amy my hand as we headed for our bikes. Nodding at the nearest family, I strapped my pack to the rear luggage rack and turned the bike towards the road. Looking at Amy to be sure she was ready, we pushed our bikes to build up some speed, jumped on the seats and heading out to finish our day trip.

Keeping my booster-gulls stretched out ahead of us, we sped up until we were going at about 25 miles an hour east along US-1A heading for the turn north where it would be renamed Ocean Drive, more commonly called Mansion Avenue.

We passed two gravel pits, both of which seemed to be in current use, though no one was working as it was Sunday. I wondered how this road could support the kind of trucks that would be needed to carry the heavy loads of gravel, so I sent some of my booster-birds out to look around the pits, and found another access road on the far side of pits, one that ran right into a railroad spur that seemed to parallel the coastline.

It only took about half an hour to reach the first of the estates of the rich and famous, well, at least the locally famous. Most of these estates stayed empty 9 or 10 months out of the year, only being maintained by either a local company or one or two caretakers that lived on the estates.

Each of them was walled, though some of them also had large, well maintained hedges to hide the stone walls. Each of the estates had a nameplate either on one of the imposing gateposts or on the even more imposing wrought iron gate itself.

Lord. Costigan. Leach. Mayhew. Lavere. Williamson. Paine. Cashiel. Darrenfeld. Shackleton. Anderson. Pollock. As we passed each estate, I made a cursory scan, looking to see if anyone was home, and checking out as much of the interior as I could. Amy however, was using her phone to take pictures of each gate as souvenirs.

Continuing north, I counted a total of 27 estates, the smallest of which was at least 5 acres and it still had a mansion with 22 rooms, not counting the servant's quarters. I counted them. Only four of them actually had people who seemed to live on them full-time, the caretakers no doubt.

Just before I planned on turning back, I sensed a chained off private road a couple of miles north of us, that seemed to lead back through the woods and around several turns that blocked direct view of the property. My curiosity aroused, I led us down the road until we were about a mile from the private road. I pulled to a stop at a point where the shoulder was in good shape, so we could stop without any danger of being hit by a passing car.

Amy pulled up next to me and slid off her bike so she and I stood next to each other. I poured each of us a cup of juice from my thermos so we had an excuse for stopping there. Holding out my hand I said, “I spotted something a little weird up ahead. Want to check it out with me?”

“Any idea what it is?” she asked me as she took my hand.
“Not really. It seems to be a closed and abandoned mine, but once the access road is out of sight of the main road, it changes from dirt to a well maintained blacktop roadway. I can feel some rodents and insects inside the mine, so I'd like to turn some of the mice and rats into booster-relays so I can explore the mine more thoroughly.”

She nodded and said, “Let’s do it. And … can you make sure I share your swarm senses well enough to see the mine too?”

I smiled and said, “I was already planning on it, it won't be as good as our body senses, but it should work well enough. You won't be able to see much, but I'll try to help you figure out how to meld all of the sensory input into a usable gestalt. And here's the first set of rats and bats for your modification pleasure.”

Amy squeezed my hand and started modding the rats first, quickly followed by the bats. While she did that I had some of my booster-gulls take up station on the ground around the mine which allowed me to use insects and spiders to map out the volume of the mine, though with minimal details. Once I had some rats to check out the ground level and bats to use their sonar to check for openings and such along the ceiling and walls I was able to get a good feel for what was in the mine.

Interestingly enough, after the first turn out of sight of the entrance, I found it closed off with a heavy, tightly sealed metal door. There was no obvious way to open the door from this side, which only aroused my curiosity even more. The whole place didn't look at all like any kind of mine that I had ever imagined or seen pictures of.

Once Amy had finished modding the local rat population, and about 40 of the bats, I had about half of them move into the mine and start exploring, while the other half started exploring the hillside, looking for air shafts, drains or any other access to the mine.

“Heh, I suspect that it'll be a lot easier than you think. After all, you already have a bunch of enhanced and unusual senses; electro-location, acute sense of smell, IR and UV range vision, and so on and so forth. You'll figure out how to interpret the sensory echo, and how to differentiate between each of the senses, though each one will have a different feel to it. And each species and individual will be different as well; two members of the same species will have a similar feel, but not identical.”

“What about odd senses? Like a bat's echolocation? Or … I don't know, a pit viper's heat sense?”

“Alright, let's get you some practice using remote senses. First thing is for you to look through my eyes … we've done it before, but that's way too much for what you want to do. Go on, feel for me use the echo, but you want to use a light touch and feel for the light, just that and nothing more. You'll need to figure out how you interpret the sensory echo, and how to differentiate between each of the senses, though each one will have a different feel to it. And each species and individual will be different as well; two members of the same species will have a similar feel, but not identical.”

“What about odd senses? Like a bat's echolocation? Or … I don't know, a pit viper's heat sense?”

“Yep. Now find a booster-relay that's moving into the mine…slide up to it and feel for one of it's
“Which one should I pick?” she asked me.

“Dealer's choice, but it's easiest if you select the one that's most active; that'll be primary sense and will probably provide the most information. If it's one you're not used to then just take your time and play with it, try different things.”

She nodded and I felt her slide towards a bat that was flying into the mine, though not towards the metal door, I was sending it down a different tunnel, one that led to a boarded up vertical shaft so that it could provide an extension deeper into the mine so I could explore further with the beetles and spiders.

I kept a close eye on Amy while I spread my swarm throughout the mine and along the ground above it. She connected to the bat's echolocation and fumbled for a few seconds before she settled down and began to parse the sensory information.

helpful “Amy, come on back for now. I want you to piggy-back on me and see if you can get an overview from my point of view.”

confused determined “Alright, just give me a moment to echo off of your sense, no that's not quite right...maybe if I...no, that doesn't do anything...hmmm... You know what, I'm gonna take a break here and just sort of snuggle up to you for a while and see what happens.”

I looked over at Amy and said, “Okay, that's different. I'm holding your hand out here, and your nicely snuggled up to me in our linkage. Are you getting anything?”

She gave me a naughty little smile and said, “Comfortable. I'm definitely getting comfortable.”

I smiled back at her and pulled her closer so I could hug her properly and asked her, “This whole mine is pretty weird, do you have any thoughts about this?”

She bit her lip then said, “I don't think it's a mine at all. I think maybe it's an old cold war bomb shelter ... or possibly a storage depot or lair for villains, something like that anyway.”

I nodded and said, “I think you're right. In any event it's not something I need to check out right now. I've got the local spiders and beetles mapping as much of it as I can, though there are several volumes that appear to be completely sealed off. I'll try to build as much of the layout as I can with my mapping program, though I'll probably need at least a basic 3D drawing program to get a good grasp of the layout.”

“I've also got some rats and bats searching the surrounding hills looking for air shafts and drains. Maybe there's another entrance somewhere nearby that we can use to get in. Or not. I'll keep looking anyway,” I explained.

Amy looked at me very seriously and asked me, “What next then?”

I looked around and said, “Let's mod a bunch of trees around the mine and the nearby hills so I can keep an eye on the mine, then we'll head for home, we can make a speed run 'til we get to the bridge, and then slow down so we can work on modding trees on the other side of the river all the way to your house, alright?”

She nodded and once we were finished with the trees that we wanted to mod surrounding the mine, she got on her bike and started heading back the way we had come. I followed her, while
continuing to map the mine area as well as I could, though when I finally approached my max range, I had all of my birds head for the bridge as fast as they could, figuring that I could make sure that they had plenty to eat and some rest once they got there, and before we crossed the river.

--------------------Legion***Amy ***Legion------------------

As I led the way back to the bridge, I used my link with Taylor to scan for booster trees out as far as I could, looking for any gaps that needed to be filled in as we rode. I really didn't find any until we were close to our picnic spot, at which point I had Taylor land a booster-bird in any convenient tree that would fill the gap and echoed through Taylor to install the appropriate mod.

When we approached the turn towards the bridge, I had Taylor take the lead as she made sure her booster-gulls had a chance to eat and rest a bit as we crossed the river. I did manage to mod another 32 of them as we rode over the bridge, since quite a few were roosting underneath in the girders.

Shortly after we crossed the river, she turned east on a side road and led us to a Burger King where she pulled in and parked her bike in bike rack. Turning to me she said, “Potty break. And we should probably grab something to eat before we go much further since we've both been working like mad, both physically and otherwise.”

I nodded and said, “Good idea, I could definitely use both about now.”

Locking up our bikes, we grabbed our packs off of the racks and headed inside to use the bathroom and wash up a bit before getting something to eat.

Not wanting to draw too much attention, we just ordered a couple of double Whopper meals, with fries and onion rings.

Finishing our meals only took a few minutes, so when we exited to continue our ride I was quite surprised to find a group of teens sitting on the bike rack, and one of them was playing around with the tool bag on the back Taylor's bike seat. It was immediately obvious that though I had been surprised, Taylor wasn't since she silently walked up right behind the boy and quite loudly said in his ear, “HEY! Just what do you think you're doing with my bike?”

The poor boy practically jumped out of his skin at her shout, much to the amusement of his friends. “Shit girl, I was just looking, no need to scream in my ear, damnit, that hurt.”

Taylor just rolled her eyes and unlocked the chain from around our front wheels and said, “As Mrs. Diston always used to say in Kindergarten, 'You look with your eyes, not your hands, young man.' Step back please, we need to get our bikes and head for home.”

He looked uncertain for a moment, probably confused by the dichotomy of her first loud shout and her next soft and polite request. Eventually he decided, after a quick look at his friends for moral support, to be a jerk; I just sighed, 'cause there was no way this would end well … for him.

Reaching towards Taylor, like he was going to push her back, he said, “And what if I don't feel like it, girly?”

Just as his hand was about to touch her breast, her left hand, the one not holding her soda, snapped out and grabbed his hand and twisted it around until the boy was forced to his knees.

Taking another sip of soda, Taylor said “Well, I guess that depends on how serious you are about trying to stop us from riding away. Personally, I've been enjoying the day so far, so I'd much prefer
to just continue on our way without any problems. You know, the kind of problems that end up with broken bones and blood on the ground.”

Stepping around the boy on his knees, I pulled my bike back from the rack and then said, “And if it does get to that point, I doubt that I’d be at all interested in putting you back together after she takes you apart.”

One of the other teens quietly said, “‘back together’? Oh hell. Good job, Billy, you just managed piss off Panacea and her friend. Miss, if you wouldn't mind, could you let Billy go, we'll keep him out of your hair, okay?”

Taylor shrugged as she released the boy and said, “That works for me. Enjoy the rest of your weekend.”

Pulling her bike out of the rack, we both mounted our bikes and rode off, Taylor leading the way. I used our linkage to listen in on the teens as we rode away.

“Christ on a crutch Billy, you sure know how to pick ’em, don’t you? It’s probably a good thing that girl didn’t really care about you, one way or another. I just tested for my brown belt and she moved like my sensei does. I’d bet my next month's allowance that she coulda taken us all down without raising as sweat. And that doesn’t even count what Panacea's family woulda done to us if we’d actually managed to hurt her.”

“Shit, ya mean she's a cape too!?”

A different voice, a girl this time, spoke up, “Doubt it, I follow the cape scene pretty close, and unless she’s new, she’s the wrong size for anyone in the Wards or Protectorate and New Wave are all unmasked, so it wasn't one of them.”

The first speaker spoke again, “Like I said, she moved like my sensei does when he's in a full-contact spar; in total control and not at all worried about what you or any of us did. I figure that's why she just used a basic submission hold on you; you aren't anything more than a minor annoyance, certainly not a threat of any kind. And for that, you should count your blessings.”

“Could she have been a villain, like Rune or Purity?”

I heard a contemptuous snort from the girl and then, “On a Sunday bike ride? With Panacea? No chance; New Wave and the Empire have had bad blood between them for years, ever since one of them was killed in her own home. You just had the piss-poor judgement to challenge a high-level martial artist, and got an appropriate smack down for arrogance.”

I snickered and turned the rest of my attention to modifying the trees as we rode along. God, I love using Taylor's multi-tasking, it certainly lets me get a lot more done, even if I can only use a tiny fraction of her ability. Though it's a good thing that one kid seems to have convinced them that Taylor's just a really good martial artist; which she is of course, she's just a lot more than JUST a martial artist. I looked around and thought about where we were and realized that we'd be to my house in less than an hour, quite a bit earlier than I had thought.

Maybe Taylor can hang out for a little while, and then we could even run a strip of modded trees all the way to her house. Which would only leave Arcadia and the hospitals before we had most of the city covered, at least with all the birds that I've already modded. Maybe we can hit the beach for an afternoon and mod a bunch more, so she can properly cover the city.

I connected to Taylor's linkage and said,
hopeful “Hey sweetie, would you like to stay at my house for an hour or so, before heading home?”

pleased “Certainly, if your parents won't mind.”

hopeful “Can't see why they would; Vicky has her friends over all the time. As long as you don't stay too late, it won't be a problem, what with school tomorrow. Though dad will probably invite you to stay for dinner.”

determined “Alright, I'll give Dad a call if I'm going to stay for dinner though. It's not like there aren't leftovers he can nuke, or even pickup some takeaway if he wants to.”

hopeful “Great, I was thinking we could run a strip of mods all the way to your house, maybe at least part way towards Arcadia.”

pleased “Hmm, I don't see why not, as fast as you're getting, I'll bet we can get to both my house and Arcadia in less than an hour, no problem.”

pleased “Sounds good to me. How far are you spreading your mapping, anyway?”

thoughtful “Eh, just over a mile wide, though the modded swath is only about 500 yards wide. I'll need to add in where we've put our tree mods, so we can work on it at our leisure. Well, your leisure really, since you're doing all the hard work.”

excited pleased “Hah! The only time it's actually hard is when I try to do it by myself, and even then it's more boring than anything else, since it takes me forever to try and move a booster-bird to the next tree. When we do it together like this, or even better when we can actually touch, it's much faster and a bit easier since I can do more at once.”

pensive “Hmm, good point. I wonder if we should look into upgrading our personal relays to handle more data across a wider 'band width', that might help with both your range and your control.”

pensive determined “Maybe yes, maybe no. I think, though that I want to look into some shaker powers first, since I have examples in my family to look at. Although, I will have to be careful not to look too closely at the source of powers, since that seems to be the trigger for the migraines, and even though our mods can deal with it, it's not something I want to push too hard without some serious thought going into protective measures.”

thoughtful “Not a problem, I think that's a good idea, and I'll keep researching better power sources to supply any new emulated powers we come up with.”

curious “Any specific directions you're looking at?”

pensive “Not really, though I've got a few ideas. Most of which are semi-dependent on portals or quantum linkages, so I'm doing a LOT of reading and research. Other than that, I'm looking at a couple of tiny energy weapons.”

curious “Like what?”

thoughtful excited “Well, I'm thinking about a switchable UV laser, so you can use it as a
relatively low-powered beam laser, or a much higher-power pulse laser. The other one is a way to direct and fire a high-voltage electrical charge along a laser ionized path. It'll only work in the atmosphere, and I'd be a bit leery of using it in either high humidity or while it's raining, since it'd probably scatter and ground out within a couple of feet. If that.”

cautious “That's what that test platform is for, right?”

cautious thoughtful “Pretty much. I think we've gone as far as we can with purely organic electrical generation, and I've got a complete set of notes on all of it's limitations and advantages so we can install the best possible system for our personal use. At least until I figure out how to make one of my 'blue sky' ideas actually work. I really don't want to get caught up in trying to twist our powers into handling this, because I think it has a good chance of screwing us up pretty bad.”

worried cautious “No kidding. I can think of at least a half a dozen issues, right off the top of my head. If I can come up with that many right off the bat, there's probably ten times as many that I haven't even thought of.”

I heard a giggle from Taylor before she went on,

amused cautious “Yeah, at least that many. I'd much rather have a solid grasp of what we're trying to do BEFORE we attempt to install it. That's the main reason I came up with the test platform in the first place; make our mistakes there instead of inside our bodies.”

I laughed at that as well, then said,

excited cautious “Believe me, you've got my vote for that; nothing that I've done so far is actually hard, it's only when we step outside what can be done with normal biology that it gets risky. Like, the human body isn't really designed to generate and store large amounts of electricity, so working out the kinks before we install those kinds of mods is only common sense. The same goes for things like force fields, flying or pocket dimensions; those abilities are way outside what normal biology can accomplish, so we need to figure out how to work outside the box … way outside the box.”

amused “Box? We don' need no stinkin' box.” Taylor said the last in a man's voice with a fake Mexican accent, before Amy's giggles caused her to laugh as well. After a few minutes of tension-relieving laughter, Taylor went on.

thoughtful worried “I've got a couple of ideas about that, but I'm reaching the end of what the public library can help me with; which is just one more reason I need to get into college, to gain access to more advanced books and research, and possibly bounce ideas off of some other people, though I'm VERY leery about doing that.”

cautious “No kidding, I can't honestly think of anyone other than you that I would trust enough to talk around the edges of these kinds of topics with, to say nothing of exploring them in depth.”

She sighed and said,

worried “I know. But I also know that I'm going to need some help, even if it's just with brainstorming. I just can't see how to do it safely, is all.”
determined “Me either, but we’ll come up with something,” I looked around more closely and went on,

curious “Hey, just how far are we from my house anyway?”

curious “Eh, about a mile or so, why?”

pleased “I hadn't realized we were that close is all. We made really good time, didn't we?”

pleased “Oh sure, there isn't much traffic on the roads we took, and most people have no clue how to judge the speed of a bicyclist, nor what is a reasonable speed, so we've been moving at about 35 miles an hour, which is a lot faster than most people can reach, much less maintain for any significant distance. I suppose professional bicycle racers could do as well, but then we haven't been pushing it, have we? I suspect we could hit at least 50 miles per hour without trying too hard, though it would probably be hard on our bikes, since they aren't really designed to go that fast. I figure 35 to 40 miles an hour should be safe for us to maintain around town.”

curious worried “Yeah, that's a bit faster than I had realized we were going, that's all. Do you think we could have damaged the bikes by riding that fast?”

cautious pleased “Not really, I was keeping an eye on the tires to make sure that they didn't get too hot and cause a blow out. I will say that I plan on replacing both my tires and inner tubes before summer gets here since they are more than a little bit old, with similar wear and tear. Still, they're in very good shape for their age. And yours are even better.”

We slowed down even more as we turned into my neighborhood and I slipped ahead of Taylor so that if anyone was watching, they'd see me bringing her home, and not the other way around. Of such things are expectations assumed and met, without actually meaning a damn thing. Taylor not only knew where I lived, she had a much better and clearer idea of how to get to and from anywhere in the city. Not to mention whether or not there were any problems or dangers ahead of us, which I found to be of great comfort.

Turning into my driveway, I carefully led Taylor past the cars and to the gate leading into the backyard. Dismounting, we walked our bikes into the backyard and leaned them against the fence, before unstrapping our packs and heading into the house. I led her into the kitchen and called out, “Hey all, we're back; is everyone home?” Even though I could clearly hear that mom and dad were watching a movie downstairs and Vicky was upstairs in her room, being quiet so I figured she was probably reading one of her books, as she had told me she was caught up on her homework.

Dad came to the bottom of the stairs and called up, “Yeah, we're all home. Is that Taylor with you?”

I looked down at him and said, “Yep. We're going upstairs to see Vicky and rest up for a bit. Do you need anything before we scoot?”

He shook his head and said, “No, we're good down here. Dinner will be at six, and Taylor is more than welcome to stay if she'd like.”

I glanced back at Taylor and got a thumbs up, so called back, “Sounds good all around, we'll see you in about an hour then, alright?”

Dad just waved as he turned back to the movie he and mom were watching, so I led Taylor up to
As I walked in I saw the school things I had dumped out and blushed at my carelessness, but quickly scooped them up and stacked them on my desk, while dropping my backpack on the floor next to my desk. “Go ahead and drop your bag next to mine while I let Vicky know that we're back, okay? Go ahead and get comfortable on the bed, I'll be back in a minute.”

Slipping though our shared bathroom, I stuck my head in Vicky's room and greeted her, “Hey sis, Taylor and I are back and are going to chill until dinner time. Just so you know, dad invited Taylor to eat tonight, though I've no idea what he's got planned, so I guess we'll just have to wait and see.”

Vicky looked up from her AP Psych textbook and said, “I've no idea either, though I suspect it'll be something pretty simple, since he and mom are still watching a movie. He might even just order pizzas or Chinese since it's just family.”

I smiled at that and said, “Thanks Vicky. I'll let you get back to your studying then.” It felt really nice knowing that Vicky thought about Taylor that way, even though we hadn't been dating that long.

----------------------Legion*** Taylor ***Legion----------------------

Looking at Amy's bed, I didn't even hesitate in taking off both my shoes and socks so I wouldn't get any of the road dirt on her bedspread. Amy took one look at me and said, “Oh yeah, that's a great idea,” before turning back into the bathroom and fetching two wet washcloths for us to use, “here hold these for a sec, while I take off my shoes.”

Shooing me towards the head of the bed, she pulled off her socks and shoes, before she settled on the bed facing me, grabbed one of the washcloths, plopped her feet in my lap and pulled mine into hers before starting to carefully wash them. I was actually frozen for a moment at the casual intimacy of the act, before I began to reciprocate. Sliding her pants leg up her calf, I carefully washed her foot, taking particular care with her toes, since it was obvious she was totally ticklish around them. I took my time with both of her feet, so that not only were they both clean, but also well relaxed after the long day of bike riding.

When we had both finished, Amy collected the washcloths and dropped them into the hamper before returning. She stopped and looked over her bookshelves and asked, “Sweetie, come over and take a look at my books and see if any of them interest you.”

I slipped off the bed and joined her at her bookshelf and started reading the spines. I immediately noticed the large selection of Sci-Fi and Fantasy books, with the occasional Historical and Romance novels and a tiny selection of children's books. Probably her favorites from her childhood.

As I scanned the titles I found quite a few that I recognized and had already read, when I came across a couple by an author my dad had mentioned a couple of months ago. Pulling one out, I showed it to Amy and asked, “How's this one? My dad mentioned it, but I haven't found it in any of the used books stores I frequent, so … can we read this one?”

Amy looked at it and said, “Oh yeah, that's one of my all-time favorites. Let me grab another one in case you don't like this one, alright?” As soon as she finished speaking she grabbed a second book and led me back to her bed; pushing me to the far side, she fluffed up her pillows and lay down next to me and wriggled around until she comfortable, with one of her legs twined around mine and her foot pressed against mine. Opening the book she held it so we could both see the pages and we started to read …
THAT DINKUM THINKUM

I

I see in Lunaya Pravda that Luna City Council has passed on first reading a bill to examine, license, inspect--and tax--public food vendors operating inside municipal pressure. I see also is to be mass meeting tonight to organize "Sons of Revolution" talk-talk.

My old man taught me two things: "Mind own business" and "Always cut cards." Politics never tempted me. But on Monday 13 May 2075 I was in computer room of Lunar Authority Complex, visiting with computer boss Mike while other machines whispered among themselves. Mike was not official name; I had nicknamed him for Mycroft Holmes, in a story written by Dr. Watson before he founded IBM. This story character would just sit and think--and that's what Mike did. Mike was a fair dinkum thinkum, sharpest computer you'll ever meet …

Amy and I lay in her bed reading The Moon is a Harsh Mistress, the same book that dad had told me about months ago, and he was right … it was an amazing story, especially since it had been written nearly 50 years ago, long before powers had appeared on our world and everything changed. It took us about two pages to synchronize our reading speed so that we were both reading at a comfortable rate, even as we also started modding trees along a fairly wide swath headed more or less directly to my house.

After about 5 miles, we started a spur headed towards Arcadia, so that we would be able to reach each other even during school hours if something important came up; you know, like what Amy would like for dinner, or if she wanted to go see a movie. Important stuff.

We reached Arcadia first, so I simply kept going towards one of the hospitals that she regularly pulled shifts at, figuring that we might as well get as much done while we had such a perfect opportunity. I hoped that we would have enough time to do at least part of the docks and along the boardwalk, but realistically it was going to have to wait until we had another opportunity like this one.

We had reached the point in Chapter 5 where they realized that they really could plan out a revolution when Vicky slipped into Amy's room.

“Oh, you two are hopeless. You had the perfect opportunity to get up to all sorts of naughtiness, and what do you do? You read a book. Hopeless, utterly hopeless. At this rate I'm never gonna get any nieces to spoil,” she grabbed the hair on both sides of her head and melodramatically shook her head back and forth, crying, “I was counting on you Taylor, you're my only hope for getting any kids outta Ames and now here I find you all snuggled up to my sister in her own bed, and what are you doing? Reading. While fully clothed.”

She slumped to the floor and looked at us with a tragic look on her face and said, “It's just not fair. I put all this effort into getting Amy hooked up, only to find that she likes girls, and she even found her own girlfriend without any help or input from her favorite sister,”

“Only sister,” Amy interjected.

“and she'd rather read a book then give me nieces to spoil! Oh woe is me! Where did I go wrong?
What horrible crime did I commit in a previous life to curse me so?"

Her dad, who'd been watching her from the open door spoke up, “It was probably because of all those times you woke us up early on Christmas morning.”

“ACK! What are you doing here dad?” Vicky asked in surprise.

“I'm not quite sure, but I think I'm watching my eldest daughter have a nervous breakdown over her younger sister not providing nieces to spoil while said younger sister is still in high school. Which, I might add, is something I heartily approve of; the waiting that is. Nieces can wait until after college, and as far as I'm concerned, nephews can wait even longer.”

By this point, both Amy and I were clutching each other for support as we giggled at the silliness that had slipped into the room while we were quietly reading together.

“Well, Vicky's obsessions notwithstanding, I thought I'd let you know that we ordered a variety of pizzas and they'll be here any minute, so you should all wash up and come on down to have a bite to eat. Vicky, you lucked out tonight since you have cleanup.”

Vicky pumped her fist in the air and said, “YES! Easiest cleanup ever, consolidate the leftovers and empty the trash and I'm done!”

Amy sat up and gave me a hand to help me off the bed and led me into the bathroom where we washed our faces and hands before heading downstairs. Vicky joined us a minute later as we all took seats around the table and selected slices of pizza from the boxes on the table and put them on our paper plates. It was pretty obvious that in the Dallon household, pizza night was ultra-casual, with the intention of keeping everything simple and easy. Truthfully, it was a policy I could get used to since I handled all of the cooking and cleaning at our house.

Amy handled most of the conversation, even as she and I gently played footsie under the table. I picked up the conversation whenever Amy wanted to eat some pizza, so I described our route, though I didn't mention that we had made it all the way to the end of Ocean Drive, instead I gave the impression that we had turned around after our picnic lunch.

Because of the short amount of time I had left before I would have to leave to get home at a reasonable hour, Amy and I shifted to a much narrower swath leading to the two other hospitals and down along the docks. There were a lot fewer trees, so we needed to use booster-birds to cover the gaps until we could get to more trees. We also silently agreed to look into figuring out a way to cover those gaps, maybe in the sewers or just underground using ant colonies or something similar to provide a micro-ecosystem to support the relays.

By the time everyone had finished eating, Vicky didn't have enough leftovers to even fill a single box, which was apparently not the norm. Both Amy and I shamefacedly admitted that the long ride had given us both ravenous appetites, so we'd sort of pigged out on the pizza.

We helped Vicky with cleaning up from dinner so it only took a couple of minutes before we headed back upstairs.

When we got to Amy's room, Vicky followed up in and took a seat at the desk.

“So you two really rode almost completely around the city? And you really think that's fun? Ames, I always thought I was the brawn while you were the brain; when did it all change?” she plaintively asked.

I sat on the bed and started to put my socks and shoes back on while Amy answered her sister. “A
few months ago, after mom had that hissy fit in Canberra about me working myself into exhaustion with all the healing,” she smiled at me and went on, “and after I healed Taylor, I did a lot of reading on physical therapy and controlled recovery from surgery and other injuries. I used a lot of that to help Taylor with her recovery and it just seemed natural to do the same types and amounts of exercise as I was having Taylor do.”

“Huh. I guess that makes sense,” she looked at me as I finished tying my shoes and said, “well, I'm gonna get back to my studying for my AP exam, I've only got a couple weeks to go, sooo…back to work I go.”

Standing up she stretched and headed for the door, calling back over her shoulder, “If Taylor needs a ride home, let me know and I'll drive her, 'kay?”

I told her as she walked through the door, “I'll be riding my bike home, so I'll have to leave shortly. Thanks for the offer, though.”

Vicky just waved at us as she headed for her room, leaving the door wide open. I cocked an eyebrow at Amy and asked, “House rules?” while pointing at the door.

“Yep. It has to be at least partly open when a girlfriend or boyfriend is in the room, to 'Reduce Temptation' as dad put it,” she giggled and went on, “’cause he claims that as teens, nothing short of Armageddon would actually eliminate Temptation, and I dare say he's right.”

I slid closer and hugged her, burying my face in her hair which she had released from it's braid when we got washed up for dinner. Enhanced senses for the win! The scent of her hair was wonderful, almost intoxicating in it's richness. After a minute or so I sighed and sat back up.

“I love being with you and I hate leaving, but I've got to get home so dad doesn't worry. I'll text you when I get home, alright?” I used finger quotes when I said text, so she'd know I meant with our new communication mod.

TAYLOR: I'll see how well I can keep an eye on you while I'm riding, if you don't mind?

AMY: No problem, and I'll do the same to see if I improve at using the linkages without your direct help.

TAYLOR: Try to follow the booster-birds, pick one out and work on both using it's senses and locating it within the city. You can even use a map and see how close you can pin it down. Feel free to ask if you need any suggestions or clarifications.

AMY: I will, oh yeah, I meant to give you the modded spiders I made earlier, but sort of forgot. I'll get 'em now, okay?

TAYLOR: Sure. They can't breed right? I'll set them up in an isolated section of the lair for now. Once we have a more secure location I'll transfer them and we can start breeding them. The description you gave me sounds really good, though we may want to tweak them carefully before we let them breed, and I want to be sure to prevent any possibility of free-breeding. Either under my direct control or using queens that are geographically limited. Maybe both methods at the same time.

TAYLOR: I definitely want to be able to keep the PRT from freaking out if they spot any of them so we might want to make them primarily subterranean, but have them work with ants or another species in some sort of symbiotic relationship. We'll have to see how it goes.
Grabbing our packs, Amy pulled the plastic containers holding the modded spiders and slid them in next to the mostly empty thermos. She paused for a moment and then put a paperback in as well, though not the one we’d been reading. Handing me my pack, she sighed and stood up.

“I suppose we might as well head out now, it's not like it'll get any easier to leave, will it?”

I shook my head and said, “No, not really. Though I think being able to link to each other and talk whenever we want to will help,” I swung my pack over one shoulder and followed her downstairs and out to where we'd left our bikes.

As I strapped my pack onto the rack, Amy took my water bottle and refilled it from the outside tap and slipped it back into the holder before stepping closer and leaned up into my kiss. This time we weren’t in a hurry or being watched by anyone so we took our time and just enjoyed it. Especially since just touching each other could be an act of the closest intimacy, to be able to kiss at our leisure and simply enjoy it was … wonderful!

Eventually, we had to back away and calm down a bit, so Amy and I walked my bike out to the street, before sharing one more kiss, though a more chaste goodbye kiss than the one we had shared in the privacy of the backyard.

Mounting my bike, I quickly built up speed and headed for home. I used my swarm to keep an eye out for any oncoming traffic or pedestrians that might be a problem, while at the same time looking back to Amy's house where I brought a number of squirrels and birds in to act as sentries for a couple of blocks around her house. I was hoping that with practice, I'd be able to simply leave a 'sub-swarm' on guard 24/7, that would actually notify me of anything out of the ordinary, even waking me if necessary. For now though, I'd be happy if they stayed fairly close by and some stayed awake at all times without my direct control.

Once I was reasonably satisfied with my set up, I looked ahead to my house and began the same type of guard around my neighborhood. When I checked up on dad, it was apparent that he had picked up some fast food after he'd finished with doing the grocery shopping. Ugh, MacDonald's again. If he wanted a burger so bad, I'd start making up some patties and keep them in the freezer for the rare nights that I didn't cook.

Even as I rode for home, I stretched out into my swarm, expanding my awareness along all of the paths that Amy had made for me, carefully exploring the underground of the city, and especially across the river. The mine was interesting enough, but it's proximity to all of those mansions and the numerous inlets to the ocean made me curious to see if perhaps some of those mansions had been used for smuggling during prohibition or even earlier. The possibilities of secret tunnels and storerooms from 80 or 100 years ago still being available was something that I just couldn't ignore.

I sent twenty booster-gulls across the river to join up with the network there, while bringing the owls into the city to roost in some of the larger parks. The crows were scattered near the gaps in the Docks so I would have plenty of extras if I needed them while patrolling.

One of the advantages of the gulls was that they could land on the water so I could use fish and crustaceans to explore any submerged or partially submerged tunnels. If I found much of interest underwater, it might be worth our while to modify a number of crabs or lobsters, since I could easily keep mine well fed, and well away from any traps.

I exchanged a few texts with Amy as I rode, partly because we could and partly to test my multi-tasking outside using my swarm. I also worked through most of the options available in my menu system, looking for any new changes, safely rode my bike, tested my systems, texted with Amy, and did some reviewing for my upcoming tests and explored the city.
Not surprisingly, exploring the city with my swarm was by far the easiest to do, while the most difficult was to recall books I had read previously and to re-read them, page by page. Even with all of that being done at the same time, none of what I did was particularly difficult, nor did I feel like any single task was being shorted my attention. Clearly my power's ability to multi-task wasn't even close to being challenged; in fact it felt as if I was getting better at it the more I used it, as was Amy.

When I finally got home, I parked my bike in the backyard, and with a glance at the sky, I pulled the blue tarp over the bike to protect it from the rain I thought might start tonight or tomorrow morning. Picking up my pack, I entered through the kitchen and with a disapproving look at the food wrappers on the table, I went looking for dad.

As I expected, I found him resting in the living room, sipping a beer as he watched tv before getting ready for bed.

“Hey Dad, I'm home safe and sound and Amy said hi!”

Looking up from 60 Minutes, he said, “Good, I hope you two had a good time on your bike ride.”

I stopped behind his chair and leaned over and kissed his bald spot before saying, “Oh we did, we covered quite a bit of distance and had a picnic on the other side of the river before we headed back. Amy's dad invited me to dinner, so I ate there before heading home. I'd like to do it again this summer, maybe even plan out a week or so for a bike/camping trip; I think that'd be a lot of fun.”

Dad twisted around in his seat enough to see me and said, “Yeah, that does sound like it would be a lot of fun, hard work too, but fun. Go ahead and start planning it so you can work out details with Amy, assuming that is, that she's interested.”

“I will, though I'm going to grab a shower and get ready for bed now. I'll be down in a while to do some studying for my GED before I crash for the night,” I said as I climbed the stairs.

It only took me a few minutes to sort out my backpack and grab clean clothes for after my shower, so I was able to get cleaned up and ready for bed just as 60 Minutes was ending. As usual, Dad was watching another of his cop shows, this one was an Earth-Aleph import called CSI: Miami. It was sort of okay, but pretty unrealistic if you asked me; the original one set in Las Vegas seemed a little less, over-the-top I guess. I actually preferred NCIS or Criminal Minds if I had to watch a cop show, but I could study while it was on without being terribly distracted, so if it made Dad happy that was good enough for me.

Taking my AP Psych text book and book on High-Energy physics from the shelves, I lay down on the sofa and started reading the physics book while reviewing both my GED Study Guide and AP Psych Exam Guide. As was becoming my norm, I also worked though a long series of math problems of ever-increasing complexity and difficulty. Really, I was far beyond what was needed for my GED, and was hopefully going to get advanced placement in Math when I started college in the fall.

Finally Dad wrapped up for the evening after CSI: Miami finished, cleaning up his trash and putting his mug in the sink before he sat down and addressed me, “Taylor, did you have any firm plans for tomorrow?”

I looked up from my book and said, “Uh, not really. Just my usual housework and studying is all. I do want to run some of my chemistry experiments again, but I can put them off if I need to. Why, did something come up while I was gone?”
“Ah, not while you were gone, no, but last week I got a call from Miss Militia, giving me a heads up on their plans for Winslow … she asked that I not tell you until this weekend, just in case something came up to cause a delay with their plans. I guess she didn't want you to be disappointed if something happened or if they had to skip the big raid and go with quiet arrests. Anyway, the plan is to drop the hammer on Winslow tomorrow morning, using both the police and school board at the same time; are you going to be okay with everything being brought back up?”

I sat upright and looked at him for a moment while I thought about how I felt about that, the idea that Winslow was actually going to be held accountable for all of the abuse that I had been subjected to … I guess I felt vindicated, that justice might actually be properly served.

I nodded at him and said, “I'm glad, even if it's taken a while for the police to be able act; I'm just glad that something's finally going to happen. Although, why would Miss Militia be the one to call you, and not the police?”

He looked a little embarrassed, as well as a bit frustrated, “Several reasons; first of all she and Armsmaster both feel responsible for causing your panic attack and heart attack, so she was determined not to let anything derail the investigation, plus the PRT has the clout to ensure that everyone who was questioned would in fact keep silent about the investigation, until they were ready to serve the warrants. Secondly, with all of the gang activity at Winslow, especially with what's been going on with the ABB lately, the PRT and Protectorate are going to do everything they can to ensure that there is no cape interference with any part of the operation.”

“Ah, I see. No last gasps from the ABB or with E88 trying to take advantage of the ABB's current troubles. That actually makes sense,” I agreed after taking a moment to think about it. “Did she say anything about Hess?”

He shook his head and said, “Not recently, though when I first met her right after your heart attack, she told me that Hess was in custody, and would remain so for a long time,” he paused to look at me carefully, before continuing. “Umm, you do know about her being…SS, right?”

I stood up and paced around the room, until I got my temper back under control and said, “Yes, and I know that I can't tell anyone about it, too. I actually figured it out the day I had my heart attack; in fact, realizing who she was is what caused the heart attack.”

I sighed, then went on, “Amy was the one who pointed out why I couldn't tell anyone about Hess' secret ID, at least not unless the PRT said that it was okay. I do understand that it's to protect innocents like her family and friends, not that I think any of HER friends could be considered innocent, but I guess … Anyway, in the end, I think it's turned out well for me; after all, that's how Amy and I met, isn't it?”

Dad smiled weakly and agreed, “Yes it is, though I just wish there had been a less traumatic way for you to meet. Anyway, the reason I brought this up is that Miss Militia asked if you could spend the day with me at work, so that you would be safely unavailable to any reporters or people looking for information or even revenge.”

I grinned at him and asked, “Sort of a 'Bring Your Daughter To Work Day' in an unofficial sort of way?”

He chuckled and agreed, “Just for you, though. I doubt that any reporters would look for you there, and even if they did, they'd never get past our friends to hassle you.”

I giggled back and said, “No kidding, the Association is probably the safest place in the city for me to hang out for the day. I'll bring a bunch of books to study from, so I'll stay on schedule, and
maybe we can have lunch together, I can bring some leftovers and …"

Dad broke interrupted me, “Or maybe I could take you out for lunch instead. We haven't done that for I while, and I think it might be a nice change,” he offered with a lifted eyebrow.

I gave him a big smile and said, “Thank you, I think that would be lovely. I'll let you decide where to go, alright?”

“My pleasure, Tay-Tay; and with that, I'm going to head for bed,” he stepped up to me and gave me a firm and comforting hug, one that seemed to last forever before he walked upstairs and went to bed, closing his door quietly for the night.

I stood there for a few minutes while I thought about dad's surprising news and tried to put it all perspective. Finally I nodded and picked up my books and put them back on the shelf and cleared away the minor clutter around the living room and headed for the kitchen.

I checked the freezer but had to go downstairs to get a couple of packages of whole chicken breasts that I would thaw out overnight in the fridge for our dinner tomorrow night. I put both the large and small slow cookers on the counter, laid out most of the non-food items I would need to make dinner, finished loading the dishwasher and started it running.

I stared around the kitchen pensively, trying to decide if I should stop for the night or get a few things done while it was still fairly early. I finally decided to get a head start with some of my normal chores, since I wasn't going to be around the house to do them like I normally did.

Alright, first thing is to start on laundry. If I start now, the noise won't wake dad up when I have to get his dirty laundry hamper. Once I have the first load running I'll start on the bread dough: the kitchen will be cool enough to slow the rising down until I come on back down to start the soup and the chicken breasts.

I trotted upstairs and knocked on dad's bedroom door, softly calling out, “Dad? Are you still awake? I need your laundry hamper, I'm getting a head start on tomorrow's chores.”

I could hear him moving around, no doubt adding a few things to the hamper, then he spoke up, “Alright Tay-Tay, here you go,” just before he opened his door and handed out his hamper, “don't stay up too late, you still need to get some sleep, even if it's less than me these days.”

I took his hamper and said with a smile, “Thanks dad, I'll only be an hour or so before I go to bed, and I bet I'm still up way before you are.”

He blew a raspberry at me and said, “That's a sucker bet if I ever heard one, find someone else to run your scams on, I'm on to your tricks.”

“Only some of them, Dad, I've been saving my best for later on, so I guess you're safe for now.”

He smiled at that and gave me a little wave as he closed his door. I set the hamper down by the stairs and fetched my hamper and the used towels out of the bathroom before carrying both full hampers down to the basement.

Sorting and starting the first load only took a couple of minutes, and I went back to the kitchen and started making my usual extra-large batch of bread dough. Once I had everything ready and rising, I transferred and started my next load of laundry and brought the picnic blanket down to be added to my load of towels.

I emptied the dishwasher, put away the clean dishes and loaded the few dirty items I had from
prepping the bread dough. After a last look around, I set my alarm and went to bed for a nap.

Though it wasn't too late, I hesitated to text Amy in case she was asleep when I realized that as soon as I turned my attention to Amy using our linkage, it was obvious that she was awake and aware.

**TAYLOR:** Hey Amy, guess what?

**AMY:** What, did you figure out something new?

**TAYLOR:** I think so. When I thought about texting you, I wasn't sure if you were asleep or not, but as soon as I actually thought about writing the text, I could tell that you were awake and active. Pretty cool, huh?

**AMY:** Yeah, it is … I don't think it's a part of the communication mod, but is part of how your linkages work. Earlier today I noticed some emotional overtones when we texted as well as when we were speaking, I'm not 100% sure it's the linkages, so we'll have to do some experiments to settle the question. Personally, I'm betting on the linkages, not the comm’s.

**TAYLOR:** Hmm … yeah, I think that you're right. It feels a little bit like when we are doing the full linkage, remember? Not exactly like that, 'cause it's not as rich and powerful, but still, it feels similar. Anyway, what I actually wanted to talk about is that Dad asked me to go into work tomorrow.

**AMY:** Why? Is there something wrong, a problem of some kind?

**TAYLOR:** No, the complete opposite. Miss Militia called him and asked him to keep me with him tomorrow because the Police Department, PRT and the Protectorate are all involved in a major operation tomorrow morning.

**TAYLOR:**

**AMY:** Well, don't tease me like that, tell me what kind of an operation is going down, and can I tell anyone about it?

**TAYLOR:** Apparently they are all dropping the Hammer of God on Winslow. They've got a bunch of warrants that going to be served on a big chunk of the faculty and staff. I bet you'll be able to hear screams and crying all the way to Arcadia. It's going to be EPIC!

**AMY:** Are you going to watch?

**TAYLOR:** I can't, I have to stay with my Dad; no one would dream of letting me go to Winslow, just so I could watch the fun.

**AMY:** Oh, don't you even try and pretend that you're not going to be watching every second of well-deserved misery and pain that drops on them, from a great and terrible height.

**TAYLOR:** giggle Oh, God, it's going to be AWESOME!! Want to watch with me?

**AMY:** I wish I could, but there's no way your dad would let me skip school just so we could hang out like that. I mean, he's really cool and all, but that would be pushing it a bit too far.
TAYLOR: No doubt that's true; but then again, I wasn't thinking about asking permission, I was planning on cheating.

AMY: SERIOUSLY!? Do you think it'll work? Of course it'll work. Oh wait, we don't even have a relay path going to Winslow.

TAYLOR: Not yet, we don't. But I do have a whole bunch of booster-birds that you so thoughtfully modded for me. And I bet we could put a bunch of relay trees in before breakfast. Even with sleeping for a few hours first.

AMY: Oh, hell yes! Let's go for it.

TAYLOR: I'm moving a bunch of booster-birds that way as we speak, so let's see what we can see. I've got an owl with a relay booster headed that way now, and I'm using it's eyes as we speak, so follow the link and let's practice sharing it's eyes.

Interestingly enough, even though the way we communicated came across as texting, it was so fast to create each text, it was more like talking than typing. There was no virtual keyboard or similar interface; simply wanting to write something was enough to have it appear on the mental screen. The big difference was that there didn't seem to be any emotional overtones, like there were when were speaking and the texts were saved like an online chat log, at least they seemed to be. I'd check later to see if I could pull up one of the earlier ones tomorrow or the day after.

--------------------Legion*** Amy ***Legion-------------------

I was lying in bed, just relaxing and enjoying the memories of our awesome road trip today. I was pondering what that mine really was, and I was thinking that it had started out as a mine, and over the years the various owners had upgraded and modified it to suit their needs.

It was just about 11:30 when I felt Taylor's attention sharpen on me. I had felt her all evening, the same way I could feel her when we sharing a sofa or laying down while watching tv; not doing anything in particular, just the comfortable knowledge that she was nearby.

But it was different when she turned her attention on me; she wasn't trying to eavesdrop or look over my shoulder. I just knew that she was now actively paying attention to me. A moment's thought showed that I could do the same thing with her. This had to be because of our greatly expanded network of relay-boosters, not an active use of our powers.

A moment later Taylor began texting with me, explaining what was going to happen tomorrow morning. And she was so right, it was going to be AWESOME!

Finding the right bird, even knowing that it was one of the few booster equipped owls, felt like a nearly impossible task until Taylor took my hand, metaphorically speaking, and showed me the correct echo and then let me touch the owl and begin finding my way to it's senses as I slowly learned how to make them a part of my own senses.

While I worked on that, Taylor wordlessly asked my permission to use my senses and gave me her permission to use hers.

Finally I was able to blend with the owl's senses, especially it's vision, allowing me to see what it could see, hear what it could hear and smell what it could smell just as easily as if I were floating there in mid-air.
I could feel Taylor, right here, she was holding me close, keeping me safe, letting me do all the work of finding and holding us together,

Amy, go ahead and try to direct the owl to fly to it's left … NO! Don't try to make the wings move or anything, you're not CONTROLLING it, all you need to do is sort of 'want' to go left. Leave everything else up to the owl.

Oooh! That's how you do it, I had no idea that it was so easy the way you do it. But so powerful, too. You don't CONTROL your swarm, you ARE your swarm. It's so beautiful …

I see what you mean now … he knows how to fly, how to maneuver, I just have to give him the desire to move in that direction. I never really analyzed how you controlled your swarm, you just did it. That makes it easier for me then, let's not make it any harder than it has to be …

I know, right? It's the exact same thing when you're using your power to make mods or heal an injury … so much of it is LETTING the changes happen, you provide the desire, the intention to change, all you have to do is … let it go … You just need to watch as the changes happen, just the way you WANT.

Umm, Taylor this is a little bit off topic, but I don't want to forget this. I think most capes just let their powers do ALL the work, maybe they can learn new tricks, but really all they are doing is getting a little better at their old tricks. Even a Second Trigger is just more of the same, writ large.

But you and I, I suspect that we are actually doing something very different; we're always studying, learning new things and new ways to do old things … it's like you told me that one time; I'm in high school, but I'm studying advanced biology and genetics, and then comparing what I see with my power to what I'm learning by studying, and that seems to be why we can not only do more than anyone else could with our powerset, but we can go beyond our powerset.

Exactly, we are NOT our power; we are more than that, better than that. I'm Taylor and you're Amy, and especially when we are like this … we are so much MORE!

Oh wow! I just realized that we're almost doing our full joining, although without physical contact it seems to be both a lot easier and yet much less powerful and rich. Amy, keep the link to the owl nice and solid, but let's you and I sort of step back slightly … not much, just enough so we can see what we are doing with the other echoes a little better.

Okay, I think you're right, just easing back a tiny bit should let us get a better feel about where we want to go.

One

Two

Three

ahhhhhh

pleased “Cool.”

curious determined “Definitely. Alright then, let's see if you can place a mod in this tree right outside Winslow.”

curious “Can you land a booster-bird in the branches for me?”
puzzled “Probably, but why? There's a couple of squirrels and birds sleeping in the branches already, try using one of them as a target and then jump to the tree.”

surprise “I can just do that!?”

curious “Won't know until you try, will you? But I don't see why not; just go for it.”

I shifted my focus, sliding down the linkage to the echo I wanted, a sleeping squirrel and sort of flowed through the squirrel into the tree. A moment's concentration, and the structure and substance of the tree began moving, following a pattern that I had followed thousands of times before … success!

I started to move back along the linkage towards my Taylor but then stopped, I didn't need to go back to the beginning to find a new echo… I could move forward from here.

And I did. I could feel Taylor holding me close, her soft breath in my ear, but she wasn't doing the directing, she was leaving it all up to me. She was just along for the ride, enjoying the opportunity to see and feel everything as I made the changes, to watch me figure out a new and amazing way to use my abilities that my power had never known how to do. God, did that feel good … oh … ooh … ooh my goD!

With a gasp I was laying in my bed, shaking and breathing in little gasps, trying to catch my breath … And … oh God, I think I just … with Taylor … I think that … together we … I'm drenched …

I grabbed my pillow and covered my face to hide my blush.

afraid “Amy, are you okay? You completely dropped out of our linkage, at least this time it didn't hurt, but …”

afraid afraid “Amy? Answer me please, you're beginning to scare me! Amy, please talk to me. I can feel you, something happened to you, but I can't read you now …”

terror despair loneliness “AMY!! Where are you?!”

My embarrassment from so unexpectedly … oh god, I was just … and then …

Then all I could feel was terror – terror and grief, a grief to drown the world – what happened? Where is my linkage!? Where is TAYLOR?!

Oh my God, TAYLOR!!!

I fumbled for a moment, trying to activate our comm mod, then suddenly … afraid relief “TAYLOR!! Where are … Oh thank God, there you are …”

I could barely hear her, her voice inside my head was a soft trembling whisper,

terror despair loneliness grief terror “Amy? Is that you?… are you real? Oh God, please be real, please be real, don't leave me, please don't leave, please don't, be real, please be real, please pleaseplease …”

Her voice was so soft and I could feel her fear and grief, though it was like she was behind a … oh God, the locker …

This time I didn't bother with our comm's, though I left the connection open; instead I threw myself
into our linkage and flew down the echoes until I reached her, half-way across the city, and yet right next to me; she was curled into a fetal ball, whimpering my name; her pain and terror nearly overwhelming me, but I refused to flinch away … I had caused this, unwillingly, unknowingly, but it was still because of me that she was suffering … and by God, it would be me who fixed it. Or ended with her … no matter what happened she would not be alone … never again, I had promised and I would never break that promise.

Taking a deep, calming breath – both in my bed and within our linkage – I focused on Taylor: my best friend, my unbreakable rock that sheltered and protected me … from everything; this sweet innocent girl-child, this ruthless goddess of destruction; the one who could make me feel the most overpowering joy simply by looking at me and knowing all of me; my other half, the only person that I KNEW loved me and that I loved back, and now I needed to bring all of this: my happiness, my power, everything that she made me feel and know, her potential and my potential, for good and for evil, for joy and for pain, for life and for death, my beginning and my end, my acceptance and my completion; all of it, leaving nothing behind, with my love to guide me and take all of me to her …

I slowly and carefully wrapped myself around her, surrounding and covering her with all of my feelings, all of my love, and then I took the next step and slid from the outside of Taylor to the inside, where there was no longer a Taylor and an Amy, but only … … …

-------------Legion*** To Bleed Within The NEXUS ***Legion-------------

As soon as I fully joined with Taylor within our linkage, we spun back through her life, finally stopping at what was probably her earliest complete memory. She appeared to be between 2 and 3 years old, and was wearing a onesie pajama that was bright green and covered in many different species of owls, she was standing in front of the sofa in her living room, staring at the brightly lit Christmas tree and the piles of colorfully wrapped presents under and around the tree.

I was floating in mid-air, sitting on nothing, and holding my Taylor in my lap, stroking her hair and whispering softly to her while we watched what was going on.

Rocking back and forth on her heels, every few seconds she would start to step forward, then step back. Finally, a tall, slender woman who looked much like an older Taylor, came into the room and sat down on the sofa and picked up the little girl and asked her, “Well, look at all the presents Santa Claus put under our tree; do you think some of them might be for you, Little Owl?”

Nodding her head so fast that Amy couldn't even see her face from the way her hair flew around her head. “Uh huh! I a vewy goo' girl! Dada say so! He e'en say a lenner to Santa say so! I a vewy goo' girl!” She slid down from her mother's lap and very carefully walked over to the front window and pointed to an ornate Silver and Gold Santa Sleigh that was part of the display on the window sill and said, “Owr pwesents in a S'eigh and fawl down a fwoor,” she looked up at her father who had just come in the room with a tray of cookies and a carton of milk and said, “an' go BOOM!” throwing her hands up in the air for emphasis.

Taylor and I watched as Little Owl, as her parents normally called her, and her parents opened their Christmas presents, with Taylor's being carefully placed on one end to the sofa Annette-Rose was sitting on. It appeared that a big part of her job was to protect the cookies from Danny and Taylor as well as helping Taylor to open her gifts. Even as young as she was, she tried so hard to not rip the paper, with somewhat limited success; every time she was even partly successful, she would take another bite of her cookie as a reward.

Once most of the presents had been passed out and opened, with only the presents for the
Grandparents and a few friends still sitting there, lonely but proud, as they waited for the arrival of some guests later that day.

Little Owl carried a large colorful picture book into the kitchen for her to 'read' while Annette-Rose prepared and served a simple breakfast of homemade oatmeal and cinnamon-sugar toast. While she waited for her mother to serve breakfast, she quietly looked at the pictures and tried to identify the animals and people she saw, and watched her mother every time she turned a page.

My Taylor had calmed down, but stayed in my lap where I held her and simply watched as the memory progressed; the memory jumped forward often, probably because Little Owl was unable to remember anything of significance, other than Annette-Rose preparing their Holiday Dinner for later that afternoon. We shifted to Little Owl's bedroom at one point when Danny changed her out of her pajamas into Christmas themed overalls so that she could play with some of her new presents. Later she carefully carried them to her room under Danny's close supervision as she took them one at a time up the stairs and placed them on her bed with the most amazing concentration and care.

When Taylor's grandparents arrived and dinner was served, she wept silently, with a soft smile on her face the whole time. When Little Owl was put to bed, we jumped again, this time into the future, to Taylor's 3rd birthday party. It wasn't a big party, but several cousins attended, as well as a few children from the neighborhood.

This pattern continued until Little Owl was in school, 2nd grade I think, when Taylor froze at the sight of a little red-head girl in her class. It was Emma Barnes of course, from when they first met. She was on the verge on a panic attack when I finally managed to turn her away so she couldn't see the little girl and I asked her to tell me what she remembered about the girl.

Taylor stumbled and froze as she tried to answer my questions; even saddled with her conflicting memories, but she soon figured out which memories belonged with the current Taylor. Many times I had to soothe my Taylor and help her find the strength to go on, knowing what was coming soon.

We watched in silence as young-Taylor and young-Emma grew up, went to school, came home and played, the sleep overs they had and the secrets that they shared. It was obvious to both of us that young-Taylor and young-Emma shared a very close bond, twin sisters of different mothers. In fact, it reminded me a lot of how Vicky and I were before puberty and powers hit me.

When the phone call came, telling young-Taylor about the death of her mother in a single car accident, young-Taylor fainted, and when she woke up, she walked around the house as if she was in a daze until she found the box of index cards with her mother's recipes written out on 3x5 Index Cards. She wrapped herself around the box and crawled under the kitchen table and just cried until Danny got home.

My Taylor broke down again, and wasn't able to even talk to me for the best part of what felt like days after her mother died. Little Owl was in even worse shape because Danny was very nearly catatonic from grief. He wasn't able to take care of himself for almost a month, much less his daughter, which forced Little Owl to suppress the pain and grief from losing her mother so she could take care of her father. All I could do was hold her and make sure she knew that she wasn't alone anymore, that I was with her and that I loved her and would never leave her.

The Barnes family is probably the only reason that Little Owl survived that spring; Zoe Barnes was able to get Danny out of his depression and at least somewhat functional while Emma was unbelievably supportive of her friend. She was compassionate and caring in a way that just simply didn't match with the behavior of Emma as one of Those Bitches.
The next significant milestone was when Taylor came home from the Nature Summer Camp.

After that point, Emma's behavior was completely twisted around to the point of being completely unrecognizable if compared to her previous actions. This was the first time I ever saw Sophia Hess, and I got to see her behavior around Taylor. The change to Emma's behavior was so striking, that somebody should have been calling for Master/Stranger Protocols the first time Emma met Taylor after the Nature Camp.

As hard as dealing with these memories must have been for Taylor, they were just as hard for me. But now, now I was seeing exactly what my beloved Taylor had suffered, and she was helping me as much as I was helping her.

The social dynamics between Those Bitches was especially enlightening; Emma was the obvious Leader, Sophia was the Enforcer and Madison was just a Follower. But if you watched closely, over time it became clear that Sophia was the actual Leader, setting the limits and targets, while Emma was almost desperate to please Sophia. Madison was the interesting one though. She was far more intelligent than any of the other abusers, and would often come up with different plans and pranks. But her pranks, as bad as they were, were designed to be either annoying or as harmless as she could manage.

Taylor was the one who pointed out the bizarre social dynamics to me and figured out that Madison was actually terrified of Sophia, and was working extremely hard to keep Sophia's attention focused outward on someone, anyone, other than herself and she was trying to figure out what were the most likely causes for Emma's changed behavior.

The other oddity was how stupidly the staff at Winslow acted, other than Mrs. Knott and one of the janitor's, every single teacher or administrator that interacted with Taylor or Those Bitches, seemed to be bound and determined to either ignore Taylor's plea's for help or actively make it worse.

Once I noticed the problems with their behavior though, I began actively looking for any evidence of a Master's interference; though I never found any. Lots of evidence of what looked like the results of a Master's influence, but no clear signs of a Master at work. With the sole exception of Emma's sudden change in attitude and behavior, it all seemed to be at second or third hand, with nothing that pointed at one person.

Eventually, after watching literally MONTHS of non-stop torment and abuse, we came to the final moment: The Locker.

To both mine and Taylor's surprise, it wasn't just Those Bitches and their followers that were involved in the attack on Taylor. At least four male members of the Track Team, and two members of the Basketball Team acted to keep people away from the hallway that Taylor's locker was in and helped Sophia force Taylor into the locker after she had been stunned by Sophia's surprise attack from behind.

I made a point of memorizing their faces, thinking that if they slipped through the cracks, a little bit of 'off the books' justice might be cathartic. Though, in the end, any decision about that would be up to Taylor, as I knew that I was much more likely to go to extremes for revenge.

Neither of us managed to deal with the Locker Incident very well, but we did get through it. Mostly by holding onto each other and not judging; but simply reassuring each other that it was over, we had survived it, and no matter what, we had each other and nobody was ever going to separate us.

The time Taylor spent in her coma was actually very relaxing until she woke up; her physical
therapy, and other treatments were painful and debilitating, but I got to see her struggle and grow as she put her self back together and started to teach herself and prepare for her upcoming exams, and she got to know what it felt like to have someone's unconditional love and support.

Living through the interrogation by Armsmaster and Miss Militia and it's consequences was unspeakably horrid, as was having to relive all of those horrible days where I had to slowly piece my beloved back together. We both felt Taylor's emotions and thoughts throughout the whole incident; every realization and revelation, just as it occurred the first time. Although I think it was good for Taylor to see just how bad it had gotten as I worked to rebuild her and give her a new chance for life.

What both Taylor and I found especially fascinating was that both times Taylor triggered, we could see either two or three massive creatures that twisted and spun around each other and seemed to be shedding some kind of crystalline body parts across a vast expanse of space and time. Whatever became of those crystalline shards, was a mystery that we simply couldn't solve in the short time we had left before we would be finished with Taylor's memories. As far as we could tell, the shards seemed to just fade away and disappear from view, though we were both certain they were not destroyed.

---------------------------Legion*** Taylor ***Legion---------------------------

I opened my eyes and forced my body to relax and stretch out from my fetal curl on my bed; I checked my swarm, and forced those elements that were still agitated from my earlier breakdown to settle down and in many cases actually settle down on empty rooftops or in the tree's. A quick check of Dad's bedroom showed me that he was asleep, fairly deeply so, and steadily becoming moreso.

As I spread my awareness back out through my swarm, I could feel Amy in her bed, just as awake as I was, probably still a bit agitated from our earlier adventure.

Activating my comm suite, I selected her name and called her:

concern worry “Amy-love, how are you feeling?”

love concern “I'm fine, sweetie, how are you?”

love amusement “I'm fine, too. Still a bit shook up, but really, I think I'm doing far better than I should be, all things considered. Oh hey, do you know what FINE really means?”

confused “Uhh … that I'm doing okay, no real problems, right?”

amused “Nope; it means Freaked out, Insecure, Neurotic, and Emotional.”

amusement “Yep, that's exactly right.”

apologetic grief “I'm sorry that I freaked out like that … but you dropped out of our linkage so suddenly, and then I couldn't feel you anywhere … I thought you might have died, a.a.and I just couldn't face it …”

concern love “I know Taylor, I KNOW! I felt the same way, well once I realized what had happened … It's not the first time we've had a breakdown from leaving our linkage space too quickly.”
thoughtful concern love “Yeah, we need to figure out some sort of automatic damping control to prevent the extra pain and the disorientation effect.”

thoughtful “Maybe an extra function added to our booster-relay so we always have a low-level connection to our linkage space.”

amusement thoughtful “That’s a good idea, Love, but we REALLY need a better name for our Linkage Space. Something with class and pizazz.”

love amusement “I totally agree, Sweetie, and I have the perfect name for it: NEXUS.”

agreement amusement “That’s perfect Amy! I like it; it’s descriptive, has pizazz, and is quite unique.”

determined embarrassment “Good, because I think we need to talk about what just happened, not the memory rewind, that can wait until tomorrow, but how and why I popped out of the NEXUS the way I did.”

concern “Are you sure that you want to do this? I can feel that just thinking about it is making you blush like a fire engine.”

determined EMBARRASSMENT “Yeah, I’m sure. 'cause if I don't do it now, it'll just get harder the longer I put it off.”

concern love “Okay, go ahead, Love. Just remember, I love you and nothing is going to change that.”

love embarrassment “I know. How can I not know after that rewind,” deep breath “It started when I did what you told me to, and followed the linkage to the unmodded squirrel and through that to the tree which I modded into a perfect booster-relay, afterwards I started to slide back to where you were so I could pick out another suitable tree to mod when I realized that I didn't need to do that, that I could pick out my next target from where I currently was and slide right over to my target tree with no wasted effort or time … and that's when things got really, umm, different.”

curious “Different how, Amy?”

embarrassment “Uhh … well, let's just say if you could see me right now, I’m blushing from my toes to the top of my head, so red hot, that I could probably melt a bank vault.”

confusion “What?”

determination deep breath “I'm pretty sure that my powers REALLY liked it that I could use the NEXUS to remotely bio-manipulate so easily. So I was rewarded with the most amazing orgasm I’ve ever had in my short and sheltered life.”

awe embarrassment “Ooooh. Yeah, amazing is a pretty good word for it, alright. You do realize that I was riding along with you, right? I would've had no chance to separate from you, even if it had occurred to me. Which it didn’t.”

embarrassment “Yeah, that's kind of what I thought, did you,” deep breath, deep breath “share
my orgasm or did you have one of your own?”

caring concern “So did I. I could hear you calling for me, but I didn't understand, well, anything really. Not at that point, anyway. It took me a few seconds to understand that you couldn't feel me anywhere, anymore than I could feel you. Once I did understand, I came to you as quickly as I could, but I think it was too late. Honestly, I think it was too late as soon as I was ejected from the NEXUS. But at least I was able to be there for you during your memory rewind, and I think that it helped you, at least a little.”

determination love “Taylor – Sweetie, I love you, period. If the choice is to be with you, and have a short life with a painful death or to be without you, and have a long life with a painless death. Well, I'll always choose you. Short life, long life; none of that matters to me. Just you.”

confusion “Why? How could you … I'm not worth it, I'm not, I …”

determination “Those Bitches hurt you so terribly, in so many ways, Sweetie, that I can tell that you find it hard, even now, to believe that anyone can truly love you. But Taylor, please think about this; when we went through your memory rewind, we did it together, I'm not sure you know what I did so I'll explain it again; I was not beside you during the rewind, I was a part of you. I was inside you, or you were inside of me. Either way, we were one person until the end.”

confusion “Oh … Really?”

determination love “Sweetie, I know that what we are doing is different, pretty much unexplored territory, but it's real. More real than I can explain, but we are doing it together and that's never going to change. I will no more leave you alone, then you will ever leave me. It just won't happen.”

confusion love “So, what do we do now? I mean, what's next?”

amusement love “Well, I suspect we'll have to do what most couples do, and make it up as we go along.”

embarrassment love “Not that! I meant, well … tomorrow? Do you still want to try and watch with me?”

determination “Absolutely Sweetie, I think we should try and get some sleep and create a relay path in the morning so we can watch the fireworks at Winslow.”

uncertain “Do you think, that we could …”

love determination “Stay connected with each other? If it's at all possible for us to do it, I want to, Sweetie. At the very least, I want to try.”
“Alright, Love. First things first, let's get comfy again. Use the bathroom if you need to, get a drink of water. I'm going to straighten out my sheets. Once you're ready, let me know and we'll slide into the NEXUS and take it from there.”

“Okay, Sweetie. All done, I'm ready to try this…”

total excitement “I'm going to reach out and touch you and you need to do the same, so that we are both establishing and maintaining the linkage. That way it should have an adaptive, dynamic structure that we'll each act to maintain while we sleep.”

“Oh, that's perfect, it's just like what I had to do while I was healing you! Instead of sync'ing our immune systems, we just have to sync our linkages in the NEXUS.”

A few moments of back and forth awareness of our linkages let us bring them down to a stable and well-balanced, low-level linkage that used the NEXUS as both a medium and stabilizing influence, as it provided a strong structure that kept everything simple.

“I think that's got it, Love. We'll shut down our comm's and we should still feel each other, but more as an awareness of each other, than as full up comm's.”

“Allright then, I love you, Sweetie. Try to relax and sleep tight. If you have problems, any problems at all, call me. Please. I'd much rather you woke me up and we talk all night then for you to be alone, okay?”

“I love you too, Amy. I promise I'll call if I can't sleep, but just having that low-level linkage is helping already.”

“Goodnight, Sweetie.” “Goodnight, Love.”

--------------------Legion***Danny ***Legion-------------------

My alarm went off at the normal time of 6:30, so a quick smack to turn it off and I got up to face yet another Monday. Of course, this Monday was going to be a pretty exciting one, at least for some people. Hopefully, it'd be a good one for Taylor.

I took my shower and got dressed for work and went downstairs to meet Taylor, I could tell that she was already up and ready for the day. Partly from experience, and partly from the smells of breakfast cooking, which was a heck of nice way to start the day.

Stepping into the kitchen, I saw Taylor, as usual, cooking a big breakfast and making it look easy. What was a surprise was the bread and other baked goods cooling on the counters off to one side.

“Well, looks like you got an early start on the day, huh? All of your baking done already?” I asked her.

She turned and smiled at me and said, “Well, since I wasn't going to be here today, I needed to get some of my chores out of the way early. I can bring my books to study from at the Association, so I won't fall behind on my studies, but some things can only be done here. That's why I started the laundry last night, as well as prepping my bread dough; that let me finish them up this morning after I woke up, so I won't be overwhelmed trying to catch up later.”

“Okay, I guess that makes sense. So what else besides breakfast do you still have to do this morning?”
“Not much, actually. The soup and chicken breasts are in the slow cookers, the bread and cookies are all done, the pies will be finished soon. And most of the laundry is done and folded and can be put away later tonight,” she explained even as she served up the waffles, scrambled eggs and bacon onto our plates and brought them to the table.

Before I sat down, I collected the morning paper and the pitcher of orange juice from the fridge. Setting the pitcher down on the table, I offered the paper to Taylor.

“Would you like to read the headlines first?” I asked her.

“Thanks Dad, I'll give them a quick skim first, but I'd like to bring the whole paper, as well as the Sunday paper to the Association this morning. It'll give me a chance to get caught back up on the news.”

I nodded and passed her the first section of the paper while I started on the local news.

Taylor finished eating quickly and started on the kitchen cleanup while I finished my waffles; she had all of the bread bagged, the pies covered and what looked like 5 or 6 batches of cookies into a large cardboard box before I even managed to clear my dishes and load them into the dishwasher.

“What's with the cookies?” I asked her.

“Snacks for everybody. celebratory snacks,” she explained with a grin.

I just shook my head and said, “Well, why not. I'll take them to the car while you get your books together, alright?”

“Thanks Dad, I'll pack them up and meet you outside, alright?”

“Sounds good to me, be sure to lock up behind yourself,” I told her as I grabbed my keys, picked up the box of cookies and went out to the car.

A few minutes later, Taylor came out the back door with her pack filled with books for her to study, and the papers tucked under her arm.

I drove her to the Association and pulled into my parking spot and carried the box with me into my office. Taylor followed close behind me and took a seat on the sofa in the outer office, next to Dorothy's desk.

--------------------Legion***Taylor ***Legion-------------------

I actually managed to get a decent night's sleep, the low-level linkage we had created worked perfectly, letting me sleep well, comforted by the knowledge that Amy was always there in the back of my mind. That awareness was a big comfort for both of us and didn't require any special effort, just the desire to not be alone, and someone who wanted to be with us.

When I woke, I could feel Amy awaken at the same time, and the first thing we did, well after saying good morning, was to begin creating a path from my house to Winslow. Beginning to end, it only took about 40 minutes to mod a complete path to both Winslow and the Association, with only a few gaps that needed to be filled in by either birds or rats that would stay in the storm drains and utility tunnels.

Once that was complete, we eased back out of the linkage so we could take care of our morning chores; breakfast, exercises, showers, all the normal things that we needed to take care of on a daily basis.
I got an early start on my baking and prepped our dinner for the crockpots. I had decided on a potato leek soup and honey dijon chicken breasts. On low, they would be fine until it was time to eat this evening, which made the idea of being out of the house all day a no-brainer.

I decided to go a little overboard with our weekday breakfast, in celebration of Winslow's downfall, and made waffles, eggs and bacon. Of course, I made a point of having a full breakfast before Dad even woke up, but then I doubted that I'd be able to snack properly during the day. I'd have to make sure I didn't use my iso-mod and kept my metabolism under control.

After breakfast and cleaning up, I packed up the freshly baked cookies into a cardboard box to take with me, and loaded a selection of books for me to study from.

Once Dad had driven us to the Association, I settled down on the sofa in the outer office and reached out to Amy.

content “Good morning, Love. How are you this morning?”

joy “I'm fine, Sweetie, in the good sense of the word. Are you ready to start watching Winslow?”

content “Yes I am. I've tested the linkages and have plenty of booster-birds around the High School, and a very good selection of spiders, ants and flies in all of the classrooms and offices. Really, I don't think there's a room that we can't listen and look into. Especially the ones I expect to see things happen in.”

content anticipation “That's great! Anything special I should look out for, or is just like last night?”

anticipation “It should be just like last night, so let's start opening up the linkage, just make sure that you're able to keep enough attention on your physical location. Make sure you join up with me first, so we can share senses and I'll control our focus. It will probably be easier if I take care of that, while you just come along for the ride. Less chance of you getting too distracted by what's happening at Winslow. If you think you're have a problem, though, please let me know right away.”

determination “I will. I'm in homeroom now, so nobody will notice if I'm a little distracted.”

joy “You're right, so let's do this.”

------------------------Legion*** Winslow ***Legion------------------------

It was a typical morning at Winslow High School, the old hallways were filled with children who didn't want to be there, only nominally supervised and controlled by the teachers and administrative staff. The peeling paint and dented lockers lined the hallways and the clanging of slamming doors could be heard throughout the school as the students made their apathetic way to their first class of the day.

As the initial roll call was being taken, 4 large passenger vans pulled up to the main entrance, followed by half a dozen police cars and equal number of unmarked cars. As the people disembarked the different vehicles and organized themselves, it quickly became obvious that something out of the ordinary was happening.
Two older men dressed in suits, walked up to the main entrance, sharply gestured to the groups behind them and headed into the school.

Behind them, the groups sorted themselves out, with both plainclothes and uniformed police going with the civilians to different, though well known, destinations.

Two uniformed police officers accompanied the first men into the school and to the principal's office, one of them peeled off at the door to the school offices and took a position blocking access to the office.

Inside, one of the men held out his ID to the secretary and said, “Ms. Dillon, you are temporarily suspended from your position here until this investigation is complete. You will immediately turn over any keys and passwords in your possession and you are requested to cooperate with the investigating officers.” A sharp gesture had the other man and his accompanying police officer entering the Principals office.

“What is the meaning of this!” the bottle-blond woman behind the large desk demanded as they entered the room.

“Ms. Blackwell? I am Michael Sheffield from the State Department of Education. You are relieved of your responsibilities as Principal of Winslow High School at this time,” he turned to the police officer and said, “Do it.”

“Ms. Blackwell, you are under arrest for multiple counts of conspiracy, accessory before and after the fact to numerous counts of assault, theft and unlawful imprisonment, you are also under arrest, on Federal charges, for accessory after the fact to terrorism and attempted murder through use of weapons of mass destruction, specifically biological means. Additional charges may be preferred by either local, State or Federal authorities, as the investigation proceeds. You have the right to …”

In classrooms throughout the school, a number of teachers were removed from the classrooms and replaced by substitute teachers even as over a dozen students were pulled out and arrested or detained, depending on their ages, and read their rights in the hallways, even before they were taken out of the school and transferred to the local police station for questioning. They were held there until their parents could be notified, and lawyers provided, though in a few cases the older students were on their own, due to their being over 18 years old.

Emma Barnes looked confused and distraught, as if she simply couldn't understand what was happening, though she did manage to ask that her father be called.

Madison Clements, on the other hand, was white and shaking, though she managed to stay on her own feet without aid as the police officer read off a list of charges. At the end of the long list, she simply nodded and said, “I understand. Please notify my parents for me. I won't be making any statements until I've spoken to them, but afterwards I'll be happy to answer any of your questions.”

The uniformed officer looked at her with a mix of confusion and contempt, and said, “I'm sure your parents will be notified as soon as possible. As for making any statements, I can record them now if you want, or you can speak to one of the detectives in charge of this case.”

Madison nodded again and simply said, “I'll wait, thank you.”

Most of the arrests went off without a hitch, though Mr. Gladly fainted when they arrested him and one of the Track Team members made a break to escape when they told him he was under arrest. He made it almost 5 steps before he was intercepted by two of the policemen and tackled to the floor before being cuffed and dragged out to one of the waiting police cars.
“Oooh, did you see Blackwell? She looks like she's gonna have a stroke! And her language! I had no idea she even knew some of those words.”

“And I thought that Skidmark had an impressive command of obscenity, but Blackwell could give him a real run for his money. Know those words? I'm not even sure what some of those words mean.”

“You saw the teacher that fainted?”

Yeah, who was he, anyway?”

“That was Mr. Gladly 'Call me Mr. G’. He was always desperate to be the 'Popular' teacher, the 'cool teacher'. He sucked up to the pretty girls and popular boys, and pretty much ignored everyone else.”

“The unpopular ones, the outcasts, the misfits? We might as well have not even existed as far as he was concerned. More than once he witnessed what happened to me, then turned his back and walked away. As far as I'm concerned, they can stick him in a cell with 'Uncle Bubba' and see how he likes it when the guards turn their backs to what's going on.”

We watched as the various substitute teachers came in and took over the classrooms. It was clearly apparent that the school board had prepared carefully for this day, since the subs had up to date lesson plans for all of the classes they needed to cover and it wasn't just the missing teachers plans that were being used.

Once all the teachers were out of the school, the police moved in to take the designated students into custody. Only those of age faced immediate arrest, all the others were held until their parents had been notified, then taken to the police station for interviews and determination of whether or not to arrest and charge them.

Most of the students taken into custody were girls, but several boys were taken away as well. One of them, I think he might have been on the track team with Sophia, tried to make a run for it, but was tackled by a couple of cops and cuffed before being taken out to one of the cars.

It was odd watching Emma and Madison being taken in, along with almost all of the girls who had helped them torment me. Emma just looked confused, as if she couldn't even understand what was happening to her; I wasn't sure if she really was that confused or if it was just another game for her. On the other hand, Madison seemed to know exactly what was going on, almost like she had been expecting it and was going to face it with as much dignity as she could. Weird.

“What's up with Madison, Love? She looks like she's about to pass out, but won't out of sheer stubborness.”

“Not a clue. But you're right, it's nothing but sheer guts that's keeping her on her feet. Maybe she heard that this was coming and has been expecting it, so was kind of prepared.”

“How about Emma, though. She's acting like it has nothing to do with her, like it's all a big misunderstanding, and daddy will fix everything.”
“Meeeooow! Pull those claws back in, Sweetie, she’s not worth it. Not here either, and I REALLY don't want you dropping one of your swarms on her remotely. If you really need to get some closure, I'm sure we can meet up with her somewhere and you can kick the shit out of her. Or you can let me do it; I'm a lot more vicious than you are, and I'll make sure to leave a few scars, just for old times sake.”

“Maybe. Probably not though, even if it is kinda cathartic to imagine doing it.”

As we continued to watch, the excitement began to die down, with most of those in custody having been taken to the police station, though a few parents had begun to show up. It was interesting to see how they reacted to what they were told, some of them were in total denial, 'cause their little angel couldn't possibly be involved in something like that. The majority of them, however, seemed to just get grim and give their kids a look that boded ill for them. I foresaw some significant punishment in the future, and I don't think it was going to be losing tv privileges or extra chores. Sore butts and hard labor looked likely for some of them.

My attention was drawn back to the parking lot when a black Mercedes pulled in and squealed to a stop, with a tall, heavy man climbing out. Well, it looked like Mr. Barnes didn't waste any time coming to Emma's rescue.

“See that bald guy, Love? That's Emma's dad, Mr. Divorce Lawyer, I wonder how well he'll do going up against those cops. Especially considering just how serious some of the charges are?”

“Bet he crap's himself when he hears things like 'attempted murder, unlawful imprisonment and terrorism with WMD's.'”

“No bet. Find another sucker. Think he'll ask your mom for help?”

“He might, but I wouldn't bet on mom going out of her way for him, especially once she hears some of the details. She's not impressed by people who believe that rules and laws don't apply to them. She doesn't think much of Divorce Lawyers either, she calls them no better than ambulance chasers, even worse because they tend to leave a lot of pain and poverty behind them.”

With that, we fell silent and just watched him storm up to the police and try to bully them.

“Where's my daughter, Emma Barnes? Produce her at once,” he demanded as soon as he was stopped by one of the police officers.

“Sir, you can't enter the school, it's off limits as a crime scene. You'll have to wait until one of the detectives can speak with you,” the policeman explained with admirable control.

“Well, where the hell are those detectives of yours? I want to speak to whomever is charge. Right Now!” he said, his voice rising and becoming more demanding as he spoke.

“Right behind you, sir. What seems to be the problem here?”

“My name is Alan Barnes, and I want to know where the hell my daughter is, that's the damn problem!”

The detective, a middle-aged man at least as big as Mr. Barnes shook his head and said, “Well sir, your daughter, a Miss Emma Barnes, correct? Is currently being booked for a number of crimes at
the Bellingham Station. You're welcome to go and meet her there, but I recommend you retain a lawyer first, because she's going to need one.”

Mr. Barnes seemed to swell up at that and said, “I AM a lawyer, I'm more than capable of representing my daughter's best interests.”

The detective shook his head again and said, “Well, that's your choice sir, but unless you've got a lot of experience at defending capital crimes, including attempted murder and terrorism with WMD's, I'd be looking for someone to lend a hand. Just a suggestion, I'm sure you'll do what you think is best.”

Mr. Barnes started to turn red, but controlled himself and stomped back to his car and drove off with a screech of burning rubber.

relaxation love “Looks like the excitement is over for now, Sweetie. Think anything else will happen now?”

contentment “Nope. I think it's over for now. The next phase is going to take a while, I can't see the trials happening too soon, can you?”

contemplation “Well, they'll probably hold arraignment hearings as soon as they can, set bail or hold them until trial, maybe even set trial dates for some of the easy cases. With that said, I expect the biggies, Blackwell, Barnes, and Clements to be a while before they actually face trial. Unless they can cop a plea that is.”

confused “Is that likely, do you think?”

contentment “I shouldn't think so, but it's possible. Even so, I can't imagine that any of the serious crimes will get a pass, though some of their hanger-on's might be able to bargain down to a record and community service. If they're lucky.”

confused “Will Sophia's being a cape change anything? Could they get off by claiming she threatened them?”

contemplation “Maybe, if they could prove that a) they knew about Sophia being Shadow Stalker and b) that she actually threatened them and they believed she would carry out her threats. The fact that she was a Ward makes that unlikely though; I think it's more likely they'd just charge them as minions or henchman just to make a point. And I'm pretty sure that would mean being charged as adults, which would totally suck for them. Adult prison for those two would be a quick education in how to be at the bottom of the food chain.”

painful concern “I don't think I want that … but I'll leave it up to the DA and police; better for my mental health if I step back from anything like that.”

love concern “That's probably wise of you. Anyway, it's getting towards lunch and things look like they've settled down for the day, so I'm going to drop out of the link and go get something to eat. You should do the same, okay?”

amusement love “I will, Love. Dad's already said that he wanted to take me out to lunch, so I'll see if he's ready to leave. If not, I'll have some more cookies to tide me over until he's ready.”
“Sounds good, Sweetie. I'll talk to you later.”

“Later, Love.”

After disconnecting from Amy, I got up and used the bathroom and grabbed some cookies on my way back. Not that there were all that many left, the workers had raided the box pretty thoroughly during the morning. I gave a couple of them to Dorothy before sitting down to read the physics book from the library; this being one I had only read once before I was taking the opportunity to settle it into my memory properly.

Just after noon, Dad stepped out of his office and asked, “So, you ready to grab a bite to eat, Taylor?”

I looked up at him and said with a smile, “Absolutely, I'm starved. Where did you plan on going?”

He grinned and said, “It's a surprise, I wouldn't want to ruin it for you.”

I grinned back, put away my books and swung my pack over my shoulder before saying, “All right then, let's go.”

Following Dad, I buckled myself into the car before he drove us to a small Italian restaurant overlooking the river. It was a small, family run place that served very good food, good enough that I spent at least a few minutes trying to figure out the recipe for the sauce, as it was better than the one I used. A lot better. So were the meatballs. By the end of a much better lunch then I had expected, I had at least the basics of both figured out and was planning to do some experimenting in the next two weeks.

After lunch, Dad brought us back to the Association and while he got back to work, I opened up my math books to do some more studying. I also had Thora turn on the computer and pull up a couple of my saved math sites, and I started working through the problems in tensor analysis, which I was finding very useful in understanding some of the more esoteric concepts in physics.

Around 2:30, I was pulled out of my studying by the whirlwind arrival of Aisha, the girl I had met on the fishing trip. At least this time she wasn't soaking wet, even if her idea of appropriate clothing for school left little to the imagination.

“Aisha? What are you doing here? I thought Winslow didn't let out until 3:25? You do go to Winslow, right?”

“Yeah, but I skipped World Affairs; Gladly got arrested and the sub was an ass. So I decided to come hang out at dad's work until Bry gets off work and I can spend the night at his place. Mom's boyfriend is a total burnout and I can't stand 'em; 'course, he can't stand me either, so it's like Multiple Ass Desolation.”

I snickered and said, “I think you mean Mutually Assured Destruction.”

“Hey! You can do what'ya want with your asses, mine are gonna get desolated, got it?”

At that I just dropped my book down into my lap and started giggling. Aisha watched me for a minute, then started to smile back at me and said, “So, how come you spent the day with your dad instead of coming to school?”

I managed to stop my giggling and said, “I don't go to Winslow, Aisha, I'm home-schooled now.”

“Huh, must be nice. What's a girl gotta do to get outta that shithole?” she asked me.
I froze for almost a minute, then said in toneless voice, “Well, I spent three days stuffed in a locker filled with toxic biological waste. Personally, I don't recommend it.”

Aisha paled, swallowed and stuttered, “F, f, fuck me. I'm sorry, I didn't know th, th, that was you,” she stepped back and looked around then said in a low whisper, “is that what all that shit today was about? I saw that bitch Barnes get taken outta class; all the shit that happened this morning, it was all about you, wasn't it. Fuck girl, a whole bunch a teachers got taken out in cuffs today, plus a bunch of students, too.”

I closed my eyes, took another deep breath and slowly let it out. “It's not your fault, Aisha, you couldn't have known. Let's just say it was both unspeakable and unforgettable and leave it at that. Personally, I've found it's generally better if I focus on the future, rather than the past.”

Aisha looked at me for a long moment, with a serious and solemn look on her face, and then said, “Fair enough. I've got stuff I don't like to talk about too, so yeah. Let's leave that shit in the past where it belongs. So, for the future, got any advice for girl still stuck in the shithole known as Winslow?”

I smiled, a little weakly, but still a smile, and said, “Well, with only one or two exceptions, none of the teachers at Winslow care; about anything at all. If you want an education from there, it's possible but you'll have to do all the work. Maybe, with the shakeup that just happened, things will change, but I wouldn't bet a lot of money on it. I suppose the Board of Ed. will want to fix as much as they can, if only to be seen as doing something, but no matter what they want to do, money is tight and that's going to limit what they can achieve. Really, that's why I think Arcadia and Immaculata are so much better then Winslow, Central or Jefferson; as private schools, they charge enough tuition so they can afford to do things right. It sucks, but money talks.”

Aisha frowned and asked, “Is that why you're home-schooled? 'Cause I don't think dad could afford to pay for Arcadia, and I'm not Catholic.”

“Not really, after I woke up from my coma, Dad wasn't going to let me back in any public school, and after everything Those Bitches had done, I didn't have the grades to get into Arcadia anymore. Besides, I'm doing a lot better on my own then I ever did at school. I study at my pace, and can explore topics that interest me, instead of being restricted to a pace and curriculum tailored for the average student. And, not to brag but, I'm not average, Aisha; I'll be taking my GED on Thursday, which is about 2 years ahead of the normal graduation.”

“Aisha, I don't know if it's available at Winslow, but you can check with the counseling office and see if they have the State Department of Education Aptitude and Career Tests. If not, you can take them at the Central Library as long as you have a library card, School ID and make an appointment. It's a long set of tests that can really help you by showing you the areas that might interest you after High School, as well as the areas that you are currently strong and weak in. It was recommended to me when I first started home-schooling, and it helped me decide how to best organized my studies.”

Aisha stared at me for a moment, biting her lip then said, “Look, I hate school, it's boring and pointless; Mom says that I don't need to go if I don't want to, while both Dad and Bryan insist that an education is important, the most important thing I can do right now according to Bryan. But then, Mom's a junkie and both Dad and Bryan have jobs and their own places to live; so I know what's the right thing to do, I just don't think I can do it at Winslow.”

“When I did that meet-n-greet at the beginning of the year, they never said a thing about career tests or anything. Just that the counselors could help you fill out college applications.”
I sighed and said, “Well, maybe you can ask at the Counseling Office tomorrow and if they don't, I can help you by introducing you to some of the librarians that proctor the State tests. Do you even have a library card? Most of the people in my class didn't, so I thought I'd ask.”

“Uhh, no I don't think so. I can't ever remember going to the library except when I was little, not for years anyway. What'll I need to get one anyway?”

I paused in thought, then said, “Usually some form of photo ID and proof of residency is all you need, so your Winslow school ID should be enough. Worst case, you might need your birth certificate and your dad to come with you. Probably not, though. I think your school ID will be enough, though having a copy of your birth certificate is a good thing, no matter what, since it's the most basic form of ID. With that, you can eventually get everything else, but without it you're screwed.”

Aisha looked at me in amazement, “How do you even know this shit? It's like you got a computer in your brain! I ask a question and you know the answer, more than my brother, and way more than the teachers.”

I snickered and said, “Your brother and dad are right, you know. Education is the ticket out of everywhere; whether it's to get you a better job, let you move out of Brockton Bay, become a movie star or a millionaire, it's the education that you have that will let you do it. In my opinion, education isn't your grades at school, though if it's a good school they don't hurt, it's the skills you learn and the knowledge you acquire that counts. That and the ability to use all of it to achieve your goals.”

“So, what're your goals? What do you want to do?” she asked, her head tilted to one side.

“Well, that's a bit personal, but hardly secret. Mostly, I want to be able to support myself, to provide a safe and happy life for my family and precious people. For now, that means learning as much as I can, selling the clothes and jewelry that I make so I have an income, and then getting into college. After that, well I'm sure time will tell, but I'd like to get married and have children, eventually. And hopefully, help make the world a better place than it is today.”

“Children huh, so do you have a boyfriend or at least your eye on a hottie? If not, I could put in a good word for you with Bryan; he's single, free and gainfully employed. Cute too, even if he is my brother.”

“Nope, no boyfriend and not looking for one; and I don't think Amy would appreciate you trying to hook me up with your brother, either. No matter how cute he is.”

She just shrugged and said, “Can't blame me for tryin', I was hoping he was serious about that Lisa chick he knows from work, but he shot that idea down pretty solidly on Saturday. And she's the only girl that he seems to hang out with. Oh well, I'll keep my eyes open for a nice girl for him,” she stopped and gave me a considering look, then went on, “or maybe a nice boy, maybe I'm looking in the wrong place for him.”

That made me laugh, thinking of Vicky's melodrama yesterday. At her quizzical look, I explained, “Amy's sister has spent the last year or so trying to hook her up with a bunch of different guys, when Amy wasn't even a little bit interested in them, but Amy didn't want to hurt her sister's feelings, since she'd been trying so hard to figure out just what Amy was looking for in a boy. Which, of course, turned out to be a girl. It's actually been funny as hell, 'cause Vicky's been a good sport about it, and has been making fun of herself over the whole thing. In fact, yesterday she did this whole riff about Amy and I being a terrible disappointment to her, because we're not giving her nieces to spoil, that had us all in stitches.”
“She sounds like a nice girl, at least she has a good sense of humor; so is there any chance that she's lookin' for boyfriend?” she asked that with wriggling eyebrows.

“Heh, probably not, she and Dean seem to have this hot and cold thing going on, but since they've been together for almost 2 years, I suspect that that's just the way they like to do things, especially since Amy said that even when they're not seeing each other, they don't see anyone else; they just mope around until they make up. Again.”

“Weird. But I guess it takes all types, and as long as they're happy, it's nobody's business but their own.”

Just then, Mr. Laborn came in, nodded at me and said, “All right, Aisha? You ready to go now? I'll drop you off at Bryan's place if you'd like, instead of at your mother's.”

“Yeah dad, that'd be fine,” turning back to me she said, “it's been great talking to you Taylor, and I'll check for those tests like you said tomorrow. Umm, can I get your number so I can let you know how that goes?”

I nodded and pulled out a pen and some paper and wrote down my email and home phone number, before handing it to her. “Here you go, email and phone number. If you need to go to the library for the tests, let me know and I'll introduce you to the people who can take care of setting up the tests for you.”

Aisha took the paper, looked at it, then folded it up and stuck it in her pocket, before giving me hug and saying, “Thanks for everything, both today and Saturday, I really appreciate it.”

I just said, “You're welcome,” and waved at both of them as they left. Dorothy was also clearing up for the day, shutting down her computer and putting away all the files on her desk. As she was leaving, Dad came out of his office, carrying his jacket, and he said, “Night Dotty, I'll see you in the morning, hopefully those roadwork contracts will come in so we can get two more crews working full-time.”

“Nichols swore that they'd be ready by 10 o'clock, so I expect we can vet them and get them signed before the end of the day, and the crews can start on Wednesday.”

Dad nodded to her, and gestured us out ahead of him, so that he could lock the door before heading for the car.

On the way home, I told him about what I did during the afternoon, especially about Aisha's visit and her description of what had gone on at Winslow that morning.

Once we got home, Dad went upstairs to get cleaned up while I checked on dinner, then went downstairs to cycle the laundry and bring up both the folded and unfolded clothes so I could start getting caught up. Dropping it all off on the sofa, I dished up the soup and chicken breasts, with bread on the side for dinner.

Dinner was quiet, since we'd already had plenty of time to talk about our days and our plans for tomorrow. Dad offered to handle the after-dinner cleanup, so that I could get the rest of the laundry done, which was nice.

After dinner, Amy and I chatted while she did her homework and I folded laundry. Mostly we just talked about our days, though my description of Aisha and her attempts to get her brother a girlfriend, and her new plan to find him a boyfriend instead, had her giggling both in the NEXUS and in real life, which apparently had Vicky wondering out loud about her sanity, since Amy
refused to tell her what was so funny.

Because I planned on patrolling later that night, I wanted to get to bed fairly early, so I decided to bring up a serious topic before signing off.

serious concern “Love, I do have a serious question for you; since we've greatly extended my range, and since I really can't shut my power off, not for more than a couple of minutes at a time, anyway; what do I do when I discover a Cape's civilian ID? 'Cause I've already ID’d three of the Wards and two of the Empire's Capes. It's not something I went looking for, but I saw it anyway.”

serious determination concern “Crap. I guess it goes back to the 'Unwritten Rules' then; unless they break those rules, they're still protected by them, so don't do anything. Just put it aside, even if they're villains. If you see something that leads you to believe they're going to break those rules, or cross some other line that's equivalent to the 'Unwritten Rules', then you can take action, but try to do it in a way that doesn't make it obvious that YOU know their ID's. That's to protect you, not them. Of course, if they have a Kill Order out on them, that's different; anything goes then. But nobody in New England, much less here in the Bay, has a Kill Order issued, so it's not really applicable.”

determination “So, just file it away and try to ignore it? I suppose I can compartmentalize well enough to do that. God knows I'm already doing that with peoples' kinks and perversions, this'll just be one more thing to 'ignore'."

amusement “Kinks and perversions? Seriously?”

amusement embarrassment “Oh yeah, almost makes me think I'm the weird one, since I just … ah no, not going there right now.”

amusement “Oooh, sounds interesting, sure you don't want share?”

teasing amusement “Maybe later, Love. Certainly not while my Dad's in the same room.”

teasing agreement “Yeah, probably not a good time. But later on, I think that might be an, illuminating, discussion.”

love agreement “I'm sure it will be, just not yet. I'm not quite ready for that, you know?”

love agreement “Yeah, I do. But someday, when we're both ready …”

love “Someday. For now though, I've got laundry to put away and then I'm going to get ready for bed.”

love concern “Alright Sweetie, finish up and head for bed. If you need the low-level linkage, contact me and we'll set it up, otherwise, I'll talk to you tomorrow.”

love “I will, Love. Sleep well, Amy. I love you.”

love “Love you, too, Taylor.”

--------------------------Legion*** ***Legion--------------------------
I set my internal alarm for 2 am, and after getting up and ready for my patrol, I checked my stores of fabric and armor components carefully, verifying that I had enough material for making the two extra Legion costumes and the new Pied Piper costume. I also set up an extra set of cord spools because I was using a lot of cord up, with all the arrests that I had made lately.

Even as I did that, I pre-positioned some of my booster-birds and swarm groups in areas that I thought might need them. Especially since I wanted to head downtown and do some scouting in an area that I had pretty much ignored, since the Protectorate and Wards ran a lot of their patrols through there.

I used the time spent on traveling to downtown to practice my parkour, especially with the muscle upgrade from Amy. Even after only a day, I could feel the difference. With my iso-mod set to zero, I was running faster, with less fatigue, and jumping further. It wasn't a huge difference yet, but I was seeing at least a 10% increase across the board, and it would probably be a greater jump every day until the changeover was complete.

Probably the biggest gain was in my ability to jump and land safely from great heights; here I was seeing almost a 50% improvement, though I doubt it would continue to improve at that rate. Prior to this upgrade I could handle a drop from a second story roof effortlessly, and a third story roof with effort, but now? Now I could drop from a four story rooftop without a problem, though I wasn't quite willing to try to go for five; I did work up to that point carefully though, a little bit higher with each attempt. My ability to jump upwards wasn't as good, but still better than the last time I had tested it. Instead of two stories, I could make three stories now with effort, and I suspected that by the end of the week, I'd be able to do four stories up easily, and five or six down with no problems. If my overall strength grew proportionally, I was looking at Brute 5 for sure, possibly even Brute 6 and Mover 5 for sheer speed.

Amy and I were going to have to find someplace private to do some serious power testing, but even without my costume, if she was right about how strong the reactive mesh was now, it was looking like at least Brute 4 for toughness, maybe even Brute 5, and with my costume I could add another 2 points, though I suspected we were both a little weak against pure energy attacks.

Scanning the city with my extended range, I found very little crime that night, which was more confirmation of my idea that most crime happened earlier during the night and that the middle of the week was quieter than the weekends. Normally that might be a bit of a problem for me, but I was more interested in scouting and testing out my upgrades than in stopping random crime.

Because a lot of the newer buildings were much taller office buildings, anywhere from 25 to 75 stories, that were sticking up right in the middle of older buildings of between 6 and 12 stories, it was a lot harder to roof hop, even with my increased strength and speed. I was either going to need something to let me stick to the sides of the buildings or to swing between them like that movie hero, Spiderman, or a lot more strength for jumping up and down.

Honestly, I think it'd be easier to figure out how to teleport or fly, then how to do Spiderman's clinging and swinging schtick. Of course, that just means that some Tinker has already figured it out. Because everyone knows that Tinkers don't play by the normal rules of physics and reality.

Of course, neither do Amy and I, so I should probably be more sympathetic to other capes who break the rules, too. But still, Tinkers.

Because of problems with traveling on the rooftops, I found a nice one to stop on, and just used my swarm to scan the area and do some mapping. I found that mapping the downtown area was a lot more time consuming than I had supposed, due to not only the complexity of the sewers, utility conduits and storm drains, but the sheer amount of underground construction. Basements, sub-
basements, underground parking garages, tunnels, elevators, you name it and it was down there. To properly map this area was going to take me weeks, maybe even months to complete and record.

In addition to the Endbringer Shelters, any new construction required a huge amount of moving and re-routing of existing services, which simply added to the complexity. I suspected that even the city didn't have a clear idea of where everything was, even if the plans they had on record were accurate. Which since I had spotted what had to be at least six different villain lairs, I had my doubts about the accuracy of their records.

I found two large ones, one of which I thought might actually belong to the PRT, and the other I wasn't sure about. It was under a parking garage near the Medhall Building, though it didn't appear to be connected to anything but the garage, and since no one was in it, I wasn't sure who was using it.

I wasn't able to get much more than a general feel for the size of them as I only had some ants and spiders to work with, as they were very clean and free of any mice or rats.

Above ground, a large segment of Downtown had E88 tags in the alleys and on the backs of buildings, well out of sight of the main streets, indicating that they claimed the area, but were being somewhat discreet. Interestingly enough, I watched several groups of 4 men who seemed to be running regular patrols of the downtown area claimed by E88, a kind of Neo-Nazi Neighborhood Watch.

While I kept an eye on them, all they seemed to do was patrol. They didn't stop anyone, even people of color, while I watched, but actually seemed to be just keeping an eye on things. This was completely at odds with what I had seen outside of the downtown area, and I wondered if perhaps there was some sort of split within the Empire, or if they had special orders for dealing with this area.

Eventually, I needed to call an end to my patrol, as I wanted to get home and take care of some things before Dad woke up.

-------------Legion*** ***Legion-------------

Tuesday started out fairly quiet, which was good as I had some errands I needed to run, including some shopping I needed to do so that I could finish up the outfits that I wanted to sell on Saturday; I just needed to pickup some more fabric and a day or so would see me ready for the Free Market.

Using my bike actually ended up saving me a lot of time, since I didn't have to wait for the bus, nor did I have to search for a parking spot if Dad had driven me. After my morning clean up, and prepping Thora with two books and the computer to do research, I took $200 in cash and added it to my wallet, giving me a little over $300 to spend. My first stop was at the Fabric Emporium where I picked out and bought enough cloth to finish the shorts and skirts I had planned, as well as a bunch of buttons, snaps and zippers that I would need to finish the skirts, blouses and shorts I was already working on. I also bought a selection of printed Size labels and Hand Made labels that I planned to sew into the clothes I made. I only spent about $103 and made sure to keep the receipts for tax purposes.

After that I stopped at the Wholesale Outlet, where I picked up a nice selection of bags, boxes and packing material that I planned on using for the items I hoped to sell. They were all plain brown, but it allowed me include the cards I had printed up, giving my email address and the number of one of my pre-paid burner phones. It had 600 minutes on it, and if I needed more it was easy to add them. I chose that phone because it had a voice mail option that I could access online as well as
from the phone itself. By choosing to go with basic brown, I was able to keep my costs down to only $56 for everything.

Once I started making sales over the internet, I was going to need to pick up actual shipping supplies. I was also going to need an easy way to figure out shipping costs for pretty much everywhere, since it looked like there was a lot of interest in coral jewelry overseas. Perhaps it was a function of the Artsy website, I would need to check.

My last stop for the day was at the bank where I picked up the two VISA cards I had ordered, one was a debit card attached to my bank account and the other was a pre-paid card that I planned on using for my 'business'; I loaded that card with $100 while I was at the bank with some of the cash I had with me. Later, I would also be able to add money to that card using my Paypal account. The bank also had gotten a card reader for me so that I could accept credit card payments using a smartphone.

Once I got home, I upgraded my Paypal account to the business level, which allowed me to accept other people's credit card payments, and if I understood it correctly, I could even make tax payments to the city and state as needed. It wasn't clear about making federal tax payments, but I could do those myself if I ever made enough for it to matter.

The last thing I did before dinner was to open up an Artsy account so I could sell things online, as well as at the Free Market. I only listed a few of my pieces of coral jewelry for now, because I wanted to see how my sales worked in person first before I did much online. Well, that and they charged for each item listed on the website, so I didn't want to go crazy just yet.

Dad had requested meatloaf for dinner, so I made a point of getting home early enough to make it and the baked potatoes right before he got home. I also steamed some fresh broccoli that I had picked up on my way home and made a nice cheddar/cojack cheese sauce to go on top of the broccoli. I had been experimenting with my cheese sauce, since I had promised Amy proper cheese fries, and I wanted to make sure that they would taste just right.

Dad liked his baked potato pretty plain, with just butter, salt and pepper, but I liked mine with at least a little bit of toppings, so I chopped up some chives, crumbled up some of the bacon I had been saving from different breakfasts, chopped up some pepperoni slices and set aside some sour cream for mine.

I was planning on making Dad a couple of meatloaf sandwiches for his lunch, so I made two large meatloaves, though I expected we would only finish one of them tonight, even with my appetite. I also made three large baked potatoes, figuring I could have two of them tonight, while dad would only want one to go with the broccoli.

Dad was definitely pleased with dinner, even if he didn't realize that I was no longer following Mom's recipes, but was adapting them and even creating my own. I was keeping my recipes on the computer, with the thought of compiling my own cookbook, that I could pass down to any of my children that were interested in cooking.

For dessert I served a basic apple pie, though I had a nice recipe for strawberry pastries that I wanted to try if I could find fresh strawberries cheap. Not an easy task in New England, even when they are in season.

The more I had to shop for fresh fruits and vegetables, the more I wanted at least a small garden of my own. Even if it just had herbs and basic vegetables like onions, tomatoes and lettuce, it would be really nice to have my own garden. It should also save us at least some money, too.
While I was clearing up from dinner and putting away the left overs, I chatted with Amy and made arrangements to meet her on Wednesday when school let out, and she said that she'd ask Vicky to take us to the library so we could spend a couple of hours listening to music together before her shift at the hospital started.

I hoped to be able to get caught up on my mapping, since I had finally settled on using only one program, one that had an inexpensive Software Developer's Kit (SDK) so that I could build the features that I really wanted. Once Dad went to bed, I figured I could get at least two hours of mapping in before I stopped for the evening and another two hours in the morning before breakfast.

Wednesday was one of my normal sewing days, and I hoped that with a full morning and part of the evening dedicated to sewing I could get everything I wanted completed before Saturday. Even with my GED on Thursday, I should still have plenty of time, though I probably wouldn't have time for any patrolling until next weekend.

While Dad watched tv and relaxed before bed, I did as much prep work as I could on the outfits I would be working on tomorrow and I was also able to finish up four of the blouses that just needed the buttons sewed on, and two skirts that needed the zippers sewn in; zippers that I had picked up this morning at the Fabric Emporium. Once that was done, I went back downstairs to keep Dad company until he was ready to head for bed.

After that, I booted up my computer and opened up my mapping program and started inputting the information from our bike trip this weekend, though I only managed about a quarter of what needed to be done by the time I was ready for bed. I did manage to download the SDK and User's Manual for it before I logged off, figuring that I could have Thora read that for me in the morning while I worked on inputting some more mapping information and looked around for a decent 3D drawing program online.

Around midnight, I wrapped up all of my work, logged out and locked up the house. Since Amy was already asleep, I just looked in on her for a moment without waking her and then went upstairs and lay down to get some sleep myself.
Chapter 24

Chapter notes: Mental Communication

texting – *AMY: It looks like this*

voice – “It looks like this.”

voice with emotional overtones – confusion “It looks like what?”

-------------------Legion*** Taylor ***Legion-------------------

I awoke at 3:30 and stretched as I climbed out of bed. I took a few seconds to scan around Amy's house before checking my own neighborhood for anything out of the ordinary. As I selected a pair of shorts and a t-shirt to wear, I checked on Dad; he was soundly sleeping and didn't look to be getting up anytime soon.

Heading downstairs, I paused for a moment to boot up my computer, before stepping into the kitchen to make a quick breakfast snack. Once my english muffins with peanut butter were prepared, I poured a large glass of milk and sat down to get some work done.

Taking a bite and washing it down with a sip of milk, I went online and researched some more freeware 3D drawing programs before settling on Sketcher3DUL, as the most versatile and useful of the free programs that I could find.

I loaded it up and worked through the tutorials while I ate my english muffins, but once I finished with that, I switched to updating my map of Brockton Bay's underground. Even with my memory, I found that I had to use my swarm to refresh my recollection of some of the areas I had scanned on Sunday; fortunately, the modded trees and birds made that a simple, though somewhat time-consuming, process.

Around 5 o'clock I closed out my mapping program, checked one last time for any emails, then logged out and shut down the computer, before heading to the basement to do my morning exercises.

Afterwards, I took care of changing out the fabric and cord spools and setting up empty ones for my spiders to work on. After that, I opened two of the basement windows and fed my coral tanks with mineral supplements and insects; the modified coral that Amy had created was able to eat and process the insects quickly and efficiently, ensuring that all of the elements in the tanks had sufficient and proper nutrition.

I checked the test platform, and after careful consideration, sent a stream of my less useful swarm in to it so that it would be ready for building some new weapons later. I thought that I'd check with Amy once she had a chance to eat her breakfast and see if she wanted to do some remote testing.

I had just finished all of that when Amy called me.

eager “Good morning, Sweetie. Sleep well?”
“Yep, slept great, yourself?”

“Pretty good. Any plans for today?”

“Yeah, a few. I’m going to finishing up the outfits I want to try to sell on Saturday, and finish pricing the jewelry we’ve finished making. I also finished the designs for the UV laser and Arc Thrower that we talked about, we’ll need to do some testing on the organic conductors and insulators; I’ve got a whole set of possible formulations, but I'll need your help to do all that. Maybe once you're settled in at school, we could work on those?”

eager“Remotely? Through the NEXUS? Absolutely. I'll open the link fully as soon as I get to my first class and then we can get started; with your help I should have no trouble doing both.”

happy“Excellent! Can we meet up right after school?”

“Certainly, did you have something specific in mind?”

“Yeah, if possible, I'd like to go to the Library, pick up some new books and listen to new music for a couple of hours before you start your shift.”

“That sounds lovely, in fact I'll ask Vicky if she'll give us a ride so we can get there sooner.”

“Will she be okay with that?”

“Oh sure, she likes to drive people places, I think it's a change from flying; either that or she thinks of it as a rite of passage to adulthood; not sure which.”

“It could be either, there's really no way to tell.”

“True dat. Anyway, I'm done with my workout, so I'm going to get some breakfast while you finish yours. Talk to you later, Sweetie.”

happy“Alright, I will. Talk to you later, Love.”

Even as Amy disconnected, I decided to do another set of lifts, but unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, even with my iso-mod set to 95%, I was finding that none of the lifting strained me. I had maxed out the bar at 385lbs, which was the equivalent of over 750lbs, and it was still easy to lift; it really didn't matter whether I was bench pressing, dead lifting or even doing sitting curls; I could handle the weight easily. At this rate, I would be lifting over a ton by the weekend, which was on the edge of Brute 5. Once I figured out how to get more weight to lift, I could probably train it up to a solid Brute 5, edging towards Brute 6.

Checking my internal clock, I saw it was almost 6 am, so I put everything away and headed upstairs to grab a shower before dad got up.

Showering and dressing for the day only took me 20 minutes, so I was back in the kitchen before dad's alarm clock even went off. Looking out the window, I checked the overcast sky and decided to go with something warm and comforting this morning, so I made a big pot of scratch oatmeal, and while it was cooking, I chopped up an apple and some walnuts to add to our oatmeal and put them into bowls so we could add them to suit our tastes.

I served up two bowls of oatmeal as dad came downstairs and sat down with my Linux
Administration book to refresh myself, since I had been concentrating on my GED and AP exams for the last month or so.

Dad brought the morning paper with him into the kitchen and sat down to eat while checking out the headlines and national stories.

Twenty minutes later, Dad put the paper down and cleared his dishes, before saying, “All right, Taylor, I'm going to head in a little early today, we've got a goods train coming in at 9:00 this morning and I want to make sure everything runs smoothly as it's a special run of goods for a bunch of stores in the city. A company down in Boston has been developing a new distribution net for most of New England and this is the first to come to the 'Bay, so we don't want any problems from any of the gangs.”

I looked up at him and frowned, “New? I thought that using trains to deliver goods to a local distributor was old news.”

He nodded as he headed to the living room, “It is and it isn't. Using trains fell out of primary use back in the eighty's in favor of using truck fleets since it allowed 'just in time' deliveries and eliminated the need for a lot of warehousing and personnel. This new system is sort of a hybrid, where trains deliver on a weekly basis and local trucks move the goods where they are needed. The cost-benefit analysis is complex but looks really good; between 26% and 28% savings over the old system and about 14% over the current system with current and projected fuel costs. AAT is using New England as a test bed for the system and once any problems are smoothed over they plan to expand down the Eastern seaboard to Florida and west to the Mississippi. Eventually it'll be nationwide, but that'll take a few years since it takes time to coordinate everything so tightly.”

Putting on his coat, he grabbed his lunch and gave me a hug before heading out the kitchen door.

I watched him for a few seconds as he started the car and drove off to work. Once the car was out of sight, I sighed then cleaned up the kitchen from making breakfast and started the dishwasher. I headed downstairs and worked through my morning katas, doing a full set in each form trying to ensure that I was equally at ease no matter which form I was in.

I finished with my katas a little before 9:00, including setting up a fabric treatment cycle and shifting new spools into place when I shifted forms. Once the drying sequence was in progress I headed back upstairs to finish up the outfits I planned on selling this Saturday. While I sewed the last of the blouses I also had Thora double check my work on inputting the data from the city's underground.

While I was sewing upstairs, I reached out to Amy to see how much we could accomplish while working remotely.

happy “Morning Amy, are you ready to try doing some remote testing?”

happy “Sure, trig is fairly easy, and if I get stuck you'll help me, right?”

“Of course I will. Anyway, the first thing I think we should do is work up some conductor and insulator test samples. You remember the different spec's we came up with, right?”

“Oh sure, Sweetie, in fact I've got an idea that should give us a body temperature superconductor/insulation combo in a package that's smaller than a human hair.”

“Alright then, let's start in bay 3 first. Let me know when you want me to test it and I'll go down and run my checks on your sample.”
“Sounds good, give me a minute.”

I continued to sew as I watched Amy use the test bed to begin creating a set of fine conductors, each of which was numbered and attached to the upper edge of bay 3. At first I was amazed at the tiny differences between each strand, then I realized that she was tapping into my physics knowledge and practice with electronics to create tiny, incremental changes in the makeup of both the conductors and insulators. Once I realized what she was doing, I carefully recorded the variations in my memory, though I planned on creating a matrix array later for further analysis.

It only took her about 10 minutes to create the first 50 strands for me to test, so I put aside my sewing and headed downstairs to do the preliminary tests. Hopefully this would help us pin down a number of options that we could then really test out. I would probably need to build a heavy duty test set to really push the limits of what these strands could do, but this was enough for us to get started with.

Actually testing each of the strands ended up taking almost 30 minutes to complete, and let me find two strands that seemed to have the properties we were looking for.

“Okay, this one is the best conductor, and this one over here has the best insulator.”

I flashed the composition and structure of both strands to Amy, and gave her some suggestions on what might improve each of them, without sacrificing strength or flexibility.

After a moments thought, I could feel her nod and both strands dissolved back into the soupy liquid filling Bay 3.

“I’m ready to start the next test series, though I suspect it will take a bit longer this time, since I’m looking at REALLY minuscule variations.”

“Alright, I’m heading back up to finish working on the skirt I was sewing, I’ll be back when you have the next fifty strands ready for testing. I may do some research on a heavy-duty tester for the conductors, because I don’t think my handheld meters are going to be good enough.”

“No problem.”

Other than a couple of pauses to shift the fabric I was treating and to run each series of tests on the strands that Amy was creating, I worked steadily until just after noon, when I finished the last of my outfits, including the tags listing their size and that they had been hand-made. I made a quick lunch of pasta and meat sauce, since I had finished most of the left-overs as snacks during the morning.

I selected the 4 best strands that Amy had come up with and put them into a small ziplock bag until I could do further testing. I then set up a layered wood and aluminum sheet target that I planned on using for my laser tests. While I got that ready, Amy constructed her first organic laser; a biochemical UV laser.

She carefully followed the design I had found and modified based on our previous experience with bio-modding and had it ready before I even had the target ready.

“The target’s ready Amy, I think that for the first trial, use a single pulse, as fast as you can fire it. Just let me put my goggles on…” I had to take a few minutes to find the old welding goggles and put them on, then said, “Ready.”
I cranked my speed as high as I could and watched as Amy triggered the laser for the first time.

Hssssss…POPI blinked and said, “Whoa…”

amazed “Uh, Amy? I think that one has a little problem.”

“Yeah, no kidding. I’m thinking that we'll put that one on the shelf for now.”

“Oh yeah, it sort of melted from overheating.” I looked at the target and the small burn that had gone almost halfway through the layers, and went on, “Good output though.”

giggle “Yeah, but a single shot isn't enough, and I really don't like the idea of that much heat being released inside my arm.”

“Me neither. Any ideas for the next one?”

“Yes…maybe. What if instead of a chemical laser, we try a solid-state laser instead?”

thoughtful “Diode pumped? Maybe a multi-stage design? We could also try an organic heat-sink with lots of blood flow to pull the heat away. Though we'll still have to figure out a good way to dissipate it.”

“Yeah, let's try that route. Think you can come up with a design for us before you need to leave for Arcadia?”

“Eh, maybe. I'll check my books and some of my resource sites online and see what I can come up with. I may need to grab some books at the library this afternoon, though.”

“Alright, I need to head for lunch now, so you go do that voodoo, that you do, so well.”

giggle “Blazing Saddles, right?”

“Yes. I love that movie, it's got so many terrible jokes in it that you can’t help but crack up the whole time you're watching it.”

“Very true. Anyway, I'll let you go for now and wrap up my work here and try to get started on a new design. Maybe we can work on it tonight or in the morning before my test. I'll have to be here to do the setup and testing while Dad’s at work, so that means Friday at the earliest. Still, I can work up some design options.”

“Love you, Sweetie. I'll see you after school, alright?”

“Love you, too. I should be there well before school lets out.”

I carefully put everything away and opened the windows to air out the basement from our latest laser tests. I also rinsed out a bunch of my glassware and laid them out on a towel on the chem workbench, as if I had been doing some of my experiments today. Just in case Dad came down to the basement.

I checked on the crockpot lasagna I was trying out, and decided that it seemed to be pretty good, though I suspected that I would prefer the more traditional method. Oh well, Dad would have to let me know which he preferred tonight.
I researched Solid State Diode-Pumped UV lasers online, and found some good primers and schematics for fairly low-power industrial lasers. I worked up some different designs for both pulse and CW lasers, though I fully expected to have to make more changes as we ran our tests. The lasers and Arc Thrower that Amy had described to me had at least preliminary designs, but I decided to design both a pistol and rifle version that others could use as well as the internal mods. I could see that Amy and I would need to dedicate a lot of time to just working on our prototypes.

After lunch, I did a quick inventory of the clothing I had ready for sale, double-checking that they all had the appropriate labels before packing them up for Saturday. Afterwards I did the same with the jewelry Amy and I had been making, putting the last of the jewelry into small ziplock bags with a price tag on it. I put the larger pieces, bracelets and necklaces into individual boxes so that everything was well protected and could be displayed easily.

I packed all of it into a large cardboard box and set it aside to bring upstairs with me before I straightened up the basement and closed all the windows prior to heading upstairs to get ready to meet Amy at Arcadia.

A quick check with my swarm convinced me that the weather was still iffy, lots of clouds and it was probably going to rain before I got home tonight. Looking through my closet, I chose a nice pair of jeans, a light yellow blouse I had made last week and a sleeveless cardigan sweater. When I pulled out the black trench coat that used to be mom's, I saw the two leather jackets I had bought a couple of months ago and realized that I hadn't even started on replacing the lining and pockets like I had planned. Another project for next week, though if it went as well as I hoped, I might not wait until Dad's birthday to give it to him. It would make a nice jacket for the spring and the spider silk lining would make it decent armor as well.

Before I shut down the computer, I checked my email one last time and found one from an unexpected source: Aisha.

From: anlaborn@winslow.bb.nh.edu
To: trhebert@echofreenet.com
Subj: Getting outta this hellhole

Hey Taylor,

I tried to get someone here to help me with those tests you told me about, but they claim that either they 'know nothing' or they can't do them at the school.

Personnally, I think there full of shit. But what do I know?

Anyways, could you check with the library like you said and see if they can do those tests for me? And when?

Thanks muchly,

Aisha

A few moments of thought let me decide on how best to respond to Aisha's plea for help.
From: trhebert@echofreenet.com
To: anlaborn@winslow.bb.nh.edu
Subj: Re: Getting outta this hellhole

Hey Aisha,

I'm going to the Central Library this afternoon around 3:00, 3:30. I'll get you all the info on the tests and send it to you as an attachment or with links. Hopefully using your school account will work, since I don't have another one for you.

Talk to you later,

Taylor

Once the email was on it's way, I finished shutting everything down and left for the bus, locking up the house behind me.

---------------------------------Legion*** Amy ***Legion-------------------

The morning was interesting, though mostly because I was working with Taylor through the NEXUS to run a long series of tests on organic super-conductors and -insulators. Being able to 'borrow' a little bit of her mult-tasking abilities let me pay attention in class as well as work at her house.

Eventually I finished my morning classes and headed for lunch. I reminded Vicky that she was dropping Taylor and I off at the library, and she nodded, and said, “Sure, I'll drop you off on my way home, though I still don't get why you two like to spend time at the library, but I guess it takes all kinds.”

On my way to the cafeteria I stopped at my locker and put away my textbooks and pulled out On Basilisk Station, having decided to reread the series from the beginning again. Closing the door, I continued on to get my lunch.

One of the nice things about Arcadia was that the lunches were usually pretty good, though we did have to pay for them. Today's menu included a tasty Penne Casserole with meat sauce and steamed carrots. I figured that wouldn't be enough fill me up so I grabbed a Chicken Caesar Salad to go with it as well as a coke.

Looking around, I decided to sit with Dennis and Chris today. They were both part of the geek crowd, so I figured that I could eat and read in peace with them, while continuing to work remotely with Taylor. Besides, Vicky's usual crowd always seemed to want to chat with me, and I had less than nothing in common with most of them. At least with the geeks I could hope that they'd either provide some interesting conversation or least let me just chill out while reading my book.

Sitting next to Chris, I set my tray down and nodded to both of them and said, “Hey. Hope you don't mind, but Vicky's friends are getting on my nerves so I wanted to sit where I could eat and read in peace. And maybe get some intelligent conversation.”
Chris smiled at me and said, “Hey yourself. Sit and eat; though if you want intelligent conversation today, you'll have to ignore Dennis.”

“Oy! What did I do to deserve that burn?” He asked with a look of confusion on his freckled face.

“Don't even go there dude, you tried to use the crap on PHO as a legitimate source for current affairs; in Bronson's class, no less.”

I winced at that. Ms. Bronson was a nice teacher, very smart and good at getting the students to really engage in her World Affairs class. But she was a serious hard-ass about sources and references; trying to use any of usual Net sources was always a gamble, but to try and use a forum site like PHO as anything other than a source of rumor was just asking for trouble.

“Tell me you did NOT try to pawn off that crap as actual factual information?” I asked him scornfully.

Chris snickered and said, “Yep, he sure did. He couldn't use his actual source,” he looked at me and raised an eyebrow, then went on, “so he tried to bluff using some of the PHO posts as proof that civil unrest is rising across the country.”

I paused with my fork of pasta almost to my mouth and said, “Well, that was a monumentally stupid thing to do, especially in her class. You're probably right about the trend, but you could have found much better sources to reference than PHO; you should have known that she wouldn't accept it as legitimate.”

Dennis looked dejected and said, “I tried, but I couldn't find any that would meet her standards that supported my position.”

I thought for a few minutes while eating my pasta, then said, “Did you go to the DOJ website and look at the Uniform Crime Reports or any of the major university PoliSci Departments? You should be able to find a bunch of trend data at either place.”

Chris laughed at Dennis’ stunned look while I continued to eat. Eventually Dennis managed to speak up, “Okay, how in the world do you know something like that. Especially cold, without any time to look for things.”

I gave him a superior smile and said, “Maybe because I'm just that good,” I paused to eat some of my carrots and then went on, “or maybe I did that paper two weeks ago and remember my sources.”

Chris managed to slide Dennis' tray to the side just in time for Dennis to drop his head to the table in mock despair.

“Nicely done, Amy. And she's right, I used Harvard and Stanford both for my sources, and the DOJ site for projected trends. You could've asked me last week or even last night; waiting until homeroom was just stupid, man.”

He turned a light red and explained, “Yeah, but I forgot to write down the assignment and completely forgot about it until this morning at breakfast. I wrote most of it while mom drove me in, and looked up some quick references before class, but … well, she didn't think much of it.”

I snickered and said, “Yeah, big surprise there. Next time, ask someone for help sooner. Me, for example; I'm almost always two to three weeks ahead on my assignments, so I can at least point you in the right direction. If you're really stuck, I'll even let you ask Taylor for pointers; just don't expect her to do your work for you; she won't do that for anyone.”
He looked thankful, but puzzled and asked me, “Taylor? Who's that?”

I pushed my tray to the side and opened my salad and poured the dressing on top before saying, “My girlfriend; she's taking her GED tomorrow, so she's way ahead of you on school work,” I smirked at him and said, “Smarter, too.”

Both of the boys laughed at that and we all settled down to eat our lunches before we ran out of time.

I finished my salad, cleared my spot, and then said, “I'll be right back,” before I took it to the dirty tray conveyor, dropped it off, and headed back to my seat. Looking over at Vicky, I saw that she and her friends seemed to have settled in for the full period.

I pulled out my book and turned to Chapter Five, where the Fearless finally arrives at Basilisk Station and Honor finds out that Pavel Young is the Senior Officer on Station. After a few minutes, both boys finished eating and cleared their trays, but they came back to keep me company.

Of course, Dennis was the first to speak, “So, good book?”

I looked at over the top of my book and said, “Very good; are you actually interested or just making conversation?”

Chris nodded his head vigorously and interjected, “It is, it really is.”

He looked first at Chris, then tilted his head to one side, looking at the book cover and said, “Well, I was just making conversation, but now I'm actually interested.”

I smiled at him and marked my page, before I handed him the book as I said, “It's a classic of military Sci-Fi, the first in a series that has at least a dozen separate books, not counting spin-offs and short story collections. The genre is sometimes called 'Space Opera' because it is pretty much written on an Epic scale. The books have sort of the flavor of the Horatio Hornblower books about the Napoleonic Wars set in a high-tech, interstellar universe. The main protagonist, Honor Harrington, starts as a Commander in the Royal Manticoran Navy, and the series follows her life and career, with all of the ups and downs you could want.”

Dennis handed me my book back as Chris took over the task of explaining the series, with his usual scattered description that switched, seemingly at random, between plot descriptions, battle scenes and waxing poetic about the tech described in the story.

Fortunately Dennis was used to Chris's tendency to wander when he was excited about whatever he was describing, so he seemed to be able to follow along just fine.

A few minutes before lunch was over I had the idea to check Arcadia's library to see if they had anything useful about lasers, but before I got up, it occurred to me that I actually had a subject matter expert sitting across from me. “Chris, got a question for you; does Arcadia's library have any good books on lasers? Especially solid state lasers?”

He looked at bit puzzled by my question, but told me, “Not really. There are a couple of books on the history of lasers, but that's about it. Why? I wouldn't have pegged you to be interested in something like that.”

I shrugged and explained, “I'm not, but I was talking to Taylor before school, and she was asking about, um, Diode-Pumped Solid-State Lasers, so I thought I'd ask you if there were any good books in Arcadia's library, otherwise we'll check with the Central Library this afternoon.”
“Oh, okay. She'll probably have better luck at the Central Library, if nothing else they can order in books for her,” he bit his lip in indecision before continuing on, “um, if you don't mind me asking, why does she want to know about lasers?”

I shrugged and said, “Not sure, probably something to do with her AP exams. I'm pretty sure she has some next week and the week after, so it's probably just to fill in a gap for her Physics Exam.”

Dennis frowned as he looked over and asked me, “Please don't take this wrong, but I thought that you had to take the GED if you couldn't graduate from high school? How can you take the AP exams if you have to take your GED?”

I just smiled at him and said, “There's lots of reasons that someone might need to take their GED; in Taylor's case it's because she's homeschooling herself. She's completed the state requirements and is ready to take her test, after that she's planning on taking several AP exams; I never asked how many she's planning on taking, though I know she's taking at least her US and World History and Psychology exams, possibly some of the other ones as well.”

Dennis looked puzzled for a moment, then turned positively white. Chris spoke up before I could and asked him, “Dennis, you okay man?”

His mouth opened and closed a few times, as if he couldn't quite form words, before he said, “Shit. I'm so sorry Amy, I didn't realize you were talking about Ms. Hebert.”

“Pretty sure I never mentioned her last name to you, so just how do you know it?” I asked him curiously.

“I, uh, well I found out by accident, sort of …” he lowered his voice and went on, “Chris, this is seriously classified and you're NOT cleared for it, okay? So don't ask and don't go looking for more information.”

Chris got a big smile on his face, but said in a quiet, but very serious tone of voice, “Got it Dennis. Three monkeys it is.”

I snickered at that and said, “Maybe he can't tell, but I can, so I'll give you the short version; Taylor was subjected to about a year and a half of concentrated torment at her school, that culminated in attempted murder. That's why Winslow got hammered on Monday. A whole bunch of people are going to be losing their jobs and may possibly be facing jail time for what they did or failed to do.”

Chris looked shocked at that, and said, “Daaamnn! I heard that Winslow was bad, but to just let that shit happen, that … that's just completely fucked up.”

I sighed and said, “Yeah, pretty much. When I was called in to try to heal Taylor, she was so badly damaged and had so little bio-mass to work with, that it ended up taking four days to completely heal her and restore her to her proper condition. Miss Militia promised Taylor's dad that everyone responsible would be called to account, which is probably the only reason the Dock Workers, and just about every other union worker in the city, didn't tear Winslow down to it's foundations and lynch the faculty.” I smirked at both of them and said, “Danny's a really nice guy, but he's got a serious temper if you push him far enough; and the Three Bitches and Winslow damn sure pushed him far enough.”

Dennis, not surprisingly, was the one to ask, “Three Bitches? I could hear the caps on those words; who are they?”

I started to tell him, but paused in thought, “Ahh … No, I better not. No names; even if you figure
it out once the trials start, please don't speculate about their identities. Right or wrong, bringing up names could cause problems for the court cases, which would be … bad.”

He nodded his understanding and said, “She's right about that, last thing either of us want to do is get on M&M's bad side. And screwing up this case would do that for sure.”

Chris nodded his head and agreed, “Not a problem, I don't need to know anything more, so mum's the word,” he paused, then went on, “though, if there's anything I can do to help, officially or otherwise, just let me know, okay?”

I smiled at him and said, “Thanks Chris, that means a lot.” I checked the time on my internal clock and then said, “Lunch is about over, let’s scoot so we can get our stuff for class.”

Dennis nodded and pointed at my book as he asked, “Could I borrow it when you are done?”

“Sure, when I’m finished, but I bet Chris has a copy you can borrow; if not you can always download it from the publisher's website.”

“Oh yeah! I'll send you the link,” he said excitedly as he pulled his phone out to find the URL.

“Dude, it can wait until after class, it's not like I'm gonna be able to do anything with it until after class anyway.”

Chris put his phone away with a chagrined smile and said, “Yeah, good point. I'll get the links for you, but if you'd like I can get my copy for you as well.”

“I'll take a look at the links you send me and see if I like it. I may just have to buy my own copy if it's as good as you two say. Oh well, I need to head to gym next, how 'bout you Amy?”

I answered as I rose from the table, “ELA, then Bio; I need to grab some things from my locker first, though.”

I led the boys out of the cafeteria and towards my locker, which was on the way towards theirs. One of the advantages of knowing who all the Wards were was that I also knew where their lockers and classes were. Once I had figured out who they were, I had decided to make sure I would always have a good idea how to find any or all of them in an emergency. After all, back then I was just the squishy healer, and I liked the idea of knowing where to go to find some Cape backup; I knew Vicky would defend me, but I also had no illusions about her tendency to charge headlong into any fight that came along.

Stopping at my locker, I opened it and then turned to address them, “Thanks for keeping me company during lunch today, it made for a nice change from Vicky's chatterbox friends,” I looked at them speculatively and asked, “would you be interested in doing it again tomorrow? Maybe we could bring in books that we like and compare them; sort of a low-key book club for geeks.”

They exchanged a quick look and then smiled at me and Dennis said, “Yeah, that sounds like fun, certainly a lot more fun than just eating and talking about school work.”

Chris nodded his agreement as I pulled two textbooks and a binder out of my locker and slammed it closed, and he said, “I've got a couple of good books I'll bring to lunch; a different Weber book and an older one by Drake. Hopefully, you'll like them.”

I smiled at him before turning to head to ELA, and said over my shoulder, “I probably will, and I'll look on my shelves to find some good books,” adding as I walked away, “you do the same, Dennis.”
The two of them nodded and waved as they headed off to class and disappeared in the crowd of other students.

--------------------Legion*** Taylor ***Legion-------------------

I put some sandwiches, snacks and drinks in my backpack and grabbed my umbrella, just in case, as I headed out the door. The weather was overcast and cool, but the rain was holding off as I walked to the bus stop. Double-checking the time as I took a seat in the bus stop shelter, I saw that I had about 5 minutes before my bus was due to arrive.

I took the spare time to run a quick scan of the covered areas of Brockton Bay, looking and listening for any problems or trouble. Even with my extreme level of multi-tasking I found that it took both time and concentration to scan properly; my bugs provided a very comprehensive scan of location, scents and vibrations, but not so much in the way of visual and auditory data. If I focused intently, I could 'hear' pretty well, but parsing the visual data was still hard; I had to combine tens of thousands of different signals into a coherent image, which wasn't easy. I could do it, but it took time to blend it all together; it was much easier to use birds or larger animals with better eyes to provide me with usable visual images.

When my bus arrived, I took a seat in the rear, which was mostly empty as usual for this time of day, and pulled out one of mom's old books, Ender's Game. The premise looked good, and the first couple of chapters were interesting. While I was reading, I tagged all of my relay birds that I could locate, which seemed to be about 2/3 of them and tried to implant some instructions, sort of how I did with my spiders. What I was hoping to do was to allow them to fly freely around the city, but to regularly 'check in' by either roosting near or in one of the relay modded trees.

It only took a few minutes to finish implanting the instructions, as the larger brain seemed to accept the instructions much easier than the spider's, so I decided to try something more. Because I couldn't reach all of my relay birds, I attempted to 'record' a command that would be sent to any relay-birds that did not already have the new instructions implanted ordering them to land on a modded tree and call for my attention.

When I finished with setting up my recorded commands, I started brainstorming some things that Amy and I could create, not just mods for us, but creations that could increase food production, decontaminate polluted soil and water, generate electricity, all sorts of things.

“Hey Amy, got a second to chat?”

happy “Sure Sweetie, what did you have in mind?”

“I was doing some brainstorming of different creations we could make and it reminded me of when you set up our forms, specifically the data storage that you designed to hold each of our forms.”

curiosity “Okay, what was your idea about them?”

“Well, you said that the main one had lots of extra, unused storage, right? So, is there any way that we can use that storage? As in, can we record things like music, movies, books and then pull it up later to listen or watch? And even better, do you think we could develop an actual computer that could run programs and applications?”

thoughtful “Uh…maybe? I don't know enough about how computers work to say for sure, but
between the two of us we could probably figure it out. Being able to see or listen would be easy, but programming it or loading things in might be tricky to do.”

excited “Probably, but it would be so worth it. Besides, just the little bit we've done with developing the power sources, storage and now the conductors, tells me it should work. I'm sure we could create an organic micro-computer that is just a copy of the larger PC's, but I'd rather figure out how to do it more, organically, so that it could also be encoded into our DNA. We might even be able to re-purpose some of the unused capacity of our brains and automate the interface for more efficiency.”

“Alright, Sweetie, put that down for this weekend, we can do some testing for the interface and check the seeds for capacity and set up a set of secondary connections for data transfer.”

excited “In fact, that would actually work for the medical scanner we talked about, we could work on that as the first test platform before we worked up our mods.”

“Sure, that would let us test out a number of different medical functions as well developing the computing capabilities we want.”

“We can check the library for any books on bio-medical scanners and equipment as well as for the lasers before we chill out in the music room.”

“Sounds like a plan. So, any new music ideas? If not I brought a couple of my mom's cd's for us to try out.”

“It sort of depends on what they have on the shelves, but if nothing catches our eyes, we can go with your cd's.”

happy “Alright, my bus is pulling up now, so I'm going to go for now, I'll be waiting in my usual spot for you, okay Love?”

anticipation “Yep, see you soon, Sweetie.”

Disconnecting from the call with Amy, I checked to make sure our low-level linkage was still open, but inactive; which it was, just as it had been all night. A few minutes later the bus pulled up to Arcadia's stop and I put my coat on and stepped down to the sidewalk and headed over to the bench I normally waited at.

I took out my thermos of juice and poured myself a cup to sip while I ate a few cookies and read some more of *Ender's Game*. After about five minutes of waiting, Arcadia finally let out for the day, so I packed up my bag and stood up to meet Amy and Vicky as they exited the side door onto the annex area.

Vicky waved to me as Amy ran ahead to greet me, hugging me tightly and then easing back enough to kiss me. “Missed you Sweetie! It’s been a long week, and it’s only Wednesday.”

“Missed you, too,” I looked over at Vicky and said, “Hi Vicky. Thanks for the ride.”

She tossed her keys in the air and as she caught them said, “Not a problem, it’s hardly out of my way and I was just going to go home and do my homework, so I’m not in any kind of a hurry.”

With that she led us across the street to the student parking lot and unlocked her car. Amy held the
door for me and slid onto the seat next to me, before slamming the door and putting on her seatbelt.

Vicky carefully eased out of the parking lot and headed north-west towards the Central Library. Because most of the traffic was headed towards the southern suburbs, the traffic thinned out and we made good time on our way.

Less than ten minutes later Vicky pulled up in front of the Library and said, “Alrighty, Central Library stop, I hope you had a comfortable trip and please ride on Vicky Trailways again.”

I laughed as Amy and I exited the car and waved at Vicky as she pulled away. We walked into the library and headed to the central desk to take care of a few things before we started looking for books.

“Hi Mrs. Jameson, how’s it going?” I asked politely.

She looked up and smiled at me, “Fine Taylor, yourself?”

“Quite well. I have a question for you though; I met a girl from Winslow who wants to take the career aptitude tests, but her Counselor told her that they weren’t available at Winslow. Can she take them here, and if so, can I get a link to send her so she can learn more about them?”

She pursed her lips in thought, then said, “Certainly. Give me a moment and I’ll get you a fact sheet that covers most of what she would want to know, including how to schedule the tests.”

Suiting her actions to her words, she turned away and started looking through one of the file cabinets behind her; Amy stepped closer and said, “I’ve got a music room from 4:00 to 6:00, though we’ll need to leave before then. That should give us plenty of time to find the books we talked about as well as some new CD’s to listen to.”

“Great! Soon as I finish here, I’ll start looking for some books on Lasers while you see what you can on Bio-Medical equipment. After that I’ll meet you by the music racks, alright?”

Amy opened her mouth to reply when Mrs. Jameson turned back to us and said, “Here you go Taylor. I’m sorry it’s a bit blurry, but it’s an old copy. I suppose that I’ll have to make up a new one someday, when I have more time.”

I looked at the page she had given me and saw that it was still legible, though more than a little blurry. I folded it up and slid it into my backpack for safe keeping, planning to make a better copy of it to send to Aisha this evening.

Thanking her, I turned back to Amy, and asked her, “Ready to go?”

She nodded and gestured towards the stacks and said, “After you, m’dear. I’ll head for the 610’s and you can check out the 660’s or 680’s for your books.”

“Maybe, but I’ll probably have better luck in the 620’s under Light/Lasers.”

“Seriously? I would have thought they’d be under Manufacturing or Engineering Technology,” she said, clearly perplexed.

“I’ll check there as well, but I doubt that I’ll find much that’s useful. Not unless there’s something specifically aimed at manufacturing processes,” I said.

“Huh. Learn something new everyday,” she said as we walked into the row labeled 600 – 630.
Amy stopped at the first set of shelves and started to browse, while I ended up on the other side of the row, about half way down, before I found the section on Lasers. I quickly found an Introduction to Lasers: Diode Pumped Solid State Lasers, as well as two advanced texts, one of which looked to be almost pure theory, rather than practical examples. After a few moments of thought, I decided to take all three, since even if I really didn’t grasp the advanced material completely, it should help point me in the right direction. Sort of how the advanced math books had helped me, even if not right away.

Amy joined me as I headed towards the CD racks, carrying two large books herself. One of them was on Biomedical Engineering and the other was on specific diagnostic devices and tools, like EEG’s, ECG’s, Pulse-Oxymeters and automated Blood Pressure sensors.

We looked through the available CD’s, which seemed to be a bit thinner than normal, with a lot of Country/Western and Classical choices, but really light on anything else.

“This is just sad,” Amy said, holding up a Lady GaGa CD. “This is about the best here, and really, I hear GaGa on the radio too much as it is. Oh well, I brought a couple from home and you said you had some of your mom’s music, right?”

“Yes, one by an Italian pianist and composer that’s pretty good and some old stuff that you may not have heard before.”

As we walked towards the music room that Amy had reserved, she asked me, “Like what?”

“Aqualung, Days of Future Passed, and Divenire by Ludovico Einaudi. Mom had really eclectic taste in music, so I grew up listening to a lot of different stuff, some of it from all the way back in the 60’s. Well, not counting Jazz and Swing, which are even older than that.”

Amy checked to make sure the room was empty before she opened the door and let me in. “Aqualung? Who’s that by?”

I smiled at her, sat down on the sofa and pulled the CD’s I had brought out and showed them to her. “Aqualung is by Jethro Tull and Days of Future Passed is by the Moody Blues.”

She shook her head and said, “I don’t think I’ve ever heard of Jethro Tull, but Moody Blues sounds kinda familiar.”

“I think you’ll like them both, though you have probably heard some of their songs before without realizing it, since they still get some play time on oldies stations and on their birthdays. Anyway, do you have a preference as to which we should listen to first?” I asked her.

“Hmm, let’s go with the Moody Blues first and then one of my CD’s to follow up with, I think you’ll like Lungs by Florence and the Machine. It’s got some really good songs on it, and I’m hoping they’ll release another CD soon,” Amy said as she removed a CD and placed it on the table next to the Aqualung CD.

Once the music started, we each selected one of our new books and began to read, slipping into the NEXUS effortlessly, and almost without thinking about it, deepening the almost subliminal connection so we could share information and ideas easily.

For the next 90 minutes or so we simply cuddled next to each other, listening to a nice variety of music while reading through the books we had selected. Finally, around 5:30, we packed up our CD’s and headed for the check-out desk to check out the books we wanted to take with us.

As we stepped out on to the sidewalk, I looked up at the overcast sky and double-checked the time.
before saying, “Amy, I have a pretty good variety of sandwiches and snacks packed, so if we pick up some drinks, we could stop at Linden park and eat under the pavilion.”

Amy smiled back at me and said, “Sounds good to me; almost as good as the sandwiches smell. There’s a Speedway on the way to the park and we can get drinks and stuff there.”

“Alright then, let’s go,” I said.

Five minutes brisk walk brought us to the Speedway where we bought a couple bottles of Pepsi’s and some apples to go with our sandwiches. Amy also chose a pint of Ben & Jerry’s Chocolate Chip Cookie Dough ice cream for dessert, so I grabbed a couple of plastic spoons from the food bar to eat it with. I decided right then to pick up a couple of those combination silverware sets that were used for camping, considering how often we had picnic lunches.

Crossing the street, we walked a short way into the park and took our seats next to each other under one of the picnic pavilions to be out of the rain that had started just as we got to the park.

Setting my books aside, I took out the box of sandwiches as well as a second box that had crackers, cheese sticks and both celery and baby carrots for snacks. Holding out the sandwich box to Amy, I watched her choose a roast beef sandwich and a tuna sandwich to start with, after which I took a ham and cheese to go with my tuna sandwich.

Once we had chosen our sandwiches, I put the box of snacks between us and began eating. As I worked on my first sandwich, I decided to bring up the topic of new mods from this morning.

“Amy, I’ve got some ideas that I wanted to discuss with you, and thought now would be a good time.”

curious “Now’s good. What did you have in mind?”

“Well, first of all was food; I was thinking of something that could be grown quickly after an Endbringer attack or something similar. Maybe a bush or low tree that has a couple different types of ‘fruit’ that can provide enough calories and balanced nutrition for a number of people.”

“Hmm. Yeah, I could do that … I think, anyway. I’d definitely need to do some experimenting on that, which will require both space and privacy since I can’t imagine that they’ll look like anything … well, normal.”

“So we would need either an isolated field or greenhouse?”

“Greenhouse preferably. More privacy and easier to work on without risk of external contamination. What else did you have in mind?”

“Well, continuing on the same theme, I was thinking some way to provide clean, potable water, possibly linked with a sewage disposal system. Maybe even a large structure that provides water, showers and toilets into one system.”

thoughtful “I suppose … but I think it would be easier to have the water plant as it’s own unit, but supplying the ‘sanitation station’ as a separate building/system. In a refugee situation, I could even have the sewage processed and sterilized before sent over to where the food plants are growing, to increase efficiency and production.” Amy paused in thought for a few minutes, then went on, “How would you do the water?”
“I was thinking a form of root structure, with multiple pumps to help raise the water to the surface, as well as to provide proper pressure. After that you could grow some filters, maybe even a reverse-osmosis system to ensure it’s purified and safe to drink.”

“Hmm, R-O really won’t work in this type of system, since if I recall correctly, the membrane requires a pretty large pressure differential to work properly. However, I think I can come up with a different method of purifying water, the big issue is going to be to ensure a high enough volume and flow-rate.”

“That would be great, depending on how stable and self-sufficient it is, it could even be planted or grown in isolated villages to help provide safe water to the inhabitants.”

“Hmm, in that case I’ll definitely want to make some changes so that it can actually pull from from the atmosphere, not just ground water or aquifers. That’s just another reason to need an isolated location to experiment at. I may even need to try it out in different climate zones, to see if I need different variants to handle different environments,” Amy explained.

I nodded and said, “I’m thinking we should check out some of the small, abandoned farms north of the river. Which segue’s neatly into my next idea; I want to do some serious mods to some of the gray squirrels around that mine we found.”

“Oh? Like what?”

“Well, bigger and stronger to start with, about twice the size and as strong as you can make them. Better hands for gripping and manipulating, and the best senses you can give them. No reproductive systems, or at least disabled unless you activate them. Plus anything else you can think of that would help them infiltrate the mine or any other facility that we need access to,” I told her as I explained my idea.

“So you want to use them to actually open it up and get inside?” She asked me.

“If at all possible, yes. I know it’s a bit out of the way, but that may be all to the good for us. Depending on what we find, there may even be remote access points on one of the nearby estates or even underwater.”

Pensive “Hmm, let me think about that while I work tonight, I should have a working plan by morning. In fact, that gives me an idea for some equipment for us, external equipment rather than internal mods.”

“Oh, like what?”

“A small rebreather/gill unit so we can stay underwater for extended periods; a net caster to capture people; possibly a way to fly using a wearable organism of some type. All things that need room to develop and test, which we don’t currently have.”

“Yep, which is one of the reasons that I hope we can get into the mine and take it for our own. Squatting in an abandoned factory or warehouse won’t be secure enough for the kinds of things we want to work on. Hopefully, we can develop a large enough revenue stream without resorting to taking ‘spoils’.”

“You still have issues with that, don’t you?”
“Some, though I’ve been giving it some serious thought, since done right, it can be a major setback for a criminal or one of the gangs. To be honest, I don’t actually care if I take the money or destroy it, since in either case it will deny them those resources. If I can intercept a major drug or weapons deal, including the cash payment, it’ll hurt them coming and going,” I explained.

“Do you have any leads for something like that?” Amy asked me.

“No, not yet. I need to be careful not to break the ‘Unwritten Rules’ in the process, so I’ve been very cautious about my surveillance, limiting myself to what I can see in the open or by following from an observed crime. I haven’t written anything down yet, but I’ve been keeping a mental log of what I can observe with dates, times, locations and names when they use them. If I need to I can write it up in a notebook or in a document. I’m leaning towards using a separate notebook for each gang or criminal so that it can’t be hacked and will only show the information that I want to show.”

“Might be best to keep it in your memory for now, but transcribe it only if it looks like you’ll need to turn it in to ‘show your work’.”

“Are you finished eating? It doesn’t look like there’s much left except for some carrots.”

“Well, of course not. The Chocolate Chip Cookie Dough was never going to last long, was it?”

giggle “No, it really wasn’t,” I told her, as I laughed out loud.

Amy gathered up our trash and dumped it into a nearby trashcan while I repacked my back pack and got out my umbrella to cover us as we walked towards the hospital.

Shrugging our packs on, I opened the umbrella and wrapped my arm around Amy to hold her close under the umbrella and protected from the rain as we walked.

While we walked, Amy recounted some of the latest gossip from the hospital as well as some funny stories she had heard about capes from other cities. After a while she started sharing some more of the dirty jokes she heard in the hospital staff lounge and even in the cafeteria when they didn’t realize she was listening.

Walking up to the hospital’s main doors, I closed the umbrella since we were sheltered under the large overhang and hung it by it’s strap from my left wrist and took Amy in my arms to give her a proper goodbye kiss.

A few minutes later she stepped back and shakily said, “Now that’s what I call a kiss,” stepping close again, she kissed me again, much more chastely and said, “I’ll talk to you later, once I get home. And you be safe too, hear me?”

“I hear you, and I promise to take care as long as you do too.”

“I will,” she said as she stepped back and opened the door, turning back for a last look before she entered the hospital.

Opening the umbrella, I sighed and walked over to the bus shelter to wait for my bus to take me back home.
After a last, longing glance at Taylor, I headed to the staff locker room to get changed out of my damp clothes and into my Panacea costume to start my shift.

Slipping out of the locker room, I entered the ER and checked in with the charge nurse to see who, if anyone, needed to seen first. Surprisingly, even for a Wednesday night, no one needed my help down here, so I headed for ICU/CCU.

Less than 45 minutes was needed to clear both wards, letting me head upstairs to the pediatric and cancer wards to see what I could do for those patients. One of the best things about Othala volunteering at the different hospitals was that there was seldom a large back log of patients needing my help, which meant that I could keep to the restricted hours that mom and so many others had been telling me to work with. By 8:30 I was finished up with both of those wards, so I decided to check out the post-surgical ward and see if I could help some of those patients before I left for the night.

Due to some equipment intervention, like an ostomy and two sets of traction pins, I wasn’t able to heal everyone completely, though I did heal them up to the point where the appliances could be removed within a day or so. Depending on when the surgery could be scheduled of course. I could have done a full removal, but there was no way I was going to show that my powers could do something like that, thank you very much.

I finished up with the last surgical patient just after nine o’clock, so I took the elevator down to the first floor to change back into my regular clothes, before heading out to catch a bus home.

Because I had stayed a little later than normal, I actually had to run down to the bus stop to be sure to catch my bus. Which was lucky, because I wouldn’t have enjoyed waiting another half hour for the next one that would get me home.

The ride was as quiet as most late weekday bus rides were, with only 5 people on the bus, even counting me. While I rode I pondered the systems that Taylor wanted to make, mostly thinking about the best way to achieve the results we wanted, creating simulations that would let me craft a working example quickly and easily.

Reaching my stop, I exited and walked the half block to my house, unlocking the front door and relocking it again once I was inside, turning the security system from standby to armed before hanging up my coat and heading for the kitchen. I could hear mom and dad up in their room and Vicky downstairs, so I dropped my pack off on the kitchen table and checked the fridge for any leftovers to snack on. To my delight, dad had made up a fully loaded dinner plate, with roast pork, mashed potatoes, green beans and gravy.

I reheated it in the microwave and grabbed a couple of dinner rolls from the bowl and popped them into the toaster oven to warm them up. While everything prepped, I poured myself a large glass of milk and pulled out one of the library books to read while I ate.

I was nearly finished eating when Vicky came up from the basement and sat down at the table with me.

“So, good book?” she asked as she twisted her head to be able to read the cover. “Design of Biomedical Devices and Systems? Really? And you enjoy reading that?”

I laughed at her and explained, “I’m trying to figure out what medical technology can scan compared to my power, and although I know in general terms, what they look for, I wanted to see precisely what they measured and how. Once I have a handle on that, I’ll be able to explain things better to the doctors, especially the jerks who assume that I’m a clueless child, pretending to be a
“Yeah, you never like it when they do that, do you? I would have thought that most of the doctors had gotten over that by now. Haven’t they?”

I sighed, and said, “For the most part, yes, but every now and then one of them gets butt-hurt when I can heal someone that they can’t even diagnose. Especially when I can’t explain what was wrong in terms that they can understand.”

“Well, that sucks. I guess having powers is kind of cheating, but still, they’re supposed to be mature, educated adults, and they should be able to deal with it better than that,” Vicky said.

“You’d think, wouldn’t you. But sadly, some of them are all too human, and don’t like it when all of their education and experience is trumped by parahuman powers.”

Vicky scowled and said, “Screw ’em if they can’t handle it; let them go through a Trigger Event and see if they still think it’s all puppies and rainbows. Assholes.”

I whistled softly and said, “You know Vicky, you shouldn’t repress your anger and resentment like that; let it all out once in a while and you’ll feel a lot better. All the head-shrinkers say so.”

She laughed, shook her head and stood up, “I’ll try. I’m heading up to bed now, how about you?”

I nodded at my mostly cleared plate and said, “I’ll be up in a bit; I want to finish eating.”

She just waved back over her shoulder as she left the kitchen, and I went back to eating and reading my book.

--------------------Legion*** Taylor ***Legion-------------------

When I got home, dad was already home and had the table set for dinner. Hanging up my coat and putting my umbrella and pack down, I walked into the kitchen and gave him a hug, saying “Hey dad, sorry I’m late,” looking over at the clock on the stove, I corrected myself, “no, you’re home early. What’s up?”

“Nothing much, just had a good day today, everything went really well. The train was on time, and the load was brilliantly organized, so all we had to do was follow the plan we had been sent to get it completely unloaded and on the road by 4:30. Even with the processing plant manned to handle the boats coming in this evening, nobody had to work late. Hopefully, we can keep it up, because I’d like to hire some more full-time workers rather than have to pay over-time.”

I nodded and said, “Yeah, that sounds better all around.” lifting the lid on the slow-cooker, I checked the lasagna and said, “If you get the salad out of the fridge, I’ll start the garlic bread and serve up the lasagna. I tried a new recipe, in addition to using the slow-cooker, so I want your opinion on how it turned out.”

Dad smiled and said, “I’m sure it’ll be fine dear, but I’ll certainly give you my expert culinarily considered opinion on how it turned out, based of course on my many years of experience with lasagna.”

I giggled at his over-the-top delivery, and finished preparing the garlic toast and slid it under the broiler to toast it quickly. While the first side toasted, I picked up dad’s plate and carefully cut out a piece of lasagna and slid it on his plate, before handing it to him, and taking my plate to do the same.
Setting it on the table, I flipped the garlic toast over so it could finish toasting, and then took a carton of milk from the fridge and filled both of our glasses and set the milk aside to fetch the garlic toast. Transferring the garlic toast to a bowl, I turned off the broiler and sat down to eat while putting the bowl between us.

While we ate, dad filled me in on his day, giving more details about the goods train, and what a difference the improved organization made. At the end of the meal, he did give me his opinion of the lasagna, which was basically that it was pretty good, but not as good as mom’s recipe.

“So does that mean you don’t want any for lunch tomorrow?” I cheekily asked him.

“Now Taylor, I didn’t say that, did I? I’d love to have some for lunch tomorrow, maybe even with some garlic toast to go with it, if possible.”

“Of course it’s possible, I’ll even make some fresh garlic toast in the morning that you can warm up to go with the lasagna, although I would recommend that you reheat them separately.”

“Thank you Taylor, that would be great. Do you need a hand with the dishes?” he asked me as he cleared his spot.

I shook my head and said, “No, in fact I plan on getting started on my baking tonight, since I’m going to be gone most of day tomorrow.”

He looked up from the dishwasher with a puzzled expression and asked, “Why? What are you doing tomorrow?”

I smiled and shook my head and said, “You forgot, didn’t you? Tomorrow is my GED, so I’ll be leaving before you do, though I do expect to be home by 6. Next week is going to be pretty busy as well, since I have a bunch AP and computer tests to take.”

Dad whistled and said, “You’re right, I did forget that was this week. Sorry about that.”

I waved it off as I dished up some more lasagna, and said, “Meh, not a problem, although we should probably get a big calendar so we can write that kind of stuff down. It’ll help both of us keep track of what’s going on.”

“Good idea, I’ll stop by Gendon’s Office Supply on the way home and see what I can find; I’m thinking one of those white board calendar’s might be best. What do you think?” he asked me from the living room, as he looked at one of the walls.

I nodded, even though he couldn’t actually see me and said, “Yeah, that sounds perfect. Oh, I’m low on toner and printer paper, so if you could pick some up that would be a big help. I want to fix up some old documents, and it would help if the printer didn’t skip or fade.”

“No problem, just let me write down the printer model number so I get the right toner cartridge,” I could hear him in the living room, pulling the printer out to check the model number while I finished loading the dishwasher and started it before getting started on my baking.

The next three hours were spent alternating between baking and reading, so that by 11:30 I had two apple pies, six loaves of a rich, multi-grain bread, and about 8 dozen oatmeal raisin cookies. The bread was a new recipe I had found online, and if it tasted anywhere near as good as it smelled, I was going to be making it again.

Once I had the kitchen cleaned back up from my baking, I went to bed, planning on waking up around 4 am.
Upon waking, I got dressed in a set of sweats before heading to the basement to do an abbreviated set of my morning exercises. I planned on skipping my weight lifting, and just doing my calisthenics and katas before making breakfast and lunches for dad and I.

Since I finished a little before 5am, I decided to hold off on my shower so I wouldn’t wake dad, and instead began putting together our lunches. I started making some garlic toast for dad and while that was toasting, I made half a dozen sandwiches of different types, using up the last of the meatloaf and tuna, as well as one ham and cheese sandwich. I also added some cheddar cheese that I had cubed to go with my veggie sticks and cookies. I filled my thermos with the last of the lemonade rather than make up more fruit juice or tea.

Dad’s lasagna was already set aside in a sealed container, so I just packed it into his lunch bag with some veggie sticks, cookies and four pieces of garlic toast and left it in the fridge for him to take to work.

Once that was done I started on my breakfast, which since I was planning on two long sessions of testing with no real snack breaks, was moderately epic. French toast, loaded omelets and lots of bacon, all washed down with milk and tea.

I had originally planned on riding my bike to the testing center, but it was already raining, and the forecast was for cold temps and steady rain all day, so it was definitely the bus for me.

Once I finished eating breakfast, I cleaned up and ran up to take my shower and dress for the day. I had just finished getting dressed when dad’s alarm went off, waking him for the day.

While he got up and dressed, I emptied my backpack and put my wallet with photo ID and some cash in it, I also made sure I had my confirmation letter for today’s test, the state waiver for my age and a copy of my state transcript letter. Other than that, I planned on loading my lunch, snacks, drinks and nothing else. Supposedly they had secure lockers for all the test takers, but I guess I’d have to wait and see for sure.

When dad finally came downstairs, I was putting on my coat and backpack and had my umbrella ready to use. I didn’t worry about his breakfast as he was more than capable of making something warm and nutritious to eat before he left for work.

Before I left I said, “Dad, I didn’t start anything for dinner this morning, since I was planning on tacos tonight, if that’s okay?”

He stepped over to where I was standing by the front door and said, “Tacos will be just fine for dinner,” and giving me a big hug said, “Good luck, Taylor. Do your best, that’s all I expect.”

“I will dad,” and just before I closed the door I said, “Have a good day, and I’ll see you this evening.”

Opening my umbrella I briskly walked to the bus stop, where I joined quite a few others who were obviously on their way to work. I was pleased that I only had to wait about 10 minutes for the bus to arrive and I intentionally waited to be last, figuring that the regular riders needed the seats a lot more than I did, and I would just take whatever was available or stand if necessary.

Because most of the seats were taken and I wanted to leave some for additional riders, I chose to sit just in front of the rear door, so I could offer my seat to anyone who needed it. Like most of the riders, I sat quietly, minding my own business, only having to get up once to let the man sitting
next to me get up to leave. Finally, I arrived at my transfer stop, so I got off and waited in the shelter for the bus I needed to take me to Lord’s College for my GED.

Another 15 minutes brought me to Lord’s College, and about 5 minutes of walking in the rain got me to Michelson Hall, where the testing center was located. When I found the assigned room, I found that I was actually early and not even the proctor had arrived yet, so I walked back to the soda machine and bought a coke to go with some cookies while I waited.

Just after 7:30, two proctors showed up and unlocked the door, so I stood up and asked them, “Hi, this is the room for the GED, right?”

The woman who was not unlocking the room turned to face me and said, “Yes it is, and you are?”

“Taylor Hebert,” I said, then held up my pack and asked, “could you tell me where to put this? My confirmation letter said that keyed lockers were available, but it didn’t say where they were located.”

She smiled and said, “They’re actually mounted in the back of the room, one for each testing station,” once the door was opened she waved me in and said, “Come on in, choose a locker and we will get you logged in and ready to start at 8 o’clock.”

I removed my wallet and the three letters that I had brought, before I put my pack into the locker and locked it. Walking back up to the front of the room, I showed my ID and the letters to the proctor, who checked everything carefully before logging me in and assigning me to a computer carrel in the first row.

By the time I had taken my seat, the other test takers had shown up and were lining up to get logged in. It appeared that most of them had only brought their wallets, leaving purses and packs in their cars or at home.

Right at 8 o’clock, the door to the testing center was closed and we received our instructions. The first test was on Math, mostly algebra and problem solving; dead easy and they gave us almost two hours to finish it, which gave me plenty of time to review and double-check my work.

After a 10 minute break, we started in on the Science test, which covered a variety of topics, though none in any depth. This time the test was only 90 minutes long, again giving me plenty of time to do a thorough review.

At 11:35 we broke for a one hour lunch, being told to be back before 12:30 because the doors would be locked at 12:35 for the Social Studies test to begin.

I took my pack and headed to an alcove near the main entrance that had a couple of sofas and chairs, as well as three vending machines, so I could eat my lunch in peace before taking the final tests.

I settled into one of the chairs against the wall, away from the vending machines, and poured my self a cup of lemonade and started eating one of my meat loaf sandwiches while several other people taking the GED bought drinks and snacks. Most wandered out of the building, probably to go to their cars to eat, but a couple had done as I had and brought lunch from home.

The two others who had brought their lunches into the building each pulled out a book to read while they ate, but I just worked though the various areas in the city that I could cover, scanning for problems or locations that I might investigate during my next patrol. Drug safe houses and the like; really anything that broke the law and would put a crimp in the gangs’ finances if taken out.
As I ate, I located three of the Merchant’s drug houses in the docks, one of E88’s safe houses that had a very large selection of weapons in the basement, and a dog-fighting arena and what looked like a ‘cage-fight’ setup in an old factory on the southside of the city.

As I finished eating my last sandwich, I checked in on Amy and found her also eating lunch while discussing books with two friends as she did so. Neither of us really spoke, but instead just exchanged a wordless feeling of love and affection, before going back to our own affairs, kind of a ‘zen’ hug, one of warm thoughts and love, for when you can’t be there in person.

I deposited my trash in the nearby receptacle, sealed up my thermos of lemonade and took my pack with me as I headed back to the testing room.

I walked into the room, logged in again for the afternoon session and locked up my pack before sitting down at the same testing carrel as before to wait for the next test to start.

Right at 12:35, they closed and locked the door and screen in front of me turned itself on with the instructions for the Social Studies test already displayed. Reading through them carefully, I nodded and started the test.

The last test was on English and Language Arts, and in addition to the computerized section, had an essay portion that had to be written out by hand. They passed out a folder to each person taking the test, which had an essay prompt, a covered booklet with a single sheet of paper to write the essay on and three sheets of paper that was water-marked as DRAFT. Two blue pens were also provided, which the essay had to be written with.

My essay prompt wasn’t too bad, asking me to write on the following topic:

**What does it take to be a good parent?**

The directions were pretty straightforward, ‘*In your essay, describe the characteristics of a good parent. Give specific details to explain your views. Use your personal observations, experience, and knowledge.*’ so I pulled the DRAFT sheets in front of me and began brainstorming and organizing my thoughts.

After about 10 minutes, I had good idea of where I wanted to go with my essay, so I took the last sheet of DRAFT paper, and began quickly writing my essay. Once I finished writing my draft version, I read it over again and made the corrections and improvements that I thought it needed. After giving it a final read through and a satisfied nod, I set my draft to one side and filled out the cover of the actual essay booklet before carefully and neatly writing out the final version of my essay.

I used the last few minutes allotted for the test to go back over and review my computerized answers, and then just quietly waited until time was called and the proctors collected all of the materials that we had been given. Once they had collected everyone’s stuff, they separated out the draft sheets and shredded them immediately and put all the test booklets in a large envelope and sealed it.

While most of the other test takers were logging out and leaving, I first got my backpack and then went up to the desk and thanked the proctors before being logged out of the system.

As I left Michelson Hall, I opened my umbrella to protect me from the rain and cold wind. The walk to the bus stop wasn’t long, but the wind kept switching directions, so my shoes and the bottoms of my pants legs were soaked long before I got there. As I waited for the bus, I went over what I had at home, and decided that a stop at the Market Basket was needed; just for a few things...
that I would need to make dinner.

The ride home was much like this morning, except that I was one of the first riders, so I got a nice seat up front where the heater would help dry my shoes and pants. The Market Basket nearest my house was two stops before my normal stop, so I figured that it would be easy to pick up what I needed and either catch the bus or just walk the rest of the way home.

Doing my shopping took less than 10 minutes and a hand basket; three tomatoes, two blocks of CoJack, two blocks of Cheddar cheese and two packages of tortillas later and I was ready to check out and head for home.

Once my purchases were paid for, I carefully placed the two bags into my backpack before opening my umbrella again and started off towards home at a brisk walk. Considering the relatively short distance I needed to go, I felt no need to wait for the bus that would take me home.

Getting home, I walked in the back door and set my backpack on the table and hung my coat and umbrella up before running upstairs to change into some comfortable, and more importantly, dry clothes. Once changed I headed back to the kitchen to start dinner.

I used the big cast iron dutch oven to start frying out the ground beef, while I chopped up an onion and minced a couple of garlic cloves, that I added along with a variety of spices and other things to spice the meat up to an acceptable level. Once the meat was mostly browned, I added some crushed tomatoes and a little tomato sauce to give it just the right consistency before turning the heat down low to let it simmer, and I then started a small pot of rice before I began preparing the rest of the toppings.

As I started grating the cheese, dad finally got home, coming in the back door as usual.

“Evening Taylor, how did your test go?”

“Tests actually, dad. The GED is actually multiple tests taken over a full day. But I think it went very well, the material tested was pretty general, and not very advanced. At least, not compared to the things I’ve been studying for my AP exams or even the different computer certifications.”

“That’s great Taylor! I’m so proud of you for completing the state requirements and taking your GED almost 2 years ahead of schedule, and doing it all on your own, with self-directed study.”

I blushed at dad’s words and the very evident pride he felt for what I had accomplished. Clearing my throat, and looking for a distraction, I asked dad, “Could you wash the lettuce and start shredding it into a bowl? I’ll dice some tomatoes while you do that, and then I’ll start on the tortillas.”

“Sure thing Taylor,” he said as he picked up the head of lettuce, cored it and washed it thoroughly in the sink before setting it on one of my cake racks to drain while he pulled out a large bowl to hold the shredded lettuce.

I quickly diced two of the new tomatoes and the last one in the fridge and put them in a bowl on the table, set the container of sour cream next to it and took the two packages of tortillas over to the stove.

I put a couple of tablespoonfuls of water into the tortilla warmer, and slid into the microwave for three minutes to pre-heat it while I heated the frying pan to heat the tortillas.

Pulling out the heated tortilla warmer, I set it on a large pot holder and started heating the tortillas, alternating between flour and corn, so they would be stacked properly in the warmer.
Dad set the table while I finished the food preps, including large glasses of milk and a tall stack of paper napkins, because as good as tacos tasted, they were in no way a neat and elegant food, at least not in the Hebert household.

Bringing the serving bowl of taco meat with me, I sat down at the table and looked over everything to make sure nothing was missing; tortillas, meat, cheese, tomatoes, lettuce, rice, refried beans, sour cream and dad’s hot sauce. Yep, everything was just the way we liked it.

“Looks good, Taylor, you did a wonderful job on dinner. Dig in!” he said as he passed me a corn tortilla and took a flour tortilla for himself.

With that we settled down to tasty but casual dinner, our eating interspersed with the occasional comment about our days, but mostly just eating quietly.

Eventually, dad finished eating and cleared his spot before heading to the living room to watch tv and relax before getting ready for bed. He usually watched PBS until his crime shows came on, but tonight he actually put in a Poirot DVD instead, which he hadn’t done since mom had died, so I made a point of checking on him a couple of times after I brought him his apple pie and tea.

I spent half an hour putting away leftovers and cleaning the kitchen, before I served myself some apple pie and sat down at my computer to do some work. First I pulled the blurry sheet from the library, smoothed it out and carefully transcribed it into a Word document, then converted into a locked .pdf file. Once I was happy with the files, I emailed a copy of both files to Mrs. Jameson, then sent just the .pdf file to Aisha. She should be able to view and print it from any browser, either from school or any library.

From: trhebert@echofreenet.com
To: anlaborn@winslow.bb.nh.edu
Subj: Re: Getting outta this hellhole
Attch: Aptitude Test FAQs.pdf

Hey Aisha,

I got a copy of the Career Aptitude Test FAQs sheet from the library for you. This is a .pdf version which should open up in any browser and let you print it out.

Talk to you later,

Taylor

From: trhebert@echofreenet.com
To: njameson @ bblibrary_bb.nh.gov
Subj: State Career Aptitude Test FAQS
Attch: State Career Aptitude Test FAQS.docx
State Career Aptitude Test FAQs.pdf
Good Evening Mrs Jameson,

I took the copy of the Career Aptitude Test FAQs sheet that you gave me and re-did it in both .pdf and .docx versions for you. It’s much clearer than the blurry copy, so you can use it both as an original template for more copies and post it on the website for download.

Hope it helps,

Taylor Hebert

Once that was finished, I used my new pre-paid credit card to order a supply of minerals and chemicals that I needed for my coral tanks, as well as some more jewelry making supplies and shipping boxes.

Because dad was still up, I decided not to work on my mapping project, but just go through my email before chilling with a book and watching some tv with him. Most of the email was junk, though I did get two updates for some of my installed software that I downloaded into an isolated folder so I could run a full anti-virus scan on them before I installed them. Other than that, the only one of interest was a notice that my PHO account had a PM request from All Seeing Eye, AKA Tattletale. Since there was no indication of urgency, and the time-stamp was from earlier this afternoon, I decided to wait until after dad went to bed to respond, since I wasn’t going out to patrol tonight or do any design work until I had finished reading my new books and had a while to contemplate my options.

Logging out and shutting down, I took out my Introduction to Lasers book and lay down on the sofa to read while watching/listening to ‘The Third Floor Flat’. This wasn’t my first time watching Poirot, so I could follow along easily as I read and reviewed for my next set of tests, MS Office and my SAT. As far as I was concerned, the AP exams could wait for the weekend.

Dad finally turned off the tv and headed upstairs around 11:00, leaving me on the sofa to continue reading for a while. He settled down to sleep a short while later, so I rebooted my computer and logged back into PHO to answer Tattletale’s PM request.

Subject: Poetry

Would love to talk about Frogs and snails and puppy dog tails.

A_S_E

To: All Seeing_Eye

Subj: Privacy

Need to chat, privately. Suggestions?

Legion

To: Legion

Subj: Re: Privacy
To: All_Seeing_Eye

Subj: Re: Re: Privacy

LGBT6969@hypercrypt.anon.ru.net

Legion

To: Legion

Subj: Re: Re: Re: Privacy

Got it. You really do like to live dangerously, don’t you?

A_S_E

Logging out of PHO, I closed the VM and opened a different one, and routed my connection through both Finnish and Cambodian anonymizers, before routing through two Tor nodes and then into HyperCrypt to retrieve the encryption key and TorChat link so Tattletale and I could chat in relative security. Hopefully, if anyone tried to trace my path, the alarms I had set would warn me in time, though since they were based on a couple of scripts that I had downloaded and modified, I didn’t want to trust them too far.

After checking everything as well as I could, I backed out of everything and created a completely new connection to the internet and to TorChat, using different anonymizers and nodes. Five minutes work got me logged into a TorChat room with Tattletale, that hopefully couldn’t be spotted, much less penetrated. I was definitely looking forward to some tutoring from Über and L337 on computer security and other related topics

ASE: Hi! You made an offer a while back, and I’m hoping you were serious.

LGN: For Bitch? Yes.

ASE: She found an E88 dog fighting ring, and wants to hit it tomorrow. Said about 20 dogs, US are helping, have a cargo van for dogs.

LGN: Have other plans for the evening, but can provide advance and real-time recon.

ASE: Address is 25993 Merrywether. Abandoned factory. Even split of cash okay?

LGN: No thanks. You’ll need a bigger truck; at least 43 dogs there now. Cage fights tonight, not dog fights.

ASE: Fuck me! Your range is bullshit!
ASE: Yeah, we’ll get a bigger truck. Any Capes?

LGN: Hookwolf, Menja, Crusader? and tall, fat male in chainmail with a large mace/club. Don’t recognize him. New Cape?


LGN: Okay, will work up floor plans and send to you. Text msgs for updates with burners. Will get number to you tomorrow.

ASE: Sounds good. bohica17 @hypercrypt.anon.ru.net.

LGN: Anything else?

ASE: Nope. Really appreciate the help.

I checked on dad again, and found him solidly asleep, so once again I logged out of everything, and once offline I started my new drawing program. It only took a few minutes to get the basics down enough to start drawing the factory, since it had come with really good tutorials and a lot of useful templates.

The basic layout of the factory, all the rooms, windows, doors and surrounding streets and parking lots was done in about an hour. Getting the dimensions was actually the easiest part because part of my ‘swarm sense’ was absolute awareness of the location of each member of the swarm, in distance, direction and orientation. Gotta love remote proprioception.

The number of insects in the factory was simply phenomenal, and I was able to shift them around unobtrusively to also trace out and locate all of the utilities and the controls for them.

The main floor was especially easy to observe because all of the dogs that were kept there, but also because of the large number of mice and rats in the walls and crawlspace.

Once I located the main office, I positioned several rats in strategic spots so I could easily listen and watch the workers there as they collected, sorted and counted the cash. By the time everything was closed up and shut down for the night, the total receipts from the gate and betting came to $26,259. And I suspected that the total on Friday night might even be higher, since the night would start with dog fights and then move up to the cage fights.

As the building was closed up for the night, most of the money was emptied out of the safe taken away by Hookwolf, while two men were left as night watchmen. Once the last of the capes had left, one of the men settled down in the office to sleep while the other one walked a regular patrol, which included ensuring that all of the dogs had plenty of water, but only a little food.

When I was sure that everything was quiet for the night, I shut down my computer and went to bed.

-------------Legion*** ***Legion-------------

Friday was much like any other day, though Amy and I did a lot of work on designing our new creations like the water and food plants. Even before lunch we had shifted to setting up some of our plans. We modded a large selection of shell fish and crabs as relays to cross the river and work up the coast until we had gone past the mine we were interested in.
Once that was done and I was certain that no people or remote sensors were near the mine, Amy began modding the local gray squirrels to be more useful for our purposes.

Amy gave them muscles similar to ours, as well as similar toughness and speed, with a very good suite of senses. Their hands looked superficially normal, though with longer fingers. The squirrel’s somewhat larger size helped hide just how different the hands were from a normal squirrels.

Amy did give them a much larger oxygen reservoir, so that they could last nearly an hour without taking a breath.

All told, Amy created 2 dozen of the modded squirrels, 12 on each side of the river, though four of them had a variation of echolocation, using low-frequency sound to try to locate cavities and open spaces though solid rock.

I emptied out all the completed tools and weapons from our coral factories, and had a set of small, basic hand tools designed for the modded squirrels that Amy programmed into the factories and set them to forming. Because of their simplicity, they should be all be completed by Sunday morning.

My hope was that the squirrels would have enough tools to get started with and that they would be able to take measurements and such so that I could design any needed tools for my little helpers.

Since Amy and I had settled on an early dinner and then going to watch a movie, I called dad at work to let him know what our plans for the evening were.

ring ring ring

“Dock Worker's Association, Dorothy Miller speaking. How may I help you?”

“Hi Mrs. Miller, it’s Taylor, can I talk to my dad?”

“Certainly dear, I’ll transfer your call.”

ring ring ring

“DWA, Danny speaking,” my dad said when he picked up the phone.

He sounded pretty cheerful, so I said, “Hi dad, you sound happy, what’s up?”

“Afternoon Taylor. Nothing too big, just the boats came in with full holds, so it looks like the fishing grounds are rebounding nicely. Steady work all around, which is always good.”

“That’s really good. Anyway, Amy and I thought that we would celebrate completing my GED tests by going out to an early dinner and then a movie, if that’s alright with you?” I asked him.

“Hmm, I don’t see why not. Sure, do you need any money?” he asked.

“No, I’m good. Plus, I’m all ready for the Free Market tomorrow, everything is boxed up and labeled and I’ve got the cash box already filled and ready to make change.”

“Sounds good. In fact, Kurt has been inviting me to go bowling with he and Lacey, so I’ll see if the offer is still open, and if it is, I’ll spend the evening with them. In any event, don’t wait up for me, I may crash at their house if it’s too late,” he explained.

“Sounds like fun, just don’t forget that you need to drive me to the Free Market by 9:00, alright?”

He laughed and said, “I remember. Have fun, and say hi to Amy for me. Love you, Taylor.”
“Love you, too, dad,” I said.

“Bye Taylor.”

“Bye dad,” I said as I hung up. Checking the time, I decided I had more than enough time to get ready without rushing, so I went upstairs to lay out my clothes for the evening then take my shower.

After my shower, I brushed my hair straight back and held it in place with two braids wrapped around my head like a crown and a pair of polished teak hair sticks with iridescent green coral caps. I had made these sticks to match my earrings and necklace, and I had another set with fire coral caps that I was bringing along to give to Amy.

The dress I wore was another one that I had made, in a dark green shade, about half-way between emerald and forest green, sleeveless and knee length with a wide black leather belt. To finish it all off, I chose a lovely hand-knitted ivory cardigan that I had picked up a couple of weeks ago at the Free Market, sheer off-black stockings and a pair of black, low-heeled shoes.

‘It’s date night, damn it, and I plan to look good tonight.’

I pulled out my green purse and packed it with just the essentials, my wallet with my ID, bus pass, credit card and cash, and my phone, lipstick and of course my pepper spray and baton. If I needed more than that tonight, someone was going to suffer. A lot.

Locking the back door behind me, I walked to the bus stop to wait for my bus to take me downtown to Massimo’s, the restaurant that Amy had made reservations for us to have an early dinner at. It was a fairly upscale Italian restaurant that had a very good reputation for excellent food and a romantic atmosphere; it was also within easy walking distance of the Cineplex where we planned on seeing a new movie.

The bus ride was relatively quiet, as the post-work rush hadn’t started yet, and I got off less than a block from the restaurant. As I walked towards Massimo’s, I could feel Amy rapidly approaching, and a quick scan showed Vicky’s car pulling up in front of the restaurant.

As Amy got out of the car, I got my first view of her outfit, which I had vigorously refused peeking at until now. She was wearing a dusty rose dress about the same length as mine, with an off-white lace shawl, and a pair of high-heel pumps that matched her narrow black sash. I could see that she had also chosen to wear the coral earrings and necklace that I had given her for our first date.

--------------------Legion*** Amy ***Legion-------------------

School was just as interesting…or boring… as it ever was on a Friday, although lunch was nice, spending time with Chris and Dennis talking about some of our favorite books and trading some back and forth was a lot of fun. A couple of other book-geeks asked if they could join us, once they realized what we were doing. Cassie and Bill were both Sci-Fi geeks, and happy to find some others who not only read the same books, but ones that they hadn’t yet.

During gym, Taylor and I chatted for a while and decided that since Vicky had a date planned for tomorrow, we would go for an early dinner and then a movie. I could feel Taylor’s excitement at the idea of another official date, so I told her to dress nice, as the restaurant I had in mind expected people to be appropriately dressed, so no jeans or tee-shirts.

As soon as school let out I called Massimo’s to reserve a table for two at 5 o’clock, at first the greeter wasn’t sure if they could fit us in, but after I gave my name and asked when a table would
be free, she asked me to hold. A few minutes later she came back and said that a table would be
available at 5. I guess being a publicly known superhero did have some cool perks after all.

Vicky walked me over to her car while I was on the phone, and waited until I was done to start the
car and head for home.

“Massimo’s, huh? Pretty fancy for a Friday night date,” she said teasingly.

I finished putting my phone away and said, “Yeah, but Taylor took her GED tests yesterday, so it’s
celebration time. I just need to reschedule my clinic time to tomorrow morning so they know not to
expect me until then.”

“Sounds like you’ve got this under control, all you need is to get permission to go out for dinner
and … what? Dancing? Movie?” she asked me as turned on to Peterson Blvd.

“Movie probably, we both have things to do in the morning, so we shouldn’t stay out too late,” I
told her as I pulled up my list of contacts and dialed St. Joe’s ER nurse’s station.

Vicky opened her mouth to say something, but I held up a finger for quiet, as I explained to the
nurse who answered the phone that I would not be in tonight, but would be in around 8:00
tomorrow morning. Disconnecting, I turned back to Vicky, “Thanks, now you started to say
something?”

She smiled and said, “Yep. Unless you already have other arrangements, I’ll be happy to drop you
off at the restaurant, and drive you both home when you’re done with your movie.”

I was tempted to give her a hug, but quickly decided that doing that while she was driving was just
asking for trouble, and settled for saying, “Thanks Vicky, that would be great. I’ve got a new dress
and shoe for tonight, and I’d rather not have to ride the bus while wearing them.”

“I can definitely relate to that. Be sure to ask dad as soon as we get home, and after your shower I’ll
help you get ready, alright?”

I smiled and said, “That would be great, Vicky. I’ll want to leave around 4:30 or so, as the
reservation is for 5 o’clock.”

She just nodded at that and we made the rest of the drive home in a thoughtful silence.

Entering the house while Vicky left to fill her gas tank, I hung up my coat and carrying my
backpack, went to find dad. Listening carefully, I couldn’t hear him anywhere in the house, so I
headed to the back door, dropping off my pack on the dining room table.

Stepping outside, I found him cleaning the ashes out of the fire pit. “Hey dad, what’s up?”

He looked back at me as he dumped a trowel full of ashes into a bucket and said, “Hey there Amy-
girl, just getting it cleaned out and ready for the weekend. It’s supposed to be really good weather
and I thought it would be nice to be able to use it. Sort of celebrate spring time properly.”

“Sounds cool. Speaking of celebrating properly, I’d like to take Taylor out to dinner tonight, and
catch a movie afterwards. Vicky’s already said that she’d be happy to drop me off and pick me up
afterwards,” I explained as I knelt next to the fire pit and picked up the little brush and dustpan to
help clean it out.

“Hmm, well, I don’t know…I was thinking about making burgers tonight, you’d have top that if
you want to take Taylor out for dinner;” he teased, with a little smile as he watched clean out the
corners of the fire pit.

I laughed as I dumped the third and last dustpan full of ashes into the bucket, and when I stopped, he asked me, “What about your clinic time?”

“I already called St. Joe’s and arranged to do it in the morning, so that’s taken care of. My homework is all caught up as usual, and I’ll keep my phone with me, just in case.”

He put the trowel into the bucket and took the brush and dustpan from me and put them in as well before standing up. “Well, it looks like you’ve covered all of the important points, so yeah, go ahead and have fun tonight. How late do you expect to be?”

I brushed the ash off my hands as I followed him to the trash can, where he emptied the bucket. “I’ll probably call for a ride by 10:00 or so, maybe earlier depending on which movie we see.”

“Alright then, I’ll let you go get ready for your date while I start with some dinner preps,” dad said as he rinsed ash residue out of the bucket and off the other tools he had used to clean the fire pit.

“Sounds like a plan to me, I do want to grab a shower so I’m gonna scoot,” I said as I headed to the back door.

Walking inside, I picked up my back pack and went up stairs to my room. I washed my hands first, then grabbed my robe before jumping in the shower and getting cleaned up, including washing my hair. Gym might not be hard, but with my iso-mod set at 85% I managed to work up a sweat and I definitely need to wash my hair before getting dressed.

I towel dried my hair as best I could, then got out my hair dryer to finish the job. Once I had it brushed out and dry, I styled my hair into a French Braid, that was designed to come down the back and then curl over the left shoulder. I thought it would go well with my new dress.

Before I put on my dress, I checked my appearance and decided that the minor changes Taylor and I had made still looked really good, so just went with some lipstick for makeup.

I slid on a pair of nude stockings and a strapless bra, then slipped into my dusty rose dress, before packing my purse with what I would need for the night; ID, credit card, cash and my phone.

Standing up, I stepped into my black heels and walked around my room for a few minutes to get used to the 3 inch heels before I walked to the door, turned out the light and pulled the door closed behind me.

Stopping at the head of the stairs, I called out to Vicky, who was in her room listening to music, “Hey Vicky, I’m ready to go whenever you are; I’ll be in the living room when you’re ready.

The music stopped and Vicky came skipping down the stairs behind me and exclaimed, “Wow don’t you look fancy tonight, definitely pulling out all the stops, aren’t you?”

Not waiting for me to answer, she spun her keys around her finger and said, “I got directions to Massimo’s, cheap sunglasses, and a full tank of gas, so let’s boogie, Ames.”

I laughed at her and put my shawl around my shoulders, picked up my purse and followed her out of the house and into her car.

She turned the radio on to a classical station that she had been listening to lately drove carefully and sedately to Massimo’s, getting me there just before it opened at 5:00. As I got out of the car, Taylor walked up to me and said, “Good evening Amy, you look absolutely gorgeous tonight.”
Turning around, I got my first view of Taylor, and was stunned silent for a moment, then shaking my head I said, “So do you, Sweetie, wonderfully beautiful.”

Offering her my arm, she slipped her hand into the crook of my arm, and with a last wave to Vicky, we headed into the restaurant, which had just opened.

We were greeted by the Maitre’d and escorted to our table, which was off to one side, with a good view of the low stage, where a group of four musicians were playing softly.

We started our dinner with an assortment of tasty appetizers, some tiny meatballs, oysters and bruschetta. Just as we finished that, the first course was served; I had the Gnocchi con Pancetta while Taylor chose the Carmella Ravioli alla Norma, we both had the Insalata Mista di Campagna to go with it.

The main course was Filetto di Manzo for both of us, with roasted potatoes, spinach and radishes as side dishes.

It was all topped off with tiramasu and vanilla bean gelato.

The dinner was amazing, a three course delight, that both of us agreed was not only worth the money, but very much worth coming back to enjoy again. Both the service and food were truly wonderful, the ambiance was elegant and romantic, and music was just perfect.

After freshening up, we left and walked the three blocks to the downtown Cineplex. Checking the time and available showings, we chose a new release, Sucker Punch, that had just been imported from Earth-Aleph, and was supposed to be both surreal and fun. Hopefully, it would live up to it’s reviews.

Purchasing some drinks and a variety of snacks, we made our way to the appropriate theater and found our seats in the very back of the theater, in the middle. We almost always sat there, if we got in early enough to claim the seats, as it was easy for us to see the screen clearly and we were seldom blocked by the people in front of us.

The trailer were as exciting as usual, but the increasing number of blatant commercials was irritating. The movie was interesting, not as good as I had hoped, but visually appealing, and some of the twists were quite unexpected.

We had agreed not to critique the film until it was over, so as we waited for the audience to leave, we started going over the film.

curious “Well, what did you think of it, Sweetie?” I asked Taylor.

amused “Heh, you can tell it wasn’t made on Earth-Bet, that’s for sure.”

curious “Oh, why do you say that?”

laughing “Because if it happened here, Babydoll would have triggered for sure, probably as a high-tier Brute.”

laughing “Or as an equally high-tier Blaster; and in either case, that ‘Asylum’ would have been rubble in short order. With a very high body count, to boot.”
While we continued discussing the movie silently, we walked over to the central plaza which had a nice park where concerts and plays were put on during the summer. On our way, I texted Vicky, asking her to pick us up on the east side of the plaza. A few seconds later, she texted back: **OMW**, so we just sat down on a convenient bench to wait for her.

About 15 minutes later, Vicky pulled up and honked to get our attention. Of course, she had no way of knowing that we had both been following her car from the moment she started her car.

Opening the door, Taylor carefully handed me into the back seat, and then slid in next to me. Once we were securely belted in, Vicky pulled away and headed towards Taylor’s house.

In between describing the movie and giving our opinions of the acting, plot, and special effects, Taylor gave Vicky the few directions she needed to drive directly to the Hebert home.

When Vicky pulled into the Hebert’s driveway and Taylor got out, I slid out and walked her up to the front door. Taking my time, I initiated a good-night kiss that lasted a good 10 minutes or so before Vicky finally flashed the headlights to remind us that she was still there.

Stepping a half step back, I said, “I had a wonderful time tonight, but next time you get to plan our date, alright?”

She smiled softly at me and gently caressed my cheek and said, “Me too, and I’ll let you know what I come up with as soon as I figure it out.”

I gave her a last hug before I turned to return to the car, and said, “I should be able to meet you at the Free Market by lunch time, maybe a little sooner if things are slow.”

Taylor waited until I was in the car before waving goodbye and unlocking the door and entering her house. As soon as the door closed, Vicky backed out of the driveway and we headed for home.

--------------------Legion*** Taylor ***Legion-------------------

Once in the house, I leaned back against the front door, closed my eyes, and just reveled in the memory of our kiss. Eventually, I sighed, opened my eyes and headed upstairs to change into some comfy pyjamas.

While I changed, I did another thorough and complete scan of the arena that the Undersiders were planning on hitting tonight, with an eye to updating Tattletale’s information.

While my computer was booting up, I called Kurt’s house and left a message for dad, so he would know that I was home safe and that the house was all locked up.

I updated the file I had created earlier, giving the current number of dogs (47), customers (438), mooks (16), outside guards (6, in 3 pairs) and capes (2). The capes were almost certainly Crusader and Alabaster, and they were moving around constantly between the floor, mezzanine, offices and checking up on the outside guards.

I also ran a close scan of the surrounding buildings, but found no one waiting as backup. Once I was sure I had as much information as I could gather, I stationed over two dozen owls in a wide pattern around the factory to keep an eye out for any problems, as well as keeping a close watch on three other E88 strong points that Hookwolf seemed to frequent; a bar called the Wolf’s Den, another factory that seemed to be a training facility and the weapon’s depot I had spotted earlier.

After a last check of the information, I saved it and sent it to Tattletale at her hypercrypt account,
along with the burner phone number that I had chosen to use for tonight. Logging out and shutting down, I went upstairs to bed, picking up *Ender's Game* to read while I kept an eye out for any trouble heading the Undersider’s way.

-------------------Legion*** Undersiders ***Legion-------------------

Tattletale grinned as her hypercrypt email pinged. Opening the only email in her inbox, she quickly read the text, listing all the details in and around the factory that they planned on hitting in about an hour, then opened the attached image file that had most of the same data as the first one, with a few updates concerning the guards and the parking lots nearby. Printing out the updated diagram, she picked it up and folded it neatly.

Logging out and shutting down, she left her room and walked into the main living area. Brian and Alec were playing Mass Effect while Rachel was grooming her dogs.

“Alright, I’ve got the latest update on what we’ll be facing tonight. Rachel, there’s 47 dogs there right now, Legion said that he’ll control them and keep them calm as we get them out and into the truck. 6 guards outside, in pairs near the different entrances, 16 mooks scattered throughout the factory, I’ll show you their current locations but expect them to move around a bit. There’s over 400 customers, so there’ll be a certain amount of panic and chaos. So far, none of the cage fighters seem to be on site, and probably won’t be until after midnight, so let’s get in and out before then. It is possible that some of them are just spectators right now, so don’t turn your back on the normals unless you’re sure they’re harmless. Lastly, there are two capes on site; Crusader and Alabaster.”

Grue nodded and started laying out the plan he and I had worked up for tonight’s raid, “Rachel, Alabaster is your target, just have one of your dogs maul him a bit, then sit on him until you can zip cuff him; his power continually restores him to full health, so you can’t knock him out, don’t even bother trying. Use at least two zip-cuffs on both his ankles and wrists to be sure. I’ll take Crusader, I should be able to keep him blinded until I can reach him to take him down, Alec you and…”

I interrupted him, “Ah Brian, there’s a problem with that. His ghosts are intangible to metal and other inorganics, which means your batons won’t work on them, but they can still swarm you. It might be better to have Rachel send one of her dogs ahead of you to sort of ‘plow the road’ as it were. After that, he should go down pretty easy for you.”

I sighed, “Fair. I can hit a man within 30 yards just about every time, unfortunately, beyond that it sort of sucks. The darts the boss provided have a Tinker loadout; they should take a man down within 20-30 seconds. Supposedly there’s no chance of side-effects or overdosing the target and it should keep them down for at least 30 minutes.”

I laughed, “Actually, they are, with illuminated signs too. The Fire Code requires it you know.”
Both Alec and Brian laughed at how absurd it was for the E88 to make sure that their illegal fighting arena was operating with Fire Code mandated safety features, then Brian went on. “Alright, last chance to look over the diagram, get a snack or use the bathroom. We’ll be leaving in 10 minutes, and should be arriving at our staging point at 10:45, so make sure your bags are packed cuffs, duct tape and anything special that you need. Any questions?”

A quick glance around showed that no one had any questions, so I just put the printed out diagram on the coffee table for everyone to look at if they wanted to, and headed over to use the bathroom. I double checked my bag, making sure I had a few powerbars and two bottles water for afterwards, but with any luck at all, we’d be in and out in less than 20 minutes.

--------------------Legion*** Tattletale ***Legion-------------------

Brian drove the U-Haul truck that we had arranged to ‘borrow’ yesterday. He made sure that both Alec and I could drive it competently, even though the plan was for him to do the driving both ways. Once we were done, we’d just park it at Weyland Mall, and it would be taken care of by the some of the people the boss had working for him, while we rode back in Brian’s car, which I would be driving.

Rachel was in the back, slowly enhancing her three dogs, planning to have them ready to go by the time we got to our staging point. She also had a box of food and water bowls and a second one with a dozen gallon jugs of water and a large bag of dog food.

Brian parked the truck facing away from the factory, but out of sight of the guards in an alley on the far side of a neighboring building. Rachel opened the back door and ordered her dogs down to the sidewalk where I joined her.

Brian checked his watch, nodded at Alec and said, “Alright, let’s go. We’ll hit the rear guards first, then work our way around the building. Keep an eye out in the parking lot for any late arrivals and we’ll dump the guards in with the trash.

I watched them walk away and then Bitch and I moved up to a point where we could see one of the sets of guards, but they couldn’t see us. Once we were in position, I unslung my tranq rifle and loaded the first magazine of 8 darts. I had 5 more magazines in reserve, but if I needed that many, I was in BIG trouble.

Even knowing what to expect, I almost missed it when Grue’s darkness slid across the front of the factory and overtook the last set of guards. Less than a minute later, the two of them jogged back to where we waited and dumped the hog-tied and gagged guards into the shadows.

“Tattletale, we’re a few minutes ahead of schedule, can we get an update on cape location?”

“I’ll see,” I said, pulling out my phone and sending a quick text to Legion. Less than 30 seconds later the reply came in:

Crusader in office, Alabaster on main floor, near north door.

Grue chuckled and said, “Perfect, let’s go,” and led us to the north door. Pausing for a moment to check our positions, he pulled the door open and Bitch sent Judas in first, with her right behind him. The other two dogs followed closely behind her, with Grue, myself and Alec right behind.

As soon as Bitch spotted Alabaster, she gave Judas the attack signal and he charged at him with a deep, echoing howl. Even though Alabaster turned to run, Judas caught him with only two short leaps, grabbed him by his right leg and started shaking him like rat in a terrier’s jaws. After about
30 seconds or so of vigorous shaking, Judas dropped him to the ground and sat heavily on his back, immobilizing him completely.

Bitch had Brutus make short, quick charges at the spectators to get them moving towards the exits, but not actually attacking them. The deep howls and barks echoed throughout the factory, and they drowned out the shouts and screams of the humans and increased their fear and panic greatly.

Bitch signaled Angelica to go with Grue and then started zip-cuffing Alabaster’s wrists and ankles. While she did that, I used duct tape to gag and blindfold him and Bitch dragged him into a corner and dumped a cabinet and some big trash cans on top of him to keep him out of sight.

--------------------Legion*** Grue ***Legion-------------------

As soon as we were in, Bitch pointed at the stairs and told Angelica to ‘Hunt’. Angelica charged at the stairs, howling fit to wake the dead, and was well enough trained to follow my commands as I pointed to the hallway leading to the offices.

Two of the Empire foot soldiers were in the hallway and started shooting at Angelica with their pistols, with absolutely no effect other than to make themselves targets for her to trample as she ran straight down the hallway.

I took a moment to knock them out with my Asp as I followed in Angelica’s wake, and then pulled out my second, wooden club so I could deal with any ghosts that appeared. Before she reached the end of the hallway where the office was located, Crusader stepped out into view and flooded the hallway with a horde of his ghosts.

Just as Tattletale had said, Angelica was bulling the ghosts aside, and if they couldn’t move aside, her mass of bone spurs popped them like soap bubbles. A few of them managed to avoid her and try to attack me, but with my darkness to disorientate them, I was able easily destroy them with the wooden club. Tattletale’s advice had been spot on once again.

Crusader took one look at Angelica charging down the hallway, and darted back into the office, slamming the door in her face. Once I caught up to her, I pointed at the door and told her, ‘Smash’ and she simply kicked it with a foreleg, knocking it completely out of it’s frame and to the other side of the office.

Sending a cloud of darkness into the office to blind Crusader and any of his ghosts, I immediately followed it in and saw him scrambling in a drawer for something. Before I could reach him, he generated a couple more ghosts and pulled out pistol. ‘Really, a Luger? How cliché can you get?’

Destroying the one ghost that I couldn’t avoid, I stepped to one side, avoiding the direction of the door which was mostly where he was aiming, and hit the wrist of his gun hand with my Asp with my full strength. I heard his loud scream, though I doubted anyone outside the office could hear anything, including the gunshot as his gun hit the floor. Stepping in close, I jabbed him hard in the solar plexus with the wooden club, and as he started to crumple, I smashed him across the nose and cheek bones with my Asp.

A second, somewhat gentler strike to the back of his head knocked him out, and it only took a few seconds to zip-cuff him hand and foot and use the duct tape to blindfold him. Because of his broken nose, I chose to leave him ungagged so he could still breath easily.

Once that was done, I checked the other three offices along the hallway, but they were all currently empty, being used more as storerooms for the drinks and snacks they sold to the customers.
Going back to the first office, I picked him up in a fireman’s carry, and trotted back down to the mezzanine and over to where Tattletale and Regent were calmly working their way through the mooks. Bitch was releasing the dogs, and as soon as they were released, they started herding the customers out of the building, while cutting out the mooks and forcing them back into Tattletale’s range.

I knew that Bitches dogs were just supremely well trained, so this had to be Legion, providing remote assistance. I idly wondered how far away he was, but on second thought, decided that I really didn’t want to know. With my luck, he was probably sitting at home, watching tv and drinking a beer, while controlling these dogs and providing recon overwatch.

“Tattletale, think you can take a break here and go open the safe, so we can start our exit plan? All of the offices are clear, you just need to grab the cash so we can go,” I said as I stopped next to her and dumped Crusader to the floor.

“Yep, two more shots and I’m done.” 15 seconds later she took her shots, replaced the magazine and handed me the rifle, “Okay, most of the customers are gone, so if you two can mug the mooks for any weapons and pocket money, I’ll open the safe,” Tattletale said before she ran upstairs, looking back over her shoulder, she shouted, “and don’t forget the concession stand, either!”

-------------------------Legion*** Tattletale ***Legion-------------------------

Stepping into the office, I pulled one of the folded duffles out of my pack and started to fill it with the loose cash on the table. As I dumped piles of cash into the bag, I searched the room for any alarms or traps, and only found a couple of alarms. One of which had already been tripped, so the E88 was no doubt on their way.

The safe had an electronic lock using a keypad to unlock the safe. The safe’s alarm didn’t require any special skill or ability to disable; it was a simple switch on the back of the shelf above the safe. It was out of easy view, but not actually hidden. I guess they needed to keep it simple.

The key lock was a little harder, but a quick spray of luminal and a UV penlight gave me the most commonly used keys; 1, 2, 4, 8, 9 and 0.

‘God, this is pathetic, these moron’s actually used Hitler’s birthday? At least they used the full 4-digit year, but still. Morons.’

A quick press of 04201889, and when that didn’t work, I used the European format and pressed 20041889 and the safe unlocked and I could pull the door open, showing a lot of stacks of wrapped bundles of cash and several fat manila folders.

Alec joined me and brought the first duffle over and started pulling the cash out and dumping it into the bag. While he did that, I dropped the folders into my backpack and pulled out and opened up a second bag so I help to empty the cash out of the safe as well.

We had the safe mostly emptied when I got a text from Legion:

E88 coming, 6-7 minutes out. 3 cars. Hookwolf, Fenja & 8 mooks.

“Fuck. Let’s go, 30 seconds and we need to run,” I said to Regent as I closed up my pack, closed the duffle I had been filling, and watched as Regent grabbed the last four blocks of cash and dumped them into his bag.

I took a quick look around the room and grabbed stack of betting forms and some printer paper,
dumped it into the safe, tossed an incendiary pen inside and closed the door partway, so everything could burn.

“Grab the hard liquor and splash it all over the room,” I yelled as I smashed two bottles of gin over the desk and computer, then a bottle of schnapps on the floor in front of the book shelf full of forms and paper.

Regent just threw the bottles against the various walls to break them open and then ran out the door and headed for the exit. On my way out the door, I tossed another incendiary pen into one of the pools of alcohol on the floor to ensure the room caught on fire properly.

“What’s up with that, ‘tales? I never pegged you for a pyro,” Regent asked as we ran down the stairs.

“I’m not, but the longer it takes for them to figure out what the hell happened here, the better,” as we reached the mezzanine, I shouted to Grue, “Let’s go, E88 inbound and we have about 5 minutes to get the hell out of here!”

He looked up from where he was packing weapons and wallets that he’d taken from the mooks into a duffle bag, zipped it shut, shouldered it and started running for the exit. On the way, he scooped up Crusader and carried him outside only to dump him on the sidewalk.

Regent and I were right behind him as he left the building and headed for the truck, though I did pull the Fire alarm by the door to hopefully summon the Fire Department. The mooks were going to have take their chances I guess, ‘cause I damn sure wasn’t going to stick around until Hookwolf showed up. Bitch had all of the fighting dogs inside the truck, with her dogs quickly shrinking in the street next to the truck.

As Grue reached the truck, he tossed his duffle in the back of the truck and kept running for the cab. Regent and I tossed our bags inside as well and I yelled at Bitch, “Close it up, we have to leave, right NOW!”

She looked startled, but called Brutus, Angelica and Judas to jump up into the truck, and as I slid into the cab, I could hear the door close behind us. Regent jumped in next to me, slammed the door and shouted, “GO! GO! GO!”

Brian had the truck running and as soon as Regent was inside, started driving away. As the truck pulled away, he stuck his hand out the window and began filling Plymouth and the side streets with his darkness.

Less than a minute later, he stopped generating his darkness and turned off Plymouth and began driving carefully through the dark streets, still with his lights off, until we were almost three miles from the factory, and we needed to turn back on to a main road so we could get to Bitch’s kennel and unload the dogs.

Once we pulled up next to her kennel, Bitch opened up the back of the truck and all of the dogs spilled out onto the street and moved over to door leading to the kennel and just waited.

My phone beeped and I saw a new text from Legion:

Nice fire, everyone’s out now. Hooky is having a temper tantrum. FD and PRT on it’s way. No one followed you, no one can see you, so you can shift to civvies safely.

I just laughed and said, “I’ll show this text to you later, but for now, it’s safe to unmask and change
Grue nodded and said, “Regent, give Bitch a hand with clearing her stuff out the truck, then shift to normal clothes.”

Regent sighed, but helped Bitch carry the food and water from the truck into the kennel while I grabbed the bag from floor of the truck and pulled out a sweater and slacks to put on over my costume, removed my mask and carefully settled the black wig into place. Brian took off his helmet and jacket and slipped on a worn denim jacket in it’s place, before putting all of the costume items into the bag for safe keeping.

When Regent came back out, Bitch looked out the door at us, nodded and closed it behind her to work with the new dogs. I let Regent sit in the middle this time, as I would need to get out first, and as Brian put the truck into gear and drove away, he took off his mask and pulled on a bright red hoodie sweatshirt, then putting his scepter and mask into the bag.

About ten minutes later, Brian pulled into the 24 hour Wal-Mart’s parking lot and stopped next to his car so I could get out. Taking out the car keys, I got in, started it up and followed the U-Haul truck all the way to the Weyland Mall, where Brian parked it, and left the keys tucked into the visor and made sure to leave in unlocked. Brian and Alec transferred the duffles into the trunk, then piled into the car and I pulled away to discreetly and carefully make our way back to our lair.

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