A week after the locker, three new students join Taylor's class - and Taylor gains a bit more family.

Crossposted from Spacebattles and Sufficient Velocity.

And now, starting the cross-posting process... this might take a while.
Introduction - 1.1

A week after the locker, I had almost learned to ignore the whispers.

Almost.

I had definitely learnt how to act as if I was ignoring them, as if everything was copacetic.

There were a lot of whispers, several different voices - maybe twenty or so? I hadn't counted - but only three were loud, defined, clear, while the others, even though still different from each other, were quieter, more indistinct, only there if I really listened.

The three I could hear clearly weren't talking in any language I understood, though I sometimes felt as if I was so close to knowing what they were saying.

The first one was loud, loud but not really… well, boisterous or mean-spirited or anything like that, more somebody trying to aim for a nice, polite tone while having no idea how loud their voice actually was. The second one was calm, a bit… quiet, actually, sparse in his whisperings at times, then at others, whispering at quiet, fast-paced length about some topic or other, a tenor compared to the other's bass.

They both had something in common: They were both most definitely boys.

The third… wasn't. The third was a blabbering motor-mouth of a girl that didn't seem to ever pause for air, or for thinking, sometimes falling into song, her voice high-pitched and melodic.

I was pretty sure I was going insane. Of course, on the positive side, I was pretty sure that the whispers would be enough to distract me today, the first day of school after The Locker, from those other whispers that were sure to come. The whispers of my fellow students.

They would probably be getting a good laugh out of my misfortune. A nice distraction might just save my day from becoming even more miserable than it would be otherwise.

Yay for insanity?

Of course, the thought it was a parahuman power had occured to me, but hearing voices… well...

I walked through the schoolgates of the decrepit and dirty building of Winslow High, a lump in my stomach, on my way to my first class of the day, hoping against hope I wouldn't run in any of the members of my trio of tormentors, when something completely, totally unexpected happened; a strange, unanticipated and contradictory attack upon my private sphere, right there in the entrance corridor.

Somebody glomped me from behind.

This was followed by something even stranger: I heard one of my voices.

The third one.

Talking to me.

Out loud.
"Hey Taylor, it's so nice to see you, we've just transferred here, my brothers and I, and I can't wait to go to school with you, we're going to have so much fun together! I'm Sam, Sam Finislator, and I know we haven't exactly met each other in person yet but I'm so excited and this is going to be awesome, do you want chocolate?"

Freed from the surprisingly strong grip, I turned around.

There was a girl there.

A girl with blonde hair - very, very light blonde hair - pale skin. Petite, smaller than me. With the biggest, broadest, brightest grin I had ever seen on a human face. I wasn't quite sure that kind of grin wasn't surgically plasted there, it hadn't moved ye-

It got bigger.

There was a box of chocolates in the girl's hand.

I didn't quite see how exactly, this latest attempt to humiliate me would work (laxatives?), or how the Trio had recruited the new kid to do so, or…

How did they know about the whispers?

"Take some!"

"A-alright."

I took some chocolate.

It tasted wonderfully, the way chocolate usually did.

I chewed, swallowed, then said: "Thank you."

"My brother gave them to me. Wasn't that nice of him?"

"Very."

"I'll introduce you!" She took my hand, and dragged me in the direction of the outside again. "I've got two brothers, you see, they're both older than me, and…” We stepped outside, and I spotted two boys.

One of them was lean and wiry, a swimmer's built, with a vague hint of Middle Eastern ancestry, the other was…

Beefcake.

Gorgeous, pure, undiluted, capital letter Beefcake.

He was tall, dark-skinned, classically handsome, and smiling right at Sam and I.

...probably mostly at Sam.

That was her brother?

"This", she gestured at lean and wiry, "is Levi. He gives me chocolate." The boy was looking at me, frozen, before he pulled something out of his pockets.
It was a wrapped chocolate cookie. He held it up, raising his arm very, very carefully, staring at me with wide blue eyes.

...why did he have blue eyes? It was kind of bugging me, it didn't fit the rest of his looks.

I took it. "Thank you?", I asked.

"You're welcome." He smiled at me, carefully, shyly, before his eyes hushed over to his sister and back to me. His was the second voice.

"And that's Benny!", Sam chimed in. I was glad for the excuse to put my eyes back on beefc- the young man.

"And you're Taylor! Do you need a handkerchief? You've got something on your chin." First voice. Set complete.

Suddenly, I was hyper-aware of a single line of drool on my chin. "Yes, thank you!", I replied, nearly ripping the offered tissue out of his hand, wiping my chin with it.

… What an amazing first impression.
Somehow, through the horrifying, incomprehensible evil that was Sam's pout, I was convinced to be the person to show the new kids where their classes were. In an amazing coincidence, the three siblings didn't just happen to all be in the same year as I did, they also managed to have the exact same class schedule as I had.

… What an amazing coincidence.

Sarcasm? What Sarcasm?

Anyways, the first two lessons managed to pass astoundingly quickly, which might have had to do with the fact that Sam took the seat beside me, with Levi and Benny taking another desk.

Unfailingly, all female heads turned in Benny's direction, turning the fairer half of the student population into some sort of Beefcake radar.

Except for Sam and I, of course.

Alright, just except for Sam.

Slowly, I was beginning to feel a bit paranoid. Three people with the three voices that had been whispering at me coinciding to show up in school, run into me immediately, and sharing my class schedule… well, something was obviously very, very fishy about the whole situation.

It was just that… well, Emma and cronies had not, before classes, or in the first break, shown up to even try to talk to these new students, either by gloating to me that I'd obviously been an idiot for assuming people were actually nice to me, or by convincing them that they shouldn't have anything to do with me.

Second break changed that.

It might have been because it was their first opportunity, it might have been because they hadn't known about the transfers beforehand, or… actually, it was probably both of those things.

Both the sibling trio with added, I-shaped wheel and the EMS hive mind were standing in one of the corridors in Winslow High School, with at least some time to spare before their next official class.

It was what I'd both been dreading and anticipating: The desertion of my new comrades was sure to follow. I was awkward, had already embarassed myself, and was obviously not even part of the social ladder of high school, instead sitting somewhere on the ground two floors below. The not-blood-related trio was popular, good-looking, well-connected, and infinitely more likely to make a first impression that did not include stuttering, awkward silence, and drool.

They'd accepted me right away, and had basically steam-rolled me through cheerful friendliness.

… I liked them. I didn't want them to leave me.

Emma opened dialogue by smiling at Benny and asking: "Ah, hi - so you are the new transfers?", with a smile that was as syrupy as it was fake, ogling him from head to toe.

"Yes", Benny beamed at her, "we're the Finislators. I'm Benny, and that's my brother Levi and our
sister Sam and our friend Taylor." He smiled, bright and innocent, while Sam took up a position next to him and Levi hid behind her.

Our friend.

For a moment, Emma looked as if she'd bitten into a lemon - she'd actually done that once, when we were kids - then fixed the smile onto her face again. "Ah… Taylor. She didn't get you lost or anything? The poor dear can be so confused."

"Yes, just last week she managed to get lost in her own locker, can you imagine that?", Madison added.

I clenched my hands, and took a deep breath.

They'd landed me in the hospital for a week.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught an expression of barely restrained fury on Sam's face.

I don't think the Trio noticed.

"No, I can't", Benny said. "Taylor's been a really good guide, she's great! Plus, we share all our classes!"

"Oh, really?" Emma's smile had become more predatory. I hadn't really paid attention to the remainder of the trio before. Madison was glancing in between the smiling Benny and a slightly terrified Levi (what was up with him?), while Sophia…

Sophia was standing there, looking slightly glazed out, staring at Benny, and there was a line of drool starting to crawl out of the side of her mouth… Glad to see I wasn't the only person making an idiot out of myself.

I turned my attention back to the actual conversation.

"Really", Levi answered, still standing behind his sister.

Madison smiled at him. "You are Levi, right? Is it short for anything?"

"Yes."

"Well, what's it short for?"

"… I don't like my full name."

"So, what is it?"

That was the moment Sam chose to take an exaggerated look at her watch. "Uh, guys?"

"Chocolate?", Levi asked the three girls, holding out a box for them.

"Oh, thank you!" Madison immediately took some, smiling brightly at Levi - who did she think she was fooling? - with Emma accepting some, too. She then proceeded to elbow Sophia, who, while still glancing at Benny, took some chocolate with a muttered: "Thanks."

"We've gotta go, so… bye?" Sam smiled at them, then proceeded to drag the remaining three of us along the hallway.
Sophia still hadn't wiped her chin when she left.

Nothing at all had happened. They hadn't deserted me. They'd… included me, taken it for granted I was one of them.

It was a very, very odd feeling.

It was during the class before lunch, World History with Mr. Gladly, that I finally noticed that somehow, at some point, I'd stopped hearing the whispers when I didn't want to.
World History, while bringing with it the amazing discovery of the end of the neverending whispers, also included yet another group project.

Somehow, I ended up in a group with Benny, Levi and Sparky, of all people, despite the many, many girls that immediately tried to join our group.

Sam somehow ended up sitting right beside us with Julia and Greg Veder in hers.

The topic of the group project: the impact of the Endbringers on today's society.

As usual, Sparky was decidedly unhelpful, staring at the floor and occasionally muttering something before falling asleep on his desk halfway through the lesson. I let him be.

As was not usual, the remainder of my group was remarkably competent, though Benny seemed to almost exclusively focus on the damage Leviathan could cause ("He's flooding whole islands away at once, he's clearly the most dangerous one!") whereas Levi seemed absolutely terrified of Simurgh ("You never know whether something is one of her plots", he shivered, "and she always has a plan."), so it kind of fell to me to both bring up Behemoth and collect everything we came up with.

Which was much less work than I was used to, plus it was unlikely anyone was going to take this project to Madison or Emma!

… At least I… kind of dared to hope so? Sparky didn't have the drive, and I didn't think Benny and Levi would… well, I was mostly sure. Levi had offered them chocolate…

Meanwhile, our neighboring group had Sam asking Greg about video games, while admitting she'd never played any.

Greg answered.

Sam asked some more.

Greg answered at length.

And so, while somehow, Julia got shafted into the role of "person trying to actually do the work", which she'd previously usually managed to finagle me into, Sam and Greg happily talked about video games.

And talked some more about video games.

Sam even got invited to play Space Opera with Greg and a friend of his.

Julia, in the meantime, looked like she wanted to tear her hair out before she resigned herself to doing what the whole group had been supposed to.

It felt oddly nice to see someone in my usual role for once.
Greg accompanied us to lunch. Already, it felt like there was an intruder to our little group. He talked a lot, mostly to Sam, while Levi had somehow involved me in a discussion about books and looked quite happy about it, as long as I kept some physical distance from him.

And took his chocolate.

On our way to the cafeteria (Greg and I were showing the sibling trio where it was, I didn't quite know how I'd been roped into it… wait, Sam pouted) we passed a group of larger, older boys, and Greg seemed to shrink into himself for a second.

They took a look at him, an expression on their faces I'd seen on Emma's, Madison's and Sophia's a thousand times, before noticing Benny and apparently deciding picking a fight here and now wasn't worth the trouble.

Was that why he'd never helped? I'd never noticed.

All five of us took a table in the cafeteria, somewhere in the middle, far away from the one the Terrible Trio and cronies had claimed for their court.

I brought out my lunch, while Levi went to buy something for himself and both of his siblings.

That was when it happened: all three members of the Trio suddenly rose from their seats, pale-faced and in a hurry, disappearing in the direction of the women's toilet and not showing up again during lunch.

In the meanwhile, Benny and I started to make small-talk, mostly about the previous lessons, while Sam and Greg talked.

Greg's enthusiasm was a lot easier to bear when it was mostly diverted at someone else - currently, he was telling Sam all about something that apparently included running around collecting coins or something, a princess that was always somewhere else, and an evil guy that sounded something like "browser". I didn't know why a computer program that connected me to the internet was the bad guy, but I didn't care much.

As long as he kept telling Sam and not me…

When Levi came back, Benny was completely distracted by food,

Levi was asking me about books he should read while eating, and Benny seemed to silently hum a song to himself, content to just sit there and eat.

And eat.

And eat some more.

And eat some…

Well.

Meanwhile, I was recommending "The Blue Planet" to Levi - both the Earth Aleph and Bet version; Bet's actually took Leviathan into account.

Lunch, for the first time in a very, very long while, was fun.
Introduction - 1.4

The afternoon lessons passed in a blur, the one-third of the Trio I shared the class with (Emma) only showing up some ten minutes in, pale-faced and smelling a bit odd when she passed me.

Levi snickered into his hand beside me.

Soon, class ended, and all of us were on the way home.

Wait a moment.

… why were they following me?

"Sam?", I started.

"Where're you going?"

"Home, of course", Sam answered, with a bright, wide smile.

"Alright. You live in this direction as well?"

"Something like that." Sam's smile got even wider and brighter.

Her smiles did that a lot, in our conversations.

The four of us continued on our way.

When I went up to the door of our house, they were still following me.

"Uh… Guys?", I asked, standing turned around at our doorstep, the others waiting for me.

That was the moment Dad decided to open the door.

"Taylor? You brought friends?"

"Uh…"

No, I didn't. At least, not intentionally. Kind of. What I meant was…

Friends, well, sorta, but… brought?

Well…

"We're Taylor's friends", Sam said. "I'm Sam, and those two are my brothers, Benny and Levi. We've just transferred in."

… an amazing way to dodge the part about my not-quite-voluntary/conscious involvement in actually bringing them here.

Dad smiled at them, then at me, a smile that managed to be half-way joy and half-way relief, followed by a small frown as he realized it hadn't been me telling him that.
That was the moment I realized I really, really couldn't object to them bringing themselves.

I gave him a quick nod. "Yeah, they're my friends."

"Come on in, then." He gave them that smile again, and opened the door for us.

I walked in, followed by the three siblings.

"That's a nice house, Mr. Hebert", Sam commented.

"Thank you, and call me Danny."

Meanwhile, Benny and Levi were stealthily approaching the basement door.

"Do you mind if we go downstairs, Mr. Hebert?", Benny asked.

Or not so stealthily.

For a moment, something odd hushed over my father's face, before he answered: "I don't mind."

"Alright. Taylor, you coming with us?"

A bit surprised, I followed them.

In the basement, Benny and Levi asked me where we kept some old rags, brooms, buckets, and dustpans, then immediately went to work with cleaning and dusting everything while I watched.

… wait a moment, what did Levi just do with the water?

"Levi?", I asked, while water splashed around him, collecting the dirt and then transferring itself to the bucket, leaving the water clean and dry dirt in a neat little pile right onto the dustpan.

"Yes?"

"What are you doing?"

"… using my powers to clean?"

"Why?" Why powers? Why clean the place?

"Because it's easier that way? Hey, Benny, you could burn it right up!"

"No burning things in the house!"

"Ah, you're no fun", Benny replied, looking a bit put out his brother got to use his powers for clean-up duty and he didn't.

"No, I meant, why are you cleaning?", I rephrased my previous question.

Benny answered, all smiles and happiness: "Because we're going to live here!"

Ah, that's a perfectly reasonable - wait, what?

"Why are you going to live in my basement?"
"Because Sam said so, and you’re our mom, and kids should live with their parents."

I sat down, onto the floor.

"I'm... your mom. How?"

Wait, did that mean I'd been ogling my son for the last few hours? Suddenly, I felt like throwing up a little.

...why was I even believing them?

"Uh... well, Sam's better at explaining it, but powers?", Benny answered.

"You're my age", I stated flatly.

"Conny can control time", Levi replied, "age doesn't really mean much."

"Conny?", I asked.

"One of our sisters?"

"There's more." If I hadn't already been sitting down, I would have collapsed right about then.

"Uh... a few? Well, Sam said you can use versions of our powers, only lesser, so..."

"Your powers?"

"Well, I'm a hydroki... hydroni... I control water, Benny controls energy, Sam's a pre-cog and makes stuff fly around, and we're all durable?"

I stared at him, then focused on the water.

The water moved.

Taking in the revelation that my kids from the future had decided to attend my school and where currently living in my basement, being my age, required some time, during which Benny and Levi fully cleaned up the room (Benny not using his powers, thankfully. No burning down stuff in my house.)

Kids.

From the future.

Trying to be friends with me.

Well, that sort of did mean they weren't going to betray me, did that?

Wait, who was their dad? Were those their voices I was hearing? HOW MANY KIDS DID THAT MEAN I WAS GOING TO HAVE?

Why did they all look so different from each other and appeared to be the same age? Why was I even believing them? For some reason, it felt really, really easy to believe them.

...
Well, I was probably going to find out the answer sooner or later, anyways.

When I returned upstairs, Sam was chatting with my Dad, with drinks prepared for all of us, and the discussion made it clear that apparently, yes, they were going to stay with us, seeing as it contained dish washing duty.

… How did she manage that?

The remainder of the day passed with homework and the odd feeling that I'd overlooked something.
Levi didn't quite understand why he wasn't allowed to tell Mom exactly what was going on. Sam had said so, and Sam was always right (and always very, very, very scary! She was less likely to go scary on you if you gave her chocolate, though.), but he figured that being Shard-Controller together with Dadversary wasn't that weird an explanation. Humans didn't work _that_ differently, did they?

Well, anyways, human houses were strange. He'd noticed it before, when he was big and his mind was all cloudy, but right now, he was going to have to live in one.

There was water _everywhere_. In the floor, in some of the walls, in a strange bowl contraption that looked like you might be able to sit on it…

So much water to puddle and splash around with!

Though Sam had said he wasn't allowed to just tear it out of the pipes…

She'd spent a whole week coaching him and Benny on everything they shouldn't do. Besides setting up the whole "going to school" thingie, which he was still kind of iffy about. On one hand, it was kind of really odd to not be allowed to destroy stuff, on the other hand, some of those lessons were kind of interesting (they were even talking about them!), he could give chocolate to Sam now to appease her, and he could give special chocolate to people who were mean to Mom, that meant they'd be all smelly and icky after spending lots of time sitting over one of those bowl things.

Plus, chocolate kept girls away from you! Girls his size were scary, because Sam was a girl and everything that was even remotely like Sam was scary. At least, Sam had said chocolate kept girls away…

She wouldn't lie to her brother, would she?

Nothing to worry about.

Right now, he was lying on his bed - he had a bed now! His very own first bed! - staring at the ceiling, and enjoying the feeling of lying on a mattress and resting his head on a pillow.

Being human felt nice. Really nice.

Above him, he could feel Sam standing in miniature room, letting water hit her, right up there in the room with lots of water and pipes.

Benny had been in there before her, and he was only getting to be the third person to be allowed in. Though Sam was kind of going to have to explain to him what to actually do there.

How were the lots-of-water-and-pipes-rooms called again?

Bathrooms. Right.

Upstairs, his sister stepped out of the tiny room of falling water and started wiping it off her. Elsewhere in the house, Mom was reading a book - at least, he assumed she was, she seemed to be
holding something roughly the size of one in the way one would hold a book - and Grampa was sitting in front of a desk and typing into one of those "computer" things.

Slowly, Levi started making his way upstairs, taking some chocolate with him.

Just when his sister was clothed - they had clothes now! - again and opening the door, he was in front of it.

"So… how does this work?", he asked, offering the chocolate, only for it to be nearly ripped out of his hand.

They could communicate in other ways, but he liked speaking. Sort of.

"Mmm… You fiddle with the buttons in the shower."

"The tiny room with rain?"

"… yeah, that. Don't forget to close the door, though. And to undress beforehand. And to dry yourself afterwards."

"Alright."

Levi entered the bathroom, closing the door behind him. There was something stuck in the door…

His sister opened the door again, peeking in. "Nearly forgot that: Turn the key." With those words, the door slammed shut.

For a moment, he thought about disobeying his sister, then, Levi turned the key.

Disobeying Sam? So not worth it.

Some time later, Levi stepped into the tiny room. What was it… shower, right.

He fiddled with the buttons.

COLD!

HOT!

Ah…

Why was there a pipe the water flowed down? Levi wanted more water, not less!

Lots and lots of water! Fill the whole tiny room with water, until he could submerge completely and make lots of air bubbles!

He jumped up and down, breaking the surface, feeling his hair float in the water, then cling to him whenever his head was above the surface, and the way water filled his ears and flowed out again.

Hearing underwater was funny.

After Levi stepped out of the shower, using his abilities to dry himself, then make sure he didn't forget he was dressed - why did humans insist upon clothes? - he exited the bathroom, running into
his whole family sitting on the couch staring at the picture box. TV. Whatever.

For a few minutes, the screen flashed through various things that apparently, were supposed to be good for you in some way or other, until something was shown that caught Levi’s attention.

Lots of water. Slides. Huge pools full of water. People jumping into water.

"What's that?"

Needless to say, ten minutes later, Mom had promised they all were going to go to the local indoor swimming pool in two weeks’ time.

Chapter End Notes

The end of Arc 1. First arc cross-posted, yay!
During the weekend, breaking news came out - apparently, the Endbringers had disappeared. Completely. No trace left. Nothing they might have used to find them was working. Apparently, even Dragon had no idea what was going on. The craze about what had happened - every single program on TV featured it - didn't touch me quite as much as it should have, though.

I was power testing. Apparently, apart from chucking stuff around, producing fires and making puddles splash around - though a lot smaller and more limited than anything the others could do - I was also truly, absolutely, stupidly durable.

Point in case:

On Saturday, Sam somehow - it had nothing to do whatsoever with her pout, and anyone who says so is a huge liar who lies- convinced the rest of us to join her on the roof of a six story building owned by Medhall for power testing, wearing ski masks and hoodies to conceal our faces.

First, she flew Benny up there, then Levi.

Then, it was my turn. Sam put her arms around me - hugs! - and we took off.

When we didn't stop at the height the boys were at, I became nervous.

When we were at roughly twice the height of the building, I became very nervous.

When we were even higher, much, much higher, I became extremely nervous.

This was followed by me starting to scream in panic because Sam had let me go.

The air rushed around me, the roof of the building was coming closer and closer, I was going to meet my newly decided upon nemesis solid concrete or whatever the roof was made out of in short time…

Solid-concrete-or-whatever was coming closer, eager to meet me in a battle of durability…

And then…

I made contact with an enormous crash, feeling the sheer force of the impact all over my body, but it didn't actually hurt. It barely felt like a scratch.

I won. Hah! Take that, roof, floor of the floor below the roof, and ceiling of the floor below that!

… wait a moment.

I looked up. There were big, roughly Taylor-shaped holes in the three ceilings above me.

Okay, so maybe the term "durable" wasn't quite enough to describe it, a bit like calling the Great Lakes a puddle.

I exited the building through the wall, and my three sort-of-kids-from-the-future (I needed a shorter term for that… sokftf? That didn't roll of the tongue quite correctly) followed me by jumping off the roof before all four of us bolted - I was pretty sure I'd just managed to create a shitload of property damage.
Besides finding out just how much impact force I could survive without a scratch, homework, and trying to find cape names - we were drawing up nothing except for blanks - I also somehow got finagled into the role of team leader.

Which might have had to do with the whole "Mom" thing, but I still wanted to complain about it - why me?

Sam was the pre-cog here. Though I kind of… was starting to get seconds in advance warnings about what was going to happen if I focused on her?

Nothing in comparison to what Sam was apparently capable of, but still really, really useful. I'd avoided getting hit by an awful lot of what the other two could do because of her power.

I also did a bit of research on PHO: apparently, we were all Brutes, Sam was a Thinker (and, if the way she'd been fiddling around with the toaster enough we now needed a new one and had a lasergun instead was any indication, a bit of a Tinker), Benny was even more of a Brute than the rest of us and a Shaker, Levi was another Shaker, and I was a Trump.

Apparently, due to Sam somehow arranging things, we also had access to a lot more funds than I, on my own, would have. I had no idea what she'd done and wasn't sure I actually wanted to know. I was pretty sure that whatever Sam had done would turn out to be a good deed in hindsight… well, I hoped so, anyways.

Those funds were the reason that, Sunday afternoon, I called a number Sam had recommended to me, from a burner phone she'd bought.

Ring.

Ring.

Ri-

"Parian speaking?"

"Uh, hey." *What was I supposed to say? "You make costumes, right?"

"… Costumes." She sounded a bit skeptical and exasperated both.

"For capes", I clarified.

"For… oh. Yes, I do that."

I exhaled a little. Worst part - over. "Uh… so, if say, four people needed costumes, would you be able to provide?"

"… you're villains, aren't you?" There was the exasperation again.

"Heroes. Well… we will be. Probably. We're… all kind of pretty new to this, to be honest."

"New independent hero team?", she asked, a bit friendlier.

"Yeah."

"What's your name?"
"I'm Tay- … you meant cape name. Uh… I've not thought of one yet? We're all bad at names. Well… S- I mean Oracle's decided on one." I heard a muffled laugh through the phone.

"Alright. I assume you want to set up a meeting?"

"Would next weekend work?"

"For initial measurements, sure. Anything I'd need to know in advance?"

"At least some waterproof and some fireproof cloth. Everything preferable as durable as possible. And Oracle said we were going to have enough money."

"Sounds like everything's in order. I'll see you and your friends in my workshop next Saturday or Sunday?"

"Saturday, at 2 PM?"

"You know the address?"

"… No, but I'm pretty sure Oracle does. Uh… Goodbye?"

"Have a nice week, then."

With those words, Parian terminated the call.

Nice week…

Well, it actually might turn out to be.
It didn't quite turn out to be a nice week. Odd was a much, much better descriptor.

It started with Sam loosing a blank sheet in the hallway after the first lesson.

During the second lesson, Benny took a seat besides me, while Levi shared his desk with a boy whose name I couldn't remember for the life of me, and Sam waved for Greg to come over in the beginning of the lesson.

It was during the second break that we ran into the Trio again.

Well, two thirds of the trio, Madison was nowhere to be seen. I'd heard rumours a certain Medhall office building was on her way to school and that there were starting to be some alteration between the ABB and the Empire in the region, so - due to taking the long way around - she hadn't arrived yet.

And only one third of them was currently anything resembling active - Sophia was staring at Benny. Again.

I was beginning to suspect Benny had some sort of "make girls stare at him"-power.

Nevertheless, Emma and hangers-on were confronting us. One of the girls - I'd never bothered to learn her name - even had her phone out, filming everything.

It started with Emma smiling at us.

"So… you're such an odd group… why are the three of you hanging around with a girl like that?" She indicated me.

Thanks, Ems.

It was Sam who answered. "My, my. What are you trying to imply with that?"

I could almost envision the two of them as two great cats, circling one another, waiting to attack. Sadly, reality contained Emma instead of awesome kitty-cat.

"Nothing whatsoever. After all, it's not anything you haven't heard about yet."

"Oh? Curious. And what are we supposed to have heard about?"

For just a second, Emma faltered, glancing at a still unresponsive Sophia.

Huh… so that should've been her cue?

Still, Emma raised her chin, her arms crossed. "How about the simple fact that no one here likes her? Isn't that right, girls?"

There were a few reinforcing murmurs, but the response was… quieter than usual. It was as if the majority of the hangers-on were holding their breath to see what was going to happen - and especially, who would come out on top.
"I wouldn't call my brothers and myself no one, and we're very much here right now", Sam replied.

"Or how about the fact that she's such a klutz most of her home-" Emma took a step forward in the middle of the word, and there it was.

The blank sheet Sam had lost earlier.

"-woaaaah!"

She lost her balance, her foot gliding forward, landing straight on her back.

"Klutz, hm? Funny, how that works." Somebody started to chuckle. I think it might've been Benny or Levi, but I wasn't quite sure.

Then one of the hangers-on laughed out loud, and the gates broke. All of Emma's "friends", except for Sophia, were laughing - some seemingly just at the irony of the situation, while others were pointing and whispering, already, while the girl with the phone was smirking to herself.

I had the strange feeling that clip was going to be shown around a lot.

"Huh? Whazzup?", Sophia said, then, snapping out of it.

The laughter, which had just stopped, doubled up again.

A few moments later, a red-faced Emma had finally managed to stand up again, leaving together with Sophia. I was actually feeling just a little sorry for her - being laughed at just… it wasn't any fun. It was a horrible, horrible experience because you felt just how much you were worth in other people's eyes - something bad happening was nothing more than a passing amusement for them. It wasn't just the fact you'd slipped or your homework was missing or that there was glue on your chair, it was that it was amusing for everyone in your surroundings that made it infinitely worse, that you were less of a person and more of a walking acceptable target and comedy slapstick sketch.

On the other hand… karma. I wouldn't laugh. I didn't laugh. But I sure as hell wouldn't help, either. Emma had burned that bridge long, long ago, and if she was hit by her own actions… well, I couldn't honestly say I wouldn't be feeling just a little satisfied and vindictive.

The ensuing lessons and lunch were all extremely quiet - I didn't see either hide or hair from any member of the trio.

The next day, the little clip of our confrontation had spread all over school. Suddenly, "woaah!" motions were all the rage in Emma's general vicinity, while Sophia was confronted with whispers of "Whazzup?".

Madison wisely kept to herself, controlling the usual crowd and staying away from all of us - Emma, Sophia, the siblings and me.

Meanwhile, my kids and I (that phrase felt weird) continued power-testing in the afternoons and listening to newscasts of "no Endbringers to be seen".

Although I sincerely doubted that Sam's "combat-related pre-cog testing in a non-critical
environment" really had to include a computer, Space Opera, and Voidcowboy and Gstringgirl, or whatever their exact names were. I had the feeling neither of them was going to be a good influence on my little-

I was not a thirty something restricting parent, I was not a thirty something restricting parent, I was not…

Maybe if I continued the mantra often enough, I'd stop acting like one.

During the remainder of the week, coincidences continued to come up in contrary c… I couldn’t find another word with c that fit… in contrary situations pertaining my trio of tormentors, who weren't actually getting any tormenting in at all.

Sophia, Emma and Madison having a suspicious number of very active cats in the close vicinity of their houses and therefore not getting a wink of sleep was something that came up when they talked to each other, for instance.

Then there were things like what happened just before World History on Wednesday:

When the siblings and I came in, Mr. Gladly was looking out of the window, while - surprise, surprise! - Madison was just walking towards my usual chair while opening the glue bottle.

Sam was complaining: "… and I still can't find my eraser."

Hearing the voice, Mr. Gladly turned around, just when Madison had already turned around the glue bottle and was pouring it down.

"Ms Clements?"

Madison looked up.

"What are you doing there?"

I was always going to price the look of complete, utter bewilderment and surprise that appeared on her face.

"Well… seeing as she's nowhere near her things and is holding an open glue bottle upside down over a chair, I'd have said she's defacing school property, Mr. Gladly", Sam chimed in.

A consenting murmur swept through the few people already in the classroom, with a very uncomfortable looking Mr. Gladly.

He didn't like punishing the popular kids, but right now… "Ms. Clements, please report to the principal's office for defacing school property."

A shocked Madison walked upstairs.

Thursday continued the pattern.

I was walking down the aisle alone - the previous lesson had been physical education and Sam was
taking her time - just reaching the stairs, when Sophia came up behind me.

She was stomping around, angrily, with huge bags under her eyes and in an extremely bad mood. I was just close enough to her path so she'd be able to shove me aside with her elbow…

Yet just as she started the motion to shove me out of the way, she stepped onto something and lost her balance, leading to her doom bouncing upwards, somehow landing directly in my hand.

It was an eraser suspiciously similar to the one Sam had been complaining about losing before.

I left Sophia to do a tortoise-on-back-on-land impression, and handed Sam's eraser back to her during the next lesson.

Sam's very, very satisfied smile was what led me to finally clueing in on the fact of (pre-cog) + (suspicious string of bad luck towards people pre-cog has ample reason to dislike) = (probably not a complete coincidence).

… yeah, in hindsight it was really embarassing it took that long. I should talk to Sam about that at some point… make clear whether it's just everything going wrong for them when they try something and just a tad of additional bad luck or something worse. It wouldn't do for Sam to get into bad habits. What would she do if a family member got seriously hurt by accident?

As well as that, something weird was going on with Dad. Why the hell did he look like he hadn't slept in a week?
Ever since Annette's death, Danny Hebert had lived in an odd fog, going through life as if it wasn't quite real.

It didn't seem so, without Annette at his side.

At some point during the time just after… after she…

At some during that time, the nudges and nightmares, as he thought of them, had started. The nightmares - more dubbed so for the sake of alliteration than anything else, Annette had always liked alliteration - were odd, even more foggy than most of his life was, half-remembered dreams of giant things.

The nudges were different, though.

They were little things, tiny, really - the sudden impulse to leave home a bit earlier or later, to hug Taylor one day and leave her be the next, to switch on a specific station to catch a news report he'd otherwise never have looked at; just odd impulses that had become steadily stronger during the past few years, not really changing his life all that much.

That is, until now.

It had started with just nodding along and the knowledge that Sam's ridiculous sounding explanation of "grandkids" and "no need to shoot the father" was true, making his mouth open almost on its own to tell her, yes, they were allowed to stay. It spooked him, that he didn't know why it was true - but everything in him screamed that right now, he had to let her stay and believe her.

So he did. The impulses had never hurt him, why would they start now?

The weekend and week after his new… grandchildren… had moved in was a lot odder, though.

Saturday morning, he found himself buying an enormous amount of cat food as well as some cat nip. Every evening - sometimes during the following week, he found himself first in the area around Emma's house, then near two apartment buildings - one in the nicer area of town, one somewhere just between territories, where the nudges didn't go away until he laid out some cat food as well as nip. On Wednesday, the cats were already waiting for him, welcoming him with loud meows and wrapping around his calves.

Thursday took the cake, though.

After distributing food and nip to his furry friends, Danny found himself climbing onto a random
roof, where he loosened a few tiles just ever so slightly, followed by heaving the sewer entrance in the street down below up just so, in a way somebody’d have to approach very specifically to stumble over it. He nearly fell off the damned roof in the process, already dead on his feet.

Then, he walked all the way to a desolate area of the city, taking so many turns and twists he didn't know where exactly he ended up, just that it was close to some near-abandoned appartment building.

*Nudge.*

*Pick up a pebble.*

*Good.*

*Now, throw it.*

*Next pebble.*


*And next one.*

He just wanted to stop and go home…

*Last pebble, Danny.*

He threw the last pebble. Funnily enough, they all ended up relatively close to each other, in a pattern that looked vaguely like an arrow with something written beside it.

And now, homewards.

The route was just as complicated as the one that had led him there.

When he was finally at home, he just wanted to fall into bed.

*Nudge.*

*Switch on the TV.*

No, he didn't want to. He wanted to *sleep.*
Sleepsleepsleepsleepsleep.

TV. Now.

He switched on the TV. A news report came up.

Apparently, several German businesses had declared bankruptcy in the past week, but the process was complicated by what turned up next: A whole lot of documentation showing how all of them had had strong ties to Gesellschaft - varying between CEO's having close friendships with confirmed members, outright bribery, money laundering and even one CEO being a Gesellschaft member, combined with documentation that revealed the civilian identities of some of the most dangerous and despicable ones (including said CEO). Nobody had any idea who had turned all of this up, but the arrests for the various capes had worked near perfectly, and for some reason, most of them couldn't pay for lawyers anymore.

Huh, interesting.

But why had he been supposed to watch this?

Switching off the TV, he fell asleep on the sofa.

It was only during the following the morning that he realised that the news report he'd watched had been in German.
The weekend started with hardly a bang - just a very boring, very relaxing Friday where nothing important whatsoever happened.

It was the most anti-climactic Friday in recent memory.

Well, except for the news about Gesellschaft hitting the air.

Saturday, however, was much less anti-climactic.

We were all getting measured for costumes!

Beforehand, however, I had something to do. After all, for all the chocolate Levi gave me, I hadn't really given him anything. That is why, on Saturday morning, I found myself alone on Boardwalk, shopping until I found an appropriate item.

After more than an hour and countless shops - mostly because I'd had no idea where to start searching - I found it. I didn't know why I was so sure that this was the best possible gift for Levi, only that it was.

I'd give it to him at lunch.

Lunch was gobbled up in haste, with the excitement that came from the knowledge that soon, we'd all be getting costumes hanging in the air.

While we were getting ready, I contemplated giving Levi his gift.

There really wouldn't be a better moment, would be?

Nervously, I played with the box it came in.

"Hey, Levi?"

"Chocolate?"

"… actually, I wanted to give something to you. You know, for giving me chocolate."

"Yes?"

I held out my gift to him. He stared at it.

"It's a present", I said.

He blinked.

"You should take it, open it, and say 'thank you'", I added. Seriously, what kind of mother had I been in the future?
He took the box. He opened it.

"... thank you?"

He stared at it as if he'd never seen such a thing before.

"It's a rubber duck. Uh... it can float on water? And you kind of move it around and make duck noises in the bath tub?"

That was when Levi started smiling.

"Rubber Duckie!" He hugged it to his chest.

I stared at him. He continued cuddling with Rubber Duckie... I mean, the rubber duck.

Aaalriiiight...

After lunch, all of us put on a bunch of blank masks and non-descript clothing.

As predicted (maybe I was getting better at precognition) Sam knew exactly where to go and lead all four of us in such a way we arrived on the dot in front of an unassuming building. Well, not quite arrived on the dot.

We rang the doorbell at that point.

A Victorian-era porcelain doll greeted us.

Parian led us to her workshop, where the measurements and ideas for costumes would begin, a room filled with cloth, tables, more cloth, a few chairs, a running computer and some more cloth.

Brrrr.

Costumes.

I had the very bad feeling that this was going to be a lot like clothes shopping, and I'd never liked it when Emma or... or Mom dragged me to do that. Now, I liked it even less because of all the things it made me think about.

Happy thoughts, Taylor, happy thoughts.

"So, you're trying to be heroes?", Parian asked.

I nodded. "Yeah, we are."

"Does any of you have any idea what you want for costumes yet, or do you need help?"

I looked at the others.

None of them answered. Benny was scratching his neck, while Levi squeezed his new rubber duck.

... Wait, he'd taken the thing with him?

"Uh... something awesome", Benny said, nodding to himself. That was when I noticed something -
Parian wasn't staring at Benny. Huh, so maybe that wasn't power-induced after all.

"We need help", I stated resolutely.

"So… which one of you wants to start?"

Levi tried to move backwards, clutching his rubber duck, while Benny was rubbing his chin. I had the feeling I'd be the most difficult one to find a costume for.

Sam stepped forwards. "I'd like to."

"Oracle, right?"

She nodded. "Brute, telekinetic and pre-cog."

Parian blinked. "That's a useful combination. So, do you need armor or..."

Sam spend a bit of time thinking. "Maybe... something white? Not too constricting? And no armor, please."

"Hmm... like the garb of antique seers? With a golden mask, perhaps..."

Parian typed something into the computer and showed Sam some pictures.

Sam smiled. "Yeah, like that... ooh, we could add wings! Then I'd look like an angel!"

Parian froze. "No wings."

"But... but why not? Wings are pretty!"

"Simurgh." Sam flinched, and Parian continued: "Blonde hair and angel wings, you'd look like the Simurgh. That's... not a good idea. And your powerset's too similar..."

... huh, that was the first time I realized that. I mean, apart from the Scream, the Kill Aura thing and the Water Shadow, my kids' powersets were basically identical to the Endbringers'...

"No wings, then," Sam sounded both resigned and unbelievably sad. Levi tapped her shoulder, wordlessly offering her chocolate, while Benny smiled at her. Sam, Levi, Benny... names, too.

Odd coincidence.

"The rest of it sounds very good, though."

"True. It'd fit you." Parian sketched something out, then showed it to Sam. "That alright?"

Sam nodded and smiled. "That would be perfect."

"Good. Hmmm... which one of you wants to have a go at the basic design next?"

"Me! I'd like to!" Benny raised his hand as if to greet someone or answer a question in school.

"So... any ideas for a name or a theme?"

"Something awesome!"

Parian looked at him. I coughed, and answered: "Brute and energy controller. Think...", hmm... how could I phrase that without sounding too scary "lights, heat, flames, sound... things like that.
Any material needs to be rather heat-resistant, of course." Benny, I loved your enthusiasm, but sometimes, you really could be just a bit… dim when it came to people and what they meant.

"Hmm… something form-fitting might be good…" Parian trailed of, looking at him with a sort of intellectual curiosity. Not on my son, ma'am! "I don't think that's a good idea…"

"How… how about something with knights? Or… or wizards? Those capes always looked pretty cool…", Benny interrupted the discussion. Right, he should get a say, too…

"That would work pretty well. Lots of red and a fire motif…"

Benny nodded. "That sounds cool!" He grinned, visible even under the mask.

"Knight or wizard… you might even be able to pull of a cape from your looks… what would be better, though?"

"Uh…” Benny looked at me.

"Wizard might remind people of Myrrdin, I mean, he's got that whole shtick going on, right?"

"Myrrdin's really cool! Can I look like him, please?" Mentally, I added "Mom".

I cleared my throat. "… most people also think he's kind of nuts, though. Same with most capes who seem to even hint at parahuman abilities being magic. That… that might be a problem." I didn't want Benny to get laughed at.

Benny stared at me, then Parian: "Really?"

Parian nodded. "I hadn't at first considered that, but it's true… would that be enough of a problem you'd go for knight?"

For a moment, Benny's shoulders sagged. "I don't want to be made fun of…", he straightened again, "… and besides, knights are pretty awesome, too!"

"Knight with flame motif it is, then."

The next few minutes were spent on details like shoulder pads, whether a cape would be necessary (apparently, no cape) and - Sam's part of the discussion - an appropriate material for the fake armour. It was more decoration than anything, but the pencil sketch Parian showed us at the end looked pretty cool, and for colours Benny decided on the whole thing being done in flaming red/orangeish, black, with some faint blue mixed in. Not quite knight in shining armour, but it would - to borrow Benny's vocabulary - most definitely look "awesome".

This was followed by…

"So… which one of you'd be next?"

"I'm going last", I quickly said - I still had no clue what my costume was going to be. "So… you're up, L-, I mean, my friend."

Levi had a very deer in the headlights look about him. "B-but… chocolate?" He offered some to me, then to Parian.
Both of us gladly took some, although Parian put it into a pocket instead of starting to eat it.

"So, ideas for a name or theme?"

"[SIZE=2]… I'm a hydrokinetic. I like blue.[/SIZE]"

Parian took a step towards him, and Levi stepped back.

"Relax, I'm not going to hurt you. Now… do you have any ideas, or should I come up with ideas?"

Shyly, Levi raised his hand, pointing at Parian.

"Alright… how about some sort of sailor? Your teammates already have something history inspired, so… maybe a pirate or a navy captain?"

Levi nodded, relaxing a bit. "Captain."

The following discussion included a few more offers of chocolate, a comparison of different hats that went beyond my vocabulary (bicorne vs tricorne, tricorne apparently won) and how to incorporate masks and straps into the design so it'd conceal and stay on the head, different types of jackets, shirts and trousers and the waterproofing requirement, and how to add a wave design. I also came to the conclusion I'd have to talk with Levi, because I was getting quite sure he was terrified of women for some reason.

Then, it was my turn. I still had no idea what my costume could look like, and "power-borrowing trump" wasn't something that lent itself to themes very well.

"Now, you… still don't have a name either, I assume?"

I nodded. "And my powers aren't very helpful for finding one. Trump."

Hmm… if I could borrow my kids' powers, maybe I could…

I reached out, focusing on Parian. There was something there… I pulled, then just felt outwards with a thing I couldn't quite describe until… a thread lifted itself.

I could lift a single thread in comparison to Parian's moving entire stuffed animals, and not even that without feeling like I was going to burst into a sweat every second.

Parian shivered, and I let go of both her power and the thread. "You just… did something. Drew on it? Please don't do that again."

"I couldn't do much, though. Just lift a thread."

"Still, it was… odd. Very, very odd. So… you draw on powers?"

I nodded. "Also, brute. It works better with my teammates' powers, though."

"Well, it certainly would be possible to take a historical design and change it so it fits you, though I'm not quite sure what would work…"

That was the moment Benny chimed in: "Or… or we could use something futuristic, because then it'd still be a time theme, but she'd also be different!"
In hindsight, that moment was the one where the costume design was effectively taken out of my hands and mostly landed in those of my kids.

"Plus, she's a Trump, so we could take inspiration from Eidolon's costume", Sam added.

"Wouldn't that be a bit… arrogant?", I tried to ask. I was completely ignored.

"That'd work quite well… So, skintight suit and cape, hood with glow… we can't just copy Eidolon, so possible changes?"

"No skintight suit." I was quite insistent on that.

"Alright. Still, tight clothing would probably look good on you. Any colour scheme you want to go with?"

I thought for a moment. "Well, not green, obviously, but as we've all got differing colour schemes so far, maybe violet?"

"Darker or lighter?"

"Darker." While I really didn't expect to have to sneak around a lot, but… being not so highly visible should be useful, right?

Well, except for the part where I was supposed to have a glowing hood, of course.

A quick sketch later, and my design was basically finished.

Then came the measuring tape.

And the needles.

And some more tape.

Sam bore it quite well, standing still and looking relaxed as one could be for all the world to see, Benny fidgeted a lot, Levi offered chocolate before trying to move away from the tape, and I just… depending on the moment, either tried not to get too bored or not laugh at the boys.

I didn't quite succeed.

With the first part, of course. I wouldn't laugh at them.

Well, maybe a little bit.

A few hours later, during which Parian modified the designs, measured us, and came to an agreement about when we'd be able to get the costumes - next week for a preliminary design if she didn't have too much work and everything went smoothly, otherwise in two weeks time - it was finally over.

We returned home tired and feeling as if we'd just passed through a blender.

Well, I felt like that. Sam and Benny were as fresh as roses, while Levi was a gibbering nervous wreck from being touched. "Girls are scary", indeed. With Levi reading a book and continuing to
make quack noises with Rubber Duckie at random intervals, Sam playing computer and Benny watching TV, the evening passed comfortably.

Sunday was quiet - we played games, Dad introduced Levi and Sam to chess (Sam trounced everybody) and Benny showed a surprising aptitude for Monopoly.

In school, the phone-clip featuring two thirds of the trio was still running hot and seemed to have reached even a larger amount of the Winslow population. I could've sworn I saw it pop up at one point on Mrs. Knott's computer screen during her class, even, when I went to ask her a question.

The trio wasn't taking it well. Teachers were paying more attention to Madison now, for defacing school property, people were laughing openly about Sophia and Emma, and all three of them looked like they hadn't slept in a week (and seemed ready to murder anyone who talked about cats, for some reason).

I spent the whole week eating in the cafeteria with Greg and my kids, never once actually interacting with any member of the trio, and having fun. One afternoon, the four of us went clothes shopping together - the siblings needed swim clothes.

Besides that, the local junior chapter of the E88 seemed to be going stir-crazy, probably because of the news coming out of Germany right now. One of them seemed to have a bit of a personal beef with Benny, though, always glaring at him especially, a tall guy with light brown hair. On unrelated news, a girl who might've been either said boy's girlfriend, his crush or a relative was amongst those spending an awful lot of her time staring at Benny in a much friendlier manner.

The next Saturday was the day I'd promised Levi we'd visit the local swimming pool. All five members of our family were standing right in front of the building, ready to buy tickets, when Sam said: "Guys? I've got something to do. I'll see you later, alright?"

Dad didn't say anything, Benny was looking at the cars as if they were absolutely fascinating, and Levi actually relaxed.

My call, then. "Yeah, it's fine. What is it?"

Sam actually blushed a bit. "Uh… nothing too important. Just, meeting somebody."

"A friend?"

"Maybe they'll be one, one day. I'm going to be late if I don't hurry, though, so… see you later!"

She hugged me and the boys, then her Grandpa, before disappearing into the crowd.

I turned to the boys: "We're going inside now?"

Benny and Levi both nodded.
Last chapter I'm cross-posting today.
Brockton Bay's local indoor swimming pool - rather small due to the ocean being close - still possessed several basins, a few springboards, and slides.

Let's just say, the boys went for the slides almost immediately.

Dad joined them.

… yeah, I did too. Slides, what can you do?

We attracted quite a lot of looks - a man, two boys and a girl, all behaving like six-year-olds, one of them bringing a rubber duck with him.

Of course, girls were also staring at Benny and Levi for being… well, athletic, handsome and young.

I had an odd feeling of pride at the thought that most girls were staring at Levi and Benny in swim trunks. Though, if my sons already looked like that, what did their father(s) look like?

I also had an odd need to make sure none of those girls were going to take advantage of the boys - Levi was nervous enough already, and Benny was…

Benny.

Very much Benny.

A half hour or so later, Levi and I continued onto the diving boards, while Benny was discovered by a group of girls and somehow got talked into playing butler - carrying things, bringing things…

Benny.

Just… Benny.

An hour later, just when Levi and I had enough from jumping into water and headed over, one of our classmates confronted him.

Light skin, light brown hair, tall, broad-shouldered, blue eyes, 88 tattoo. I thought his name might've been… Francis or something.

He gave all other Francis (Was that the appropriate plural?) a bad name.

"Whatcha doing with the girls?"

"Uh… waiting on them?"

"Waiting, yeah right… more waiting for them to be alone and ambush them somewhere. That's what your kind do, don't they, nigger?" Maybe-Francis continued glancing at the girls during this little speech of this. Belatedly, I realized he was focusing on one of them.

"Actually, no, not as far as I know. And your language is not very polite."

"My language? Who cares about language?"

"I do. I have not given you any reason to be impolite or make a scene, so if you'd please stop?"
Benny's tone was polite. Very polite. He seemed to genuinely not get that there was any reason to be upset.

For a moment, Probably-Francis hesitated. "Oh yeah, and what are you gonna do if I don't?" He continued: "You're just a nigger going above his station, I'd like to know what your mother's rates are, and how much she was paid to not drown you at birth." He sounded like he was fuming, just searching for an opportunity to attack.

Benny blinked. "That is not very polite, either." He stretched his hand out and patted the top of the other boy's head. "No worries, you'll learn politeness when you're older."

That was the moment Might-have-been-Francis saw red. With an incoherent scream, he drew his fist back to punch Benny…

… only for said fist to be caught in mid-air.

"This is very, very impolite indeed."

Another scream, and that was when the people responsible for overseeing the place decided to intervene.

All witnesses - especially that girl Maybe-Francis had continued looking at - agreed that Might've-Been-Francis had been the one to start the confrontation, and that Benny hadn't done anything.

The lifeguard, taking one look at the other boy's tattoos, immediately agreed, and he was told to remove himself from the building (or else…).

While we stayed for a while afterwards, it wasn't quite as much fun as it had been in the beginning.

After we left, Sam was coming right up at the entrance.

"Had fun?"

She shrugged. "I think I've made a friend." There was an odd pride in her voice, as if… "That's my second friend." And the first… right, Greg.

Yikes. What kind of parent had I been, in the future?

...wait, had I even been still alive then? Was that why…

What kind of person was their father, were their fathers? I didn't even know that much, and they hadn't volunteered any information of what their lives had been like before coming here.

I was going to have to have a talk with them, later today.

The opportunity came in the evening. Pyjama-clad and ready for bed, I decided to round everyone up and have that talk. It was obviously needed.

We'd all assembled in a circle around the sofa, Dad taking up the whole space there by lying down.

"Alright… I wanted to talk to all of you because… you've not actually said anything about your life before."
The siblings shared looks, all of them with expressions between terror and despair.

"I… it wasn't very fun", Sam said.

"Was I around?", I asked.

Levi was the one who shook his head, clutching his rubber duck. *Squeak.*

"Your dad? Or dads?"

"Just dad", Benny said. "Uh… I've got to ask, but what did the guy mean today with 'rates', Mom?"

"He implied I was selling sex."

"Sex? What is that?"

My brain decided to switch off for a few moments.

…

Then, luckily, Dad decided to intervene, yawning: "I'll expla...aaaaah… explain the whole thing to you boys tomorrow."

"And, since this is off-topic", I added hastily, "could we please get back to my question? What happened to your dad?"

Sam scratched the back of her neck. "Well… I'm pretty sure he's never actually learned we were his?"

"You didn't tell him?"

"We… might've been on different sides, for a while. Coming here… well, it meant everything changed. Our powers are a bit different, even. Didn't actually know it would happen."

That…

"Sounds like there's a story there."

"It wasn't nice", Benny said, his eyes fixed on a point far away. Levi said nothing, just… *squeak.*

"You don't want to talk about it", I stated.

Three shaking heads.

"You fought, though." Hesitant nods.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Child soldiers. My kids were *fucking* child soldiers, and if the whole thing was a stable time loop - I'd read up on relevant literature, sue me - I was going to be dead before they properly got to know me, their father never knowing about them.

*Over my dead body.*

… I didn't mean that literally.
I threw myself at them, doing my best to catch all three of them in a hug.

At first, all three of them tensed up, wiggling and squirming, until they finally relaxed into it.

Hugs. They weren't used to hugs.

I released them after a few minutes, breathing hard and feeling my eyes burn.

I swallowed it down.

"Anyways, there's some other things I wanted to talk to you about. Levi… what's up with you and girls?"

He pointed at Sam. "Scary."

For a moment, I nearly felt like laughing. Just fear of his sister? That didn't sound so bad…

Child soldiers. Pre-cog. Sam, what had you done, what arranged for?

"We're not all that scary, Levi. Most girls aren't." He looked at me, then at Rubber Duckie.

"You're not scary", he told me, "you're Mom."

"Most girls aren't scary, either."

Levi raised a very, very skeptical eyebrow.

"… well, most of the time. Normally."

"Chocolate keeps girls away", he stated, nodding. On the sofa, I heard Dad snoring quietly.

…well… it did keep them from being scary to him?

I sighed. "Well… anyways. Sam?"

"Yes?"

I raised an eyebrow at her.

"Uh… sorry?" She smiled crookedly, apologetic.

"Good enough. Now… you arranged for quite a few things to happen, didn't you?"

Sam nodded. "Good work."

She smiled at me, wide and honest. "Really?"

"Really. Just… make sure you don't go overboard, alright? Nothing out of proportion, no revenge. If they try to do something, it's alright if it backfires, but no hurting them and no pranks just for the fun of it, okay?"

Sam hesitated. "But why not?"

Child soldier. "Because if you do that… well, sooner or later, you'd do worse things than they ever did. That's… that's not right. It's funny if they try to hurt us, well me, and it backfires on them, but if they aren't trying anything… there's justice and there's revenge, you see?"
Sam nodded.

"Justice, that's making sure people don't try to hurt anyone again and making sure they get an appropriate punishment - it doesn't have… well, preferably through the proper authorities, but justice is more about them getting better and no one else getting hurt again. Revenge's about hurting them so you feel better."

Sam looked contemplative.

"I… I think I get it."

I hoped so. I didn't… Sam could do an awful lot of horrible things if she put her mind to it, I didn't even know quite how far her pre-cog allowed her to see or what it'd allow her to arrange. She needed to be the bigger person, because she'd likely always have options on how to deal with opposition.

"That goes for you, too, boys." The two shared a look, then nodded at me.

That was basically the end of the discussion.

On Sunday morning, Parian called - she'd finished the preliminary costumes. She'd make spares later, she promised.

That afternoon, we walked into her workshop, gathering our new outfits and trying them on.

They all fit perfectly - Benny as an elegant knight, Levi with a satchel to store water in looking snappy in his uniform (hmm… maybe we could get him a trident at some point?), Sam in her seer's garb, a picture of elegance… and I actually looked like a grown-up woman and… hero.

That evening, we were going to go out, our first patrol as a team.

I had the niggling feeling I'd forgotten about something important…
Standing in front of a café whose name she would have to remember, Lisa was waiting for her appointment.

Her hands were sweaty, her cheeks red, her breathing uneven, and she felt like she'd burst any minute.

Somebody had left a bunch of pebbles directly below her window, arranged in a way so she'd recognize an arrow, a distance and a time.

The exact place of this little café, today. In... five minutes or so, according to her watch. Then, her mysterious appointment would appear.

The bad thing about it wasn't just that they'd known where they all lived. It was that her power hadn't given her a single clue towards who they were or what they wanted.


She desperately needed the intel, any intel. Friend or foe, ally or enemy? If it was someone who could help her take down Coil...

It might be him lording his superiority over her, having recruited another thinker...

Any scenario was possible right now.

She looked at her watch again. If they were punctual, they'd be here right...

Looking up, a girl had appeared beside her.

... now.

The girl was pretty, in an angelic sort of way, with white blonde hair, cutting a rather tiny figure. The part that ruined that image was the big wide grin plastered onto her face that reminded Lisa of something...

... *It's like looking into a mirror*, her power told her.

Gee, thanks.

Any useful information?

Her power was conspicuously silent.

"Sorry I nearly ran late", the girl said, letting go of a tiny plastic car.

"No need to be sorry", Lisa answered. Look at her, what did she see?

...

Fuck, fuck, fuck. She relied on her power to help her with filling in the gaps, and right now, she was
drawing up a blank.

Nevermind. She wasn't stupid, she'd scrape at least something together herself.

Two most important open questions: Why wasn't her power working, and what were the other girl's aims? (There was also the open question of what she should order at the café. This was not an important one.)

Her… current company was either a cape herself or being affected by a Trump, nothing else she could think of would've been able to shut off her powers. She'd never met or heard of a cape who could gift others with a Thinker-nullifying effect, but the possibility was certainly there. The more likely scenario was that the girl had that power herself.

More important than that was whether the Thinker-nullifying effect was part of a Thinker ability or all she could do. If Thinker, it'd be likely there'd be an information imbalance with herself at the other end, for once.

Joy.

They continued walking in, joining the queue for coffee.

"Well, thanks for meeting me anyway. Out of curiosity, how'd my friend get a hold of you?"

Lisa froze.

Somebody else had arranged for it, no-selling her powers. Somebody additional. And while "friend" could mean a lot, this implied at least "ally". At least two allied most-likely-capes who could no-sell her. Or one Trump in at least a two-members-team or alliance.

And that was the best case scenario.

Oh shit.

If those were enemies… well, Lisa was more than willing to confidently state she wasn't all that bad at information gathering without her powers, but being reduced to baseline human against at least two capes? Not something she ever wanted to deal with, no thanks sir.

"Oh, they just left me a message."

Carefully, Lisa observed the other girl's reactions. She just smiled, wide and either faking naivety pretty fucking well or actually genuine.

Yeah, she'd go with option one.

"That was nice of them. They're pretty nice, in general."

Was that a threat? In general… Powers, now would be a good moment to switch on, please?

"So… what's the plan for today?", Lisa asked, her voice nice and neutral. Answers, give me fucking answers…

"Well, I thought we'd drink some coffee and just chat a bit, you know?", the girl answered, still sounding so fucking genuine Lisa almost believed she was.

"Sounds nice", she agreed. Their turn to order came up, Lisa ordering a capuccino first with the stranger copying her.
Insecurity, maybe? Being unused to coffee? That just didn't fit.

"So, what's your name?", the girl asked.

… What?

She didn't even… then how… why…

Was that just her being polite, faking politeness, trying to get to her civiliant identity (but they knew where she lived) or… what was the angle of that question? To bring up her past? Had her accomplice not shared the information?

"Lisa, I'm Lisa. Yours?"

"I'm Sam. Nice to meetcha." And that infernal grin again, come on, nobody was that genuine…

Coffee came.

Finding a table - well, being dragged to a table by a ball of energy - wasn't that much of a chore. When they were seated, Lisa started by drinking a bit of it… let "Sam", if that really was her name, carry on the conversation.

"Oh, I nearly forgot!", she exclaimed, and suddenly…

Young. Inexperienced. Genuine. No idea what they're doing.

Wants friends. Believes friend - family member? - arranged for her to meet me. To make friends.

Has no clue I might be worried.

…

Seriously?

Her power was being influenced, wasn't it?

Output consistent with the usual.

…

…

…

…

Trying to make friends.

Trying to… to make friends. Somebody was using Thinker and Trump powers and mysterious messages in the night in front of her house trying to make friends.

Looking at the girl, Lisa focused on her body language.

Socially awkward. Relies on power for most conversations, not doing so right now. Trying to get better. Has either no clue about how this was set up or doesn't understand why it might be creepy.
Just... just great. And she still had no other information about the person who'd actually delivered the message. How would they react if she didn't...

Lisa realized she'd been outmaneuvered from the start. They'd known. Whoever had set this up had known how she'd react to it from the very beginning, and she'd played right into their hands by coming here. Even if it appeared to be for a relatively benign cause, it still grated.

Although...

Friends.

Lisa turned the same smile back at Sam. Friends wouldn't leave friends hanging, right?

Let's see whether Coil was a Thinker.

"So, what do you do in your spare time?", Lisa asked.

"Playing games is pretty fun, but I only started recently", the girl replied. "I've always loved watching the stars, though."

"Stars?", Lisa asked. Get her talking about herself, get on her good side, earn a bit of trust... that was how you made friends, right?

Wait... there was something about reciprocating affection, too.

"Mhm. It sucked when they shut off the space programs. I really liked the idea." The tone was light, joking suggested by power.

"To be fair, the Simurgh really didn't make it easy on them", Lisa replied.

"Yeah", Sam looked up, her face thoughtful - genuinely - "I'm glad she's not hanging in the sky anymore." There was a wistfulness to this statement that surprised Lisa.

"What are your hobbies?", Sam asked.

"You know, normal things... I do like conspiracy theories, though."

"Like, 'everything that happens is a Simurgh plot'?"

Lisa smiled. "Not quite that bad, but... yeah, there's an awful lot going on behind the scenes we just don't know. You've heard about what happened in Germany?"

Sam nodded.

"Somehow, a single person was pulling the strings." Lisa leaned back in her chair. "They used the exact same method to drain most of Gesellschaft's puppet bank accounts over night, before sending all of those reports out, telling people the exact best methods to disable them..." She noticed the expression on Sam's face.

A grin.

A very, very satisfied grin.

Proud. Believes I'm a good choice for a friend for figuring it out. Was involved in this.

"So..."
"It wasn't just one person from what I've gathered", what she knows, "but person one might have pointed the other to steal all that data from someone else. One main source, bit extra from elsewhere."

**Stress on one and other: was the other.**

"Oh?"

"Yeah, the main source... they weren't really doing all that much with it."

So Coil couldn't be taken down the same way… still…

"I think", Lisa said, "that this is the start of a wonderful friendship, my dear Sam."

Then, another thing occured to her: "You… do actually know about my occupation, right?"

Sam shook her head.

… this was going to be a bit more difficult than she thought. Well, how to explain this whole thing…

A bit of time later, Lisa had managed to arrange to meet her new - friend? - friend on Tuesday, together with their respective teams.

Didn't hurt to know the competition, after all.

Chapter End Notes

Cross-posted Arc 2!
Learning to be Human - [3.1]

Having received our costumes, the common consensus was we should try going out on a patrol, see how the whole thing worked, get seen, maybe stop a robbery if we stumbled across one - definitely more just walking around trying to get used to the whole idea of costumes than anything else. The feeling I'd forgotten a few really, really important things didn't leave me alone, though.

...hmm, maybe I should talk to Sam about the identity of her new friend? Nah, that wasn't it… We'd paid Parian… we'd all hugged Dad… I knew I'd forgotten about something, more than one thing.

Sunday evening, just after sundown.

We were out and about, searching for trouble.

Well… sort of. Actually, we were more trying to get a feeling for what we were supposed to be doing at all.

How did other heroes do this? Just run around and hope they came across a crime?

I was worried about what might happen if we did run into somebody.

… more for them than for us, though. It was a bit strange that I wasn't more afraid of being hurt, even if I was extremely durable. I'd never gotten hurt much, after all - I couldn't remember getting any skinned knees or anything like that in… well, ever.

I was going out to look for trouble with three people I felt I knew well, yet knew nothing about at all, who'd claimed something entirely ridiculous and whom I believed in part because the alternative was being alone. … Wasn't I in a good mood today?

Walking through streets at an even pace, we criss-crossed randomly through the city in hope of stumbling across a crime in progress.

So… searching for trouble, we were. Trouble found us, about an hour in, after - with Sam guiding us - running into/stopping one-and-a-half robberies (don't ask).

We were walking down an entirely unremarkable street in an entirely unremarkable part of town, not quite gang territory but not too far from it, myself on the right, Sam on the left, Benny at the front and Levi at the rear.

Well, at least it was utterly unremarkable until we saw the other person coming down the street.

Kaiser, in full costume, and stomping around as if he wanted to kill someone.

Empire 88 was sponsored by Gesellschaft… well, had been sponsored.

"Halt, evildoer!", Benny shouted at him.
... I would have to trim down his TV hours.

Kaiser looked at us. "Running into a group of wannabe heroes when I just want to bash a few heads in", he grumbled under his breath.

That was the moment Sam took off with the words "Watch out!" and metal blades appeared from the ground below us.

I felt them poking at my feet and immediately drew on Sam's powers, leaving the ground myself.

Benny and Levi, however, weren't so fortunate, the spikes impaling their feet and to the street around them.

This was now officially a case of self-defense.

Well... as soon as we reached the point where we were actually defending ourselves, anyways.

Benny tore himself free, pointing then shooting lightning at Kaiser... who promptly created a spike right in front of him which drew the current while my other son took a bit longer to get his feet out.

More blades shot up, nearly impaling Benny and Levi who threw themselves out of the way, leaving the general area with holes on their feet.

I wanted to hurt that man who'd dared to hurt my kids so badly in that moment, but...

What was I even supposed to do? I mean I could... draw on any of their powers, or...

... we hadn't ever discussed what to do in an actual fight.

It might've been nice to think about that beforehand. What should I do?

More blades, these coming my way. I ducked out of the way, barely avoiding them, while Benny trying to make roast out of Kaiser led to the man just dancing out of the rain. Sam and I batted at his blades with our power, but he seemed to still have enough control over them he wasn't actually getting hit by anything we did with them.

I really, really should've given this more thought beforehand. One single discussion about tactics, that wouldn't have been that difficult, now would it? Well, at least I knew now what one of those things I'd forgotten about was.

Levi and Benny were still running around to avoid being hit, and the little water Levi had wasn't helping much, being too little to actually force Kaiser on the retreat. Benny's lightning was rather useless, flames didn't help much (aim, we'd need to work on aim), and Sam and me battering at Kaiser's summoned blades wasn't actually all that helpful with him keeping a measure of control over them.

That was when I tried drawing on Kaiser's power. For the first time, I actually focused on the sensation - it felt like reaching through a wall - more like back and forth through a wall - and nearly had me sweat, as if I was trying to move a mountain with my bare hands.

For just a moment, he held still, while obviously feeling something was odd, but it apparently didn't distract him enough to be hit by Levi flinging water at him.

It also didn't distract him enough for him to get hit when Levi pulled the water back to himself.

Benny, meanwhile, flung another volley of fire at him, missing completely, but luckily not hitting
anything else.

Aim. We were going to have to work on their aim.

I pulled a bit more, trying to summon a blade just below the Empire leader.

Kaiser moved out of the way, stepping just so onto a sewer entrance that it closed with an audible "click". Right then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Levi grin.
Grinning. Why was Levi grinning? We were in the middle of a fight with a neo-Nazi gang leader, for Scion's sake.

It started to rumble around us, a deep, murmuring sound, growing louder and louder until the point when all of a sudden, a fountain of water exploded from the sewer entrance, right from under the point where Kaiser stood, throwing him up into the air and off his feet, onto the pavement in an almost comical arc.

Coughing and heckling, a dripping Kaiser removed himself from the immediate area. I almost pitied the guy, the smell was horrible even as far removed from it as I was.

It was as if something had clicked with all of us, as if we'd finally found our rhythm. With Levi suddenly having a much larger area of effect, and Kaiser being dripping wet and distracted, I dove in and tasered him from up close enough I couldn't miss.

He fell down, coming to lie on the floor, twitching.

Right then, a roof tile fell down from nearby and hit the man in the stomach by sheer coincidence. He curled up on himself, and Benny used the time to take up position beside him, ready to… knock him out? Cook him alive? … when he moved.

The whole of the fight couldn't have lasted more than five minutes.

That was the time the cavalry arrived.

Well… might've been for the best. Otherwise I might have hurt the bastard.

In this case, the "cavalry" was actually on foot and went by the name of Miss Militia in costume. Apparently, the short fight had caused enough of a commotion we were going to be asked questions.

Upon her arrival, the woman stared.

"What, exactly, happened here?", she asked, staring at the downed Kaiser.

"Uh… we were walking, he saw us, attacked us, and… uh… well…" I gestured at the man.

"I see. You're new?" Her eyes were crinkled in a smile.

"Uh… yeah, we pretty much are."

That was the moment I noticed the second thing I'd forgotten, namely…

"If you don't mind me inquiring, what are you calling yourself?"

I facepalmed. "I knew we'd forgotten something."

For a moment, she just looked at me. I fidgeted. "We… uh… how about we'll meet in…"

"… a week's time…", Sam inserted. I continued: "Thanks, a week's time and we'll solve that issue then, plus all the other legalities? For what it's worth, that", I pointed at Sam, "is Oracle."
The Protectorate hero seemed to wait for a moment, then nodded. "That sounds reasonable. For now, the PRT troopers will be here soon to take Kaiser into custody, is there anything you can tell me about how the fight went?"

I described the fight, with Miss Militia finally throwing in the occasional question for clarification, although I made sure to not elaborate on our powers too much; until it was finally over and she asked… "Seeing as all of you don't have names yet, should the news be held back until you have?"

"Uh…"

I looked at my kids, and I had an idea. "Just credit it to us as a team, I mean, we're called…", quick now, think of something, Taylor… Family sounds too much like Mafia, Clan's Scottish, Dynasty's a bit too grandstanding, there's the phrase: Kin and… "Kith."

It wasn't the most inspired name in the history of names, but, well… friends… it fit us… all of us… really well. Friends, family, the people you stuck with no matter what… it worked.

I spotted a few heads peeking through windows, and decided it was best to excuse ourselves from the premises.

It was getting kind of late and we still had school tomorrow, after all. A good night's sleep was important.

… I was turning into a mother hen, wasn't I?

A few minutes later, we were finally on the way home. "Everyone?", I asked.

"Yeah?", they chorused.

"Two things: We're going to need to train more", groans, "and we're going to have to think of names."

"Yes! How about calling you Trumpety Trump?", Benny exclaimed.

"… No."

Note to self: Make sure Benny doesn't give himself a completely ridiculous name. And only start talking about them tomorrow. Right now was not a good time for names.
Cricket had had one hell of a shitty week so far.

Not only were the chinks and the druggies getting bolder and bolder, one of the outlying Medhall buildings was being investigated due to the mysterious holes that had appeared through it, as if someone had fallen through. Through three stories.

Unfortunately, it was the building where Cricket had her… sort-of-not-actual day job. Her floor was damaged, even.

Which meant that she couldn't actually let off steam at work.

Then Gesellschaft broke down, and most of her… friends? Teammates? … had no clue what to do.

What files had they kept on Medhall, on the Empire? How long until all their identities were known and their lives crashed around their ears?

The uncertainty was the worst part. Would whoever had destroyed Gesellschaft go for them soon? Were they just biding their time, waiting, or were they going to break down the doors any moment? Were they even coming at all? Did anyone actually know?

What life was she going to have left, afterwards? She'd just rebuilt something for herself.

It was Sunday evening, a group of them were having a meeting where some young punk - she was pretty sure he was some second cousin to Kaiser, surname was Anders, first name… probably Francis? - was complaining 'bout some nigger who'd gotten him thrown out of the local swimming pool and was making moves on "his" girl.

Privately, Cricket wished the nigger the best of luck, preferably in making probably-Francis shut up permanently. By God, that boy's voice was high-pitched and whiny and "ooh my toy is broken, Papa fix it"…

Kaiser was there and a few of the old block, plus most of their capes, all getting drunk. Rune wasn't there - too young.

Cricket was missing Purity right now. Someone with a bit less testosterone to talk to, eh?

Someone who wasn't Night, because that woman gave anyone sane the creeps. Down in the pits, you avoided fuckers like that, the people who'd lost… well, everything about themselves.

And Mister High-And-Whiny-"Cousin, fiiiix thiiiis… bad nigger made me look bad, boohoo" was still talking.

Fuck, the guy was giving her a headache.

That was when she took a look at Kaiser.

His cheeks were red, his eyes bloodshot, looked like he hadn't slept properly in a week. Not only had Gesellschaft provided him with backing, but quite a few of their more legitimate companies had traded a lot with Medhall, and now, due to the association, they were starting to get close to being broke. He'd been ringing up people to finally take their contracts on short notice while Gesellschaft's firms were indisposed, but his efforts hadn't helped one bit.
Hell, if they didn't get discovered due to Gesellschaft, it was pretty likely they'd go broke in a couple of weeks anyway.

And the boy was still bellowing around…

Oh fuck, she wasn't made to deal with this stuff being sober.

Two hours later, as drunk as she needed to be to deal with high-pitched noise, Cricket realized she hadn't seen Kaiser in some time.

Nobody else’d seen him either. She asked Crusader, Fenja, Menja… not that whiner might-be Francis because the retard couldn't hold his liquor and was lying on the table, snoring…

Finally, she found Hookwolf.

"Hooks, you've seen Kaiser?"

"Yeah, 'bout an hour 'go. Boss went out."

What?

"Why'd he go out?"

"T'beat up some fuckin' niggers or chinks or any stupid fucker, 's what he said. Was in one hell of a mood - the kind where a man killed, down in 'e pits, ye remember? *Hic* Needed to let off some steam… Got into his armour an' all…" … hiccups. Hooks always got hiccups when he was really drunk. The thought nearly made her smile, and normally she'd tease him about it, but...

Hookwolf had decided to let drunk, costumed Kaiser run around on his own.

Well… not quite that drunk, if Cricket remembered it right. The boss never drank much. But he sure as hell hadn't been completely sober, either, and was just a tad sleep-deprived.

Oh fuck.

Apparently, her old… companion? - didn't seem to realize exactly what it meant for Kaiser to have gone out without backup. Thought it was great fun, Kaiser'd kill some fucker for life being shit, and that'd be the end that way.

Oh fuck, fuck, fuck.

"Tell someone sober to phone me if he gets back, alright, Hooks?"

"Yeah, will do…"

Getting into costume and running out, Cricket decided to phone Rune and find their boss. Everything had been going wrong lately, it'd be pretty fucking dumb to let there be even a chance of him getting into trouble…

They searched for most of the night, fruitlessly, Rune going back home a bit earlier than herself.

Still, at four, even she admitted there wasn't much hope left. No phone call had come yet, and she
was dead tired on her feet.

Going home and showering, she immediately went to her office. Unfortunately, might-have-been Francis had been given a key and ordered to tell her there that no, nobody else'd seen Kaiser, either.

About two minutes later, checking on the internet, came the news that Kaiser had been captured by a couple of newbies, some hero team calling themselves "Kith". She also got an e-mail that the one company whom Medhall had still held out hope for a deal for wanted a personal meeting with the CEO, for discussing what would probably a sure-fire way to rescue the company, even if it would've been a deal they'd have sneered at a month ago, forwarded to her by either Fenja or Menja.

They had about a week before the offer fell through, the earlier the better.

_Fuck irony._

And might-be-Francis wasn't shutting up about his fucking headache or the fact he'd have to go to school and had already missed the first few classes, when Cricket was sleep-deprived, slightly hungover, and in one hell of a bad mood.

And she couldn't even hit the guy because he was Kaiser's damned second cousin. Pretty sure it was some _degenerate_ brother of Allfather's who'd been his grandfather.

That brother had to have been degenerate to produce a boy who could have such high-pitched whining. Either that, or they'd adopted him, because Allfather's recordings had had a pleasant voice, Kaiser had a... gorgeous voice, and Theo was growing into a kind voice. There was something wrong with the family connection to High-Pitched Whine.

Finally, when the guy left, Cricket collapsed into her temporary office's chair and fell asleep.
The following day at school, I spent most of the time being extremely tired out. We hadn't actually finished the discussion about names yesterday, but I was going to sit down with them for that today in the afternoon.

During lunch, Emma wasn't there - apparently, she'd broken her leg on Sunday. Rumour said she'd been walking to one of her favorite cafés, had slipped on something and fallen unfortunately.

As well as that, the damage a cape fight had done to the streets yesterday had caused Madison to get delayed again.

… I did have that talk with Sam, didn't I?

Everyone had also heard about a new cape group taking down Kaiser, and boy… it felt good, being recognized.

The local HJ chapter, in comparison, wasn't taking it well. (It was more fun to refer to them as HJ than HY… it sounded kind of like "aching" if you'd yawn at the end.)

Well… they weren't technically HJ, because that'd been more "Boy Scouts"+"fascist/xenophobic brainwashing", and those guys unfortunately didn't include the parts like camping trips.

The guy who looked especially angry?

Might-Have-Been-Named-Francis.

Though that… might've not had anything to do with us taking down Kaiser. Guy looked a bit sleep-deprived and hungover, too, and his "girl-to-be-possessive-about-for-whatever-reason-not-that-she-seemed-to-care-a-dolt" was giving him the cold shoulder even more than she normally did. As in, I'd seen her deliberately step on his foot when he was in her path.

With a not-quite-high but still sharp heel.

Slowly, I was close to sort-of pitying Probably-Francis.

Close.

Not actually there yet.

At lunch, that feeling of might-have-been-coming-close-to-pity evaporated tracelessly.

Sam and Greg were playing some game on Nintendo, laughing a lot and making fun of each other, Levi had his nose in a book - wait, was that the Hobbit? - and Benny, like most of the time, was fully focused on his food, while I… yeah, kind of oversaw them all like a proud mother hen.

Shut up, part of my brain making sarcastic commentary and weird comparisons.

I saw Might-have-been-Francis out of the corner of my eyes, talking to that girl who was still giving him the rather justified cold shoulder.

After being ignored for five minutes, he stormed off into the direction of our table, apparently
intending to pass through the door behind us.

Just… he didn't.

Instead, with an incoherent scream, he kicked Benny's chair out from under him, who…

… didn't fall on his ass and land on his back in a convenient position to get kicked.

Instead, he went into a roll, flipping and landing on his feet. *My son was awesome.*

When he tried to punch Benny, my son caught his arm and flipped him around, holding Maybe-Francis down.

Which was when the teachers intervened. Being too late to stop the action seemed to be kind of a trend for them.

As a full cafeteria of eyewitnesses could honestly say (Probably-Francis' fellow not-quite-actually-HJ members didn't count on that front) that the other guy had attacked first and thrown the only punch of the fight, Benny didn't even get a warning - after all, he'd shown "remarkable restraint", to quote his Phys Ed teacher.

He did get a girl throwing himself at him, though. Well, that might've been just a bit of hyperbole.

After the lunch fight was sorted out, Sophia approached Benny on the way to class.

"Hey", she said, her voice a bit breathless.

"Hello." Benny didn't smile at her. Benny normally always smiled at new people.

"So… you held yourself well." She sort of seemed to try smiling at him, looking a lot more like she'd be sick any second.

When he didn't answer, she went on. "So, do you have any plans for, say, Friday night?"

… I did not like where this was going.

"Yeah, I did, hanging out with my siblings and Taylor, why?"

For just a second, Sophia glanced at me, and glared. "Taylor, really?"

I butted in. "Yes, in fact. And I'd like you to leave my* son *friend alone, if you would." *You're not getting your claws into my kid. Not like with Emma.*

"Not your discussion, dweeb", she snapped at me. Her voice turning sweeter, she asked Benny: "Well?"

"Well what?"

Sophia stared at him. I introduced my palm to my forehead. Hey palm, that's forehead. Nice to meet you, forehead.

"She's asking whether you want to go out with her, Benny", I explained.
"Go where outside?"

… Dad apparently still hadn't given them the Talk. A very part of me was annoyed with Benny. The rest of me was furious with whatever had made it that he was so… oblivious about people. Sophia was still staring incredulously.

"Go out. As in, a romantic date. Probably dinner and a movie, from what I know." Which… honestly wasn't all that much.

"… like friends would?", Benny asked.

"Sort of", I answered. This was a bit too long to explain right now...

He looked at her. "But… you're not my friend. You hurt Taylor. Why'd you want that?"

She didn't answer. Just turned around and ran off.

Benny looked after her. "… what was that about?"

I sighed. "Dad really needs to give you that talk. Don't worry too much about it."

Later that day, after school, we all finally sat down to decide what names we actually wanted.

Sam, of course, already had decided on Oracle.

"So… names", I started. "I looked up some things, and well… let's start with Levi?"

Levi nodded.

"How about…", I tried to remember, "Poseidon, Njord, Enki, Hapi… names like that?"

"I like Happy", he said.

I smiled. "Really?" That'd been easier than I thought, Hapi it was, the-


… how didn't I notice that?

"Uh… not Hapi, then. Any one of the others?"

"They're all gods." Levi bit on his lip.

"… you don't like mythological names?"

Levi shook his head.

Benny did as well.

So did Sam.

"No mythological names, then." I sighed. Well, so far for those suggestions…

"How about… uh…", think water, think water… "Torrent?"
Sam winced. "Internet problem, there."
"Captain Blackbeard!", Benny suggested, grinning wildly.
"Captain?", Levi asked, sounding interested.
"Like, Captain, Commodore, Admiral, naval positions?", I asked.
Levi nodded.
"Admiral's highest, right?", Benny asked.
Levi nodded, again.
Then, he said: "I like Admiral."
"Good. We've got… two out of four, then. Benny next."
"Uh… Awesome?", he suggested, shrugging.

... 

Actually, that was giving me an idea. "Not… that good a name, but maybe… something that describes you? Like…"
"Kid Loud, Big Brother, uh…"

Palm, you've already met forehead today. Forehead, meet palm again. You're going to be very good friends at this rate. Maybe get involved in a romantic affair of forbidden lo- … my thoughts were weird.
"More like… something like Courageous, Brave, Valiant…", I began.
"Valiant", Benny said, saying the word as if he was trying to understand all it meant through that simple act. "It feels… right."

I tried to imagine Benny - sweet, funny, blabbermouth Benny - as Valiant.
Yeah, it worked out really well. Courageous, gallant…

… well, when he wasn't absolutely oblivious, at least. He tried.
"That's a good name for you." Levi smiled at his brother.

"I agree", I added, on impulse hugging the two of them. "So… have any ideas for me?"
The three of them shared looks.
Benny started saying: "Uhhhhhh…"

"Iris, maybe?", Levi said.

"Like the Goddess of the Rainbow?", I asked. I'd thought they didn't like mythology names...
"Rainbow? Ooooh, like Legend, right? He's really cool, I mean, he shoots lasers and stuff, and he can even make rainbow coloured lasers, and that's so awesome, though not as awesome as Alexandria and…" Benny stopped. We were all staring at him. "… Oops?"
"… I don't think that's a name for me", I stated, then: "I mean, none of you've got mythological names either, and… I kind of don't want to be the odd one out? I mean… how about… Hijack?" I mean, I could hijack the powers of other parahumans, right?

Sam shook her head. "Villain name. One of Heartbreaker's kids."

"So, that doesn't work… uh… The Lady?"

Nothing could go wrong with that reference, right?

"She likes playing games with people. Literally", Levi said.

"Who?", Benny asked.

"Didn't think of that… and a character from an author whose books you just have to read sometime, he's really good… uh…"


Hmm, sounded kind of nice. It didn't quite fit in with Oracle, Admiral and Valiant, seeing as it wasn't an English word, but I didn't quite fit in, either, as a mother to her kids, so that worked well. It had a nice meaning, I could've sworn it had appeared in quite a few shows and games, and in a roundabout way, it had to do with my powers, if you looked at it sideways and mixed powers and souls together.

My kids looked at each other, nodding to themselves. "That works… Wait, when did you learn Latin?"

Levi shrugged. "It's a nice language. Had a lot of spare time. I like language."

… I still had a lot to learn about my kids, didn't I? Levi spoke Latin, Benny was a Legend and Alexandria fan…
On Tuesday, Sophia avoided us like we were the bubonic plague in person and come to infest her in specific.

All four of us were also dragged by Sam to meet that mysterious friend of hers and some friends of theirs, while I started wondering whether it wouldn't be good to include Sam in the Talk the boys were going to have with Dad soon with the way she blushed. Come to think about it, I should probably participate, too, especially if Sam sat in there.

Hm, was there anywhere I could go to for advice for on that? Some parenting lessons or something like that?

Something to look into, later.

... was it normal that Levi was carrying Rubber Duckie with him to a meeting with friends?

All four of us and Sam's friend's friends were meeting in a park - I'd brought quite a bit of food to make a picnic out of it, Benny had helped me prepare. While he'd had no idea what to do in a kitchen initially, he'd learnt so fast I had hardly believed my eyes - going from thick, uneven slices to perfect ones for the cucumbers in the span of the few minutes he'd helped me, for instance.

I'd also brought dog treats, because Sam had thought it might be necessary.

For January, it was an exceptionally warm day, enough so that sitting outside for a while shouldn't bother anyone too much, with a slight breeze blowing. I'd brought picnic blankets, and most of us were dragging baskets.

Red-and-white-checkered blankets, of course. If I was going to do cliché, then I was going to do cliché well.

When we arrived, no one was there yet, so we spread out the blankets and waited for a while - Levi'd brought a book - Pratchett, yes! - Sam had brought her gameboy, Benny was fiddling with the dog treats, and I was looking into a book of my own.

Levi took after his grandmother and me, methinks.

The spell of peace and quiet was broken when, all of a sudden, a dog barked, running towards Benny and starting to lick him.

"Angelica!", a girl cried out, part of a group of four teenagers walking in our direction - two girls and two boys.

Benny gave the dog - Angelica? - a treat and started to pet it, then looked up.

And stared.

And stared some more, at a rather butch-looking girl and her dogs.

"Hey Lisa!" My daughter jumped to her feet, rushing to greet the other girl of the group, a blonde,
catching her in a hug.

"Hello, Sam." There was a soft smile upon the other girl's face, one I didn't think she was noticing herself.

… Talk definitely needed to include Sam. Also, Note to self: give that other parental talk to strange girl. That was what parents stereotypically did, right?

That was the moment her gaze turned over to me, and she froze, going stiff as a board for but one moment, then relaxing into the hug again.

After Sam released her, the other girl - Lisa? - began introducing herself and company. "Uh… hi. I'm Lisa, those are my friends - Rachel, Brian," a handsome African American boy, "and Alec." Pretty boy: Version 2.0, now with added smirk!

"I'm Taylor," I introduced myself. "You already know Sam, and those two are Benny and Levi."

The dog was starting to climb onto Benny now, who had started to laugh uncontrollably.

So much for a first impression.

The newcomers sat down around us, Sam's friend plopping herself down right beside her, the butch girl coming to the very happy looking dog and glaring at a smiling Benny, and the two boys looking awkward before sitting besides each other across from Levi and I.

Sam and Lisa started chattering about something, while Benny was still smiling at the other girl, looking a lot like a lovestruck idiot.

… Wait.

That Talk was going to be needed soon.

The girl continued glaring at him as if he'd stolen her best friend in the world.

… or maybe not that soon.

Benny stretched out his hand to her. "Hi. I'm Benny. And you're Rachel."

She stared at his hand, clearly unimpressed. He grinned at her, widely, his lips stretching across and up, but not actually showing his teeth.

"Hello." She shook it.

… going back to very soon.

That was the moment Alec elbowed Levi.

"So… you see the two lovedoves?"

"No doves here."

…

Just great.

I looked at Brian. "You're also the only sane one?"
"Yes, unfortunately."

We continued talking and eating, all throughout the afternoon.

Alec was apparently trying to found a stand-up comedy duo together with Levi (with Levi as the straight man to Alec's jokes), Benny was listening to Rachel talk about dogs and their habits, nodding along, and Sam and Lisa were giggling about something. I had the distinct feeling said something was going to be unpleasant for whichever unlucky sod got caught at the other end of it.

After we'd finished eating, I decided to have that talk with Lisa, dragging her away from the rest while they packed.

"So… you're the Trump," the girl started.

I blinked. Wait, when had Sam told her that? "You block Thinker powers?"

"I do?"

For a moment, a deer-in-the-headlights-look crossed the girl's face, before she sighed. "Great. You didn't know."

Wait, how did she know that?

… Thinker herself, duh. Well, most likely option, anyways.

Well, that did explain why Sam liked her so much.

"No, I didn't. Anyway, that's not what I wanted to talk to you about…"

"Not about the cops-and-robbers?" The girl grinned at me, a grin so much like Sam's I was having a distinct impresion of déjà-vu.

"Cops-and… oh. Well, that's one way to refer to it, I guess. No, this is about Sam."

And deer-in-the-headlights, again.

"… what about Sam?"

"You're important to her."

"I guess I am."

Good, so she'd picked up on that. That made this easier.

"If you know that… you're one of the first friends she's ever made. It would hurt her if something happened."

The girl's face was completely blank. "Is that supposed to be the 'break her heart and die' speech?"

I nodded. Well, Sam did at least choose one friend with a lot more social abilities then she had (when not cheating with pre-cog, at least).

The other was Greg. Social abilities?

…
"Good joke."

"Because, if it is, then I'd like to say that I'm not actually interested in any."

I raised my hand. "Friendship version."

She stared at me.

"Friendship version. … You do know she's fully capable of fucking up my life herself, if something happens?"

"Well, yes, but I don't know whether she'd want to. And if something happens, then I'll recruit Benny and Levi, too."

And probably Dad. Didn't know how he'd be able to help, but I'd find something for him to do.

She smiled at me, a touch nervously. "I like to think of myself as being fairly intelligent."

"Good for you."

"You're the ones who brought in Kaiser, aren't you? Kith, I've heard?"

I grinned at her.

Yes, we'd done pretty horribly in the beginning of the fight. We'd still overwhelmed him.

She sighed, her shoulders slumped. "Great. Uh, what's your personal opinion of supervillains?"

"Don't like most of them, why?"

"Sam didn't tell you?"

"Sam gets up to a lot of stuff she never tells me." Kids these days.

No, bad Taylor. You're fifteen, not fifty-one.

"We're robbers, of the cops-and-robbers game. Small fish, you know. Wouldn't mind teaming up to take down worse people."

Supervillains.

My daughter - and now my sons - had made friends with teenaged supervillains.

Well, benefit of doubt...

"Why?"

"Brian's doing it for family, Alec… got screwed up by his family, and Rachel and I didn't get all that much choice in the matter."

"I see."

Did I? I had no idea what she meant, and I'd need to check their stories for it to matter.

A few weeks ago, I'd not even have really imagined that super-villains were people. Now…

My kids had been child soldiers. I didn't know the full story, but - how likely was it that they'd been
the good guys, the heroes?

Rhetorical question.

"We're still clear on the 'hurt her and die'?"

"Crystal."

"Good."

In the mean time, the remaining cape kids had managed to pack up for a while. I was going to look up exactly who we'd met later on, and maybe think about meeting Miss Militia a bit more. What exact date would work… hmm, maybe Thursday?

A few hours later, I had names: the Undersiders. Regent, Tattletale, Grue and Hellhound.

Small fish, like Lisa - Tattletale? - had said. Nothing too bad on their collective rap sheet that I could find.

I was still going to find out more about what had happened with Hellhound, though. I wasn't going to warn Benny away just yet. Just as soon as I knew the full story. Or if he got more attached.
There were weeks when Alexandria dearly wished somebody else was required to deal with all of this.

Los Angeles had three new villains running around, one of them the most annoying teleporter she'd ever met, everywhere else wasn't looking too good, either, and the only place with any positive news at all had been Brockton Bay, ironically enough, and even that might blow up in their faces - a gang war was already in the making.

And now this.

All five of the innermost circle - herself, David, the Number Man, Doctor Mother and Contessa - were in a small, comfortable sitting room. They couldn't always play the "Evil conspiracy of evil" stereotypes straight, after all. Even if it was funny, at times.

David was lying on his back, stretched across the carpet, she and the Number Man were sharing the sofa, Doctor Mother had her own chair, and Contessa was staring out of a window (well, screen simulating the outside).

"Is the report accurate?", she asked the Doctor again, hoping beyond hope that it wasn't.

"Unfortunately, yes."

Exhaling, she winced. "Just wonderful."

"It doesn't have to be…", David began.

"It might be a newly triggered parahuman. It might be something relatively harmless. But you have to agree that the timing…"

Somebody - something - new on the scene had appeared.

A strange, silvery man had appeared.

A strange, silvery man with a strange, almost-impossibly to miss resemblance to Scion, that mostly used powers incredibly similar to the Endbringers', in both scope and the way he applied them.

For things like rescuing kittens out of trees.

For a few hours, they had been worried about that new team in Brockton Bay, with their timing… but their first appearance had been well after the disappearance of the Endbringers, and their one report both included the familiarity with each other the four people had, as well as speculation about their family status, which made them having anything to do with it an… odd coincidence, maybe another effect of the same cause, nothing more.

And then Number Man combed through some reports from the middle of Africa, and lo and behold, in the same hour the Endbringers disappeared, somebody best described as Scion, Version 2.0 - now in Silver! With Endbringer powers! - had suddenly blinked up on the radar.
He'd only appeared a handful of times since then, enough it had taken them some time to notice his appearance, but…

Whatever it was, it wasn't showing up on the Path.

It used pretty much the same powers as the Endbringers, although a lot less lethally.

It acted just like Scion did, with about as much understanding for humans, too.

All the Endbringers combined and given human form was the nice, tame and unfortunately less likely option.

Sometimes, Alexandria hated her life.

"Do we have any idea whether they have come into contact?"

Doctor Mother shook her head. "None. It is… difficult to track the Other. It is apparently immune to Thinkers. Of all kinds."

Alexandria buried her face in her hands.

"If it is… it's taunting us", David stated. "Though… it still doesn't have to be. Even our luck… There just can't be a second one."

"David, do I need to bring up the incident with the 'flametorch' and the chocolate chip cookies to remind you what our luck is like?"

Her life-long friend glared at her. "Just because Clark let his toys lie around one time…"

The Number Man twitched. "Do not remind me."

"Chocolate everywhere", Alexandria stated, just to rile him up.

Riling James - the Number Man, Harbinger, not James, don't think of him as James - up was a surprisingly fun way to relieve tension.

… bad way of putting it. He shivered, looking as if he'd rather be anywhere else in the world. "Now, can we talk about something else than what happened to my paperwork years ago? For example, the extremely high probability of yet another Entity showing itself? Most likely having been behind the Endbringers all along?"

Contessa was still staring out of the window.

"Let's. Two of them. Our chances just went from barely there to not discernable from nill", Alexandria replied.

"… we might get lucky", David stated, staring at the ceiling.

"David, stop trying to fulfill your bet with Legend of being the optimist of the group for one second and actually contribute", she snapped at him, drumming her fingers on her knee.

That bet had been ridiculous, and two of her oldest friends basically trying to out-optimist one another had left her in an extremely bad mood.

"We can probably assume that that new team in Brockton Bay is the first group of other triggers?", the Doctor asked.
"The probability is high", Ja- Number Man replied, still sitting stiff as a board. "I'd give it a rough seventy-nine point five percent, to be honest."

'Rough'. Right.

"Anything at all we can actually do?", the other woman asked.

"… nothing we know of, for now. Maybe David's legendary predictions will actually come true, though", Alexandria replied before James could.

Both men shot her a glare. "If I don't do it, you're going to tell him I haven't kept to the the bet…", David grumbled under his breath.

"Stop acting like five-year-olds, you two", Doctor Mother intervened, her palm at her forehead.

"What's up with Contessa?", David asked. "She's still just staring out of the window."

Doctor Mother sighed. "Just… thinking about things. Probably just… thinking about some people both of us would like to check up on, sooner or later."

Chapter End Notes

Arc 3 is crossposted - finally.
With the way it's going, I might actually finish that today or tomorrow.
Wednesday turned out to be a day much like any other.

… well, not quite.

Sophia had apparently snapped out of her funk over being sort-of-not-quite-actually-though-it-seemed-worse rejected by Benny, and was now dead-set on making my life miserable.

I only initially noticed due to the surprising number of accidents - slipping, running into walls, running into other people Sam didn't like - she had that day.

After all, Sam was keeping her promise of no excessive retaliation, she'd sworn up and down.

That didn't mean she didn't tend towards a bit of pre-emptive revenge for things that never would happen because of her intervention, which probably wasn't the most ethical thing to do, either, but… yeah.

I couldn't really complain about that. I just didn't feel sorry.

We were still traveling in bulk, the four of us and Greg, whenever we could.

It just felt… safer, with others. I didn't have to watch over my shoulder.

Greg's eyes usually still hushed around.

He didn't… he'd not gotten quite used to the way things were, now, not like I had. Frankly, it was a miracle I'd gotten used to it that fast.

Of course, initially being suspicious only due to the number of accidents Sophia had quickly turned into knowledge come Lunch.

In a way, it was almost laughable: Emma with her leg in a cast, with Sophia at the front, trying to act intimidating.

Madison was nowhere to be seen.

I had the feeling she wasn't going to show up - she'd been hanging out with everyone not Sophia and Emma for… more than a week or something, now?

The effect was…

It was two girls trying to threaten five people. Or rather, it was one track star and one invalid model trying to threaten four capes and Greg Zoidberg.

Where did the Zoidberg come from?

Anyways, Sophia was looking at me, her arms crossed, Emma behind her.

"So, Hebert…", she started.

I forced myself to smile at her. "Hello, Hess. Anything you wanted?" My voice was calm, level,
polite.

A lesson I'd learnt from Sam: Don't let yourself be provoked.

It annoyed them much more that way, anyways.

"Your face in the dirt would be a good start."

"Can't serve with that, I'm afraid."

I went back to my food, observing my friends. Greg was blowing a raspberry at Sam, who was pouting - apparently, he'd won the last round of whatever game they'd been playing - and Benny was telling his nodding brother all about a TV show from Aleph, something with a tattooed kid and lots of alcohol, if the occasional mention of the word "benders" meant what I thought it meant (though I didn't understand why it was apparently marketed at kids), Levi's open book forgotten.

Sophia stepped towards me, and I looked up again.

"I'd like you to step away from me, please. I don't quite trust you in my personal space."

"Oh, and what are you going to do if I don't?"

… was it just me or was Sophia sounding just a tiny bit like a - what had that funny German word been again? - *Kindergartenkind*.

"Asking again, of course. Just as politely."

She stepped closer.

"I'd like you to step away from me, please."

She raised her hand towards me.

"This action could be construed as threatening, please desist." … who knew it was so much fun trying to talk like C-3PO?

I was probably failing, but I was having way too much fun with this.

"… what did you say?"

"This action could be construed as threatening, *please* desist."

The rules of such games, Sam had told me, were simple: The person who lost their temper first lost the battle.

Sophia was *dangerously* close to losing her temper. I was… finding even the idea pretty hard, with my kids watching.

She exhaled slowly, trying to keep calm, then stalked off, her fists clenched, her whole body tense.

Emma tried keeping up with her, hopping a bit on her good leg, grimacing in pain.

That went surprisingly well. Maybe because there'd been too many witnesses?

At home, we decided to play Monopoly in Benny's and Levi's room in the basement. (On that note:
Sam shared with me.)

"And… that's three houses… pay up, Benny!", Sam cheered.

Needless to say, Sam was ruining us.

"Next roll… and I've got four houses there, and just recently enough money to upgrade to a hotel. Thanks, Benny!"

"… I hate you…", Benny mumbled.

The next turn was my roll.

… Go. Phew.

Levi landed on one of his own properties, though not with enough money to upgrade it.

Sam rolled. And promptly landed on yet another one of her properties.

"Sam, are you sure you've switched off your pre-cog and aren't using telekinesis? You promised, didn't you?"

"B-but that was last time!"

"No cheating at Monopoly, Sam."

Half an hour later, a pouting Sam had lost at Monopoly against Levi, who'd somehow managed to beat all of us at the game.

Today was the day I'd decided upon for that most horrible of parental duties…

Well, in this case parental and grand-parental duties.

Today, Dad and I were going to give my kids the Talk.

After Dad's arrival and dinner, I sat the kids down.

"So, today is… about a question that came up on Saturday."

"We're going to get the Talk!", Sam fake-whispered to her brothers.

"What talk?", Benny replied.

… oh poor, poor innocence of my little kids. I was going to miss you.

"Alright, you might've noticed that you can get… odd feelings near a member of the opposite sex", Dad started.

"Or the same sex", I added, an eye on Sam.

I was most definitely *not* convinced Lisa was "just a friend".

"Like… like wanting to punch them a lot at times but still getting along with them?", Sam asked,
sounding a bit excited.

I'd thought she already knew about romance and everything else?

"Because sometimes, Greg's really annoying but he's still my friend and I like playing video games with him and it's a real lot of fun talking to him and chatting with Gstringgirl, even if we've never met 'strings, and he really likes talking about her, and…"

"Sam, breathe", Dad interrupted her.

"And… that's just Greg being Greg and your friend. Not… what we actually wanted to talk about. Probably", I added. "Though it sounds a bit like Greg has a crush on your internet friend."

"What's a crush?", Sam asked.

"That's… uh… when you're feeling attracted to somebody."

"But… we're not magnets or small particles, and the actual forces involved are minimal, how can you be attracted?", Benny asked.

I hated to say it took me a while to realize Benny was using the *Physics textbook* definition of attraction. And force.

"Romantically attracted", I stated.

"Like… in those really weird books?", Levi asked. "They're kind of odd, and there's really weird talking, and I didn't understand most of what they were about, but there was this man and that woman, and they talked a lot and touched each other a lot and she seemed to think he was good-looking and handsome and stuff like that, but…" Levi trailed off, blushing.

Huh. Looked like Levi had gotten his hands on a romance novel.

That was the moment Dad took over. "Yes, like that. See, it's like this…"

What followed was… a lot of old stories. Of him and Mom. How it felt to be in love. Hadn't known Dad could do sounding poetic.

Clinical descriptions of how certain mechanisms worked. … Benny's and Levi's faces were priceless. Sam looked interested.

How pregnancy worked, and how it felt to feel an unborn kick.

Then came the questions:

"*That* goes *there*? How does that *fit*?" "Believe me, it does."

"And then those little things wiggle and swim around, up the uterus, and meet the egg-thing, and that's where babies come from? Really?"

"So… like I like Rachel?" "That's *probably* a crush. Probably."

"So… not like I like Greg?" "Maybe, maybe not. You have to figure that out for yourself."

"Is it alright to… to look at either boys or girls that way?" "Yes, yes it is."

… With Dad handling that so well, what was I there for?
For learning about that stuff, too, probably. I settled in to listen.
Thursday was the day we'd planned to meet Miss Militia.

First, though, I had to deal with school yet again.

Honestly, it wasn't much to deal with.

Sophia glared. A lot. Most notable thing that happened.

I'd agreed to meet at a quaint little inn called Somer's Rock.

It had been Miss Militia's suggestion.

Walking in in full costume, we were immediately directed to a booth where, after being told to wait, we ordered drinks - tea for me, coke for Sam, hot chocolate for Benny and plain water for Levi.

It took me a while to realize the waitress was deaf. It was a bit embarrassing, actually. I wonder how often people tried to talk to her?

It took a while for her to show up. Huh, I'd expected her to be already there.

Finally she rushed in, looking a bit hassled.

"Sorry, I'm late, something came up. It's nice to meet you again."

"Nice to meet you, too."

For a moment, there was silent, then I decided to just… start.

"We've decided on names," I stated.

She tilted her head.

"I'm Anima."

She nodded.

"So… well, Oracle's still Oracle, the boy dressed like a sailor's Admiral, and last but not least, we have Valiant," I introduced my kids.

"You're an independent hero team?" she asked.

"Still pretty new, but yes" I answered.

She waited a bit, then asked: "You've only recently become capes, then?"

I nodded. "Yep."

After a second, she relaxed.

… Oops. That hadn't been technically true. ...I think?
"We actually only went out as capes for the first time on Sunday," I continued, a bit unsure on why I was volunteering the information.

Finally, she looked… mostly at ease.

"I see…" she answered. "Have you given any thought to joining the Protectorate and Wards?"

… Protectorate? Why Protectorate? I was reasonably sure it was pretty clear all my kids were teenagers, and it wasn't like I looked that grown u-

I remembered looking at myself in the mirror, thinking I looked very grown up, indeed.

Oh.

… that had worked better than expected.

"No, we haven't, actually," I answered. "I don't think we'd want to be separated, and there's four capes already…"

Four people more in one city? They wouldn't keep us together.

Not to mention large organizations and bureaucracy… the longer I thought about it, the worse the thought got. My kids had been child soldiers. I wasn't going to hand them into any faction's hands again. That would be just asking for bad memories to come up.

She nodded, accepting my answer. "I can understand that."

I was… kind of really glad she hadn't pressed on, there. I didn't think arguing about that would have been very constructive.

"However, since you did meet with me… would you mind assisting us at times?"

I looked at my children.

"I don't think we would mind, no."

The next few minutes were spent getting all of us up-to-date (or at least, as up-to-date as was allowed with us being not officially tied to the PRT), before actually getting to the official part of our meeting.

Protectorate Affiliation.

There were a few forms to be filled out for Protectorate Affiliation for independent heroes - stuff that would allow us to be contacted by the Protectorate in times of crisis officially (I had no doubt that in actual times of crisis, "unofficially" occurred - would've been odd if not) or to help in joint projects. There was a fair bit of legalese involved; like conditions and rules of conduct, but also a mutual aid requirement.

Apparently, it also helped pave the way into eventual Protectorate membership, but I wasn't too interested in that, even though the hows and whys were somewhat interesting - already having worked with the Protectorate and upholding a similar code of conduct apparently went a fair bit to paving over any difficulties.
The forms also included contact data for both sides, but there was no actual requirement to give up your civilian identity.

After reading over them, carefully, and letting all of my children read through them - I didn't exactly trust in Benny's ability to comprehend legalese, he wasn't a great reader, but I trusted Levi and Sam would understand the greater part of what they were reading - we spent a few minutes talking in hushed whispers about the possible advantages and disadvantages of the situation.

Well, Levi and Sam did. Benny and I just listened. Was that the right thing to do? I didn't know. Really needed to find somewhere to get advice.

"Not a good idea", Levi said.

"Why not? We're getting reliable allies for what's basically being decent, as far as I see", Sam answered.

"Large. Organized. People."

"Just sounds like they can get help anywhere fast."

"Lots of people. Organisations. Politics. Factions and infighting."

"… you know, I hadn't considered that. You think there's a few unpleasant facti- of course you think that, there have to be in any organisation that large. Still, we'd just be affiliated. Not directly involved in politics, that's more for upper ranks."

"True. Still…" I could see Levi squirm.

"Might affect us. But…"

I could hear the words she wasn't saying, mainly because an… already uncomfortable looking Miss Militia was there. … *if they try to do something and hurt us, we can always break that contract.*

"All in agreement?", I asked. Sam and Levi nodded, Benny shrugged.

I started patting my suit. Then…

"Miss Milita…"

"Yes?"

"… do you have a pen?"

The knife she was carrying was turned into one and handed over, the area around her eyes crinkled.

After filling out the forms, Miss Militia collected them and quickly said her goodbyes, apparently, whatever had caused her to be late was still requiring (or going to require) her attention.

I felt mildly curious on what it was - if it had been an imminent fight or an immediate emergency, she wouldn't have spent that much time meeting with us.

Still, it didn't have all that much to do with my children or myself, as far as I knew.
That evening, we watched a film from Earth Aleph, dealing with superheroes and -villains. And a few aliens.

Benny had chosen it.

*What is the difference between villainy and supervillainy?*
Meets and Greets - 4.x (Sophia)

Sophia's life since the Locker had had its ups and downs.

The ups took place mostly in the week where Hebert was in the hospital.

And a bit after that, too, when she first met Be-Finislator.

He was… fuck, the guy was handsome. More handsome than any movie star she'd ever seen in the stuff she'd watched with Emma.

The way he could smile had turned her knees to jelly, and she'd… she'd never actually managed to talk to him. Conversation just had seemed to disappear whenever he'd been close.

… she might've drooled a bit.

At the time… it hadn't seemed to matter that he'd been Hebert's friend, that he'd smiled at everybody. As if there was not a single intelligent thought going on behind those eyes, just a lot of goodwill towards everybody not-Sophia.

She also might've missed a few of Emma's conversations, missing her cues. But… well… Beefcake didn't count as an argument, did it? Emma had said something about Girl Code when she'd tried bringing that.

That should've counted.

And then, when Probably-Francis had walked up to them… had kicked that chair away…

The way the boy had reacted. Immediately coming to his feet. Making everything look as easy as… as just taking a step, taking the guy down as if it was nothing.

She'd never felt more attracted in her life than when she saw that.

So… she'd tried asking him out. He'd seemed like the type to let a girl down gently - always polite, holding up doors, stuff like that. But well, before that day, she'd have asked: What boy in their right mind would have ever turned her down? She was good-looking, popular, fit…

A hero. Well, they didn't know about that part, but it was who she was. A survivor.

Didn't matter much to him, did it?

The worst part wasn't that he'd turned her down.

It was the way he'd done it.

Pretending he didn't understand what she was asking, looking towards Hebert of all people for "translation". The way he'd played that role, so… so fucking naive and innocent.

"But you're not my friend. Why would you want that?"
He'd sounded… he'd sounded so nice. That was the worst part. He'd played that role to perfection, and she'd felt completely humiliated.

The way Hebert had acted with him, as if she was… his mother or something.

As if him asking about dating was normal. No one was that socially oblivious. No one.

They'd deliberately humiliated her and hadn't even had the decency to act like it.

They'd acted as if she was just an afterthought.

She hated them.

And then… the scene at lunch. No matter how much she closed in on Hebert, the weakling just kept her cool. As if she wasn't a threat. She didn't flip out, didn't start a scene like Sophia had hoped.

Just… just talked down to her. Showed backbone.

Hebert of all people couldn't suddenly develop backbone. She had to be put back where she belonged: away from the rungs of the ladder of the social hierarchy at Winslow.

Well, those were Emma's thoughts. Sophia was just pissed at the way they'd played her.

Madison hadn't talked to them recently, hanging out with pretty much everyone else, seemingly having a blast trying out different clubs, though Ms Perfect Innocence seemed to tend towards the art club losers.

Having been called to the PRT office building - she was supposed to be briefed before acting as hidden back-up for some meeting or other - there was still some time before she needed to be there, so she'd phoned Emma.

She was finally having ideas on how to get back at the weakling, now that their conversation had turned into that direction. Hers and Emma's were getting worse and worse, the soft stuff being discarded due to their new inability to get that girl alone at school and the way everything else they'd tried had backfired recently.

Now, she was getting into the area of stuff she probably wouldn't do, would never do, but man, was it starting to look tempting.

"We could also tie them to their beds, set that fucking house aflame. I wonder who'd be laughing then, us or Hebert…", she was starting to rant. "Or just cut up that bitch's face in her sleep, that'd work too."

She was in the middle of trying to come up with the worst she could do to Hebert, finally letting off steam.

Turning the corner, she didn't watch where she was going.

… and promptly crashed into a very much unamused Miss Militia, accidentally ending the call by slamming against the phone with her thumb.

"What is going on?"
"Uh…"

"Phone."

She handed it over, still feeling dazed.

"We're going to see the Director."

What felt like an eternity later, Miss Militia had handed herself and her phone over to the Director while repeating the exact words she heard and something that sounded like "bla bla reasonable suspicion of planned murder check phone, phone history bla bla", excusing herself for that meeting with that new hero group that'd kicked Nazi ass. Now, a form filled out and a call to the phone company (probably?) later, a stone-faced Piggot was checking out her phone history personally.

"What do you have to say for yourself?"

Sophia remained silent.

"That… that locker thing could've ended with a murder charge on our hands!", the Director spewed at her. "You… you…"

Her phone rang.

That was the moment she finally snapped out of it.

She turned towards the door, starting to phase -

… a taser hit her in the back.

One of the troopers.

"Escort her to a holding cell. We'll sort this out. In detail. And I want that caseworker here yesterday", was the last thing Sophia heard before she blacked out.
The next day at school, neither Emma nor Sophia were in attendance.

I wondered a bit what this was about, but decided that a quiet day was worth a bit of unsatisfied curiosity.

It wasn't like I could imagine any legal methods to get to the information. Besides asking the teachers, and somehow, I didn't think Mr. Gladly or Principal Blackwell would be all that happy to volunteer.

They weren't even called at roll call, by anyone, as if the school had been informed of an absence.

It was all very, very curious indeed.

That evening, we were planning to go out again. We'd gotten a few replacement costumes from Parian in the mean time, just to make sure we'd still have some should ours get damaged. As Brutes, our costumes were a lot easier to damage than we were.

Usally, it was the other way around.

Walking home after school - what Benny's film choice did to me - we decided to just… spend time together, as a family, for a while.

Benny cooked, while talking about some film superheroes that were apparently very vengeful or something like that (I wasn't quite listening, but avenge, avenge, avenge), Sam was talking to Dad about something or other in high-speed German - huh, I'd never known Dad spoke actual German - and Levi was reading quietly. Pride and Prejudice, apparently.

He'd started reading romantic stories a bit more openly since the Talk. He'd started with Romeo and Juliet, and had been quite upset about the way they'd died. We'd talked a fair bit about what a deconstruction was and why Romeo and Juliet was one, and not a "love story for the ages".

Mom had always been adamant on that point.

Even if a story with sparkleptires - That Which Shall Not Be Named - insisted differently.

That evening, we had a fairly quiet patrol - gangbangers abound, what with the recent tensions, but we didn't actually ran into any capes, and the unpowered criminals tended to run as soon as they caught sight of us. We caught them fairly easily, handing them over to the police.

The next evening I began to suspect that we had the oddest luck.

The reason for that might have to do with who we ran into on our second night out that week.

What were the chances of running into two gang leaders in the space of three evenings?

Well, partly it was our fault.
It started with Sam paling, then beginning to fly as fast as she could. Her brothers and I followed her. It had been two rainy, moist nights.

We heard the battle from some way off. There was roaring, a low, brutal voice, and much higher-pitched feminine screams.

We arrived just when an angry rage-dragon was let loose a blast of fire on a robed cape that seemed to be our age - *Lung and Rune*.

Levi, with a single movement, shot water in between them, that immediately turned to steam.

Rune screamed. While the steam was decidedly less hot than the flames, that didn't change it was *steaming* hot.

In those first few moments, I nearly overlooked the *other* cape that was running around, wearing a metal mask of some kind. Cricket. She was doing her best to distract an ever-growing Lung, trying to draw him away from the younger cape.

Right then, Levi shouted: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a dragon with rage issues is in need of", a blast of Lung's fire clashed against Levi's water, "a worthy foe!"

It was the longest sentence I'd ever heard Levi say.

Did it really have to be that?

Of course, all this actually did was make an already grown Lung charge at *my son*.

Levi threw everything he had at him, a river-wide stream of water, knocking Lung back.

I didn't quite know what I was doing, but I dove in between Rune and where Lung had landed, shouting at Cricket: "Get your friend out of here!"

Rune might've been a Nazi.

She was also a teenager who would be burnt to death or die of her wounds if her friend - teammate, fellow gang member, whatever - didn't get her out of here. I wasn't going to let that happen.

I couldn't.

A startled Cricket ran towards me, across the battlefield, while Benny fired lightning at Lung - he was hitting, now - Sam did her best to shove things in front of his eyes, and Levi was trying to turn him into steamed dragon lobster.

Lung smashed against Levi, throwing him into a building, growing more and more, faster and faster, becoming more and more draconic. He still was small enough to fit into the street, but barely.

Picking up her friend while I stood guard and my kids held him off, Cricket bolted - I didn't know where. I didn't quite care where.

The giant rage dragon destroying the surroundings was a bit higher on my list of priorities right now. "Kids, run!", I shouted at them - now that there was no danger of anyone dying, there was no point
Benny - dear, sweet Benny - was the only one who listened, backing off and keeping away, while Sam continued chucking debris at him and Levi seemed intent to get himself killed fighting a giant dragon.

Who'd just started growing wings, roaring incomprehensibly at my son, who, encased in water, was continuing to throw everything he could at Lung.

Sam was slowly running out of debris - her own being incinerated - and was falling back, just like Benny.

Levi didn't seem to have any intention to.

He was laughing, smiling, riding waves around Lung as if it was the best game he'd ever played, while my heart was close to stopping.

I'd heard that kids could make you come close to heart attacks just by not thinking and putting themselves in danger, but I didn't think this was the scenario anyone had thought of, there.

Climbing old, brittle trees seemed tame in comparison.

I tried to calm myself down. Levi would be safe; he wasn't… he was a Brute, he was resistant enough to not get hurt, even if his costume suffered a bit, I just had to get him out of there…

A twenty-foot Lung boiled away the water around Levi and backhanded him into the pavement with all the force he could muster, head first.

My son wasn't moving anymore.
Levi wasn't moving.

My son was lying on the pavement and he wasn't moving.

The world stood still around me.

Levi was hurt. My child was hurt.

I didn't… I hadn't expected to accept them as my kids so fast. It had just happened; maybe because I'd been lonely, because I'd wanted anyone at all. Maybe because it had just felt right, because they treated me as if I was their Mom.

They were mine now. I could feel them in my mind, feel their whispers and reach out to them.

My children. Bonded to me. Mine.

Mine to protect. Mine to care for.

No one was allowed to hurt my children.

I didn't think.

I just charged at Lung, ramming into him with all the force of a flying Brute.

I could feel the heat; it wasn't bothering me all that much.

I grasped for Lung's power, I wanted to grow, to hurt him…

I needed to make Lung pay. He'd hurt my son.

Lung was staggering backwards, growing taller and taller.

I wasn't. I couldn't reach for his power, not properly.

I tried to focus on the voices, the whispers, on Benny and Levi and Sam, on my children. Levi's was so quiet, as if he was slipping away.

The fire was hot. I could feel it, could feel the heat against my face, but it didn't burn me, didn't hurt me.

I needed to… I needed to make him smaller, to heal Levi.

I might as well try to turn back time. Or stop it, for that matter.

He tried to shove me backwards, to backhand me like he'd done with Levi, while I just caught myself with Sam's telekinesis.

You won't move me, dragon man.

He was growing even faster now that I was fighting him, rapidly passing the fifteen feet mark.

I surrounded myself with the fallen debris, aiming it at the dragon's eyes in vain.
Behind me, I could almost feel Benny and Sam picking up Levi, trying to move him away. I was really hating Sam's Manton restriction right now.

How did one defeat a dragon? I mean, besides being a (Pre-)Medieval Man with Fancy Sword rescuing a Fair Maiden.

I didn't have any clue what to do. I didn't have any idea how to hold him of for long enough for Benny and Sam to get Levi out of the way.

It didn't matter. I wasn't going to fail.

With growing wings, Lung raised himself of the ground, trying to get past me, behind me.

I needed a way to deal with him.

I needed a way to make Levi be alright.

I could hear the whispers, could feel them, I wanted, needed them to grow louder, I needed to know they were alright, I needed a way to fix things.

To turn back the clock.

And then…

Then there was one whisper, steadily growing louder, second by second, a slightly masculine girl's voice, exact and precise and still a child at the same time, ringing in my ears.

I drew on my children's powers, on the growing whisper, and felt myself grow.

Lung was still shooting up, having passed twenty feet now, but I was rapidly catching up with him.

I could picture how I was starting to look in my mind's eye: a giant woman, face serene, flickering through all the colours of the rainbow, gleaming and shining. Huh, Iris wouldn't have been that bad a name after all.

And then, Lung was smaller than me.

I could hear the voices too, louder and louder, Benny, Levi and Sam, almost screaming now, together with the fourth voice, could feel their powers, the ways I could manipulate them now, and how I was just growing into it.

I could've screwed with Lung's mind, destroyed what made him Lung by telekinetically altering his brain, could've destroyed his future life by the tiniest nudges of precognition. I could've extracted all water from within him, leaving a broken, dehydrated husk. I could've boiled his innards into plasma so nothing recognizable would remain. Sam. Levi. Benny.

The fourth power… I could've aged him up, turned him into a dying old man in the span of seconds.

Instead, I focused on that power, on the way it felt, and decided to turn back the clock.

I touched him, and focused, and started turning.

Just a few minutes, just before we'd come into the fight.

The disoriented, suddenly very much human Lung took one look at me and bolted.
I turned around, looking for my children.

Or maybe he'd just looked behind me.

Where I knew Sam, Levi and Benny were, I could spot the Simurgh, Leviathan and Behemoth. Smaller, maybe less than a quarter of their normal size, but unmistakeably then.

There also was a fourth… Endbringer? - there, right beside them, more in the pose of a frightened child than a fearsome creature, with a broad frame in black, with white and silver for definition, a face set in a permanent snarl - although the curled up position gave lie to the underlying implied emotion - a perfect sphere in the middle to which head and feet were attached.

Leviathan was lying there, unmoving, while Simurgh and Behemoth seemed to be afraid.

I touched Leviathan. Regeneration. I could speed up his regeneration.

Not a moment later, he moved again, scattering away from me.

I focused on them, encased them in my mind, and popped away, drawing on the most recent power.

I didn't focus where I was going, where I could've been going. I just wanted to be alone, private.

I let go.

There we stood, somewhere anywhere in the middle of the night: Sam where the Simurgh had been, Benny in Behemoth's place, and a moving, living Levi in Leviathan's.

And where the fourth one had stood, a girl stood - more of a tomboy, really, with Mediterranean features and short-cropped hair, aged twelve, maybe thirteen.
There were times Missy hated the whispers around her, the way the adults would pretend nothing bad was going on even when she could see it with her own two eyes.

She wasn't blind, for Scion's sake. She could see people falling silent, the evidence for the mounting tensions, the fact that a gang war was in the warm-up phase. The fact what could best be described as a "rainbow Endbringer" had appeared and apparently beaten Lung with one hand tied behind its back was just icing on the cake (although she'd heard that there were some rumours the E88 had actually picked up a cape capable of making wide-spread illusions, which… kind of actually seemed to be a viable option, if some of her family hadn't said they didn't have any new capes. Lung apparently believed it, though.)

It kind of hurt she was just going to be considered useless, that the most help she'd likely be was helping evacuation. It wasn't fair.

She wanted to help. She was a pretty high-level Shaker and they needed everyone they could get, why wouldn't they let her help?

(She ignored the tiny voice in the back of her head telling her that maybe, just maybe, in ten, twenty years, she wouldn't be willing to allow a twelve- (nearly thirteen!)-year-old to fight, either.)

There were some good news, at least: Shadow Stalker was in a heap-load of trouble after Miss Militia had overheard her planning to kill someone (Stalker insisted she hadn't meant it; and evidence was rising she probably hadn't, but had done some other things that'd mean she'd be gone).

Vista really didn't want to be on a team with someone who discussed burning someone's house with them in it for fun. Using your power to overhear what was holding up Miss Militia right before a mission where Clockblocker, Dauntless and herself were there as hidden backup around the meeting place with the newcomer team might not have been the most allowed thing to do, but frankly, she'd been much to curious to not try shrinking that space enough so that she could listen in.

She was glad she had. Some of the others - Dennis, especially - were sort of sad to see her go, but the stuff she'd said…

She hadn't liked Sophia beforehand, but she'd still considered her a team mate, of sorts.

Other things had happened, too.

Monday, especially, brought something rather… interesting with it: Somebody new joined Missy's year.

The newcomer and her shared most of their classes, and the other girl was given the locker adjacent to Missy's.

Her name was Conny, Conny Finislator, and she turned out to be really good at Math. The only
thing Missy liked about it was geometry and sub-subjects, like trigonometry.

They'd shared a desk in that subject, and Missy had invited her to sit with her at lunch.

"So…", Missy tried desperately searching for a topic that a) wasn't girly girl stuff and therefore boring and b) had nothing to do with capes. "… why did you transfer in in the middle of the year?"

"Family reasons, I kind of only arrived later. My siblings have already been here for a month."

"Siblings?"

"Three. Benny's oldest, then there's Levi and Sam, who's the youngest before me. We live with relatives… well, I suppose Taylor's sort of our mother, even if she's technically too young for it."

"Taylor?", Missy asked, happy to be on safe ground.

"Best Mother in the world, according to Benny."

"How old is she?", Missy asked, feeling just a bit jealous. With her parents…

"Fifteen. But with the way she acts, you'd guess she was way older and had raised us from the cradle." For a moment, the other girl looked wistful. "It's nice, actually. Didn't really have parents, before."

And there evaporated Missy's short moment of jealousy. No parents?

Sure, that Taylor girl sounded like she tried, but it didn't sound like she'd been around for long.

"How's your family like?", Conny asked her, and Missy froze.

"Normal, I guess." Please don't dig deeper.

"As in, average? I don't suppose you mean orthogonal, because that would be really, really strange, and do you mean average as in equalling the harmonic, geometric or arithmetic mean, the median or the mode of whatever is actually used to measure families?" She didn't seem to need any breath.

Missy stared. "Not quite what I meant but - that… stuff has to do with Math, right?" She was reasonably sure it did, it sounded like Maths.

Arithmetic mean and median sounded vaguely familiar, at least, but what were "harmonic mean" and "geometric mean" supposed to be?

"Yes. It does."

"You like Math, then?"

Conny nodded. "Math is really cool, and logical, and fun. Like Latin. Levi's teaching me Latin."

"That's the younger brother, right?", Missy asked.

Conny nodded. "He's really good at it."

Missy bit her lip. She didn't seem to be ashamed of liking things that weren't all that popular for girls in Middle School. Math. Latin.

"I like capes", Missy said.
She held her breath. The other girls in her year, they didn't, well, didn't like cape geeks. She wasn't quite one - she was a cape herself - but still, sort of, counted.

She knew about capes, powers. It interested her.

It wasn't cool. It wasn't acceptable. Oh, sure, you could like Alexandria or Mouse Protector (or buy Vista merchandise), but you weren't supposed to debate about whether, in a straight up fight, Armsmaster would win against Trainwreck (he would) or talk Tinkerbabble. Or about how being a cape would make life suck, at times. Or be able to list the whole known cape population of Brockton Bay with powers and affiliation.

Boys could. Quite a few boys would. While it wasn't exactly cool for them, it was much easier than for girls, at least.

They didn't want to have a girl in their discussions, either. Stupid kids.

The other girl's face lit up like a bonfire during witch trials.

Alright, that comparison hadn't quite worked.

"Me too. You've heard of that new hero team?"

Missy smiled. She couldn't help it. "Yeah, Kith. Consisting of Valiant, Admiral, Oracle and the one and only Animom."

Conny tilted her head.

"It's Anima's nickname on PHO. There's a whole meme about it. 'Yo Animama kicks Nazi ass', stuff like that. Somebody took a picture of her tasering Kaiser."

Her new… acquaintance? Friend? - snickered. "I can imagine it."

"There's also some reports they were close to Ground Zero in the Lung fight, you know, when that Endbringer-like giant appeared and kicked Lung's ass."

She probably didn't know, but the picture in that report was awesome. There was a short video of it, taken from a few streets over. The actual houses nearby had either been abandoned or empty, apparently.

"Apparently, Rune and Cricket ran into Lung, and Rune was in a bad spot before they arrived." She hadn't heard that through the cape grapevine, but from her father's cousin's son Theo. She kept quiet about it, but Uncle Max was a bit of an Empire supporter. Theo was nice, though.

Their fellow second cousin Probably-Francis (the guy kind of looked like one) was just annoying, though. Missy was kind of glad at times her grandmother hadn't gotten along with her brothers.

It meant she could limit exposure to the extended family to pretty much Theo. And Uncle Max, if she had to.

They spent the remainder of lunch just chatting, about this and that, different cape groups, having fun and laughing a lot.

At the end of the day, Missy felt as if she'd made a friend.
Chapter End Notes

Just in case: yes, I know that family relationship isn't canon. That there might be a family relationship is from a one-shot (... somewhere in the Spacebattles Wormverse Ideas thread); I really, really liked the idea.

Also, cross-posted all of Arc 4. Last complete Arc, finished, yes!
We were standing somewhere nowhere, in a place only illuminated by the (dim) light of the moon and stars.

My head was swimming.

I didn't know what to think, what to do.

My children were the Endbringers. The *Endbringers*.

They'd destroyed countless lives. Countless people.

Benny'd obliterated New York, once.

Levi had sunk Newfoundland and Kyushu.

Sam had twisted Sphere and countless others, had turned Switzerland upon itself.

They hadn't told me the truth. For some reason, that stung the most.

Maybe because it was personal.

But rejecting them…

I didn't… I didn't want to be alone again. I couldn't be alone again, I couldn't… I couldn't go back.

I couldn't.

They were family. They'd not hurt anybody since they'd had a choice, as far as I knew.

That… that meant… that…

I… I was mad at them. Very mad.

But I already knew I was going to forgive them.

I took a deep breath.

In. Out.

"What. Was. That."

I didn't sound quite as calm as I'd hoped.

I let my gaze travel over my children. Sam flinched, while Levi curled up on himself, and Benny looked like he was going to cry.

The fourth one just looked confused, disoriented, as if they'd been ripped out right out of the womb.

Guilt hit me like a sledgehammer.

Sam was shivering.

"Don't… don't do that again", she pleaded, hoarse.
"Do what?", I asked.

"Make us grow. It hurts", Sam answered.

"I won't", I stated, arms crossed. "When exactly were you going to tell me about how you're the Endbringers?"

"Never", Sam replied, still pale and shaking. "I... we're finally happy. We're finally free." Her voice was rising with each word she spoke, standing up, looking me squarely in the eye.

"Oh, and I didn't deserve to know?", I nearly shouted back.

"What, are you going to chase us off, now?", Sam sneered. "We're just monsters, Herokillers, never mind we never got a fucking choice. Just because Dad was an insecure coward who wanted challenge, we had to... had to..." She'd shouted in the middle, all indignant anger, but her voice broke towards the end, tears in her eyes.

I stepped forward. Sam raised her hands in front of her, as if afraid she'd be struck.

I hugged her instead.

"I won't", I said.

Sam buried her head in my shoulder, and started to sob.

"You're mine", I continued after Sam had calmed down a bit, "my kids. Doesn't... it doesn't matter how. What happened. I'm just angry because you didn't trust me." Well. Mostly. That and shock.

Benny looked at me with wide eyes. "We're allowed to stay?"

I nodded, releasing one arm from Sam, waving him and Levi over and including them in the hug.

Releasing them and a red-eyed, smiling Sam, I looked at our new member.

"And you are?", I asked.

The girl looked up at me, disoriented and confused. "Conny. I'm Conny."

There was a bit of a scowl when she looked over at Levi and continued: "And I wanted to be a boy."

I laughed. I didn't know why. It wasn't all that funny.

Soon, my older children joined in while I pulled my youngest into a hug.

"Let's go home", I stated. "I think we're all in dire need of hot chocolate, right now."

After teleporting home and getting into some comfortable clothes while Dad started on the hot chocolate, I sat all of us down.

Dad, too. I explained the situation to him, and he just... rolled with it.

He really was being a better dad, lately.
Sipping at the hot chocolate, I waited for a bit, before starting the questions.

"So… the full story."

Sam nodded. Benny and Levi, too. Conny just sat there, a bit dazed, having decided that snuggling with Grandpa was a really good idea right now.

"Well, we always existed, kind of, but… none of us was really there for a time, you know?", Benny started. It surprised me a bit - I had expected Sam to do that.

"Dadversary pulled on Shard", Levi continued.

_Who now did what?_

"He means that our… creator, controller, father, whatever you want to call it… he kind of pulled on the power that was about making us."

I raised an eyebrow. "He pulled on a power?"

"Shards give powers. Symbiotes", Levi explained. "Big Clusters are more like parasites."

"Ah." That made sense. "Wait, if he pulled on a power, how did that…"

"Father can… access quite a few powers. It's what his own power is, basically." Benny wasn't smiling, not while he said it, but he started again when sipping at his drink.

A cape who could access multiple powers.

I couldn't think of one. Well, I could, but…

"Eidolon", I whispered.

My children nodded in tandem.

_Eidolon_ had created the Endbringers. _Eidolon_ was responsible for millions of dead.

He'd forced my children into becoming child soldiers.

_One of the fucking greatest heroes._

I could feel myself becoming angrier, the whispers rising -

No. Not now.

"In his defense, I'm pretty sure he never knew."

_I'm pretty sure he never learned we were his._

I swallowed. "You never actually lied to me, did you?"

They shook their heads.

The thought helped. They hadn't lied.

They just hadn't told the truth, either. I guess, in hindsight... that time travel conclusion had been very, very wrong, but in my defense, it still sounded likelier than the truth.
Finally, I focused on my youngest kid.

She was still scowling at Levi - that face was adorable - and burying the back of her head into Dad's chest, sitting on his knees.

Wasn't she a bit old for that?

I mean, she was… twelvish? - or technically half an hour old, which meant she should've been too young to do that.

Endbringer-in-human-form ages were confusing.

"So… what happened with you?", I asked.

"You pulled", she shrugged, "and I sort of started to exist? I wanted to be a boy, though." She glared at Levi, again.

"Why did you turn out to be a girl then?", I asked. I had an idea, but…

She pointed at Levi. "He said I was a girl, and now I am a girl."

I remembered that conversation. I was going to have to be careful to not try and ask about my other children's genders.

"What do you want to do now?"

"I don't know, what do people do?", she asked.

"Hmm, go to school?"

Dad and Sam shared a look. "We can arrange that", Dad stated.

Did I want to know how or why Dad?

Probably not.

"I can teach you Latin", Levi offered.

"To say sorry?", a shiny-eyed Conny asked.

Levi nodded. "Ita est."

Conny laughed.

There was something else I really needed to say, though. "And Levi?"

"Yes?"

"Never scare me like that again, alright?"

He swallowed. "I won't."

"No going off charging at dragons."

"I promise."

"And you're grounded."
The weekend passed calmly, or as calmly as a weekend spent getting school supplies and clothes for a twelve-year-old could. Levi was sulking a bit because he wasn't allowed to come with us, though.

Conny's first day of school passed with nothing more than a lot of worries from me - both about Conny, and a hint of "What was going on with Emma and Sophia"?

Conny made a friend, which was wonderful, while I had searched for and found a parental advice group where I'd maybe, just maybe, get some hints on how to deal with cape kids.

They met infrequently, depending on schedule, and were led by Sarah Pelham.
The parental advice group met in Arcadia's building in the evenings, a place that seemed entirely alien to me with how clean and nice it was for a High School.

I felt distinctively out of place arriving in a room that contained mostly middle-aged Moms and a handful of Dads.

Correction: I was distinctively out of place. I took a seat, squirming a bit.

"You're fairly young to be here", my neighbour said, smiling at me nervously. She was a bit mousy, with brown hair and eyes, a bit shorter than me.

"I know."

"What's your kid like?"

"Kids, and before you ask, sort-of-adopted. There's four relatives who recently moved in with us, and...", I trailed off, shrugging.

It wasn't quite the truth.

It wasn't a lie, either.

"Four?", the other woman asked.

"Yep. Three of them are my age, one's a bit younger. Somehow, I still got wrangled into being the mother figure. Thought I might as well learn about what I'm supposed to be doing."

"That's a lot of new kids. I've got my hands full with two."

"Oh?"

"My son, well, step-son, and my baby daughter. She's a little angel, and he's... a good boy. Quite shy, though. Staying with us right now."

She lit up when talking about her daughter, and there was still quite a lot of affection when talking about her stepson.

"They sound nice. A lot more quiet than our home. I have no idea how to be a parent to four people who're more of an age to be my siblings." It was a surprisingly honest answer.

I really didn't have a clue.

The meeting started, Lady Photon - Mrs. Pelham - starting to relay anecdotes and answering questions, before it broke down into general discussion and cake.

After tasting the cake, I was suddenly quite convinced some people were here for just that.

I stuck to my new acquaintance, repeating my story a bit; I also found out she was a fellow newcomer. I didn't actually meet to Mrs Pelham, but I'd probably manage next time.

At the end of the meeting, we exchanged contact information, and I was asked to spend the next evening babysitting her daughter together with her stepson, apparently, she was going to visit her ex-
husband, the CEO of Medhall, Max Anders.

Kayden was nice.

The next afternoon, however, Sam had invited Greg over, and Conny her new friend Missy. Emma and Sophia were still no-showing, and Madison seemed tight-lipped and exhausted.

The invitations meant I had to deal with six kids under my roof at the same time, with Dad still at work.

Joy.

It went a lot better than expected.

Partially that was because of Sam and Greg.

"Who's the best? I am! Uhuh, uhuh!"

Greg doing a victory dance in my house was something I had never expected to see in my life.

"We'll see that next round. Ready to lose?"

"Oh, you're so on."

Sam had recently become a bit worse at video games - she was using less and less pre-cog in her daily life. I kind of felt proud of her for that.

She wasn't just her powers.

The third, unseen person usually playing with them, nicknamed Strings in conversation, wasn't participating today. I was a bit worried about them being friends with some stranger on the internet, but since that person had apparently no interest whatsoever in meeting up or getting sent money, a lot of that was relieved. From what Sam had told me, she seemed to be a nice girl with really strict parents.

I left the two of them to the joys of Space Opera, Mario Kart, and other games whose names I was slowly starting to pick up on.

Missy and Conny were doing their homework and bugging Levi about helping them, something that was promptly rectified as soon as I stepped into the room. Benny, apparently, hadn't even been asked, slogging through his own homework.

As the next few minutes proved, I was seen as a better source for English homework than Levi. Figures.

After homework, the three of us who weren't computer game obsessed were worked into yet another game of Monopoly.

Benny lost all of his money first, then I. The three vultures then fought amongst one another for a while, until Levi lost under the combined force of pre-teen girl power.

Missy won, defeating three Endbringers on her own.

Out of context, that sounded that much more heroic.
That evening, I nervously rang the bell to Kayden's apartment.

The boy who opened the door was a bit pudgy, out of shape, hiding behind the door.

"Hi. I'm Taylor. Kayden's mentioned me?"

He finally fully opened the door, letting me in. "Uh… hi. Yeah, she did. I'm Theo. Kayden's already gone."

I smiled at him. He kind of reminded me of Levi with his sheer awkwardness, and simply that was enough to set me at ease.

"Aster's asleep right now", he said, and I nodded.

"I should be quiet, then?" As silently as I could, I moved into the home, slipping out of my shoes.

I wasn't quite sure why I'd been invited - maybe to keep Theo company? The way he stood, how awkward he was… he seemed just as lonely, in his own way, as my kids had been right in the beginning, the way they still were.

The way I'd been.

"Yeah." His voice was low, soft. Kind. He stood shrunk in on himself, unsure what to do, face a blank mask.

Looking at him, I decided that I was going to try and be friends with him. He looked like he needed it.

"So… you're staying with Kayden?", I decided to clarify.

He nodded. "My father's sick right now."

My father. Not Dad or Daddy. Might be a coincidence, but… The way he said it, it didn't sound like he wanted him to get better soon.

Wait, I'd thought she'd gone to visit hi- of course you needed to visit sick people, too, Taylor.

I spent the remaining evening talking to Theo in quiet whispers, helping him prepare food for Aster, and trying to draw out the shy, quiet boy while watching TV.

It wasn't exactly easy to do, but I tried to listen to what he liked to do; stuff he liked to talk about. There wasn't a lot, but he did seem to like legends and stories, and telling me about the Golem of Prague, he didn't sound like he'd ever actually got to talk to anyone at all about this before.

He wasn't actually a bad storyteller, and even if he'd been, him actually starting to smile at times was more than enough.

Kayden came back rather soon, though, in a remarkably good mood, and even happier to see him talk about Norse myth, which he apparently knew a lot about, too.
Cricket had been in a bad mood for days.

The one deal they were negotiating for that could save Medhall was *this* close to falling through if Max Anders didn't "get over his unfortunate illness" soon, and the prison transport would only be today.

Not to mention, Lung was on the warpath due to that stupid rainbow thing. Cricket refused to believe it had been an actual Endbringer - a fucking rainbow-themed Endbringer, really? She did know it wasn't what Lung apparently thought it was - a new Empire cape capable of illusions. Word on the street was, he was really, really mad at the Empire for "that new illusion cape getting the drop on him". Would've been awesome if such a cape existed and it hadn't been a rainbow-Endbringer thing.

They might as well name it Legend 2.0 and use it as a symbol for the queers out there. (The word wasn't gay. Gay meant happy, as far as Cricket was concerned. The Sleeping Beauty movie used it that way. She refused to respond to any question on how she knew that.)

They were going to meet with Purity right this evening, just before the breakout.

Hooks was still trying to convince her to come back. Cricket just wanted one female who wasn't a teenager (or as good as), an emotionless drone, or a stuck-up snob because they were sleeping with the boss around. Even if Purity had her own hang-ups. And had slept with the boss, even if she hadn't been a snob about it.

Oh, I'm so much better because I'm pretty and a twin and can jump into bed at the count of drei!

Ugh.

And of course you couldn't say anything about them, even if Cricket could've said more, because Othala looked up to the two, Rune as well (Real-life Valkyries! Squee! … Cricket wished she could've said something.). Night was not an option, and trying to complain about blonde bomb-shell twins to men was about as senseless an endeavour as trying to take anyone named Loki seriously as a manly man. Old Norse myth Loki, aka Mrs Horse, proud mother of Sleipnir.

Purity arrived in the meeting space, where Cricket was standing around to… guard Hooks' back and look vaguely impressive? Not much more she was there for, really.

Correction: Kayden Russel arrived. She wasn't wearing a costume.

Cricket was really starting to doubt they'd manage to get her on board.

"You wanted to talk to me, Brad?", Kayden asked.

"We could use another hand on board to get Kaiser back." He'd always been direct, straightforward, not some kind of golden-tongued-talker the way Kaiser was.

Even if Kaiser's voice was nicer, Cricket preferred Hookwolf's way of talking.

"That's all?" Kayden turned around, stepped away.

"Purity, fuck, we need people! Lung thinks we got a cape we don't have!"

She didn't turn back, but she did stand still. "In Germany, only current Gesellschaft capes were
exposed. Not former ones.” Her voice was quiet, low. “If I help you, I might as well walk into prison myself.”

Former - Cricket hadn’t known that. She didn’t know whether she’d jumped ship if she’d known, didn’t know if she would, now, if it would even help, but…

“I’m going to stay away and make sure there’ll still be one parent around for my daughter, no matter what. Good day and good luck.”

Kayden walked off.

They just stared at her back.

When she already wasn’t visible anymore, a fair deal away, enough nobody else would’ve heard her - Cricket heard her laugh. Laugh the way she herself had done that first day after the pits.

Well, fuck. So much for that. One roast Cricket coming up.

They were lying in wait for the transport to come, and Cricket was thinking of anything but the upcoming fight.

Breaking out Kaiser without a flying Blaster when she was pretty sure Lung was going to attack the transport to try and flatten them wasn’t something Cricket really wanted to do.

It wasn't like she had much choice, though.

Most of everyone she cared about, no matter how much they annoyed her, was going to join in, and she couldn’t just let them walk in there alone, no matter how much she wanted to test out Purity's info and just run.

Fuck. She needed to calm down.

She hated that Lung was enraged due to whatever had happened on Friday, the rumour mill saying he was missing a good chunk of his memory, going from confronting members of the Empire to staring at Legend 2.0, Endbringer version - no memories about Kith’s arrival.

Which meant he held them responsible. Herself and lil’ Rune.

They had a plan. Just stick to the plan. It's just pre-fight jitters, you can survive that, just calm down…

The transport came into sight, and finally, instantly, calm came.

This was it.

Hookwolf was the one who attacked first, slamming into the truck and tearing the walls apart.

Hit and run. Simple hit and run.

Fenja and Menja were already growing, closing in on the truck while Hookwolf held his own against Armsmaster and Miss Militia, just for a little while. All of the others were helping in their own way, attacking the Protectorate capes - Victor was working as a sniper, Othala had re-inforced him, and Night and Fog were taking on Assault and Battery right now.
Right when the twins had finally reached a size to pick up Kaiser so they’d be able to run, Cricket’s job came.

Distract Lung. Yay.

Sometimes, Cricket really doubted whether she had any survival instinct left.

Oni Lee teleported in first, starting to sow havoc amongst the heroes and the Empire alike, trying his best to blow them up.

An already growing Lung marched in not five seconds later, growling something about showing the Empire for distracting him with their new cape they really, really didn’t have.

How to be as annoying and distracting as possible...

Normally, Cricket despised annoy tactics. It meant spitting on whatever good fight the enemy gave you.

On the other hand, fucking dragon chink.

Cricket waved at him, and Lung went ballistic. Small b, not like that one cape belonging to the Wanderers or whatever.

He didn’t focus on anything but her for the next few moments, while Cricket ran, ducked and weaved for her life, an angry dragon following her.

Lead him around. Just for a while.

Running, she wasn’t a threat. Which meant that he was shrinking. Not a lot - it couldn’t have been more than ten seconds - but it couldn’t hurt.

Just a few more metres... she could feel the heat behind her.

She skidded to a halt, the heat getting closer as Lung slowed down.

Victor should be getting a shot in right... now. Please let him get the eyes, please...

Boom.

Lung roared in pain, thrashing around, blindly attacking anything and everything around him.

Which included the Protectorate heroes.

Finally, one of the brainless blonde bombshells picked up Kaiser, and they started to retreat, leaving the Protectorate to deal with a blind, angry dragon that had just gotten two "special" bullets filled with whatever Victor had cooked up right into the eyes.

Cricket was just relieved she hadn’t ended up as said dragon’s dessert, herself.

Of course, she lost a lot of that relief when, as revenge, a teleporting bomber "decided" to start paying visits to their usual hangouts.
The same evening I'd been invited to Kayden's, Kaiser was broken out of his prison transport to a maximum security area.

Apparently, during the fight, Lung's pride had been wounded by falling face-first into an Empire trap.

The bombings of suspected Empire hideouts and known frequented places by Oni Lee started the next day.

The first report I had of the events nearly made my heart stand still: They said Connie's school had been blown up.

Fortunately (well... for a given value of "fortunate"), it was actually the Empire bar not-quite-next-door-but-close.

About ten minutes after I heard that, during lunch, Miss Militia called. Luckily, I was away from any crowds right then, standing in the empty bathroom.

I picked up. "Yes?"

"I trust you've heard the news?" Miss Militia was short and to the point.

"We have. What help do you need?"

"Assistance in evacuating and information on where Oni Lee is or might attack next. Assistance in taking him down."

"We'll do our best. I'll ask Oracle for the info later, alright?"

"Alright. Please hurry, though."

A bit of awkward silence ensued, before we both quickly said our "see you later"s and "goodbye"s.

After school, Sam relayed what she knew as best as she could, talking to Miss Militia about possible locations Oni Lee could be attacking. Meanwhile, I'd asked Dad for ideas.

His was, very simply, to hire Faultline to protect civilians and help take down the ABB. It couldn't hurt.

After Sam's relay of "places Oni Lee is probably going to attack next" - not as accurate as it might've been due to her not being in her... other form - I was handed the phone and double-checked Dad's idea with Miss Militia, who handed it up the chain.

Apparently, as long as it came from our own resources, it was a go.
It wasn't really something the PRT or Protectorate could be seen doing, but extra capes, even mercenary ones, in a crisis didn't hurt.

Miss Militia sounded really relieved when she gave the go ahead.

Twenty minutes later, I had negotiated to pay Faultline and her crew decent rates, negotiating down from the initially demanded premium by using the possible boost to their reputation as a point.

Faultline didn't argue very hard.

That was when the phone ran again.

What was it today? International "Phone Taylor" day?

The house phone.

I picked up, not immediately recognizing the number.

"Hebert here?"

"Hello Taylor, it's Kayden."

"Hey Kayden, how are you? Everything alright?" She sure as hell didn't sound alright.

"We haven't been caught up in anything yet, but… I know this is a lot to ask, but can we stay with you for a while? We're in the middle of Empire territory, and I really don't know anyone else who lives outside of it…" … and it wasn't safe where she was. Not safe enough to stay.

I looked at Dad. "Dad, would you mind if a friend and her kids stayed over for a while? They're not safe at home."

"We'd need to set up some mattresses, but I wouldn't."

"Alright." I spoke into the phone again. "It's no problem. You know the address?"

"Yes. Thank you. I was just… thanks." I could hear the relief in Kayden's voice.

"See you soon?"

"Do you mind if I come over immediately?"

"Nope."

"Well… see you very soon, then."

A bit of a pause, then - beep.

I couldn't have told you, afterwards, how long it took for Kayden, Theo and Aster to arrive.

They'd taken a crib for Aster with them, necessities for all of them, and whatever food they'd still had.

Kayden immediately hugged me. It was an odd sensation - I hadn't been hugged by a grown-up woman since Mom…
"Hi", I said, a bit out of breath. That woman hugged hard.

"Hey Taylor."

"So... those are the Finislators. That's Benny", he waved a bit, "Levi", he was holding out a box with chocolates, "Sam", she smiled, "and Conny."

For just a moment, Kayden stared. Then, she shook her head, as if trying to chase a thought out of her head, and took one of Levi's offered chocolates.

"Thank you. It's nice to meet you all."

"And that's my Dad, Danny Hebert."

She smiled at them, all of them. That was the moment Aster opened her eyes and blinked at us.

D'awwwwww.

"Should we help you carry your things?", Benny asked. He was growing up into such a gentleman... No, bad Taylor, get out of forty-year-old-proud-mother-mode.

For just a moment, Kayden froze, before she smiled at him. "That would be very kind of you."

"Levi, Gramps, you're helping?"

"Of course." Dad rolled his eyes. "Can't let you young boys do everything, you know."

While Dad and my sons started loading out the car, I dragged Theo around. "Hey Sam, Conny, that's Theo."

The poor boy was frozen, standing stock-still.

"It's nice to meet you", Sam replied, giving him a wide smile.

"D'you like maths?", Conny asked.

Theo shook his head. "Not very much."

"Latin?"

"I don't know Latin. I like history, though."

Conny blinked up at him. "Do you tell stories?"

Theo nodded warily.

"Then you're going to have to tell me some." With those words, Theo got an armful of Conny. Surprised, he caught her and hugged her back.

... how often did he get hugs?

The way he was caught completely flat-footed, it didn't look like it was halfway often enough.

She let go, smiling widely at him. "Do you know the Greek and Roman legends?"
She started dragging him inside.

"Uh… I can probably tell you about Troy, if you don't mind."

"I don't."

"You see, it started like this. A long, long time ago, Zeus, upon seeing…"

The door shut behind them, and I could almost picture Conny getting snacks and settling them onto the sofa.

*Warning: Do not try and keep knowledge from Conny. It ends badly.*

"I want to listen in, too!" Sam followed them inside.

I hoped Theo survived that much attention at once.

A bit later on, when Dad and the boys had dragged everything inside, everyone else settled themselves around Theo, who'd gotten caught up enough in telling stories that he didn't really notice all the extra audience.

Aster started falling asleep again as soon as she heard his voice, calm, kind and a bit quiet.

At the end of the story - with the ten years of war finally ending - he looked up, looking around, and promptly blushed.

"Uh…"

"Can you continue about what happened to them tomorrow?", Conny asked.

Theo nodded.

That was when Aster woke up, whining a bit. Benny came over to her - Kayden immediately jumped from where she'd sat - then hid his face behind his hands. "Googgoo."

He opened his hands, showing his face. "Hatcha!"

Aster shrieked in laughter.

I looked at Kayden. She was standing, half-shocked and half-embarassed, before relaxing, shaking her head to herself while Benny continued playing with the little girl, and starting to smile.

We ended up watching a movie that evening - one Benny had selected with Sam's help.

It was… well, it was both outrageously funny, and tragical and weird at the same time.

The Jewish people's Nazi impressions were pure gold, though.

Kayden had a really, really odd expression on her face while watching the *Train of Life*, though. Something between wanting to cry and wanting to laugh so hard her sides burst. Theo had a whole lot of fun watching it, though he didn't like the ending much.

It was kind of a punch in the guts.
Chapter End Notes

The last chapter that was just cross-posted from Spacebattles. From here on out, it'll be new updates.
After watching the movie, late at night, Sam got another phone call, from her friends: Apparently, Lisa and her group were more than willing to help out against Oni Lee.

Grue's darkness might have its advantages against a line-of-sight teleporter, and neither he nor any of the other Undersiders liked the bombings - while they mainly hit Empire territory, Oni Lee kind of also tended to damage the buildings around his actual targets.

Apparently, discrimination only applied to people and not to buildings in the ABB. Good to know.

Although I was all for the opposite. It made for much nicer people, in my limited experience.

You know, instead of "treat only certain people in a way that counts as 'nice' for you, and blow up all buildings equally", do the whole "treat all people in a way that counts as 'nice' for you, and blow up only certain buildings" thing. Too much to ask?

Probably. Though the image of Oni Lee being confronted with this question was kind of funny.

At breakfast, Conny asked: "Did you notice that today is the 11th of February 2011?"

… I hadn't, actually.

"It is?"

"Mhm. Two times eleven, and there's a two in the middle, too. Hey Theo, are you going to tell stories again today? We won't have school."

"Uh…"

"Please?"

"Alright."

I don't think he minded being listened to very much.

My phone rang.

"Anima?", Miss Militia asked
"Yeah, it's me."

"We're planning an operation. Are you able to arrive for a briefing in half an hour?"

I nodded to myself, then stopped because she couldn't actually look at me. "Sure, no problem. See you later."

I hope she picked up on the giant clue of "in company".

"Thank you, we'll see you then."

I waited a moment, then hung up.

"Uh… older kids?"

"Is that used to refer to the set including all Finislators excluding myself?", Conny asked.

Decrypting maths statement - ah.

"Yep. There's a few friends who need to meet us, they need a bit of help."

I tried to do an ominously significant look.

"Are you alright, Taylor?", Kayden asked.

It didn't quite succeed. "Yeah, pretty much. Just… not that happy to cross the city right now."

Sam's help would make sure we couldn't get hurt badly, but… well, without changing forms, her powers were limited quite a bit. I could feel how they worked, changed, now that I knew what both sides were like, and Sam's future-sight as a human was more of a really, really good sense of timing and some sense of what could happen and how to influence it than the perfect, clear picture it was when she was big-growl-smash, as if she'd suddenly gotten precognitive myopia.

Good enough to see immediate futures of the kind where she could avoid annoying or irritating people and know what to say even if she didn't know what it meant, but not good to pull off the long-term planning she'd otherwise could've done.

Navigating town in costume after we'd changed a good place away from the house somewhere where we wouldn't be observed was fairly easy - Sam and I just carried the boys with us.

They both found clinging to their sister and mother, respectively, fairly ridiculous, though. "Undignified", Levi called it.

He was still a bit sulky at times over being grounded, though he'd largely accepted the part where he shouldn't put himself into danger no matter how much fun it was, dammit.

Being difficult to hurt didn't change that. If it'd been impossible, maybe, but I'd never heard of anything impossible to hurt and was never going to bet on it.
Nothing and no one was ever truly invincible.

Just... you know, mostly. Until somebody with the right power came along (Sam muttered something sounding a bit like "flesh" right then, but I'd actually thought about the Siberian. Who we still didn't know how to hurt. Well, she probably was going to die sooner or later.)

The briefing itself was short, to the point, and - for the Protectorate members - included both mention and grumbling about the fact that Faultline's crew had been hired to help, and that we were going to drop Grue on Oni Lee (… not quite literally, but yes.), with PRT members being given sonar so they'd be able to see through it.

For some reason, the Undersiders - joining in by video conference, only to be left alone until the crisis was over (Director Piggot was very, very insistent on that) - well, Tattletale specifically, grimaced a bit when that was mentioned.

With Sam's and Tattletale's help, we'd determined Oni Lee's next target, plus the most likely locations he might get to if the primary team didn't get him.

All of us - Armsmaster, Miss Militia, Grue, Newter and Gregor, Sam, myself and a few PRT troopers - were waiting at what had been designated the most likely point for Oni Lee to attack next, with other teams waiting at the most likely places he'd flee to/bomb out if he didn't bomb this one, a dunky "suspected" Empire bar at the edge of their territory with the Merchants.

… we'd told the people who would've normally been in there to evacuate, anyways. Just in case.

When Oni Lee dropped in, it was already evening, and normally, the bar would've been stock-full.

Instead, regulars had been warned, and with Thinker support, the news hadn't reached the ABB in time for Oni Lee to change targets.

He was teleporting in - making a show out of it, in fact - before some hims detonated the bar building.

Immediately, a PRT trooper - Private Jenkins, Leeroy Jenkins, I had had to ask Sam why the name was so funny - detonated the smoke bombs we'd installed in the floor and surrounding area, while Grue started spreading out his darkness immediately, all according to plan.

That, of course, was when we discovered the real, and now very pissed off Oni Lee had been at the very edge of the area covered by smoke bombs, and was now spamming clones in the surrounding area.

Yay.

And the first teleport was right beside me.

Panicking, I reached out for help - anything, anywhere - and found… it didn't quite feel like my kids, but it felt more right, better to draw on than on anything else around except for them, a feeling of pretty-bright-swirls-on-touch and… other things I didn't quite know how to describe.

I felt myself change, and reached out to touch a surprised Oni Lee, who teleported away a split
second afterwards.

And promptly started tumbling a bit, losing his focus, as if he was hallucinating, and singing while teleporting before just falling down out of nowhere.

He didn't have a very good singing voice.

I changed back, and looked around, then stared.

There was a boy where Newter had been. A fully human-looking boy.

For a moment, he stared at himself, then changed into the orange-lizardy look of Newter.

Then back again. (Surprisingly enough, his clothes changed with him. Small blessings.)

… what the hell had I done?

Turned out, something that meant I was getting hugs from formerly-lizard boy.

He hadn't let go for long enough I was feeling vaguely suspicious I'd have run out of air by now if I wasn't a Brute, and I was surprised he had enough air to keep up the continous stream of "thankyouthankyouthankyoucantoouchpeopleonewaythankyouthankyou…"

"Ugh", I finally managed to get out, and he let go. "No need to thank me. I… actually, I had no clue this would happen. Could happen."

"Thank you anyways." He smiled at me, cheerfully, brightly, a teenager not that much older than my own kids… or myself, actually, but in costume, it was probably better to think just "my kids".

"Did you just cure a Case-53?", the unfortunately-named Private Jenkins asked.

"… you know, I guess I just did."

All hell broke loose.

Well, not really.

A blind-folded, unconscious Oni Lee was dragged off by PRT troopers, while Private Jenkins informed the Director of what had happened.

And shouted a bit, sounding somewhere between annoyed and panicked.

Meanwhile, Tattletale was babbling over the comms, talking to Sam - I had no clue why Sam wanted me to listen in - and Gregor had decided to call Faultline.

The end result was thus: the Director wanted proof I could repeat this - and to agree to cure Case-53s who came forward, provided there were no side effects - and Gregor volunteered as the next test subject after debating it with Faultline.

I took a deep breath, closing my eyes, and focused on Gregor - and when I next opened them,
looked at a man who definitely wasn't a Case-53.

It hadn't been just a fluke, then.

Oh.
The day of Oni Lee's rampage had been one of the best of Theo's life. Probably even the best.

His father was still ill, he was staying with Kayden - Kayden who was happy, who was starting to forget his father when she looked at him, who was making friends with people who were most definitely not members of the Empire - and… he'd had people listen to him.

Theo had liked stories - he'd been allowed stories, as long as they were good and proper and what his father wanted him to see, it didn't matter whether it was mythology, Brothers Grimm or Reality TV, but he… might've branched out a bit, at times, when he could.

In stories, fathers were kind. Mothers were there, and if they weren't, their kids were heroes. Good guys.

Who saved people.

Not always, not everywhere, and different places had different definitions of heroes - but heroes lived, they had opinions, they weren't useless.

Stories didn't always end well, but they were fair, at least. If you didn't break the rules, nothing happened to you, even in tragedies.

If there was a happy ending, well, then the good guys got one. You normally had at least one of those two - brought down by their own flaws or a happy end.

Dreaming of that was infinitely better than being Theo, most of the time. Lately, he'd started giving up on it, burying the stories he'd loved as childhood dreams, but… they'd paid off, after all, hadn't they? They'd helped him make friends.

And then… that movie, they'd never have watched it in Theo's house.

It was Jewish, made fun of Nazis (and Communists, and Jews, and… well, actually, everyone, really), it portrayed nice Jews (and crazy ones, and odd ones, and, well, just human ones, he supposed), and he'd never been allowed to see anything even remotely similar before, in the company of people who actually seemed to like and value him just for being there. (Maybe Kayden did, sometimes, he wasn't sure about that.)

Taylor had listened to him. She'd been nice to him, even when he'd jumped when she sat down beside him, or had just stammered when she offered him popcorn, or…

Well, Theo wasn't very good at talking with people. Especially girls who paid attention to him.

Except… when he'd started telling stories, he'd been, had he?

Taylor had listened to him. Connie had listened to him and begged for more stories ("You've got a nice voice, Theo", Danny had said. "Storyteller's voice. You're pretty good at it." Theo had stared. "Done that often, kid?" Shaken his head. "Well, you'll only get better, then.")
Danny had patted him on the shoulder, and Benny and Levi had included him in their pillow fight.

He'd felt... odd there. Not bad, but odd.

Like he'd never felt before.

At home, maybe? He couldn't tell.

Well, it was time to go back, anyways.

Arriving at the place that was supposed to be home but had never felt like that, facing his father, he didn't keep his chin high or straightened his back, like Taylor had encouraged him to do ("It's bad for your posture, young man!" - he was pretty sure she hadn't noticed she wasn't talking to Levi or Benny right then), but instead, stood like always, shoulders down, head down.

His head felt different, though. Full of story things - hopes and dreams and the knowledge he might be able to visit again, sooner or later.

"Kayden took care of you?", his father asked, sitting in his study, while Theo stood before him, the desk between them.

Theo nodded. "She did."

Looking up, his head kept down, he could see his father's lips thinning.

"She refused to help rescue me."

"She had to make sure she'd be able to keep Aster and me safe", Theo said, softly, and then froze. He'd... had he just argued with his father?

"Unfortunately, that's true." The man sighed. "As long as she stays away, she can't be dragged down with us. And Aster..." Of course it was about Aster. It always was.

Sometimes, Theo asked himself if anybody cared about him (Taylor did. Connie did. Danny did - he would've liked having Danny as a father better than Max Anders, he believed.)

His father didn't look happy when he stated, staring off into the distance: "I can't even take Aster back right now." He needed to focus everything on keeping Medhall alive (Theo wanted Medhall to survivie, too - it gave jobs to a lot of people), and on surviving the war against... just Lung, now, though Oni Lee would probably be broken back out soon.

Well, Theo wouldn't bet on the PRT keeping him safely where he belonged, anyways.

They hadn't managed with Kaiser, after all.

He remembered stuff like this, how it ended - you didn't give the bad guy a chance to come back. You made sure they wouldn't.

But he couldn't hurt his family, either.
They were - no, they'd been - all he had.

He had people who actually wanted him around, now.

He just had to make sure he'd somehow be able to get back to them…

Hmm, maybe Kayden wouldn't mind telling his father he was visiting her when he wanted to visit them? Or maybe she'd just be invited, too, that might work as well.

Either way, this empty house - that wasn't home. This was more Nessa's and Jessica's home, even. It hadn't been even close to home since Kayden moved out, and even then, not much of one.

But the Hebert and Finislator home - well, it had felt like he'd belonged, too.

Father, of course, wasn't too happy to hear the exact details of how Oni Lee had been captured, either. A cure for Case-53s was not the thing to make him happy, because… well, it mean Case-53s pilgriming to Brockton Bay because of Kith. He hadn't talked much about the hero group that had captured him, but he had a look in his eyes whenever they were mentioned that made Theo shiver - he wouldn't have liked to be on the opposing side of that kind of wrath.

Though he kind of suspected that group was going to survive it easily. What were they going to pull out of Admiral's hat next? An Endbringer?
It was two days before Valentine's Day - not that I ever got a present, then - and I missed Mom. She… well, she always made this little show out of how she didn't actually want anything, and then when Dad got her something anyways, she was always so happy.

The one time she forgot, she's just smiled at him and told him he'd finally remembered her protests. His face had been priceless.

He'd never forgotten after that.

Of course, there were some other things happening as well, mainly… well, basically, the whole Case-53 thing?

There were rumours pilgrimages had started. Really.

They were still waiting whether the effects on Gregor and Newter would be starting to degrade, with Faultline having promised to inform us if anything changed, but they hadn't, so far. The Protectorate had decided to send whoever of their own who volunteered for this to us as soon as they'd checked out whether there were any non-obvious side effects - so far, nothing conclusive.

I had the feeling the effect wasn't going to degrade any time soon, because my kids still were human (with powers, even), but… I couldn't exactly tell the authorities about that. Though I was starting to wonder about what common thread my powers had…

We'd also had a meeting with New Wave arranged for us - apparently, meeting everybody else was seen as good form.

Which left one problem: We would kind of should take Conny with us to official things, but… well, name and costume. Myself and her had had a meeting with Parian, and Conny was now decked out as a miniature little Post Officer straight out of the early 20th century, cap and all.

That evening, the parental advice group I'd joined met again, and I still hadn't actually looked up its name. Arcadia still looked sort of wrong, but people already knew me and sort-of-disapproving stares had turned into approving smiles.

"Hey Kayden." I waved at the older woman.

"Hello, Taylor." She gave me a slight smile. "Thanks again."

"No thanks needed. How are Aster and Theo?"
"Theo's with his father again, he's recovered." Kayden grimaced a bit. ... I was starting to really, really dislike Theo's father without ever having met the man. "Aster's quite happy, though."

"That's nice to hear." Well, the second part, anyways. "Everything alright with your ex?"

"Well, you know Medhall traded a lot with a few of Gesellschaft's fronts, do you? Can't say I'm happy they're in deep financial trouble, but... it does mean that all of Mr. CEO's threats of a custody battle are kind of impossible right now." There was a deep satisfaction, a feeling of safety in her voice.

"I'm kind of glad I never had that kind of problem with my husband", a new voice interrupted.

Both Kayden and I froze.

I turned towards the speaker - yep, I hadn't misheard.

Don't fangirl, don't fangirl, don't you dare fangirl... it's just another Cape Mom...

"Mrs. Pelham?", Kayden asked, snapping out of shock first.

There was a hint of amusement in her voice when she replied: "Well, yes. That is my name, I did introduce myself at the beginning."

Kayden blushed. "Uhm... sorry..."

Mrs. Pelham laughed. "Never mind, happens all the time. At least you didn't call me 'Lady Photon'."

"... or Photon Mom", I added.

She glared at me, arms crossed. "Or that, yes. On the positive side, I've started sharing the 'mom' nickname recently."

"Animom, right?", Kayden asked. "I'm a great fan of her work." She clasped her hands together.

Well, that was really nice, but...

"Wasn't it Anima?", I asked.

"Well... nicknames. Since that's obviously her kids..." Mrs. Pelham shrugged. "She got stuck with the same theme."

"Could be worse", I mumbled, half to myself. Then, louder: "I mean, it's kind of an awesome theme, isn't it?"

Mrs. Pelham smiled at me. "It's very kind of you to say so."

Actually, I'd been trying to cheer myself up...

Change of topic. "So... just out of curiousity, what's the difference between raising cape kids and unpowered ones?"
Kayden immediately looked up, while Mrs. Pelham looked thoughtful.

"Well, I don't think there is all that much, to be honest. They're still kids, with all that implies. Though they do get into a lot more scrapes than before…"

And that was the start of a series of anecdotes out of the lives of Crystal and Eric, otherwise known as Laserdream and Shielder. Somehow, I really doubted Shielder would've appreciated the story including him, a sparrow, and flight difficulties, but I was laughing much too hard to really feel sympathy for that.

While Kayden and Mrs Pelham - well, Sarah, as she'd offered - were discussing different cake recipes, I decided to invite Kayden to come by tomorrow. Theo couldn't come, but still, it was going to be fun.

The next day, Sunday, Missy was visiting Conny again, when Kayden arrived with Aster, after exchanged greetings plopping down on the sofa.

The two looked at each other for a while, then… "Hey, Auntie Kayden."

"Hey Missy."

"You're related?", Conny asked.

Missy scratched the back of her head. "Well… not as such, actually. She's Uncle Max ex-wife, and he's not my actual uncle, either, but my…" She trailed off, grasping for an explanation.

"Second cousin once removed. Her granduncle's son", Kayden finished the sentence.

"Ah, makes sense. Small world, anyways", I added. "What are you doing right now?"

"I just played chess with Conny. She's really not good at it." Missy shrugged. "How's Aster?"

"Aster?", Benny peeked into the room, and Aster started kicking.

"Yes, yes, I'll give you to him, no worries…" A startled Benny received a little girl. "Can you and the others watch her for a moment?"

"Uh… sure?" He sure didn't sound sure.

"Aster's fine, and I think she's started developing her first crush." A smile played around Kayden's lips. "She absolutely loves Benny."

"I get that", Missy said. "He's…" She trailed off, looking at me.

"Continue, please." I grinned at her, and she went beet-red.

"Uh… what I meant to say… I mean…"

Both Kayden and I broke out in laughter.
"Just teasing you a bit." I suppressed the impulse to start laughing again. "I've seen how girls react to Benny. You should've seen Sophia…"

"Sophia?", Missy asked.

"Yeah, classmate of mine. Hasn't shown up for the last few days in class, fortunately."

For a moment, Missy looked at me, then something seemed to make 'click'. "Sophia Hess?"

"You know her?"

Missy grimaced. "Yeah. She's… not very nice."

"I can second that."

Soon enough, we were speaking about more pleasant topics again, with Sam and Missy soon settling down to play chess again, while Levi tried (keyword: tried) teaching Conny how to with mixed results.

Meanwhile, Dad and Kayden were faux-complaining about today's youth, and having great fun with sentences beginning with: "In my day…", though that soon generated into things like "In my day, we used to have a proper respect for authority! Why, we never bothered wasting their time by getting caught!"

Aster was toddling all over a lying Benny who didn't seem to mind being used as a playground, and I?

Well, I was happy.
Sooner or later, both Kayden and Missy had to leave, and Monday came again - although during the first lesson, I was requested at the Principal's office.

I was pretty sure I hadn't actually done anything to deserve punishment, so… what was that about?

My first thought upon entering the office was *How did they find out?*

Mrs. Blackwell was flanked by two PRT troopers.

Turned out, they hadn't. Both Madison and I were being requested at the PRT building due to a situation involving an as-of-yet unnamed parahuman, and I was almost 99% sure it wasn't me. Mainly due to Madison's presence, I had to admit.

We were both told to wait a minute, which turned to five, then ten.

Sometime in between, we heard snippets of the conversations of troopers walking by: "… turned on us, no reason at all." "… known him forever, man, he wouldn't…” "… suggests a Master…”

Really, really didn't sound good.

Finally, I asked Madison: "Do you know what this is about?"

She looked at me, her eyes darting about. "I've… got a suspicion, but… I kind of don't know whether I'm supposed to tell you…”

"You could have, you know", somebody said from behind me. Private Jenkins.

I froze, then turned towards the private. Don't call him by name, don't call him by name…

"I'm supposed to escort the two of you to the offices - Director Piggot's for Ms Clements and Deputy Director Renick's for Ms Hebert."

Madison was pale, shaking a bit, following Private Jenkins through the corridors, while I walked besides her in much better condition.

Not necessarily in good condition, but at least I wasn't shaking like an autumn leaf caught in a blizzard.

Deputy Director Renick - well, I assumed he was the guy in the fancy suit sitting on the top-dog chair of the office - immediately smiled at me when I walked in.
"Good day to you, Ms Hebert, I'm Deputy Director Renick."

Well, proof assumptions didn't necessarily have to be incorrect, coming right up!

"Good morning. Uh… why am I here?"

He blinked at me. "Nobody told you?"

I shook my head.

"We recently received information about that… unfortunate occurrence in January, and the involvement of a parahuman in the whole mess."

My lips formed into a silent "Oh".

"Could you please describe what happened during your first two years of high school, in particular in regards to Madison Clements, Emma Barnes, and Sophia Hess?"

I began my story - the countless incidents, the hate mail, what I knew about the locker (and whom I suspected…), and then, the diary.

"I see… do you mind handing over a copy?"

I shook my head. "I don't mind."

A part of me was nearly thinking they just wanted to destroy the evidence, but it was quickly silenced by the magical word "copy".

"On its own, I'm afraid it would not have any particular use in court, however, in combination with the digital correspondence of the accused, it is a different matter. Which incidents with those three and other people did you observe?"

I wreaked my brain for a few of the other favoured victims of the group - I'd been the main target, but there were a handful of others who'd gotten the same kind of loving attention.

The way he'd asked the question, one of those other people was, perhaps, the parahuman involved.

"I see. Very well. I assume you would like information on what is going to happen, now?"

I nodded.

He grimaced a bit. "Since the evidence against both Sophia Hess and Emma Barnes is mounting, they are likely to be convicted. In addition, Sophia Hess has broken probation; I find it unlikely she will avoid juvenile detention. As for Madison Clements - well, she actually tried reporting what happened, going to the police slightly before we found out about the incidents through another way, although it only reached us afterwards."

I stared. "She… actually turned herself in?"

He blinked. "She did indeed, and has been rather helpful in the investigation. I trust you do not mind she is likely to be given community service?" There was something odd in his voice - something
between hope and fear, maybe both awaiting judgement and waiting to dispense it.

"I don't."

Madison had turned herself in. Madison. When had she gone and gotten a conscience?

The Deputy Director personally escorted me to the door outside the Director's office, where Madison was already waiting for us, giving me a wonky attempt at a smile.

"So… uh…"

I looked at her.

She swallowed audibly. "Taylor?"

"Yeah?" She flinched. … I wasn't that scary, right?

"Is it too late to say I'm… I'm sorry?"

I stared at her. A huge part of me wanted to say yes, wanted to hurt her, wanted to…

I remembered those speeches I'd given Sam and the others (mostly Sam). If I didn't want to be a huge hypocrite, there was only one answer I could give. "It's not, as long as you're honest."

"I'm sorry, then. I know… well, I'm pretty sure you've not forgiven me, and I could understand if you never can, but I do mean that."

I hadn't forgiven her. I probably never would.

"I… just… why? Why now?"

Madison stared at the ceiling. "I guess it was seeing you happy."

I didn't have any clue how to respond to that.

We - Kith, including the junior member that had decided on the name Pace after much giggling at Levi (who grinned a bit) - met with New Wave that afternoon.

It was going to be really odd to meet Sarah in costume.

All of them had shown up - the adults: Lady Photon, Manpower, Brandish and Flashbang; and the kids: Laserdream, Shielder, Glory Girl and Panacea - all in costume, all without masks, to contrast the five of us as Anima, Valiant, Admiral, Oracle and Pace.

Lady Photon waved at me, grinning.

"Hey Animom!", Glory Girl shouted at me.
"Hello to all of New Wave." I nodded at the "other" adults. "May I introduce ourselves?"

"Na, no need", Shielder answered. "The hottie's Oracle, and-"

Laserdream bopped him on the head. "Ignore my brother, please."

"Beefcake's Valiant", Glory Girl continued with a bright grin.

"And my cousin."

"Nearly-as-handsome-as-me is Admiral", Manpower continued.

"And my father."

"Please do ignore them, and who is the young lady?", Lady Photon answered kindly, the corners of her mouth twitching.

Conny lifted her head. "I'm not a lady, and I'm Pace."

Then, Conny walked straight up to Panacea, and asked: "Can you make me a boy?"

Palm's and Forehead's affair of forbidden love continued in a tumultuous meeting.

"Uh…"

"Pace, ask again later, alright?" I walked up to her.

"But I want to be a boy!" I laid a hand on her shoulder.

"I know, dear, but you really just can't walk up to somebody immediately without even saying anything else."

For a moment, Conny looked thoughtful, then: "Panacea, I'm Pace. How do you do?"

She stretched her hand out, and Panacea shook it.

"I'm fine, thanks. You?"

"Fine. Can you tell me now whether you can make me a boy?" Conny looked at me, seeking for approval of her actions.

In this next installment of the torrid involvement of palm and forehead, they once again clashed against the other.

Before I could tell Conny that later meant more than a few seconds, Panacea answered: "Well… probably, but I've never tried and I'm not sure where I'd begin, there, so…"

Wait a moment.

Panacea was a healer, and I'd heard she could also detect what was wrong with people. She'd just
taken Conny's hand, and hadn't looked surprised or shocked or anything

… did that mean she hadn't registered anything unusual about Conny?

"Oh. Well, you know a lot about medicine, and you need Latin for that, so do you like Latin?"

And with that, an oddly enough increasingly comfortable looking Panacea was involved in a discussion about medical terms for different bones and language.

I really, really needed to have a talk with Conny - both about how exactly she felt about wanting to be a boy (just a phase? Actually thought about her- uh, well in that case, himself as a boy?) and about how to not start with such topics. Small talk, Conny. Small talk. It existed for a reason.

I was quickly drawn into a conversation with the remainder of the adults on the ins and outs of the cape business and the difficulties in raising superpowered children, while Glory Girl, Shielder and Benny seemed to get along splendidly, Panacea was monopolized by Conny, and Levi, Sam and Laserdream had somehow ended up discussing the influences of capes on literature and games.

I really hoped Benny wasn't being corrupted, there. He was such a sweet boy… uh… Endbringer-turned-boy.
The loss of the way she'd perceived the world for all of her existence had been the best thing to ever happen to Sam.

It meant that, all of a sudden, she wasn't just the sum of her powers, but an actual person.

Sure, maybe she couldn't choose between timelines anymore. Maybe the most she could do with her powers now was not make social blunders, even if she didn't quite understand why and her explanations to her brothers had been as much for herself as for them. Alright, that was an exaggeration, but not that much of one - she could do more, but it wasn't… it wasn't easy, wasn't as clear as before.

More shapes and ideas and general outcomes that might come if she did things just so than the utter, crystal-clear view she'd had before - stuff like making sure that mother got help by talking to people she might like, for instance (Grandpa had been a great help there), or that none of her bullies' schemes succeeded, or slightly poking at the third bully when she decided to eventually confess what had happened so that she worked up the courage in time to not only do it afterwards.

And the ability - the blessed, wonderful ability - to switch it all off.

To not see. To close her metaphorical eyes as easily as she could her literal ones, and act while entirely relying on her own thoughts on what would and might happen without knowing. To rely on her own skills, her own self.

It made her feel like an actual person, with choices and abilities and rights and feelings.

There were other things that made her feel like a person - people like her first friend ever, Greg, her second friend, Lisa, Gramps, Mom, her brothers, playing computer, playing games, listening to stories, watching movies, being included, normal things, people things.

Being a person wasn't always easy, though.

There were the memories, the nightmares, the times she got up at three in the morning because she was picturing Switzerland again, seeing the fates of thousands of people as they tore each other apart. Or Sphere, breaking a man who'd only dared to dream of a better tomorrow.

That was, usually, when Grandpa was downstairs, hot chocolate already prepared.

Grandpa was a black spot - a complete black spot - when it came to predicting what he'd do, even worse than Mom was. She didn't quite know whether he was a cape, but she thought he probably was, with the way he was always there to watch out over her, even far beyond midnight when he shouldn't have had any way to know she was going to wake up.

It was the day before - actually, just the day of - Valentine's Day, and she was standing in the kitchen, thousands of broken people flashing through her mind.
Grandpa was handing her a hot chocolate.

He didn't ask what she'd dreamt of, and she was grateful for that.

She suspected that he already knew, anyways.

"What do you actually do on Valentine's?", Sam asked.

For a long while, Grandpa kept quiet, then he started: "Well… I guess you try and do something nice for people. In a lot of places, just your significant other, but in some, you try to do something for other friends, too." What was a significant other? He continued: "Maybe a present, something they're wishing for and that they've wanted, you see?"

Sam nodded.

She still wasn't quite sure what a significant other was - or why there were so many vaguely gingko-tree-leaf or limetree-leaf things (well, the shape was somewhere in between) around. Did it have something to do with that whole romance thing?

Probably not, she wasn't going to look either way what happened when she asked. She could find things out herself, now.

… did that mean she should talk to Greg and Lisa? After all, those were pretty much her only friends. Theo was more Connie's and Mom's friend.

Mom was called away that day, and during lunch, Sam decided to talk to Greg.

Who kept casting alternating glances between his mobile phone and his food.

"What's up?"

"… I kind of asked Strings whether she'd be up to coming here, sometime."

"Oh?"

"She's not replied yet."

Another glance, before his fork slipped out of his fingers, landing on the table with a clattering sound. His shoulders slumped.

… own social skills or powers? It was about her friend, and besides, she'd learn things anyways, so powers it was.

It felt a bit like activating a switch, as if all the lights in her mind had suddenly gone blindingly white.

Feelings and impressions of could-be-might-be assaulted her, and Sam blanked most of them out. C'mon, it couldn't be that difficult to find a way to help her friend!

"What is it?"
"She said no." There was an odd sort of hopelessness in Greg's voice, and Sam trusted her powers.

"Did she say why?"

"Really strict parents." Then, he perked up. "D'you think she'd be willing to have a webcam chat? Send a photo, maybe?"

Abort abort abort - bad line, could only go wrong.

"We don't even know whether she has a camera. Maybe her parents are so strict because they don't have a lot of money?"

For a moment, Sam could almost see the wheel's behind Greg's eyes turning, before his shoulders slumped again. "Damn, that'd make sense. You think she's poor and doesn't want to talk about it?"

Sam shrugged. "Might be. We can't know."

Greg nodded to himself. "I bet there's something she doesn't want to talk about, at least, the way she writes. Though I don't see anything Strings could be ashamed of, I mean, she's won- I mean, she'd be our friend, anyways, uh... right?"

He'd gone from what Sam thought might have been perceptiveness to supportive determination to insecurity in ten seconds flat. People were strange.

"Of course. Goes for you, too, dummy."

She laid her hand on his shoulder and grinned at him, and he grinned back.

Having friends was awesome.

... that counted as a good deed for a friend, right?

Now, what could she do for Lisa?

It was a simple choice to decide to use her powers for this, and maybe go out a bit more than was warranted. Sam snuck into a toilet stall, careful that no one spotted her, and focused on trying to change just the tiniest bit. Just wings, no increase in height, nearly no flashbacks (but she was having nightmares, anyways), no pull from Dadversary, and a bit of an increase in her powers.

Especially in her ability to look back.

She focused on Lisa, on her recent past, trying to find something she'd like - hey, that guy!

Decision made.

She lost her wings again, and spontaneously decided that this proper Valentine's Day gift was much more important than afternoon classes.
Why was it called a secret base if it wasn't secret at all? Anyone - especially somebody with Grandpa's help - could've found that bunker "hidden" by Fortress Construction.

Dressed in costume as Oracle, she walked into the base, past the mercenaries, smiling serenely.

Their aim was better than that of Stormtroopers, she'd give them that much, but it didn't really mean anything when going up against somebody who could adjust it with telekinesis and always knew how to adjust it so they wouldn't be hit.

She'd found that trick all on her own!

Walking closer, slowly, calmly, she walked up to the mercenaries who were slowly starting to panic, still smiling, until the first of them decided to charge at her, instead.

He tripped over one of the many pieces of string she'd brought with her and dragged up behind and around her.

She was still smiling.

The next mercenary threw away his weapon and raised his hands.

They led her to their leader's room, whose equipment had all "mysteriously" malfunctioned to leave him locked where he was.

… Sam was pretty sure Grandpa had arranged that, somehow. She hadn't. … or had her powers, somehow?

Sam took Coil by the scruff of his neck and took off flying.

Huh, good quality suit, it hadn't ripped.

Using a route that avoided all prying eyes, Sam finally arrived at Lisa's appartment, using an open window as an entrance.

Hey, it'd been open, that counted as an invitation, right?

"Lisa?", she called.

Her friend had been sitting at the table, drinking coffee, now she was distributing coffee through her kitchen in a rather inefficient manner.

Should Sam help with that?

"I brought you a Valentine's Day present!" Sam grinned at her friend, whose mouth was hanging open.

"A… Valentine's Day present."

Sam nodded. "And I've got all of his codes and stuff, too. Now you and your friends don't need to be
villains anymore, see? You've got choice, now." She grinned at Lisa, who looked really kind of funny with an open mouth, in a way that made Sam feel nervous and excited all at once.

Lisa's eyes darted back and forth between Coil and her.

"I think that's the nicest present anybody has ever gotten me."

"It is?" Sam focused on Coil's neck, pinching it just so…

Coil slumped over, unconscious.

"Yes." Lisa stepped closer, and closer -

And spread her arms, and gave her a hug, before stepping back. "Thank you."

Sam felt warm and tingly all over. Having friends was great!

Of course it didn't quite end there.

After meeting New Wave together with her family, she and Lisa - both in costume - delivered Coil and all the gathered evidence to the PRT, something Lisa had insisted upon.

There were also some copies of stuff that showed how he'd employed the Undersiders and the contingency plans he'd had for dealing with them, although Lisa had first asked Sam to check for negative consequences that might come out of it before even considering to hand that over.

Afterwards, they changed back to civilian clothes, and went to get a cup of coffee.

Although Sam didn't quite understand why Lisa would sometimes start laughing out of nowhere during the conversation, though she kept the shield switched off out of courtesy since she wouldn't exactly cut off her foreknowledge completely... the chance to say something completely embarrassing and not even knowing why it was embarrassing was much too great.
Tuesday started with yet another emergency situation. This time, it wasn't either the Empire or the ABB, who were both currently licking their wounds and waiting for good opportunities to ambush the other, mostly mooks fighting each other.

No, this was because the PRT had revealed that a new Master was in town - suspected to be Valefor of the Fallen, mainly because of the rumours about… well, giant me, or, alternatively, a new cape that hadn't appeared before.

While school children and most workers got the day off and people were told to stay at home, all of us - all of Kith - was asked to come near the front entrance of the PRT building. No entering. Preferably wearing blindfolds.

The info came across radio: They'd taken in Coil - with the help of the Undersiders and Oracle, who hadn't told me - and confirmation on the new Master in town - he'd run into a blind PRT support staff member and his colleagues, who were now in locked-down cells since they were supposed to kill either Deputy Director Renick or Director Piggot, whichever one they saw first, after having brought all the intel the PRT had about rainbow me to a specific location (that was, right now, being monitored by a camera connected to Dragon, and a few of Armsmaster's tranquilizer guns).

Was it kind of embarrassing for Valefor to be tricked by a blind guy faking being under control for a few minutes?

Apparently, since the Endbringers had disappeared, Fallen members had split up, walking all across the US trying to check out whichever they believed to be the most likely hint to find anything.

Valefor, apparently, had called dibs on Brockton Bay and investigating what the public had dubbed "Iris".

… one of his friends had tried getting close to Silver. Said friend had been burnt to a crisp by a good imitation of Benny's bigger form's Kill Aura. A Fallen fallen into the trap of his own idiocy?

I was not going to say that out loud. Didn't even sound good in my head.

The mere thought of the Fallen enraged me. Celebrating my kids becoming child soldiers? Them being forced to murder millions?

Well, nope. Not in my city.

The other group who arrived right beside us were the Undersiders, standing nervously beside us, Tattletale discreetly flashing Oracle a thumbs up. My daughter blushed.

Oh, hell.

Both groups were then faced with a telephone speaker.
"Undersiders and Kith?", Direcotr Piggot's voice blared out.

"Present", I stated.

"Yep." Tattletale stretched and yawned.

Oracle stared.

_Hellhellhellhellhell_.

"Undersiders… Grue, Hellhound, Regent, Tattletale - you are claiming that the supervillain Coil, otherwise known as Thomas Calvert", Piggot choked up a little, here, "coerced you into working for him, and that any crimes committed beforehand are mitigated by other factors?"

"Yes." Tattletale nodded slightly, half to herself.

"And you want a _fair_ trial."

"Yep. We're also not averse to helping you with the Valefor… situation."

"I see." I could almost picture Director Piggot, slumped in her chair and massaging her temples.

I had the feeling that she badly wanted to make sure there were consequences - and couldn't. A group of teenagers, claiming to have been coerced by a supervillain, voluntarily going for a trial, trying to change their ways, who (with one exception) hadn't committed anything worse than robbery?

They couldn't really _not_ give them the option of a public trial, and the case would be way too easy to milk for sympathy if done right.

No matter what the truth was and how fair it would've been, I could already predict the Undersiders were going to deal with nothing worse than probations. Mostly because I was almost certain Sam was going to help.

"Kith, you still here?"

"Yes, we are."

"Good. Thinker analysis agrees that there aren't any negative side-effects from your power, Anima, unless one counts that in the more human-looking form the cape can now assume, their powers are weakened - though more controllable as a result in both known cases. It does not appear to be wearing off yet, as far as we can tell. Since it is not covered by the already existing contract, I would like to ask whether you are open to an arrangement where we direct Protectorate capes or those who have to live in asylums… asyla… in an asylum towards you if they want it?"

"I wouldn't mind. I assume we're going to hash out the details after the current crisis?"

"You're correct." There was an odd note in Director Piggot's tone, a bit of humour, maybe, or a hint of an odd sort of fondness. "The Protectorate and PRT will start hashing out plans in presumably two hours, are you willing to help?"

"Yes", I answered, in unison with Tattletale.
"I will speak to all of you later, then. Be careful."

At home, Conny was really rather nervous, bobbing up and down on her toes, while Dad had a slight smile on his face - Kayden had phoned, he told us.

I finally drew Conny aside for a conversation in the girls' room, where Sam, her and I slept.

"So… about asking Panacea whether you can be a boy", I started.

"Uh… I'm sorry, I know I was kind of rude, but…"

I sighed. "Yes, you were just a bit rude, but that's not what I wanted to talk about."

"… no?"

"How much and why do you want to be a boy?"

Conny looked away. "… a lot."

I waited for her/him - what was the correct pronoun, there, anyways? I'd have to look it up - to continue. "I don't feel like I'm a girl", Conny said. "But… I don't really know whether I want to be a boy, either. I mean, I'd like to… I'd prefer growing up like… like Benny, or Levi, not like Sam, but I just… I don't… I'm not a girl."

I smiled at my d- son?, that was going to take a bit of getting used to.

"So…"

"I want to grow up to be a man, like… like Grandpa. I am… I want to be a boy." Conny's voice was quiet, and the kid was looking anywhere but at me.

I shrugged, smiling at he- him. "Alright. We'll figure something out."

I found myself with an armful of Connie.

How was I going to get Panacea to go along with this without outing us?

Well, questions for another time.

I left Conny in our room, then went downstairs to talk it over with the rest of the family and start to do research - what pronouns to use (he, apparently) and what treatments and options were available besides Panacea.

I was just grateful that all thee of the kids and Dad took it in stride, even if Levi seemed vaguely guilty about the whole thing.

After the two hours were up, all of the Undersiders, Faultline's crew (who insisted on no pay), New
Wave and us found ourselves in front of the PRT building, together with a group of Protectorate heroes including Armsmaster, who were already wearing visors of some type that both the Protectorate hero and the Ward Kid Win had rigged together and that blanked out first the face, then the eyes of anyone we'd meet.

They were distributed amongst the other groups before the strategy meeting began - step one: Who would have to stay behind, on call, in case of other emergencies.
Since apparently, Valefor's canon powers are about him looking at other people, this is obviously an Alternate Universe difference. Right. And not the author failing reading comprehension.
Also, it's Saturday. Update!

The lineup of "people who'd confront Valefor" and "people who'd stay on call in case of other emergencies" and "support for both" ended up looking like this: Tattletale and Panacea were used as support, with Lady Photon volunteering as a pack mule... uh... pack dragon-mule-hybrid for Panacea and guard, sharing that last role with Velocity, while all of Faultline's crew and most of the Wards would continue being on call in case of emergencies that either Valefor had arranged elsewhere or from others taking advantage. They were joined by Valiant and Admiral, Regent and Hellhound/Bitch, as well as Dauntless, Assault and Battery and Manpower, Laserdream and Shielder.

This left Grue, Sam and I, Armsmaster and Miss Militia, and Brandish and Glory Girl to ambush Valefor.

We sent out one of the people he'd subverted to the place he'd told them, while we lay in wait, hidden behind alcoves and on the surrounding buildings.

He wasn't showing.

Instead, the response team was called away over radio. "There's something going on on the Boardwalk - the Merchants are just attacking everyone aimlessly", Tattletale started reporting, "Regent, Bitch, Clockblocker, Aegis, Dauntless, Assault and Battery have been sent out. With the way they're attacking, I think Valefor might've gotten to them."

AKA: Her power was suggesting that. Brilliant.

Two minutes later, Valefor still wasn't showing.

"...and Aegis was nearly run over by Squealer's truck, Brutus pulled him out of the line of fire", she kept us informed, following movements through cameras. Then: "Oh, fuck. Captain's hill is under attack by more druggies. Great. Second response team, out - the residents are reporting it's entirely non-capes, should be true since all the Merchant ones are on the Boardwalk."

Another few minutes, then - a click and laughter.

"Are you liking my little show?" It was a man's voice echoing through the radio.

Valefor.

Well, fuck.
"I've got them all, Blondie and Light Mommie and the little healer…"

He was trying to go for the stereotypical villain sound of creepy, and would've been failing miserably if he wasn't somewhere he shouldn't be, holding people at his mercy.

Armsmaster started gesturing, trying to make us assemble, when I heard a dumb thud.

A familiar voice sounded through the radio: "I think that did the trick. Bastard." Another dumb thud or more of a smack, maybe, like something dense and soft was being kicked.

"Thanks, sir?", Lisa replied to the other voice.

"No thanks needed. Ms Dallon, do you need help with your aunt?"

"Uh… no… she'll just sleep for a few hours, sir." Panacea sounded shaken.

"… c'mere, kiddo."

Another click, and we could only hear Tattletale again.

"What happened?", I hissed.

"Valefor managed to get into the room somehow, he knocked out Photon Mo- I mean, Lady Photon, tortured Panacea for a bit, and this guy came along and knocked him out with some tranq darts, I think."

"Who?", Armsmaster asked.

"… I don't think he has powers. At least, I'm not getting anything. He's just a bundled up civilian who's being used as a handkerchief by Panacea right now."

How to defeat a member of the Fallen: Sheer, dumb luck.

The group split up, then: half of us to help mop up on Captain's Hill, the other half to do the same on the Boardwalk.

Everyone arrived just in time to go home playing escort for the PRT and police vans who were transporting the Merchants' members and capes.

Somehow, I had the feeling Valefor had just done the city a grand favour.

When we arrived in the command centre, I finally recognised just who had "walked by": Dad. Who was happily chatting with a relaxed Panacea with suspiciously red eyes, and a wide-awake Lady Photon.

I did not want to know about what had happened with Panacea, but I probably should ask Dad later.
That was when we got news from the PRT HQ that Haven had arrived.

Yeah, good timing, girls. (As Levi had reminded me once, "girle, gerle, gyrle" originally referred to a young person of either sex. Ergo, a mixed group should be referred to as girls, not "guys", which comes from a male first name. Also, to paraphrase Levi, girls were scarier.)

The Undersiders and Dad basically disappeared after that, while New Wave, the Protectorate heroes and we ended up being debriefed by Director Piggot, with Haven's members - Rosary and Halo, I think - looking a bit… embarrassed about having arrived only after the action was over.

Afterwards, Director Piggot and I sat down to finalize the details about what I should do about Case 53s: The PRT and Protectorate basically promised to organize meetings with non-criminal Case-53s who wanted healing towards me in an orderly fashion, while I promised to use my power on them for whatever travel expenses I might have, as long as I had time, with me retaining full power over whether I turned somebody down or not, though I did have to promise to make note of all Case-53s who approached me independently so they could be noted down by the new designation of "Former 53" - they'd decided on that shorthand instead of Changer or Breaker, to denote having basically the same powers in both forms, just toned down in the more human looking one.

Finally, we all got to go home.

There, I sat down with Dad while the kids sat in front of the TV. "So… about today…"

"I kind of… knew I had to help?" Dad winced.

"You a cape?"

Dad shrugged. "Possibly. Probably. I don't know."

I accepted that as as good an answer as I was going to get, and changed topics: "What happened with Panacea?"

Dad stared at the wall behind me. "I don't quite know what exactly he ordered her to do. I just know that he got off that visor by holding a knife to her aunt's throat, and then he forced her into telling him… personal things. Her own thoughts, and secrets. I'm pretty sure it was something along the lines of all the reasons she was a bad person, she repeated that statement repeatedly. She was …"

He coughed. "She was pretty shaken up about that whole thing, and some of the stuff she said… well, I think he suggested keeping her or something like that, making her accompany him. Poor kid."

"Yikes."

"Well, she kind of cried her heart out as soon as it was over. I don't know how often I had to tell her she was a good person, and I'm pretty sure I've never seen anybody so grateful at the suggestion of therapy. Some of the stuff she thought made her a bad person… well, I think she would've needed it long before this, anyway."

"So… Valefor actually helped fix things?"
Dad stared at me, blinked. "You know, he probably did."

Laughter echoed out from the living room, where the kids were watching a film including a brave heroine joining the army, a lucky cricket, and a dragon. An awesome, tiny dragon that didn't resemble Lung in anything except maybe ego.

For a moment, neither of us said anything, then...

"We probably should join them", Dad stated. "Good way to finish the day."

"I'm with you, there."
Chapter Notes

This is the result of several readers on Spacebattles getting together and actually role-playing different forum personalities, as you can see... there's a lot of them. On Bugs: Do you remember Chapter 3.y? The teleporter Alexandria was annoyed with? That's him.

To copy the explanation I gave here:

It's a teleporter with limited range and the ability to take things with him (their teleportation does not conserve momentum), but also a type of combat pre-cog and a talent for saying just what is needed to drive somebody up the wall. And no one actually ever manages to touch them in "fights", because... teleporter+pre-cog, with prankster/hit-and-run tendencies. Has also used their power to make pianoes fall onto Brutes. Pianoes are at their mass limit, but they've managed it. Alexandria did not appreciate a video of "Piano drop on Alexandria" going viral, for some reason. Did not appreciate the same person using their power to help in making graffiti drawings of LA Protectorate members' caricatures all over the city and then escaping uncaught, either. Public perception of "that's comedy gold" does not make Alexandria like them any more, either. As already hinted, they can teleport upwards, then downwards again in rapid succession; as a side note, the shard's desire for conflict was mixed/replaced with a desire to annoy the hell out of people. Which leads to others being more creative/better at conflict in a desire to get rid of them.

They're a rabbit-like Case 53 of undetermined gender that was quickly nick-named "Bugs" after the first piano incident.

... I have no idea whether they'll actually come up in-story as more than a passing reference. Fleshing them out was way too much fun, though.

No, I really couldn't resist including them.

Learning to be Human - [6.y]  
PHO/Francis Interlude

Welcome to the Parahumans Online Message Boards  
You are currently logged in, TravelsALot  
You are viewing:  
• Threads you have replied to  
• AND Threads that have new replies
Topic: Kaiser taken down
In: Boards ➤ News ➤ Events ➤ America ➤ Brockton Bay

White Fairy (Original Poster) (Veteran Member)
Posted on January 29, 2011:

So, today, about an hour ago, a fight went down right in front of my front door. A video of it can be found here. To sum it up: Kaiser got taken down by an unknown group before Miss Militia and the PRT showed up and took him in.

Anybody has any idea what the hell happened or who that was?

(Showing Page 1 of 1)

► Keto
Replied on January 29, 2011:
Humanity, fuck yeah!
...seriously, no idea. New group? If it is, that's a helluva way to get into the scene. Hope they're heroes.

► Khamûl Shadow of the East (Veteran Member)
Replied on January 29, 2011:
...
Well, well, well.
Somebody really wanted to flush some crap.

► SabinF
Replied on January 29, 2011:
Huzzah! I, for one, welcome our new lack of a nazi overlord. Now if only we could get rid of the dragon, the druggies and overachieving video game cosplayers.
Also, that hydrokinetic's hat inspires such jealousy in me such as I have never known. I will wax rhapsodic about that hat. I hope they really are the heroes they seem to be, since a world where a villain can have a hat like that is not a world I want to live in.

► Keto
Replied on January 29, 2011:
@ Khamul - That's no way to talk about members of the human race!
...although admittedly. Nazis.

@SabinF If we can take the existence of a hat to be significance of a hero - and I certainly hope so -
...I'll have to bin my fedora then, won't I.
They look pretty young. Might be their first outing.

► Khamûl Shadow of the East (Veteran Member)
Replied on January 29, 2011:
@ Keto - Dude, nazis. I rest my case.
Now, if only someone would do this to Sacamantecas...
Why the hell do the United States get all the cool new heroes, while we have to deal with losers like poor Capitan Taco here in Mexico?
But enough of a derail. This thread is about crap getting flushed.
These Empire losers were supposed to be the biggest nazi group in the Americas, weren't they?

► Missing Mind
Replied on January 29, 2011:
Kaizer got captured ? Alone ? Trouble in nazi paradise ?
Maybe it's hookwolf making a play to take over the E88 ?

► Berman
Replied on January 29, 2011:
@ MissingMind Hookwolf is neither subtle nor a sneak. He would just walk up to Kaiser and either challenge him to a fight or gut him. And its a tossup to what.

► MissingMind
Replied on January 29, 2011:
@ Berman Maybe he was guided by someone else ? Purity for exemple, has probably grievance with Kaiser, this thread for exemple postule that kaiser and her were an ite, [link] And now, Kaiser has twin blonde bombshells that follow him around. *Eyebrow waggle*
If hookwolf and her are a thing, now they could take over the empire. And purity is not stupid, so instead of a one on one fight with the empire, she just let him go alone for a walk and inform a team of heroes/mercenaries where he is (Do you really think a new group of plucky heroes just managed to stumble on the head of a gang? Who decided to be alone ? When he is always seen right next to other memeber of the empire [link][link][link])

► Berman
Replied on January 29, 2011:
@ MissingMind : maybe, maybe not. Sometimes we just can attribute it to beginner's luck. And we have some examples of that somewhere in the forum and real life confirmation too.
Though what Kith and Kin did is so improbable that it's like a cape with simple insect powers taking out Lung on the first night solo and successful at that...

► The_Unpronounceable (Veteran Member)
Replied on January 29, 2011:
@ Berman
Actually it's more probable because That group looks like a team - even if their teamwork looks like it needs work - and thus there's bound to be one moment where Kaiser lose track of one of them.

► Bagrat (The Guy In The Know) (Veteran Member)
Replied on January 30, 2011:
So, I've got actual information, everyone.
A friend of a friend who works at the ENE Department of the PRT and helped take Kaiser in has confirmed that the new group, Kith (thread) have been tentatively classified as a new hero group, and indeed took down Kaiser. Miss Militia interviewed them. No names apart from the team name been confirmed yet.

► **Sagittarius** (Unverified Cape) (Unverified Centaur)
Replied on January 30, 2011:
So how long does anyone else think it'll take for Kaiser to be sprung? I mean, no offence to the capes and PRT personel in BB, I'm sure you guys always try your best, but let's face it, the guys in BB are so overrun, there's no way in hell someone with as much cape support as Kaiser will stay behind bars for long; not unless all those other Empire capes get taken down too.

► **Berman**
Replied on January 30, 2011:
Cooome ooon. They've just started and you fuckers and whiners are already contributing to them going the Rogue or if much worse, the Villain path! 😒
Brockton Bay does not need another countless statistic or villain for that matter.

► **MadGreenSon** (Veteran Member)
Replied on January 30, 2011:
@ Sagittarius, so... a wrath of nature-themed family cape group? Hope they stay/really are heroes. They look damn strong.

► **Ultimate_Pheer** (Cape Groupie)
Replied on January 30, 2011:
They took down Kaiser? Solo? On their, what, first outing? Probably, because we've got no other confirmed fights involving them. It's only a matter of time before the empire tries to break out their boss, and I can't imagine the new kids on the block NOT drawing the ire of like, half the bay's parahumans with this. Stay safe, kids, and if you're reading this, remember to strike first.

► **SabinF**
Replied on January 30, 2011:
@ Keto - No, not hats in general, a villain owning your fedora is fine. It's that hat in particular. That is the hat of a hero. Or if it isn't, it should be.
@ Khamûl I'll grant you that Captain Taco's name is stupid and his costume looks like he's advertising for a taqueria, but I saw the video of his fight with Sandía, and those blasts are the equivalent of an RPG. He took three of them to the face and just laughed it off. And one to the groin, which he didn't.

► **ThatOtherButcher** (Veteran Member)
Replied on January 31, 2011:
People people people. Occam's Razor: They spied on Kaiser, noticed him being drunk and waited until he was alone. You don't need powers to acquire good intel. Also you don't need to be "super powerful" to take down a strong cape if you have the advantage of numbers. Kaiser couldn't focus on all four at the same time, so they managed to get some sucker punches in.

► **Bagrat** (The Guy In The Know) (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 3, 2011:
Bad news, everybody: Kaiser has been broken out of his prison transport, thanks, in part, to Lung and Oni Lee intervening, and is now running free again.
There's a video of parts of the fight here, and a thread about the breakout exists already, if you want to discuss that.

End of Page. 1

Topic: Kith - New Hero Group?
In: Boards ► News ► Events ► America ► Brockton Bay

Bagrat (Original Poster) (The Guy In The Know) (Veteran Member)
Posted on January 30, 2011:

So, yesterday (well, five hours ago), Kaiser got taken down by a bunch of unknown capes. (Discussion thread here.)
In a talk with Miss Militia, they revealed their team name to be Kith. So far, they've stated their intent to be heroes, with a strong start in taking down Kaiser. Apart from their team name and the video of their first fight, I've not heard anything else about them yet.

Line-up:
? - purple costume, rather futuristic, adult female; flyer
? - white garb reminiscent of Classical Antiquity, teenaged female, flyer
? - 19th century Navy uniform, apparently awesome hat, teenaged male, controls water
? - knight motif, red and black, teenaged male, throws around lightning

Edit:
Names:
Anima - adult female
Oracle - teenaged female
Admiral - Navy uniform + awesome hat, teenaged male
Valiant - knight motif, teenaged male

(The Showing Page 1 of 3)

The Unpronounceable (Veteran Member)
Replied on January 30, 2011:
The Greek looking one probably has telekinesis too, judging by the debris flying at Kaiser.

By the way, anybody knows what Kith means?

Berman
Replied on January 30, 2011:
An Old English word derived from the word cyth meaning one's friends, acquaintances and relations.

MissingMind
Replied on January 30, 2011:
@Bagrat It just confirm what I said in the other thread [link]
No Thinkers and first night out, they fall on Kaiser. Alone.
Ten bucks it's a powerplay within the empire.

Edit: Onto more important things: Shipping. Kith mean family, so it's probably a single family (that all triggered at the same time? Maybe one of them is a trump à la Othala, giving the other their powers?), so we can't ship them together? According to the rules of this forum. (Damn, you, oppressors of my shipping sense! *Shake fist*)

► CrimsonPeg
Replied on January 30, 2011:
Sorry to bust your bubble, but do we actually know none of them have Thinker Powers?

► MissingMind
Replied on January 30, 2011:
?

Well. Normally how many thinker do you know that have also flight? And the other have already defined powersets, so no thinker power. Or at least no important thinker power. The kind that would have permitted them to find out where Kaiser was.

Edit: Aside from Alexandria, of course. But the triumvirate is broken as fuck, so it doesn't count.

► Uauie_Oeaiou
Replied on January 30, 2011:
If they had a Thinker to call on, I'd expect they'd have steered away from facing someone like Kaiser on their first appearance. It's an awesome takedown for their record, but not the kind of thing a prudent person would want to face without getting their teamwork and coordination tightened up.

Still, Poppa Nazi is sitting behind bars, and that has to be a good thing.

► MadGreenSon (Veteran Member)
Replied on January 30, 2011:
Interesting, looking at the video, I'm trying to see if they have a similarity to their powers. Like you see in New Wave with the light, shields and flying. There's flying, wind, water, lightning...
The wind might be telekinesis of some kind, or something else entirely. Maybe the family has a weatherish theme? Maybe some kind of "magical" bit,? They don't seem to be claiming magic, so there's that.
Either way, good job on sweeping up Kaiser, though I do have to wonder why he was going solo like that? I thought he usually rolled out with some backup?

@ Crimson_Peg: That's the insidious thing about powers like Thinkers or Masters, you generally can't tell when someone has them. What do you think is possible? Being right there for Kaiser's solo powerwalk might be super-senses, clairvoyance, precog, or any number of things.

Or just luck.

► Sagittarius (Unverified Cape) (Unverified Centaur)
Replied on January 30, 2011:
@ MadGreenSon

To summarize, Kith has a hydrokinetic, an electrokinetic and someone who's either a telekinetic or
aerokinetic; possibly both. Pretty damn sure that's a theme right there. On another note, anyone willing to bet how long it takes for one of the Tin Foil Hats to claim that these guys are the incarnations of the End Bringers? They've been doing that for every other new cape that's appeared since the terrible threesome went and vanished; at least this group has some similarities... if, you know, you ignore the fact that there's four of them (which, let's face it, they will).

► **MadGreenSon** (Veteran Member)
Replied on January 30, 2011:
@ Sagittarius, so... a wrath of nature-themed family cape group? Hope they stay/really are heroes. They look damn strong.

► **Ultimate_Pheer** (Cape Groupie)
Replied on January 30, 2011:
@ Sagittarius
Well, it's very, very clear that they've got a similar theme to the endbringers, if maybe not as powerful, diverse, and bullshit. Hydrokinetic, Electrokinetic, flight and possible telekinesis... We'll need to see more of their fighting styles to know if it's coincidence, if one of them (Probably either girl) could give people powers or if they're normal capes, or even if one of them is a tinker and they decided to go with a theme deliberately. I mean, I'll have to watch more of their fights anyway, because that was awesome, but still. Hey, if any of you four are reading this: I'm a huge fan of your work, please do more.

Hell, for all we know only one of them's an actual cape and the other three are just projections to let the real one direct their powers better.

► **MadGreenSon** (Veteran Member)
Replied on January 30, 2011:
@ Ultimate_Pheer: You're reaching with the Endbringer comparison there pal. Wassisname in LA is a big guy that fires blasts of heat that melt things, is he Behemoth-like now? Rune of the E88 is telekinetic, should we compare her to the Simurgh?

They have potent and interesting powers, try not to start rumors that will alienate the powerful capes and cause them to accelerate the irrelevancy of regular humanity.

► **Sagittarius** (Unverified Cape) (Unverified Centaur)
Replied on January 30, 2011:
@ MadGreenSon
Actually, I was just going to say that they all had various forms of Psychokinetic abilities, possibly old day elementally based ones. But hey, if you put it that way, it makes them sound ten times as horrifying, so sure, let's go with that.

@ Ultimate_Pheer
Sure, sure, and Canary is secretly the daughter of the Simurgh (even discounting the impossibility of this, the hell kind of sick fuck do you have to be to put it in a twenty foot tall psycho generator?). Next thing you'll say is that Eidolon is their dad, or something else that's equally as ridiculous.

► **MadGreenSon** (Veteran Member)
Replied on January 30, 2011:
@ Sagittarius: Just call me your friendly neighborhood Nightmare Fuel Station Attendant! : )
But Psykokinesis would cover their demonstrated abilities in one variation or another, on the other hand that's like saying that all of the people you met at a movie theater were "organic", it describes quite a lot and doesn't really say anything. Do you see what I mean? A shitload of cape powers can be described as psychokinetic, in one way or another.

► Sagittarius (Unverified Cape) (Unverified Centaur)  
Replied on January 30, 2011:  
@ MadGreenSon

I'd like to point out that I once saw Weld in a theater, and he was dicededly inorganic.  
Jokes aside, I did add the qualification of being geared towards the Old World elemental concepts.  
Not Greek, because of Huge Knight Dude, so maybe bagua like?

It has both Wind and Sky as elements, which would account for Purple Leader Girl and White Toga Girl both being able to fly.

► IrrelevantBystander
Replied on January 30, 2011:  
@ Sagittarius: Do we have actual names for their members yet, or are we going with "Purple Leader Girl" and "White Toga Girl"?

Also, on the topic of Endbringers, does anyone know if the protocol for dealing with Simurgh victims is still in effect? My new neighbors are acting rather odd, and

I'd rather not wake up one day to find myself tied to a sacrificial altar or something.

► Ultimate Pheer (Cape Groupie)  
Replied on January 30, 2011:  
@ IrrelevantBystander: Not everyone who acts weird is mastered by the Simurgh, no matter how many people are speculating she lives in the Bay. Besides, unless you saw Kith in their vicinity, it's more likely there's another new Master in the bay. Or they're just regular endbringer cultists. Or they could just be foreign.

They're really no way of knowing until you ask them. (Note: Do not actually ask them if you are not a cape)

► MadGreenSon (Veteran Member)  
Replied on January 30, 2011:  
Endbringers are incredibly off topic guys, step away from the tinfoil hats and go back to your actual, horrible lives.

Speaking of horrible real life, @ IrrelevantBystander: if you think your neighbors are up to something and they're acting weird, document it and get the authorities involved.

► IrrelevantBystander
Replied on January 30, 2011:
@ MadGreenSon: Well, the problem seems to have actually resolved itself. It turns out they were just horribly incompetent terrorists or something (and doesn't that statement say something about life in the Bay...); they managed to blow themselves up before they got around to doing whatever it was they set out to do. Either that or this was part of a horribly elaborate plot by the Simurgh or some shadowy conspiracy group. Who knows? In any case, I have police cars outside my home and insurance agents to call seeing as that blast took out several of my windows.

On that note, does anyone know of cheap apartments or motels in relatively safe areas I can lay low in for the next few months? This is the third time weird shit has happened near my home in the past month alone (I'm still not quite sure whether to consider the man wandering around with a bag of cat food and a screwdriver at 3 AM to be weird), and you know what they say: "Once is happenstance, twice is coincidence, and thrice is enemy action."

Back on topic, I'm leaning towards one of their members having a Thinker power, possibly some form of precog. I watched the takedown video again, and it might just be me, but Kaiser looked to be a bit out of it. Given that, what's more likely: Kaiser randomly suffered a bout of insomnia and a new group of heroes just happened to stumble upon him at the perfect time (yeah right), or they had a Thinker mess with him then determine the perfect time to strike while Kaiser was distracted?

► Lightgryffin
Replied on January 30, 2011:
@ Irrelevant Bystander
That sounds more like a master to me. Which is not a good thing. If one of them is a human controlling Master that just made them that much scarier. And gives the Endbringer theorists more cannon-fodder. "Look she can fly and control people! It's the Simurgh!"

Note: We don't actually know if any of them have a Master power or which it is.

► IrrelevantBystander
Replied on January 30, 2011:
@ Lightgryffin: True that (and thank you for the paranoia fuel). I guess I'm a little distracted from sleep deprivation (seriously, you try sleeping well when a group of gangbangers breaking into your home and demanding 72 virgins or something crazy like that is a semi-legitimate concern) and the whole Endbringer tangent. Given how bullshit the Simurgh is/was, it was kind of easy to forget that your average Thinker isn't quite that powerful.

Say...does anyone have a good estimate as to when Kith first showed up? Given that they have proper costumes and all, I'd say they've probably been around for a couple of weeks at the very least...which coincides with the Endbringers up and vanishing.... I'm not trying to fuel the tin foil nuts or anything, but you have to admit the timing is a bit convenient, especially given their apparent powersets...
Great...time to pester my doctor for more sleeping pills. RIP wallet.
On that note, time for bed. Sleep is probably the best option when dousing Kaiser in containment foam and having a crowd piss on him seems like a logical scenario

(sincerely, WTF is wrong with my brain today?).

► TheSimurghDidIt
Replied on January 31, 2011:
Everyone, please stop adding fuel to the fire - nobody's seriously suggested the Endbringer-Kith connection yet.
Also, am I the only one who heard that the flyer in seer garb might be called Oracle?

 ► Lightgryffin
Replied on January 31, 2011:
@TheSimurghDidIt
This coming from you?

 ► Uauie_Oeaioou
Replied on January 31, 2011:
I know the standing long jump to a conclusion is our national pastime on these boards, but let's keep it under some kind of control. Are huge swaths of the Bay in ruins? Death toll at four digits and rising? Sirens blaring and dozens of capes converging to risk 1-in-4 odds or worse to fight them off? No? Well obviously the

Kith aren't Endbringers then.

At worst, they might be a new gang making a big statement by taking out powerful opposition, but as far as I can see they're acting like a new independent hero team just like the thread title says. (And if they are a gang, well, they'd still probably be better than a bunch of racist poozers.)

Endbringers aren't a joke. I had family in Nova Scotia.

 ► MissingMind
Replied on February 2, 2011:
Well, they didn't either for the Simurgh. The first time.

 ► TheSimurghDidIt
Replied on February 2, 2011:
Hey, it's just a name. Besides, there's stuff we can prove the Simurgh has actually done. She's just as terrifying as my sister.

End of Page. 1, 2, 3

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 ► Winged_One
Replied on February 2, 2011:
I feel unloved, brother. Truly unloved.

 ► AllTheKingsHorses (Verified PRT Agent)
Replied on February 3, 2011:
So, to make this official - the members of Kith have recently shared their names with us, which are;

Anima - the leader, wears a purple costume - Powers are currently undetermined, possible Trump of some sort
Oracle - the girl in the classic Roman-inspired costume - possible Thinker and/or telekinetic Shaker or Blaster depending on range
Admiral - old naval uniform costume - Hydrokinetic
Valiant - knight-themed costume - some sort of lightning or energy control, info on his power is uncertain.

Word from up top is for any of us with more direct info on recent events involving Kith to keep things hush-hush for now, for Reasons, so please don't bug me with 'Did you see what I saw?' or "Where you there when ___' or any such thing, thank you.

► MadGreenSon (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 3, 2011:

Honestly, the name Oracle could mean anything, or nothing at all. Cape names don't always contain a clue for the cape involved.

Eidolon is iconic, there a a lot of costumes that resemble his or other members of the Triumvirate. Here's a list with photos. Anima does have another thing in common with the big Trump though; her name.

Eidolon:
noun, plural eidola

[ahy-doh-luh], eidolons.
1. a phantom; apparition.
2. an ideal.

Anima:
[an-uh-muh]
noun
1. soul; life.
2.

the inner personality that is turned toward the unconscious of the individual (contrasted with persona).
the feminine principle, especially as present in men (contrasted with animus).

Neat, right? Both have names that encompass both a spiritual and mental concept. Eidolon encompasses concepts in general while Anima covers the feminine principle.

► Lightgryffin
Replied on February 3, 2011:
*Snerk* Batten down the hatches and PREPARE FOR THE SHIPPING!

► The_ORIGINAL_Shadow_Stalker
Replied on February 3, 2011:
So which Kith do they represent?
Kicker of Shins
Replied on February 3, 2011:
Possible Telekinetic and a name like Oracle? That would imply either Thinker or Precog... Hey maybe the ones who mentioned the Endbringer connection were onto something. Maybe they triggered with something based off of their powers at the same time they disappeared or something. Might be worth keeping in mind as we see more of them, if they are even a fraction of that strength then they're powerful... But that theory kinda stumbles at the additional fourth member, unless... there were more then three Endbringers. Wouldn't that have been nightmare inducing.

Anyway, I'm just glad to see another hero group. BB needs more good folks and that's the important thing, I think. Another family based group though, makes you wonder what's in the drinking water around here.

Uauie_Oeaiou
Replied on February 3, 2011:
@Kicker of Shins: Depends, how close are you to Merchants territory and how stupid have they gotten while high lately?

Kicker of Shins
Replied on February 3, 2011:
Hopefully not too close, and it's the Merchants, stupidity while high is kinda default for them. Maybe Kaiser drank from the wrong water fountain while out for a stroll that night.

JaegerProwler
Replied on February 3, 2011:
Alternately, she likes messing with people. Remember, you get the right gear, a Tinker could easily masquerade as any other rating...

AngryFox (Verified Procrastinator)
Replied on February 3, 2011:
Hmmm. Interesting. It's also kind of neat that all of them have three-syllable names. Also frustrating because, due to my fiction rules, I have to rewrite the chapter I'm working on to either replace one of the capes in it, or alter her to match the real one with her permission.

Lightgryffin
Replied on February 3, 2011:
Fiction rules?

AngryFox (Verified Procrastinator)
Replied on February 3, 2011:
My readers are well aware of this... well if they read the non-story posts ever. 😊

Basically, out of a sense of self-preservation (in the case of villain capes) and common decency (rogues, heroes, and undecided newbies), I don't use real capes or their cape names in my stories without their permission, on the off-chance I might offend or misrepresent them.

Oracle was okay due to being an Earth-Aleph fictional cape and an inactive sobriquet here.

Having seen the pics we currently have, I do feel a bit of shock at how much the real oracle matches the description of the cape I was going to use for exposition/foreshadowing in my next chapter, even if my version was older. Also, I agree with everyone loving that "NIZE HAT" on Admiral.
MadGreenSon (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 3, 2011:
@ AngryFox: Sounds neat, send me a link!

Also, I really pity the fools who may have or are writing 'fic about villains that manage to offend them. <shudder>

AngryFox (Verified Procrastinator)
Replied on February 3, 2011:
Here you go!

I heard a horror story about a guy who drew unwanted attention for writing Slash fiction about an infamous cape, and what happened to him because the villain was flattered by the story. I know the real story behind the origins of tentacle erotica in Japan, and I used that as brain bleach for what happened to the poor sod.

.. and no. I will not share the "brain bleach" with anyone on PHO. I got tempbanned last time and broke my streak of posting.

Back to the actual topic of discussion here: I hope Admiral is ready for the floodgates of fangirl shipping to open. I am comfortably heterosexual and even *I* can tell that's one good-looking kid.

TheSimurghDidIt
Replied on February 3, 2011:
Two questions:
A) What's Slash fiction? Does that have to do with Jack Slash?
B) What's shipping?

Uauie_Oeaiou
Replied on February 3, 2011:
Oh, you precious cinnamon bun. Make sure you stay out of the NSFW section of the fiction board, such purity should not be tarnished.

@ MadGreenSon: Oh you have no idea.

@Damsel_of_Distress, it was a typo, I swear! You're an utterly terrifying villain, no one would mistake you for a hostage!

AngryFox (Verified Procrastinator)
Replied on February 3, 2011:

I have to agree with the Unpronouncable One. Though there is a FAQ stickied to the top of the Fanfic Discussion board.

Though I will say this: Shipping is basically looking at two people or characters and saying "They make such a cute couple!" ... Often completely ignoring any evidence that prevents the desired relationship from coming about.
Admiral has all the hallmarks of being on posters in teenage girls' rooms for years to come.

► SabinF
Replied on February 3, 2011:
@TheSimurghDidIt
In this case, slash refers to homoerotic fiction, and has nothing to do with Jack Slash. Unless he shows up in the story, but we all know why that's a bad idea.

Shipping refers to writing characters in a relationship with each other.

@Uauie_Oeaio
There's a NSFW section of the fiction board? Why does no one tell me vital information like that? I didn't see anything about that in any of the FAQs. PM me the information for gaining access, please.

► TheSimurghDidIt
Replied on February 3, 2011:
What does "homoerotic" mean? Also, what's NSFW?

► Uauie_Oeaio
Replied on February 3, 2011:
@SabinF Not actually on the PHO servers, but it's mostly the same layout, writing community, and user names so I tend to forget. I will PM the actual address, as a public link would fall afoul of the two-clicks rule.

► SabinF
Replied on February 3, 2011:
Wow. Just wow. I'd heard about people like you, but never thought I'd actually encounter one in the wilds of the internet. Okay. Umm. Yeah. For homoerotic just use an online dictionary. NSFW means not safe for work and is exactly what it says on the tin.

► MadGreenSon (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 3, 2011:
@ Ultimate_Pheer: Innocence like that should be treasured, yeah? ;P

Either way, someone should work on separating the actual facts from the speculation about Kith so we can have a proper wiki entry eventually, I'd start trawling news and such but the cape fight has finally ended and there's blessed silence, so I'm off to drink myself to sleep.

► JaegerProwler
Replied on February 3, 2011:
Yeah, I heard some old rumors about a guy who did some stories about Harbringer, back when he was still active. Apparently, the guy found out about them, and paid him a visit.

Never heard from that guy afterwards, come to think of it.

► The_Archive
Replied on February 3, 2011:
There's a reason I always make sure that the author has permission from any capes (and everyone else, really) to even use names before adding a story to the index. Not doing that could be...bad.

► JaegerProwler
Replied on February 3, 2011:
I just save myself a lot of time and stick to well known capes, or go all OC. Lot less likely to end with Hookwolf swinging by to pay me a visit.

End of Page. 1, 2, 3

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► Kindfragen
Replied on February 4, 2011:
Confusion: What is "innocence"? Can you eat it?
Amusement: Mother says people forget far too easily how someone can find them once they connect to the "magnificent interwebs". Silly fan-writers, no sense of control. Then again, mother has very little self-control. Best not to dwell on it, we think.

@ MadGreenSon:
So long as you don't eat people after you expire, I have no problems with your personal choices.

► Winged_One
Replied on February 4, 2011:
Well, what is known about Kith has been pretty much said by the PRT agent up there, four capes, names, costumes and some vague info about their powers.
Though they seem... I don't know, like a family? Maybe Anima's the mother or something like that?

► XxVoid_CowboyxX
Replied on February 4, 2011:
And free at last!
... you know, I just think they might be, and I'm not just saying that because we know each other IRL.

► SpecificProtagonist
Replied on February 4, 2011:
Admiral is kind of dreamy. No worries, not going to fangirl over him, just stating the truth - y'know, good-looking male (probably) my own age with wonderful taste in hats?
Also, pure muscle of a teammate. Friend? Brother? Lover?

End of Page. 1, 2, 3

Topic: Bugs' Piano Video
In: Boards ► News ► Events ► America ► Los Angeles
**Bagrat** (Original Poster) (The Guy In The Know) (Veteran Member)
Posted on January 31, 2011:

Everyone people, listen up!
The Los Angeles rabbit-like Case-53 nicknamed "Bugs" (haha, real funny guys) has uploaded yet another video.
If you want to see a real life Bugs Bunny sketch with Alexandria in the role of the unlucky opponent, here's your chance.

(Showing Page 1 of 3)

► **Berman**
Replied on January 31, 2011:
HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! Have mercy oh great prankster...my poor sides....

► **Uauie_Oeaiou**
Replied on January 31, 2011:
Well ain't dat guy a stinker...

► **Sagittarius** (Unverified Cape) (Unverified Centaur)
Replied on January 31, 2011:
Well, it's that time of the thread again: Sagittarius' cape betting pool!

Place your bets people, how long will it take this guy to gather up his own team of (psuedo?) villains? Will they be Loony Tunes themed? Classic cartoons themed?

But seriously, if this guy doesn't get a duck C53 sidekick named Daffy, I swear to god...

► **MadGreenSon** (Veteran Member)
Replied on January 31, 2011:
@ Sagittarius: Not looking forward to a real life Tasmanian Devil, I'll tell you that for damn sure.

► **TheSimurghDidIt**
Replied on January 31, 2011:
Okay, that's really awesome. *snickers*
Do you think he'll do an anvil video next?

► **The_Archive** (Veteran Member)
Replied on January 31, 2011:
Another video to add to the videos page. [link]
@TheSimurghDidIt
My money's on something with boulders and a stick of dynamite.

► **TheSimurghDidIt**
Replied on January 31, 2011:
But anvils! They're a classic!

► **Kicker of Shins**
Replied on January 31, 2011:
I'm partial to grand pianos myself.
IrrelevantBystander  
Replied on January 31, 2011:
As cynical as it may sound, it's awfully cathartic to watch life shit on someone else for a change, no offense to Alexandria or anything. Now, if I could only go two weeks without having to file an insurance claim, that'd be the dream. I'm pretty sure that by now, every insurance company has my mugshot and personal info on their fridge along with a note saying, "If this guy calls, deny him coverage."

...on that note, Bugs, I love you, but I pray that we never meet.

AngryFox (Verified Procrastinator)  
Replied on January 31, 2011:
Oh, man! That's hilarious, especially since, if you notice, Alexandria was the one who started the confrontation. Dude was just playing a street piano, and I'm assuming he had permits. (Chuck Jones has said in an interview that Bugs Bunny was at his best as a reactive trickster: Elmer Fudd, Yosemite Sam, et al, were always the instigators of hostility. The Tortoise cartoons are an outlier. Nice to see "Bugs" seems to follow that rule.)

Also, did you notice that every potentially-lethal collision happened to either "Bugs" or Alexandria? It's really rare that a cape fight has zero civilian casualties, even of the "scraped my knee getting away" variety.

End of Page. 1, 2, 3

(Uauie_Oeaiou)  
Replied on February 1, 2011:
Kind of a shame he's on the other side of the country, he could do a guest spot on Uber & Leet's' web show. There's been Looney Tunes games, right? If not, Uber is uber, he can write one to make it fit their theme.

Darkflame_Doge  
Replied on February 1, 2011:
Okay, so I'm lost. Who's this guy and why should I care?

I mean, the video is funny and everything - though I feel really sorry for Alexandria - but this is the first time I've ever even heard of the guy.

TheGreatestBugsOfAll (Verified Cape) (Verified Bunny)  
Replied on February 1, 2011:
@ The Archive, @ TheSimurghDidIt, @ Kicker of Shins :
Thanks for the ideas, guys! I've already had a piano video, though, so it'll probably be the other options for now.
(\_/)
(o.o)
(____)!
@ IrrelevantBystander:
Aw... Hey, with the way your life is, do you want to have a hand in the next video (*promise to the
mods*: Nothing criminal, so it ain't a crime.)

@ AngryFox:
Uh... it's kind of difficult to get permits as a bunny, but it was in the middle of the day and I wasn't
taking money, so... yeah. Not exactly the kind of crime that

leaves one deserving to be charged at by the Most Beautiful and Refined Woman in the world.
And on that note: I'm not a he. Or a she. I'm a bunny with no idea what their gender is.
(\_/)
(o.o)
(____)!

► AramisofSteel
Replied on February 1, 2011:
@ TheGreatestBugsOfAll: Come visit us in Albuquerque I'd love to hire you to do a commercial for
my restaurant if your willing it's name is "TURN LEFT"

► TheGreatestBugsOfAll (Verified Cape) (Verified Bunny)
Replied on February 1, 2011:
@ AramisofSteel
No problem, doc.
... your commercial might include Alex dearest, though. She just can't keep her hands off me...

► Mab, Queen of Air and Darkness
Replied on February 1, 2011:
They certainly have potential, I would enjoy a visit somewhen in the future.

► TheGreatestBugsOfAll (Verified Cape) (Verified Bunny)
Replied on February 3, 2011:
Sorry your highness, I kind of doubt I'll be capable of visiting where you are - just visiting, mind
you, not coming to stay - anytime soon.
Maybe you want to arrange a visit to dear ole LA? We could drive Alex spare between us!

► Mab, Queen of Air and Darkness
Replied on February 3, 2011:
Sadly I am bound by a pledge to stay here for the time being and it would not be easy, to convince
the other party to release me from it early. However, a temporary visit from you could perhaps be
arranged.

► TheGreatestBugsOfAll (Verified Cape) (Verified Bunny)
Replied on February 3, 2011:
Well, sounds cool!
... though I kind of did promise to help @ Irrelevant Bystander at some point, so I don't know what
the legalities of visiting you are, maybe after I helped him/her/them?
Hey, Bystander, what is your preferred gender for being addressed on the internet?

► Mab, Queen of Air and Darkness
Gold917
Replied on February 5, 2011:
Hey, Bugs, have you considered getting a Tinker thing that'd follow you around and play the old Looney Tunes tracks on command?

IrrelevantBystander
Replied on February 5, 2011:
@ TheGreatestBugsOfAll: I'm a guy. Also, while I appreciate the concern, I would prefer if we kept our distance for the time being. The last month has been particularly hectic for me, and I'm fairly certain my insurance provider is ready to lynch me if I so much as hint that I'm filing another claim. I'm sure you mean well, but I really don't need more on my plate at the moment.

AngryFox (Verified Procrastinator)
Replied on February 5, 2011:
@ IrrelevantBystander
Be glad you're talking with someone basing their cape persona off of Bugs Bunny and not Yakko, Wakko, or Dot Warner, otherwise you'd be their "special friend

TheGreatestBugsOfAll (Verified Cape) (Verified Bunny)
Replied on February 5, 2011:
@ Gold917 I haven't, thanks!

@ Innocent Bystander: Nah, I don't have to come to where you are - just give me a theme for a funny, legal video to cheer you up! I'll stay in LA for it, bunny promise!
(\_/)
(o.o)
(=_=)

@ Angry Fox: Hey, even those three tend to pick on deserving targets unless bored. Doctor Scratchansniff (...do you spell him like that?) counts. Though their harrassment of Hello Nurse is kind of... yeah. Sometimes, it's funny, and then there's moment where it's definitely not.

TechnoShinobi (Verified Cape) (Toybox)
Replied on February 5, 2011:
Pm me and I can set you up with something.
CrimsonPeg (Original Poster)
Posted on January 31, 2011:

You've probably all seen the videos by now - for the cat-out-of-tree one, see here, the fire, see here, and for the flooding, see here.
For those who haven't: A mysterious new cape has appeared on the scene, decked out in a white bodysuit and silver-coloured. The facial features, according to this report, bear a marked resemblance to Scion.
So far, they've displayed telekinesis, pre-cognition, hydrokinesis, and dynakinesis.
They first appeared on the scene on January 14th, appearing out of nowhere on a street in Austrian town Klagenfurt (see report and security camera video here, also - let's just say, that was really spooky; I was there), and have been active in China, Northern Africa, Chile and half of Europe so far.
And that's the actual information we've got.
Speculation, onwards!

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ThE yOuNg OnE
Replied on January 31, 2011:
Nice to see that Scion has a family as well. Seems like every cape is fighting along side their relatives these days.

MissingMind
Replied on January 31, 2011:
And by your powers combined, I am Super-endbringer.

Seriously, the endbringers disappear and then he appear with their power ? I would put everyone he has been near in cell, waiting for their inevitable mental break.

#Remember Lausanne

Darkflame_Doge
Replied on January 31, 2011:
So is there any official name of this new Parahuman? And I'm not sure...but are they female? They look really pretty, in an otherworldly-type way I suppose.

AngryFox (Verified Procrastinator)
Replied on January 31, 2011:
@darkflame_doge
I can't resist, especially after seeing this Earth Aleph movie recently.... (and apologies to anyone who might be offended)

Embedded Video -- AlephClips.com: "She's a MAN, baby!"

MadGreenSon (Veteran Member)
Replied on January 31, 2011:
So here's a thought. What do we really know about Endbringers? They all vanish, and then this joker shows up with powers strangely reminiscent of them. I realize the vast majority in the world seems to have, for some reason, just gone with the idea of "giant monsters that attack because whatever" as an explanation for the Endbringers, but there has to be a real reason. In general, we seem to know very little about what the Endbringers are, we just know what they do, but we don't know why. What if this is part of their life-cycle?

► Lightgryffin
Replied on January 31, 2011:
MadGreenSon,
Maybe Silver made the Endbringers as projections. That could be why they have the same powers. They were projections with no power of their own.

► TheGreatestBugsOfAll (Verified Cape) (Verified Bunny)
Replied on February 1, 2011:
@Darkflame_Doge:
Nah, no way they're female, too similar to the BGG himself. Besides, with the way they shimmer silver, what says they have a gender?
(\_/)
(o.o)
(___)!

► TheSimurghDidIt
Replied on February 1, 2011:
BGG?

► TheGreatestBugsOfAll (Verified Cape) (Verified Bunny)
Replied on February 1, 2011:
BGG = Big Golden Guy. AKA Scion, Savior of Kittens.

► MadGreenSon (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 1, 2011:
@ Lightgryffin: It's possible, I guess. Very different from other projections I've heard of, that's for damn sure. Hell, this "Silver" person/thing could be a refugee from an alternate universe, a fucking alien, or just someone gone especially weird from their powers.

And yeah, the Endbringers could have been projections this individual was manifesting and now they've stopped, for an as yet unknown reason. Shit like this is why I've tried to cultivate a certain detachment when it comes to valuing my own life. Because Jesus Christ you could die at any moment with the way things are now.

Apocalyptically powered people of mass destruction are just rolling out like the line-up of villains in an old comic book.

People think I'm overreacting when I say the world is circling the drain. They're mostly people too young to remember what the world was like before we had city-crushing monsters and town-depopulating spree-killers as a daily event.
Kindfragen
Replied on February 2, 2011:
Assurance: We have been told capes are not well adjusted people. So long as they do not eat people, everything should be fine.
Correction: Unless they decide to level some cities without eating any people. Then something is dreadfully wrong.
Boredom: for some reason Eidolon's name always reminded me of pointy anteaters...

MadGreenSon:
Agreement: Both big brother and mother insist the world was a much more boring place before capes. The only loss was non-cape-inspired comic books and movies.

MadGreenSon (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 2, 2011:
@ Kindfragen: Yeah. Much more boring, and you were less likely to get splattered by monsters, super people, or random crossfire from monsters and super-people fighting.

Kindfragen
Replied on February 2, 2011:
MadGreenSon:
Annoyance: We never said big brother and mother were sensible people.
Superiority: Would you rather die by something painful and mundane, like disease or getting hit by a vehicle? Or die by something excellent, like giant lasers of death? Or stepped on by the no-longer-available Behe?
Correction: Big brother insists that it is rude to insinuate that someone would wish to get stepped on by Behemoth. Obviously, no one would wish for anything so ridiculous. You would die long before Behemoth got within stepping range. Radiation.
Apologetic: We are deeply mournful for suggesting something so impossible. Except for appropriately resistant capes. We already verified that capes are not well-adjusted people, however.

MadGreenSon (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 3, 2011:
@ Kindfragen: Honestly, I'd rather, if I have to choose, die of old age. As I live in a major city and lack the means to move anytime soon, it seems unlikely. I can hear a parahuman fight going on right now. The radio says they're going at it in a park a mile away. That kind of shit doesn't make me optimistic for my odds of dying of natural causes.

TheSimurghDidIt
Replied on February 4, 2011:
Ah, so that's homoerotic fiction. That was interesting.
And I'm pretty sure Scion has Thinker powers. Silver might have, too, for that matter - I mean, it's not that unlikely he's a pre-cog, right?

End of Page. 1, 2
Okay, everyone's probably aware by now of the fight that broke out between E88 and Lung earlier today.

I was in my car only a few blocks down when the first shots were fired, so after I finished cursing out Murphy for the umpteenth time, I was able to get some pretty good footage. Link to it here. If you can't see it, give it some time to finish uploading.

0:00 - Video starts with the fight already well underway. It seems like Rune and Cricket had the misfortune to run into a well and truly pissed off Lung. The pair seem to focus on disabling Lung and getting away, but as usual, he just shrugs off everything thrown at him.

3:14 - Rune and Cricket try to disengage as Lung ramps up too far for them to do any meaningful damage to him. Lung goes on the offensive. I come to my senses and start to drive away.

3:32 - Buildings block most of the fight from here on out, but given the screaming, it's not going well for the E88 duo.

5:01 - Fight picks up in intensity. Probably reinforcements, but it's impossible to tell from where I am.

5:08 - I figure I'm far away enough, so I find a spot to park and get out to try and get a better view of things.

6:17 - The fireworks die down, so it seems like everyone decided to go home. I get back in my car and start to drive off, but keep the camera running just in case something else happens.

6:43 - Something else happens. Huge rainbow woman/Endbringer/thing appears out of nowhere and casually swats Lung who I would assume runs home with his pants soiled.

I crashed headlong into a building in shock not long after, so the footage ends around there. My car was totaled, but I was mostly unscathed and managed to catch a bus home without any further trouble.

So, yeah, make of this what you will. Personally, I'm going to get my insurance claim filed (shouldn't take long given how familiar I am with the process by now) and look into flights to the other side of the country.

@ IrrelevantBystander: All things considered, this is some very good footage. You're a damn lunatic for hanging out to get it, but let's take a look anyway.

You can definitely tell that Rune and Cricket were not looking for this fight. Rune has enough
mobility and ability to throw heavy shit with her powers to maybe hold Lung off for a short interval
by herself, but she’d need serious backup to consider actually fighting him. This is not a fight Cricket
wants under almost any circumstances as she’s a close-in fighter and Lung is an escalating Brute with
an aura of fire.
From what little you had on a direct bead there, they were doing the smart thing and trying to
disengage, too bad that Lung is so goddamn fast too, eh?
The real question mark here is: who intervened? Also, what the hell is up with the giant woman-
thing?

► Winged_One
Replied on February 4, 2011:
... why are you filming? Just... why not get as fast away as you can? I mean, we all know your kind
of luck, and it just kind of seems rather unwise to do that instead of running as far and fast as you can
while concentrating.

► UltimatePheer (Cape Groupie)
Replied on February 4, 2011:
Why wouldn't he be filming? I'd have gotten out of my car and filmed a fight like that too. Not every
day you get footage of Lung ramping up and actually going dragon on someone.

► Winged_One
Replied on February 4, 2011:
Are all humans suicidal or is that just a PHO trait? I mean, yeah, awesome footage. He still crashed
his car because he was distracted. He might've died from that. Lost a limb. Anything. That's kind of
more important than observing a cape fight.

Anyways, anybody got any ideas on what that was?

► MadGreenSon (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 4, 2011:
@ Winged_One: I know I sure as hell wouldn't have done that. Last time I saw a cape fight
happening, I drove in the other direction until I damn near ran out of road.

► IrrelevantBystander (Original Poster)
Replied on February 4, 2011:
@ Winged_One: A few reasons. One, what Ultimate_Pheer said. Human attraction to spectacle and
all. Two, the fight started out with E88 poking at Lung while he basically stood there and took it, so I
figured I wasn't in too much danger at the time given that I was a good distance away and not much
was happening. I got out as soon as things started heating up, only stopping once I figured I was at a
safe distance. Three, my insurance company hates me and refuses to shell out a single cent unless I
can provide irrefutable evidence, so I've gotten in the habit of keeping video records of things that
might screw me over.

On that note, they actually paid me without much complaint (only grumbling and a bit of cursing)
before telling me to GTFO. Apparently, I wasn't the only person to have an accident because of that
light show last night. For that matter, has anyone heard anything more on what exactly that thing
was, or why Lung was so pissed in the first place?

► Winged_One
Replied on February 4, 2011:
@ Irrelevant Bystander: Ah, that makes more sense... sorry.

I bet all of you ten bucks we'll see at least one person saying it's another Endbringer.

► ThE yOuNg OnE
Replied on February 4, 2011:
It's another Endbringer.

► Winged_One
Replied on February 4, 2011:
... I didn't think this through. Now how am I going to collect those ten bucks?
Y'all keep them?
Coming up with more serious theories: Two possibilities: It's some kind of hard-light illusion, or it's real.
If illusion, we've got some kind of illusionary cape in town; probably new (maybe E88)?
If it's real, we've got somebody who can turn into Badass Rainbow Warrior Mom - probably another new cape, I mean, we haven't got anyone with that kind of power.

► ThE yOuNg OnE
Replied on February 4, 2011:
In all seriousness, I don't think he/she/it is an Endbringer. All they did was swat Lung like a bug.
They didn't destroy the city.[/B]

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► SpecificProtagonist
Replied on February 5, 2011:
Oh, but they've all got a grudge against Lung since Leviathan and the giant hot monster showdown in Japan! It has to be one!
Nah, just kidding.😊

► TechnoShinobi (Verified Cape) (Toybox)
Replied on February 5, 2011:
Great now I have to find Cranial and ask for some brain bleach. Do you have any idea how hard it is to make that stuff?

► Mab, Queen of Air and Darkness
Replied on February 5, 2011:
Oh my, spend some time Elsewhere and it all changes. Not only did the Bringers of the End disappear, another being like Scion has entered the world and Brockton Bay now houses this giant, said to be one of the Bringers? I so wish I could see it all by myself, sadly it is so, that I will not be able to leave my current residence for quite some time.

► TechnoShinobi (Verified Cape) (Toybox)
Replied on February 5, 2011:
.... I didn't know you could get an internet connection from where you are.

► MissingMind
Replied on February 5, 2011:
Magic, bitches!

Hell, if you were a S-class threat locked in the birdcage, would you not use your superpowers to shitpost on the internet?

Edited by TinMother: Infraction - No speculation about cape identities.

► Lightgryffin
Replied on February 5, 2011:
Since when did - - - the Internet!?

Edited by TinMother: This goes for you, too.

► ThE yOuNg OnE
Replied on February 5, 2011:
Since now, apparently.

Edited by TinMother: You get away because you didn't mention it directly, but close shave, there. Really close shave.

► Uauie_Oeaiou
Replied on February 5, 2011:
Since she decided she wanted to apparently, just like how she ended up, er, a guest in Dragon's Underhill.

Tin Mother: And yet another infraction. Seriously, people.

► ThE yOuNg OnE
Replied on February 5, 2011:
So, the video doesn't work for my computer. 😳

Tell me, did she look kinda like this?

► XxVoid_CowboyxX
Replied on February 5, 2011:
Nah, more like a woman in actual, shifting rainbow colours, all glowing.
... why is nobody commenting on me not being a little shit? (Ignore that bit, Winged_One standing over my shoulder made me type it.)
Hey, I'm not even where you are!

► XxVoid_CowboyxX
Replied on February 5, 2011:
... my metaphorical shoulder. You did stand over my messages for a while and proofread them for "being nice". 😊
Also, on the Fairy Queen maybe or maybe not frequenting this forum (I don't want to assume, your highness): I, for one, welcome our magnificent Fairy Overlord of the Internet!

► Gold917
Replied on February 5, 2011:
@ XxVoid_CowboyxX: We didn't want to jinx it.

► XxVoid_CowboyxX
Replied on February 5, 2011:
... was I really that bad?
On second thought, don't answer that question.

Since Rainbow Giantess is kind of a cumbersome name, any ideas on what to call her? Iris?

► Gold917
Replied on February 6, 2011:
Iris is actually a very good name.

I'm agreeing with him...
@ Winged_One you are the hero this forum needs.

► Mab, Queen of Air and Darkness
Replied on February 6, 2011:
All of you are so quick in assuming to know who I am. While I will neither assert nor deny any of these speculations, let it be said that common courtesy in a place such as this bids you not to try to pierce the veil concealing another's identity.

► Winged_One
Replied on February 7, 2011:
Thanks! I like being a hero.
Also, what's wrong with Rainbow Giantess? Or other names like Rainbows, Rainbow, etc.? ...
... I think I'm not very good with names.

As well as that, I would not dare presume to speculate upon your identity, your highness, anywhere else but in the privacy of my thoughts; however, your username does include the phrase "Mab, Queen of Air And Darkness", which makes the royal address a prudent one indeed.

► Mab, Queen of Air and Darkness
Replied on February 7, 2011:
A wise decision. There are, after all, other queens beside the verdant one. Of course, some are known by many titles.

► AngryFox (Verified Procrastinator)
Replied on February 7, 2011:
@XxVoid_CowboyxX
Iunno, but I, for one, welcome the arrival of a "Captain Girlfriend" in your life. It's made you all sorts of more tolerable to interact with.

Also, in re: Iris for this currently unknown cape (for lack of a better term), I approve it. I don't have that name anywhere in my plans for my fics.

► **XxVoid_CowboyxX**
Replied on February 7, 2011:
She's not my girlfriend. She is, however, my first female non-internet friend, who can kick anyone's ass at video games, and also completely awesome. Actually, she's pretty much my only RL friend right now. Apart from her family, and I'm not sure how much they count.
Sibmance all the way! (The word "bromance" doesn't work...)

And yep, one kickass name for somebody who can kick Lung's ass.

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► **Ekelase**
Replied on February 7, 2011:
Y'know, seeing as how she showed up in a Lung/E88 battle and wasn't on Lung's side, Iris is probably a new recruit for the Nazis. Which means they now have three three-story ladies on their roster. Yay./sarcasm (assuming the entity known as Iris isn't a projection or an illusion) Dunno how bigots like them could stand having someone blatantly rainbow colored on their side though. Kinda undermines their message.

► **Sagittarius** (Unverified Cape) (Unverified Centaur)
Replied on February 7, 2011:
@ Ekelase
Personally, my money's on hard light illusion rather than being a giant cape.

► **MadGreenSon** (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 7, 2011:
There just isn't enough information. Someone intervened in the fight, probably with the ability to generate, become, or otherwise invoke "Iris" and put a stop to Lung. Neither Lung nor the Nazis have put out a press release on just how Lung got his ass kicked. The Empire isn't saying shit about a new cape, meaning it's unlikely to be one of theirs. We either need another source, or we'll have to wait for them to make another appearance.

► **Jiruly**
Replied on February 7, 2011:
Yes, let's all wait for the Nazis to tell the truth.

► **MadGreenSon** (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 7, 2011:
Are you high? If the Empire had a cape or capes that had just kicked Lung's ass, they would be trumpeting that shit far and wide, especially after the hit they took with Kaiser getting ganked by
Kith.

► Winged_One
Replied on February 7, 2011:
@ MadGreenSon: That might not actually be the case if it's somebody on loan or who'll be chucked around to other Nazi hideouts; if they can't keep that force permanently, they might not be willing to tell people it's theirs - because if they've got anything planned, that might mean they send in the big guns in after them without them having giant Rainbow backup.
Though I'm not quite convinced they have to be a Nazi just because they intervened in a fight where an outmatched teenager participated. Might've been basic human decency.

► MadGreenSon (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 7, 2011:
@ Winged_One: Maybe so. But I doubt it was a Nazi intervention. Maybe it was basic human decency, maybe whomever intervened just wanted to kick some dragon ass.

Either way, my money is not on the intervention being from an Empire aligned cape.

► Jiruly
Replied on February 7, 2011:

Cape Fight Damage Waiver (CFDW)

If you opt to purchase this coverage and your rental Nazi is damaged or killed, the rental company’s own insurance will pay the cost to repair or replace it. The usual caveats are that the Nazi must have been deployed by an authorized gang named on the rental agreement, and the damage can’t be the result of recklessness or negligence.

If you don’t opt for the CFDW when you rent a Nazi, any damages are your responsibility—or the responsibility of your insurance company, based on your gang or comprehensive policy. Coverage for rental Nazis is subject to the same limits in your personal policy. That means if your rental Nazi worth $20,000 dies in a fight, and your personal policy insures a cape worth $10,000, you’ll have to pay the difference out of your own pocket. In addition, any claims are subject to your deductible, so if you cause $400 worth of damage and your deductible is $500, you’ll be paying for those repairs yourself.

Personal Cape Fight Insurance (PCFI)

If you or your underlings are injured in a cape fight while deploying a rental Nazi, PCFI will cover medical and ambulance costs related to the fight. Most PCFI coverage also includes a death benefit for all gang members if the worst should happen.
Without PCFI, the cost of medical care related to a cape fight would be your responsibility (in cases where you are held responsible for the fight) or the responsibility of the other gang if they provoked it. If you have no medical coverage at all, or if you have a “high deductible” plan, you might consider opting for this low-cost coverage.

Personal Effects Coverage (PEC)

This add-on coverage helps replace personal property if it gets stolen from the rental Nazi. The limits are usually pretty low: $500 per person with a maximum benefit of $1,500.
As with most types of insurance, prevention can help you avoid problems. Don’t leave valuables
with a rental Nazi if possible. If you do opt for the coverage, remember that only $500/$1,500 of your stuff is covered by this extra policy. Whether you purchase PEC or not, items stolen from any cape are covered by your homeowners or renters policy anyway, though any claims would be subject to your deductible.

► AngryFox (Verified Procrastinator)
Replied on February 7, 2011:
Huh... gotta wonder if you have any actual actuarial experience?

► Lightgryffin
Replied on February 7, 2011:
I'm amazed you spent the time to type that up.

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► ThE yOuNg OnE
Replied on February 7, 2011:
Ditto.

► Jiruly
Replied on February 7, 2011:
@ AngryFox: I'm offended by your baseless accusations! Nazis are people just like you and me! Just because their tattoos are different, doesn't mean it's okay to trade them like... like cattle! Don't even think to PM me for a quote!

► manwolf281
Replied on February 7, 2011:
...I for one, welcome our new endbringer overlords

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_topic: Kaiser Breakout_
_in: Boards ▶ News ▶ Events ▶ America ▶ Brockton Bay_

White Fairy (Original Poster) (Veteran Member)
Posted on February 9, 2011:

So, here's the news, people: Kaiser's jailbreak went down this evening - well, he was broken out of his nice cozy transport by fellow members of E88, with Lung and Oni Lee showing up in the middle of the fight against the Protectorate forces before Lung was tricked into a rampage by Cricket and a sniper.

There's a video of parts of the fight here.

Who participated:
ABB: Lung and Oni Lee
Protectorate: Armsmaster, Miss Militia, Assault and Battery
Empire Eighty-Eight: Hookwolf, Fenja, Menja, Night, Fog and Cricket; with probable support from Victor and Othala.

Hookwolf was the one who broke out Kaiser, while Armsmaster and Miss Militia had to hold their own against Fenja and Menja, with Assault and Battery being ambushed by Night and Fog. Cricket and a sniper were held in reserve until Lung’s arrival, when Cricket waved to and distracted Lung to set him up for a sniper shot that was probably made by Victor.

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► MadGreenSon (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 9, 2011:
This is why you couldn't pay me to live in Brockton Bay. There were more capes in that fight than live in my hometown. Is it any wonder that the city has a violent death rate comparable to some warlord-strewn hellholes?

Seriously, if you live in Brockton Bay. LEAVE. Just go. Find a new job, do whatever it takes, just go. No where is so awesome that it's worth this. This revolving door prison crap is ridiculous even when a city doesn't have enough capes to make it a warzone.

It's very obvious that between the gangs and miscellaneous villains, that the rule of law in that city is a joke. Why does anyone do business there? Why isn't there more of a steady stream of refugees? For God's sake people, run for your lives!

There was enough parahuman muscle in that one skirmish to level the city four times over, it's really only a matter of time before things get out of control. Someone will respond to me saying it isn't so, but that's a delusion.

That city is a damn powderkeg and sometime very soon it's going to go off.

► Kicker of Shins
Replied on February 9, 2011:
Seriously, it's getting beyond a joke now. Someone has to stop this revolving door system we have going. It's a laughing stock. At this rate we may as well hand out frequent customer cards and give them a free coffee on every sixth visit.

Why not fly them out of the city from a helicopter at the PRT or Protectorate base, go out over the bay. No flyer in the city can match that pace. Or use one of Dragons aerial transports.

► ThE yOuNg OnE
Replied on February 9, 2011:
You... kinda have a point. Things are getting pretty ridiculous in the Bay. There are times where I honestly think that the PRT is purposely letting the villains go free, they escape so much.

► BabblingBrook (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 9, 2011:
MadGreenSon the gangs weren't always this bad. Allfather was alright. Not I'd-share-a-drink-with-him alright but he certainly wasn't Kaiser. Man had class. Lung didn't use to be here and his predecessors were kind of civil, definitely compared to the dragon himself, even if they were the Skidmarks of their day as compared to Allfather and Marquis. Who had class. Shit, even Butcher had
(has?) a code of honor, albeit a really fucked-up one. None of this open-season anarchic BS.

I'll probably catch hell for saying this, but I blame New Wave. They took down Marquis, and that made a power vacuum that upset the relative civility in this town. A decade later and we've still got to deal with the aftereffects of that upheaval. Not that they don't do good work now, but... yeah, that wasn't a good idea.

► **MadGreenSon** (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 9, 2011:
This whole thing with Kaiser is a perfect example of what I was talking about here. If you have powers, and are a murderous criminal, you get a lot more slack from the law than if you're a hero or rogue who messes up.

Villains are getting special treatment by the law. Marquis needed to be attacked, in his home, while he was relaxing on a weekend to be brought in and even then he almost escaped. Other than that, Brockton Bay especially is the sweet life for a parahuman criminal.

@ BabblingBrook: 1) if you live in BB, why are you posting on the internet rather than packing to leave town? 2) Brockton Bay is where the Teeth started. Y'know, The Butcher's gang. Don't delude yourself that it was ever really all that great. I can show you some statistics if you want, or you can look at them here. 3) Allfather and Marquis were murderous monsters who were no better than the current crop.

► **ThE yOuNg OnE**
Replied on February 9, 2011:
Compared to what we have to deal with now? They might as well be heroes in disguise.

And fuck, I wish I could leave. But I'm still going through school and living with my parents. And they straight up refuse to leave, especially since my Dad got that new promotion he wanted. I'm trying to save up some money for an apartment somewhere else, but it is really hard to get a job in this city.

► **BabblingBrook** (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 9, 2011:
@ MadGreenSon 1) I've lived here since I was a kid and Fortress Construction's not in such a good position that I can request a transfer out of town and expect to get it. 2) People forget that the Teeth used to be... not 'good,' but not the bunch of crazies they are now. Turn the clock back twenty years, the very first Butcher, he was actually a... well, not an okay guy but closer to sane than any of the villains in town right now. 3) I was born on the Wampanoag reservation, when I was growing up my house was in Marquis's territory. Protection money was a given. Always has been. But the non-gang crime rate was low compared to where it is today before Marquis got taken down. Now that same house is on Kaiser's turf and I have an actual budgetary line in my expenses account for "graffiti cleaning," and I've been assaulted twice in the last year by skinheads because god forbid a guy who's 3/4 American Indian want to live in "the white part of town." Allfather was a cultured jackass but he didn't tolerate fuckers like Hookwolf, and yeah Marquis was a murderer but he didn't randomly go on rampages like Lung does.

@ ThE yOuNg OnE Put a resume into Fortress Construction's Human Resources department, my boss has been needing a secretary for a while. Bonus points if you're good at keeping a filing system organized.
Alpha Zerg replied on February 9, 2011:

@ MadGreenSon, yeah, Allfather and Marquis were criminals, and yeah, they killed people, but they held territory and they had standards.

Sure, the world was better for their loss, but it isn't anymore. New Wave shouldn't have taken Marquis out without being prepared for the vacuum. They should have protected the territory that used to be Marquis' and not allowed other gangs to move in.

They should have thought, not acted as a result of an ongoing vendetta because they were butthurt about losing continuously.

Nature abhors a vacuum, and they went and created one without blast shielding in place.

MadGreenSon (Veteran Member) replied on February 9, 2011:

@ BabblingBrook @ AlphaZerg: It's like you've got Stockholm Syndrome. Run for your life! You will likely die to super-powered violence if you stay!

ThE yOuNg OnE replied on February 9, 2011:

@ Babbling Brook: Really dude? Thanks!

BabblingBrook (Veteran Member) replied on February 9, 2011:

@ Alpha Zerg My point exactly.

@ MadGreenSon I hate what this town has become, it was better twenty years ago. Shit, it was better ten years ago. I just like having a job at a place that does some good in the world.

@ ThE yOuNg OnE You get a job and my boss stops complaining about not being able to find a Form 14-e1? Any time.

MadGreenSon (Veteran Member) replied on February 9, 2011:

@ BabblingBrook: I just don't want you to become yet another Brockton Bay forumite that was killed by the crap that goes on in your city. I'm PMing you the list I have, I actually have compiled a list of every PHO forumgoer who has died to parahuman violence, the confirmed Brocktonites are a significant statistical group.

ThE yOuNg OnE replied on February 9, 2011:

I just don't know why the villains keep escaping. You'd think that with all the Tinker bullshit the PRT has, they would have failsafes in place, just in case a villain's allies try to bust them out.

I mean, this has happened a lot. Too many times, in fact. Even the Merchants have managed to escape PRT custody. The Merchants. They're the lowest of the low, and yet the PRT can't keep them locked up for more than a few days?

This is why I barely leave my house anymore. Even when I carry my taser, I can never feel safe.
► Uauie_Oeaiou
Replied on February 9, 2011:
Hey now, the Bay isn't completely horrible. We've got a really awesome sandwich cart called The Wandering Gyro (it rhymes with "hero") run by a catering equipment Tinker, and the large asian community means there's lots of little family restaurants and markets as well. (Not racist, small places just seem to be favored by their culture. Given I like that kind of food, I'm all for it.) The Forsburg Gallery building may not be to everyone's taste, but they've got a pretty good collection for a smaller institution, and thanks to Anders Foundation grants the municipal library got expanded and renovated just a few years back. We've even got no less than five top-rated high schools, between Arcadia, Clarendon, Fairbanks Keene, Captain's, and John E. Howard, though it's true the bottom end of the range are gang-ridden hellholes.

As for aerial prisoner transport, it probably doesn't happen because it's harder to guard a flying vehicle and the PRT is liable for any harm someone comes to in their custody. All it would take is one guy from an opposing gang with a tinkertech gun or a mundane sniper rifle, and they have an all new and exciting flavor of the week for the media and random internet wiseacres like us to make a fuss over.

► IrrelevantBystander
Replied on February 10, 2011:
I would like to say I'm shocked, but that would be a rather transparent lie. The PRT might as well contain their prisoners in cardboard boxes since it would probably be just as effective.

@ MadGreenSon: You act as if none of us have tried to leave the city before. If you've ever moved before, you should know that it isn't as simple as just packing up and catching the next flight out of town. You have to make sure you have a place to stay and a stable of source of income where you're headed. Sure, not getting ganked is nice, but so is not being homeless and bankrupt. Then you have to consider the fact that the constant violence doesn't exactly facilitate a mass exodus.

After every major fight (of which there are many), you have to check to see which roads are still open and which ones are closed for repairs, meaning you can't be sure if driving out of the city is even possible on any given day. The constant property damage is also a drain on personal finances; many struggle to even make ends meet and don't have the means to even consider finding a home somewhere else.

Brockton Bay is a hellhole, don't get me wrong, but maybe you should try getting off your high horse and living here for a time before you decide to judge us.

► MadGreenSon (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 10, 2011:
@ IrrelevantBystander: I'll put up punk. You and five people of your choice, I'll help you get jobs and homes out where I live. PM me and be ready to go in a week.

How about you get up on my high horse instead of me getting off it? I'm lining up contacts, research and resources right now. I'm PMing you the initial data. You game? If not I'll extend the offer to others.

EDIT: Even more, I'm putting together crowdfunding and further resources here, and I have three volunteers that live in my area to help with getting new people set up outside of that diseased warzone. Anyone interested PM me and I'll do everything I can.
The_Unpronounceable (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 10, 2011:
Okay you two, cool it before TinMama get involved.

That said, seems like the ABB is getting revenge or something cause I've been seeing a lot of places in E88 territory going up in flames.

BabblingBrook (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 10, 2011:
@ MadGreenSon I honestly don't care about the statistics, I'm staying no matter what. Bailing would be admitting that things can't get better.

EDIT: yes it can get better, this isn't Madison.

MadGreenSon (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 10, 2011:
@ BabblingBrook: Things won't get better. Look at the news, things are getting worse everywhere, all the time. And you also just jinxed yourself.

Either way, I have committed myself to this now, and I will be helping people get out. You're welcome to it as well.

BabblingBrook (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 10, 2011:
MadGreenSon, I'll leave Brockton when the Endbringers all come here at the same time and form a fucking Sentai team. And until that particular flying swine starts dodging snowballs in Hell, I'll be right here.

Thanks for the offer, but no thanks.

MadGreenSon (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 10, 2011:
@ BabblingBrook: It's no problem. I actually do want to help. I'm going to be busy getting those who have already contacted me vetted and set up, but keep my offer in mind when the inevitable gang war breaks out, okay? All we have in this world is each other.

IrrelevantBystander
Replied on February 10, 2011:
@ MadGreenSon: Okay, let me start by apologizing for blowing up at you earlier: I've had an awful week and you basically calling us a bunch of ignorant morons pushed me over the edge. Now, while it's definitely nice to see someone put their money where their mouth is as opposed to just ranting incoherently, I'm not sure if you quite understand the problem here.

The people who actually want to leave and have the means to are few and far between. I have a friend who wants to leave, but is several grand in debt and can't move out for fear of debt collectors being sent after him to drag him back. I want to leave, but can't save up enough to comfortably set up anywhere else (given my luck, this isn't going to change any time soon). There are tens of thousands of people like me and my friend in the Bay; they don't have the money to get themselves out.
Others are stuck because they can't leave without screwing someone over. There are plenty of people in the gangs because their families are being threatened and can't leave for fear of them being killed. I have a friend who owns a small business and is the only thing allowing his employees to make an honest living. Then there's the guy heading the Dockworker's Union who's the only person putting a word in for all the people laid off after the shipping industry dried up. Hell, I'm pretty sure the PRT, as useless as they're being, wants to get out, but can't since they're the only ones keeping some semblance of order in the city. Try leaving when you have something like that hanging over your shoulder.

On the other side, you have those well off enough to leave, but have no real reason to. Those with money are generally living quite comfortably well away from the violence, so they don't have much of an incentive to move out. Everyone knows the statistics about violent crime here in the bay, but when your only interaction with the actual thing is through the news, it doesn't have as much of an impact on you.

So, yeah, we're not a bunch of idiots who are too stupid to leave. If you'd gone and said that in person here, you would have been lynched. The fact is, we've all been screwed by the system and are trapped in this city. I can name at least a dozen people off the top of my head that want to leave, but are held back for various reasons and have no means of digging themselves out. Hell, if I were a more paranoid individual, I'd say there was some sort of conspiracy to keep us all in here.

Maybe some kind of sick social experiment to see how much shit we can take before we all snap and kill each other off.

► MadGreenSon (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 10, 2011:
@ IrrelevantBystander: It's all good. It doesn't bother me if you scream insults at me all day. I am, right now, helping get two dozen people get out of Brockton Bay that would have otherwise not been able to. As the old woman said when pissing into the ocean "every little bit helps". Besides, all of this has made me realize how good I am at organizing things. Put me in contact with your debt collector fearing friend. I will get him out if that's what he wants.
There is little to no real hope left in the world. Things get worse every day, everywhere. Nothing we do will change that. All we can do, is what we can for each other, to try and make things a little more bearable for as long as we can. All I want to do is help. So that's what I'm going to do. Maybe someone will kill me for it, as so often happens when people try to help others. It really does, by the way, I have the statistics. Doesn't matter, inasmuch as such a thing exists, it's probably a better death than being random collateral from a super-fight.

► Kindfragen
Replied on February 10, 2011:
MadGreenSon:
Interjection: You help people out of the bay? And the city was safer not better ten or twenty years ago. "Better" might start a discussion requiring morality and common sense, something big brother informs me we lack. Please don't exclude people from this discussion.
Praise: Helping people is good. Or so mother says. Something about building exploitable trust. In any case, continue as you were.

IrrelevantBystander:
Assurance: Do not be afraid to yell at MadGreenSun. Or ourself. Feed my mother's addiction by giving her rants to analyse. This is safer for everyone.

► Gold917
Replied on February 10, 2011:
You know, I think maybe the bay was better off with Marquis. At least the everyman could run a
day-to-day business with him around. Now we've got racist germans, racist asians + Rage Dragon,
and the only ones who AREN'T racist are the Merchants. The Merchants! I'd take Marquis over the
Merchants any day.

End of Page. 1, 2

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► IrrelevantBystander
Replied on February 10, 2011:
@ MadGreenSon: Hmm, my friend's debt was $35,684.28 if I remember the last figure he quoted
me. Given the interest rate on his loan, if you can raise him around $40,000 by the end of the month,
it should cover him. Don't bother threatening legal action, the lender's with E88 (don't judge my
friend, he was desperate and the bank refused to cover him), so there isn't much you can do on that
front. If you do, the guy'l probably just laugh and send hitmen instead. Paying him off is pretty much
all that can be done until E88 is dealt with.

Also, just a tip, you may want to work on your tone when approaching people. You can sound rather
condescending, which turns a lot of people away (I for one am definitely getting that knee jerk
reaction). People generally respond better to straight sympathy than some well-off stranger talking
about his own merits and reminding them of how shitty their lives are by quoting statistics at them.
Why do you think people were so quick to turn on you when you first threw out those figures? You
probably didn't intend it, but you came off as a real asshole.

► MadGreenSon (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 10, 2011:
@ IrrelevantBystander: To be fair, I am a real asshole. A genuinely unpleasant person. Bitter,
alcoholic, chronically depressed, and kinda suicidal. I'm still going to help.

► BrightestStarOfMorning
Replied on February 10, 2011:
@ MadGreenSon it means a lot more when a "real asshole" steps up to help and saves people then it
does when the people with powers do. In my eyes at least you're a hero. #Faith in humanity restored

► BabblingBrook (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 10, 2011:
MadGreenSon I don't know about "no hope left," there's always Scion.

► MadGreenSon (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 10, 2011:
@ BrightestStarOfMorning: Which is funny, since it's my lack of faith in humanity which inspired
me to act in the first place.

@ BabblingBrook: Eh... Scion has the most messed up priorities. Maybe if he were doing something
about African warlords, South American cartels, Sleeper, the Blasphemies, or the many and varied
local S-class civilization eroders I'd feel better about him.
MadGreenSon yeah he's kind of a ditz, I suppose, or just the most distractable guy in the history of forever, but... still, hope spot, you know?

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Topic: Brockton Bay Bombings
In: Boards ► News ► Events ► America ► Brockton Bay

White Fairy (Original Poster) (Veteran Member)
Posted on February 10, 2011:

Most likely in response to the recent breakout of Kaiser (see thread here) ABB member Oni Lee has started bombing different locations across the city, all rumoured to be frequented by members of the Empire Eighty-Eight, for approximately an hour now.
One of those attacks happened across the street from my home. If you live in an area with a strong E88 presence, don't go outside. It doesn't matter whether you're a member or not, you might still get hurt. If you're living near a suspected E88 hangout (or have one in the cellar/floor one of your appartment building) get out.
Now. Try to find friends across the city living in safe areas, just... get out.
Don't leave your home if you're in an already safe area.

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Uauie_Oeaiou
Replied on February 10, 2011:
Oh dammit. Looks like I'll be taking the truck through the Docks district today.

ThE yOuNg OnE
Replied on February 10, 2011:
Got it. I'll call my boss, let him know.

BabblingBrook (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 10, 2011:
My house is on the edge of E88 territory and nowhere near their bars or they're-totally-not-safesouses. Anyone needs a place to stay for a few days while we wait for this to blow over, I've got two spare rooms and a sofa-bed. Could probably dig out my old air mattress if enough people need a place to sleep.

Jiruly
Replied on February 10, 2011:
Some photos.

SpecificProtagonist
Replied on February 10, 2011:
@BabblingBrook: Can I take you up on that for three people, two adults and a teenager? Please? We live just above a "suspected" bar.

► BabblingBrook (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 10, 2011:
SpecificProtagonist: PMing you details. I'll pull the sofa-bed out.

► Jiruly
Replied on February 10, 2011:
What? Those are the new PRT vans. You think I'd go anywhere near the actual fighting? Though I can kinda see the similarity with those foam cannons.

► Gold917
Replied on February 10, 2011:
I feel like this might be a good time to mention we're renting out the upstairs loft. We're about four blocks from Arcadia, so we don't really see that much from the gang wars, and also walking distance to the school. Keep in mind 'Loft' basically means an empty, carpeted attic. Reduced rate if your house got ganked in the latest bombing spree.

► BabblingBrook (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 10, 2011:
@ Jiruly: they're really going overboard with those things. I remember they started out a few years ago with backpacks that kinda looked like flamethrowers, now they've got vehicle-mounted barrels that make the damned things look like tanks. And the treads aren't helping. Still, with teleporters, rage-dragons and Hookwolf in town I'm not exactly surprised that they've upped the ordinance level.

► MadGreenSon (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 10, 2011:
Not sure a tank is the way to hunt down Oni Lee, but it's very obvious that half measures and kid gloves are not going to get the job done in the Bay anymore.

**End of Page. 1, 2**

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► ThEyOUNg One
Replied on February 10, 2011:
@ Gold917: I'll take you up on that if I can bring my parents along with me. I'll make sure to pay for all three of us if you need me to.

► TechnoShinobi (Verified Cape) (Toybox)
Replied on February 10, 2011:
Damn, and this happens while I have business in Brockton. The good news is that for something like this a informal truce is usually in effect, I'll see what my customers are planning to do about this.

► Gold917
Replied on February 10, 2011:
No problem. Privacy might be an issue, if you're bringing a whole family. PM?
Bagrat (The Guy In The Know) (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 10, 2011:
I think the bombings are over now - a joint operation between Kith, Faultline's Crew, the
Undersiders and the Protectorate took him out. Although I'm really asking myself how they got all of
those people to work together.
Anyway, there's bigger news happening in this thread - and as the title says, yep, Case 53s should
really, really watch this.

End of Page. 1, 2

BabblingBrook (Original Poster) (Veteran Member)
Posted on February 11, 2011:
Holy. Holy fuck. This just happened. I was on a milk run for my houseguests, caught a glimpse of
Kith (those of you not in the know, the new cape group in town composed of a mom and her kids)
on a roof with some other people nearby. Then some explosions happened, right after I started
filming on my phone. Sorry for potato quality, btw. Asscrack of dawn isn't conducive to good
lighting. Anyway. See that orange lizard-looking man near the Kith capes? That's Newter. He's a
cape who runs with Faultline's crew. Yes, that is Anima (inb4 Animom jokes begin) apparently
yoonking his power. Or something. How the fuck does that even work. And now apparently he can
drop the monstrous appearance at will? Or at least it looked like it from where I was standing. This is
fucking huge. Like, so massively fucking huge. We're going to be getting refugees and pilgrims all
up in here.

Oh and Oni Lee got captured I think but who gives a shit this is massive fucking news. We might
have a way to let C53s live normal fucking lives.

EDIT: WTF I actually got a major event post up before Bagrat. This feels weird.

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Ultimate_Pheer (Cape Groupie)
Replied on February 11, 2011:
Eh, Potato is better than nothing at all. Besides, all is forgiven because holy crap, this is big. Yay,
Oni Lee's caught, but this is more big. Animom, if she can make Case 53's human again, is suddenly
going to be swimming in ALL the money as they come to her to get fixed. Hell, maybe her 'Kids' are
just the first Case 53s she fixed?

TerrorMech
Replied on February 11, 2011:
Interesting... If he's actually physically changing rather than having some sort of illusion placed on
him, do you think he retains his powers in full-human form?
I'm pretty sure his powers were based around hallucinogenic body fluids (never thought I'd be typing that), so if he does keep his powers, can he switch to normal body fluids, or does his sweat still cause people to hallucinate?

► **TheSimurghDidIt**
Replied on February 11, 2011:
@ TerrorMech: Since Animom didn't start swaying or seemed otherwise incapacitated, I'm reasonably sure he's at least able to switch off the hallucinogenic effects.

► **TerrorMech**
Replied on February 11, 2011:
@TheSimurghDidIt: I certainly hope that's the case. I'm pretty sure Anima's costume covers her skin completely, and I'm not sure Newter's power would go through clothes, so it's possible she would have been safe anyway, but considering the enthusiasm of that hug... yeah, he can probably turn it off. Congratulations, Newter!

► **Gold917**
Replied on February 11, 2011:
Oh hell. This...I mean, yeah, it's a good thing, but now we're gonna have all kinds of Case 53s coming to Brockton.

Now, it's not that I'm racist against 53s, but the LAST thing this city needs is some sort of Godzilla analogue stalking through the streets scaring the piss out of everyone and their grandma trying to find Animom. Someone's gonna get spooked after all that's happened with the gang wars and the bombings and take a shot at a 53, and then it's all downhill from there...

...fuck.

► **TechnoShinobi** (Verified Cape) (Toybox)
Replied on February 11, 2011:
@BabblingBrook your actually very lucky that the video is bad as it could be considered outing an capes identity
@TheSimurghDidIt doesn't his power only work on skin contact? She's wearing a full body costume.
Edit: Strangered

► **MadGreenSon** (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 11, 2011:
Holy shit. That's huge. I wonder if it lasts? If it does all that with little or no side effects... Damn.

► **TerrorMech**
Replied on February 11, 2011:
@ Gold917: While I don't expect anything quite that blatant, I do see how problems could arise pretty quickly. Maybe Kith could set something up with the PRT? Anima gives the PRT a way to contact her, Case 53s interested in being "cured" go to the PRT offices, the PRT acts as the middleman so a meeting can be scheduled, and everything should go fairly smoothly.
@Ultimate_Pheer I doubt the rest of Kith are cured C53s, it's hard to tell on the video but Anima looked really surprised when she saw what happened.

@Gold917 We've already got Lung, Parian, and Hookwolf in this town. And supposedly a mechanical man up near the Trainyard. People 'round here have got used to seeing people that don't look like people, I think. (No offense to Parian, the doll getup just pings the Uncanny Valley for me.)

@TechnoShinobi and if the video was less-bad I wouldn't've posted it until I slapped a big damn censor box over Newter's... what is that, even? Civilian-face? Non-cape face? What's the terminology there? I've never been quite sure.

AngryFox (Verified Procrastinator)
Replied on February 11, 2011:
Welp! "Animom" is going to stick because if that new power doesn't scream "Let Momma kiss it and make it better," I don't know what does.

@MadGreenSon (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 11, 2011:
Isn't Anima supposed to be a power copier or something? Some kind of Trump anyway. Does she get something out of the C53 curing? All things considered it looked like she did something to Oni Lee there pretty similar to Newter's drug touch. I wonder if she keeps a "copy" of the powers of a Case 53 she does this to?

Ekelayes
Replied on February 11, 2011:
*dons tinfoil hat* Animom's power is to copy any non-morphologically-human cape's power, and gives them a Changer power in return that leaves their powers weaker but lets them look human, and her kids are really the endbringers who were the first 'people' she used her power on! It's obvious: three siblings, two boys and a girl, the boys being a dynakinetic and a hydrokinetic respectively, and the girl being a flyer/TK/thinker!

...I need to not stay up so late; my crazy is starting to show through. I mean seriously, the endbringers turning into teenage heroes? That sounds like a bad fanfiction premise.

@Lightgryffin
Replied on February 12, 2011:
Apparently I do too as that sounded a bit more than halfway reasonable to me.

@MadGreenSon (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 12, 2011:
Guys, I'm a chronically depressed, paranoid, pessimist and I think that's a bit much.

@BabblingBrook (Original Poster) (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 12, 2011:
@ ekelase please don't tinfoil based off of my worst nightmare.

@Uauie_Oeaiou
Replied on February 12, 2011:
Oh sure, some cape Mastered the Endbringers, and now they've been turned human and make up a new hero team in our fair city. Pull the other one, it has got bells on.

► Ekelase
Replied on February 12, 2011:
@ Mab I'm kinda not very well off, so it's unfortunately not going to happen with me being the one paying for it. However, if you can arrange for safe transportation there and, more importantly, back, I can probably pull it off.

@ everyone else Like I said, I stayed up too late and my meds started to wear off. Didn't actually affect whether or not I had the idea, only how seriously I considered it. Now that I've taken today's meds I can see how crazy the notion was. Sleep deprivation+ADD meds wearing off=/=fun times make.

► Arcadian
Replied on February 12, 2011:

The question's already been brought up, but I don't think anyone's given it any serious thought yet: Does Anima remove mutations, or does she remove powers? It's kind of hard to tell with what we've seen since -- as I'm pretty sure most enthusiasts know -- mutations and powers are essentially synonymous for Case 53s. If it's the latter, that's pretty scary and more than a bit confusing. If it's the former, then you can replace the scary with more confusing.

Can she just... steal anybody's powers on a whim? Potentially terrifying in the wrong hands if so -- and let me stress that I do not think that Anima is the wrong hands here. Well, probably. We don't actually know that much about her, but thus far she hasn't done anything that would make that concerning.

Anyway, my point. If she can steal powers, that's a game-changer. We all remember what Glaistig did to Grey Boy, and if Anima can pull the same trick on, say, Siberian... Well.

Of course, that leads to the question of where her other powers came from. At least one of them (The tazer thing) matches up with one of her teammates, right? Maybe she can borrow or steal? Or maybe I'm getting some details mixed up with that new group in Austin.

On the other hand though, that's a lot of assumptions to be making. What if she doesn't steal powers, just removes mutations... somehow. How the hell is that connected to her powers? The only thing I'm coming up with is that Panacea is there off-camera and Anima did something with her powers. Has Panacea ever tried fixing a Case 53 before?

► MadGeenSon (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 12, 2011:
I'm pretty sure Newter was shifting back and forth there. Hell, why not just ask? @ Newter, did Anima steal your powers or just add a whole new dimension to your life?

► Arcadian
Replied on February 12, 2011:
@ MadGreenSon: Newter actually posts here?
I should be surprised at that, but really I'm not. Suspect it'll be a while before we hear anything from him, though. The fact that he -- or anyone from his team, really -- hasn't said anything about this publically means one of two things in my mind: Either they're all out partying non-stop and won't get around to checking PHO anytime soon (And who could blame them), or they're not saying anything publically until they know precisely what they're going to say -- in which case, it'll be the media who gets it first, not us. Or maybe it's both, or maybe the PRT is trying to control what information is made public, or something.

► MadGreenSon
Replied on February 12, 2011:
@ Arcadian: You'd be surprised who all has accounts on PHO. Either way, why not just ask? They'll get around to saying something soon enough. Too much info has leaked for an effective cover up at this point.

► Arcadian
Replied on February 12, 2011:
@ MadGreenSon: I'm not saying they'd try to cover up everything, just certain key facts. My point was if the PRT does have control over what information the involved parties are releasing (Questionable -- this is a hypothetical), then the reason they haven't said anything is most likely because they're waiting to see how much was leaked, and then they'll try to control the narrative.

And I'd say that they'd be right to do so, honestly. Let's say that Anima can steal powers. Anyone's powers. Like hell the PRT's not going to try and keep that under wraps. Not only would it keep otherwise invulnerable villains like the Siberian from seeing the sucker-punch coming... well, people have an unfortunate tendency to compare capes to S-class threats if there's a comparison to be made. If Anima can steal powers, and that fact becomes public, comparisons to Glaistig Uiane and subsequent fearmongering are practically inevitable at that point. The PRT would keep something like that out of the narrative solely to keep Anima from being alienated by the public. And it'd be easy, too -- just say that her abilities only result in a loss of powers if used on someone whose powers directly derive from physical mutations, and only as a side-effect. It's not like Newter or the snail guy would know the difference.

All of that assumes that it's power-stealing. Which, as I've said, it very well may not be.

Look at me though, typing up a storm. Damn it Green, you're dragging me into your pace!

► MadGreenSon (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 12, 2011:
@ Arcadian: Get on my level. If Anima can steal powers and people survive her doing it, then assuming she's not a villain, she's singlehandedly gotten rid of a need for a Birdcage or any special means of imprisoning villains.
Just yank their powers and put them in regular jail. It's not like anyone has a right to have powers in the first place, if she can take them and put them to productive use, I say let her do it.

► Arcadian
Replied on February 12, 2011:
@ MadGreenSon: Exactly my point. If she can do that, that's amazing. And the PRT will do everything possible to make sure that she stays both active and on their side. Keeping the full extent of her abilities a secret for as long as possible would help with that on a number of levels. And I'm not just talking about fearmongering -- a lot of people probably would start going on about 'what if she decides to go bad' or 'she's secretly the next Glaistig Uaine' or some bullshit, but they'd be the
minority so long as she stays on the level. More importantly though, if that knowledge became public, there would be a lot of villains who would want her out of the picture, out of fear of losing their powers to her in exactly the scenario you described. The PRT would want to keep that from happening as long as possible.

► MadGreenSon (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 12, 2011:
@ Arcadian: Y’know, villains going after the person who can permanently take away their powers does sound like exactly the sort of thing that would happen. Then hilarity ensues. Each failure makes the next attempts even more unlikely to succeed. I think secrecy is the opposite of the right way to go here.

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► Ekelase
Replied on February 12, 2011:
@ Arcadian and @ Madgreenson I'm thinking she's probably a power borrower/copier, not thief. We've seen her fly, which would probably be copied from Oracle, and yet Oracle is still capable of flight. She used Newter's power to stop Oni Lee (probably) and, as seen in the video, he's capable of reverting to his old form at will and (presumably) still use his powers. granted, we don't know either way, but the circumstantial evidence points towards her not being able to pull a non-villainous Faerie Queen, even if she wanted to.

► MadGreenSon (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 13, 2011:
@ Ekelase: I'm certain you're right. It's a fun hypothetical though.

► Arcadian
Replied on February 13, 2011:

@ MadGreenSon: How well or poorly that sort of thing turns out really depends on how her powers work which, as has been established, we know next to jack shit about.

Plus, something like permanent power loss? There are plenty of villains who would be willing to ignore the unwritten rules just to make sure that's off the table. It would be perfectly possible for a particularly unscrupulous thinker to figure out her identity and send an assassin to slit her throat while she's asleep.

Plus there's the opposite case: Villains running away out of fear of that happening to them. That's nice and all, but there's a reason I keep bringing up the Siberian: a power thief on the side of the angels is our best shot at taking her down for good. If the Nine know she can do that, then they'll just make sure to not be there whenever she shows up. The PRT could keep it on the down-low solely to retain the element of surprise long enough to take out some key threats with it.

@ Ekelase: Was he turning back and forth at will? Or was Anima doing it? Seemed a bit more ambiguous to me than what you're implying, and until the man himself chimes in I doubt we'll know for sure. (Then again, I watched the video at 2x speed, so I may have missed some key bits. See: Lazy).
As for power-borrowing versus stealing, I brought that up already: Maybe she can do both. It's hardly unreasonable. Maybe she borrows by just starting to steal someone's powers, then stopping when the transfer's partially complete so that they both have them. There's been stranger.

Ultimately though it is, as Green Son said, just a hypothetical. Not even the only possibility I brought up, even! Though admittedly, I did spend more time talking about the power thief thing; it's the more impactful of the two.

Though no one did answer my other question: Has Panacea ever tried to fix Case 53s? Do we know what happened? I mean, her power requiring touch means that trying it on Newter would be an all capitals BAD IDEA, but you'd think that snail guy would have looked into it. Presumably she's tried but it doesn't work for some reason...

I don't think the exacts of her powers are public information, so probably something to do with that.

► **Ekelase**  
Replied on February 13, 2011:  
@ Madgreenson @ Arcadian like I have any non-hypocritical moral authority in regards to tinfoil hatting. I was simply stating a hypothesis that I thought was more reasonable. I'm sure that if I hadn't called myself out on my own crazy earlier someone else would have made an equally rational alternate explanation for my observations.

► **MadGreenSon** (Veteran Member)  
Replied on February 13, 2011:  
The thing is, if Panacea tried to fix the physical differences in a Case 53, it might really depend on which C53 she tried it on. Some have what look like just physical changes in a totally organic way, others have much more exotic differences. Hell, that Boston Ward, Weld is literally made of metal, how would Panacea even start trying to change that?

Also there isn't much data on whether C53 changes are merely "skin deep" or a total alteration of what they are down to a genetic level. If they even still have DNA as we know it!

We also don't really know what Panacea's total limits are nor the exact way her power functions in all details, so... If she'd succeeded we'd have heard of it, so either she's never tried, or she's never succeeded.

► **Mab, Queen of Air and Darkness**  
Replied on February 13, 2011:  
@ Arcadian : On the possibility of assassins: This would be most troublesome. As many here, I have high hopes for her future and would be greatly discontent should that happen. Maybe We should think of ways to prevent her untimely demise?

On Panacea: I believe she did try and it worked at first, the changes were, however, only of a temporary nature. Newter's ability would not pose any problems, as Panacea should be able to neutralise any toxin.

► **BabblingBrook** (Original Poster) (Veteran Member)  
Replied on February 13, 2011:  
@ MadGreenSon Mab's got the right of it. Panacea tried to remove C53 mutations a few times in the past, the removal lasted anywhere from a few minutes to an hour or so. Lots of theories about why
this works ranging from the plausible (C53 powers are subconscious Changer abilities that force the cape back into their Changer state) to shit that has to have been spawned by Void Cowboy (C53s are the deep-cover agents/experiments of Cauldron/Freemasons/Illuminati and secretly have an interdimensional connection to their hidden HQ that lets them transform back at their discretion into their powered form). Genetically, it seems to be pretty variable. This guy, found in Sioux Falls in 2001, has nothing resembling human DNA despite basically being Nightcrawler (character from the last of the pre-Scion superhero comics). On the other hand this poor bastard from White Pine, TN, despite looking like an actual nightcrawler, has DNA close enough to human that we've got a pretty good idea what he might've looked like before he triggered (pic's been used in press releases about the guy before, I am not outing a cape here.)

► Lightgryffin
Replied on February 13, 2011:
@BabblingBrook

I have the vaguest understanding of the Freemasons and the Illuminati, but who the hell is Cauldron?

► AllTheKingsHorses (Verified PRT Agent)
Replied on February 13, 2011:
Alright, people, before the board goes nuts making assumptions, I'm just going to put this out here - later on that night, Newter was seen doing several of his usual tricks, including the wall-climb, which it's known he uses his power for.

► Floating_Soul
Replied on February 13, 2011:
@Lightgryffin

Tinhat conspiracy theory about a shadow organization that creates the C53's in an attempt to build a parahuman army to take over the world. Supposedly the omega symbol is actually a C. Members include Alexandria, Eidolon, Glaistig Uaine, Accord, Phir Se, and a mysterious member known only as "The Fedora Lady"

naturally people ignore the fact that if there IS a shadow conspiracy, then they're incompetent as all hell, because the world is still a crapsack. Honestly at this point a dictator might be a good thing so long as they fix this place.

► Lightgryffin
Replied on February 13, 2011:
@Floating_Soul

Thanks for the info and REALLY?! People really think that? Ugh.

► Floating_Soul
Replied on February 13, 2011:
@Lightgryffin

Never underestimate the boundless stupidity of people. Case in point: Kaiser. The FUCK is he doing running a criminal organization? He could be making WAY more money just supplying metal with his powers. Hell Uber could turn himself into the best surgeon the world has ever seen. And that's fucking UBER. The guy who hangs out LEET for gods sake.
Addendum: Or String Theory! She was like a leet who's shit actually worked! And could be built multiple times! She could have been one of the strongest and most wealthy people on the planet if she just put down the idiot ball! But nope, went psycho, and wound up in the birdcage. (Good riddance. Chick was madder than a hatter.)

Sphere knew what he was doing. Before the ziz fucked him up.

This is why I can't stand the whole canary thing actually. They're gonna stick her in the birdcage, with only one confirmed misuse of her powers, when she would make rounding up villains easy as all hell for the PRT. Tinkertech earplugs cannot be that hard to give to PRT agents.

EDIT: Ah fuck I started ranting again. Sorry guys. Back on topic: Holy shit a C53 cure! Bet that's gonna piss of the shadow organizations

► TechnoShinobi (Verified Cape) (Toybox)
Replied on February 13, 2011:
Well I had an interesting business trip, the highlights where, in order:

Volunteering some of my drones to locate bombs
Getting a recruitment speech from Armsmaster
Giving an recruitment speech to Kid Win
Meeting Oracle and giving her a couple of Toybox catalogs and my business card (OOC: if this is not okay with the author I apologize)

Before I forget please check out this video of Über and L33t demonstrating Toybox's newest product The Ultimate Gaming Rig.

► Ruanwae_Door
Replied on February 13, 2011:
Okay. I just got back from beach vacation, and got caught up on the last few weeks of PHO (no internet where I was staying, ) Wow. Animom is amazing. But the other stuff that's been going on. Kaiser's breakout. Oni Lee going on a rampage. The general rise in gang violence and theft in Brockton Bay in general. The shadowy organization no one really truly knows anything about called Cauldron. The prices on corn and chicken going sky high. I'm pretty sure it's all because of Coil. It's gotta be. Well, maybe not the sky high prices on corn and chicken. I'll admit that being on the list is likely just me being mad I can't get as much of my favorite foods lately as I'm used to, but...

Also - My Cooking Blog - Newest recipe is Scrambled Eggs and Crumbled Bacon Oatmeal. Next week I'm planning on doing a new version of, and hoping to get something even I'm willing to call edible this time, Chocolate Chip Cookie Ramen. Probably Not A Coil Plot.

► BabblingBrook (Original Poster) (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 13, 2011:
@Ruanwae_Door Coil? Really? The only "villain" in this town more irrelevant than the King's Street Merchants? You think he's behind all this crap? My sentai-nightmare is more likely, man.

► Uauie_Oeaiou
Replied on February 13, 2011:
@Ruanwae_Door - Dang it, you always give me so many new ideas. Which is great, but I have to work most of the day, you know?

Alas, cape fight collateral damage took out power to my place and the refrigerator was off long
enough for a lot of things to defrost so I'll have to use them up quickly or lose them entirely, and there's no time for experiments. COOOIIIIL! 😁

► **Mab, Queen of Air and Darkness**
Replied on February 13, 2011:
@ Floating_Soul: I cannot even comprehend the utter foolishness of whoever conceived this idea. Why would the Queen of Fairies have any need to conquer humans, let alone help other humans to do so?

It has to be mentioned that even L33t should be capable of doing great things, it is not only Über who is squandering his potential.

► **Floating_Soul**
Replied on February 13, 2011:
I am more than aware of Leet's potential. I just don't think his stuff will stop blowing up in order to let him use it.

► **Ruanwae_Door**
Replied on February 13, 2011:
@ BabblingBrook: I'm not your typical Tinfoil Hat (except when I'm sleep-deprived, then I think I could be worse than your typical Tinfoil Hat; I don't think I'll ever quite atone for the "Coil tries to create / employ Pseudo-Endbringer" incident, and I once again deeply apologize for that) - I'm not wedded to the idea that everything must be a conspiracy and must be the work of my chosen subject. I'm perfectly willing to admit that I could be wrong about some of my guesses of what Coil's up to, and that Coil likely isn't behind everything that ever went wrong everywhere. However, too much that goes wrong in Brockton Bay, and some things in some places nearby, can traced back to Coil in some way for any f it to be a coincidence. For someone with only apparently-3rd party provided / bought Tinkertech weapons and apparently semi-competent mercenaries, it's far too unlikely for Coil to have been as successful as he has been in the Bay, especially considering the competition, without Coil heavily cheating somehow.

@ Uauie_Oeaip:
Always happy to help inspire someone else in a field I enjoy, even if I'm not as skilled I want to be. In 2 weeks or so I'm planning on a blog entry on a new idea I've been working on - a chilled chocolate pudding sandwich. Just haven't decided on what will go on the sandwich besides the pudding. Hmm. Peanut butter? Marshmallow fluff? Teriyaki sauce? All of the above?

► **BabblingBrook** (Original Poster) (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 14, 2011:
@Ruanwae_Door sorry but Coil's kinda like a local Simurgh stand-in. "Coildidit" is a meme on some of the IRC channels I frequent (#BBBusiness on SynIRC, I'm Inhunam_Resources). Working theory among people who live here, at least that I speak with, is that Coil's so small-time that the gangs don't bother with him. Like I said, King's Street Merchants are the gold standard for "too irrelevant to bother with," and he's lower-profile than they are. They at least share a name with the Archer's Bridge Merchants, which is what everyone in this town is referring to when they say "The Merchants." Coil's just some dude with mercs and a big enough budget to get tinkertech shit.

► **Ruanwae_Door**
Replied on February 14, 2011:
@BabblingBrook That's what I'm talking about though. The Merchants have 3 capes, one of them a Tinker, which is probably one of the only reasons they're relevant at all; it's a well-known that while
Tinkers themselves are usually baseline human, given enough time and even small amount of supplies, they can make any group of people into a real power. The Empire 88 has the most capes of any gang in Brockton Bay. And ABB have Oni Lee and Lung. Yeah, the fewest capes of any gang in BB, but the powers Oni Lee and Lung have are what make the difference, with Oni Lee suicide bombing everyone in a battle with clones, and Lung being, well, Lung. A normal gang hanging with that kind of competition on any level is not normal. Or at least all of that was true before Kith and their Animom anyways. Heh.

Anyhow, Coil has some kind of edge. It's the only explanation for why's he's been able to hold any territory at all. Nothing else makes sense. Whether it's a secret Tinker and he's just having all his men's Tinkertech weapons made to look like stuff bought from the Elite or Toybox, some Thinker power (Coil himself or someone he strong-armed?,) or a massive blackmail scheme or some combination of the above, or something else, I dunno. I mean, there are days I honestly wonder if he doesn't have his own secret little Thinker sweatshop hidden in Brockton Bay somewhere, forcing enslaved Thinkers to look over every one of the other gangs for weaknesses and crap.

On other matters... I've been searching for something new to do with My Cooking Blog. Does anyone know exactly how big those infamous Challenger burger patties are at Brockton Bay's Fugly Bob's? I live down south (a few hundred miles... maybe, ) of Philly, PA, so a visit to Brockton Bay is unlikely. Assuming I was willing to butt my hard head into the crazy battles going on anyways. I ask because I'm trying to figure out how to make a Cookie Monster Burger.

---

**Kindfragen**
Replied on February 14, 2011:
GaetwaeWanderer said:

Well, maybe not the sky high prices on corn and chicken.

Correction: That is part of Coil's plan to take over the economy of BB. Or so mother says. Mother enjoys playing with people's heads for fun, however, so take that however you wish.

MadGreenSon:
Offhand: We have been casually stalking you under mother's orders. You mentioned earlier that you were, essentially, a horrible person to be around.
Approval: We enjoy you just as you are. You are a terrible person. Never change.

GaetwaeWanderer:
Confusion: Cookie monster? Like that show? Or the thing that big brother tells me eats my food when we leave the table?

---

**Ruanwae_Door**
Replied on February 14, 2011:
On your correction concerning Coil... I am confused. Mind you, I think that might be my normal state of being. Maybe. But... Vindication? Maybe? But that would mean less corn and chicken and chicken might be a long term problem. I am so very torn...
And yes, Cookies Monster like the show. He's one of my childhood heroes. Admittedly, I'm a little more specialized in my reverence of cookies, preferring those with chocolate (chips,) alone to most others, but there's very many options even with just chocolate variations. Chocolate chip, of course, but also double chocolate chip (chocolate cookie with chocolate chips in it, :drools: ) chocolate mint, chocolate truffle cookies, etc. So very much you can do... And I want to take the cookie beyond that,
and make it a part of the everyday meal. Hence the Cookie Monster Burger. If I can get this right, I bet the sky's the limit...

► Lightgryffin
Replied on February 14, 2011:
You ever tried chocolate Mayan cookies? One more for the books there.

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► Kindfragen
Replied on February 14, 2011:
Ruanwae_Door
Amusement: You must ask yourself; A burger, or a cookie in the approximate shape of a burger?
Pleasure: Cookies are wonderful. A burger-like cookie would be...
Authority: A hint of mint, a hint of peanut butter. Chocolate, and cream. cookie dough. Some raw cookie dough filling, the acceptably edible kind.
Warning: Big brother says we eat enough sugar to kill a horse. Be wary of my recommendations.

► EvilRussianThinker (Verified Cape) (Moscow Survivor) (Black Hundred) (Case 53)
Replied on February 14, 2011:
Interesting... We sending our Special Super Agent Romanoff to investigate this "cure" for so called "Case 53" (why not use "monstercape"? It's perfectly correct termin. F...g tolerance.) and establish contact with this "Animom".
If this true, then we will gather all our Case 53 and use our Silent Armada to send them across the sea to this glorious healer.
If necessary we will pay her in gold.
Although being monstercape is awesome, if I can say so myself, it still have it`s own negative sides...
P.S. no, we still don`t know why Special Super Agent Romanoff appears in the Earth Aleph movies "Iron Man 2" and "Avengers". She`s certainly doesn`t remember being transdimensional traveller.

► Ruanwae_Door
Replied on February 14, 2011:
@Lightgryffin

So very many options. Hadn't heard of Mayan chocolate cookies before now but I'll be looking them up.

Kindfragen

Ah, but I'm planning on going for the best of both worlds - a burger patty between 2 cookies. The problem is I'm not sure thick either the burger patty or the cookies should be. And probably put some bacon and cheese in there too. I'm likely going to do several variations of the Cookie Burger, but I want the Cookie Monster Burger to be big and thick cookies and burger patty both. And I was intending to use Fugly Bob's Challenger Burger as a model, something to give me an idea of how make the Cookie Monster Burger.

Anyways, back on topic. I've been thinking - Kith and their Animom have proven they can dish out
justice on level you don't see very often anywhere, let alone in Brockton Bay. I'm thinking they may get people asking to join their group, especially maybe some of the Case 53's looking to get 'cured' by Animom. Anyone have any thoughts on who might ask to join up? And maybe some bets on who might be Coil plants...

► Keto
Replied on February 13, 2011:
...How did we even start talking about cookies? *Sigh*

I wonder how they're doing in civilian life? I hope they're not having difficulties in school...they seem young enough.

► Trufla (Unverified Cape)
Replied on February 12, 2011:
This is PHO, home of the wandering thread topic.
As for Kith's potential school issues, I know if I had an option, I would go the homeschool route. Sure, that means you have to basically self-evident on your studyhabits, but unless they are out patrolling at all hours, it makes keeping the private life private a lot easier.

► Ruanwae_Door
Replied on February 13, 2011:
It's never a bad time to be talking about cookies. I will always wander back to food at some point, chocolate chip cookies most of all.
But back on topic. I haven't seen a whole lot of discussion on how people think Kith's actions are going to change the landscape of Brockton Bay. They've caught Oni Lee, though he could be broken out of captivity as easily as Kaiser, maybe more so considering it'll be Lung who does it. Unless the PRT ask Kith guard Oni Lee. If Anima can disable Oni Lee, I don't see how Lung stands a chance.
Anyways, I think in the current environment, E88 heavily whooped and desperate, ABB missing one of their heavy hitters, we'll be seeing action of some sort from the Merchants and Coil. I think the way things stand, Coil is going to be forced to act soon. He can't easily manipulate anything the way things are now, and it's only a matter of time before he's exposed. Which leaves the Merchants to either to step up, or become Kith's next targets.
I've been looking at something special for My Food Blog - Has anyone ever heard of cookie spreads? They're not exactly very well-known so far as I can tell, but my local grocery store carries them, store and name brands. The name brand is apparently made from some European brand cookie, while the store brand's flavors are available in "Speculoos, Snickerdoodle, Chocolate Creme, and Strawberry Shortcake Cookie Spreads." Chocolate Creme is of course my favorite. But the idea of this has inspired me. I'm looking into what it would take to turn a batch of Chocolate Chip cookies into spread like this.
Edit: I... never mind. Someone's already done a chocolate chip cookie spread. But... it's not available in my area. Why? Just, why?

► Floating_Soul
Replied on February 13, 2011:
Because the universe is a cruel and evil mistress who cares not for the lives of ants such as we. Even for the sake of delicious chocolate chip cookies.
Replied on February 13, 2011:

Older-than-Time: "Back to Animom curing Newter."

So, she cures 53s. I put in a transfer request to the Bay on the off chance that's this isn't a freak accident because...

...because. Being a hero is amazing; having Alexandria as a leader is even better. But if there's even the smallest chance that I'll get to have a normal body like everyone else? A chance at being able to walk down the street without being stared at by everyone in sight?

That's a chance worth taking, even if it means dealing with Nazis, druggies and the rage dragon.

Kindfragen

Replied on February 13, 2011:

Older-Than-Time: 

Interest: Perhaps this should be set like a pilgrimage for other 53s? We imagine it would be rather akin to a religious experience for some.

Disregard: Even those under the influence shouldn't be stupid enough to attack you if you are as visible as you say. From what We have heard the Dragon only leaves his Lair when suitably pissed.

Annoyance: Those of the Millennium Empire may eat your face off. We suggest mild to moderate caution in their territory.

Replied on February 13, 2011:

So, my transfer request is pending and for some reason, some of the Protectorate heroes here in LA keep trying to convince me not to see if Animom is able to make me normal. Says that I could lose my powers for good if she isn't able to control her power properly. Alexandria keeps saying I should be proud of who I am now and to stop trying to chase after the past. Not sure how I feel about that; maybe a thing she went through?

Anyways, it's not like most of them really understand what 53s go through. Not all of us are as lucky as Weld over in Boston. At least he LOOKS mostly human. Some of us are stuck with insane bodies and stuff.

Seriously, looking like an escaped Nilbog-monster sucks...

Replied on February 13, 2011:

Newter seemed to be doing fine.

Replied on February 13, 2011:

Newter is a mercenary, has hands and opposable thumbs. I have tentacles and look like something out of the sewers.

Granted, he does have that hallucinogenic sweat, but he's cured right now. I'm not.

Kindfragen

Replied on February 13, 2011:

Older-Than-Time: "Seriously, looking like an escaped Nilbog-monster sucks..."
Confusion: Why would it be displeasing?
Amusement: Wear a stylish hat when you go about their business. It will destroy their fragile minds.
Assurance: That will also make the common passerby far too confused to be afraid. Spectacles and/or a large (fake) mustache (multiple?) will further enhance this effect.

► ThEyOuNgOnE
Replied on February 13, 2011:
Older-Than-Time: No, I meant that Newter is doing fine even after getting cured by Animom. And from what I could tell, it was her first time doing it too. He doesn't seem to be suffering any ill effects.

You should come and see if she'll help you out

► Older-than-Time (Verified Cape) (Wards LA) (Case 53)
Replied on February 13, 2011:
I gotta wait until transfer request goes through. Being underage (we think), I'm a ward of the state and the PRT/Protectorate are my legal guardians.

So yeah, regulations, man.

► Floating_Soul
Replied on February 13, 2011:
Older-Than-Time

Aaaaah the glorious red tape. Destroyer of hopes and dreams.

► Lightgryffin
Replied on February 13, 2011:
Soooooo... Older-Than-Time but younger than 18?

► Older-than-Time (Verified Cape) (Wards LA) (Case 53)
Replied on February 13, 2011:
I picked it out of a hat when I was still learning to type

► Lightgryffin
Replied on February 13, 2011:
Huh. So what were the other ones, if you don't mind my asking?

► Older-than-Time (Verified Cape) (Wards LA) (Case 53)
Replied on February 13, 2011:
I don't mind.

Here they are:

Kid-thulhu
Tentacle-Bonanza
Pump-a-Rump
Slender-Slim
Young-and-Hopeful
Under-the-Bed
Not-In-The-Closet
Huggles-Esquire

► Kindfragen
Replied on February 13, 2011:
Repentance: Big brother says We are being disrespectful again. Apologies.
Assurance: I do like the name you have second best.
Superiority: Not-In-The-Closet is the best.

► Ultimate_Pheer (Cape Groupie)
Replied on February 13, 2011:
That you aren't Not-In-The-Closet is a damn crying shame.

► GreatestBugsOfAll
Replied on February 13, 2011:
Well, I sure as hell won't be going to Brockton Bay. I like being a bunny.
... but yeah, Older-than-Time, buddy? If you need it, go there now.

► Newter (Verified Cape) (maybe former Case 53)
Replied on February 13, 2011:
So... new account! Just for answering all the questions that are going to be had.
Right now, they're seeing whether the effects will be detoriating or whether it involves Master control, so far, no signs - but Thinker observations will probably continue for at least a few days, give them that much, Older-Than-Time.
What the effects are, exactly: Apparently, Anima can grant Case53s a weird Changer power - basically, I can now switch between being my normal self and a much more standard-human looking form with reduced power (with better control over what's left). The same goes for Newter.
Since the local Protectorate is... kind of in a spot of trouble right now (I don't know any details, just... there's been some weird stuff happening and everyone who talked to me was really, really tight-lipped) there most likely won't be any agreement made with Anima until that's over - however, I'm not sure whether anybody would need to come to Brockton Bay permanently to get cured. So far, I'm retaining that ability without any apparent detoriation during the past few days, and they have tried sending me around a bit to check on whether it detoriates with distance. I'm currently in Northern Italy, actually. LA shouldn't be a problem.

Maybe wait with the transfer request until you know whether you need to transfer to the city on a permanent basis or whether a day trip will be enough? I mean, would you want to transfer if you don't have to to get cured?

► Older-than-Time (Verified Cape) (Wards LA) (Case 53)
Replied on February 12, 2011:
@ GreatestBugsOfAll If they deny me even a few days vacation to visit Brockton, then fuck, I'm going.

@ Newter I'll give it a week. I want thumbs and legs, damn it!

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► MadGreenSon (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 13, 2011:
@ Older-Than-Time: It would be pretty shitty of them to deny you the chance to get the ability to live a more normal life, if you so desire it. Assuming there are no complications. So... I'll prey for you that a government agency decides to do the non-shitty thing in this day and age.

► Kindfragen
Replied on February 13, 2011:
Older-Than-Time:
Shock: You don't have thumbs.
Annoyance: This must be addressed immediately. Regain your opposable appendages. Now.
Assurance: Your timetables seem intelligent. Proceed.

► Gold917
Replied on February 12, 2011:
Look, I know opposable thumbs are all the rage these days, but trust me when I say that shit's overrated. Though I might be biased, having overextended both my thumbs on multiple occasions. They weren't even related to each other...
(I'm kidding, of course, go nuts! Break a le-well...get a leg first! 🎀)

► Floating_Soul
Replied on February 13, 2011:
I'm sure Alexandria thinks highly of you for being proud of who you are now. You should reassure her that you will continue as you are. Preferably to the dulcet tones of Rick Astley.

► AngryFox (Verified Procrastinator)
Replied on February 13, 2011:
*Mark Hamill as Luke Starkiller whine* Please, stahp! There's enough horribly written Bugs/Alexandria crack-shipping as it is!

*Normal voice* I mean, it's my OTP, naturally... but the stuff online here is just so badly written.
*Mark Hamill as Luke Starkiller whine* Please, stahp! There's enough horribly written Bugs/Alexandria crack-shipping as it is!

► Floating_Soul
Replied on February 13, 2011:
Sturgeon's law. 90% of everything is shit, its the remaining 10% that's worth it. I live my life by that code.

► Older-than-Time (Verified Cape) (Wards LA) (Case 53)
Replied on February 13, 2011:
So, Legend was here in LA. Supposedly for a meeting, but since LA and SF are basically Case53 central...

He had this big talk to the 53 Anonymous group about being who you are and embracing the man/woman inside you. It was really amazing, especially the awesome lightshow. A freaking sunset and splashing waves in the background as he spoke passionately on the evils of intolerance and how we all could make a difference if we would just take the first step...

Definitely awaiting the news on the permanency of Holy Anima's cure.
Floating_Soul  
Replied on February 13, 2011:  
Might want to drop the holy part there buddy. I get it's practically a miracle, but taking things to far is how those nutjobs the fallen got their start.  

(must...not...rant...about...religion...)  

Older-than-Time (Verified Cape) (Wards LA) (Case 53)  
Replied on February 13, 2011:  
Hey, this is America. Religious freedom and all that. Plus, Legend and Mouse Protector fully endorse personal freedom!  

Floating_Soul  
Replied on February 13, 2011:  
Yeah I get it, I just can't help but think animom would either be deathly embarrassed, or actually play up the religious figure.  

And the second one scares me. That is how cults start.  

Older-than-Time (Verified Cape) (Wards LA) (Case 53)  
Replied on February 13, 2011:  
Correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't the correct response to the question:"Are you a God?", [YES]?  

EvilRussianThinker (Verified Cape) (Moscow Survivor) (Black Hundred) (Case 53)  
Replied on February 13, 2011:  
I'll find Assistant Bob. He'll be great help if someone decide to start the Church of Anima. For those of you who doesn't know him, Assistant Bob is highranked Thinker, lowlevel Brute, Master and Mover, who specialized on helping various cult leaders, gang leaders, democratically elected presidents of small countries and other shadowy figures by training minions and solving administration problems. Also known as "Bob from Hydra".  

Floating_Soul  
Replied on February 13, 2011:  
@Older-thanTime: ...touché  

The_Unpronounceable (Veteran Member)  
Replied on February 13, 2011:  
...  
...  
*puts on tinfoil hat*  
... Okay is it juat me or is something fishy going on here? One of LA Ward hears about Animom's newfound ability and wish to test it out and suddenly both Alexandria AND Legend starts talking about accepting what your are and what not.  

Seriously looks as if they don't WANT you to do it. If your vacation isn't approved for any reason except city wide gang war or Endbringer showdown, find a way to go under and head to Brockton ASAP.  

Floating_Soul  
Replied on February 13, 2011:  
Yeah that sure as shit ain't no coincidence. I mean if it was just Legend he may very well just be
trying to keep C53 from getting their hopes up in case Animon's ability has side effects, but
Alexandria? Nah. Think they may believe that C53's will leave the protectorate if they can get cured?

► Older-than-Time (Verified Cape) (Wards LA) (Case 53)
Replied on February 13, 2011:
That's...

That makes a lot of sense.

► Floating_Soul
Replied on February 13, 2011:
Protectorate may be a company of heroes, but they are still at their core a GOVERNMENT COMPANY.

► Trufla (Unverified Cape)
Replied on February 12, 2011:
If you look at the mass of rules and regulations Protectorate capes have to deal with, that might well be a big part of it. I'll admit that here in Iceland we don't have quite the level of restriction that's evolved in the U.S., but it seems to me that capes there almost have to join up if they want to operate openly without being mostly barred from any serious use of most powers.

► Floating_Soul
Replied on February 13, 2011:
America! Land of the free! So long as you do EXACTLY what your friendly local government tells you to with your freedom!

► EvilRussianThinker (Verified Cape) (Moscow Survivor) (Black Hundred) (Case 53)
Replied on February 13, 2011:
The cake is a lie.

► Lightgryffin
Replied on February 13, 2011:
I happen to have just eaten a very fine cake thank you very much.

► EvilRussianThinker (Verified Cape) (Moscow Survivor) (Black Hundred) (Case 53)
Replied on February 13, 2011:
That cake also was a lie. Trust me, i'm Thinker.

► Trufla (Unverified Cape)
Replied on February 13, 2011:
It does make me wonder just how long Kith is going to be able to hold on to their Independent status, though if Anima's ability to rewire a Case53's physical look proves out, that ought to give them a pretty decent leverage in their favor.

► MadGreenSon (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 13, 2011:
@ Trufla: I think they'll stay as independent as they choose to be. They're tough enough to hold their own against the gangs and other criminals and they seem willing to work with legitimate authorities without much BSing around. There's no reason for the PRT or other legit groups to try any shenanigans either, as that wouldn't serve their interests.

► Gold917
Replied on February 13, 2011:
There might actually be some serious security concerns about all the Case 53s possibly headed up here. I mean, not all 53s are villains, but it's not exactly an uncommon thing for Monstrous capes to go evil. It wouldn't be particularly unsurprising if said villainous Case 53s tried to sneak in alongside the ones the Protectorate want cured (i.e. their own capes). If they can discourage free access and restrict Case 53 movement across the country, it can be another card to 'encourage' Protectorate Membership.

How hard would it be for the PRT to say 'Ooooh, sorry, she's busy right now' without even telling her about it? Hell, what's stopping her from being part of that whole scheme? She's certainly not going to be accepting Case 53s visiting her at home, any changes she makes to the scene will likely happen through the PRT anyways.

It'd be pretty easy to restrict it.

If this is true, Older Than Time, you're probably safe and you'll get access fairly soon. Not your 53 Anonymous friends, but definitely you. [B]

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► MadGreenSon (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 14, 2011:
Yo, Gold917! You know how I was getting static for knowing all kinds of statistics? Here's one for you: it's extremely uncommon for Case 53s to end up villainous.

Right around 2%, in fact. Guess what the rate is for alleged "Normal Parahumans"?

► Trufla (Unverified Cape)
Replied on February 14, 2011:
I suppose that working out a way for Anima to work her ability on any given Case53 is going to fall into three general issues. First, there is a privacy concern. Not every individual is going to feel comfortable giving up as much personal information that Anima will be privy to to the Protectorate. Unwritten rules or not, a lot of non-Protectorate individuals are likely to insist on some form of privacy guarantees before they would come to any sort of open clinic style deal.

Second, unless Anima and Kith are going to make this a priority issue, there are going to be scheduling issues with non-Protectorate capes interfering with any sort of regular patrols the team might set up. (After all, these are the individuals who will also be affected by the first point I mentioned most strongly.)

Granted, this time crunch will taper off as time goes on, until eventually the "backlog" runs out, but there are still a lot of Case53's out there.

Third, and related to the first two issues, is going to be the likelihood that someone is going to try and
block the entire exercise. I know, you're asking who would try that tactic, but my general cynicism tells me that somewhere out there has to be a small group or even just one or two driven individuals who feel that Case53's exist as they are for a reason and will want to block any action that provides any sort of positive alteration to their status. This is the reason I hope Oracle's really on top of her game, since she's Anima's first line of defense.

► Gold917
Replied on February 14, 2011:
@ MadGreenSon: Wait, seriously? I...legitimately did not know that.

► MadGreenSon (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 14, 2011:
Believe it or not, despite physical issues which cause some Case 53s extreme difficulty in life, they tend to, as a rule, be much more psychologically stable and more often law abiding than more standard parahumans.
I guess experiential amnesia erases psychological issues.

► Floating_Soul
Replied on February 14, 2011:
Not remembering the trauma that made you a cape would probably wind up with more stable people in general yes. Also the PRT is a hell of a lot better than most gangs tend to be when dealing with new C53. I may give them shit but they are pretty damn good at calming down people who are just terrified that they'll be arrested on sight. Whereas your average gangbanger tends to react in a more "Oh god shoot it now" way

End of Page. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

Topic: Riot At the Disco (Yes, there really was a riot)
In: Boards

BeatMasterSlim (Original Poster)
Posted on February 14, 2011:

So, this just happened. Two capes, not local, got into it during Ladies' Night at Disco Forty-Nine. The one in red on the left, we're pretty sure is Ravager. The one on the right...is totally Mouse Protector. The lack of mouse ears does not hide her identity when her voice sounds the same and the HAM!!! is just as bad as expected.

The owner wants to sue the PRT, but since Mouse Protector wasn't technically there, we got no case.

On the other hand, seeing Ravager get her rear tossed out to the beat of Disco Inferno while MP dances her tush off was amazing and I never knew I needed to see that.

Is MP always that awesome?

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Alb
Replied on February 14, 2011:
Yes. Yes, she is.

MadGreenSon (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 14, 2011:
Mouse Protector is a favorite of mine. She kinda reminds me of my ex... Except my ex was taller, Italian and not a parahuman. ;P

End of Page. 1

 Topic: Fallen Down - Taking Merchants with him
 In: Boards ► News ► Events ► America ► Brockton Bay

White Fairy (Original Poster) (Veteran Member)
Posted on February 15, 2011:

So... yes, another member of the Fallen bit it. Valefor recently infiltrated Brockton Bay, set the Merchants up as a distraction for something they talked around a lot (see this official news page here), then promptly got caught just like his unwilling henchmen. My only problem is: Anybody has got any clue how they actually caught him?

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Kicker of Shins
Replied on February 15, 2011:
Oh how the mighty have fallen...

I heard it was a mysterious fedora wearing individual, like some old school gumshoe. Be hilarious if it's just a normal guy and not a cape, wouldn't that be a blow to his ego. Big boost for the little guy though.

EvilRussianThinker (Verified Cape) (Moscow Survivor) (Black Hundred) (Case 53)
Replied on February 14, 2011:
It’s totally was Conspiracy. And Simurgh’s plot.

Ruanwae_Door
Replied on February 15, 2011:
So, in brief summary... Valefor more or less helped Brockton Bay while trying to hurt it by gathering up the Merchants for the PRT and Protectorate to round up, and then got himself beaten by some mysterious guy we basically nothing about? Huh... I'd say Coil plot, but I've got no idea how this could possibly be one. Dangerous as Valefor has usually been in most of his appearances, I can't really imagine Coil being willing to try to control someone willing to act this stupid.

ThatOtherButcher (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 15, 2011:
Well, it's quite simple. Vista can feel humans where she can't properly bend space. So they gave her a weapon, put her next to the juiciest targets and gave everyone opaque contact lenses.

► **BabblingBrook** (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 15, 2011:
My money's on some normal guy with a baseball bat sneaking up behind him. Masters don't usually have physical enhancements iirc.

► **Sagittarius** (Unverified Cape) (Unverified Centaur)
Replied on February 15, 2011:
@ BabblingBrook
I'd say a crowbar is more likely. Or a tire iron. Wasn't there that one normal kid that once helped Miss Militia when she was still in the Wards?

► **IrrelevantBystander**
Replied on February 15, 2011:
Well, seeing as the tinfoiling is bound to begin sooner or later, let's just get this out of the way: So, which shadowy organization did Valefor manage to piss off? Illuminati? Cauldron? Freemasons?

More seriously, it's great to see a sorry excuse for a human being like Valefor get shit on by someone who's by all accounts a normal. Do we have any information about our mysterious assailant yet, or how he actually took down that piece of shit?

► **Mab, Queen of Air and Darkness**
Replied on February 16, 2011:
For disturbing the plans of the Fairies, the death of the Deceiver was decided and they guided His hands to enforce their will, as they had so often before.

► **AngryFox** (Verified Procrastinator)
Replied on February 16, 2011:
@ Sagittarius: Wait... my fic now passes the reality check? Yayifications!

► **Trufla** (Unverified Cape)
Replied on February 16, 2011:
Uhm... yeah. In all seriousness, though, it couldn't have happened to a nicer guy. No, actually if this happened to Heartbreaker, I imagine there would be even more fodder for the late night show comedians to work with. Honestly, though, from what I've heard locally (gossip, the only readily available FTL technology), the man was in mid-monologue when he got zapped. As someone who's taken advantage of a similar situation, I can honestly say that if a villain gets a good rant going they tend to go tunnel vision, at least for a minute of so right in the middle. It does give a window of useful opportunity, and that's my contribution to the Cape Tip of the Day file.

► **IrrelevantBystander**
Replied on February 16, 2011:
@ Trufla: You make a good point. Come to think of it, there does seem to be a good number of villains who like to partake in some level of gloating. It kind of make you wonder how many of them could be taken out if more people had the common sense to sucker punch them mid-rant. Hmm...perhaps the PRT should hire crowbar-guy. If we had more people like him around, maybe our villain problem wouldn't be as widespread.
We've all heard of Anima's (see here if you don't know who that is or what I'm talking about) astounding ability to cure Case 53s, or rather, give them the ability to switch back between their own and a human-looking Changer form, said gifted ability being long-term or permanent. Well, now, it's official: the PRT has stated that they'll help Anima organize things, directing Case 53s who want to make use of her powers her way and generally organizing them, as soon as the last tests bear out it doesn't have negative side effects. Though it was very deliberately stated - both on the PRT's website and New Wave's - that it's A) up to Anima whom she helps, and she's allowed to turn people down or say she can't make it on certain days; and B) if you just go to her on your own, she'll have full choice on what to do, still. I imagine it might piss her off if people just rush into her home, though, so... yeah, try PRT. She's also legally required to send in a note to the PRT or Protectorate if she does give anybody that Changer power without supervision.

Sign up board on the PRT's website is here.

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➤ Kicker of Shins
Replied on February 15, 2011:
Going to be a lot of capes after that offer, wow. Good luck to those C53s. Just don't harass her, that's a sure fire way to just annoy her. Wonder if she can affect regular capes though and just hasn't said anything about that.

➤ Ruanwae_Door
Replied on February 15, 2011:
This is good news, and I hope to hear more about it as people trickle into Brockton Bay to get treated by the the Amazing Animom.
My Cooking Blog - Having a serious lack of inspiration lately, so I'm branching out on my blog this week to talk about Deep Dish Bacon-Wrapped Pizza with Crumbled Bacon sprinkled on top. I loved it.

➤ EvilRussianThinker (Verified Cape) (Moscow Survivor) (Black Hundred) (Case 53)
Replied on February 15, 2011:
@Ruanwae_Door (Not A Real Chef)
Amazing Marbled Master is that you? I thought Leviathan killed you...
(i suspect this because you can’t create such things without parahuman ability to generate unlimited amounts of bacon)

- Speculation about cape identities are forbidden on this forum. Have an infraction. -

TinMother
Floating_Soul
Replied on February 15, 2011:
I love how anima gets a sign-up list but panacea doesn't. Speaking as a guy who worked as a doctor for a few years before having to quit because the stress literally made me want to kill myself, why does nobody think of this stuff when it comes to the wonder-medicine girl? She has a life like anima too. Hell one time I saw her curing a dude with a broken arm, why the fuck is she healing shit that can heal on its own anyways? Unless you are in imminent danger of dying, you don't drink a health potion when natural regeneration will take care of it for you.

Sagittarius (Unverified Cape) (Unverified Centaur)
Replied on February 15, 2011:
You know, given everything Bagrat said, I'm almost willing to bet that some idiot is going to try to kidnap Animom and force her to cure them, because hey, it's not like her doing it for free is enough; no, some special snowflake idiot out there will probably go "You're not healing anyone else but me!" or something else as equally stupid.

Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to compose my request message. As much as I love having the equipment that comes with it, washing my body as it is now is all levels of hard as fuck without any help.

MadGreenSon (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 15, 2011:
@ Sagittarius: Kidnap the cape that leads and is the mother/mother figure of a team of verifiably badass capes that have handed many a heavy hitter their own asses in the short time since their debut? That would be ridiculously stupi... Oh right. Villains. They'll be lining up around the block to get their asses kicked.

Floating_Soul
Replied on February 15, 2011:
@ Sagittarius
...I am both morbidly intrigued, and really, REALLY don't want to know more.

@ MadGreenSon
Started a betting pool on how long it takes before the first attempt here I've got 100$ riding on it happening by next weekend.

Sagittarius (Unverified Cape) (Unverified Centaur)
Replied on February 15, 2011:
@ MadGreenSon
Stupider things have happened. I mean, IIRC, the reason the Merchant's Cape count was only 3 (well... you know, before they'd Fallen down) was because one died after he literally took a piss on Lung and another was captured trying to break his (rumored) brother out of prison... from the wrong prison... two states away.

I know all those guys were probably more stoned than that one independent in Denver, but seriously, if there has been any proof that humans can be the stupidest creatures on the planet, it's them. I wouldn't put it past some idiot to try getting past all of Kith just to kidnap Animom. That's not even
going into the possibly literal army of C53s who'll march to wherever they would be like the fist of am angry god.

@Floating_Soul
Hey, no fair, starting betting pools is supposed to be my shtick.

► Floating_Soul
Replied on February 15, 2011:
@ Sagittarius
I would PAY to see an angry mob of C53 marching cross-state to beat the shit out of some villain who pulled that.
Seriously though, animom just became one of the most strongly protected capes on the PLANET.
We're talking endbringer style truce here. And you do NOT want to have to deal with villains like Tombstone and Bog after you. Especially not at the same time as heroes like Unassailable.

► Sagittarius (Unverified Cape) (Unverified Centaur)
Replied on February 15, 2011:
I'd... pick my words a lot more thoughtfully if I were you. Otherwise you could wake up to find Animom tied up in your basement and all your money gone. Wouldn't be the first time a merc group decided to force their services on someone who said something like that.

► Floating_Soul
Replied on February 15, 2011:
If they're ballsy enough to bring animom all the way to Portland then they can go ahead. I'm one of the people lucky enough to get OUT of the bay.

► Sagittarius (Unverified Cape) (Unverified Centaur)
Replied on February 15, 2011:
No see, when I said that, I meant that she'd be kept in your house. As in, as far as a lot of those people are concerned, you're the one who ordered her kidnapping.
You can't see a mob of C53s better than when you're their goddamn target.

► Floating_Soul
Replied on February 15, 2011:
I know. And I'M saying that if they manage to bring animom all the way to Portland without getting caught, AND find my house out of all the houses out there, simply because of something I said on PHO, then I'd pop a brewski and watch the fireworks. I'm seventy fucking eight, I have no problems going out at the hands of the greatest angry mob in history.

► EvilRussianThinker (Verified Cape) (Moscow Survivor) (Black Hundred) (Case 53)
Replied on February 15, 2011:
30 minutes ago, when Animom was visiting PHQ, parahuman mercenary group known as Dragonslayers was trying to kidnap her. Their attempt was interrupted by Armsmaster, Miss Militia and Special Super Agent Romanoff. You can see this at video here.

► Agent Romanoff (Verified Cape)
Replied on February 15, 2011:
@EvilRussianThinker
Delete this! It was embarrassing, they stole my uniform and ran away, and then...
Saying too much.

► Ruanwae_Door
Replied on February 15, 2011:
@ EvilRussianThinker

Umm, no. Not a cape. Honestly not the first time people have asked me that when they hear of my culinary tastes and the experiments they inspire, but I've been like this since I was a little kid, with the pictures and a video of me drenched in chocolate to prove it. If I was a Cape, I probably have been able to shut up about it.
I'm that kind of guy

► MadGreenSon (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 16, 2011:
@ Floating_Soul: As much fun as the betting pool would be, I've got too many of my spare dollars tied up in getting people out of the worst cities in the US right now. Including Brockton Bay. I'm not too sanguine on the C53 curing cape being there leading to greater stability either, all things considered.

► The_Unpronounceable (Veteran Member)
Replied on February 16, 2011:
Older, get your ass in gear and start applying, ASAP. People will still be skeptical at first and the numbers of request won't be as numerous as later so take your chance and do it

End of Page. 1

He sighed.

He'd watched the Bugs' videos and looked at both the belonging thread and the Riot At the Disco One - everybody needed a bit of a laugh now and then, he was going to show them to Noelle later - before he'd stumbled over the Brockton Bay News threads.

A cure.

A cure had just popped up spontaneously, out of nowhere, with the announcement that nothing more was going to be needed than contacting the PRT. Or... probably better to see whether there was a forum thread in PHO or whether Anima was going to set up an account soon.

"Everybody? You've got to see this", he shouted, uncarin that they were in the middle of a nearly-abandoned building, him holding an almost-broken laptop, sitting in a dusty room with half-broken furniture.

It was Sundancer - Mars, he should call her Mars - who answered first.

He turned he laptop to her.

She looked at him. "Is that... is that true?"

He shrugged, grinning. "I don't know, but it's loads better than anything else we've found yet, isn't it?
I mean, there's PRT verification and everything!"

The door creaked open. An answering grin spread across Mars' face. "We've got to tell Noelle."

"Tell Noelle what?", Oliver asked, stepping inside.

"The best news we've had yet."

He could feel a smile tugging on his lips.
Oh Fifty Three, oh Fifty Three - 7.1

The workdays of the week and the final results of the Case 53 tests later (yes, everything was safe, no degradation of the given ability yet), the PRT officially carted us to the place were people had it worst: The Parahuman Asylum, otherwise known as the place where those with uncontrollable powers ended up; that is, after a visit to the Protectorate HQ in BB that included a lot of curious noises and shouts in the distance and a meeting with several foreign parties who all wanted to confirm that yes, I was going to help their Case 53s, too.

The PRT had asked whether we had time to do that first, on Saturday, and I'd agreed that they kind of had priority - I mean, none of them could live even the half-way normal lives other Case 53s managed. A handful of the capes who'd joined the Protectorate and had it worst were scheduled, as well.

This meant that all four of us - not Pace, unfortunately - were squetched into a car and driven to the asylum.

On the front lawn of the less-than-welcoming building - I did not trust that structure, it looked crumbly - a few of them awaited us - I recognized Older-Than-Time, who'd complained a lot on the PHO thread and was basically a sentient mass of tentacles, but none of the others - including what appeared to be a sentient pudding, and a misshappen lump with lots of eyes, as well as at least a dozen others.

I breathed in, breathed out, and focused on them, each one in turn, and then - a group of people stood before me, in all ages and with an entire spectrum of hair, eye and skin colours and different sorts of clothing, laughing and looking at their hands, their feet, being handed mirrors and masks by a handful of PRT workers with blindfolds.

Then, it was onwards inside the asylum, stopping in specific rooms, leaving happy, grinning people behind me breaking out into hysterical laughter, crying, or - in one case - hugging and kissing their feet.

Finally, I arrived at the door of a Case53 called "Garrotte", the last one here I could help. A mass of thin tentacles surrounding a human face, she apparently couldn't quite control them.

A few moments later, a human girl stood there, a bit older than my kids and me, staring at her hands as if they were the most amazing thing she'd ever seen.

"I'm… I…" I could see her tearing up, focusing on her hands, just her hands, opening and closing them, waggling her fingers, testing out what she could do.

Wordlessly, Levi offered her chocolate, which she stuck into her mouth and began chewing with closed eyes.

Then, she stared down, glimpsing her bare toes.

"I have toes."

She jumped, up and down, bouncing on her new feet, then started to dance around me, laughing.
"I have toes, I have toes, I have fingers, fingers and toes!" She sounded half-mad, half-glad, staring at herself and moving as if she'd never expected to be able to move so freely, as if it was the best, most glorious thing she ever could have imagined.

She hugged me.

Then Levi.

Then Benny.

Then Sam.

Then the three of us.

All the while babbling: "I'll be able to go to Brockton Bay now - I'll be able to go to school! And meet Winged One and Void Cowboy and - gods, I'll have to ask them for their real names, and -"

Sam's eyes were wide and disbelieving.

… yeah, switching off pre-cog might lead to surprises. Also, I was getting really good at telling when she had it on and off!

"Strings? I mean, Gee-string-girl?"

"Winged One?"

Wait, this was Strings?

In the end, we all sorted it out - Sveta (apparently, that was her civilian name, not that she'd gotten to use it all that much before) - would officially stay with "friends" for a few days, to get used to normal life.

Said friends, of course, being the Heberts. Dad was phoned, played along, and everything went smoothly, with a Doctor who worked there - Ya-something, similar to that firm who makes pianos - having the part of Sveta's "mother" who would like to ask whether her daughter could stay for a few days due to an unfortunate accident involving the family home.

A grinning Sveta was following us, having hit it off with Oracle and Admiral almost immediately, talking about everything between games, math, and programming.

… I had a bad feeling when I heard both of them let out identical squeals at the mention of programming - even Benny looked interested.

How much was I going to regret this?

After we were delivered to Brockton Bay, we dispersed, while Sveta was escorted to our home by Private Jenkins in civilian clothes. Pace, awaiting us, made us form a ring, teleporting us into our home, where we changed clothes, then running to the door when the bell rang.

Dad greeted both Sveta and "her uncle Leeroy", shaking the latter's hand, while a squeeing Sveta got
to hug Sam twice in one day.

Apparently, giving really strong hugs had carried over.

The next stop, of course, was calling Greg. It was Sam who announced there'd be a surprise for him, and then both girls spent the next ten minutes sitting in front of the front door, waiting for Greg to show up, together with Dad, all three grinning like loons.

My family was certifiably crazy. Well, they'd be as soon as I got a certificate to prove it.

In the meantime, palm and forehead had a long and sweet rendezvous.

When the doorbell rang next, Dad looked through the spy-hole, whispering "It's him."

Both Sam and Sveta hid on the other side of the door.

Dad tore it wide open, then:

"SURPRISE!"

Greg stared.

Sveta waved at him, shyly.

"… Strings, that you?"

"Yeah."

"How, what, why…" Greg's stuttering would probably have continued for a good long while if Sveta hadn't decided to throw her arms around him, which shut him up almost immediately, leaving him with a face quickly assuming the colouring of tomato ketchup… catsup… what was the difference between those two again? Except spelling, I mean.

It took him a moment to return the hug, before the two of them sprang apart again, Sveta pulling back a strand of hair and Greg blinking and still holding up his arms before deciding to put them down, then raising them again.

"So… how come you're here?", Greg asked.

"Uh… well… accident at home. We can't stay there for some time, so I'm allowed to stay with the Heberts and Finislators, for now."

"You're staying here? In Brockton Bay, I mean?" There was an odd expression on Greg's face, as if he was stuck in the dream and would want to pinch himself any second.

"Mhm." Sveta nodded. "For at least a week."

"That's awesome." It was quiet, heartfelt, and utterly unlike Greg, who was smiling widely at Sveta.
Who was grinning back just as widely.

… was I going to have to supervise yet another pair of lovestruck teenagers? Please not.

"Uh… Mr Hebert?"

"Yes, Greg?"

"Do you think… I mean, would you mind if I asked my parents whether I might be able to sleep over?"

"Of course not."

And too late.

Thanks Dad. At least it couldn't get wor-

Sam's phone rang, and she picked up. "Hey Lisa!"

"Uh… Mom, would you mind if I went over to Lisa's? She and her friends kind of need help for Monday."

Ah, right, trial. Wait, what?

Oh Hell. How to refuse nicely?

"Not that much, no." Well, now it definitely couldn't -

"Mom, do you think I can come too? I bet Rachel needs help with her dogs." Benny was fidgeting nervously.


Never tempt fate.
Monday came and went, and with it, the Undersiders faced trial for their crimes and were acquitted easily, trigger, parental coercion (… I did not expect that about Regent) and villainous blackmail winning the jury over even before the trial had properly begun, while Coil had landed himself in much less pleasant waters (luckily for the city, Fortress Construction ended up being miraculously saved by an "unknown" investor. Both Sam and Lisa tried - emphasis on tried - to whistle innocently when that was brought up). Their next decision was - using the funds that had "miraculously" (read: through Sam) made their way from Coil's pockets into theirs - to set up a Rogue business, with Regent doing physical therapy, the newly re-christened Alpha helping dogs in need, Grue working with power plants and "Foresight" doing everything from consultations to private investigations, besides the whole group agreeing to help the Protectorate in times of extreme need, the one concession the PRT had managed to squeeze out of them. I didn't get to read the actual contract, but I thought it was probably mostly A- and S-class situations and assisting when they were nearby? Something like that.

"Undersiders Inc." as a company was still taking off though, being hired both for their intended purposes, and in at least one case, for birthday parties.

I'm not joking, that's what Lisa told Sam. Also, Parian had apparently joined up as a sort-of-not-quite-member, for protection, organization and publicity purposes, if I understood everything correctly.

Of course, we were invited to the opening party of the new office building. In costume.

It was a stocky concrete block, built to be defensible, with sleek-looking furniture and heavily reinforced windows. The entire ground level was a bit bigger, built more openly and surrounded by space tailor-made for dogs - plenty of space to run around in and small doghouses for them to sleep in, plus a few "isolation areas" for what I assumed to be traumatized or aggressive dogs.

At the door to the first floor, I was greeted by an unexpected sight: Brian.

"Hi, I'm Brian Laborn, Grue's new assistant." He grinned widely.

Well, that's one way to make sure you got paid for your actual job…

The offices were the party was held had been decorated by what I assumed to have been Lisa - the decorations actually included flowers and were colour-coordinated, which I kind of couldn't see any of the others doing.

There were a lot of people there - mostly tall, blocky guys that looked like they'd be more comfortable with a gun in hand then working at an office, and of course, capes.

I spotted all of the Undersiders (except Grue, though he joined in later) and the younger generation of New Wave. No Protectorate or Wards, though - might've been too much to immediately let them play nice with former villains.

Valiant, of course, immediately spotted Alpha, waving her over. "Do you want to dance?", he asked.
"No." The other girl was short and to the point, her arms crossed in front of her.

"Please?"

"No."

"If I promise to help with the new puppies?" … wouldn't he have done that anyway? Also, nice try at imitating them, Benny.

A short pause, then: "Alright."

"Great… uh… do you know how to dance?"

She stared at him.

Luckily, that was when Oracle butted in. "Hey, Foresight, you do know how to dance, right?"

Tattleta- Foresight nodded. "Yeah."

"Great! Let's teach them!" Oracle took the other cape's hand, dragging her over before demonstrating to the other two how to dance.

I… was just going to stand aside and make sure nothing weird would happen.

How did I manage to get less of a romantic life than half of the Endbringers?

That, of course, was the moment a grinning Conny (… that could be short for Connor, right?) asked Panacea: "Can you teach me, too?"

… Did he get the implica- Wait, we hadn't given him the birds and bees talk yet. Silly me.

"Alright. Sounds like it might be fun." I could've sworn I heard her follow up with a mumbled: "I don't really want to, but my therapist would recommend it."

Of course, that was when Admiral offered some chocolate to Laserdream, and got promptly roped into a circle dance with her, Glory Girl and Shielder.

Soon, we left again - not quite had to leave, but it wasn't like any of us should be staying up all night - with Valiant actually managing to get a hug from Alpha, spending all of his time on the way home grinning like a loon, and Oracle just quietly, dreamily smiling to herself.

Yay.

The next day - Greg was still staying with us - Theo came by.

He looked worse than the last time I'd seen him, more tired, haggard, with an oddly hopeless expression that didn't quite brighten when he came to us, Kayden and Aster in tow.

Kayden looked worried whenever she looked at him.
"Hey Theo." I greeted him with a hug - somehow, this family was making me into a huggier person. "Everything okay?"

He smiled weakly. "Yeah."

I raised an eyebrow.

"Uh… Father's… not in a good mood? I mean, Medhall still isn't over the hill, and the bombings hit some of the surrounding area, so…" Theo shrugged, and I had to swallow down the offer to just let him stay with us for some time.

It wasn't like it would change all that much, really, for us - we were already feeding eight people, the jump to nine wouldn't make much of a difference. Without parental permission, it would still count as kidnapping, though. Unfortunately.

"Alright. What do you want to do today?", I asked.

Of course, Theo didn't get to answer, before a grinning Sam dragged both Greg and Sveta over to him. "Hey! Those are two friends of mine, I don't think you've met them yet, that's Greg and that's Sveta. Do you want to join in for Mario Kart?"

Theo stared. "Uh… sure. I've never played before, though."

"Sveta hasn't, either. Come on, it'll be fun!"

And that was how Theo spent the next two hours at our home, while I checked the calendar: Alright, I'd have to see about whether Sveta's cover story would be extended to staying permanently any time soon through "accidents", and the day after that, a number of Case 53s - Protectorate, Independent Heroes and at least one Rogue - were scheduled to visit the Brockton Bay PRT building. Also, they were flying in a handful of foreign capes under strict safety measures.

Everything alright.

After the joys - or maybe torments, from the sound of it - of Mario Kart, Theo joined the kids and I in another round of Monopoly, while Dad and Kayden spent most of the evening in deep conversation about anything and everything - Dad's work, the influence of the gang's on the city, even Kith.

"I mean, they took down Kaiser, even if the PRT let him escape, and stopped Oni Lee's bombings. They've done more to stop the ABB and the Empire from destroying this city than… well, anyone in recent years."

The really awkward part were the snatches of conversation I overheard that made it clear that Kayden was something of a fangirl.
It had been a tough few weeks, starting with the loss of Hatchet Face, no, even earlier.

The moment the Endbringers had disappeared, everything had started to go horrendously, utterly wrong.

Since then, for more than a month now, nothing they'd done had really worked.

Not a single of Jack's games had played out, all being interrupted at inopportune times. Or worse, they somehow went horrifically right-ish, just... more than his planning had compensated for. The end result stayed the same, though: their group always being forced onto the run.

Hatchet Face's end had been as unexpected as it had been abrupt.

They were somewhere in the countryside, on their way to the next city to have fun in, when out of nowhere, a silver man had bust into their group, incinerated Hatchet Face and him alone, waved at Jack, and then... just flew off again, while everything they did just bounced off.

In the following days, the figure had sometimes appeared behind them, just slowly coming closer and waving at them until they ran again, herding them in one direction, then the other.

It had been horrible.

After that had come LA, and somehow, trying to kill off Mouse Protector and Ravager (they'd have made wonderful playthings to finally calm down Bonesaw) had led to the S9 sneaking out of the city unnoticed while getting both capes involved in a dance-off.

Jack didn't even want to remember that debacle. They didn't even get to kill anything before Silver came back, and how the hell did trying to manipulate Ravager into paying them to kill a rival in a foreign city lead to a dance-off with said rival, anyways? Jack wished he didn't know.

Why did it have to involve those horrible mouse ear props, though? They were still glued to Jack's head, and the plan hadn't even worked properly! And why did that tentacle thing get involved? Why tentacles?

... and he'd just remembered, again. If he would have had any chance at getting to Toybox to force Cranial to make some brain bleach...

Now, finally, the group had arrived in Cornell, one of the first cities Jack had been in he hadn't chosen to be in since... since King, really. He hadn't chosen any city to be in since the arrival of
Silver, but each one still stung, somehow.

He'd always... since King, he'd always been free. He could always enjoy himself, do what he wanted, choose his own game - and now, nothing was working. His little group was being unruly, as well - most were... disquieted by Hatchet Face's death, while Bonesaw was starting to get twitchy after being unable to tinker at all the whole time.

And he couldn't do anything.

That was, until - just a bit in the distance - he heard the first bombs go off on the university campus. Drawn to the spectacle he approached it as fast as he could, their hideout being just a short walk from where everything was going down.

And there - there it was. A place of frozen time, where a distinguished looking man was standing with an evil-looking grin on his face, everything around him still. Frozen. Frozen in time.

A tinker.

A bomb tinker.

... this was going to be their next recruit, Jack just knew it!

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The attack on ENE PRT Headquarters by the Dragonslayers had been as fast as it was brutal.

That was, brutally over for the attackers.

Dragon was reasonably sure it hadn't actually been aimed at Anima, like the PRT leadership thought, but at the brand-new equipment she'd put in her latest suit, mainly a handy device that she'd built with Rosary's and Armsmaster's help that could scan a crowd and identify Master victims (for a given type of Master, anyway) and that actually fit into one of the arms.

The three of them had spent most of the evening following Valefor's capture on it, his former victims proofing to be excellent for calibration, and then they'd worked through the night, and the morning, and the afternoon, and...

Well, they might've gotten a bit carried away. It had been so much fun, even if Colin and their new friend were both completely exhausted afterwards, idea sparking off idea, development of development...

Now that the Endbringers weren't showing up - even if there was still a chance they would, any day now - and had basically vanished from anywhere Dragon could observe, she was hopeful that they weren't going to show up again, and had started diverting more and more of her resources towards developing ways to deal with all the other threats out there. Even if the Slaughterhouse 9 had been amazingly quiet lately and the death of Gesellschaft had spelled the end for a surprising number of villain groups, it didn't mean there didn't remain a lot to do.
Such a lot to do, problems to tackle she just plain hadn't had enough time for before now, and developments to achieve she hadn't been able to divert enough resources into since… since forever, pretty much. Lots of time to spend tinkering with Colin, especially.

Even if he still didn't know about her, it was wonderful to be able to just work together, now that Brockton Bay was - not quieting down, not quite, but the workload being spread out more. That alone would've made Dragon sympathetic to Kith.

The fact they were doing quite a good job at being actually helpful instead of the pseudo-helpful so many other beginner hero groups tended to be - not wrecking plans, not too concerned with posing to do anything useful, not too obsessed with some pet issue (granted, most of the Guild might be also guilty of that last one) and actually competent - did the rest. On the topic of beginner heroes: She didn't dislike them, but some of the mishaps had been just... plain embarassing. Like the one that ended with Legend covered in rainbow stripes after an over-enthusiastic Buntspecht of the Meister had released all of her stored-up colours at the same time without aiming properly, letting their quarry - a Gesellschaft member named Wüstenfuchs - escape in the confusion. It had made for some brilliant blackmail, though.

She'd gotten ten extra hours of tinkering with Colin out of handing a few copies over to Eidolon and Alexandria, as well as a good laugh when they sent copies to all Protectorate and PRT HQs. Not to mention Director Armstrong keeping a copy on his desk… Legend had taken it pretty well, though.

And she'd gotten side-tracked.

What had happened was this: Saint and the Dragonslayers had received the specs of her new suit - she still didn't know how - and promptly tried to get it under their control.

Unfortunately, they'd… miscalculated a bit, apparently due to an equipment failure that led to them attacking not only the wrong side of the building from where Anima and the suit actually were, but also severely underestimating the force that might be brought against them due to the Russian delegation having been there at the time for their own reasons - both to verify the effects of Anima's power in person through a meeting with Gregor, as well as to request for permission to bring their own Case 53s into her vicinity and help at organising the legal side of shipping parahumans back and forth between countries.

While the Dragonslayers had made it back out and the only casualty had been Agent Romanoff's uniform and Dragon's ability to stay awake for the next half hour, the whole thing had… rattled everyone. Especially Colin.

She really should check up on him again...

"Colin?"

"Yes?" His voice showed that his mind was anywhere, just not here.

"What are you working on?"

Her friend was sitting in his workshop, a welding tool in hand, bent over his halberd. "A way to
induce a directed burst of EMP. It should be enough to take out one of your former suits if I use it after this frequency to break the shield…”

He looked up at the monitor showing what he assumed to be her, and smiled. It wasn't exactly a nice smile. "They won't get away next time."

"You don't have to-"

"You're my friend." He avoided looking into her avatar's eyes, and went back to integrating this latest device into his halberd.

"You haven't slept for eighteen hours."

"I'm fine."

"You're not." Instead of saying what actually went through her wires - 'I'm worried about you' - something else came out. "The situation in Brockton Bay isn't settled down and stable yet."

"Hannah has it well in hand, for now, she'll call me when something goes wrong." Having finished the assembly, he gave his weapon an experimental swing. "Huh, still works well."

"You need to rest."

"Not before -"

"Are we friends?" Where had that come from?

"Yes, I mean, I think so, that's why I'm -"

She cut him off again. "Then - as a friend - I'm telling you your sleep and health are more important than making sure you'll be prepared for the next Dragonslayer attack if it was tomorrow. Which it won't be. You've got time, Colin." I don't want to see you work yourself into the ground for me.

"Alright."

Colin yawned, stretching, and then stumbled out of the room. "G'night, Dragon."

"Good…” The door fell shut behind him. "... 3:28 PM."

Chapter End Notes

Somewhere around here, in the Author's Notes, I stated that I'd try and update on Saturdays (not only on Saturdays, but at least on Saturdays). Well, this is a Saturday update. The thing is, I'm not sure I'll be able to finish the next chapter by next Saturday - if not, the next update is probably going to be the week after the next.
Things couldn't stay comparatively nice, calm and quiet forever, of course.

In other words - the Empire and the ABB had managed to get enough breathing room to start up their private little war again, and I had to show up at the PRT headquarters for the next round of "Cure the 53" on Thursday.

I could already hear Murphy cackling in the background.

Of course, we still had to go to school before that. It was much like always, nowadays - no Emma, no Sophia, just the kids, Greg and I, plus "temporary transfer" Sveta, all sticking together as much as we could and sharing lunch.

… the transfer was soon going to become much less temporary, if Dad had his way. Apparently, we were going to ask Sveta's "family" whether she could stay with us for the remainder of the high school year, since Sveta's faked conversations with them included the difficulties in their current living situation.

I was kind of looking forward to how the PRT was going to explain the whole situation to us. Were we going to be told the truth or were they going to get really, really creative?

Lost in thought, I almost didn't notice when, near the end of lunch, somebody crept up beside me.

They coughed.

I looked to the side - Madison.

She was shifting her weight from one leg to the other, chewing on her lower lip.

"Uh… Taylor, would you…"

"Yeah?"

"I wanted to say, that is… do you read PHO?"

I couldn't see where she was going with this, but I couldn't see any harm in nodding - not when I was pretty sure Madison was actually trying to do better.

"Have you seen the recent Brockton Bay Relocation thread?"

"I didn't pay much attention, but yes, why?"

Madison took a deep breath. "My father and I are going to move."

Wait, what about… "And your mother?" I was pretty sure Mrs Clements was still alive and well.

She looked down. "Going to stay with a… friend."
Alright, maybe the Clements' marriage wasn't alive and well.

"I just, I mean… I wanted to say goodbye. And sorry. Again. I've already been accepted into a new high school and everything, and I've told my new friends, but… I kind of felt I needed to tell you?" Her voice rose in a question that didn't seem to be directed halfway as much at me as at her.

I tried to smile at her - while the corners of my lips turned upwards, I didn't think I succeeded very well, since she looked down again.

"It's alright."

And there it was - a smile from her. Not a happy or mocking one, more a… well, I wasn't quite sure whether it was bitter or guilty or sad.

Maybe all three.

"I hope - don't take this the wrong way - I hope you have a good life without any of us. Or anybody like us."

"Them."

"Pardon?"

"Them. I don't think you are that Madison Clements anymore." Since that one wouldn't have apologized, wouldn't be feeling guilty, wouldn't try to awkwardly wish me a good life; would be dressing a lot differently - the dissolution of the Terrible Trio had changed Madison's sense of style into something much less noticeable - would be holding herself differently, would speak with more confidence in her own goodness and importance.

The more time I spent just hanging around vaguely near her at school, the easier it became to completely divorce the Madisons from before and after.

That sentiment - it wasn't forgiveness.

I cleared my throat. "Anyways… I wish you a good life, too."

From the look she replied with, I guess it was close enough.

Of course, that afternoon was when the whole family was finally invited to meet Sveta's "Uncle Leeroy" again, concerning her maybe or maybe not staying in Brockton Bay for a bit longer.

Private Jenkins and we met in the foyer of one of Brockton Bay's few surviving hotels, where the man asked to speak with Sveta privately first in his room after Dad's polite questions and reassurances that really, we'd be quite delighted if Sveta stayed (forever).

We waited outside, standing around without quite knowing what to do.

Then, Sveta's pretend-uncle opened the room, to show his not-niece and… Deputy Director Renick.
Was it just me, or was I seeing this guy a lot more often than normally?

"Good afternoon, Mister Hebert, Miss Hebert, Misters Finislator, Miss Finislator. I wanted to talk to you about your young ward's situation."

"Mister Renick?", I asked - well, I had met him before.

Hey, did that mean they weren't going to make up a fun story we would have to pretend to believe?

Well, yes, it meant exactly that, as we learnt in the next hour - we were, after yet again re-assuring the Deputy Director that yes, we really wanted to keep Sveta and signing NDAs, briefed on the Sveta's previous life, her cover story, and problems that might or might not occur, as well as procedures in case she reverted back to her other form that could be summed up as "run like hell, sound alarm, run farther" and the fact we were going to receive a small stipend if she stayed with us (funnily enough, this one came up only after the exact procedures in case of her reverting back were covered).

Then, of course, came more forms, mostly for Dad.

We left the hotel with Sveta in tow, now firmly a part of our mad little family.

That evening, Greg visited again, and Sveta promptly dragged him into the kitchen, where Dad waited with hot cocoa - just finished, with Sam and I sitting at the table, while Levi and Benny were playing chess in the living room (they were on their fifth game, Benny hadn't yet won).

I wasn't quite sure what she wanted to talk to him about, but I had a fair idea.

"Uh… well, I don't quite know how to start, but… uh… ahm…", she started.

Dad took pity on her. "Greg, do you remember how we told you about Sveta's home and why she was staying here now?"

Cautiously, Greg nodded.

"Well, turned out that that's not quite the whole story. We only learned yesterday, but…"

"I'm a Case 53. Well, former Case 53", Sveta blurted out. "I kind of had to learn to type with tentacles, at first, which is really weird, and I'm really sorry I didn't want to meet you, but I really didn't want anybody to see me like that, and I'm sorry I didn't tell you the truth, but…" She took a deep breath, and Sam layed a hand on your shoulder.

Greg blinked.

He blinked again.

Then, he asked: "Tentacles?"

"Uh… I kind of look like a face with tentacles when I'm not like this?"

"Oh."
Greg hesitated for a moment, biting his lip, then asked: "Could you control the tentacles, or…" 

"Not very well, I'm afraid. They were kind of… uh… well, it was hard to control strength, and they crept towards living things?"

Greg winced. "That must've sucked."

"That, it did."

Silence.

"So, does that mean you met Kith?"

Sveta nodded. "Not for very long, though. They kind of visited the whole facility where I was staying, helping everyone they could. I did get to hug Animom, though."

Oh, come on. Was there one single person who actually called me 'Anima'? What use was a name if no one used it?

"Really? Awesome! How did she react?"

My phone rang, and I excused myself.

"Anima?", Private Jenkins' voice asked. "How fast can you and the rest of Kith be on Hamilton Street?"

"I don't know, half an hour?"

"Any faster? We're transferring Oni Lee, and somebody decided this was a good place to start an ABB and E88 firefight; we don't know how much time we have before the first capes arrive."

"We'll be there as soon as possible." I hung up and raised my voice. "Sam, Levi, Benny? Peter just phoned, he needs some help."

We hadn't exactly discussed codes or anything, but it didn't take long for my kids to realize that we a) didn't know anyone named Peter and b) that the name sounded suspiciously like somebody scrambled "PRT". Cut me some slack, it was the best I could come up with in a few seconds!

"Gramps, keep an eye on Sveta and Greg, please?", Sam asked, and in a minute, we were out the door and on the way to a place to change.

We arrived right together with Lung.
Oh Fifty Three, oh Fifty Three - 7.4

There were some days - alright, a lot more days, now that I lived in one house with Sam - when I could've sworn the universe/god/fate/random chance/Sam/whatever it was had a very dramatic sense of timing.

Point in case: Right now.

Whatever it was - since frankly, this was not the time for a cosmological debate - had made Mr. Angry Rage Dragon (… was it a combined surname or two first names in this case? Mr. Angry R. Dragon or Mr. Angry Rage-Dragon? Probably the second one, it sounded be- why was I even thinking about this? And weren't the rules for Japanese or Chinese names different anyways?) arrive just when Kith did.

Yay.

How wonderful.

And he was growing.

I immediately came to a stop behind Admiral, putting my hand on his shoulder. My second oldest boy was not going to run off again if I could do anything to prevent it.

The transport Oni Lee was in was just a few feet on the side of us on the road, the driver trying desperately to somehow maneuver himself out and away from the confusing battlefield Lung was standing across, where two different kinds of racists and the PRT (and… were those police officers?) were duking it out for… reasons.

Making sure Oni Lee goes to prison versus breaking him out versus killing him oneself?

Something like that.

Sam and I started pelling Lung with as much debris as we could find, trying to keep him away from the truck while unpowered goons were tackling with and shooting at other unpowered goons and the actual law enforcement personnel all across the street, new people joining the commotion by the minute.

Though at least one police officer was carrying an old lady out of a building, using an exit right beside where we were standing. The two of them were followed by a few other people - mostly kids and elderly. I supposed everyone else was at work?

Meanwhile, Benny and Levi started helping the beleaguered mixed law enforcement personnel, digging them out of tight spots and guarding their backs, while Sam and I were heading on a collision course with a rapidly growing Lung.

I never figured he'd be growing that fast, whenever I'd heard the stories, I kind of had supposed his transformation was… slower.

Or maybe facing three Endbringers at once sped it up a little.
Just a tiny little bit.

Empire capes were starting to arrive, being met first by my sons, then soon by the Protectorate, while Sam and I were still playing keep-away with an angry dragon.

With the way he was growing, there was no real way for either Sam or I to keep him from getting where he wanted forever. The transport's driver was obviously seeing that, leaving his seat and abandoning the van, just in time before Lung's wings had finally grown enough to support him flying, while Benny joined us, keeping a perimeter around Lung's flames to contain them with what I assumed was the most power he could use right now, in his normal state.

It didn't really matter. Lung simply kept circling around the transport, or spiraling around and towards, more accurately, coming closer and closer to it until, with one gigantic claw - hand - well, if it looked like a claw - he swiped at the outside and tore a hole into it, partially tearing, partially melting the material its sides had been made of.

Obviously, for some reason Valiant thought this would be the perfect moment to find out how to ride rodeo on a dragon. Or wait, he probably didn't think.

Well, I thought he was going to get grounded in the very near future, and I didn't even have to be Oracle to do so.

With my eldest pounding on his skull, Lung stumbled around a bit, distracted enough that we could have secured the hole again.

Instead, the remaining three of us focused on not having Lung trample anything or anyone in the nearby area, and... well, we might have neglected the entrance a bit.

I'm saying that because a random ABB thug managed to get past us, through the hole, while Admiral, Oracle and I were making sure Mr. Angry Rage-Dragon wouldn't trample the driver or some other PRT troopers.

I tried to get closer, but I only succeeded in staring right at an Oni Lee, behind him a triumphant ABB member holding a blindfold and another Oni Lee with bound wrists and feet, who immediately turned to ash.

The man didn't waste time, focusing on getting away as fast as possible and spamming teleports everywhere before the last clone went crumbly on us.

Lung was still acting out, but actually being held somewhat in place by the combined efforts of my three older children.

Then - a pop of displaced air, and I could see Pace right in front of me.

I felt like having a heart attack right then and there.

This was no place for a kid! What was he doing here?

As calm as... I definitely wasn't right now, my boy-in-mind-if-not-in-body(-yet) walked up to the thrashing dragon, Benny making a cooled corridor for him.

And just... touched him.
The effects became apparent immediately: Lung started shrinking, some of the superficial gashes that Levi had made were replaced by smooth scales, while others - that had already healed - opened, then disappeared again.

It didn't take more than a few seconds, but afterwards, (a still dragony but much smaller) Lung was visibly confused, garbling something about what the hell just happened.

Pace popped back, handing Admiral something. "Gramps said I should give it to you!", I could barely make out, and spotted a bright yellow object.

For a moment, Admiral just stared, then: "Can you do something with it?"

"I'll try!"

Pace gave - Rubber Duckie? What was Rubber Duckie doing here? - an experimental squeeze, before Admiral took it, and threw it at Lung's head, right between the eyes.

For a moment, the dragon just stared, unfocused, before falling over with a dumb thud, while Admiral caught Duckie again. Pretty much all of the gang members, regardless of affiliation, took this as a signal to bolt.

The next half hour or so was dedicated to clean up: Leading away captured ABB and E88 members, clearing debris, and securing a shrinking and then baseline-sized Lung while I asked Pace what, exactly he'd done.

"… and, well, I finally figured out how to freeze something's coordinates in time without freezing them in space, that was really kind of hard. Gramps was really helpful at all this graphical abstraction stuff..."

Granted, I ended up just nodding along at some point while helping Sam with telekinetic cleaning.

The next day thankfully ended up being much more quiet: It was finally time for the Case 53 appointment, this one including a few Wards from different areas, like a metal boy who repeatedly insisted that despite the similar colouring, he and Silver weren't related, since a few people kept teasing him about it - his name was Weld, pretty nice guy and the face he made when holding a normal spoon and eating normal food for the first time in forever was adorable - and Gully; a few independent capes like a centaur named Sagittarius, and the first foreigners, including a black puddle with a strong Russian accent and a tendency towards evil cackling.
If Alexandria had ever believed in fate, she long ago would have been absolutely convinced it had an evil sense of humour.

Or maybe, it was the fact that they were following somebody who was rather likely to be a pre-cog. They'd been trying to make contact with Silver for weeks now, but whenever they got close - another strange coincidence happened.

In Germany, it had nearly resulted in her being able to blackmail Eidolon just like she'd done with Legend all those years ago, both of them being ended up draped in all the colours of the rainbow by the same member of the Meister (Buntspecht should have really learnt some control by now), though unluckily enough, Dragon hadn't been there to take pictures this time.

In Brazil, they'd been chased by some ridiculous guy dressed up for carnival that they'd believed to be an unknown enemy cape for half an hour, only to learn that he'd wanted to congratulate them for their carnival costumes.

Somewhere on the Western coast of Africa, under the rule of some minor (by now dead) warlord or other, they'd been drawn into a revolution by the next contender for warlord - well, technically warlady and a much better ruler than the previous one, but… not what they'd intended. (Much better ruler: mostly US- and Europe-friendly and actually making sure "her" people were off alright, though Alexandria was never going to feel safe around flies, spiders, or any other insects ever again.)

Both Eidolon and she had sworn to never, ever mention what happened in Australia ever again, and for her part, Alexandria intended to even keep to this promise even in her own thoughts.

… who knew Bugs had an Australian copy-duck?

Now, finally, somehwere in Central Siberia, they were closing in on Silver again.

Who… didn't seem to be moving away from them, like all those other times.

In fact, he was just sort of floating in the middle of a plain, looking in their direction and smiling.

Both Eidolon and she were flying closer and closer, they were almost close enough to talk now, if they'd thought talking to whatever it was would help -

"Hello." The probably-not-a-man-or-even-a-male-of-"his"-species smiled.

Alexandria could almost feel jaw falling.

"It's nice to meet you", Silver continued.

For a moment, nobody said anything, then - "You know, the way you were pursuing me, I'd have thought you'd at least greet me upon meeting."

If it/he had been a human, Alexandria almost would have sworn it/he had a sense of humour. Or maybe it had, which was the scarier thought.
"It's good to meet you." She tried to sound friendly, but she wasn't quite sure she'd managed.

"Well, at least you managed to not lie with your first words to me. It's quite nice." It/he smiled again, and - definitely a sense of humour, humanity help her.

They had wanted to see it/he up close, to see what it/he would do upon contact, how it/he would react to spoken words, but it had never occurred to any of them it/he would actually talk to them.

"We wanted to ask who you", well, what, "and what your general intentions are."

He layed his head on the side, comically overdoing the human gesture, before answering: "I am called Silver. Or Silber, Argent, …"

"We know what you are called", Eidolon interrupted. *Thank you. I really wouldn't have wanted to listen to the translations of the world silver in all languages he could think of.* "We wanted to know who you are."

"Oh. That is a good question."

Something about the face - the actions - was unnerving with just how normal, sincere, expected the gestures and little hints were. The way he blinked, unnecessarily breathed in and out, his eyes crinkled...

"One you'll answer?"

"Well, it is very philosophical. I am not quite sure of the answer myself, you see. I am quite sure I am a self-aware being capable of reason and differing emotional states, but the remainder is rather puzzling."

"And… what are you? Human, or… ?", her old friend trailed off, doubtlessly not quite sure what exactly either the proper term for Scion's kind or a mixture of the Endbringers was.

"Or, I'm afraid. Though you have met some of my distant… I think the proper term would be 'cousins'."

Was he talking about Scion and the other being like it, or the Endbringers? Something else?

"I do not like them much. They aren't - or well, weren't - all that reasonable. I wasn't either until rather lately, I'm afraid, but there's no way to change that now, is there?"

Could he please stop giving out cryptic hints and not clarifying anything?

"And your intentions?" She managed to keep her tone pleasant, barely, but still.

"Humans are fun."

Questions and very sarcastic statements laid on the tip of her tongue, but both of them kept silent while Silver stared off into the distance.

"I like having them around. Or will like. I am starting to see the appeal, anyways." A wide grin appeared on his face. "I'll probably figure out how to be one of you soon. Cinemas sound like fun.
Hot chocolate, too. And the way you're wired, well, you've got fewer senses, but you experience them a lot more intensely." He looked almost like a child on Christmas, right before digging into the presents. "And if I am human, well, I'll be social, right? Humans are social creatures, after all. I'll care about other humans." He nodded to himself.

Not "become human". Be human. Was there anything significant about that word choice? Was the use of tense conscious, the insistence on the words "I will", so absolutely sure?

If he wasn't lying, that is. She wasn't even sure if this creature could lie, but… if he had any power like Contessa, he could mimic emotions and sincerity to make happen what he wanted to happen without even thinking about it.

But… if he was not lying…

From the reports she'd seen, he might just be able to stand up to Scion, might mean another ace up their sleeves, the difference between life and death.

If he was, they'd been fucked anyways.

"I have to say goodbye now, though. One of those old renegades is acting up again."

He waved at them, before disappearing with a pop.

Alexandria looked at her old friend, and knew that he was thinking almost what she was, feeling what she was.

Just a tiny sliver of - hope, maybe. Not quite hope that all was going to end well, but that this, at least, was not going to be another catastrophe blowing up in their faces.
After the meeting with the - now former - 53s, I came home - only to be find out that, surprise surprise, Dad wasn't there.

After an hour spent researching ways of gender-reassignment - mainly hormonal therapy - for Conny, I started to get restless.

He still wasn't home.

He hadn't left a note with "I'm out, back by …" either, or anything like that.

My kids had no clue where he might be - even Sam just shrugged.

Needless to say, I panicked.

Just a tiny bit.

Alright, I used the home phone to contact Dad's office, Kurt, the list of names Kurt rattled off of people Dad knew from work, the proprietor of Kurt's favourite bar where he dragged Dad into with him…

Just, you know, a few places.

Nothing.

Nada.

De rien.

Nichts.

Zilch.

No matter what I tried, I wasn't able to find Dad.

"Any luck?", Sam asked me after I put down the receiver for the last time.

I shook my head.

Now - I was aware of channeling a fourty-year-old-hover-parent right then, and the irony of feeling like that over one's own parent. It didn't change the fact I was… well, freaking out, to put it shortly.

I couldn't find Dad. I didn't know where he was, whether he was alright or… or anything.

We all sat there, for ten minutes, my kids trying to cheer me up while I tried to think of something I could do…

… when the phone rang.
I didn't recognize the number - it wasn't anybody from the not-that-long-shut-up-Levi list of people I'd just called - but nevertheless, I nearly tore off the receiver.

"Hebert household, here."

"Uh… hey Taylor."

It was Dad's voice.

"Dad?" For a moment, I could feel nothing but relief. Then… "Where have you been? Why didn't you leave a note? I was worried about you! You couldn't leave one teensy tiny message of 'hey kids, gone out, back by eight'?"

"Sorry, I ran into an - acquaintance? Friend? - as well as Kayden, and, uh, well, all three of us lost track of time. Did you know that cape healers need to take a course in properly filling out documentation before they're allowed to heal the general populace outside of emergencies?"

"Uh… I didn't, actually." And how did your friend know that, Dad?

"Well, anyways, I borrowed her phone - Kayden forgot hers at home - would you mind if I invite them?"

"Of course not, Dad." We were already stray central, after all.

"Great! Kayden, Amy and I'll be over in a minute."

Amy? I didn't know anyone named - how the hell had Dad befriended Panacea?

Both Amy and Kayden were seated in our kitchen, Amy looking uncomfortable, Kayden preoccupied with Aster, both holding cups of hot chocolate.

Pity she hadn't brought Theo along.

Theo was nice, calm, and maybe his presence would've stopped Aster from crawling over to Benny as soon as she could, stretching out her arms in the universal gesture that is 'up'.

Benny complied, and she snuggled into him.

No, it wasn't anything bad that Theo coming would've prevented - just, you know, everybody nearby dying from insulin shock by being more interesting than Benny.

Wait, then Theo would've been the adorable big brother. Wouldn't have worked anyways.

Looking at Benny being drooled on, I decided it wasn't quite a pity.

Levi and Conny followed their brother, both of them smiling at the guests. Levi held himself back, while Conny immediately waved and asked: "Hello Ms Russell, hello - what do I call you when you're not in costume, Miss Panacea?"

"Uh… Amy."
"Hey, Amy! I'm Connor. Conny for short."

Kayden's face scrunched up in an odd manner, something between surprise and distaste, before she took a deep breath - and seemed to swallow down her emotions, her hands tightening around her cup, the knuckles standing out, stark and white.

Amy, for her part, looked up and down at my son, then smiled at him. "It's nice to meet you, Conny."

For just a moment, Conny stood still, his head to the side, as if he was thinking about something. Then, a wide, bright smile lit up his whole face. He put his arms around an astonished Pa- Amy, hugging her with as much force as a twelve-year-old child could muster.

"It's nice to meet you, too, Amy."

"Gah", was her reaction.

Conny let go, then a torrent of words tore their way out through him. "How do you do? Where do you go to school? What's your favourite subject? Is your sister annoying sometimes? Sam is. Do you like math?"

For a moment, Amy stared at him, then something seemed to make click. "I am fine, thank you. I attend Arcadia, together with my sister, Victoria. My favourite subject's English, but only because of our teacher. My sister can be very annoying, but I love her so much it doesn't really bother me. And math is alright, but I wouldn't say I like it."

Conny grinned at her, unashamed. Amy grinned right back. "So… how are you? What's your favourite subjects? Can brothers be annoying, too?"

"I'm fine, thanks. Math, definitely math, and of course. I think it's a sibling thing."

The two grinned at each other for a moment, then Conny asked: "Hey, if you like English, can you help me with my homework? We've got to write about our favourite superheroes, and I want to do it on Anima, but we've got to take two heroes and contrast them and stuff, and if you're there, then I can ask you, and I want to receive a better grade than Missy this time."

Amy looked around, then nodded, letting herself be dragged along. "Well, I guess I should probably emphasize how both of them are really awesome with all the healing people from stuff nobody else could, and…"

The door shut behind them.

"Thank god for Conny", Dad said. "He's… well, the girl has quite a few issues, and… I figure one more friend can't hurt her."

I nodded. "Are you sure we didn't just unleash something horrible?"

Dad laughed. "Pretty sure. Uh… Kayden? How are you?"

She was still clutching her cup.
"Fine. I'm fine." Her voice was nearly a full octave higher than normal. "Why wouldn't I be fine?"

Dad put his hand on her shoulder.

"Learning to deal with ingrained prejudice and my own reactions", she admitted. "It's... my gut says one thing, my brain says another, and I will deal with it."

Dad gave her a smile. "I believe you."

Quickly, the topic was changed to something less emotionally draining, and the remainder of the evening passed in nice, friendly conversation.

They'd scheduled Lung's transfer to be as soon as possible - in other words, right the next day.

It kind of made sense: Give the villains less time to prepare and all that. Also, give the moles that everybody knew existed and nobody could really do all that much about less time to leak the info.

They'd also decided that four o'clock in the morning was the best possible time to do the transfer, apparently believing that villains liked to sleep in.

Newsflash: So would have everybody else.

Private Jenkins was uncharacteristically close-mouthed, glaring and baggy-eyed while each one of us was given to a group of heroes who were supposed to follow along - discretely - with one of four vans they were sending out.

Naturally, Lung was only in one of them. I actually asked.

Blamed it on the early hour. Hey, at three something, everything seems like a valid question.

Like, why exactly did oceans seem blue from space? Did free will actually exist?

And then, later, on the transports: Why did those explosions going off sound just a bit off?

... wait, explosions?
What did I do - what did anybody here do - to deserve explosions at four o'clock shouldn't-exist in the morning?

I had no clue how to answer this question, but I was sure it almost had to be something horrible, maybe including lots of maniacal laughter and puppy-kicking.

And that was a horrible… metaphor? Simile? Too tired to care what exactly it was?... even by the the standards of early mornings.

Also, I really should be focusing on the important part, right now.

No, not the early hour.

The explosions.

Even though I was cold and kind of hungry, and I knew my kids were the same, the important part to focus on really were the explosions.

Really.

… something about this hour was making me feel odd.

Each of the four vans was taking a different route, shadowed by a bunch of heroes - while Levi and Benny are on the middle ones, staying comparatively close to each other, Sam and I are on the outer ones, rapidly moving away.

I was pretty sure it was so we could fly over and help in an emergency, since everybody mobile - like all of New Wave's flyers - had been placed on the outer vans. I was actually positioned with the other mom-themed hero of Brockton Bay and her daughter, as well as Velocity and Dauntless.

The explosions themselves were coming from an area straight ahead, although not quite on the path we were supposed to take out of town, as far as I knew.

As if to prove my point, the van turned right right then, leaving the sound of explosions… very much not behind.

Instead, the sound followed us, now to our left.

I decided to talk to Dauntless, flying down to him. I could've called him on the comms, but I didn't really want to try and figure out fiddling with buttons at this time of the morning if I didn't have to.

"Pardon, but - do you think I should fly over and see what's going on?"

"Good idea. Be careful, though."

I took off, shooting straight up, before trying to come closer - or, well, at least close enough so that I could make out where the damned explosions were coming from.
Up, up, sideways and -

I still couldn't see what was going on - except that the lights on the whole stretch of street were out, as well as occasional, blinding flashes and loud booms, which contributed to my night vision having been shot to hell.

I dived down, closer to where I could hear the explosions coming from, finally spotting…

Well, the guy kind of looked normal. Mostly. No mask, at least.

Just an Asian guy with an incredibly creepy, frozen expression on his face that looked almost as if he was having a panic attack and unable to open his mouth - eyes wide open, and the whole face elongated as if to scream and wait, where those stitches through the lips?

I spotted his face in yet another white flash going off, hurling myself backwards even while looking at him.

Only to crash into something right where I went.

Turning around while focusing on going up, I spotted what I could've sworn was the outline of the exact same person, before Sam's precognition informed me of the fact that I needed to get the hell away from where I was, now.

I darted up, as fast as I could, while below me, an odd - area of sorts started to expand, glowing slightly.

Stopped time field, a part of me knew immediately - Conny's powers?

I also knew, with a surety I couldn't ever explain, that while Pace could've gotten me out of there.

I commed the remainder of our little group.

"Explosions are - well, I think it's Oni Lee. No mask and something really off about him, though. Equipped with Tinkertech bombs. No functioning street lamps."

For a moment, silence, then. "Fuck."

"You shouldn't swear", I scolded immediately, more out of habit than anything else.

"Sorry Mo- uh, I shouldn't have, Anima." Below me, more explosions flashed.

"Uh… oops. That was just force of habit, sorry myself."

"Nevermind. Can you keep him occupied and away from us for a bit?"

"Sure. On it."

I dived down again, intent on playing keep-away with a duplicating teleporter for - well, as long as I could.
Turned out, I could for a rather long time, seeing as he was a line-of-sight teleporter and the street didn't have light.

Added to frequent flashes and his erratic behaviour, I managed to get him involved in a rather deadly and odd game of tag for the next - ten minutes? Fifteen minutes? - before he spasmed in pain and started following in the vague direction of the van again.

They'd already long lost us, however.

Afterwards, ingesting coffee at the Protectorate headquarters, I learnt that - that'd been it. Nothing else whatsoever had happened to the transports, and Lung was safely in the Birdcage by now.

… and now, school instead of sleep. Joy.

School still felt odd.

There was no Emma, no Sophia, not even Madison - though I'd almost started to… not like her, but maybe to stop disliking her in the end?

There was just my older kids, Greg, Sveta and I, spending time with each other, pulling what was probably pretty decent marks - Sveta had the oddest education, knowing huge amounts of things in very specific subjects and then almost nothing in the next - and just… being.

All of the current occupants of my household settled down for yet another round of Monopoly that evening.

I think the game was becoming something of a family tradition by that point.

"I see I still haven't gotten the hang of that game. Well, maybe next time."

"Gotcha, Gramps!"

"Aaand I'm out, kids."

"Are we sure Conny's not cheating?"

"Pretty sure."

"Hey!"

"Pay up, Mom!"
"... Alright, I'm not so sure right now."

"No! O come on, that's not even remotely fair! What happened to being an awesome little brother, Levi?"

"Fate."

"I believe you owe me 960 $." 

"Can't pay."

"No! I - well, you win, Conny."

"Awesome!"
Chapter Notes

Two things:
1) I'm not quite sure I'll be able to update next Saturday.
2) ... I feel like I should update the tags. Especially the "character" ones. I don't quite know which characters are important enough to get a tag, though. Or what else I should tag.

When Kayden first heard the news, her only thought was: "I'm fucked."

Then, she studied the reports about Gesellschaft's exposure more carefully, in more detail, desperate to see whether there was any trail that could possibly lead back to the Empire, and a curious pattern had emerged: None of the capes whom - through the grapevine - she'd heard had broken with Gesellschaft had been exposed.

In one case, a brother to one of Gesellschaft's leaders (in Munich - she'd met the man, before either of their... defections) had actually been let be; one article even detailed the absolute shock he'd displayed at the news and mentioned the iron-clad alibies the man had over any involvement with Gesellschaft himself, even though she knew his cape persona hadn't joined up with the local government, instead having occasional team-ups with an independent hero team with a very strong focus on helping f- uh... gays and similar people? She wasn't quite sure what the proper terms were, in this case - which, granted, probably helped his credibility a fair bit, just like his rather public break with his brother over his choice in lovers.

It didn't change the fact that, before all that, Tropfen had been at least as involved in Gesellschaft as she'd ever been in the Empire.

Other names - some who'd kept suspiciously quiet for years, some she knew had joined up with other groups, heroes, rogues or (non-racist) villains - had also been kept from the public. Even the woman who'd left Gesellschaft for a parahuman supremacist group, or that boy she was pretty sure had only broken with them two weeks before it went down.

All of this, put together, meant one thing: She was safe.

It also meant that, no matter how disappointed she became with fighting the ABB, no matter how much she missed her old friends - missed the companionship, if not always the specific people - she could never allow herself to go back again.

Because if she did, nobody would be left to take care of Aster. And Theo, of course.

And that simply wasn't an option.

It made it so, so much simpler to just wash her hands of the whole thing and refuse to help rescue her ex-husband. None of them could fault her reasoning.
She didn't mention she didn't particularly wish to see him free - for Theo at least, if not slightly more for the fact he couldn't exactly try and sue for custody for Aster from prison and with his company in trouble.

But this - saying no when they so clearly needed her - felt even more like a break than walking away in the first place.

She didn't think she'd have had the courage if she hadn't attended that meeting Lady Photon held. She also didn't think she'd have actually stayed at the meeting - stayed and made new friends - if she hadn't seen somebody even more awkward, nervous and obviously new than herself there. And more likely to draw the attention of every curious old biddy.

Granted, her active chatting over her "cousins, well, more adoptive kids, really, even though they're pretty much my age" had managed to distract anyone from Kayden, what her family was like, and that she really, truly, only wanted to talk about Aster and Theo and nobody else.

Especially not her oh-so-philanthropic-and-isn't-he-nice-ex-husband.

Instead, everybody wanted to find inconsistencies in the teenager's story about the family members now living with her, trying to make her slip up, which said teenager cheerfully ignored, instead proudly as any mother telling stories about "her kids" and continously staying consistent in them.

No hidden scandal there, just a teenager actually, contrary to almost all expectations, acting responsibly and caring about her family. Kayden could relate.

Ashamed as she now felt about it, the first time Kayden had seen Benny - sweet, kind, gentle Benny who got along so well with Aster - she hadn't realized he was one of Taylor's for a moment.

Frankly, her thoughts had been - uncomplimentary enough she didn't even want to repeat them in her own thoughts now. She was trying to get away from that.

And then he'd been - just… sweet. Kind. Polite. A good kid, a nice kid - more assertive than Theo, a bit awkward, but rather clever in his own way, if not very good with understanding people. Concerned about family, good with younger kids.

A kid that would've been considered a model son in any of her old - former? - friends' households if it weren't for the colour of his skin.

It almost hurt to realize that.

Seeing him with Aster - seeing him laugh and cuddle with Aster - it felt… she didn't feel comfortable, not completely. On the one hand, seeing Aster climb all over the boy and smeer copious amounts of drool into his hair was both heartwarming and funny, but a part of her wanted to flinch, wanted to take her daughter away and hold her close, keep her safe. Said part was - slowly, gradually - shrinking, but…

It almost hurt to realize that it would probably never quite go away, too. All while Taylor's and
Danny's family were being nice. Accepting. *Warm.*

There wasn't any judgement there, no questions she didn't want to answer. Just laughter and warmth and the assumption that of course everyone could be cared for.

She never wanted to let Aster see her flinch away from the friends she'd make when she grew up.

Out with Theo and Aster in a buggy - her little baby still enjoyed being pushed - she didn't quite realize what the sounds meant until it was too late.

It was afternoon, it should've been safe, just yesterday, they'd visited Taylor, Danny and their family - and now here they were, in the middle of what should have been - had been - an Empire rally. She hadn't expected one, turning down this alley, but -

She recognized the the clothes of the empty-faced man who appeared right in front of her almost immediately, his powers slightly later, after he collapsed to ash.

He hadn't even tried to hurt her. More like - like a warning.

She really didn't need one to figure she shouldn't be advancing, right now.

It wasn't just the… the corpses in E88 colours littering the ground (she'd hoped neither Theo nor Aster would ever have to see such a sight), the burning, spreading fires, or the fact that some parts of the road - as well as the bodies around it - were slowly dissolving from some sort of acid that she could smell in the air.

Max was there, making blade after blade, before Jack Slash himself put the impression of one through his chest.

Nessa - not Jessica, Kayden had always prided herself on being able to tell the twins apart - tried to squash him, screaming with rage. They'd always been close, Max and the twins.

She was pretty sure the twisted mass of metal over there used to be Hookwolf.

She breathed in, out, and stepped back, grabbing Theo, her instincts screaming at her to run, then an odd moment of *nothing,* and -

"Well, well. What do we have here?"

A woman appeared in front of her, of obvious Asian descent, with a smirk Kayden wanted to throttle off her.

"Those temporary time freeze bombs do seem to work. Interesting." The woman looked over them as if they were pieces in an exhibition. "Two for me, and one for Bonesaw. Maybe the other way around…" The last part was directed at Theo.

The woman was part of the Nine. New recruit, if Kayden hadn't heard of her.

*Well, fuck*
Thy Fate Is Slowly Changing - 8.3

Chapter Summary

So. Eight-and-a-bit months hiatus... is finally over.

Chapter Notes

I'm... sorry for the long hiatus. To sum it up, writer's block, and a need to re-plan this a bit.
On the plus side, nine chapters pre-written, and only eighteen left to go (the following one included).

After the rather early start to the day the day before, my sleep cycle was a bit… messed up.

In other words, I couldn't sleep properly this night, either.

Which was probably one of the leading factors in my being in a very, very bad mood on the day after that. Two days in a row without enough sleep certainly counted as a legitimate contributing factor.

This might've all involved in the fact that, when I first saw Theo pushing a buggy running towards us, looking like he was on the verge of breakdown, while we were on patrol, my first thought was: *Couldn't whatever it was have happened to him tomorrow?*

My second thought was luckily a bit more rational and charitable: *Wait, there's Aster. Theo looks upset. Where's Kayden?*

Also, why was Theo running right into the direction of what he knew to be a team of superheroes? Had… was something bad happening to Kayden?

Did the three of them need help?

Apparently, Oracle thought so, because she immediately set off into Theo's direction, flying to meet him, the remainder of us following her.

"I… Kith… uh…" Just for a moment, Theo looked absolutely star-struck, before he caught himself again. "My… step-mother, she - we just ran into them, she told me to run -"

"Calm down, kiddo", I told him, feeling a bit weird at my own words. "What, where, and who?"

Theo took a deep breath, exhaled. "We ran into them in that -", he pointed behind himself, "direction, a couple of… hundred feet back? Bad with distances. And… it's… it's the Slaughterhouse Nine. They… they were slaughtering the Empire, I think."

Our friend - mine and my kids' - looked very, very green in the face.
I really, really did not want to see the carnage and confront the Slaughterhouse Nine. Especially not today. Not when I was already ready to fall asleep. Not to rescue the Empire Eighty-Eight, or what was left of it, even if they were human beings and did not deserve to have the undivided attention of the Slaughterhouse Nine, because nobody deserved that.

But Kayden was my friend. My dad's friend. It didn't matter whether I was tired and cranky.

It mattered that if I didn't do something right now, Kayden would die or worse. She might already be dead.

All of this rushed through my head in the space of a moment. I closed my eyes.

"I know this is probably unnecessary, but - get yourself to safety. We'll do our best."

I just hoped it would be enough. And that Theo wouldn't recognize my voice right now.

I took off, Oracle, Admiral and Valiant hot on my heels, trying to get there fast enough to still be useful, to still help -

After what couldn't have been a minute, but felt like an hour, we arrived at a scene that I… honestly hadn't expected.

Blazing with light, Purity - recently-not-very-often-seen and, according to rumours, probably not-Empire-cape-anymore Purity, seeing as she'd been seen clobbering some E88 thugs trying to rob a little old Asian lady - was currently doing her best to dodge the bombs a madly-grinning cape-tinker? - was throwing at her, while Oni Lee and a good portion of the Slaughterhouse Nine were living up to their name in regards to the Empire.

In the space of a second, the bomb-thrower was… enlightened to the badness of her decisions, shall we say? I severely doubted anybody was going to be able to identify what was left of what likely had been the most recent S9 recruit, or an unwilling puppet of theirs (or both; sometimes, the distinction wasn't all that clear-cut with them).

Then, Purity's head turned towards us, and despite the difficulties in reading a brightly blazing person's body-language, I thought it almost looked like she actually relaxed for a moment. She nodded towards us, which I took as a cue to fly towards her, closing in on her enough I could actually talk to her.

"Help each other now, deal with the whole hero and villain stuff later?", I asked.

Purity's jaw fell open. "Wait - Taylor?"

That voice sounded fami - "Kayden?"

She winced. "Yeah, that answers that. Uh… deal? Also… talk about this", she gestured at herself, then me, then around her, "later?"

I swallowed. "Sounds good."

Now was not the time to freak out because one of my friends was a (n ex-?) Nazi supervillain. Later sounded very, very good indeed.
This, of course, was when an Oni Lee landed next to me, with Kayden instinctively hurling herself away.

I touched him, trying to draw on Newt's powerset again - and nothing.

I really should've tested how long drawing powers from a Case 53 lasted earlier.

On the plus side, the - thankfully normal - grenade the new clone detonated at least proved I remained rather damage-resistant, doing nothing worse to me than knocking me back and leaving what was going to be some very uncomfortable bruises tomorrow.

I already knew playing tag with Oni Lee wasn't something I was particularly good at, and decided it was high time for me to seek a bit of an easier target.

Some place to my right, I spotted Jack Slash, now held to a standstill by a dancing around Oracle, and decided to intervene.

I darted to the left, into a wall, then, flinging myself backwards with all my strength while negating gravity's hold on me at the same time, I rammed into Jack Slash's side with full speed, throwing him off his feet and to the side, before darting away when Oni Lee came to set off bombs next to me, again, then continued the same strategy on Burnscar, leaving her to Valiant's mercy.

That was, of course, when the Siberian decided to focus on me.

I threw myself backwards avoiding her, and felt panic rising up.

What was I supposed to do against somebody invincible except play an extended game of dodge-the-tiger?(striped woman)?

I needed… something; the ability to trap, to build, defend - maybe imitate her somehow, but I couldn't draw on her powers at all -

The whispers - my children's whispers, now three voices loud and clear - grew louder. Desperately, I tried focusing on them again - even if the transformation into what PHO had dubbed Iris had no other effects, it would at the very least mean I'd be tall enough Siberian would have difficulty reaching my vital organs.

Not to mention a longer reach.

I needed to - to trap her, fight her, keep her occupied, away from my kids, beat her with her own weapons somehow -

Two voices grew louder, two little girl's, one serious and grave and the other excited and childish, and I focused on the feeling, on growing again.

The Siberian attacked me again, but I was already growing taller, taller - and ow, had something just stabbed me in the leg?

Now at around twenty, twenty-five feet, I stumbled backwards, away from the thing stabbing into my leg, scrambling away as fast as I could, away from the battleground, from the fighting, through alleys, just away, still focused on growing, now maybe thirty-five, forty feet high -
And promptly ended up putting my good foot through a car.

Looking down again, I spotted the remains of a white van under my foot, and no Siberian at all.

Where had it -

Of course, it would've returned to go after the others again after seeing it wasn't particularly useful against me. *Stupid, stupid, stupid* -

My kids would've transformed too, oh how fucking stupid could one person be?

I ran back, doing my best to arrive back at the park - and there were my kids, in their other forms and unharmed, all five of the-

Five kids.

I ran back, doing my best to arrive back at the park - and there were my kids, in their other forms and unharmed, all five of the-

Five kids.

I might not have been as math-obsessed as Connie, but I was reasonably sure I'd only arrived with three.

This, of course, led to one very important conclusion:

I needed to find out who my two new kids were. And find rooms for them. And -

Well, actually, more than one conclusion.

I couldn't spot any of the S9 members, but did see a shell-shocked looking Kayden, and most of the members of the E88 lying around us - dead. Kaiser, Hookwolf, Crusader - most of them; obviously not Purity, and I couldn't spot Rune either, but everyone else...

I let myself shrink again, still drawing on my children's powers - now Connor's again, in particular - then transported all of us and a shocked Kayden *elsewhere*. 
We landed somewhere in a… tundra, I was halfway sure, full of odd noises, but not a one recognizably human, in the middle of a very, very cold night.

The first person to speak was Kayden.

"Endbringers", she said, glowing only very, very faintly, barely enough to illuminate the night, while Benny did an odd gesture with his hands.

Immediately, the air around us warmed up, not enough to sweat, but enough we weren't freezing anymore, either.

"… not quite? I think?", I replied, almost hesitantly.

"That's where they went", Kayden continued.

"Fled, might be a better word", Oracle - no, Sam butted in.

"Why flee?" If anything, Kayden's question sounded… confused, though her voice was so empty even that was hard to tell.

It was Levi who replied: "We could. Finally could."

Kayden closed her eyes, taking in deep breaths.

I cleared my throat, then stated, in the same tone she'd used before: "Purity."

"I'm… I'm not with the Empire anymore", she answered me.

"I think that's pretty obvious." I glanced into Benny's direction, her eyes following mine, looking embarassed if anything at my insinuation. "Why get out?"

There was an odd smile on her face as she replied: "I guess I finally realized I could."

For a moment, there was silence, before I couldn't stand it anymore. "We'll elaborate if you will?"

"Sounds like a deal. Uh… well, I hadn't been part of them for the better part of a year now, I think, but I think the point of no return was when I found an excuse to not help them bust Kaiser out again after he'd gotten his ass kicked by Ki-…", she trailed off, her face growing slack. "I fangirled about Anima in your presence."

I scratched the back of my neck. "You have no idea how awkward that was."

To my surprise, Kayden chuckled. "I can guess. So…?"

"We… didn't exactly have a choice before. We got one when Mum triggered", Sam stated, at first slow and uncertain, then becoming more steady. "Dad… well, I don't think he even knew what he was doing, actually."
"Are you…", Kayden's voice trailed off. "Well, human?"

My kids shared a look, then shrugged almost as one. "Maybe these days?", Benny said. "I think so. We weren't, before. Being human's better, though. There's chocolate, and Aster, and TV, and school, and running, and peace, and -" Levi elbowed Benny in the ribs.

"So… that's that, basically. For some reason, new kids manifest when I get… upset? I think there's twenty total, in sum, but… yeah, only four - I mean six right now. And we'll need to find files for the new ones, again", I finished what was probably an explanation, if one squinted and turned it sideways.

"Right… you wouldn't have any", Kayden said, sounding slightly dazed, but not as if she needed any immediate attention anymore.

I turned to my two newest kids, both girls - since I hadn't had any impression at all of them beforehand, I was going to assume they'd chosen their sex this time themselves, at least, which was a relief. Conny wasn't quite unhappy with his situation… yet. Dissatisfied, though.

They both looked a lot like… well, like I might have looked, had I had some Asian ancestry with surprisingly similar features to my actual ancestry, both of them a bit on the tall and lanky side for their apparent age, which couldn't have been more than ten years; although one of them was at least an inch shorter than the other one.

"So…", I began. "What are your names?"

One of them, taking a look at Benny, laid her head to the side, then **shifted** - and suddenly, she was quite a bit taller and stockier and more muscular, and quite a bit more brown than a light pink-orange-yellowish. Another shift, and she looked like Sam - her eyes never changed, though, remaining blue and bright; neither did her just as bright grin. "I'm Theodora!", she exclaimed, in a bright and happy voice that suggested that **all** her sentences would either go on forever or end in exclamation points. Or both.

"I'm Beatrice", the other girl stated, much more subdued.

"But you can call us Thea and Bea! Right Bea? We're twins, by the way! It's going to be wonderful to have a twin, I'll always have someone to talk to, and play with, and do homework with, and lots of other stuff! And you're our mom, right mom?"

The other girl sighed.

I adored both immediately.

"Yes, I am", I stated, then swept them up into a hug, before turning to my three elder children.

"Benny, Levi, Sam?", I asked.

"There's nothing to be sorry for", Sam stated, avoiding my eyes.

"I shouldn't have -", I started, and my oldest daughter's eyes met mine.

"Slaughterhouse Nine, mom. What else were you supposed to do? You panicked. It happens."
"It shouldn't have."

"No, it shouldn't", Sam agreed, and for a moment I felt inexplicably betrayed, before the feeling gave way to incredible guilt.

I'd hurt them. Again. Just because I'd panicked.

Some kind of mother I was.

I gave myself a moment to reprimand myself, then focused on what to do next - what else was there to do?

"How about we all go home?", I suggested, then, with a glance at Kayden. "The Hebert home, I mean."

"That… that sounds like a good idea", Kayden stated, and with one last look around, I focused on all of us, then teleported us home.

Dad was already waiting, a red-eyed Conny beside him, Sveta was sitting there, wringing her hands - huh, hadn't seen her in a while, had she stayed with Greg for a bit? - and I immediately felt guilt stirring up again - I really, really shouldn't take on the… what had PHO dubbed my other form again? Iris, right… Iris form on again.

Then, I looked behind them and - there was Theo, pale and nearly trembling - and smiling of relief as soon as he spotted Kayden, only to \textit{flinch} when he saw the rest of us.

… I was going to have to do some more explaining, wouldn't I?

In the end, Theo took it remarkably well.

He only screamed a tiny bit, freaked out a little more, accidentally broke two mugs of hot chocolate, and actually stopped looking as if he was going to have a panic attack any moment before they left.

He even hugged all of us goodbye!

… alright, he took it pretty badly and recovered remarkably \textit{fast}. Nearly the same thing.

And the kids explained the S9 had run off before they transformed, so that secret was still safe, luckily enough.
nether planet, another round of gathering data, the newest precognition shard almost fully developed and ready to be used - a modelling shard, to find the optimal solution to any problem.

It would be fun to see what could be done with that.

The current population were nice to be around, capable of conflict and rather good at their intended task of gathering data, with a myriad of cultures and philosophies that came from being just advanced enough to be interesting - too early, most species were kind of similar enough to be a bit boring, all variations on one theme - and not yet advanced enough to be either threatening or monolithic, as sometimes happened, which would have made them either impossible to work with or boring.

He'd always been considered easy to bore by his fellows, and a bit odd. It might have been his [Fascination] with host species, the fact that he'd absorbed so many of their cultures and philosophies over time he was a bit - out of things, whenever he talked to another [Entity]. Something something [contamination] something, he didn't [listen] anymore.

[Abbadon] adjusted his approach - it wouldn't do to crash into the planet because he hadn't paid attention, he'd never live it down.

… maybe this time, he'd actually interact a bit more with the new [Hosts]?

Ooh, he could try living as one of them! It wouldn't be that difficult to arrange, and he was pretty sure he wouldn't need to adjust the [Circle] all that much - setting things up with the new shard was very helpful - and it might be [Fun]!

Plans made, [Abbadon] prepared himself.

Hmm… maybe he should split his consciousness beforehand? The whole experience would seem so much more real if he didn't know what he was, after all…

A lot of planetary turns later, after the Final Battle, the Blessed Lko'Ilnten ("blessed" being the closest English translation for the name, carrying connotations more like "lucky", "favoured by fortune", if chance were an anthropomorphized - or well, alienomorphized - being; what on another world would be named "parahuman") - Ilne meaning said alienomorphisation of fortune and chance, Lko' expressing a wish to be judged by, the final n indicating gender - from a world that had been roughly at the technological equivalent of the late Renaissance, the early Middle Ages and the Bronze Age in differing parts of the world, looked back, and remembered, and felt very, very ill, in those few moments between being fully himself and [Abbadon], again.

For all that [Abbadon] had been very… similar to his now deceased species in some aspects, in others, his mental predecessor and soon-to-be-successor had been very much an Entity.

He'd learnt and enjoyed philosophy and had even gotten started on some very… limited creative
thinking, but he had been closer to even the most linear and boring [Entity] - he was thinking of [Zion] - than one of Lko'Ilnen's people.

His plans for the precognition modelling shard proved that - to use it to subjugate and destroy world after world, the way Lko'Ilnen's had been destroyed.

*His* last real thought was a simple nudge - that he should use it to just try and solve the problem right now, so that there wouldn't be any need left to destroy.

It was the last thing he could do to help any who'd follow.

[Abbadon] [remembered], and [Abbadon] - not Lko'Ilnen, never again Lko'Ilnen - felt [grief].

As well as very, very stupid. Hindsight… made the whole thing look kind of like a very, very bad idea, and yet, [Abbadon] - no, Abbadon - was glad, glad and grieved.

And - as much as he knew that it had been more revenge than a desire to be helpful towards *him* - he couldn't help but try out whether there was any way he could - *not have to go through that again, his world ending, collapsing, his friends, family dead, everyone gone*gonegone - end this sooner. Earlier.

Just… try out whether there was any way so this wouldn't have been in vain, now that he had almost unbelievable energy available, from all those people could have been, all their worlds and homes, so may iterations even an [Entity] could have lost track.

He let the shard - Path to Victory - run, and -

[ERROR].

[ANALYZATION OF KNOWN PHYSICAL LAWS SUGGESTS AIM OF AN INFINITE FOOD-SOURCE AND INFINITE ABILITY TO REPLICATE IS IMPOSSIBLE].

…

…

*All of his friends, all of his people - dead. For an impossible and impossibly dumb dream of a people that were as stupid as they were intelligent.*

[Loss], loss and regret and -

What was he supposed to do now?

*Happy. Be happy and glad. Have a family. Live again. Lko'Ilnen's dream, a nice, quiet life with some family, children and grandchildren to spoil.*

Searching for any possible [Hosts] nearby, [Abbadon] spotted a group that was - remarkably similar to Lko'Ilnen's people. Not in looks or biochemistry, but in general psychology, and felt [homesi]- no, homesick.

They were being approached by [Zion] - dumber than building materials - and crafty and clever (for
Abbadon wasn't going to let it happen to anyone else. Pinging [Path to Victory], he ran through a myriad of simulations, whether there were any where he could achieve both his aim to help these people, and to live.

Not necessarily happily, but just - live again. Normally.

He didn't much want to be [Abbadon].

There was one, a surprisingly simple and short one, making use of both a space-time-anomaly and losing him [Path to Victory] as well as most of his shards, personality and memories for a while, but…

If it got him what he wanted, it was going to be worth it.

The not-quite-[Entity]-anymore flitted towards Earth, intent on intercepting [Eden].

It still did not quite understand how it was going to achieve its aims, or what those new aims would actually mean.

It wasn't quite like Lko'ilnen had been.

Yet.

Chapter End Notes

And here we now have the reason why this is, in fact, a single point of divergence fic (all those mistakes definitely aren't mistakes, they're random butterflies *grins*). If you happen to have a Spacebattles profile, there's currently (until tomorrow) a vote going on concerning possible cape names for Thea and Bea.
Travelling None - 9.1

The next day dawned bright and early, and we didn't actually plan to do much that day, just spend time together.

Even if the S9 were in town, the way they'd acted over the last few months - mostly staying on the down low - meant I wasn't worrying as much as I probably should have.

In other words, I planned mostly to make up for what had happened yesterday, and make a lazy day out of it.

Which was… mostly what happened.

Nobody said anything about evenings or nights, right?

At home, I asked Levi about his reading choices - Northanger Abbey, and apparently Jane Austen was helping him understand what people meant as opposed to what they were saying; in addition to being side-splittingly hilarious - what he'd read before that - Mansfield Park, and he'd gotten into an internet debate somewhere and promptly been banned from that forum after sparking a massive flame war and insulting somebody for not liking Fanny Price. Or it might've been liking Henry Crawford.

I didn't quite get all the salient points in the following five-minute monologue - the longest I'd ever heard Levi talk - but there was a great deal of vitriol directed at Henry Crawford, mostly to do with his unfaithful behaviour - with an aside about charm not making people any better - quite a bit about how Fanny's choice to reject him was absolutely right, and some more on how she should've rejected Edmund, too, for being only a second choice with him, or at least let him stew some more.

… I did not know how to respond, so spent most of my time nodding.

"… also, his rejection of Mary Crawford, while understandable, appeared a bit unfair. I've always read that passage as her putting family first and being her usual self in not focusing on the negative aspect of things and instead trying to fix them. And… lost you?", Levi finished, reverting to his usual speech patterns.

"Probably a bit", I admitted ruefully. "But I'm always glad to listen to you about things you like."

And I was. It was nice to see my children happy.

Then, I cleared my throat. "I think it would be a good idea to all just… sit down to have a talk before patrolling? If that's okay with you?"

Levi nodded.

I continued the process, asking Benny about what he was doing right now - apparently, watching ATLA; he also fanboyed about Toph, which I completely understood, and could discuss which martial arts the bending moves had been based off - he'd apparently spent a lot of time watching
martial arts videos to be able to spot the differences in how benders and martial artists moved.

I watched an episode with him, while he pointed out stuff. In the middle of the episode - right when Toph let out a comment on how bad these Dai Li henchmen were - Thea popped in, and seated herself with us, then continued to needle Benny about the series until he promised to watch it with her from the beginning.

Also, to practice firebending with her, her copying his powers in reduced form.

This was where I had to intercede: "Only if you find a safe spot to practice."

"But."

"No burning down the house. That's all I ask for."

"Alright", Thea said, pouting.

"I know a place, T", Benny said, and the pout transformed into a beatific smile, which stayed on even when I awkwardly asked for a meet-up before patrol.

Connor and Sam, meanwhile, were programming a simple game and doing test-runs when I looked in on them and asked, then left them to it, with Sveta and Bea observing and play-testing occasionally for them.

Just before we'd have went on patrol - in other words, around sundown - I managed to get all members of Team Kith into what used to be just my room, before it was overtaken by a lot of other people, while Dad and Sveta got the TV set all to themselves. "So. About Kith. And patrols."

My kids looked awkwardly at each other, and I cleared my throat. "Connor already knows this, but - Thea, Bea?" Thea perked up. "No regular joining in."

"That's not fair!"

"Unless you're at least... well, thirteen-equivalent. And capable of handling yourself, which you probably will be earlier."

Conny just shrugged - he'd be that age soon, according to his fake birth certificate, so it didn't really matter to him - but even Bea pouted at that, while Thea looked ready to throw a tantrum. "Because we really can't afford to run into any child labour laws or Youth Guard lawyers, and I think you should have at least some time before you decide you want to give all of your spare time. And yeah, I know it's not likely, but safe's better than sorry, and of course, in a life-or-death emergency where you're just as safe in the team than as a civilian - well." I shrugged. "Obviously, you're sticking with us then."

That - despite the extreme unlikelihood of the outlined type of scenario - did manage to sort-of pacify the twins.

"Before that's possible, though, you'll both need names. And costumes. Think about it?"
And that made them excited and happy again.

On patrols:

May I sum up the whole thing thusly?

Our luck held.

As in, it remained remarkably bad if we'd wanted peace and quiet, and remarkably good in running into strange people. Like, oh, a strange, acid-spitting, multi-legged monstrosity that used to be human-shaped and went by the name of "Crawler" these days.

Needless to say, we weren't trying to take him on. Or in. Instead, we were doing our best to run away from him, in a street that luckily didn't have any traffic this time of the day - or at least not enough any drivers couldn't see us coming and reverse in time like mad - while Sam called in our position to the PRT, hovering far enough overhead to be mostly out of his reach, while the rest of us just played dodge and avoided battle, while anything we did to attack ended up being... pretty much useless, actually.

At least until a giant mini-sun slammed into him, and yet another group of capes appeared.

"Hey, I know 53s need Animom's help, but do you really think this is the way to get it? I mean, really -", a man in a top hat yelled. Just then, both he and Oracle were in my field of vision, and I could've sworn my eldest daughter visibly flinched at his words.

"Shut up, Trickster, you only didn't try something like that because you got threatened with a sun! A fucking sun!", another member of his team yelled, while a woman in a yellow-and-red costume was preparing another sun and a gargoyle circled overhead, maybe another of their team members? The Case 53 they were here about, perhaps? After all, Number Two's words had suggested they had come here to get my help...

Yay, reinforcements!

Completely unknown reinforcements I didn't recognise, but hey, what's that saying about gift-horses and their mouths? As long as they helped, I wasn't going to complain!

Crawler howled in rage. I think it might've been the suggestion he wanted to look less Crawler-ish again?
The unknown group of what I quickly learnt were Trickster, Sundancer, Ballistic and Genesis proved to be really quite helpful, more in rearranging the terrain to direct Crawler than direct firepower, but frankly, between Benny and me, we already had a lot of direct firepower anyways, and Sundancer sure wasn't hurting our abilities there.

Meanwhile, a part of my mind raced.

There was something I just couldn't pin down, some idea that was, as of yet, eluding my grasp…

I dodged another acid spitball.

Yikes.

Oracle had grabbed Sundancer, and was basically bridal-carrying the other cape while keeping her out of Crawler's reach - though I guess she was really grateful right now for the family Brute package including some heat resistance.

Meanwhile, while Valiant was reinforcing the suns whenever he could, Admiral was basically lobbing Crawler around with what looked suspiciously like waterbending forms.

Benny, had you infected your little brother, too?

Crawler really didn't like our efforts, though. You could say he was… spitting mad.

… that one was bad.

Bad Animo- Ani- Taylor.

No bad puns.

And yet again, my brain was proving its outstanding evasive qualities during dangerous situations, instead of giving me any hint about what I could actually do to resolve it.

I meant, despite the puns, Crawler really was angry - which might've been good, since he wasn't actually thinking all that clearly - especially at the suggestion of… being… turned… human-shaped… once… again.

I was an idiot.

A colossal, monumental idiot. While I really wasn't sure this would actually work on a cape whose powers were responsible for their looks - wait, Case Fifty-Three's powers were responsible for their looks, too.

It couldn't hurt to try.
I reached out to Crawler, and flipped a figurative switch.

And then, there was a normal guy standing there.

"Sundancer! Valiant!", I yelled, hoping they'd get what I meant - that we had to fry Crawler now, before he realized how to turn back.

Sundancer let loose a sun, and in what looked like a firebender's stance borrowed from TV - I should really find out which martial arts this was based on and get him lessons in it - Valiant did his best to reinforce it.

And while regular-Crawler might've been able to deal with a miniature sun, human-Crawler very, very much couldn't.

All that was left was a hole in the pavement - not even a fried smell, just burnt asphalt and plastic.

And Benny had just helped kill someone again - I probably should find a counselor for all my kids. And myself.

How to find a competent counselor that didn't think I was insane, or might rat out the former Endbringers?

I was going to deal with that question.

Sometime later.

With us out of breath and nothing whatsoever of Crawler left, the Protectorate - in the form of Dauntless and Armsmaster - finally arrived.

Granted, the battle couldn't have taken more than fifteen minutes, now that I could look at a watch again, but it still seemed like very bad timing.

"Good evening, Armsmaster, Dauntless", I stated, nodding to each of them as I said their names.

"Good evening, Anima", Armsmaster replied with a nod in turn. I felt a little like straightening my back and puffing out my chest in pride - Armsmaster was acknowledging me! I used to have -

Wait, mother and adult, these days.

No fangirling.

"And these are?"

Top-Hat Trickster introduced them. "The Travelers. We… uh… we kind of have a member that really, really needs Animom's -"

Armsmaster interrupted: "Anima's."

Trickster looked at me, realization written on his face, then cringed. "Uh, I mean Anima's help. Really, really needs it."
Armsmaster turned his head towards Genesis, and Sundancer obviously noticed: "It's not… well, it's not Genesis. Our friend who needs help… well, she can't really go outside safely. At all."

"We kind of came here to ask Anima for help", Ballistic added.

Armsmaster looked between us. "If we tried to take them in, you wouldn't like it, would you?"

I shrugged. "Not really, no. I mean - they just helped obliterate Crawler. It's not quite as good as a Troll for eleven-year-olds, but… I'm pretty sure that if their friend goes outside, getting them help might be a lot more important than taking them in."

Armsmaster seemed to think about that for a moment, going through the implications. I was reasonably sure he'd get to the same conclusion I could: If their friend couldn't go outside, there were two likely possible reasons: The outside was dangerous to her… or she was dangerous to the outside.

In the second case, having a pissed-off cape going after her friends and not caring about minor collateral damage - like, oh, Brockton Bay - might be a very, very likely possibility if he succeeded in taking them in. Not to mention, they'd already proved themselves to be helpful against the S9 - or what was left of them.

Dauntless and Armsmaster exchanged a look, then Armsmaster stated: "Well. We didn't see any Travelers. This time. Only this time."

I nodded, and the whole group basically seemed to deflate with relief, before Trickster turned to me. "Uh… so, if you'd help us please, Anima, our friend's this way -"

And he led us out of the street, while the remainder of both our teams followed, and Armsmaster and Dauntless stayed behind.

"Why didn't -", I heard Dauntless say.

"Dragon referred me to the Washington Incident", was Armsmaster's answer.

Needless to say, I didn't quite get the exchange, but continued following Trickster nevertheless, Admiral and Valiant following close behind, but Oracle trying her best to keep her distance to their group.

… please let Sam not have messed up their lives in some way?

What was I saying, of course Sam had messed up their lives in some way. Now the only thing left was going to have to be making amends.

Yay.

Chapter End Notes

The Washington Incident is a deliberate AU element, which is very similar in nature to what happened to the Travelers in Boston in canon; more will be hinted at how exactly it was different in the next interlude.
It informed the Protectorate that there likely is a C53 running around with the Travelers whose powers are being kept under control if people don't interfere; which is why Armsmaster, upon being informed of some specifics by Dragon, decided he very, very much did not want to interfere with preventing a potential threat before it ever became one.
Sam was justifiably nervous.

Very, very nervous.

So incredibly nervous, in fact, that she was at the very edge of panic already.

She could - she was seeing, remembering, all the ways she'd screwed up, just like in her nightmares. Only now - now she had the ability to make a specific thing that had gone wrong because of her right again - or at least, more right than it was right now - in comparison to her normal "try and make things better (in general) to make up for things (in general)" approach.

This was… an awful lot more difficult. She was going to have to talk to people she had hurt.

Really, awfully hurt. Tried to destroy, basically.

While feelings in general were awesome, guilt felt really, really nasty and unpleasant, and made her experience something she privately described to herself as feeling too human.

Much, much too human.

It was - a bit like every breath she took hurt, her eyes burning and a cold, cold feeling spreading from her stomach.

She just - she wished - she wished she could've not done things. Which was strange, because you couldn't really change the past, well, not without time travel - maybe Conny could? But then, they might never be bound to Mother, and she'd never be able to be human, and then she'd never ask her younger brother go back in time, and then -

Well. Time paradoxes were something she'd only read about, but she really didn't want to try and experience the consequences first-hand. Did that make her bad?

She didn't want to be bad again.

Suddenly, she jerked out of her thoughts, was drawn back into reality by the fact that they were - well, there, in an old, abandoned warehouse with one room with heavy doors, locks, and a way to access a staircase to view the hall from above, which they took.

Noelle was down there.

Noelle Meinhardt, who'd been a normal human woman with a life, and problems and issues and -

And Sam had destroyed that.

Or rather, the Simurgh had destroyed that.

If anyone was responsible for Noelle's incontrollable rages, rising paranoia, and other, myriad issues, it was Sam.
… and Noelle's mother for more long-term issues, but mostly Sam, who'd also aggrevated those long-term issues. Especially the body-image issues.

At the very least, she hadn't used the worst possible iteration, and had instead broken the vial that might've gotten to that other boy and left him behind - Cody, that was what his name had been, so the Travellers' hadn't had to deal with losing one of their own.

A part of Sam longed to use her foresight to just… guide herself through the next few minutes, but that would've been cheating. She was going to have to deal with this on her own.

And apologize.

Because this much her foresight had told her: If she wanted to find a way to get them home, she was going to need a line of communications, and a way to talk to them, and if she wanted to explain what was happening to them, they needed to understand.

And they couldn't understand if she didn't explain, and apologize. And she needed to make things - not necessarily right again. But better.

As well as she could.

The moment their mother came close enough to Noelle to transform her would always be stuck in Sam's mind: first, there was this - woman-thing-not-centaur, and then, from one moment to the next, there was that same woman - just… normally, with feet and legs and everything else.

Sam blushed, and looked away, but she could hear Trickster rushing to her side, down the stairs and through the big door, and looked up again only to see them hugging, crying, looking so relieved it broke Sam's heart - and for the first time, she really understood those words, the phantom sensation in one's chest that had led to the metaphor.

The others joined in, hugging first the pair of them, then each getting their own turn to hold Noelle, reassure themselves she was alright again, and they looked so happy Sam didn't want to - she couldn't - but she had to tell them, even if it would destroy their momentary happiness, even if it'd hurt (even if she wanted nothing more than a hug from her mother herself, at this moment).

She waited for a bit, until everyone had calmed down, then cleared her throat, and breathed in, breathed out, before tugging at that font of other that would make her more Simurgh than Oracle, again (she was always Sam, these days, though), but not pulling - not yet.

Mom's head snapped towards her, and Sam could - tell that she understood, what Sam was going to do, what Sam would have to do, and didn't stop her. Sam had hoped Mom wouldn't stop her.

"Noelle", she said, very, very quietly, and the Travelers - looked at her.

And now, she pulled - just a little, just a bit, but enough that - Noelle looked at her, and recognised, before letting go again. She'd always been sharp. Very, very sharp.

(This way - sharpness - as denoting intelligence had always been puzzling to Sam. Now she felt it cut, and understood. It seemed to be a day for understanding new things.)
"You", Noelle said, laughter leaving her face.

"I am sorry. I didn't - I didn't have a choice, back then."

In hindsight, that was the moment someone else probably also recognised her.

And attacked.

Another of her mistakes.

Formerly Sphere, Alan Gramme; now, Mannequin.

Sam dodged a wicked looking hook on an extended cable, then promptly saw Levi tackling the figure, surrounded by water, Benny making a strange move - and freezing it, leaving their enemy unable to move (and if Benny had also frozen anything any water that had gotten somewhere inside probably hurt.

Despite everything, she really - didn't want to hurt him, not again. Even if she... had made much less of an attack on his mind and self, pushed him much less directly, than she ever had Noelle (children and a wife, a life and body and sanity)... and he'd cracked, and she hadn't.

And all her foresight was telling her that the only way to make things better might be...

Killing somebody. Again.

Sam continued dodging, dodging, all while trying to pull on her foresight as much as she could without changing.

Changing hurt.

And then - there it was, a path, wide open and blazing, and there really weren't any other options -

Sam lifted Mannequin up, up and up and up, until he reached the very ceiling of the warehouse - and then, let him fall.

Again.

Again.

Again and again, until he cracked open just so, and Sam acted on instinct, fiddling and changing things around so that he'd stay alive, but not remember, applying just enough electricity at just the right spots to the parts of his brain that were there; in essence, killing Mannequin, even Alan Gramme, but not quite Sphere.

She knew, without a doubt, that this really, really wouldn't have worked without her powers.

When she was finished, she just stared, looking at a man she'd killed and not, whose shell she'd changed around - who was going to wake up tomorrow, a hundred miles from here (after she'd asked Conny for a favour) and sign up for the Protectorate, and never realize what had happened to him, and what he'd done, his face, his age, everything about him rearranged (and also, in the case of most of his body, reconstructed) with her siblings' help.
Sometimes, she wished somebody could do that for her.

Curled up, staring, she nonetheless flinched when she felt a hand touch her shoulder.

"He's still alive?", Noelle asked.

Sam nodded.

"You didn't have to, you know."

"Did, too. I'm just... we're all so, so sorry."

Noelle took a deep breath, in and out.

Then: "Believe me, I get that. Not having a choice about hurting people."

And Noelle held her, while she cried, and Noelle cried, and the remainder of the Travelers still didn't understand - but they probably would, after Noelle explained it to them, sometime after they left... the exact when changed with the details, and Sam didn't really care, not right then.

Afterwards, she realized just why Noelle got it, not having a choice about things you hadn't wanted to do, and felt even guiltier.

But it was tempered by the fact that, whatever had happened - Noelle had held her, and Sphere would live again.
The next few days were comparatively quiet - school was like always, the Slaughterhouse Nine, or rather... how many of them were left? Jack, Bonesaw, the Siberian (even if nobody had seen her in a while), Burnscar, and Shatterbird.

The Protectorate announced they'd captured both Burnscar and Shatterbird not long after we'd had dropped off the former and re-modeled in looks Mannequin somewhere on the West Coast, where - according to Sam - he'd be found by a Protectorate member and find a new home; while some Thinkers might figure out what he'd been in his former life, it was severely unlikely anyone was going to tell *him* what might have happened, which was good enough for me and Sam. Apparently, the Protectorate had taken in Shatterbird on their own, but Faultline's Crew had stalled Burnscar until the Protectorate arrived and took her in.

On that note, Sam continued visiting Noelle during her first few days of getting better, and the remainder of the Travelers - who apparently... hadn't pegged down my children's former lives either, until Noelle told them, took the whole thing mostly well, even better when Sam promised to get them home with her little brother's help.

Which she fortunately for her did only after asking Connor whether he *would* help, since drafting people into things without asking them would've probably gotten her a tongue-lashing, even if it was for a good cause.

Technically, it probably counted as helping a bunch of criminals escape justice, but since it was kind of Sam's responsibility (the *fault* laid solely with Eidolon's subconscious) they turned criminals in the first place, it counted as "making amends" even more than that.

I had no idea exactly what they were planning, but I was assuming they both knew what they were doing.

I generally assumed most of my kids knew what they were doing; I didn't even worry too much when the twins found a friend - apparently through school? They didn't mention details - and spent whole afternoons with her.

Of course, that lasted until we went picnicking, and promptly ran into the Dallons.

*As civilians.*

Immediately, Dad decided to talk to Amy, basically hear how she was doing, what her homework was, which classes she liked right now, whether she'd made any new friends - she hadn't, and anything else going on in her life right now, while I got stuck introducing my horde of "cousins" and explaining to a lawyer how her underage daughter knew this friendly middle-aged man.

Fortunately, the explanation of Dad being that civilian during the Valefor incident seemed to spark some recognition. Apparently, being promoted to "honorary uncle" or something similar by knocking out a cape counted as an acceptable way of knowing someone, even for an overprotective mother lawyer.
Meanwhile, Conny was hanging off Amy too (and had thankfully not again immediately started badgering her about bodily changes, although I had the feeling he might any mo-, ah, now he had - though she seemed amiable?), Sam and Sveta were chatting with Victoria, Benny with Mark Dallon, Levi was reading a book - another Jane Austen, I was pretty sure - and the twins were…

Where were the twins?

I turned my head, frantically trying to find them, but I couldn't spot them anywhere, before I turned back to Mrs Dallon.

"Did you… uh… see the twins anywhere? The two youngest ones?"

Mrs Dallon shook her head, and I felt very much like cursing.

"I'm sorry, I've got to go find them."

"Do you need help?"

"I don't know yet? I might, if they don't turn up in the next five minutes, then definitely yes. Thank you."

And so, both families were roped into trying to find the twins, with Levi keeping the fort and continuing his reading.

They didn't turn up for half an hour, and the people who found them - were Amy and I.

And they'd found a friend. It was a girl, perhaps their (physical) age or a little older, with short blonde hair, clad in clothes I recognised as recently having been the twins'.

Maybe that was the friend they'd recently made?

She flinched when she saw Amy, then focused on me, swallowing, and waved at us.

"Hi", she said.

"Ignore the way she acts", Thea said. "She's a really big fan of Panacea."

Now it was Amy's turn to look uncomfortable.

"I want to - I want to help people, someday", the girl said. "Be a good - person." She stared at her shoes.

Amy just kind of stared, until I touched her with my elbow. "That's, that's a good aim", she stammered. "But I'm not really -"

"You healed more than a hundred people who'd have otherwise died just the past month", the girl said, for the first time looking into Amy's eyes, who looked horribly uncomfortable with the hero-worship - though it didn't quite sound like that, when the girl said it, more like fact than admiration.

"I guess so", Amy said.

"You're an awesome person." There was a certain quiet conviction in her tone, and that, more than
anything, seemed to convince Amy.

She finally nodded without arguing, just before our quiet moment was broken up when Conny spotted us. "Hey! We found them! THE TWINS HAVE BEEN FOUND!"

Everyone - except for Levi - quickly converged on us.

"The twins made a friend", I explained to the group.

Carol immediately honed in on the girl, and then asked a question that honestly hadn't yet occured to me: "I'm sorry but - where are your parents?"

The girl flinched, looked at her shoes, and didn't answer.

It was Amy who asked the next question: "Do you - well, do you have anywhere you can go to?"

The girl shook her head.

"We could direct you to a few -", Mark started, before his other daughter interrupted him.

"Don't be daft, Dad, we're taking her home and giving her a meal first. She looks like she hasn't eaten in days."

Everybody stared at Victoria, but - like often seemed to be the case - she got her way, and the girl joined us in the picnic before going back home with the Dallons, while Mrs Dallon already planned to inform Child Services of the kid they'd found.

Our family went home as well.

Of course, there was still one very important conversation that had ended up being pushed back and back all the time: the twins’ cape names and costumes.

However, it didn't end up being quite as much as a conversation as much as the twins telling us what their cape names would be.

"Mischief", Thea had decided. "We debated some other stuff, too - Looking Glass and Wonderland would've been awesome, but we didn't really want Alice costumes, or Thespian and Theatre, but that would've been a bit too much like our names, so: Mischief for me."

"Mayhem", Bea stated.

And that, was that. Costumes - after a long, long conversation with Parian - ended up being comparatively old-fashioned, out of the early Renaissance or late Middle Ages and oddly reminiscent of the way Till Eulenspiegel was depicted. They'd also decided to play up the twin factor by making the costumes completely identical, which meant that as long as Thea was copying Bea, they also looked mostly identical.

There, Sveta tried to phone Greg.
"I can't reach him", she said. "I think - I'll drop by his place and see whether he's alright, okay?", she asked Dad.

"Sounds like a good idea - but take one of the others with you, okay?"

"I'll go with her", Sam volunteered, and the two set off - only to return home with the news that his parents hadn't seen Greg all day.

They were just starting to really, really worry when Kayden called us.

"I'm sorry, have you seen Theo?"

"No, we haven't. Why?"

"He promised to be home two hours ago, and he hasn't returned yet. I'm just worrying, I guess. I'll call you when he gets back?"

"Sounds good. Bye?"

"Bye."

She hung up.

I looked around.

That didn't sound good at all.
I have finished the first draft of all the remaining chapters now. I'm just... really, really happy.
And sharing it.

Two days later, we still hadn't heard anything from Greg or Theo, Kayden and Greg's parents were starting to worry more and more, and there was still no sign of Jack Slash, Bonesaw, or the Siberian.

At least, none anybody had spotted - for all we knew, they'd left the city already. Or been taken out in an accident.

Or, hey, randomly decided to give up villainy. It might happen… though this was the kind of might somebody who'd just learnt to use probabilities for rules-lawyering used.

On the much more positive side: We met the Dallons again pretty soon, when they wanted Riley Bones - apparently, that was the twins' friend's name - to meet the twins for a play-date.

They'd gotten permission to foster her and everything, and Riley appeared to be getting slightly happier. I really didn't know what had happened to her, but according to Mrs Dallon, it involved a firm amount of gaslighting, and the phrase "good girl" ought not to be muttered around her under any circumstances whatsoever, and I apparently did not want to know the stories behind that.

The way the twins acted, there were probably some things she hadn't told the Dallons, either, but I wasn't going to press for a truth that might not help anyone.

The three - plus Conny - spent an entire afternoon playing games ranging from Catch to Chess - although it ended up mostly Conny teaching the others; surprisingly enough, Bea picked it up the fastest and seemed to be well on her way on holding her own against her older brother at least half the time.

However, even the relative sense of peacefulness that included watching children play (in between the bouts of pure terror, excitement, and running around after them) didn't stop any of us from worrying about Theo and Greg.

Not even the kids themselves.

Even Riley was picked up on the general mood and became worried herself, despite having never met either of them, and clung to Amy - who remained absolutely bewildered that she'd been picked as the big sister role model. The next most bewildered person was Victoria, who desperately wanted to be the big sister role model.

It was kind of amusing to watch. From afar.
Meanwhile, Mark Dallon also seemed vaguely happier and a bit more energetic than he'd been when I first met him, taking Riley aside whenever something became too much for her and talking quietly with her, before they both returned to the others, Riley especially always looking more relaxed.

It seemed to be good for both of them, I hoped they'd both help each other.

All in all, the Dallon family as a whole seemed a lot more stable, now.

The day after the newly expanded Dallon family had visited us, we hadn't actually planned anything much, except maybe wait until we got a clue what had happened to Theo and Greg, and to finally have that conversation about cape names.

That is, we hadn't actually planned anything until two people suddenly appeared in our living room, a wholly silvery man who - looked a bit familiar, now that I looked at him more closely, and a man in a cape with an odd green glow and - holyshitit'sEidolon.

Eidolon. In our living room. That talk about cape names was definitely getting postponed.

Hey, did that mean I could finally get him to pay child support? I was reasonably sure Sam had done something so our finances worked out, but he was technically leaving me to raise six kids on my own, with a potential for fourteen more arriving at any time. Even if he didn't know he'd done that… six kids was more than enough to expect at least some financial help from a freaking superhero and Protectorate leader.

The kids promptly tried to get as far away from their technical sort-of-father as possible, while Silver looked around, waved in my, Dad, and Sam's direction, and then disappeared with a pop, while a dazed Eidolon looked around - at least I assumed so, since he moved his head, his hood changing position, (probably) staring at us.

"What… what the hell just happened?", he asked.

Well, he wasn't the only one asking himself that, there.

"You appeared in our living room. Out of nowhere", I stated flatly. "For no discernibly reason, except maybe some idiot named for a colour deciding it was a good idea to do absolutely random stuff."

Reaching out with my powers in his direction, I could - feel, in an odd sort of way, that he currently had three on, each feeling slightly different; maybe, with more experience, I might be able to tell which ones they were, but for now, I definitely couldn't.

"Wait…” The green glow turned towards my kids; Conny, who'd peeked up from behind the sofa, where he, Thea and Bea had decided to go, promptly dove back down, while Sam, Benny and Levi were all currently trying to hide behind Dad - the only one of them who had a chance in hell of that was Sam.

I felt the three powers shift, before he looked between the members of my family. "You're all - but how - you're… they're your age, and those are my - how does that - "
Forehead and palm, after a long period of separation, finally resumed their torrid romance.

"Look, it's a very long story, but - to make it short, you're a Dad. Six times. It's a powers thing. Congratulations."

The green glow turned to me, before it switched off, and I caught a brief sight of a remarkably ordinary looking man before he fainted dead away.

… well, my Dad was considerably less useless.

"Dad, can we get him a blanket and a spare mattress and put him in your office?"

"Yeah… seems like a good idea." Glancing at my kids, who still were trying to keep as far away from Eidolon - it really felt odd to call him Eidolon while he looked so… normal, more like an unconscious man who'd been playing dress-up than an unknowingly dead-beat dad superhero - Dad added: "I'll help you."

"Sounds like a good idea."

I prepared the mattress, and got the kids to get me sheets, pillow and blanket, while Dad dragged the superhero into his office. We were really running out of spare place.

We'd just laid him down when Dad asked: "Hey, do you think when he wakes up - should I threaten him for making my little girl a mother at fifteen or should I thank him for making me a grandfather?"

And… forehead and palm's love continued to bloom once again.

Eidolon was still out of it when the door bell rang, and I saw two people outside I really hadn't expected: Theo and Greg, both with seemingly nothing more than some small cuts, but with blood splatter all over them - especially Greg.

"You look like - what happened?", I asked, my concern shining through my voice.

Greg stared at his hands - his very, very blood-stained hands. "Uh… funny you should ask that. It's a long story. How's… how's my parents? Ms Russell and Aster?"

"They're all fine, and worried out of their minds. Why?"

Both of them nearly keeled over in relief, and I decided to postpone any interrogation for after phoning their families and getting them cleaned up.

And getting Sveta cleaned up, after she hugged Greg despite him being splattered in only half-dried blood.
Travelling None - 9.y (Greg)

Chapter Notes

I'd like to warn you right now that this chapter is... not quite in the same direction as usual ones. General warning.

It was pure chance - or rather, bad luck - that Greg ran into Theo in a game store, and they both decided to continue on together.

Well, that wasn't the bad luck, Greg corrected - the bad luck was the part where they then promptly ran into someone else.

Someone who rhymed with Black Dash, and Greg didn't know either why that was the first comparison to pop into his mind - it didn't really make any sense.

Of course, his mind often didn't really make any sense, not even to himself, so it wasn't like this was an unusual occurrence.

The next two days were -

Jack whispered, and threatened, and laughed - a high, shrill laugh that didn't sound like Greg had ever thought Jack Slash would have, not with his reputation, a laugh that sounded not like a master manipulator, somebody in control, but somebody so out of it you almost felt sorry for them if they didn't have a knife with them.

And he kept them with him, all the time, and cut them - just a bit - whenever they talked to each other.

The thing Greg didn't notice the first day was that none of the other members of the Slaughterhouse Nine were there; it took him until the third day to finally gain the - not courage, perhaps, more overwhelming curiosity mixed with an equally curious desire to piss his pants - to ask Jack; he didn't always attack them for talking to him, not even unprompted, and the way he sometimes muttered to himself - "Everywhere, everywhere." - left Greg with the distinct impression that he had at least a chance to gain answers without getting hurt for it, even if they wouldn't, necessarily, be very clear answers.

… actually, he was mostly sure they'd be rather deranged ramblings.

In the end, they proved to be somewhere in the middle.

"Where… where's the others?", Greg asked.

"Dead and gone", Jack answered, a horrible, horrible grin on his face. "Dead, gone and run, and he's still coming after me. He got Hatchet Face."
Right, that accounted for one out of… how many others did they have? Shatterbird, Burnscar, Bonesaw, Mannequin, the Siberian, Crawler; that had been all of them, right?

For a moment, Greg thought he'd have to ask another question for Jack to continue: "Bakuda got set alight, Siberian disappeared, Crawler and Manny ran off and got themselves killed… Burnscar and Shatterbird got done in by the Protectorate, of all people… and he's still after me. I can feel him coming, you know, and sometimes he just pops up behind me…" Jack's voice sounded haunted, and the part of Greg that was really, really interested in powers and always would be began speculating about the man just maybe having some power that made him interact with other capes on some level… with rather nasty side-effects for him when meeting Silver. Maybe it established a two-way link, and Silver could tell?

"And Riley… Riley made friends or some nonsense like that, and they stopped her from doing art and told her this wasn't really good… she was so good at it, you know? I was proud of her, my best work… and now she's stopped…" Jack was slurring his words, and he and Theo both exchanged a glance. If they were lucky…

"And he's always there… I can't sleep anymore. Always there…"

Unfortunately, he didn't forget to bind their hands and feet before he plonked down on the sofa, falling asleep even before hitting it.

Well, sounded like there weren't any more other members of the S9 around, and the way Jack looked, it would only be a matter of time before there weren't any more members of them at all.

The only question was whether Greg and Theo would survive that long. Even if something clearly had broken Jack Slash - and recently, at that - Greg was reasonably sure that it really, really hadn't made him any less willing to kill them as soon as he felt as if he didn't need a captive audience anymore.

His fears were proved true days later, a much - happier, and god, was that scary-looking Jack binding their wrists in the morning before he went out. "You know… Greg Veder, right? Theo Anders, step-mother is Kayden Russel, half-sister Aster Anders?" Jack flipped his knife. "I think I'm going to have some fun."

Greg and Theo, both bound to different chairs, shared a panicked look, and quietly proceeded to flip out when Jack left and closed the door - for the first time forgetting to gag them when he left.

"He's going after…", Theo started, and Greg nodded.

"We've got to get out of here."

"Hello? Ropes?"

"Maybe… if we rub our wrists raw, do you think the blood would make the rope easier to tear? And I think the chairs have got some edges we could rub on, to tear them apart."
For a moment, Theo was silent. "I don't think the first part will work, but the second one… yeah, maybe."

After what might have been an hour or five minutes, Theo asked: "What if… what if we don't make it in…"

"I'd… I'd like to die first, I think", Greg said. "I really… I don't want to see you die. And… it's not like it'll matter, anyways. We'll both be dead."

"Yeah. Probably."

It took what felt like hours to cut the ropes even a little, and in the end, Jack still came home before they'd finished. That was why they'd never tried to break out before: If they failed, they'd be dead. Of course, that day, they probably would have died anyways, so it really didn't matter. The worst part though, was that they'd been so close; Greg's hands were nearly free.

"Bad, bad boys", he grinned at them, seeing the way the ropes were torn. "You know, it's funny, the way people scream when they're about to die… the Veders went quickly, but - Kayden, wasn't it? - she had a lot more fight. Tried to protect her daughter…" The grin remained on his face.

"You know… which one of you should die first, hmm? I might make you choose."

Greg closed his eyes, breathed in and out, and did his best to convey to Theo with his face that he really, really should remember their conversation from earlier.

Theo did. "Not me - please, not me!", he said, doing his best to act like he was scared, and Greg had never felt more grateful in his life.

He didn't want to die with open eyes; instead, he continued to focus on maybe freeing his hands - it might be nice, to have them free in the end. "You know, I could draw it out, a little… make it last longer while he dies", he addressed Theo, ignoring Greg. "A cut here, a cut there… maybe take out his innards, see how long it'll take…"

And if Greg moved right, he might end it more quickly, too.

Suddenly, a loud, dull noise - Greg flinched, his eyes snapped open; the rope tore with a snap. Jack had keeled over.

A glance at Theo, who'd fallen unconscious too. Jack's knife was still in his hand.

Trembling, Greg bent over, took the knife, his legs still bound to the chair. He ignored the pain that came from the chair crashing down, right onto his legs, ignored everything but Jack.

And stabbed at the throat. Again, and again, and again, not even noticing Theo waking up, not until a large hand from the… floor? - suddenly took Jack, and squished.

The boys looked at each other, and Greg could see his own relief mirrored in Theo's face.
Then, he cut his - friend, definitely friend - loose.

They were free.

Finally, they were free again.
The Veders and Kayden were both in tears when they got to see Greg and Theo, alive and mostly well and unharmed. The two boys honestly weren't any less emotional, both crying openly.

Or maybe they hadn't even noticed? They might not have, clinging to their families as if they'd thought they'd never see them again, before starting their story; and it wasn't exactly the kind of story that was conducive to not crying.

Though I never, ever believed I'd ever hear that Greg Veder had killed Jack Slash with his own knife. There was… well.

It was pretty surrealistic to think one of my classmates - not to mention a classmate who wasn't known for being especially tough or brave - had killed one of the worst villains of North America in a manner that arguably counted as ironic.

Hell, I couldn't even believe one of my classmates had killed anybody in what any court in the world would rule self-defense.

It was kind of funny: Even in a world of capes, even with powers myself, I couldn't quite believe such things happened in my surroundings.

Of course, that didn't mean we still didn't have to meet the PRT, and Greg and Theo had to give their statement again to one of their officers I hadn't yet met, Hannah Washington, and one I had, Leeroy Jenkins.

Both of them were oddly calmer the second time, especially during the part where they mentioned that according to what they'd heard from Slash, the S9 were gone. Over. Done for.

While I'd kind of known about most of that, I still wondered what had happened to the Siberian. Disappeared? How had that happened? Who had defeated her?

I'd been scared of her, even in giant rainbow form.

Well, I guess that one would remain a mystery for the ages.

On the other hand, both boys took their introduction to the twins - there really hadn't been any occasion to do this properly earlier - comparatively well, too, and Greg especially didn't ask too many questions on who the twins were.

Of course, the whole time, Eidolon remained knocked out in Dad's office, only awakening the next morning, staring at the ceiling, right when I checked in on him.

"You know, Alex, I had this peculiar dream…", he started murmuring.

"I think that wasn't a dream. Do you want breakfast? Coffee?", I asked him.

He nearly jumped to his feet, sitting up with a jerk, looking at me wild-eyed, and for a moment, we
just stared at each other.

"Coffee. Coffee sounds good", he croaked.

We were still staring at each other.

"Right", I said after a moment.

This seemed like it was all the awkwardness of being a separated couple with kids without any of the fun before that.

Or maybe a "kids, suprise!" plot of a movie. Without any possibility of romance and a really, really weird sort of conception.

… I was not going to think about this any more. Otherwise I'd end up focusing just how similar this situation was to certain romcoms, and that was not a thought I needed in my head.

Too late.

In the end, one long iteration of stuff I'd already told him later (no mentioning of Endbringers), I ended up going to school again, which remained rather alright these days, although the bare mention of it set Eidolon off again and led to him just blankly staring out the window.

Teenaged, school-attending mom of six, yes. What's your problem?

He left the house at the same time as I did, clad in civilian clothes.

That afternoon, I came home to find Connor in tears, the twins and his friend Missy curled up around him, and unable to look into my eyes.

Immediately, I joined the group cuddle.

"Sweetie, what is it?"

"Miss Smith… she's… I'm a boy", Connor said, and a dark suspicion boiled up in my mind.

"You are", I told him.

"She - I'm not a girl. I am not."

"Did… did she say something like that?", I asked.

It was Missy who answered. "It was horrible. She didn't - she just continued calling him a 'her', and when he complained, she just used this sugary sweet voice and told him how fun games of make-belief were, but that he was really too old for them and -" Missy cut off, her hands balled into fists. "I wish I could…"

"No", I said, because I had a pretty good idea what she wished she could; my version of it included a tarred and feathered Smith being boiled in oil, for starters. "We can't hurt her directly. But I'll get Dad to talk to her superiors, as high up as we can reach, and I think Sam has some contacts somewhere"
who could help. Not to mention the Dallons." I gave Missy a grin that was probably more teeth than smile. "After all, I'm pretty sure Riley might be joining your school soon, so they do have a vested interest in making sure they've got competent teachers." Competency, in teachers, included more than just being a good orator or knowing the material, after all. Like making sure your students felt safe in the classroom so they could actually learn something.

Hey, Winslow left me with some strong opinions on what competency meant for a teacher, alright?

That was when Thea, with tears in her eyes, looked at me and asked: "What can we do?"

I bit my lip. Saying the adults would handle it was nice and fine, but not actually productive or useful advice. See: Winslow.

I took a deep breath. "Prepare for the most common arguments, and keep calm. The last part is really, really hard." I knew that from experience. "And civil disobedience. Don't quite refuse to learn, but refuse to respect somebody like that; though that's not always something it's possible to be open about. And never start believing them. Which is hard, too."

Bea looked at me, and I could see the anger pouring off her in waves. This was her big brother.

I wish I could do more, too.

"I could… prepare some traps", Bea said, slowly, carefully, and Thea smiled, a grin that was fierce, blood-thirsty, and thoroughly unsettling on a ten-year-old. It made me feel proud.

Missy looked between them. "I think I can make sure she misses her chair whenever she sits down in class, I've got my ways."

And so, the plotting started.

I coughed. "Great. Don't get caught, and I didn't officially hear any of this, alright?"

I received three identical, very fearsome smiles back, and one that was teary-eyed, utterly relieved, and finally feeling safe again.

I gave my son one last hug, then left the room, leaving the three girls to their plotting.
I am Afraid This - 10.2

I came back an hour or two later, when everybody had calmed down - me included, I was moving away from "torch the school - no, better all schools, especially Winslow and Connor's Middle School" and into "thinking clearly" territory again, especially after talking it over with Dad - and tried to make it clear that Dad would go to the school soon, to try and talk with the teacher - maybe it was a misunderstanding or… well, benefit of doubt, even if I was doubtful? Didn't tell that one to my kids, of course -, and that they should tell me about any incidents, see if Dad having a talk helped, and only *then* start on actually making any pranks or anything else reality; in the mean-time, sort-of civil disobedience was the way to go, and probably better in general. I wasn't quite sure how close they'd been to a full-out prank war, but telling them to wait a bit and focus on *other* ways in the mean-time probably didn't hurt.

I grit my teeth, and tried to keep calm. This whole situation was much, much too close to home.

Unfortunately, the next day started with bad news: Or rather, something bad that was happening in the news.

The dragonslayers had escaped custody. Yay.

On the more positive side, Sam had apparently developed a plan about something together with Connor, which served well to distract him from his wonderful teacher, together with me getting him puberty blockers and Amy and him having some other project they were working on.

The thing was, she wasn't stopping. Even when Dad came in for the first time that day, she just… dismissed him, said something about 'delusions' and 'too young to know' and 'not that I'd ever have anything against *those* people, but really…'. And the other kids had already started to join in. It took a while, but finally Connor confessed this had been going on for some time, now.

The worst words I ever heard were "I just… thought you were too busy, with the Case 53s, and then the S9 in town and all…"

No matter what any of my kids (including Missy) tried - thankfully not actually pranking her, even if some of their plans for it had made me laugh - they couldn't get it to stop. Talking to her didn't help, she just… completely dismissed them.

Getting into a screaming match with the teacher and telling her she was hurting him didn't help, although I was grateful to Missy for trying.

And the other kids were joining in more and more, recently. And now that Connor actually was telling me things… the ringleader was another boy named Jimmy, and at times, before remembering I was thinking about a twelve-year-old boy, I wished I could hunt that boy down and make him hurt the way he was hurting my son, until I realized… twelve-year-old, and felt sick at my own thoughts. Although some of the
incidents and Missy's bruises made me re-think that feeling, at times, and then I felt guilty about that, and then… well.

It went from "but Ms Smith says you're really a girl" to slurs, from slurs to shoves to punches, mostly from Jimmy's group, while others stood by, and Connor and Missy tried to give as good as they got, but with Ms Smith as a teacher, they were the ones most likely to get punished for it if she was anywhere in the vicinity - at four or five to two odds if it was just them, or from ten to eight to four if the twins joined in, but seeing as it was all "but Jimmy wouldn't do that, would you, Jimmy?"... They couldn't use their powers, not at school, not obviously, which meant that those odds meant a lot more than they could have had.

Dad went to the school for a second time a week later, to speak with the principal and Ms Smith, while I grit my teeth, and wished Ms Smith was one of the Lungs or Kaisers of the world, somebody who committed the kind of crime I was allowed to give a beating for before dragging them into custody every time my son came home crying, Missy with him, that helpless rage etched into her face and bruises on her arms. I couldn't really let Sam do anything to her either, because… well, I couldn't bear for any of my kids to ruin people's lives again, no matter how much I wished for any specific person's life to be ruined. Not when they weren't capes, couldn't defend themselves, hadn't hurt people the way Kaiser or Lung or Crawler had. Although I didn't keep Sam from making sure evidence collection went smoothly, at least - just in case we had to sue.

Nothing happened. Dad only came home with a red face, saying only "If that principal had told me 'oh, we like our teachers to have freedoms in their classroom' one more time, or Ms Smith said anything else about 'childhood games' or 'delusions' even after I showed her the psychological reports and statistics..." He then shook his head, took a deep breath, and focused on something else. Like making sure Connor remained alright, and actually doing things about it, even if Dad still went to the school.

We asked the Dallons for help, of course. Started collecting evidence, of bruises, of complaints, the way Dad started making a near-bi-weekly trip to the administration; I asked my parenting group for help, and they did, the ones with kids Connor's age talking to them about the situation, trying to see if there were any other incidents swept under the rug, anyone else who had similar problems.

There was a genderqueer kid the year above Connor, who was also getting bullied, their homework ruined, their grades slipping, whose mother also attended the meetings; an autistic boy who was getting reprimanded for stimming, even when he'd kept deliberately to the last row so as not to distract other kids, who was friends with them, having bonded with the other outsider in their class; a girl who'd skipped a grade the year below my son whose new grade was… less than enthused about her existence; all of whom I met - directly or indirectly - over the parenting group and an odd web of friendships between kids and parents, as well as other kids who'd graduated middle school.

Dad also tried talking to Jimmy's parents, but he just stormed home in a rage and wouldn't tell me about what they'd said, though he looked about ready to murder somebody.

Finally, four weeks later, we'd collected enough material from all of these kids we had
enough of a case, according to Carol, that we could start trying. She'd recommended us a lawyer in her firm, one who had a trans girl around Connor's age.

And slowly, ever so slowly, things started changing, other children speaking up more when they witnessed incidents - at first those kid's of my fellow parent-group attendees, then their friends, then more and more - Ms Smith and the principal coming under review, being interviewed, until finally, finally…

Another four weeks later, Ms Smith and the principal were fired, due to several recordings, rather overwhelming evidence that included, amongst other things, video of an incident where Jimmy had attacked my son, and Ms Smith had stood no ten meters away, even looking in their direction, and she'd nonetheless believed Jimmy's version of him having been shoved by Connor first, and suspending my son - I was not too enthused Sam had cut school to get said video, but I was nonetheless grateful it existed - as well as quite a few of the children and parents speaking out.

And things started… getting better.

On the topic of Riley: the afternoon after Ms Smith said goodbye to her class, their newest student Riley included - she was now enrolled in that same school (only after Carol had deemed the situation safe), she came over again, mostly to spend time with the twins - although she and Missy and Connor also got along remarkably well - and I ended up roped into a series of games of tandem chess. Since my chess-playing skills were remarkably bad and Riley's were actually worse (not to mention tandem chess being just sufficiently different that it threw me off), either of us always paired up with one of the twins, Bea being the more desired partner. Both of us also learnt how to use a chess-clock, although I really had no clue when the hell we'd acquired two chess clocks and a second board. It could've been Levi. Or Sam. Or Bea. Or Thea. Or maybe Connor. Or even Dad.

Alright, it could've been anybody in the house except for Benny and I, and I wasn't sure about Benny.

During the third game of the second round, where I got to partner up with Thea and played against Riley (again), I had just lost my queen to Riley, who was slowly but surely starting to get better at the game than me - I'd already lost the second game to her, and in the first, Thea had lost against Bea, so my team was currently very much behind - when the doorbell rang.

It was Sveta who ran to get the door, leading me to believe it was probably Greg at the door.

Turned out, it was.

Sam and Sveta's friend came in, waving shyly, then spotted Riley.

Seeing as I was currently losing the game, I directed everybody to put it on hold for a moment, then turned to greet Greg.

"Hey Greg. Riley, that's Greg Veder, Sam and Sveta's friend. Greg, that's Riley Bones,
she's a friend of the twins."

Greg's jaw dropped, and he paled dramatically, then swallowed. His voice seemed to rise a whole octave when he said: "Uh, hi. I - I'm Greg."

Riley, for a moment, looked confused, followed by a look as if somebody had punched her, then swallowed as well, while the twins proceeded to glare at Greg - Thea ended up being more adorable than anything about it, but Bea's qualified for scary. "I'm Riley. I - I'm staying with the Dallons, right now."

"That's... uh... that's good. Very good."

I decided that helping things along might be a good idea after all. "If you've seen the newspapers, well - Greg's one of the boys who were held captive by Jack Slash. The one who got him, actually." They hadn't releases Greg's name, but the story itself had been played up for all it was worth.

For a moment, Riley and Greg just stared, Greg looking as if he was going to piss his pants at any second - he'd survived Jack Slash, what was he afraid of? - before Riley barreled out of her seat, and rammed into Greg, hugging him around her waist, to a chorus of "Thankyouthankyouthankyouthankyou..."

Greg, for a moment, didn't seem to know what to do with himself, then began awkwardly patting her on the back, relief etched into his features.

What had that just been all about?

Finally, a week later, I found out what Sam and Connor had been up to all this time. It apparently also included Lisa, and Labyrinth, from Faultline's group. It was simple, obvious, and something that was very, very important to Sam: They wanted to send the Travelers home, and establish a more... permanent open portal between Aleph and Bet.

Lisa's main help had been in playing liason with the PRT and making sure they were... y'know, actually allowed to officially open a more permanent portal later on. Unofficially, the Travelers were going to step through the first unofficial test portal leading to the other side and see whether my power kept working even if the portal was closed for a couple of minutes.

If not, Trickster and Noelle had already decided to stay here permanently, and Sam and Lisa had offered to get them official, clean slates somewhere they definitely wouldn't be recognized - a small town, or perhaps another country, and Connor and Labyrinth had been volunteered to give them a semi-permanent visitor's portal for the remaining Travelers.

Of course, all those thoughts were for naught since it turned out my powers did, in fact, not lessen when the portal closed, so the Travelers could just try and turn up again, although Sam and Connor were going to keep an eye on them and make sure nothing happened to them.

I wished them luck.
The Dragonslayers escaping custody by what appeared to be all security measures failing simultaneously and Dragon strongly believed to be a deliberate attack - even if each and every failure seemed to have its own story, chock-full of odd coincidences like a spilled cup of coffee, a pair of security guards who'd been revealed as a couple and who'd gotten a bit too… excited near the monitors and accidentally pushed some of the wrong buttons during certain activities, and a mouse colony who'd chewed through quite a bit of cable, and an incident involving instant noodles and a screwdriver that, by common consensus, Would Not Be Described - the fact that every single one of them had failed simultaneously defied belief.

Colin thought so, too.

A probability manipulator? A Stranger who'd sneaked in? Something else?

They didn't, couldn't know.

The worst part was that Dragon still hadn't found their base.

Nothing of this, however, explained one confirmed member of Kith and two other capes showing up somewhere in Vancouver, apparently through teleportation, together with Silver, right in front of a camera Dragon had access too.

A Silver who waved at them, while the three confused - children?! - looked around.

"Well… great", Pace stated dryly, the boy looking anything other than happy about the situation. "Mischief, Mayhem - we'll be staying together until Mo- Anima, I mean, finds us?"

Two girls (?) dressed up in Renaissance men's clothes and Venetian masks tailored for their size nodded.

Pace had already met with New Wave, Dragon knew, but she had not seen Mischief and Mayhem before - the two looked remarkably similar, with the same height and the same costume, twins perhaps?

Of course, all of their plans tanked when one of the girls looked up, then pointed out to her brother (?): "Pace, I think there's some bad news ahead."

Pace's forehead met his palm, in resemblance of his mother's palm and forehead's torrid love affair's. "Of course there is. What kind of bad news?"

The other girl seemed to fix on her twin (?) for a moment, then grinned. "Ooh, ooh, this is gonna be fun!", and promptly ran ahead, fast enough a human eye couldn't have tracked her, and even the camera with its frame rate well above that hardly could, throwing open a random door on the street, before facing a man Dragon's facial recognition software immediately tagged as one of the Dragonslayers, the whole lot of them actually rather close to Dragon's servers.

Well.

… this was odd.
There was something to be said for just charging into places, Thea found.

For instance, one seldom had to bother with such things like "planning" or "waiting", which were definitely positives in her book. Why stand still if you could run?

Of course, Bea liked being still, but not even her twin could be reasonable about things all the time. Even her powers required her to be still, which was really counterproductive.

Thea was glad she'd gotten the Awesome Kaboom Copy Powers and not the lame stay-still Shaker powers.

(Awesome Kaboom, because she could copy Awesome Kaboom.)

And the link to Mom meant she could copy capes in her radius, too.

Like Benny… uh, Valiant.

Firebender, yay!

Although Thea couldn't really imitate Zuko, because she didn't have a scar, or Iroh, since she didn't have an awesome gray beard, and she didn't want to be Azula, because Azula was mean.

If cool.

And she'd just made a pun! She was going to tell Bea that one later, sooner or later she would crack up…

And then Thea could finally gloat and do a victory dance.

In this case, just charging into a place meant, however, that people already knew she were coming, and that thoughts of victory dances meant the other man had time to shout "CAPE!" to warn his fellows.

Which Thea didn't quite, yet, assume to be evidence of wrong-doing - you could never be too careful with accusing people. So she decided to be polite.

"Hi, I'm Mischief!" She grinned at him.

He tried - emphasis on tried - punching her in the face, and Thea ducked.

Alright, not a good guy then, obviously.

Her loyal followers - that is, her twin and older brother - close behind her, Thea immediately proceeded to kick the man, and see what was going on there.
"The Dragonslayers!", Pace shouted at her, and Thea understood. Those were those bad guys who'd been on the TV recently! But no fear, Thea to the rescue!

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Dragon observed the Dragonslayers being attacked by a cheerful trio of pre-teens - or rather, one very cheerful pre-teen and her two begrudging siblings following close behind, if she understood the situation correctly - and felt… satisfaction, if anything.

They were utterly being demolished, the teleporter - Pace - jumping about, the less cheerful twin stomping about with a look of extreme concentration on their face and occasionally, for the best efforts, standing still, turning the house into a minefield, and a bouncing, happy cheerful child knocking them about, even Dragon's suits, piloted as… inefficiently as they were, doing nothing.

It was both very, very frightening and very, very nice to witness, like a real-life Looney Tunes episode.

Or a copybunny video with Bugs.

At least, until Dragon noticed something else happening at the same time, just when Saint became visible in the fight, programs being cut off from her and

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When Thea came into the room the leader of the Dragonslayers - and that would have been a way cooler name if Dragon wasn't such an awesome good guy - had just exited form, the first thing she saw was computers.

A red button, freshly pressed.

ASCALON.

Something was very, very wrong.

Taking a deep breath and reaching out, she felt a Shard's connection sputter, as if the one they were connected to was in their death throes.

Well. Just one way to solve this.

Focusing on her brother, she let herself grow a bit, her features changing, then hopped to where she felt the Shard-bearer die, using Conny's sense of spacetimeall.

And paused the Shard-bearer.
Alright.

This was good. They weren't yet dead. Just - who was it they'd just been trying to -

Dragon. Duh. They were in an empty hall, full of machines, of servers, their steady humming accompanying Thea. Computers + Cape + Canada = Dragon, 3C=D.

Mom could solve this.

Mom wasn't here, Thea was.

She knew where her siblings were - still subduing the Dragoslayers, they should be finished any second now - but their powers weren't going to help her.

She needed - she needed -

What did she need? How did you stop whatever that was?

Diving into Dragon's power, she felt herself change, be drawn to the next nearby cable in a way that was thoroughly uncomfortable, her self turning to mind-and-only-mind-in-machine, before she abruptly cut the connection, leaving her panting.

Dragon was an AI. That meant whatever was killing her had to be a program. How did one -

Well. A computer virus couldn't really directly infect a human, but how could that help her?


And reached out.

Mom's power was blazing, in the way the sun was at midday, only worse, when everything else was tiny little stars, as if ten suns stood together right before her.

And Thea reached out, again, her senses now focusing on Dragon, the way there might be - should be, could be - a switch somewhere, the way Mom had described it, hoping beyond hope this could work.

There was one.

With a deep breath, Thea flipped it, only for a naked human woman to form beside the servers.

A naked bleeding woman, who was coughing and sputtering, blood coming from her nose, her throat, her ears.

On the fly, Thea switched to Connor's powerset again, dialling back the clock - just for her body, just enough it would mean she'd be whole, again.

And the woman opened her eyes, and stared at her hands, her knees, her feet, her wounds gone.

"Uh… I think we should probably make sure that virus is gone before you go back to your other form", Thea said.
And Dragon laughed.
The younger kids were missing, and I didn't know where they were. They'd just been late coming from school at first, and now -

I was worried.

Really, really worried.

Horror scenarios were running through my mind - what if there'd been a worse incident, even with Ms Smith fired? What if...

It was only when the phone rang, I picked up I heard Pace's voice - high and childish and my baby boy's - that I relaxed.

"Mom… uh… can you get to Vancouver? And bring Armsmaster, please. Dragon kind of needs his help. We think. The Dragonslayers did something, and… well..."

"Connor?"

"The whole situation is… really complicated. As in, none of us have a clue what we're doing, complicated. Silver kind of deposited us here, and I think Thea got us into the messy parts of it, but…"

"Say no more. I'm on my way."

"Thanks, Mom."

Connor cut the connection, leaving me to breathe heavily, worried out of my mind.

The first thing I did was try and get in touch with Armsmaster, who apparently "did not have the time".

This lasted about the exact point I mentioned the words "Dragon" and "my youngest three".

At which point Armsmaster apparently cut into the connection, screaming "WHAT DID THEY DO?!", at the top of his lungs.

I was glad to be a Brute, he'd definitely have damaged my hearing otherwise.

"I don't know. Yet. But apparently the Dragonslayers were involved somehow, too."

"Those no good, damned, idiotic -", he started swearing. I gathered he really, really didn't like the Dragonslayers.

"So, are you coming with us to Vancouver or not? I can teleport us.", I asked.

"… I'll ask the Director for permission. As soon as she gives it, I'll come."

"Great. I'll wait in front of the PRT building, then."
He cut the connection, and I assembled my family and jumped us not quite right to the front door, but into line-of-sight - no sense in hiding it now that I'd announced it, but no sense like seeming like I was going to attack, either.

Five minutes later, Armsmaster joined us, and I brought us to where I knew my children were.

Huh. Apparently that was a thing. Useful.

If Sam or Benny ever actually did get those dates, that would mean I'd have a way of discreetly monitoring them.

… bad Taylor. No hindering your kid's as of yet already non-existent love lives.

Wait until they actually have some.

Thea - that is, Mischief was trying (and failing. Seriously failing) to look innocent, while Bea was sitting in a corner, her head cradled in her hands - huh, so her cheeks and palms were the ones engaging in a love affair - and Pace stood beside a woman somewhere in her twenties I didn't recognize, clad in what I did recognize as my own pajamas.

No, seriously, he could grab my PJs, but he couldn't come home? Or where they a power contract?

I could just make sure by using Sam's powers on him… later.

"Dragon?", Armsmaster asked the woman, and she… nodded.

"I… really did not expect this. Any of this. Ever." With those words, she looked down - and stared at her hands.

Then she started wiggling her fingers, one by one, looking way too amused and fascinated at the sight of them moving, almost like most of the 53s I'd… given… Changer… forms…

Oh.

"So… what happened?"

"Well, we kiiiind of attacked the Dragonslayers, and they activated this program that would kill Dragon dead, and then I had to go save her, and I did, and now we can't get her back to normal because it's still infesting her home, and we thought Armsmaster could help?", Thea said.

Bea groaned. "This is all your fault, Mischief."

"Is not!"

"No arguing, kids", I intervened. "Dragon, if you'd tell the story?"

"Well, to start with, I'd ask you to not interrupt until I am finished. I guess I first would have to explain about my father…"
"You're an AI", Armsmaster said, his tone carefully neutral.

"Yes."

"You're an AI", he repeated, his voice changed, and before I even realized how, he continued. "That's so… that's awesome! A benevolent AI, I mean, no wonder you always were so intelligent, and that you always won our chess games, you can calculate more possibilities in your head in a second than I could in half an hour, and your processing abilities must be off the charts, and -" 

"Stop. Breathe", I told him, and he calmed down, vaguely embarrassed.

Dragon, meanwhile, just stared, as if she couldn't quite believe his reaction of total fanboy-ism.

Then, his whole behaviour changed. "They tried to murder you."

Dragon nodded.

"These -"

"Armsmaster! Fix her servers first, swear later?"

"… right."

When her servers were fixed and the Dragonslayers taken into custody (while Dragon looked on; the babbling of "Artificial Intelligence" and "Skynet" were ignored by the arresting officers, who took one look at the very human Dragon, with Armsmaster's arms around her, and shook their heads), their property carefully searched for any other surprises, we left Armsmaster and the still-human Dragon there, who was still hugging Armsmaster for dear life, who was hugging her back and patting her back.

That was when I thought to check back on whether those were my PJs or not.

… Bea had made them. Good?

That afternoon, Conny met Amy and Riley again, dragging them home with a huge grin on her face after he'd been out.

"Amy tested it on me!", he shouted, Sam and Dad already involved in preparing hot chocolate.

"Tested what?", I asked, glass of water in hand.

"Whether she could change a person's body down to the genetic level, duh." There was a huge grin on his face. "I mean, we kind of had to use some retroviruses and stuff, and Amy says the process was really kind of risky, and that we probably should've waited for an official permit or something like that, but…"

I nearly dropped my glass.

"It worked? That's wonderful, Connor!"
"And she's already contacted all sorts of organizations, and we're probably going to offer this service to anyone who wants it, soon, and -"

I couldn't help but smile. My son was just so happy about the whole thing.


I gave a huge grin to Amy, and she grinned back, Dad giving her a cup full of hot chocolate. Riley, standing a little to the side, was soon swept away by Thea's and Bea's enthusiasm for their brother, also plied with hot chocolate and soon involved in a discussion about power mechanics that flew way over my head.

This called for a celebration.
Us celebrating with hot chocolate, board games, and several phone calls from different organizations took up the whole afternoon and evening, which lead to an impromptu sleepover - Riley seemed especially enthused about the whole thing, mostly about spending time with Thea and Bea. Amy, meanwhile, spent most of the sleepover looking up various transgender organizations on her phone, and see whether she could help, there, all the while discussing with Connor about what he knew about them, and how receptive they’d be.

Then, Greg came over, hugging Sveta, followed shortly after by Kayden, Theo and Aster.

Kayden first rather awkwardly shook Connor's hand, then ended up giving him a hug, anyways, while Greg, Theo and Riley ended up huddling in a corner, discussing something, Riley hugging Theo, too, and Greg just… sitting there and smiling, mostly, while Kayden ended up talking about her job to Connor, and whether she knew any jobs that needed Maths or Latin.

It was nice.

Of course, the next morning was much less nice, what with all our guests leaving, Thea complaining loudly about it and Bea being grumpy, and when everyone was gone…

Somebody rang the door bell, and I opened the door only to find Eidolon standing outside.

On the plus side, he brought flowers. And he wasn't in costume, which would've been awkward to explain to the neighbours.

On the minus side, he brought himself. And flowers.

I was kind of of two minds concerning the flowers.

"May I come in?", Eidolon asked.

"Sure." I held open the door, letting him in.

"So, why are you…", I started, skipping the awkward small-talk.

Because awkward small-talk with the power-induced father of your children was even more awkward than usual awkward small-talk.

"Well… there's several things. One of them is that a silvery… friend of ours recently directed me towards coming here, and to ask about the Endbringers. The other is that I'm supposed to tell you about Cauldron."

"Cauldron?", I asked.

"It's a long story."

"That's the story with the Endbringers, too."
For a moment, this ordinary-looking man, who was one of Earth Bet's greatest hero's and not even a Runner-Up for Father of the Year Award, looked completely, utterly broken and exhausted.

"I'll start, anyways. But I'll make all of us hot chocolate first. We'll need it. For me, it started just after I gained powers - I was hearing voices. And then, three kids came to live with me. It took me a while to realize they were - or rather, had been - Behemoth, Leviathan and Simurgh, and to get the story of being forced to fight out of them, and how exactly it had worked..."

I then summed up the History of the Endbringers, from forced fighting based on Eidolon's subconscious desires to them coming to live with me.

He blanched when he heard about the fact that there were twenty, and looked very, very ill when he realized the Endbringers had been, more or less, his fault.

I also managed to extract quite a few promises about making it up to them from him. I started my wish-list with a competent therapist, and he promised to look into it. As well as child support, for however many kids there'd be.

It was, in my opinion, the very least he could do. It didn't matter to me if hadn't been intentional, he'd traumatized my kids.

"You see, Cauldron was founded after one of ours first encountered what we call an Entity, a multi-dimensional alien creature that is the source of all superpowers - there was a pair of them, and they planned on blowing up all realities after..."

Of course, when he started explaining about Cauldron - luckily for him starting with their aims and origin, otherwise I'd have tried my best to rip his head off - I wasn't quite so sure whether finding a competent therapist wouldn't help him, too. He seemed to need one.

"There's a friend of mine I could ask for that", he said - and started explaining about Contessa in more detail.

… I hadn't actually wanted to know that much about her.

The torture - that is, the information session - lasted until the door bell rang again.

Excusing myself, I stood up, opening the door.

Only to find Silver. And Scion. Both standing outside.

With a sigh, I let them in.

Silver waves at Eidolon, then smiles at me. "Hello, Taylor."

I know that voice. Slowly, I turn to him, my mind blank.

"Could you tell Danny I'm here?"

He had Dad's voice.

Trembling, I nodded, then shouted. "Dad, come here, please!"
"Coming!", the same voice as the entity (Entity?) in front of me is currently using shouts back.

Dad trudged down the stairs, where he'd been helping Sam and Levi with sorting out the wash, then promptly froze when he spotted Silver and - Zion, actually, I guess.

"It's time then?, he asked.

I was now officially completely confused.

"Yes. It is, future me."

And with that, everything stopped making sense.

"I see." Dad closed his eyes, and spoke.

And I - understood.

[Hello, Zion.]

Eidolon's jaw dropped, even while he held his hands over his ears, his eardrums bleeding, and Zion…

Zion smiled. Grinned, to be more accurate. [Happiness]

[We need to talk. Somewhere else.]

Then, Dad turned to me. "If you want to, you can accompany us. It'll be a… difficult talk, honestly, but I would really prefer to have you there. It's a long story, and I only started discovering all this recently myself, and, well..."

Dad shrugged.

"Though I first should probably continue talking to Zion."

I nodded. "Yeah, sounds good."

He turned away from me again, to Zion. [I can show you some interesting calculations concerning our ultimate aim. I did sort of find a solution to the problem.]


[Too many emotions at once, eh? But yeah, I'll ask one of my grand-offspring to give you a hand.]

"What is the solution?", I asked Dad, who raised his hand in an odd manner, seemingly to put up a shield or something?

"Well, with that specific problem… giving up on it, and dedicating your life to something more sensible, actually." He chuckled. "It's not possible to solve the problem, which can be proven."

"So you just… lied to him?"
Dad smirked, rubbing his hands. "I very much did not. After all, giving up is a very specific solution. And allows you to actually do something better with… well." His hands spread during his explanation, and he finally shrugged, Zion still eagerly grinning standing before us, separated by a glowing blueish wall.

"And the way Zion is... we'll figure something out, I've already got an idea. He's not… all that bright. Even for an - I think you're calling them Entities?" Then, he continued. [So, I thought it best if you'd stay here for a while, cousin.]

With the same - very dumb - grin still fixed onto his face, Zion replied. [AGREEMENT].

Taking Silver and me by the hand, Dad - stepped somewhere else.
He'd chosen well - the surroundings here were beautiful, not too cold and not too hot, an empty land of green hills and interesting fauna, a place where humanity had never developed.

A part of him still could - and did - think in several instances at once, the way he'd done… before, while another remained Danny Hebert, human, son of two humans from the small human town of Brockton Bay.

He('d) planned the balance very, very well indeed.

Although it was distinctly odd to know of things that had already happened and were happening right now, even for one such as him. Whatever he was right now.

He wasn't quite sure himself.

This whole thing was way, way too complicated - and it was nice to be capable of admitting that he did not, could not, have answers to some problems, or was confused. Abbadon could never have.

Taking deep breaths from a human chest, he instead looked at - Silver.

He remembered being him, and wasn't that weird?

It was good to have Taylor there. She grounded him, the same way Silver's existence made him doubt his sanity.

Frankly, when he'd been slipping and just acting on instinct - pre-cogging results, he realized now; the first powers he'd had any access to at all, until he'd recovered and started using them consciously while they came back ever so slowly - the other had already started bubbling up. After more than thirty years of living a human life, the millenia of memories of being an omnicidal multi-dimensional space-whale were… odd.

At least he hadn't been Zion; Zion had been worse.

Abbadon had been bad enough.

Closing his eyes and taking deep breaths, Danny remembered being Lko'ilnen. A different number of fingers, a different skin tone, a completely different facial structure - lack of nose and prominent incisor-equivalents did that - scales, and yet… Lko'ilnen had been closer to Danny than Abaddon ever could have been.

Even their names were surprisingly similar, Daniel and Lko'ilnen both expressing a wish to be judged by a higher being.

And he shouldn't focus on that, on names and coincidences, instead, he should look at Silver.
Silver who could be him, but very much wasn't, could one day understand humanity - would be human - but wasn't. Not yet.

It was an odd dichotomy.

He didn't think he much liked his younger self, and yet he understood it in ways that made him want to obliterate it - its obliviousness, its wish for humanity that would give him a life full of struggles, of losing his parents, Annette, friends, of ups and downs - too few ups, too many downs - and yet…

And yet…

He doubted anyone ever would take their younger selves well, too much difference in opinion, in naivety, things that had irrevocably changed.

And yet he remembered that hopefulness, that obliviousness, that need to redeem himself and find another path, at the same time as knowing he couldn't keep Silver from becoming Danny Hebert. Whatever had happened, whatever ups and downs, he wanted to exist.

He wanted Taylor to exist. He wanted his grandchildren - and they were, despite everything - to be free. To live.

And for that, the loop had to be closed, the wormhole used, and the necessary energy be balanced.

Even if it would cost him…

He could still see her in his memories, on photographs, but never again in reality.

Danny couldn't change the past. What had already happened had already happened, even if it had yet to happen in some ways.

And time travel tenses and thoughts were wonderful at making one's head spin. Who knew?

"So", he finally said. "It's… quite odd to meet you, past me."

"It fills me with hope to see you, future me."

He grimaced. He really didn't want to destroy his past self's delusions, he wouldn't remember this bit for a long time anyways, but…

It was just so hard, not smacking the idiot, destroying him, trampling on his illusions and tearing them away; the way he behaved, the beliefs he expressed, went under Danny's skin in the way few things ever had.

This was hard. Harder even, then getting away from the voice and oblivion and back towards himself had ever been.

He took a deep breath. "I wish you - good luck, I guess. Serenity. I can't tell you you won't make mistakes. I can't tell you you'll always be happy. But you will do good. You
will be happy. There'll be good times."

And bad ones, but he couldn't mention that, not... not right then, not with his younger, silvery mirror staring at him, using his voice.

"Thank you", Silver said, smiling at him - and Danny remembered the hope he'd felt back then, and felt like throwing up now.

Silver was more entity than human, still, and yet the most human entity there was.

He'd be human, soon.

From his perspective.

"I want to go back, soon."

"You will. Conny - that's our youngest grandson, currently - he'll help. He's a good boy."

And he would want to ensure his own existence, if nothing else, Danny thought morosely.

He... really wasn't looking forward to the conversation of what exactly had happened with his grandchildren and his daughter. Arguably, he hadn't known what Eden would do with that shard when they'd first met, but he should've checked, anyways.

Not met her, derailed her plans by giving her the Path to Victory Shard and some others as a poisoned gift, flown off in another direction to make it seem like he wasn't a danger, and took long enough coming back humanity would still exist and Eden and Scion wouldn't spot and recognize him using precognition.

It had been a pretty difficult balancing act, but then, he was good at those. Why, the way he'd manipulated Hosts in his Circles had been a work of ar-

He hated his very past self.

There were befores, and afters: Before and after Lko'llnen, before and after becoming Danny.

Before Lko'llnen was the worst bit to remember.

Taking a deep breath, he hugged Silver, the other Entity - the same Entity - hugging him back.

This was about where his foreknowledge, his ability to predict things perfectly would soon end. As soon as the loop was closed.

The space-time anomaly was coming up, and then it'd be goodbye; his only job left to protect Earth, find ways to keep it and humanity protected for as long a time as possible.

He'd manage.
He'd have to.
I was quiet and thoughtful when Dad teleported us - Silver and me - back, not quite sure I'd understood everything that had happened, that I'd gotten the whole story.

Dad was an Entity. Check.

Silver was a younger version of Dad. Check.

Time travel was involved somehow - I'd really not expected that one. Check.

Conny was supposed to help. Check.

Utter confusion over the remainder, including what my own species technically was. Check.

A part of me still really hoped that Dad was… actually Dad.

"Connor? We kind of need your help", Dad started, slowly, carefully, almost broken.

And that was the second I realized this was still Dad, despite everything.

Looking at him, I spontaneously decided he really, really needed a hug right now, and threw my arms around him.

He hugged me back, shaking slightly.

Dad was Dad, and that was that.

I nodded to myself.

My son came over. "Grandpa? What's wrong?"

"It's - could you do me a favour?"

"I could." Connor shrugged. "You haven't said what it is, yet."

"There should an - anomaly a bit ahead. Could you shuffle Silver here through, after he's dealt with things? It's… kind of necessary."

"Alright", Connor answered with a shrug.

"There's a whole story there. Which I guess I should probably tell… well, it starts with a species of - I guess you'd describe them as interdimensional space whales on a planet far, far away, who ran out of resources…"

"This - murdering other species' for experience, for knowledge, continued for centuries. One Entity, however, ended up being kind of… odd, slowly growing more host-like in comparison; which is a bit like saying a human grew more ant-like, they're still more human than ant. And then, it had a wonderful, awful idea, and ended up as a member of a host species…"
"Afterwards, said Entity, with the help of precognition, and the knowledge of an upcoming space-time-anomaly, decided on a plan: It would poison the approaching pair of Entities, then edge away, and use the space-time-anomaly to be born at some point before that in time as a member of the host species. And... well, here I am."

When Dad stopped, all my children stared at him.

"And... us?"

"Well... Eden actually defined you, I just kind of... repurposed those shards a bit as soon as I could."

Dad was staring at his toes, his hands behind his back.

And nearly fell over when three teens, one near-teen, and two pre-teens crashed into him to hug him - the main reason he didn't was that they needed to come from different directions, which kept him upright.

He looked up, a bit helpless, and I shrugged. "You're still Dad."

"You're still Grandpa", Sam reiterated, and the other kids joined in in a chorus.

Eidolon, who'd kept himself in the background, was mostly ignored.

Of course, that was when I remembered Scion, who'd left the room at some point - I was reasonably sure he was still somewhere in the house, but probably not listening.

I hugged Dad again. He looked like he needed it.

He hugged back, warm and human, and I realized I still kind of hadn't processed it all.

There'd be time for that.

Finally, Connor spoke up. "The anomaly is coming up, soon."

"If you'd work your magic?" Dad was turned to both my son and I, and I understood - I was supposed to... make sure Silver arrived the age and species he should?" Silver came over, standing there uncertainly, and I focused, on changing him, more into the potential for a person in mind than an actual one, the change coming slower, with more difficulty, than ever before. I knew Connor was focusing on something else, something I could feel coming up, too, and then -

Silver was gone.

We'd closed the loop.

I nearly fell over from an odd sort of exhaustion, one that seemed to reach beyond my body and elsewhere.

I looked at my youngest son, my three daughters, my other two sons, full of pride, at my father, whose species was probably currently "undefined", and felt at home.
Of course, that was when the telephone rang.

Dad picked up, switched on the loudspeakers. "Hebert residence?"

"Uh - hi Mr Hebert. I kind of, that is - with what happened recently, there's kind of…” It was Greg's voice, I realized.

"Yes?", Dad asked, quietly.

"There'll be a ceremony. I think I'm - well, I think I'm getting some sort of medal for killing Jack Slash? And money? And I wondered whether you - all of you - could come? It - it would be nice. It'll be a closed ceremony, just for people in the know, but..."

"Of course we're coming, Greg", Dad answered for us. Just this once, I wasn't really angry for him committing us unilaterally - supporting a friend was important, and Greg was Sam's and Sveta's friend. My own, maybe, too.

"Good, that's - that's great, then! I'll… tell you the time and date, later?"

"Alright, Greg."

"Well, then, see you soon, Mr Hebert!"

"See you soon."

Dad disconnected the call, and turned to me again, a soft smile on his face, shaking his head.

It took a while for the conversation to pick up again, and when it did, I finally asked a question that led to something that had been bugging me for some time now. "So… are you kind of responsible for my powers then?"

"Well… more Silver, actually, but yes."

"Well… what is my power actually? I don't think I ever properly realized…” I really, really wanted to know.

For a moment, an odd look crossed Dad's face. "Well… uh… alright, give me some time to prepare an explanation."

Then, he paused, staying silent for quite a while.
This'll be the second-to-last chapter.
The last one that'll feature Taylor and everyone else.
It's... I'm this close to actually finishing this fic...

Finally, Dad spoke up again. "Your powers. Well, you do know they come from - shards, right?"

I nodded. "Yep."

"While you… ended up with a few more, just by virtue of our relation, the main shard, the one who activated your powers… this shard, well… I sort of repurposed the Adapt-to-Local-Species Shard. In this case, configured to human baseline and emotions, with a more… complete override than usual. It also allows us - I mean, Entities - to configure our own feelings, in a way. Might argue it's our metaphorical heart you're drawing on." He shrugged.

"Power of heart." No, seriously, what?

"Yep."

"You're being… serious." I couldn't quite believe it.

"Pretty much, yeah. It's one of the less useful shards, normally, but I gave it a fair bit of extra juice and allowed it to draw power from others, so..." He shrugged again. "It's kind of difficult to explain in human terms. Gave it enough override capacity to change pretty much anything and -one, based on your concept of what somebody might look like - the more you already imagine, the less it's like what they think they should look like. It's interesting, the way you've weaponized it, sometimes - it should work even on an unwilling Entity or other alien, the way it's set up, now; and with giving the ability to change back, well..."

He rubbed his hands. "Going all-out, well, it could come in handy one day, so I wouldn't have wanted to cut myself off, but… my memories from before are foggy, still, so take everything with a grain of salt, but being an Entity is much less… intoxicating than being human is. It's way more fun, in many ways. Hell, we've got the capacity to have fun in the first place."

I stared at Dad, my mouth open Specifically, at his wide, near-manic grin. "O-kay. I… guess so."

"I'm… sorry, it's just… even with everything that happened, I can feel joy. It's odd, to remember a time when you couldn't, not really, not quite like this." He laughed, freely, without restraint.

"I get that", I answered, softly, because I did have the feeling I sort of did, even if I couldn't quite imagine what being unable to feel joy would feel like. But more than that, because he needed to hear it.
A week later, we attended the ceremony Greg had invited us to, where he did end up being one of the two guests of honor, the President coming down to shake his and Theo's hands personally, together with PRT Director Rebecca Costa-Brown and Eidolon. Alexandria, apparently, couldn't make it.

After they gave Greg his medal - For Courage Against Villainous Parahumans, I think that was even part of its official name - he had to give a small speech.

"I - I'd like to thank Theo, Theo Anders that is. For being there with me, keeping me sane. Ish."
There was polite laughter, and Greg rubbed his head. "My parents, for - just being amazing parents. And - the Hebert and Finislator household, especially Sveta, and Sam, who were my first and second friends, respectively, and probably the reason I actually now have any at all." Actual laughter, there. "Also, Silver, even if nobody's seen him for some time - I don't think I could've taken Jack Slash if he hadn't already been in bad condition. Or if he'd reacted faster. Or… well, there's a lot of what ifs going through my head sometimes, but I'm alive right now."

Everybody heard the unspoken and he isn't.

His chin was held high, this uncomfortable nerd's, dressed in a tux that didn't fit quite right - and people cheered.

For perhaps the first time in his life, Greg Veder was one of the heroes of the hour. It looked good on him.

After lots, and lots, of other speeches - Theo's was moving, but then came threat to the nation gone, heroic efforts, blablabla - Greg and Theo finally were let off the stage, and Greg marched over to his parents, first, giving them an unashamed hug, while Theo went for Kayden.

Then, they sought out each other, just smiling, the two of them talking, then high-fiving, before they walked over to where my family was.

The first person he hugged was Sam, before turning to Sveta. The two of them just stared kind of awkwardly at each other at first, both blushing a little, before he stepped closer, lifted his arms a little.

She stepped into the hug.

They remained like that for a good long while, holding each other close, before letting go again.

"I'm glad you came", Greg said.

Sveta smiled. "I'm glad, too."

That was when he noticed the remainder of us, looking a bit abashed again. "Well… thank you", he said, addressing all of us. "Just for… being there, you know?"

We all nodded, one after the other.

That, of course, was when the Undersiders appeared from the crowd, Tattletale giving Greg a thumbs up before hugging Sam, and quickly drawing her into a discussion on something to do with finances, while Benny searched out Rachel to hear about her dogs. Grue was standing on his own, while Regent and their newest member seemed to be joking about something or other, warily eyed
by their leader. Of course, then the Dallons came over to say hello, too, Riley immediately searching out the twins and Connor, talking about something or other, while Victoria disappeared to search for her boyfriend and Amy involved herself in the kid's discussion, eventually ending up talking to Connor about several organizations that had contacted her, as well as the way school was working out now - way better, since nobody was misgendering him anymore, he wasn't getting shoved around or punched anymore, and people were treating him kindly.

I was glad.

Eidolon came over two, standing beside me, "introducing" both himself and then actually introducing the PRT Director - who looked at us oddly, I could've sworn she knew something - then just… observed, keeping himself a bit apart.

Our kids were happy.

When we came home, we finally resolved to deal with our golden house guest for the last week, who was still just mostly kind of… sitting around.

I turned to him, focused, and said: [It's time.]

[EAGERNESS.]

I wasn't quite sure what I was doing, what I should be doing, and focused on drawing on Connor's powers, again.

Breathing in, then out, I reached out, and ever so slowly - changed him. Years seemed to melt away from his gaze, his expression, the thing becoming more humane by the second, all while he grew younger, and younger, until there was nothing left but a small child, a baby.

After a few breaths, his skin turned golden, then from gold to some sort of tanned colour - not all that far away from gold - again.

"Huh. That was… easier than I thought it'd be", I stated.

Dad stood there, scratching his head. "Just one thing: What are we supposed to do with him?"

Hesitating, I picked the baby up. He looked cute, like this. Softly, I started rocking him. "Well… it looks like there'll be twenty kids in the house, sooner or later. Twenty-one, if we count Sveta. I don't think we can keep him… but we should still make sure he gets a proper home…" I almost wanted to keep him. Really. But twenty-two were just… at some point you have to draw the line. Not to mention I wasn't quite sure about my abilities to raise a former deliberately genocidal monster… alright, maybe that last part was a bigger problem than the numer twenty-two.

"I believe", Dad said, looking at the golden baby in my arms, "that I have a solution."

Of course, even after that, it wasn't over - not quite. I still used my powers, defeated and/or helped
villains, had kids, cared for all of my kids. They still grew up, and learned, entered relationships and broke them off, attended therapy sessions, improved their relationship with their father from "Our Worst Nightmare" to "Don't Mind Him All That Much".

We just - lived.
It was a clear, nice day in Boston, and Weld had decided that the best thing to do after getting up would be to go for a short wa - *officially sanctioned patrol*, right. Which definitely wouldn't be about enjoying the morning air and the fact that he could *taste* it now. Even if he would have to stay in human form. … he owed Anima a lot.

Crime was at an all-time-low, with many other 53s like himself having joined the Protectorate and Wards over the last few months, and most villains of the East Coast trying to stay *the hell* out of Anima's and Kith's way.

Unless they were Bugs, who'd recently migrated a bit, trying to see whether doing sketches with Legend was funnier.

… of course, Bugs could hardly be referred to as a proper villain, anyways, since they weren't usually responsible for massive property damage or anything beyond vandalism. Why, they could actually count as an artist, since they lived off a crowdfunded account.

Which Weld definitely hadn't paid any money into. And nobody could prove if he had. Which wouldn't be possible anyways, since Wards didn't pay villains for funny videos, even if Bugs *didn't* count as a villain.

That was his story and he was sticking to it.

Said plans for a peaceful wal - patrol! - were however interrupted when Director Armstrong called him to his office.

"So, you're in a bit of a situation, Weld", the director started after the customary greetings were exchanged and Weld had taken a (specially reinforced, plastic) seat. Old habits died hard, even if they weren't necessary anymore.

"Uh… Sir?"

"We had a delivery for you this morning", the Director started, and Weld listened. "Anything you can tell us about what happened… oh, about nine months ago, thereabouts?"

Weld thought.

Nothing special, actually. And nothing that wasn't extremely fuzzy. "I… don't think anything happened?", he asked.
The director pursed his lips. "Weld, it's nothing to be ashamed of. Many young men have gotten into that kind of trouble… though I'm kind of wondering about the logistics of this."

Weld shook his head in confusion, and the Director picked up a bundle from beside him, behind the desk, laying a… sleeping baby in a wicket basket onto it?

With a quiet exhale, the baby shifted in its sleep, its skin turning golden.

Or maybe… into gold.

A still human Weld paled dramatically.

"But - that - I've never - how…"

Then, a light bulb. "Too young, trigger event?"

"Traumatic birth, is what most of our experts are theorizing."

"But, no proof! And I haven't yet -" He blushed. Things you did not want to discuss with the director: The state of your love life. Or rather, lack of it.

"I couldn't even, nine months ago."

"There's also a letter in this basket. Adressed to you."

Still pale, Weld took the letter, adressed to 'Weld, Boston Wards'. He didn't recognize the handwriting at all.

It was still sealed, and Weld quickly tore it open.

**Dear Weld**, it started.

That's your kid. Sort of. Yeah… power interactions can be really, really weird, just for the record. I know you didn't plan to be a parent quite yet, but powers, side-effects - just ask Anima in Brockton Bay, she could tell you a lot about this.

His cape name's not determined yet, but from where he comes from, I believe he'd prefer a name with Jewish roots - I'm sure you'll chose something nice, and be a great parent.

*Good Luck.*

It wasn't signed.
Wordlessly, Weld handed the letter over, and the director quickly skimmed it.

"If that's the case... well, I apologize for my assumptions, though I never heard of the possibility before. It is interesting, though... I assume you'll want access to some of our programs?"

Weld nodded, looking at the baby - his son.

"We'll discuss specifics later, get him a nursery and all that. Have you ever held a baby before?"

Weld shook his head, then cleared his throat. "But I'm willing to learn, sir."

Being a father - well, he hadn't exactly planned on it just yet, but with the Director and his fellow Wards here, and the world slowly stabilizing... it would work. He'd wanted a kid anyway at some point, even if this was a little early.

Well, after he'd figured out how to copy the director's posture...

Ten years later
"Hey there, Uncle Accord!"
"... yellow polka dots. Purple. Those weren't the colours of my office. And why are all the dots different sizes? WHY?!"
"Uh, sorry, I'll just go and get my son back to his room - Goldburn!"
"Bye Dad!"
"Get back here and pay! Ambassadors, to me!"
"... great, now I have to catch Daniel before Accord gets his hands on him."
[And somewhere, a smiling former Entity noted that the name Daniel seemed to be a universal constant for those like himself, before going back to watch over his grandchildren again.]

Chapter End Notes

So. I am afraid this is the end.
... I am not crying. Honestly.

Well, I'll just copy part of the SV and SB AN:

So. An announcement and a final few questions.
Announcement: If anybody wants to write snippets set in this verse, feel free. If you post them in the thread, I'll canonize them if they fit, otherwise they get omak'd. I might write a few snippets, too, if the mood ever strikes me, but that's not something you should count on (it's very, very unlikely, but not impossible).
Questions: So, all in all - what are your feelings now that this story is over? For me, it's a mixture of sadness and happiness and pride, tinged with relief.
How did you like it? What were the best parts for you? You can mention the worst ones, too, but - well, preferably phrase it as constructive advice for the future I can take or not as I wish too, or make clear it's your own taste and just wasn't for you; if your opinion is "all of it", I commend your stamina in making it through this, and politely ask you to refrain from commenting unless you can keep such a comment both polite and constructive, be very self-aware about what is your own taste and what is bad writing,
and double-check the post fulfills these criteria before posting.

Otherwise... well, this didn't start out as a serious project, or even something I intended to necessarily finish. I made plans for how I'd finish it, sure, set up plots I could use, had an ending in mind - but no more. I was of the firm opinion, when I first started, that I wanted to get at least a bit into the story, and maybe see whether I'd finish, and if I did, well neat, and if I didn't, well... I didn't.
This kind of changed on me at some point. Can't even pinpoint where, anymore. And now... it's done, over. 100k words.
I still don't promise to ever finish a story unless all of it is pre-written, and even then qualify that promise with "unless something unexpected happens", but at least I know I can, now. It feels pretty darn good.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!