Weaver's Adventures in Philly

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Weaver’s Adventures in Philly

by asododsteel

Summary

During her time with the Protectorate, Taylor is called into Philadelphia to deal with a mysterious group of antiheroes.
The young man ducked into an alley, keeping his head down. It had been a good night. A few wallets. Some jewelry. Things really got interesting when he held up this rich looking lady in an expensive coat. She immediately pulled out some pepper spray, and he slapped it out of her hand like it was nothing. That had really gotten his blood pumping, the thrill of the hunt. It wasn’t often in life that you experienced such animalistic pleasures. Crouching in the alleyway, he turned his attention to the woman’s purse. The bag itself was designer and would probably fetch a good price second hand. On the other hand, his girlfriend’s birthday was coming up; and the time saved shopping for a gift would more than cover the profit lost. Inside there were miscellaneous things: pens, business cards, car keys. There was a smart phone. He knew some guys who could take it off his hands, which was good cause more and more folks had those phone tracker apps. He spied a number of pill bottles. Antidepressants and anxiety meds; prescription too. He’d get a good price for those in University City. Finally, he found the pièce de résistance: the pocketbook. There wasn’t much money inside, people in the city rarely carried cash on them. What interested him were the credit cards. That was where the big money was, provided you could get them to the right people before the owners’ canceled them. And since this woman was alone in the city without a phone, money, or access to her car; he had some time. Reveling over his spoils, he barely noticed the lights going out. First the street lights. Then the storefront lights. Finally, the small lantern hanging in the alley flickered out and died. He stood up, glancing around, but the darkness was overpowering. Then a voice rang out.

“Oh, lucky day! We’ve found one! And here I thought it would be another wasted weekend.”

“It’s not luck, it’s circumstance.” came a second voice.

“I don’t follow.” said the first.

“Luck implies a sort of unseen influential consciousness at work. This violates causality. In the real world, probability is affected exclusively by confirmed causal connections, not some intangible omnipotent force.”

“You must be a blast at parties.”

The young thief finally got the courage to speak up.

“Who’s there?” he yelled. There was a flash. The first thing he noticed was that the lights were back on. The second was the two figures standing no more than ten feet away from him. No, not figures. Capes. One was dressed in a black suit, like a magician would wear, with a smiling white mask, the kind you saw in theatres. The other had a more traditional costume; yellow and orange spandex with a brown trim around the neck. His mask covered the lower half of his face and was styled after a lion’s mouth.

“Shit.” the thief muttered. It just wasn’t his day.

“Hi there!” said the one in black. “The name’s Comedy. And that over there is Nemean: King of all hardasses.” The cape in yellow glanced at his companion and sighed. “That’s a nice purse you’ve got there.” continued Comedy. “Love the style. Goes perfect with your complexion.” The cape chuckled. “You know, it’s funny. We were just talking to a woman who had a bag just like that one. What did she say happened to it?”

“She said a young man fitting your description accosted her, stole her bag, and then ran off with it.” said Nemean, taking a step forward. “Would you mind coming with us, sir?”
“Back off!” yelled the young man, edging away from the two capes. “I haven’t done anything!”

“He seems tense.” spoke Comedy. “Think he’s had a rough day?”

“It’s gonna be a helluva lot rougher if he doesn’t start cooperating.” Nemean cracked his knuckles and took another step forward.

The thief glanced back. There was a fence at the end of the alley. If he could just get to it. Turning his attention back to the capes, he reached into his sock and pulled out a knife.

“Oh no, a sharp piece of metal!” cried Comedy. “Our one weakness!”

Nemean folded his arms. “Really, kid? You’re bringing a knife to a cape fight? You know, I’m not even mad. At this point I’m just curious what you’re hoping to accomplish.”

“This!” cried the thief, hurling the knife towards the two capes. They watched as it sailed past them and clattered uselessly against the ground. When they glanced back, the thief was already at the foot of the fence. He pushed each foot into the rungs and began to climb.

“Shall I pursue?” he heard one of them ask.

“Nah, let me handle this. I’m in the mood for some fun.”

As he reached the top, there was a bright flash behind him. He ignored it and jumped over, landing on his feet. He was about to start running, when he noticed two things blocking his path. One was the cape Comedy, standing not ten feet away from him. The other was the wall of flame he was casually standing in. He strolled out of the fire, some of it lingering on the edges of his costume.

“It’s a bit warm out.” he said, the flames behind him casting long, sinister shadows. “What do you think? Is it the heat, or the humidity?” The young man inched back up to the fence. “What, not a fan of that one? Tell ya what, let’s make a game of it! How many times can you hop over that fence before you lose the will to go on.”

The thief turned and scurried back over the fence. He didn’t care what waited for him on the other side, just so long as he was away from that freak. He practically leaped over the fence, and when he was safely on the other side he was shocked to discover that the way was clear. Not looking back, he sprinted for the street. Halfway there, he tripped on something. As he hit the ground, he felt an unbelievable amount of pain in his right leg. It felt like someone had taken a sledgehammer to it. Looking up, he saw Nemean standing over him.

“Sorry.” said the cape. “I’m not one for games.”

“I think you overdid it.” said Comedy, appearing right beside him. “I’m pretty sure legs aren’t supposed to bend that way.”

“I apprehended him, that’s all that matters. At least now we know he’ll be off the streets for the next few months, regardless of his sentence.”

“You assholes!” the thief groaned, biting back the pain. “Acting all high and mighty...”

“Assholes?” said Nemean. “We’re heroes. You’re a criminal. It’s our job to do everything in our power to stop you.”

“You think you can treat folks however you want,” he growled, tears in his eyes, “just because you have powers?”
“You know he has a point.” said Comedy. “Enforcing our will on him just because we can? That’s edging a bit into might makes right territory if you ask me.”

“It’s the law. He broke the law so he must be punished for it.”

“That’s appeal to authority. Or maybe to tradition, one or the other.”

“It is in the best interest of the general public that criminals are brought to justice.”

“That’s a utilitarian argument, which is good if you assume that utilitarianism is a flawless philosophy, which it is not.”

“What’s the alternative?”

“Well there’s the Socratic system of justice, Aristotle’s virtue ethics, Kant’s deontology which states-”

“Yo, capes!” shouted the thief writhing on the ground. “My leg’s busted! Aren’t you gonna call an ambulance?”

“Well we could,” said Comedy, “but that could be considered a violation of your moral autonomy. You see...”

That was all the thief managed to hear before passing out from the pain. When he awoke he was in a hospital bed, his leg hung up in a cast. He reached up for the call button and rang for a nurse. A young heavy-set woman came in carrying a clipboard. And she wasn’t alone. Following behind was a tall figure in silver and gold armor, a distinctive sword on his back. It was Chevalier, leader of the Protectorate. While the nurse checked his condition, asking him questions and jotting down notes, Chevalier took a seat beside him. The armored hero didn’t say anything at first, politely waiting for the nurse to finish her business. When she left, he spoke up:

“Hello young man. Do you feel up for talking?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Excellent.” He reached into his costume and pulled out a stack of papers.”

“Um, if you don’t mind my asking, how much trouble am I in exactly?”

“That remains to be seen.” said Chevalier, handing him a sheet of paper. “But first, if you can, tell me everything you know about the man in this photograph.”
I leaned back in my seat, watching the clouds pass by. Dragon had just gotten around to installing the ergonomic pilot’s seat, and in my opinion it was a much needed improvement. I sighed. As nice as it was, I really felt like I should be doing something productive.

“ETA.” I said, leaning up.

“Estimated time of arrival to Philadelphia is 16 minutes, 41 seconds.” spoke the ship’s A.I.

I stretched briefly then turned to the onboard computer. I’d been called in from Chicago by Chevalier himself, though for what for he wouldn’t say. I brought up the list of Wards I’d be working with. Masterwork, High Wire, Capoeira, Flame Master, and Kinetic Lad. I recognized Flame Master from PHO, something about him being “best pyro”, but the rest I’d be meeting for the first time. Not that I had trouble working with new teams. I was shocked over the past year how quickly I was accepted by the Chicago Wards, how much I began to think of them as my team. I shook my head. It wasn’t like I’d be spending much time here, a week tops. With the increased frequency of Endbringer attacks, I couldn’t afford to be separated from the team for too long. Peering out the window, I could see the city skyline coming into view. As if reading my mind, the onboard computer started mapping out the local area, trying to determine the best landing procedures. It didn’t matter. Defiant’s trip estimation software was accurate within 10.25 seconds; the most efficient route was mapped out the moment I punched in the coordinates. As we approached the city, the ship’s engines started rerouting forward thrust downward, giving it altitude and reducing its velocity all at once. It stopped into a hover over Franklin Square, and began slowly lowering itself onto the front lawn of the Protectorate Headquarters. Though I trusted the A.I., it was still a little nerve-racking watching the Dragonfly almost flatten a nearby bike rack. It wouldn’t have been any of my fault, of course; but I would still rather not upset the owner of the black 10-speed locked there. With a whoosh, the ramp came down, letting in the fresh scent of inner city air. I secured my mask and walked down, allowing me to get a sense of the surrounding area. There was a park across the street, with a playground and a fountain. At the far end was a statue shaped like a lightning bolt. I wondered what cape it was for. I turned my attention to the headquarters. The lobby was surprisingly empty, from what I could tell with my bugs. Only a few guards plus a guy at the front desk listening to an earpiece. As I approached the building, I moved a few bugs closer to the desk guy to see if I could listen in. It appeared to be playing music:

“I am the ... I stay under glass. I look through my window so bright.”

Suddenly, the young man jerked back, having just noticed the fly buzzing around his ear. He flailed about, trying to hit it, and only managed to knock the glasses clean off his face. As he bent down to retrieve them, I decided it was as good a time as any to make my entrance. I walked through the doors as nonchalantly as possible. The guards didn’t spare me much more than a passing glance. Either unfamiliar capes were a common appearance, or Chevalier had made it a point to inform everyone that I’d be coming. On the other hand, when the young man at the desk sat back up, his eyes immediately widened in fear at the sight of me.

“That’s weird.” I thought. “I just got here. Usually it takes a few days for me to get that kind of reaction.” That was when I noticed the flyswatter and can of insecticide he was carrying. “Ahh, insectophobia.”

There were no insectiphobes back in Brockton Bay. Rather, it was considered a mental disorder not to be afraid of bugs. Or at least, that was how the saying went.
“Hello.” I said, “I’m Weaver. I’m here to see Chevalier.”

Hearing this, he quickly composed himself, hiding the look of disgust on his face. “Alright. Just a moment, Ma’am.” He typed into the computer in front of him and raised a finger to his earpiece.

“Hello, Chevalier?” He said. “Yes. Yes, she’s just arrived. Very well, sir.” He looked back at me. “Chevalier will be down shortly. You can take a seat if you like.”

“I’ll stand, thank you.” I said, turning towards the elevator. I could already sense him three floors up, marching down the hall in his surprisingly lightweight armor. I idly wondered if that was an aspect of his power.

“So, you control bugs right?” asked the desk guy. He looked at me with a stoic expression. I couldn’t tell if he was honestly interested or just trying to be polite.

“Yeah.” I replied.

“That must be... interesting.”

“I guess you could call it that. It’s certainly more versatile than your average superpower.”

“So, hypothetically speaking, do you think you could get rid of all the bugs in the city? Just dump them all in the river or something?”

I tried not be offended. I was a superhero not an exterminator. Except for that one time with the rats, but that was different. I decided to laugh it off, no need to make a bad first impression.

“Sorry, but I doubt I could do that.” I chuckled. “My range is limited to a few blocks. I don’t think I’d have time to just run around the city herding bugs.” Of course, even if I did have time to, doing so would probably disrupt the local ecosystem. And I doubted the PRT would ever let me gain access to a city’s worth of bugs. But no need to bring that up.

My thoughts were interrupted by a dinging sound on the fourth floor. I sensed Chevalier enter the elevator, and I followed him as he made his way down to the lobby. Before the the metal doors slid open, I was already turning to face Chevalier. The leader of the protectorate entered the lobby, armor shining and head held high.

“Weaver.” He said. “It is good to see you. Thank you for coming.”

“I was glad to.” I replied. “Thank you for having me.” He nodded and beckoned me to follow him.

As we entered the elevator I asked, “I thought you had moved to New York?”

“I had, but since I was the one who requested your presence, I thought it only right to welcome you in person. Besides, it’s good once and a while to visit the old team. Catch up, see how everyone’s progressing. You may move to a different city, but you never stop being a leader.”

I got a feeling that he wasn’t just talking about himself. But if that was the case, was it true? Did I still consider myself a member of the Undersiders? I hadn’t spoken to any of them since the Cauldron meeting; and as far as I knew, Tattletale was doing a good job leading the team in my stead. I shook my head. It was no time to focus on that. I had business to attend to.

“So why am I here?” I asked, as we exited the elevator. “Why did you request me in particular?”

“Officially, this is a team building exercise. Letting you practice cooperating with an unfamiliar team
and allowing the local Wards to work with an experienced cape.”

“And the real reason?”

“That,” said Chevalier, leading me to an open doorway, “Is a bit more complicated.”
Chevalier led me into a large conference room lined with whiteboards and projector screens. There was a long mahogany table in the center. Sitting at the end was a dark skinned cape flipping through a stack of files. He had a padded black costume with gold accents, and instead of a mask he wore a pair of large hi-tech aviators. I think I may have recognized him from the New Delhi fight.

“Allow me to introduce you to Mangonel, the current leader of the Philadelphia Protectorate.”

“Only when you’re not around.” smiled the hero, standing up to shake my hand. “Welcome Weaver, glad to have you on the team.”

“Thank you.” I said, taking an offered seat.

“I was just about to explain to Weaver our little predicament.” said Chevalier

“Predicament?” I asked. Mangonel nodded and slid over one of the files.

I read over the cover:

THE PHILOSOPHER KINGS

“They’re a group of independent heroes operating in the West Philadelphia area.” said Chevalier. “They first appeared two years ago, but have had a very subtle presence. No public appearances, and zero participation in S-class threats. Almost all of the information we have on them is from witness testimony.”

“A secretive bunch.” I observed

“Very much so.” replied Chevalier. “So secretive in fact that only one of them has ever been caught on camera. And despite the constant schedule they keep, venturing out on Saturday and Sunday nights exclusively, we almost never come in contact with them on patrols. That is not the issue though.”

“The real issue,” spoke up Mangonel, “Is that lately they’ve taken up some remarkably unheroic activities. There have been reports of excessive force on multiple occasions. A few nights ago a young man they arrested was brought in with a fractured tibia. He’ll likely need surgery. And that’s not even counting the fact that, despite having several wallets on him upon arrest, his person was suspiciously free of cash. We can only guess who took it.”

“Why not bring them in?” I asked. “Give them probationary Ward membership? It’s been done before.”

“That would be an option,” said Mangonel, “if we could ever get them to come in. Like Chev said, they’re elusive. They’ve consistently refused to work with the Protectorate, let alone come in for questioning.”

“And without any major evidence, the director is hesitant to issue an arrest warrant for them.” continued Chevalier. “Philadelphia has a high population of rogues and independents, and the last thing the PRT wants to do is alienate them, especially with the current Endbringer situation. That’s why we brought you. Given your background, and your success with the cape Romp, we thought that perhaps you could persuade them to be a bit more cooperative.”
“When you say persuade, do you mean I should persuade them or persuade them?” It was an important clarification.

“Either or.” said Mangonel. “Whatever works best.”

“Really?” I raised my eyebrows behind my mask. “You’re leaving it up to my discretion.”

“Within reason.” clarified Chevalier. “That being said, you’ve proven yourself trustworthy time and time again, so I believe that deserves some trust in exchange. Consider it a test run, to see how you handle the responsibility of a full fledged hero.”

I nodded, awestruck. They were finally giving me some leeway. The chance to prove what I could do without the Wards’ dumb restrictions. Not that I’d ever let them stop me in the past.

“I won’t let you down.” I said, as I began flipping through the file.

The first page was a brief summary of the team, with things like first appearance, team members, legal status, and notable events. The next pages had bios on the individual members. The first one had an artist’s drawing of a cape in a lion themed costume.

“Nemean” I read the name aloud.


“Like an immovable object?”

“Yes, though use of his power appears to slow him down.”

“That’s good.” I thought. “The last thing we need is another Siberian.”

The next page had another sketch, this one of a girl in a poofy looking dress.

“Nephelai” said Mangonel. “Shaker/Stranger 4. Creates clouds that impede both vision and sound.”

“Interesting.” I thought. “It wouldn’t happen to affect other capes’ powers, would it?”

“Not that we know of.” said Chevalier.

“Go to the next page.” said Mangonel. “You’ll get a kick out of that one.”

“Gadfly.” I read aloud. “Changer 5. Can transform entire body into a swarm of insects.”

“Huh.” I said. “You don’t think I could control him do you?”

“I doubt he’d give you the chance.” said Chevalier.

I moved on to the final page.

Comedy

The first thing that jumped out at me was the power classification.

“A Trump.” I thought, “That’s never good.”

Trumps were the rarest and most dangerous kinds of capes, capable of bestowing, altering, or manifesting powers. It was telling that Eidolon, the strongest cape in the world, was a Trump. As
was Hatchet Face, the bogeyman of capes. Not the kind of person you’d want to meet in a dark alley.

The second thing I noticed was the accompanying picture, namely that it was an actual photograph. It showed a tall figure in a black suit, wearing a white comedy mask. Judging by the angle, the picture seemed to have been taken by a security camera. I focused on the background. It was familiar somehow... Then it hit me.

“This is from the lobby.” I said.

“Yes.” said Chevalier. “This is a photo of Comedy’s first appearance, two years ago. He walked into the Protectorate Headquarters and asked to join the Wards.”

“Really?” I thought “This keeps getting more and more interesting.”

“Ultimately he was rejected.” continued Chevalier, “On the grounds that he refused to divulge his power set.”

“Wait, he tried to join the Wards without telling you what his power was?”

“Yes.” Chevalier said. “And when we refused he left to form his own team.”

“What powers does he have?” I asked.

“All of them.” said Mangonel.

“What?”

Mangonel pointed lower on the bio to a list, each one showing a different date and power set. Each instance was signed off by a different witness.

“Every time he shows up, he displays a different power. Flight, teleportation, intangibility, super speed, telekinesis.”

“There are also reports of him utilizing Tinker-tech.” said Chevalier. “Jetpacks, grappling guns, jet boots, invisibility cloaks, jet pants, portal guns and, I kid you not, a ‘lightsaber’.”

“Hmm...” I said, looking over the list.

“Any questions?” asked Chevalier.

“Yeah.” I thought, “What were these people on?”

“Yes” I said, “Are we sure the witnesses were in the right state of mind when making their statements.”

“Those who consented to testing showed no signs of long-term Master/Stranger influence.” said Mangonel.

“What about hallucinogens. I know of at least one cape capable of producing them.”

“I assume you are referring to Newter.” said Chevalier, “Yes, we’ve met. It it not likely that a similar power is involved. It is common procedure to perform drug tests on offenders involved in theft or drug dealing. So far we have found no correlating substances in those apprehended by Comedy.”

“Of course, it’s hard to tell through all the other substances.” said Mangonel. “Despite all the
progress we’ve made the last few decades, the drug problem in the city is still, well, a problem.”

I leaned back, trying to piece this all together. If what all these people said was true, did that mean there was another Eidolon walking around Philadelphia? One capable of producing Tinker-tech? No, there had to be a simpler solution.

“Is it possible he received this tech from a third party?” I asked.

“We have no evidence suggesting a connection between the Philosopher Kings and the Tinker black market.” Mangonel said. “However, ever since Toybox was wiped out, the local kingpin Iron Maiden has been forced into a tight place. It’s not out of the question that she’d ally with some rogues or independents.”

“Would I have you permission to investigate her? My power is well suited to surveillance and I have experience doing stakeouts. It’s a Wednesday, so if I got started right now I’d have three days to prepare.”

“That’s certainly a possibility.” said Mangonel. “Though for now I think it’d be best if you took it easy and got yourself all settled. You just got here after all. It would be a mistake to go out without meeting your teammates and getting the lay of the land first. And speaking of which…” He glanced down at his phone. “High Wire and Masterwork should be getting back from patrol by now. How’d you like Chevalier and I to introduce you to the Wards?”
As we made our way to the Wards’ quarters, Mangonel spoke into his wrist.

“All Wards to the hub. 5-minutes.”

By the time we got there, they were all lined up. I wasn’t sure if it was in deference to Chevalier and I, or if Mangonel just ran that tight a ship.

“Hello everyone.” said Chevalier. “It’s good to see you all. I would like to introduce Weaver from the Chicago Wards. As you have all been informed, she will be staying in Philadelphia and working with you for the next week or so. I trust you all to help her feel welcomed and to represent your city.”

Masterwork, the leader of the Wards, approached me. According to her file, she was a striker. She had the power to turn anything she touched into a weapon and imbue it with special properties; fire, ice, electricity, etc. She was dressed like a fantasy hero, green cloth and leather, with lots of pouches and holsters, and golden plate armor on her arms, legs, and chest. I noticed an abundance of weapons on her. There was a thin sword sheathed at her side, and a boomerang and a slingshot on her belt. A wooden quarterstaff rested on her back.

“Hello Weaver,” she said, “I have heard much about you.”

“Is that a good thing or a bad thing?” I wondered.

She offered her hand. “It’s good to have you on board.”

“Thank you.” I said, taking it. “I hope to be of as much help as I can.”

“Masterwork,” said Mangonel. “Chevalier and I need to have a word with you privately. Weaver, feel free to relax, get to know the other Wards.”

Masterwork left to speak with the two Protectorate members while I joined the others.

“So,” said Flame Master, grinning, “they say you’re pretty strong.”

He had a red and yellow costume with an obvious fire motif. Much like my costume, it had numerous compartments built into it, but it was streamlined to the extent that it didn’t look bulky. His mask covered the top half of his face and was curved at the top to resemble flames.

“I’m confident in my strength.” I replied, trying to gauge his intentions. As many capes as there were that admired by accomplishments, there were an equal amount who hated me for them. It wasn’t easy being a hero turned villain turned anti-hero.

“How’s that for a reaction!” laughed Flame Master. “Girl faces down Endbringers and the S9, and all she feels is confident.”

“There’s nothing wrong with being humble.” said Capoeira, striding forward. “You should try it one of these days.” Her costume was a blend of greens and blues, swirling together like a windstorm. It was tight in some places and loose in others, to provide maximum maneuverability without obscuring her figure. She had my sympathy. Many a female cape had to sacrifice basic utility to satisfy the PR department.
High Wire let out a light chuckle in response to Capoeira’s words.

“She’s got ya there, Flamie.”

High Wire didn’t wear a costume. There was no need. He was a Case 53. He was tall, well over 6 feet, with black lines running down his face and arms. His arms themselves seemed too long for his body, like they’d been stretched out. On top of that, his eyes seemed to be reversed, with black sclera and white irises. Despite his unsettling appearance, he seemed like a pretty relaxed person. His shiny black hair was in a ponytail and since returning to the HQ he had changed out of his uniform and into a pair of ratty jeans and a t-shirt.

“You’re one to talk.” Flame Master said to Capoeira. “You’re the biggest show off out of all of us. With all those flips and twirls and all.”

“That’s completely different.” she said, “Dance combat is supposed to be flashy. That’s what makes it effective.”

“I realize we might not be making the best first impression.” said Kinetic Lad. He was the youngest of the Wards, probably around twelve or thirteen. His costume was white and blue, with black panels the front of his arms and legs. The jagged patterns suggested he was a speedster, though I knew from his file that his power had more to do with momentum. “We’re usually a lot cooler than this.”

“Don’t worry about it.” I said, smirking behind my mask. “My old team was worse.”

“Really?” asked Kinetic Lad, “I didn’t think the Chicago Wards were that bad?”

“They’re not. I wasn’t talking about them.”

He cocked his head. “Huh?” I watched as the realization slowly dawned on him. “Oh.”

An awkward silence ensued. It seemed my past as a warlord was some kind of elephant in the room. Thankfully, Masterwork took that as her cue to return, with Chevalier and Mangonel in tow.

“I’m afraid it’s time for me to go.” announced Chevalier, “I would have loved the chance to catch up with each of you individually, but I have a Protectorate to run.”

As he turned to leave, he spoke to me, in a tone light enough for only my bugs to hear.

“Weaver. A word, if you will. Outside.”

I waited until he left the room, then spoke through my bugs. “I’m here.”

“I’m placing a lot of faith in you Weaver. In exchange, I trust you not endanger any of my Wards.”

I was about to respond, but he put up his hand.

“Listen, I know that you care about your teammates. You look out for them, and I respect that. But you also have a history of being unpredictable. You take chances, put yourself and others in harm’s way. I just want to make sure that before you decide to take a risk, even a calculated one, you’ll consider just whose life you are putting on the line.”

I paused for a few seconds, then responded. “I understand.”

Chevalier nodded, and then made his way towards the exit. I sighed, then turned my attention back to the Wards. It seemed they did not notice my momentary absence from the conversation. I suppose I came across as the quiet type.
“Say Masterwork,” I turned to the Ward leader, “When’s the next patrol?”

“Later tonight.” She said, “Flame Master. Kinetic. That’s your route, right?”

They nodded.

“Would it be okay if I joined?”

“I don’t see why not. It would be a good chance for you to familiarize yourself with the city. Do you approve, Mangonel?”

“Fine by me.” He said, “Just stay out of trouble.”

I couldn’t help but feel bad for the guy. He had no idea what he had gotten himself into.
We patrolled through the Spring Garden area that night. A PRT van had dropped Flame Master, Kinetic Lad, and I off on the east end, and we were to go west and circle back on foot. As I felt out with my bugs, I noticed that most streets in the city were arranged in a grid pattern. I wondered if I would have ever discovered this if I didn’t have my powers. Ignoring the info from my bugs, I began studying the area with my eyes. It was a nice neighborhood, lots of old brick buildings. There was a lot of greenery, trees growing outside homes and on the sidewalks. It gave off a peaceful atmosphere, in the midst of the bustling city. I had the feeling that Masterwork chose this location to keep me out of trouble.

Of course, no place was free of crime. A few blocks north, there was a drug deal going on. Elsewhere, there was a mugging. I had my spiders spin some silk to restrain the dealer. The mugger, I sent a swarm after. We were far enough away that Flame Master and Kinetic Lad couldn’t hear the screams.

“So,” I asked, “any good restaurants around here?”

“Of course,” replied Kinetic Lad, “HQ’s right by Chinatown after all.”

The drug dealer let out a yelp as silk cords began wrapping themselves around his arms and legs. The buyer tried to make a run for it, but I tripped him with a cord and began tying him up too; Just for good measure.

“Oh! There’s this one underground market there that I think you’ll like.” said Flame Master, “They’ve got these big bowls of noodle soup. Real cheap too.”

“I’ve been there.” said Kinetic Lad, “Seemed kind of unsanitary.”

“I’ve never gotten sick.” Flame Master replied.

At this point the mugger was on the ground, flailing about as my bugs swarmed him. I instructed the victim to stay put, but the sight was too much for him and he began to flee.

“It’s not just that. Do you really want to eat a meal with flies buzzing everywhere?”

“Eh, a few flies never hurt nobody,”

The mugger had stopped struggling. I pulled my bugs off him, including the ones in his mouth. He laid there silently as I restrained him. I checked his pulse. Still alive. I’d hate to give someone a heart attack on my first night.

“Do they have wonton soup?” I asked.

“I think so.” said Flame Master

“Then I’m game. Beats Defiant’s nutrient paste.”

There was a police cruiser in the vicinity. I sent a swarm clone to inform them of my captures. They reached for their guns at the sight of it, but after convincing them to call the PRT and verify that I was on their side, they calmed down. I gave them the locations of the offenders, plus the victim in case they wanted his testimony.
“So, are you and Defiant friends or something?” asked Flame Master.

“Kind of...” I said, “It’s complicated.”

“Well you must be pretty close if he made you that fancy jet pack.”

I glanced at my flight pack. I had gotten so used to wearing it, I barely noticed its weight half the time.

“He had some help from Dragon.”

“It must be nice, having Tinkers on the team to make you stuff.” said Kinetic Lad

“You guys don’t have any Tinkers?” I asked. That was surprising. You would think that in a city this big, there’d be a lot of people triggering with Tinker abilities.

“Most of them get snatched up by Iron Maiden, sent away to the Toybox.” said Flame Master. “Of course, after what happened with the S9, that’s probably not gonna be an issue any time soon.”

I nodded. I remembered when I heard the news of the Slaughterhouse Nine’s attack on Toybox. It had not been the best day of my life.

“This Iron Maiden, how powerful is she?” I asked.

“She used to be a really big player.” said Flame Master. “Controlled all the Tinkertech in the city. Was even able to take on both Chevalier and Myrddin.”

“Now that she doesn’t have the Toybox backing her, she’s been a lot less active.” said Kinetic Lad. “Still supplies the local gangs, but doesn’t really do much on her own.”

“I see. It’s hard to be an independent Tinker without a team behind you.”

Just as they were about to leave my range, I sensed the police as they found the mugger. Seeing that he was breathing, they carefully lifted him into the squad car.

“Well,” I thought, “that's one less thing for me to worry about.” The night had been going well, not much action or danger, just a nice walk through the city. Even still, I was on alert, waiting for that other shoe to drop. It ended up coming from the most unlikely place: a late 80’s hip hop ringtone.

Flame Master checked his phone. “Break in at the Art Museum.”

“Is it close enough to get there by foot?” I asked.

“Not really. Kinetic, think you could make it in time?”

“Probably, but I’d be using up a lot of velocity.”

“Okay,” said Flame Master, “Looks I’ll have to show off a little.” He pointed towards a nearby fire hydrant. Water leaked out of his suit and flew over to the hydrant. It snaked around the valves and began to unscrew them. Meanwhile, Flame Master undid a latch on his shoulder and removed a rolled up bundle of plastic.

“What exactly am I looking at?” I asked.

“I thought you were a pyrokinetic.”

“Whatever gave you that idea.” he said.

I didn’t answer.

He laughed as he unrolled the bundle. “If you have to know, it started off as a joke. I walked in with a flame based name and costume, just to see how everyone would react. I even played it off real good like ‘Oh, when villains hear about me they’ll try to fight me with water, and that’ll just give me more ammo’. Eventually, more and more people got in on the joke, and it just became a kind of open secret. Everyone knew I wasn’t a pyro but they pretended they didn’t for the sake of the joke. Then the internet got to it and it was like:

‘Whose the best pyrokinetic?’

‘Definitely Flame Master!’

‘Flame Master confirmed for best pyro!’”

I shook my head. All things considered, it was not the strangest thing to happen in the PRT.

“I’m surprised you didn’t read about it in his file.” said Kinetic Lad. “It seems like something you should have been told about.”

“His was unavailable. All I saw was a name and a picture.”

“Clearly, someone in the records department has a sense of humor.” said Flame Master,

He finally finished unscrewing the fire hydrant and instead of a burst of water, a strong steady stream began pouring out and into what I now recognized as an inflatable kayak. Water flowed into it from a number of holes, and it swiftly filled up. When it was finished, Flame Master shut off the hydrant and channeled the excess water into his suit.

“All aboard!”

I looked at the boat. It was small and blue, with a PRT Logo printed on it. It looked like seatbelts had been added for safety. It also had only two seats.

“Is this street legal?” I asked.

“As far as you know.” said Flame Master, climbing into the front. I shrugged and took the back seat, strapping in. Kinetic Lad sighed and climbed onto Flame Master's lap.

“Comfy?” asked Flame Master.

“Don’t make this weird.” he replied, buckling the two of them.

Flame Master chuckled and threw out his arms. The boat lifted two feet off the ground.

“Give me a push!” he yelled. Kinetic Lad placed his hands on the sides of the boat and suddenly we were moving forward at 30 miles an hour. The wind roared around me and whipped through my hair. I was really glad I had a mask on. There were straps in front of my seat, and I held onto them for dear life. You would think that after mutant dogs, Atlas, and a door covered in glass, I wouldn’t have a problem with unconventional modes of transport; but it seemed that I was a little out of practice.
“Funny thing about physics!” Flame Master yelled from the front. “Objects in motion stay in motion, so all I have to do is keep us above ground and compensate for air resistance, and we can keep up this speed indefinitely!”

“Fascinating!” I yelled back. “You do this spiel with all the girls you patrol with?”

“That depends. Are you impressed?” he asked.

“I’ve seen better!” I replied.

“Cold!” he shouted back.

We flew through the streets, darting around corners and signs. As we approached a busy street, Flame Master grunted. Suddenly, we were flying 10 feet in the air, gliding over cars and pedestrians.

“Isn’t it cumbersome,” I asked over the wind, “carrying this thing on your back all the time? It seems a little unnecessary, given the nature of Ward work and the fact that the PRT has vehicles for emergencies!”

“You kidding? I’ve got all sorts of unnecessary things stowed away in my costume!”

“It’s true!” Kinetic Lad called back, “I’ve even seen him put trading cards in there!”

“It’s for luck!” cried Flame Master.

“Still weird!”

“And you consider flying through the streets of Philadelphia in a kayak normal?” I asked.

“Didn’t you used to ride around on giant bugs?” asked Flame Master, “I think you’ve officially lost your ‘normal’ privileges!”

“It was one bug and his name was Atlas!” I yelled forward.

“Like the god who carries the world?” asked Flame Master, “Fitting!”

“Actually, Atlas was a Titan and he held up the sky!” I answered.

“Damn! I’m just getting lit up tonight!”

“You promised you’d stop doing that on patrol!” Kinetic Lad yelled.
The Art Museum was a large building that resembled an ancient Greek temple. It sat on a tree
covered hill, with statues and flower displays, and there was a large staircase leading up to the front
entrance. The roads leading up to the museum were blocked off, and there were police cruisers
everywhere. Outside the police barricades, crowds of civilians stood. All eyes were on the museum.
As we approached, Kinetic Lad once again laid his hands on the kayak. We began to slow down.

“It takes a lot of momentum to move three people and a boat.” he explained. “Might as well save it
for later.”

Flame Master set us down in front of two Protectorate capes. I recognized them as Archive and
Crusher.

“I’m surprised you came.” said Archive. She had a brown, grey, and gold costume, with a
rectangular pattern. She had the power to instantly memorize the contents of any book she touched,
the book being destroyed in the process.

“We were in the neighborhood.” replied Flame Master, getting out. “You okay, Weaver?”

“Copacetic.” I said, wiping loose hairs out of my face.

“What?” asked Flame Master.

I nodded. “What she said.”

“So what’s the situation?” asked Kinetic Lad.

“Art theft.” said Crusher. She was a slender young woman, about my height. Her costume and mask
were violet in color, and she wore a green hijab. Her power involved magnifying the gravitational
force in a given area, crushing people under the weight of their own clothing. “The culprit snuck in
and disabled security. Power’s out in the entire museum, but luckily the most valuable pieces have
separate sensors built into them.”

“Seems like a lot of trouble just for some pictures.” said Flame Master.

“Among the missing artwork is Vincent van Gogh’s Vase with twelve Sunflowers.” explained
Archive, “Although the painting itself is considered priceless, a similar piece was once sold for an
adjusted price of $82.6 million.”

“Damn.” muttered Flame Master, “I need to take up painting.”

“Any idea what we’re dealing with?” I asked.

“We believe it’s a cape called Arsène.” said Archive, “A phantom thief with a Stranger ability that
lets him get in and out of secure facilities unnoticed.”

“He’s one of those gentlemen thieves.” explained Crusher, “Steals from high profile targets, leaves a
calling card, is gone by the time we show up.”

“Except this time we appear to have him trapped.” Archive said, “Right now we’re watching all
exits, and sending in teams one wave at a time. Stranger protocols are in place, and each officer is
equipped with a body camera and radio. For now, we just need to maintain the perimeter and make sure he doesn’t escape.”

“In that case, we should spread ourselves out.” said Flame Master. “I’ll watch the South side near the river. Kinetic, you can get the North. Weaver, why don’t you head to the other side and guard the West entrance.”

I turned to Archive. “You said Arsène was male, right?”

“Yes.”

“Average build, about 5’ 10’’”

“Why yes, how did you-”

“He’s hiding in the bushes over there.” I pointed, “About 100 yards in that direction. Carrying a large rectangular case. Costumed but appears unarmed.”

They turned towards where I was pointing. The man in the bushes stirred, and darted behind a nearby wall, out of sight. I concentrated my swarm and surrounded him, blocking off any escape. And then he was gone. No, I could still feel the bugs on him, but they were somewhere else; behind a tree 20 feet away.

“He’s a teleporter!” I shouted, gesturing towards the tree.

Kinetic Lad took off with a burst of speed, crossing the distance in seconds. Though he couldn’t see Kinetic Lad approach, the thief still reacted, teleporting to the top of a wall. Strangely, he was closer now to the museum than before. I wondered why he didn’t teleport past the blockade. Was there a limit to his power? Settling bugs on his head, I could see that the thief wasn’t even looking at the young Ward. Instead, his gaze was focused on a cluster of police on the North East end of the museum grounds. They were busy redirecting traffic, only one or two of them bothering to watch the museum.

“A weak point.” I realized.

“Kinetic Lad.” I spoke through my bugs, “The barricade, on your 2. He’s making a break for it.”

It was too late. The two alert officers glanced down at their radios, and Arsène took that opportunity to teleport underneath their squad car, then disappear; reappearing in a tree across the street. Once he was free of the barricade, he began chain teleporting, going from treetop to rooftop to dark alleyway. Kinetic Lad followed.

“What’s happening?” asked Archive.

“He’s getting away.” I said, “Moving too fast; I’m not sure if I can stop him.”

The bugs I had on his person were too weak and too few to cause any harm, and he could move faster than I could gather my swarm. I tried anticipating where he would reappear, setting my more dangerous bugs there to trap him. Unfortunately, he didn’t seem to be picking the most efficient route, instead choosing more out of the way locations to teleport to. If I was going to win, I would need to play this like Tattletale: analyze the situation, find my opponent’s weakness, and exploit it. I considered his powers. Teleportation wasn’t too out there, but like many powers it usually included something extra; a bonus perk or peculiarity. I considered how he acted when I alerted everyone to his presence. It was like he knew when I found him. Enhanced senses perhaps? What about limitations? There wasn’t any time restriction; once he was free of the blockade, he had made a series
of jumps in succession. Was there a range limit? The first jump was around 20 feet, though there was no reason to believe he couldn’t go farther. Now that I thought about it, what was the point of a distance limit if you could chain teleport? I shook my head. He was nearing edge of my range; I had to focus. If there was no limit to distance, why had he taken so long to leave the museum? I recalled the officers at the barricade, how he had waited for them to be distracted before he made his escape. I supposed that was his thing, getting in and out unseen. Archive and Crusher had said as much. Then it hit me. They said that he was never seen during a theft. What if it was more than that? What if it was that he couldn’t be seen? When he was trying to escape, he made sure he was always out of sight; that Kinetic Lad could never get a bead on him. Maybe it was because he couldn’t teleport while being watched. That would explain why he knew we were looking at him. His power would have to tell him that or he’d never know when to use it. I focused back on reality. Teleporting into a deserted alleyway, Arsène was almost at the edge of my power. Kinetic Lad was following, but it was no use. Any farther and he’d be gone for good. I had no choice. I had to use my extra sense. The part of my powers that went unused ninety nine percent of the time: Sight.

Immediately, my mind was flooded with visual information, monochrome images like ink blots rushing in from every bug in the damp alley. It wasn’t painful, but neither was it very pleasant. Amid the chaos in my head, I heard something.

“What the fuck?” Arsène cried out. He was glancing around the alley, trying to find the thousand eyes staring at him. He started swatting at himself, trying to kill the bugs I planted on him. And most importantly, he wasn’t teleporting.

“I see you.” I whispered in his ear. He froze. “Don’t be afraid, I won’t hurt you.”

That only served to make him more afraid and he scrambled towards the street. I blocked the way with a swarm clone. “I can’t let you do that.” I spoke through the clone. I began converging my bugs to the location, my spiders beings carried as they prepared lines of silk. “Drop the paintings and wait here for the police to arrive.”

He ignored my warnings and proceeded to plow his way through the clone. I rewarded his bravery by coalescing the entire swarm onto his body. When Kinetic Lad arrived, he was greeted to the sight of a screaming man desperately trying to rip wave after wave of bugs off his face.

“What in the world?” he gaped.

“Sorry,” my swarm buzzed, “This probably looks pretty freaky. Could you watch him until we get there? The others and I are heading over now.”

“Uh, sure.” he said, averting his eyes from the horrific sight.

“Seriously though, keep watching him. He can only teleport when no one is looking, so keep your eyes on him. Don’t get distracted, and whatever you do, don’t blink.”

“I’m watching a man be eaten alive by bugs.” said Kinetic Lad, “It’s not the easiest thing in the world to stare at.”

“Well you’re going to have to. Seeing through this many bugs is really unpleasant.”

“How do you think I feel?”

As we were talking, Arsène steadied himself against a wall. His arms and legs were bound, but that didn’t stop him from slowly reaching for a canister on his belt.

“I wouldn’t do that...” I whispered. “There’re black widow spiders on your neck, ankle, and a third
place I won’t tell you. If you so much as move, I guarantee you’ll be waking up in a hospital, if at all.”

The thief paused for a moment, then grinned. “I’m calling your bluff, hero!”

Before I could react, he grabbed the canister and pulled the cord. Many things happened at once. There was a loud bang. I lost all sight from my bugs. Kinetic Lad was crouched over, clutching his face. And Arsène was gone.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“What?” he said. “I can’t hear you my ears are still ringing. Also, I think I’m blind now?”

“Flashbang” I thought. I focused on Arsène. It seemed that even while bound up, he could still teleport. He was several blocks away now, traveling in a different direction. I still had my black widows on him; I could end it right now. I hesitated. Fear, intimidation, near-lethal force. Those were all things Skitter would have used. But I wasn’t Skitter anymore. I couldn’t go back to being the person I was before. I was Weaver, I was a hero, and I had to act like one; even if that meant letting the bad guy get away.

As he slipped out of my range, I sighed. “He’s gone.” The others looked at me. We were in a PRT Van, traveling to Kinetic Lad’s location. “He got away.”

“Were you at least able to recover the artwork?” asked Archive.

“I believe so. He dropped the case he was carrying, so assuming he didn’t stash it inside the museum somewhere, that should be it. Right now we should focus on Kinetic Lad. He got hit by a flashbang.”

When we got to the alley, he was resting against the wall, the black case on his lap.

“How’re you doing?” asked Flame Master.

“Well my vision’s back, and the ringing’s almost gone, so there’s that.” he said. “Glad I went for the anti-glare visor.”

“Are you sure you don’t need medical attention?” asked Crusher.

“I think I’ll be fine. Did you guys get the thief?”

“He escaped.” said Archive, “However, seeing as the paintings were recovered and you’re all okay, I’d call this a victory. You should all feel very proud of yourselves. That includes you too Weaver, you did an excellent job for your first night here.”

“Job’s not over yet.” I said, reaching into my costume. I retrieved a folded up map of Philadelphia that Dragon printed out for me. “How well do you know the city?”

“Extensively.” replied Archive. “I’ve subsumed innumerable texts on its history, infrastructure, culture, demogra-”

“Great.” I said, handing her the map. “I need you to mark off all the hotels, motels, hostels, and abandoned buildings in the city. The rest of you help her.”

“We couldn’t possibly search all these locations in a single night.” said Archive. “The paperwork alone would take months.”
“We won’t have to.” I said. “Before he got away, I planted females from a dozen different species in his costume. I had their pheromone production set to max, and I made them chew their own legs off so they wouldn’t escape. Assuming he doesn’t wash his clothes tonight, we’ll find him.”

Back in his hotel room, the phantom thief collapsed into his bed. He had stripped off his costume and thrown it lazily against the open window. He honestly couldn’t care less. Tonight had been a disaster. First the sensors in the paintings went off (he blamed that partly on bad intel and partly on his own carelessness). Then, that bug girl showed up and sensed him with her weird bug ESP. On top of that, she somehow figured out his power’s one flaw and exploited it. He shivered. If he wasn’t afraid of bugs before, he certainly was now. He didn’t even want to think about that creepy buzz-talking; he’d be hearing that voice in his nightmares.

Arsène sighed. “Laisse tomber…” he muttered to himself. This was but one job. A single step in what was going to be a long and glorious career. Tomorrow he’d skip town, find a nice place to lay low, and once the heat died down, he’d find a new target. Maybe he’d go back to Europe. London was wonderful this time of year. That was when he sensed it. Four pairs of eyes marching up the stairs in a military manner: eyes forward, gaze unwavering. They didn’t bother to check the room or floor numbers, they knew exactly where they were going. Arsène bolted out of bed and towards the window. He had chosen this room for the view. Specifically for the view of several deserted rooftops. When he reached the window he cursed. There were officers on every roof, and they all had body cameras attached to their backs. There was no way he’d be able to slip past them like this. There was a loud banging on his door. “PRT! Open this door!”

He ran for the bathroom. It had a window facing the other side of the building. He was fairly sure there was an empty alley way underneath. When he looked down he cursed again. There was group of teenagers loitering in the alley. Specifically for the view of several deserted rooftops. When he reached the window he cursed. There were officers on every roof, and they all had body cameras attached to their backs. There was no way he’d be able to slip past them like this. There was a loud banging on his door. “PRT! Open this door!”

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“You have three seconds to open this door, or we will open it by force!” Shouted the PRT officer. “One!” Arsène panicked. He had never felt so trapped. “Two!” Looking across the alley, he saw a dark rooftop. His power didn’t sense anyone. “Three!” Arsène was gone.

With a pop, Arsène landed on the rooftop. The surrounding buildings blocked off the city lights, leaving this one rooftop shrouded in total darkness. It was cold and wet against his bare feet. He realized belatedly that he was still in his underwear. It didn’t matter, wasn’t like anyone could see him.

“Now!” came a shout. Suddenly, lights sprang up all across the rooftop. Arsène felt a dozen pairs of eyes on him. Looking around, he saw that he was surrounded by PRT officers, some of them holding cameras, others carrying spotlights. Before he could react, he felt a sudden weight on him. It was like his undershirt and briefs weighed a hundred pounds. Looking up, he saw a cape in violet, holding out her hand but averting her eyes. Next to her, was another cape wearing a grey bug themed costumed. Her mask covered her entire face, but he could feel her staring right through him.

“You have the right to remain silent.”

Back at the Protectorate HQ, Mangonel and Arsène sat opposite one another in an interrogation room. Or at least Arsène sat. Mangonel had a chair, but he turned it sideways so he could rest one leg on it and cross his arms, in the classic interrogation pose. It gave him the height advantage, allowing him to glower over the table like a specter.
“You’ve quite the extensive record.” said Mangonel. “Funny thing about leaving a calling card. It seems really cool, but it also let’s us know each and every place you’ve hit.”

“To be fair.” said Arsène calmly, “A lot of those are copy cats. Some pretend to be me to cover up their thefts. Others hide their possessions, and claim I’ve stolen them to collect on the insurance money.”

“We’ll just let the judge sort that all out.” said Mangonel coolly.

“Speaking of which, aren’t I entitled to a lawyer?”

“You waived that right when you signed your Miranda card.”

“What?” He was handed the card. “Huh. You do realize they make this very hard to understand.”

“I know.” replied the Protectorate cape wearily, “Sometimes I think it’s halfway intentional. But right now it’s working in my favor, so who am I to complain? Regardless, this is a very large list of charges stacked against you.”

“I assume you’re going to imply that I’m bound for the Birdcage, and the only hope for me is to throw myself at your feet and plead forgiveness. We are both busy men so let’s just skip that charade. I plan on cooperating fully and I am willing on offering useful information in exchange for leniency.”

“Straight to the point, huh? Alright. And what kind of info do you plan on offering?”

“The location of all the valuables I’ve stolen, or the names of those I’ve sold them to.”

“You think we’re not already going to get that out of you? Try again.”

“I see you are playing hardball.” said Arsène, “Very well. What if I told you I possessed inside information on one of the teams operating in your city?”

“I would say that you’re a liar. We have no record of you associating or doing business with any of the villain groups in the city. Or in the surrounding area for that matter.”

“I’m not talking about villains.” smiled the thief. “Tell me, have you ever heard of the Philosopher Kings?”
The next morning, the Wards’ quarters were abuzz with activity. Kinetic Lad was excitedly telling the other Wards of last night’s escapades.

“So he pops onto the roof, the lights turn on, and he’s in his underwear!”

On the other side of the room, Flame Master was engaging in a rapidly intensifying argument. He was talking to a young man in a dress shirt and slacks. It took me a moment to recognize him as the desk guy from yesterday.

“Look,” he said, “You were doing the boat thing again, right? Maybe it fell off then.”

“I think I would notice my glove flying off my hand. I’m telling you, I had it with me when I got back.” Flame Master turned to me. “Weaver, you were there. I had my costume gloves on the entire time, right?”

“I believe so.” I said, “What’s going on?”

“They got lost in the wash or something, and now Mel’s telling me that they’re taking it out of my wages. Oh, yeah.” he gestured to the young man next to him. “Weaver, meet Mel. Mel, Weaver.”

“We’ve met.” he said. “I had desk duty yesterday.”

“Ouch, really?” asked Flame Master, “That must have been tough. You know, cause you’re so bad with people.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“I take it you’re not normally a receptionist.” I said.

“I’m an intern.” he said. “I do whatever job they tell me; usually the ones they can’t bother to hire people for. Today I’m recording Arséne’s confession. Congratulations, by the way. Not many capes can manage three separate arrests in one night.”

“Three?” asked Flame Master with a puzzled look.

“Well, four actually. But two were at the same time so...”

“When did this happen?”

“When we were talking about restaurants.” I confessed sheepishly. “It was such a nice conversation, I didn’t want to interrupt.”

The Ward started at me critically. “Is this the reason you were given +2 in every category?”

“It’s a reason.”

Mel was about to say something, when his phone started buzzing.

“Ech. I’ve got to go set up. They’ve got this new omnidirectional camera, and someone needs to connect it to the server.”

“Will we be able to watch it?” I asked.
“If you want. It should be available from the computers over there.” He began to walk off. “Oh, and Flame Master. The glove thing might just be a clerical error. If you want, I can check with records later. You okay with that?”

“Copacetic.” muttered the Ward.

“What?”

“Fine, excellent, satisfactory.” snapped Flame Master, “Read a book, why don’t ya.”

The intern shrugged and left the room. Meanwhile, I made my way over to the computer and logged into the feed from the interrogation cell. By the time the camera blipped on, the rest of the Wards were gathered behind me. The screen showed a panoramic view of the room, and we watched as Arséne was led inside, followed shortly by the Protectorate cape Photocell.

He had a power set similar to Brockton Bay’s Battery, enhanced strength, speed, and some electromagnetic manipulation. The main difference was that his powers were recharged by sunlight instead of by remaining still. As a result, he was much more effective in the daytime, but significantly less so at night.

Mel the intern followed behind. He connected his laptop to the camera and began monitoring the feed. He gave a thumbs up to Photocell, and the hero spoke into the microphone.

“This is Photocell of the Philadelphia Protectorate. I’m conducting the confession of the accused cape, alias Arséne. The accused has agreed to divulge pertinent information in exchange for police protection and lenient sentencing.” He turned his attention to the thief. “You may proceed.”

“Hello, my name is Arséne. I am giving this statement willingly and of my own free will.” He took a deep breath. “The information I possess concerns a local hero group, the Philosopher Kings. What I have to say is shocking, hard to believe even, but the fact of the matter is that they aren’t-”

The feed cut off.

“What did you do?” exclaimed Flame Master.

“Nothing.” I said. “It just shut off.”

“Something’s wrong.” said Masterwork. “I’m going down. High Wire and Capoeira, come with me. The rest of you stay here and see if anything changes.”

As they set off, I gathered my bugs towards the interrogation room. The door was sealed off, but I was able to find an alternate route through the vents. It seemed the cell was not totally Weaver-proof.

Inside, Arséne had left his chair and was pressed against the far wall. Photocell advanced upon him, stepping over the broken remains of the table, and delivered a swift punch to his gut. He slumped onto the ground, immobilized.

“What’s going on?” I buzzed.

“He tried to escape.” said Photocell.

“What happened to the camera?”

“It just stopped working.” said Mel. “My computer too. I don’t know what’s wrong.”

“That’s not important right now.” said Photocell, “What’s important is getting the prisoner to secure
containment.” He bent down and grabbed the fallen villain. “Come on, kid. I need another pair of eyes.” Mel nodded and followed the hero, making sure to grab his computer as he left.

Eventually, the intern returned to the Ward’s quarters following Masterwork, High Wire, and Capoeira.

“What happened?” asked Kinetic Lad.

“The camera system failed, and Arséne used that as an opportunity to escape.” said Masterwork, “Photocell subdued him, but it doesn’t seem like he’s willing to cooperate anymore.”

“This is too convenient to be a coincidence.” I said. “Mel, you were there. Could you go over what happened from your perspective?”

“Uh, okay.” he said. “Photocell was conducting the confession and I was monitoring the feed. Everything was going fine, when all of the sudden my laptop shut off. I was worried that meant the camera was broken too, so I alerted Photocell. Just as I said that, Arséne ducked under the table, teleported to the other side of the room, and tried to break open the door. Before we could stop him, he teleported to the underside of the table. Photocell broke it in half trying to get to him, and he scrambled over to the wall. Photocell took him out, and it was about that time that you showed up.”

“What do you mean?” asked Capoeira, “Wasn’t she up here with these two?”

“A swarm of bugs streamed out of the vents and started talking in her voice. I assumed it was her.”

“It was.” I said. “I can speak through my bugs.”

“Woah, that sounds creepy.” remarked High Wire

“It is.” said Kinetic Lad.

“Do you have any idea what could have happened to the camera?” asked Masterwork.

“Not sure. There were no warnings, no error messages. All I know is that my laptop went out with it. Now neither of them are working. I can’t even get them to turn on.”

“Could it be a virus?” asked Kinetic Lad.

“I don’t think so. I know of no viruses that could physically damage the hardware.”

“I think we’re all ignoring the obvious answer.” I said. “Something that could disable electronics indiscriminately.”

“You talking about an EMP?” asked Flame Master.

“You’re not suggesting that Photocell had any hand in this?” said Masterwork.

“I’m just saying it’s a possibility.” I said. I didn’t like accusing a teammate, but I knew better than anyone how a good hero could go bad.

“Photocell has been a trustworthy member of the Protectorate for years. He’s never done anything that would lead me nor anyone else here to question his loyalty.”

“Um, that’s not exactly true.” said Mel, “There’s what happened in June last year. In Brockton Bay.”

“Echidna.” I muttered.
“After that, everyone started treating him differently.” said Kinetic Lad, “It wasn’t overt, but there were stares, whispers. No one would say what happened, but there was this... atmosphere.”

“It’s better now.” said High Wire, “Cell’s a cool guy, the kind you can’t stay mad at. But immediately after that, it seemed like everyone really hated him. No, not hate; more like mistrust.”

“A Cauldron cape.” I thought. A cape who didn’t trigger naturally, but got their powers from a bottle. Did this mean that Cauldron was involved? I thought back to that night in Vegas, when they freed the cape Pretender from PRT custody. Could this be a similar situation? No, Arséne was a teleporter with a weak Thinker ability. He couldn’t see the future or resurrect Alexandria. Cauldron would have no interest in him.

“I have to go with Weaver on this one.” said Flame Master. “If anyone could disable electronics, it would be Photocell.”

“It doesn’t matter if he could.” said Masterwork, “What matters is if he would. And he wouldn’t, ever. He’d have no reason to.”

Perhaps I was looking at this the wrong way. The cameras shut off right before he could tell us about the Philosopher Kings. Maybe the goal wasn’t to free Arséne, but to silence him; to keep him from spilling the Kings’ secrets. I shook my head. Too many assumptions. Too much speculation. It was entirely possible that this was just one long string of coincidences. What we needed were solid answers, and I knew just how to get them.

I turned to Masterwork. “How much experience do you guys have with stakeouts?”

“Varied.” she said, “Why?”

“Because we’re going to confront the Philosopher Kings. Face to face.”
The next two days we spent poring over records, trying to find a pattern in the Philosopher Kings’ appearances. They mainly worked in West Philadelphia, but that was a large area to search, even with my swarm sense. We’d have to limit it to a few blocks. I’d taken my map and began marking locations, using different colors and symbols to represent dates and times. Saturday morning, Mangonel approached me. “Hey Weaver, how’s it going?”

“Fairly well. We’ve narrowed it down to the Overbrook area.”

“Heh, Overbrook. I went to high school there.”

“You’re from West Philadelphia?”

“Born and raised.” he chuckled, “But that’s not the reason I’m here.”

“What is?”

“Two things. First off, I figured I should fill you in on the Arséne situation.”

“How is he? Were you able to get a second confession?”

“Sadly no. He hasn’t said a thing since the incident.”

“What about Photocell?”

“He’s under investigation. For now, we’re keeping him off duty and under surveillance; at least until we find the source of the malfunction. Personally, I don’t think we should discount the possibility that this is just a coincidence. Equipment shuts down sometimes. Doesn’t mean we should start suspecting one another.”

“If that’s your opinion...” I said, deliberately leaving out the second part of my sentence.

“Aside from that,” continued Mangonel, “I was hoping to talk to you about the little operation you and the Wards have planned.”

“You’re not calling it off, are you?”

“No, Chevalier saw fit to grant you carte blanche; which I’m interpreting to mean the freedom to act at your own discretion; and I won’t take that away from you. That being said, I’m still responsible for the safety of all Wards under my command, including you. So, I’m assigning a Protectorate member to your mission.”

As he said that, two capes entered the room. They had near identical costumes, one white with black accents and the other black with white accents. I recognized him/them as Duo, a cape/capes whose power was/were being two people/one person. I took a deep breath. Using the correct pronouns was physically painful.

“Duo, may I introduce you to Weaver.” said Mangonel. “Weaver, meet Gem and Nye.”

“Gem and-? Ah, Gemini. I get it.”

“The real joke is that one of us is an Aries.” said one.
“And the other’s a Pisces.” finished the other.

“Which is which?” I asked. They glanced at each other and shrugged.

“Duo is going to be assisting you in your mission.” said Mangonel, “Functionally speaking, he is a single person in two bodies. The two halves share thoughts, senses, and experiences. Much like with your bugs, this connection cannot be detected, blocked, or interfered with; meaning its perfect against foes who can disrupt standard communication equipment. During the operation, Gem will stay within your range and follow you, while Nye remains here with me. That way, you and I will be in direct contact the whole time.”

“If a fight breaks out, can I expect their help?”

“We’ll want to avoid that.” said Gem.

“But if need be, yes.” said Nye. “I’m a competent fighter, and the nature of our power allows us to transfer injuries and exhaustion onto one another. As long as one of us is kept safe and secure, the other can fight twice as well.”

“I hope you’re not planning on engaging them.” said Mangonel sternly.

“I’m just asking out of necessity.” I said, “I don’t plan on getting in a fight, but depending on how things go, I might need back up. None of your Wards are going to get hurt, if that’s what you’re concerned about.”

“What I’m concerned about is a cape under my command engaging in hostilities with other heroes. We can’t look like we’re forcing people to join the Protectorate.”

“Like you did with me?” I sniped.

“Exactly. I’m glad we see eye to eye.”

He was being dismissive, but he had a point. I was supposed to be the harbinger of a new, transparent Protectorate. If I used force or coercion, I’d be no better than Alexandria. If I was going to get the Philosopher Kings to cooperate with the Protectorate, I’d have to convince them that it was in their best interest to do so; and considering the PRT’s track record, I had my work cut out for me.

It was a warm night, as I walked through the streets of West Philadelphia. I was wearing plainclothes, a long jacket and baggy sweatpants to hide my costume. My flight pack was hidden inside a worn backpack. I forwent a mask; it wasn’t like I had a secret identity anymore. All together, I looked just like a normal college student; which was appropriate, considering I was ten minutes from University City. It was strange. Had I never triggered, I’d probably be looking at colleges right now. Touring campuses, weighing the pros and cons. This would have been the perfect city too. Close enough for Dad to visit, but far enough that I’d have my independence. Now that the thought appeared in my mind, I couldn’t stop thinking about it. Who would Taylor Hebert be if she never became a cape? Would I have kept being a loner? Would I have found friends? If not, going to college would have been the best way to start over. What would I study? English like my Mom? Programing? Definitely not parahuman studies. This world was hard enough to navigate as a cape, let alone a normal person. I sighed. It’s not like it really mattered. Even if I was just an ordinary girl, living an ordinary cape-free life, that wouldn’t stop the world from ending in a year. All I could do was focus on this reality.

Keeping a steady pace, I felt out with my bugs, trying to find anyone in costume. I sensed Gem a
few blocks away. I had placed a fly in a petri dish, and given it to him as a sort of Weaver Compass. Now he was following behind me, far enough to not be suspicious but close enough to be of help. I had been patrolling for about 20 minutes when I sensed him, a young man in a mask and cape. He was prancing along the street, humming a tune I couldn’t quite place. The other pedestrians seemed not to notice him, or if they did they didn’t react. Was this normal? Were capes so common here that people didn’t even spare a glance? Wait no, that wasn’t important right now. I buzzed Gem,

“Detected possible target. Move into position?”

“Affirmative.” he responded.

Mapping out the surrounding area, I found a deserted alley a few blocks ahead of the cape. I made my way over there, and waited until he was within hearing distance. Once he was close enough, I let out a scream.

“Help!”

The cape perked his head up and dashed for the alley. As he appeared around the corner, I made out a dark suit and a smiling white mask.

I buzzed to Gem, “I’ve found our guy.”

The cape strolled up to me. “Well hello there! I couldn’t help but hear your wonderfully piercing scream just now. Is there something wrong?”

I sniffed and put on my best kicked-puppy face. “M-my purse! A man, he had a gun, he took it!”

“Your purse, huh? Is this the one you’re talking about?” He pulled out a shining silver bag.

“Um, no.” I said.

“Okay, then how about this one?” He produced a gleaming gold purse.

“No, I-”

“You know what? Just for you’re honesty, I’ll let you have both.”

I was at a loss for words. I’m not sure what I expected, but it certainly wasn’t this.

“Do you... Do you just carry around purses with you?”

“Maybe...” he said, putting up his hands. “Why? Do you carry something different on your patrols.”

“No, it’s just how could you-” I stopped. I immediately took three steps back.

“Was it something I said? Oh, the part about patrols. Yeah, I guess that was a dead giveaway.”

“How did you know?” I asked warily.

“That you’re a cape? Little things. Body language, clothing; nothing to get hung up about. I’ve been doing this for a while.”

I let out a breath. No point in keeping the charade going. I slipped off my jacket and sweatpants, revealing the costume underneath. I reached into the backpack and strapped my into flight pack. Finally, I donned my mask.
As my eyes adjusted to the blue-tinged lenses, I saw the other cape nod approvingly.

“There we go!” he said, “Now we can have a proper introduction.” He gave a little bow. “The name’s Comedy. And you are?”

I was about to answer, when he raised his hand. “Wait! I am inclined to guess and fond of showing off.” He gave me the once over. “Let’s see... That jet pack suggests you’re either a Tinker or on the same team as one. One of Iron Maiden’s hires? No, the light grey outfit suggests a hero, probably Haven or Protectorate. No, not Haven; lack of Christian iconography. So that means Protectorate, most likely Wards. You’re not one of the local Protectorate, so you must be from another city. There’ve been no recent cape deaths or tragedies, so you’re either a specialist or possess enough social capital to choose where you work.” He stroked his chin, or rather his mask’s chin. “Any number of capes could fit under these criteria; but there’s one more observation far more telling than the rest. You seem perfectly comfortably venturing out without your mask. That suggests you’re a cape who’s already been unmasked. Someone whose secret identity is common knowledge.” His mask’s smile almost seemed to widen. “Taylor Hebert. Also known as Weaver, formerly known as Skitter. Am I correct?”

“Yes.” I said, unimpressed. “I take it you’re using a Thinker ability?”

“Maybe.” he said in an almost musical tone, “Or maybe I’m just that good.”

“I somehow find that hard to believe.”

“Fair enough.” he said, “Regardless, it’s a pleasure to meet you.” He held out his hand. I took it without hesitation. He’d be foolish to try something, and my armor would protect me from anything short of an explosion. As we shook, he leaned in close.

“Hey.” he whispered.

“Yes?”

“Are you afraid of me?”

I bristled. If this was a challenge, I wouldn’t back down.

“No.”

“Then why’re you shaking?” he put a hand to his stomach and burst out laughing.

“Oh, God.” I thought, “He’s one of those capes.” This would be a trial.
As his laughter died down, he turned to look at me.

“So, Ms. Weaver. It seems like you went to great lengths to contact me. What is it you want?”

“To talk.” I said, “About you, and your team.”

“Wonderful! I love to talk.” I was about to respond when he held up a finger. “But not here.”

“What?”

“Look at this place.” He gestured around. “It’s cramped, dirty, filled with garbage. I spend way too much time in alleyways as it is. We should go somewhere better suited for intellectual discussion.”

“Generally speaking, it’s not wise to follow a stranger to a second location.”

“Who says I’m a stranger?”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“You clearly know who I am, judging from this ambush. And as I’ve just demonstrated, I know who you are. We’re both heroes, so we’re more like co-workers than anything.”

“I don’t think I can trust you from that alone.”

“Not asking you to.” He turned to leave. “I’m going. Come or not, it’s up to you.”

He took a few steps and then paused. “Unless of course, you plan on stopping me.”

I didn’t say anything. He nodded and continued on his way.

As he walked off, I buzzed Duo. “Comedy’s moving. Should I follow?”

After a few seconds he responded. “Affirmative, but use caution.”

I nodded and ran ahead, falling in step with the white masked cape. He was likely leading me into a trap, but if I could discover the location of his base or hide out, it would be worth it.

“So, you’ve decided to tag along? That’s good. It’s dangerous to travel alone, especially at night.”

“We’re capes. Danger is sort of inevitable.”

“Perhaps. Still, it’s funny isn’t it?”

“What is?”

“This area’s mainly residential. Lots of row houses attached to one another.”

“And?”

“It just seems strange, is all. That you just so happened to find the one dark alley in the neighborhood to ambush me.”

“Quite the coincidence.” I said flatly. He turned to look at me. I wasn’t sure what he was trying to
find out, but I was determined not to give anything away.


“After you.” he said with a wave of his hand.

“I don’t drink.” I replied curtly.

“Then you must be very thirsty.”

I stifled a groan as he failed to stifle his laughter.

Stepping inside, I got my first good look at the place. It seemed like a typical pub. It was filled with young people, many of them college aged. They didn’t seem bothered by the presence of two capes. In fact, they didn’t seem to notice us at all.

“Hey.” I whispered, “Can they see us?”

“I think so.” said Comedy. “Hey you! With the hat!” One of the college guys looked in our direction. “Can you see us?”

“Uh, yeah?” said the young man.

“Thanks, just asking.”

“Um... Okay.” he turned back to his friends

“Are you using a Master/Stranger ability?” I asked.

“No. Why, are you?”

“No.” Technically I was, but my powers didn’t work on people. That was probably for the best. I couldn’t imagine what I’d do with that kind of power.

“So this is just normal? Capes just walk into bars here?” I asked, desperately wishing he wouldn’t use that as a setup for a joke.

He shrugged. “Not sure about other capes, but I come in all the time.”

“In costume?”

“Of course. What’s the alternative?”

“Taking it off?”

He stared at me for an uncomfortably long time.

“Yours comes off?”

“Figuratively speaking?” I asked, hoping I hadn’t gotten in over my head.

“Of course, I’m not insane.” he assured.

I frowned. This was an area of discussion I was never perfectly comfortable with. To be honest, I
couldn’t remember the last time I thought of my suit as just a costume, the last time I was sure that Taylor Hebert wasn’t just another mask.

“No.” I said, finally, “I suppose it doesn’t.”

He offered me a seat at the bar. “Then I see we have common ground.”
I sat down, not letting my guard up. He took his seat and waved over the bartender.

“Hello.” he said, “We’d like some drinks please.”

“Maybe I should clarify. I’m not legally old enough to drink.”

“Neat, neither am I.” he turned to the barman, “Two Shirley Temples, extra cherry, no ice.” He turned to me, “And did you want anything?”

“I’m good.” I said, ignoring his snickering.

As he was brought his drinks, it struck me. How was he supposed to drink anything with his mask on? The dark mouth piece of his mask looked solid, but as he brought the straw up to his face, it slid right through. Looking closer, I could see it was a trick of the light, and that the mask had an actual hole for the mouth. He slurped his drink loudly, oblivious to my scrutiny.

“You know what I like about this place?” he asked between sips, “The cherries. They taste fresh. If I had to guess, I’d say they’re only a day old. From the Italian Market, I’d wager.”

“Thinker or not, you’re only saying that because I have no way to prove you wrong.” I said, “Besides, no one likes a showoff.”

“Correction! The only people who dislike showoffs are those competing against them. The audience, on the other hand, love a showoff.”

“When you say audience, do you mean it in the “all the world’s a stage” kind of way?”

“No, I mean it literally. We’re being watched, right at this moment, like actors on the screen.” He pointed to my chest. “That dark circle right there. That’s a body camera isn’t it. Meaning this whole conversation’s being monitored by the PRT.” he waved at the camera. “Hi there everybody! The name’s Comedy! I enjoy fruity drinks and long walks in the moonlight.”

I buzzed Duo. “Are you watching me?”

“Of course not.” he responded, “We’d never invade your privacy like that. Also, could you stop crossing your arms? It blocks the picture.”

I shook my head. I was surrounded by smart-asses.

Noticing my frustration, Comedy put down his drink and turned to me. “So, to what do I owe the pleasure of this lovely conversation?”

“The PRT sent me because they believe you and your team have been crossing the line. There are reports of you using excessive force and robbing your captures. You’re also suspected of associating with local villain groups.

“I haven’t the slightest clue what you’re talking about.” said Comedy. “We’re heroes, devoted to upholding truth and justice. We’d never, to my knowledge, participate in any illicit activities...”

“Are you implying that your team is doing things without your knowledge?”
He didn’t answer, merely tilting his head to the side.

“Alright.” I said, “So hypothetically speaking, if you were aware of such activities, would you be willing to stop them?”

“Well when you put it that way... if, hypothetically, we did commit such acts and I was aware of it; I would argue that such action was neither unwarranted nor unjustified.”

“Hm?” His words were so roundabout, it took me a second to parse the meaning behind them.

“I’m sure you know better than anyone how dangerous some fights may be. Not all of us are bullet proof, and often that split second of indecision can mean the difference between life and death. If you had the choice between having an injured bad guy and a dead good guy, you’d choose the former, would you not?”

“If the situation is always that dire, why don’t you ever wait for the police to arrive and explain your side of the story.”

“We each have our reasons. I’m not at liberty to reveal the others’ secrets; but in my case, I can’t afford to reveal to how I work.”

“Why not?”

“It’s nothing suspicious I assure you. Rather, it’s due to a certain quirk of my power. My ability’s effectiveness is inversely proportional to how many people know about it.”

“What?” I’d never heard of a power like that.

“It’s hard to explain, but the simple version is that the less people know about my power, the better it works. Naturally I can’t go into too much detail, lest I risk the lives of my teammates and I; but suffice to say, working with the PRT is not an option. I’m sure you of all people can appreciate that.”

“The issue isn’t that you’re not working with the PRT. If you guys want to be independent, that’s fine. The problem is that you’ve been doing things like taking money from the crooks you're supposed to be bringing in.”

“I haven’t the slightest clue what you’re talking about.” he said confidently, “But if I did, I’d argue that without our intervention, that money would be used for criminal purposes. Alternatively, in our hands it could be used to further our own heroic ends. Is this not the best distribution of resources? Would this not cause the greatest amount of good?”

“It doesn’t matter. You’re still breaking the law.”

“So you’re saying it’s never okay to break the law, even if it would save lives?”

I didn’t have anything to say to that. The truth was, the case I was making wasn’t my own. They were arguments made to me by PRT Directors, Protectorate leaders, and even my fellow Wards. How could I win a debate for a viewpoint I didn’t truly believe in?

“Look.” I said, “I can sympathize with what you’re trying to do. I understand that the PRT’s rules can be stupid and restricting and just plain counterintuitive. Sometimes, compromises have to be made and rules have to be broken. You do what you have to, even if it means accepting certain necessary evils. But right now, the PRT and the Protectorate are one of those necessary evils. There is a fourth Endbringer, a fifth is possibly on the way, the Slaughterhouse Nine are due to appear with an army of clones, and to top it all off, the world may very well end in a year. I get that you want to
“Protect the city? Is that why you think I do what I do?”

“Is it not?” He let out a low chuckle. I did not like this sudden shift in tone.

“Then why do you fight?”

“I fight for my friends. I fight for truth, justice, and the American way. I fight for the future and a brighter tomorrow. But most of all, I’m a hero because it’s fun.”

“Fun?” I exclaimed. I knew people who became capes as an escape, people whose lives were so awful they’d do anything to be someone else, but fun?

“Of course!” he replied joyfully

I thought about everything I’d gone through since becoming a cape. All the danger. All the hardship. All the sacrifice. “How can you call any of this fun?”

“How can you not? We live in a world where men can fly, women can lift buildings, and children can conquer a city. A world with robots and monsters and superheroes. Real superheroes! What’s the point of a world like this if no one takes the time to enjoy it?”

“This isn’t some comic book.” I said, managing to keep the emotion out of my voice. “Being a hero isn’t a game. Not when peoples’ lives are at stake. Not when the world hangs in the balance. It’s serious business.”

“Games can be serious. Just because I’m having fun, doesn’t mean I’m not helping people. We really do strive to be the best heroes we can be.”

“Then why are you associating with villains?”

“I honestly have no idea what you talking about. And I mean that sincerely. I’m not being sarcastic or facetious or anything. I know it sounds like I’m being sarcastic, but that’s just how I talk. I’m completely serious right now. I swear.”

“There are multiple reports of you using unlicensed Tinkertech, so unless you’re secretly a Tinker, there’s only one place you could have gotten it from.”

“How do you know we didn’t buy it legally? How do you know we don’t secretly have a Tinker on our team? How do you know we didn’t just find it?”

“That’s not a very strong defense.”

“Perhaps not, but let me ask you this: Do you have any evidence of wrongdoing on our part? Any actual proof that we’re working with villains? Because if not, all you have is assumptions and speculation.”

He had me there. I had hoped to find something concrete tonight, but so far all I had discovered was his horrible sense of humor. Still, I had one last card up my sleeve.

“There’s one other reason to suspect your team. Does the name Arsène ring a bell?”

“Arsène? Like the character, Arsène Lupin?”
“No, he’s a cape.”

“Is he French?”

“I don’t know, probably. That’s not important. He was recently arrested for robbing the Art Museum, and during his confession he brought up the Philosopher Kings.”

Comedy perked up at the mention of his team. “Really? What did he say? Was he giving us a review? Oh, I need a moment to prepare myself. I love getting feedback but it’s always so nerve racking.”

“Can you stop? I’m not laughing.”

“Sorry, it’s my thing. All capes have a thing, you know? Some joke, some monologue, some give those silent judgmental stares.”

I didn’t say anything.

“See, you do them too!”

“Could you please focus? Arsène claimed to have inside information on your team. Information supposedly valuable enough for us to grant him leniency. However, before he had a chance to reveal this information, his confession was interrupted.”

“Oh, really? What interrupted it?”

“There was a technical malfunction, and Arsène tried to use that opportunity to escape.”

“Unfortunate, but I don’t see how that implicates us.”

“The feed cut off just as he was about to reveal your secret. Rather convenient, don’t you think?”

“I’d say it’s quite inconvenient, if it’s casting suspicion towards us. In all likelihood, Arsène had no information. He probably knew about your interest in us, and used that to gain a means of escape.”

“Are you serious?”

“I mean, what secrets could we possibly have? And how could he possibly know about them?”

“He was very specific about the nature of it. He said that you aren’t something. Any idea what he was talking about?”

“None at all.”

“So you’re saying you don’t have any secrets. Nothing even remotely compromising that could be used against you?”

“If I did, I wouldn’t be at liberty to just give it away. Tell you what. I’ll give you three guesses as to what the secret could be. Get it right, and I’ll give you a completely straight answer.”

“No jokes?”

“None from me.”

“And what if I get it wrong?”
“Hmm... I suppose it would be too much to ask for you to give up your investigation?”

“Yes. Yes it would.”

“Then my only request is that you give us the benefit of the doubt. You don’t automatically assume we have ulterior motives.”

I considered it. I supposed I wasn’t giving up too much on my end. I buzzed Duo. “What does Mangonel think? Anything he wants me to ask?”

“He’s a bit preoccupied at the moment.” replied Gem, “A cape fight just broke out near HQ.”

“Do you need backup? Should I abort?”

“No, we can handle this. Continue with your mission.”

I turned my attention back to Comedy. “Alright, you have a deal.”

“Excellent. What’s your first guess?”

“Is your secret that you aren’t heroes?”

“Nope. I meant what I said and said what I meant. The Philosopher Kings are heroes in the most classical sense of the word.”

I expected such a response. Most people saw themselves as heroes to some extent. Still, if they really thought of themselves as heroes, what secret could be so important that they’d resort to breaking out a villain to protect it? I thought about what he said before, about how he got the Tinkertech. He never denied that it was Tinkertech, but tried to obscure where they got it and why. What if...

“Is the secret that you aren’t really capes?”

“Ooh, good guess! Wrong, but still very good. No, I can assure you I am 100% parahuman, not that I don’t appreciate the outside the box thinking.” He leaned back. “One last guess.”

I hesitated. Those were the best guesses I could come up with. The problem was that I simply didn’t have enough information on the Philosopher Kings. I had never fought with them, never gotten a feel for how they operated. If only I had a little more time, a little more facts. My thoughts were interrupted by a voice some blocks away.

“Um, Weaver?” said Gem, “There’s a bit of a problem. Remember when I said we wouldn’t need backup? I was wrong. Nye is down and I need to revive him, so would you mind watching my body?”

“Sure.” The moment I responded he slumped onto the ground. My bugs detected the scent of blood and burned flesh. I got up from my seat.

“Something the matter?” asked Comedy

“I have to go.” I said, “My teammates are in trouble.”

“How unfortunate. I suppose we’ll have to continue our little game another time.”

“I guess so.” I said, walking away. “It was... nice to meet you.”

“Oh, believe me.” he called from the bar, “The pleasure is entirely mine.”
Running out of the bar, I checked on Gem.

“Are you okay?” I buzzed

“N...no.” he groaned.

“I’ll get help.”

“Ugh...Thanks.”

I radioed HQ. “This is Weaver. Duo is injured. We need an ambulance sent to these coordinates.” I gave them Gem’s location.

“Hello Weaver, this is Archive. We’ll do what we can, but things are a bit of a mess here. I’m not sure how soon we’ll be able to get someone to you.”

“What’s the situation?”

“Gang war. Fighting broke out between the Dons and the Archfiends, and it’s spreading throughout the city. Right now we’re devoting all our resources to containing it.”

I cursed. A massive cape fight and I was stranded on the other side of the city.

“Could you relay my signal to the Dragonfly? I’m out of range.”

“We can’t. It’s onboard A.I. detected the fighting and switched into heightened security mode. We can’t connect to it without the passcode.”

I thought for a moment. “Is this a secure radio frequency?”

“It’s only accessible to PRT personnel.”

“I need you to order everyone else to tune out.”

“Alright. Everyone but Weaver and I are ordered to switch to a different frequency, stat.”

Glancing around, I spoke into the radio. “The password is 48 61 6c 62 65 61 72 64.”

“Affirmative. Connecting now.”

I waited until I heard the familiar tone of the Dragonfly’s A.I. “Verification required. Please state name.”

“Weaver.”

“Voice patterns accepted. Hello Weaver.”

“Pick me up at this location.” I relayed Gem’s coordinates. I knew it was dangerous to move an injured person, but I couldn’t just leave him here.

“Confirmed. Starting takeoff.”

When I reached Gem, I found him facedown in the street. His arms were badly burned, and there was a large gash on his back. It seemed the damage he sustained was transferred to his suit as well. I
kneeled down.

“Hey. Can you hear me?”

“Uh huh...” he murmured.

“Don’t worry, help is on the way. In the mean time, I’ll try to patch you up.”

I took out my first aid kit. Stopping the bleeding would be my first priority. After soaking a cotton ball in disinfectant, I began dabbing around the wound, clearing up the blood. Using my flight pack’s arms for support, I carefully lifted his mid section up and began applying gauze. By the time the Dragonfly arrived, he was in more or less stable condition. All of Dragon’s manned ships came with emergency medical compartments, complete with supplies. I ran inside and wheeled a stretcher down the ramp. When I got to Duo, I lowered it to his level.

“Ready?” I asked, bending down and placing my hands under his body.

He nodded and, gently distributing his weight between the limbs of my flight pack, I set him on top of the stretcher. After strapping him in, I wheeled the stretcher back up the ramp and set it into place against one of the benches, strapping it in so he wouldn’t move around during flight. When I was sure he was secure, I spoke aloud.

“Dragonfly. Take us back to HQ.”

“Setting destination to Philadelphia Protectorate HQ.” replied the ship.

As we began takeoff, I eyed Duo, making sure the vibrations didn’t disturb him. We lifted high into the sky and began soaring over the rooftops. I had my eyes on the scopes, searching for any signs of fighting in the distance. As we approached, I spotted flashes of light streaking through the sky. Zooming in, I saw Mangonel, standing on the roof of the Protectorate HQ. The picture was somewhat blurry, from what I realized was probably the forcefield surrounding the building. Mangonel let out another blast of energy, and I followed its path to a spot several blocks west. I readjusted our course, making sure the Dragonfly passed over the area.

I felt the fighting before I saw it. Spreading my bugs out on everything that moved, I could sense three different groups battling it out. Unfortunately, without knowledge of the local capes, I couldn’t tell who was who. Were those guys with guns gang members or PRT agents? Was that fiery cape a villain or an independent hero? Without context, I didn’t know who to stop. The Dragonfly picked up a small group of capes on the edge. It was the Wards. They were no doubt trying to box the combatants in, keep the fight from spreading. My best bet would be to land and meet up with them. Then again, I had Gem to think about. As secure as the Dragonfly was, there were unknown variables at play, two groups of villains strong enough to battle the Protectorate head-on. I couldn’t risk him getting injured, not after I promised to protect his body. The responsible thing would be to take him back to HQ where he’d be safe. But that would mean leaving the others, and in a cape fight every second could mean the difference between life and death. Taking a few precious moments, I made my decision.

“Archive.” I called, walking over to the ship’s side hatch, “It’s Weaver. Are you still there?”

“I’m here. Status?”

“I’m in the Dragonfly with Gem. We’re on route to HQ. Listen, when the ship returns, you’re going to have to send someone to get him. He needs immediate medical attention.”

“Alright, I’ll have someone on call when it arrives. But what about you?”
I opened the hatch. “I’m not going back.”

The wind whipped past my face as I stood on the edge of the ship. Looking over that 50 story drop, I was glad I didn’t have a fear of heights. Still, I felt a moment of hesitation. A moment of indecision, where the rational part of my brain pleaded for me to close the hatch and return to the safety of the ship’s interior. I took a deep breath, disconnecting myself from the situation, and focused on my swarm. Focused on the individual members of my swarm. Focused on the girl, hanging out the side of a ship. As easily as I commanded any of my bugs, I made her jump.

There was a whoosh and she was falling, the wind rushing by, her breathing calm and steady. I activated her flight pack, so that she’d have a safe descent. The antigravity panels weren’t strong, but she was falling a long way; giving her time to decelerate. I guided her as she slowly glided down to the surface, careful to let her down near her companions. I opened my eyes, and saw the Philadelphia Wards staring at me. Kinetic Lad was the first to speak.

“Did she just fall out of the sky?”
Masterwork approached me.

“Glad you could make it.” She said, “Things are getting hectic. The Archfiends and the Dons are at war, and we’re caught in the middle.”

“How can I help?”

“Right now we’re just trying to contain the fighting. If you could help maintain the perimeter…”

“On it.” I spread my swarm throughout the battlefield, tagging anything that moved. The combat seemed to be concentrated in a four block area. I could make out three distinct groups, consisting of both capes and armed grunts. I wish I had more bugs on me, but I left my crates back on the Dragonfly.

“I’ll just have to make do.” I murmured. Just as I had that thought, one of the combatants made a break for it, running towards the blockade, knife in hand.

“Incoming!” I shouted, spinning out threads into a tripwire. Capoeira beat me to it. With a series of graceful ballet-like leaps, she brought herself within inches of the man, twirling on her feet and knocking the knife out of his hands. Before he had a chance to grab it, she did a spinning handstand, swiping the knife and kicking him in the face in one single motion. The man staggered backwards, but Capoeira rapidly closed the distance, sweeping his legs and sending him flailing onto the ground. The confrontation lasted 4 seconds at most, and had a type of fluidity that you didn’t see in normal fights. I’d think it was choreographed, were she not a cape.

As she cuffed the offender, I took note of his appearance. He looked about middle aged, with a bald head and grizzled beard. Despite this, he was surprisingly muscular. I noticed a tattoo on his hand, of a black and silver cross. I remembered a conversation I once had with Brian about tattoos, about their significance in the gang hierarchy, about how the hand was one of the more painful places to get one.

“Who’s he with?” I asked.

“The Archfiends.” said Masterwork, following behind. “A biker gang known for their violence and instability.”

“And for being really frickin’ metal.” said High Wire, “See that tattoo there? That’s one of their symbols. It looks like a normal cross, but when you bring it to your face or salute with it, its inverted.”

“For a long time they operated mainly in Camden,” continued Masterwork, “but now it seems they’ve set their sights on our city.”

“How many capes?” I asked.

“Two present, five in total.”

I counted. Excluding the Wards and I, there were currently nine capes on the battlefield. It was just a matter of picking out the villains.

“I’m going to get a better look.” I said, extending the wings of my flight pack. I activated the
propulsion system and flew up onto the roof of a nearby building. Masterwork grabbed onto Kinetic Lad and the two of them were propelled upwards, landing a few feet beside me. From my new vantage point, I got a clear view of the combatants.

On one side was a group wearing pinstripe suits and old fashioned fedoras. Each had a domino mask and a submachine gun. Dead or dying gang members lay at their feet. It didn’t take a genius to figure out they were the Dons. They were lined up in a row, firing on a muscular golden suited cape with a bull motif. I recognized him as Toro, a Protectorate hero. He had the standard Brute abilities: strength, endurance, regeneration; as well as a personal forcefield that activated when he ran and canceled out air resistance. It seemed he was making the most of it, as he charged towards the gunmen. Suddenly, the area in front of his feet became discolored, like someone had put a monochrome filter over it. As his foot made contact with it, it began to slow, as if he had stepped in a patch of mud. Meanwhile, the rest of him continued forward at normal speed, causing him to trip and fall on his face. The row of gunmen parted as one of their number walked forward. She had a black and magenta suit and her arm was raised towards Toro.

“That’s Time Zone.” said Kinetic Lad, “She’s a Shaker who creates bubbles of slowed down time.”

Behind her walked a short man with a crooked smile. His steel gray suit was freshly tailored, so fresh in fact that there were still pins sticking out of it.

“And him?” I asked.

“Sharp. A ferrokinetic. He can control small metal objects.”

As Kinetic Lad said this, the villain waved his hand and a flurry of nails, razors, and needles flew out of his costume towards the downed hero. Before they reached him however, their trajectory changed and they plummeted to the ground. From behind a downed car stepped the hero Crusher, flanked by two PRT troopers. Together, the three of them ran out to help Toro. The other Dons fired at them, but their bullets never made it within twenty feet before hitting the ground.

Time Zone raised her arms towards the heroes, but before she could do anything my swarm descended. She let out a yelp and turned her attention to my bugs, trapping large swaths of them in her bubbles. It was like they had entered a thick patch of molasses, their bodies moving in slow motion. Their wings, normally too fast to see with the human eye, beat like a bird’s. Strangely, I could still feel their senses in real time. It seemed that while the air around them was slowed, internally they were moving just fine. I supposed that was the Manton Effect in play. Using the trapped bugs as reference points, I sent the rest of my swarm around Time Zone’s bubbles and into her face. She didn’t take it well. Alerted by her screams, Sharp ran to her aid, and I turned my swarm to him as well. He responded by creating a personal whirlwind of blades, shredding any bugs that tried to get close. While that stopped me from attacking him, it did nothing to protect Time Zone. My bugs were swarming too close, and he couldn’t get at them without running the risk of striking her.

One of the PRT troopers took advantage of this distraction, and lobbed a foam grenade at the two villains. Time Zone wiped the bugs out of her eyes just in time to see the grenade flying towards them, and managed to trap it in her time field. Seeing the trapped grenade, Sharp grabbed a bat from a fallen Archfiend and swung at the bubble. Time Zone released the bubble and the bat made contact, sending the foam grenade flying into the distance. The two of them exchanged a relieved look, before collapsing to the ground. Crusher walked forward, her hand extended towards them. The two capes struggled to get back on their feet, but the weight was too much for them, and they had no choice but to lay there as Crusher approached, cuffs in hand.
However, as she bent over to restrain Time Zone, Sharp flicked his fingers in her direction. The numerous nails and razors that littered the ground rose up and flew towards her. No time to shout out a warning, Toro rushed over and pushed her out of the way, receiving several sharp objects in his back as a result. Her concentration broken, Crusher’s gravity field disappeared; leaving the two villains free to make their escape, the other Dons providing covering fire. Toro shielded Crusher with his body, letting out grunts of pain as the bullets hit him. The PRT troopers dived for cover, but not before launching another round of foam grenades at the retreating villains. One hit Sharp in the back of his leg. Containment foam began spreading out, trapping him in place. He let out a growl as he tried desperately to pull himself free. Time Zone briefly hesitated, leaving her comrade a sparing glance, before continuing her retreat. The time bubbles trapping my bugs winked out, and I was able to send my full swarm after the villain.

Toro, meanwhile, started charging the Dons, Crusher following behind. Bullets pinged off his forcefield, and as he approached, he threw his arms out, clotheslining the group of armed gangsters. Those that were still standing turned tail and ran off. Crusher kept running, pursuing Time Zone. She held her arm out towards the retreating villain and activated her power. Time Zone, hearing the commotion, threw her arm back and did the same. Her time field materialized right in the middle of Crusher’s gravity field. Then, something very strange happened. The time bubble began to wobble, quivering as if under intense pressure. Then it burst. I felt the effect before I could see it, all of my bugs being pulled towards a single point, along with everything else. Dirt and trash and loose bits of concrete were all sucked up into what could only be described as a condensed sphere of debris, floating where the bubble once was.

“What’s happening?” shouted Toro.

“I think her field absorbed my gravity well!” Crusher shouted back.

“What the hell does that mean?”

“Higher gravity means slower time. Whatever causes her time dilation field is reacting to my power.”

She waved her arm at the sphere, but nothing happened. It seemed she wasn’t able to stop it. That left Time Zone. The bugs that I had sent to chase her were all being sucked up, their mass being added to the sphere. I could feel each and every bug being crushed to death, their flattened bodies becoming another layer of the rapidly expanding globe. I tried to move as many as I could to the edge of the effect, but more and more were recaptured by the attractive force. It seemed the bigger it got, the greater its pull. I needed to end this quickly.

I focused my bugs on the perimeter of the battlefield, trying to find a Ward that could help. I found High Wire near the street Time Zone was escaping down, so I alerted him to her presence. As Time Zone made for the end of the street, a black cord shot out from behind the corner, latching onto a street lamp on the other side. Time Zone saw this, and in a feat of exceptional athleticism leapt into the air, soaring over the first cord, and right into a second one placed a few feet higher. It hit her in stomach, and with a painful grunt she was flipped onto her back. As she hit the pavement, her power switched off, and the ball of compressed litter fell to the ground. The cords retracted and High Wire stepped out from behind the corner. He held out a hand to her, and the black lines on running down his arm separated from his body and wrapped themselves around her like rope.

As Crusher approached, High Wire released some of the wire so she could properly cuff the villain. Toro did the same with Sharp, who was still stuck in the containment foam. The villain tried to fight back, but as all his razors and nails were either stuck in the foam or absorbed into the trash sphere, there was little he could do as the hero restrained him.
On the other side was a larger, more assorted group. There were teenagers barely older than I was, and older men with beards. They wielded everything from shotguns to tire irons. The only common theme was leather. Some had leather vests and jackets. Others wore studded leather pants. A few had those spiked leather collars Rachel liked to collect. I took it they were the Archfiends. Despite their ragtag appearance, they were managing to hold their own against the PRT. It seemed that what they lacked in organization, firepower, and general combat proficiency; they made up for in sheer numbers.

I saw the other Duo, Nye, carrying an injured PRT trooper to safety. His retreat was being covered by Cuirass, another PRT cape. She wore a heavy suit of combat armor, built like riot gear but stylized to resemble knight’s armor. Her power let her alter its shape, creating weapons or bolstering specific areas against attacks. She was currently using it to fend off a squad of Archfiends. On one arm she had formed a large shield, and out of the other extended a nightstick. She stood her ground against the mob, holding them back as Duo got to safety. When one pulled out a handgun, the armor thickened in response, catching the bullets and spitting them back out. Holding her arm out, she extended the nightstick, knocking the gun out of the man’s hand. Before she could press the advantage, an unearthly howl rose above the clatter of battle. The Archfiend members scattered as a strange creature pounced forward. He resembled a man, wearing face paint and black stretch pants, but he was down on all fours, his long sinewy limbs tipped with claws and his facial features stretched to resemble a wolf.

“Who or what is that?” I asked.

“Therion” said Masterwork, “Changer 5, Brute 4. Can take on various animal-like forms.”

“I see.” I said, gathering my swarm.

Cuirass enlarged her shield in anticipation as Therion began to charge. Before he reached her however, his upper body began to grow, his muscles expanding and his face flattening out to resemble an ape. With his newfound girth, he crashed into Cuirass, toppling her to the ground. I sent out my swarm, but he was already towering over her, his brawny hands wrapped around her throat. Just then, he let out a yelp and pulled his hands back, revealing the large spikes that had popped out from her collar. Before he could react, pieces of Cuirass’s suit started wrapping around him like shackles. Strangely, instead of trying to break his restraints, the villain closed his eyes and took a deep breath. His body began to shrink down, his arms becoming limp and flexible. A layer of shiny black and red scales began to spread out over his skin. He slipped his arms and legs out with ease and slithered back, ready to counterattack. That was when my bugs hit.

They crawled over him; flies and roaches, wasps and mosquitoes, and even a few spiders; prying up the scales and stinging the soft flesh underneath. While he was preoccupied, Cuirass advanced, her armor reforming around her. She pooled the metal around her arm, forming a large hammer. She winded back, ready to strike, when a foam grenade came flying from the distance, hitting her in the back. By the time she noticed the foam, it was already growing fast, expanding over her suit. She spread her armor out, wrapping it around the foam in an attempt to bottle it up. Unfortunately, it seemed the foam was spreading faster than she could contain it, and it was coming very close to consuming her entirely. Sighing, she opened up the front of the suit, stepping out to safety and letting her armor be engulfed by the foam. She was left with only her mask and a black regulation bodysuit. There was a riot shield a few feet away, dropped by an injured PRT trooper. She scooped it up and placed it on her arm. Immediately, it began changing shape. She channeled a large portion of the material into her hand, shaping it into a long plexiglass sword. The remainder she distributed to the rest of her body, providing light protection to her vital areas.

Therion, meanwhile, had stopped writhing under my bugs’ assault. He began changing into a
different form. I couldn’t see beyond my curtain of insects, but I could feel his skin shifting, his scales realigning and reinforcing themselves. His limbs becoming thick and sturdy, his nose and mouth extending into a round lizard-like snout. From his lower body extended a long, straight tail. As he stepped out of my swarm, walking once again on all fours, I could see his grayish green scales glinting in the night. He looked like a cross between a man and a Komodo dragon. Cuirass stood firm, her sword raised, a knight facing down a dragon. Unfortunately, without her armor, one hit would mean game over. I would just have to make sure she didn’t get hit. I assembled together all the bugs in the area, creating a veil separating the two capes.

I whispered in her ear. “Hey, it’s Weaver. I’m going to need you to move three feet to your right.”

She did so, and I started forming a swarm clone where she once stood. I created another clone three feet to the left of that one. Finally, I started gathering bugs around Cuirass.

“Oh, so I’m going to cover you in bugs.” I said, “You’re just going to have to roll with it. Don’t make a sound and don’t attack until I give the word. Got it?” She nodded, tensing up as my swarm enveloped her. I provided a modest layer of insects, heavy enough to cover her completely, but light enough as not to smother her. Sure enough, as the spiders and roaches crawled over her, she made not a sound. This was why I liked working with professionals. When I raised the veil, Therion was met not with one cape, but with three squirming abominations. I had essentially created a human shell game.

In the day time, it might have been easy to pick out the real Cuirass; but here in the dark, in the heat of battle, it was anyone’s guess. Even so, that still left the villain a one-in-third chance of choosing correctly. If I wanted to improve those odds, I’d have to cheat.

“Start moving, forward and to the right.” I whispered to Cuirass. She did so, walking slowly to flank Therion. I mirrored her actions with the other clones, the leftmost clone going left, the middle one moving straight ahead. Therion eyed all three of them, flicking his gaze from one to the other. He was not doubt looking for some difference, some telltale flaw that would give the real Cuirass away. I gave him one. As the left clone took its next step, I made it stumble, letting out a small cry. The villain turned to the decoy and lunged.

“Now!” I said, as he slashed at the clone. His claw cut through the middle and the clone fell apart on top of him. I took that opportunity to condense all of my bugs onto his face. I might not have been able to get past his scales, but I could still blind him. Meanwhile, Cuirass dashed forward, slamming her sword into his back. It struck true, causing him to rear up in surprise, but failed to break the skin. It seemed his scales were simply too durable. Seeing this, she rounded back, slipping up beside him and striking him across the jaw. She didn’t manage to draw blood, but the blunt force trauma was enough to send him crumbling onto the ground. As he lay there, his body slowly changed back to normal. Shifting her sword into a pair of manacles, Cuirass cuffed his hands behind his back.

“Thanks for the assist.” she said to the remaining swarm clone. “Oh, and please never do that again.”

“Sure thing.” I said through the clone.

It seemed that with the three villains down, the battle was over. That was when I heard it.
The sound of explosions filled the sky, one after the other, louder and louder each time. No, not louder. Closer. I turned towards the sound, just in time to catch a cape flying through the sky. He was wreathed in flames, and left a trail of fire behind him. As he reentered my range, I noticed he was flying in a serpentine pattern, darting left and right as blasts of energy rained down on him. I recognized those blasts. They were Mangonel’s; meaning this guy probably wasn’t a hero. As he got closer my suspicions were confirmed.

I saw he wasn’t just covered in smoke and fire, but made of it. I could make out a shadowy humanoid shaped core, surrounded by a cloak of flames. The inferno curved and twisted, forming horns on his head and large claws extending out of his arms.

“`Iblis.’” said Masterwork, drawing her slingshot. “He’s the field leader of the Archfiends. A Blaster, Mover, Breaker; his body’s immune to physical damage.” As she said this, she readied a plastic sling bullet. At her touch, it began to let out a faint blue glow, and as she fired it soared out at an incredible speed. The demonic cape spied the glowing projectile as it streaked towards him, and from his hand he produced a jet of fire, incinerating the bullet. I watched his eyes, two dark shadows in a horrifying burning visage, as he traced it back to us. I was suddenly reminded of my first fight against Lung.

“Run!” I shouted, darting for the edge of the roof. I reextended the wings of my flight pack, and glided down to street level. Masterwork and Kinetic Lad followed right behind me, holding on to each other and slow-falling to safety. Just as they left the roof, a wave of fire washed over it, tendrils of flame stretching out to lick at their backs.

“That was too close.” said Kinetic Lad as his feet touched the ground.

“We’re not out of danger yet.” said Masterwork, looking up.

Sure enough, out of the fire flew Iblis, his fearsome gaze pointed directly at us. He floated there beside a tall building, outside of Mangonel’s line of fire. Masterwork readied another bullet and trained it right at his head, the threat implicit. A terse silence descended on the capes, only to be broken by the clacking of leather shoes on pavement. A man in a dark blue suit walked casually onto the battlefield. He had a mask and fedora, like the Dons, but carried no weapons.

“‘Scuse me kids.” he said, stepping past us, “I’ve got a score to settle.”

The pavement cracked beneath him as he leapt into the air. He plunged into Iblis fist first, passing right through his body. The villain let out a groan as his flames began to dim, and he fell slowly to the ground. The newcomer landed on the other side, completely unscathed. As he dusted himself off, I noticed what looked like steam coming off him. Looking closer, I could just barely make out a thin crystalline layer coating his body. Every bug that came into contact with it died.

“Who-” I began.

“Icepick.” said Kinetic Lad, “Field leader of the Dons. Has super strength and can freeze things on touch.”

Iblis got up and glared at the Don, hatred burning in his eyes. Icepick walked toward him and spoke. “You guys got a lotta nerve, muscling into our turf like this. What, that garbage dump you call a city not big enough for ya?”

“You know exactly why we’re here!” snarled the Archfiend, his flames flaring up, “You shall
“answer for your crimes!”

“Huh...” replied Icepick. “Well that doesn’t answer my question at all.” He cracked his fists, “Suppose I’ll just have to beat it out of you.”

The two stood opposite one another, eyes locked, all but daring the other to make the first move.

“This is bad.” said Masterwork, “If those two go all out, they could destroy the entire block.”

“Well, what do we do?” asked Kinetic Lad, “We can’t beat those guys. They’re way out of our league.”

“We don’t have to beat them.” I said, sending out my bugs, “We just need to stall them until help arrives.”

“What do you suggest?” asked Masterwork.

“For now just stand back and wait for my signal.” I said, walking towards the two villains.

“Weaver, wait!” cried Masterwork, but I had already entered the battlefield.

Right off the bat I was at a disadvantage. Their powers killed my bugs on contact, and I imagined my silk would be equally ineffective. I would have to talk my way out of this. Luckily, it seemed they hated one another, meaning one couldn’t attack me without leaving themselves open to the other.

“Excuse me.” I said in an even tone.

The two villains ceased their staring match and shifted their attention towards me.

“Who the hell are you?” growled Iblis.

“Weaver. I’m with the Protectorate.”

“Weaver, huh?” said Icepick, “I’ve heard of you. The bug cape, right?”

“Yes,” I said, letting the bugs in my costume crawl out of their pouches and over my body, “The bug cape.”

“Well buzz off!” he replied, “We’re in the middle of something here.”

“As much as I’d like to let two villains waste their energy trying to kill one another, I can’t let you do that. This area has not been fully evacuated yet; and frankly, I’m not confident in your ability to minimize property damage. Case in point.” I gestured to the smoldering rooftop the Wards and I had just escaped from. Iblis frowned and raised his arm towards the roof. The smoke and flames left the building and funneled themselves into the palm of his hand.

“There.” he said, “Now leave us. I must exact my vengeance.”

“Your vengeance?” exclaimed Icepick, “You guys are the ones who’ve been hitting us all week.”

“Liar!” snarled Iblis, “Your men have been raiding our safe houses completely unprovoked. Don’t try to deny it!”

“Get real! You creeps are just looking for an excuse to steal our territory.”

“Like we need an excuse.”
As they bantered, a thought occurred to me. If both groups attacked one another, why would either one deny it. Clearly one was lying. Or both. Or perhaps...

“Masterwork.” I buzzed

“I’m here.” she responded, “Shall we move in?”

“Not yet. I just have a few questions. You said the Archfiends operated in Camden, right?”

“Yes.”

“What about the Dons? Where are they based?”

“Mainly in North Philadelphia.”

I thought back to the map. Those areas were nowhere near each other.

“What about where we are right now? Whose territory is this?”

“No one’s. We’re only a few blocks away from HQ after all.”

“Then why.” Before I could finish my thought, I noticed a sharp spike in the surrounding temperatures. The area around Iblis was burning hot, and the air surrounding Icepick was unnaturally cold. Turning my attention to the two villains, I saw that they had stopped talking and were preparing to attack. Before I could think better of it, I found myself rushing in between the two.

“The fuck are you doing?” cried Icepick mid-lunge.

“Do not interrupt our battle.” said Iblis angrily, “We would not hesitate to kill a child, even a foolish one like yourself.”

“I may be foolish, but I’m smart enough to know a setup when I see one.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Icepick.

“You said this was a fight over territory, right? But we’re not in either of your turfs, are we? Tell me, what brought you and your gang here tonight?”

“That’s none of your business.” he responded defiantly.

I turned to Iblis. “And you?”

“We received intelligence that the Dons would be gathering here tonight, in preparation for an attack.”

“Bullshit!” said Icepick, “My boys and I only came because we heard you clowns were here looking for trouble.”

“You see.” I said, “This wasn’t some random fight. Someone lured both of you here, to the Protectorate’s doorstep, in the knowledge that your fighting would attract the local heroes.”

“Nonsense.” said Iblis, ”How could someone could deceive both of us. And what would they gain by doing so?”

“Distracting the Protectorate. Weakening two of the biggest gangs in the city. That’s just off the top of my head. As for the how, I was hoping you two could fill that in. I’ll ask again: Who told you to
“And I’ll tell you again.” replied Icepick, “None of your damn business. You think you can waltz down here like you’re some hot shit and start piecing things together like some fucking detective? Well sorry Sherlock, but there ain’t no mystery. You think this is some kind of scheme? That the attack on my men was a setup? Well unless there’s another cape wandering around with the same powers as this walking garbage fire, you’re wrong.”

“What was that?” said Iblis.

“My boys saw you attack our warehouse. They’ve got the burns to prove it.”

I hadn’t expected this. Gang affiliation was an easy thing to fake. Superpowers were not. It seemed that convincing two capes not to kill each other was easier said than done.

“Believe me or not.” I said, “I don’t care. But I cannot allow you to continue this fight.”

“Oh yeah?” laughed Icepick, “And you’re going to stop us?”

“No.” I said, taking a step back, “They are.”

I raised my arm. Every bug in my radius began to relay the same message: “Now!”

On my signal, the Philadelphia Protectorate came out of hiding. Crusher and Toro. Duo and Cuirass. Masterwork, High Wire, Capoeira, and Kinetic Lad. They all entered the battlefield and formed a wide ring around the two villains.

“So,” asked Duo, arms crossed, “Still up for a fight?”

The villains glanced at each other and bolted. Iblis flew straight up while Icepick made a break for the street. Crusher activated her power, but it seemed to have no affect on them. Iblis wore no clothes and Icepick had super strength. Masterwork loaded her slingshot three bullets at a time and began firing rapidly at the retreating Archfiend.

The glowing blue bullets seemed to cause him great pain, extinguishing the flames wherever they hit, but ultimately did little more than slow him down as he flew into the distance. Icepick, on the other hand, was not so lucky. High Wire had managed to catch him with his wires, ensnaring his right arm and leg. Despite his considerable strength, Icepick wasn’t able to break the cords. Instead, he planted his feet and tugged on the wires, pulling High Wire towards him. The young Ward tried to hold his ground, but eventually his strength wore out and he found himself being forcefully pulled to the villain. Before the other Protectorate members could stop him, Icepick had brought the Ward into striking distance, delivering a solid blow to his stomach. High Wire’s cords relaxed and Icepick was able to continue his escape. As a last ditch effort, I created a wall of bugs in front of the villain, hoping to slow him down at least. He didn’t seem to care, barreling through and killing any bugs he touched. I couldn’t even plant any on him, that was how strong his aura of cold was. I watched uselessly as he bypassed the perimeter and made his escape. Turning my attention back to the rest of the Protectorate, I saw them crowding around High Wire. As I approached, I was relieved to see he was still conscious, though I did not envy the amount of pain he seemed to be in.

“I’ll be fine.” he uttered between groans, “I’m tougher than I look.”

The other Wards and I waited with him until the ambulance arrived, before returning to HQ. I didn’t even bother to submit my report as I trudged over to my room. That could wait until morning. It had been a long night.
The next day, I walked into Mangonel’s office, written report in one hand, mask in the other.

“Ah, morning Weaver.” he said, looking up from his computer. “I was just about to send for you.”

“You don’t say.”

“Well, not so much you in particular as any of the Wards. High Wire’s just been discharged from the infirmary.”

“Already?”

“Yep. The doctors say his wound is fine. Just a few more tests and he’ll be good to go.”

“That’s surprising. That was a pretty bad hit he took.”

“So I’ve heard. I wish I had been there in person. Sadly, my powers work best at a distance. How are you feeling after last night?”

“Well enough.” I answered, laying the report on his desk. “I assume you’d want to see this.”

“That I do.” he said, leafing through it. “Tell me, how did your assignment go?”

“In a word? Frustrating. I was able to make contact with the cape Comedy. I discussed with him the concerns the PRT had about the Philosopher Kings.”

“And how receptive was he?”

“Not at all. He refused to admit any wrongdoing on the part of his team.”

“Did you mention what we got out of Arsène?”

“Yes. He treated it like a joke.” I thought back to what he said about his motivations. How he was a cape for fun. “No, like a game.”

“Hmm...” Mangonel drummed his fingers on the desk. “This is becoming more and more difficult. I’d hoped for at least some good news after last night’s episode. Regardless, you’ve done an excellent job, both on your mission and during the fight. Shame we don’t have more to show for it.”

“Can I make a suggestion?”

He looked up. “Go ahead.”

“So far, every accusation we’ve made against the Philosopher Kings has been based on speculation. All of the evidence we have is circumstantial at best. What we need is solid fact. Concrete proof that they’ve been up to no good. That’s the only way to get them to play ball.”

“I see. And what do you propose?”

“Remember that suggestion I made about a possible connection between them and the tinker black market?”

“Yes.”
“Well, I think it’s about time we explored that connection. If we can find evidence that the Philosopher Kings have been colluding with Iron Maiden, we’d have grounds to bring them in.”

“And where exactly are you hoping to find this evidence.”

“Straight from the source. We find Iron Maiden’s base of operations, and either confront her or try to gather information discreetly.”

Mangonel took a deep breath and sighed. “Weaver, look. I appreciate the work you’ve put in so far, and I understand your eagerness to go out there and get stuff done, but what you’re asking just isn’t realistic.”

“What do you mean? You didn’t have a problem with the idea before.”

“That’s because before, we weren’t in the middle of a gang war. If you recall, Icepick and Iblis escaped. So long as they’re out there and at each other’s throats, we’ve got to be on guard. There’s no telling when the next fight might break out. Even if we were able to find Iron Maiden’s lair, we’d need the whole team to take her on. I can’t risk a major operation like this with my heroes and resources spread so thin.”

“Then don’t send the whole Protectorate. Just me.”

Mangonel stopped drumming his fingers and looked me in the eye. “Are you serious?”

“Very. Like I said before; I’m an expert at surveillance. It’ll be much easier to infiltrate the base with just one person. I can search the place from blocks away, and leave without a trace. I could even-”

“I’m just gonna cut you off right there.” said Mangonel. “There’s no way I’m letting anyone on my team, let alone a Ward, do this kind of mission on their own. These kinds of gang wars only tend to last a few weeks. We can wait until things settle down, and then launch a full scale investigation.”

“I won’t be around for a few weeks. There’s no telling when the next Endbringer attack will be, and I need to be with my team. It has to be done tonight, while it’s still the weekend. It’s my only chance to catch them in the act.”

There was a long pause before Mangonel spoke. “Weaver. You’re a strong cape. I respect you and everything you’ve done for the Protectorate. But we’re not talking about some two-bit street gang. Iron Maiden’s the real deal. She came in here with nothing and within months made herself an installation. She was able to take on both Chevalier and Myrddin at once with only her tech and some mercenaries for backup. Believe me when I say that she is out of your league.”

“You’re underestimating me.”

“That’s a risk I’m willing to take. I’ve already had one Ward injured this week. I will not allow a second.”

“I won’t get hurt. I promise you I can handle this.”

“And I promised Chevalier that I’d keep you safe.”

“Chevalier trusted me to complete this mission my way. I thought you’d do the same.”

It was a dirty trick and I knew it, but I wasn’t about to give up when I’d come this far.

“This isn’t a matter of trust. This is a matter of a seventeen year old girl thinking she can take on a
major crime lord.”

“You’ve seen my file. I’ve fought worse than crime lords.”

“As a super villain. But you’re not a warlord anymore, you’re a Ward. And being a Ward means following certain rules, the foremost of which is chain of command. This city is under my command, and if you want to stay here you will follow my orders. Are we clear?”

“You’re not—”

“Are we clear!”

I sighed. “Crystal.”

“Good. Then that’s the end of this discussion. When the situation changes, I’ll let you know. Until then, you can join the rest of the Wards in their duties. Understand?”

“Yes, sir.” I said quietly, trying to hide the disaffection in my voice. I stood up and made for the door.

“And Weaver,” he began.

“Hm?” I glanced back at him.

“No hard feelings, okay? You’re a good cape, but everyone has their limits.”

“Of course.” I replied, knowing better than anyone how true those words were.

Back in the Wards’ quarters, I found Flame Master lying face down on the couch.

“You okay?” I asked, taking the seat across from him.

“Muph mrphmended muphmrols.”

“What?”

He lifted his head. “Fuck extended patrols.”

“Language.” called Masterwork from the other side of the room.

“My sincerest apologies,” he replied in a mocking voice. Turning back to me he continued. “They got me running around since six in the morning. That’s three hours of patrols! And I’ve got another three to finish this afternoon.”

“It serves you right, blowing us off last night.” said Capoeira, strolling up beside the couch, coffee in hand. “We were fighting Iblis. We could have actually used your help.”

“I wasn’t blowing anyone off. I didn’t even know there was a fight. My phone was dead.”

“And therein lies the problem.” said Masterwork, stepping forward. “A Ward has to be alert at all times. Even something as small as letting your phone die can have major consequences. In this case, it contributed to two super villains getting away, and more importantly, one of your teammates being hurt.”
“I get it, I messed up.” he said, putting up his hands, “I apologized to you, and I’ll apologize to Wire when he gets out. There’s no need to punish me for it.”

“This isn’t punishment.” said Masterwork, “There’s a gang war going on. We’re all doing extra patrols to make up for High Wire.”


“That’s a relief.” said Capoeira, “Think we should visit him?”

Masterwork shook her head. “We should give him some time to rest.”

“Yeah.” said High Wire, “Give the guy a break. Also, who are we talking about?”

They other Wards turned in surprise. Being me, I had noticed his arrival long before he entered the room.

“Hey, man!” said Flame Master, exhaustion being replaced by excitement. “How ya feeling?”

“Not too bad. A bit hungry maybe. But other than that...” he shrugged.

“How are your injuries?” I asked.

“Better.” he lifted up his shirt to show the bandages wrapped around his chest. “Just some light bruising. Honestly the punch wasn’t even the worst part; it’s the frostbite that’s killing me.”

“Hopefully not literally.” said Flame Master with a grin.

“Nah, it just stings like a” he glanced at Masterwork, “Er, it stings a lot. Anyway, once they give the word, I’ll be ready to head out and do it all over again.”

“Er, maybe it would be best if you took a day or two off.” said Masterwork. “No need to push yourself too hard too soon.”

“Are you sure? I figured you guys’d need my help, what with all the extended patrols this week.”

“We’ll be fine. The patrols are mainly about deterrence. Putting on a unified front to discourage further violence. I expect little actual fighting. Besides, we have Weaver backing us up.”

I nodded, unsure of what to add but eager to prove myself.

“Alright,” said High Wire, “If you’re sure. I’m up for a little down time.”

Masterwork crossed her arms. “Alright then. If that’s everything, I have to go pickup Kinetic Lad on our way to South Street. The rest of you know your routes. Let’s start this week off strong!” With that, she squared her shoulders and went on her way.

“Well,” said Capoeira, leaning over Flame Master, “We might as well get ready. Come on.”

Flame Master groaned. “Five more minutes.”

“If I give you five minutes you’ll turn it into ten, then twenty, then forty. Then it’ll be the Mummers Parade all over again.”

“Fine, fine. I’m coming.” He made an attempt at getting up, only to fall back onto the couch. “Carry me?” he said, stretching an arm out to Capoeira. She shook her head slowly and walked out of the
“What? What did I say?” He got up and started running after her. “C’mon I was kidding!”

High Wire took that as his cue to plop down on the couch in Flame Master’s place.

He let out a yawn. “Quite the team, eh?”

“They’ve certainly got character.”

“You can say that again. Still, I wouldn’t trade them for any other team in the world.”

I nodded. “I understand how you feel.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” I said, staring down at the mask in my hands. “My old team wasn’t perfect. In fact at times they were downright dysfunctional. But there isn’t a day that goes by where I don’t miss spending time with them.”

“You don’t regret joining the Protectorate, do you?”

“Of course not. There have been difficulties, times when I felt confined or held back. But there have also been a lot of good times, training with the Chicago Wards, working with Dragon and Defiant, exchanging book recommendations with Narwhal.”

“Wait, you know Narwhal?”

“Yes.”

“And you guys recommend books to each other?”

“Oh huh. Last week it was a Ray Bradbury anthology and the latest Maggie Holt novel.”

High Wire laughed and shook his head.

“What’s so funny?” I asked.

“Nothing. That is just the weirdest mixture of nerdy and awesome I’ve ever heard. Next thing you’ll tell me you like to go LARPing with Eidolon.”

“Well I mean...” I gestured at my costume.

“Okay, good point. I guess with all the fighting and dying, it’s easy to forget how goofy the concept of super heroes is. Or was, back when they were just characters in comic books.”

“I suppose it’s easy to make light of something when it’s a work of fiction. Few people know what it’s like to put one’s life on the line, day after day. Going from city to city, trying to adapt to new teams and new sets of powers.”

“Well isn’t that why you’re here?”

I looked back up at him. “What do you mean?”

“Mangonel said you came to Philly as part of some team building thing. To help you practice working with different heroes.”
“Well... That’s part of the reason.”

“And the other part?”

“Hm.” I supposed there was no harm in telling him. The Philosopher Kings already knew I was after them. I looked High Wire in the eye. “What do you know about the independent teams in the city?”

“Only that there are a bunch of them. The Rowbottoms. Liberty League. The Flyers.”

“What about the Philosopher Kings?”

“The guys Arsène mentioned? I’ve heard of them, but I don’t think I’ve ever met any of them in person.”

“That’s not surprising, they’re an elusive group. The PRT suspects them of misconduct. And the reason I’m in Philadelphia, the real reason, is because Chevalier asked me to come investigate them.”

“No kidding. I suppose that explains the whole stakeout thing you mentioned after the interrogation.”

“Yes, I was hoping to corner the Philosopher Kings and find out their intentions, but I don’t have enough evidence to get them to cooperate, and Mangonel won’t let me investigate my one remaining lead.”

“Why not?”

“He’s scared I’ll get hurt.”

“Will you?”

“What?”

“Will you get hurt if you check out this lead?”

“Probably not. I’ve faced worse and survived. And it’s not like I’d be going in there looking for a fight. The problem is that I’d be going against Mangonel’s orders.”

He scratched at his chin. “Huh. Wouldn’t think something like that could stop someone like you.”

“Don’t get me wrong, it’s not like I’m afraid to break the rules. It’s just that I have to be selective about it. And in this case, I’m not sure the risks outweigh the rewards.”

He nodded. “I can understand. Got to pick your battles and all that. Not that that’s a luxury we can really enjoy, being heroes and all.”

He smiled lazily and stretched his arms, only to wince and put a hand to his chest.

“Your wound?”

“Uh, yeah. I’m fine though, nothing to worry about.”

“Are you really fine, or are you just putting on a brave face?”

He shrugged “A little bit of both? I mean it hurts, but it’s not gonna kill me. They did let me out after all.”

“If you insist. Still, Icepick appeared to be quite strong. I’d imagine most people wouldn’t be okay
after a hit like that.”

“Well, I’m not exactly most people. I’ve got these guys.”

He held out his arm. The black lines running down his body detached themselves and started wrapping together into cords. “You ever heard of graphene?”

I worked with two of the greatest Tinkers in the world. How could I not?

“Well it’s kind of like that.” he continued. “Basically, my body produces these carbon nanotubes, a hundred times stronger than steel, and threads them throughout my skin, bones, and organs.” He smiled, “Like I said, I’m stronger than I look.”

“Impressive.” I said. “I didn’t think carbon nanotubes could be that long.”

“They can’t. At least, not by normal means. The list of Tinkers fighting for the right to perform my autopsy is longer than my arm. The top bidder’s this guy named Masamune. He’s willing to pay 10 grand to figure out how I work.” he gave a wide grin. “One of the rare benefits of being a monster.”

“I was actually meaning to ask about that. I thought most Case 53s had left the Protectorate to join Weld and his Irregulars. You know, after the Echidna incident.”

“Not all of us. Polish stayed on. And of course Hunch wasn’t about to give up his precog certification. As for me? I dunno, I guess I just never had enough reason to leave.”

“Really? Even knowing what the Triumvirate were involved in?”

“Yeah it’s fucked up, but to tell the truth, it doesn’t really bother me that much. I’m happy with who I am. Or at least, not unhappy enough to walk away from it all. My life’s not ideal, but it’s a life I can live with it.”

“Huh. That’s an interesting way of looking at it.”

“I mean sure, I’ve got these cords all over my body. But if they help me survive a punch from a supervillain, I’m not complaining. Yeah, my arms stretch to my knees; I’ll probably never be able to wear a suit; but to be perfectly honest, they’d never be able to get me into one if I was normal looking. The eyes are a little off-putting, but on the bright side, I can see infrared and I’ll never have to wear glasses. You know, unlike a certain someone, cough cough.”

“Hey,” I smirked, “At least I can get Lasik.”

“Fair enough. But my point is that if you always dwell on the things you can’t do, you’ll never be able to focus on the things you can. You gotta take the good with the bad. Like sure, I can’t take a walk without people seeing me and thinking I’m a freak. But you know, there are people who can’t walk. There are people who can’t see. There are people who can’t think. They become PRT Directors.”

I let out a snicker despite myself.

He put on a look of false surprise. “Could it be? Does big bad Weaver have a sense of humor?”

“Big bad?” I raised an eyebrow. “Is that how you guys see me?”

“Sure. I mean, put yourself in our shoes. Imagine you’re a normal Ward, fighting street thugs and the occasional super villain. You hear a former villain’s going to be stopping by, a big one too, the kind
who faces S-class threats on a weekly basis. She walks in all stoic and edgy, three of the ten plagues hiding in her hair.” He smirked, “And then it turns out she’s just a big dork like the rest of us.”

At an earlier point in my life, being called a dork would have bothered me. Now, it just made me laugh.

“So yeah,” he continued, “I think I’m fine where I am. I know it’s schmaltzy, but the team’s my family. They’ve been there for me since the day I joined. Masterwork. Capoeira. Photocell, back when he was in charge.”

“Photocell was a Ward leader?”

“Yeah, a few years back. Before Kinetic and Flame Master joined.”

“I suppose that explains why Masterwork was so quick to come to his defense.”

“Yeah. Between you and me, I think she used to have a bit of a crush on him.”

I nodded. “That’s not uncommon. Teenage drama and all that.”

“Well, luckily for her it turned out she was right.”

“What do you mean?”

“Didn’t you hear? Photocell’s been all cleared.”

“What? But it’s only been four days.”

“I guess that’s how long it takes. To be fair, I heard they had Archive interview him. She’s memorized everything there is to know about tells, psychology, body language. She’s basically impossible to lie to.”

“What did he tell her?”

“The same thing we heard before. The camera turned off by itself, Arséne tried to escape, Photocell stopped him.”

“And Archive confirmed that was all the truth.”

“I think so. I doubt they’d let him off the hook if he was lying.”

This didn’t make sense. Photocell was the only one capable of disrupting the camera. It may have just been a coincidence, but after all the other coincidences this week, I wasn’t going to take that chance. Either he found a way to fool a human lie detector, or... Archive was in on it. The bugs in my costume began to stir. How deep did this go? Who else was involved? And how far would they go to keep me off track? Far enough to start a gang war? Perhaps.

“You okay?” asked High Wire, “You suddenly got all quiet.”

“I’m fine.” I said, standing up. “I just figured out what I have to do.”

“Um, alright then.” he said, “Nice talking with you.”

“Same.” I replied.

As I left the room I donned my mask, resolute in purpose.
Something unseemly was afoot, and I was going to figure out what it was, orders be damned. I may not have had much love for the Protectorate, but I wasn’t about to sit back and let its heroes be jerked around like puppets on a string. Whatever plot was being hatched, whatever scheme was being schemed, I’d put an end to it. And I knew just the person to help me.
I found him outside, sitting on a bench in the shade of the Dragonfly. There was a half-eaten hamburger to the right of him and a college notebook on the left. He was typing away at his laptop, so engrossed that he didn’t even notice my approach.

I spoke up, “Hello, Mel.”

The intern frowned and looked up at me. “Weaver.”

“I need a favor.”

“I’m kind of in the middle of my break.”

“That’s fine. This isn’t official business.”

He sighed. “What do you need?”

“The case files of one of the villains in the city.”

“If you want access to the supervillain records, you’ll need to put in a request to the central office, or get permission from the active PRT Director or Protectorate leader.” he explained in a bored tone.

“I’m afraid that’s not an option. This all has to be off the record.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Why?”

“Can you keep a secret.”

“Potentially.”

“I think there may be some sort of conspiracy going on, and major members of the Protectorate are involved.”

He gave me a look. “No seriously, why?”

“I am serious. Haven’t you noticed all the sketchy stuff that’s been going on? Arsène name dropping the Philosopher Kings the day after I arrived in this city. His confession being interrupted. A major cape fight breaking out right by the Protectorate HQ, right as I manage to track down one of the Philosopher Kings. Don’t you find any of that suspicious?”

He shrugged. “That kind of thinking is above my pay grade. Which is nothing, by the way. I’m unpaid. Not even a stipend.”

“Does that mean you’re not going to help?”

“Eh.” He shrugged. “Suppose I’ve got nothing better to do. But why come to me?”

“There’s a reason, but it’s not a flattering one.”

“I think I can take it.” he said dryly.

“To be frank; whatever’s going on, you’re probably not important enough to be included.”

He blinked. “Wow.”
“I don’t mean any offense, but your position is a transient one and-”

“No no, I get it. It’s just... Wow. You did not sugarcoat that at all.”

“I don’t have time to beat around the bush. I’m on a deadline.”

“Alright. What do you need?”

“Info on the villain Iron Maiden. Powers, associates, notable appearances. Can you get that?”

“Officially speaking, I’m not authorized to access that kind of information.” he said, turning his attention back to his laptop,

“I’m not asking if you’re authorized. I’m asking if you can get it.”

“But of course.” He turned the computer around to show the PRT’s cape database. At his prompting, I typed in Iron Maiden.

Iron Maiden, Real Name Unknown

Classification: Tinker 6; traps, counter measures.

Disposition: Villain (B)

Last Known Location: Philadelphia (Fishtown area, east).

Crime lord of Bridesburg-Kensington-Richmond since est. date of October 2005. Subordinates: Styx, Queen, Grateful Dead. Former Toybox distributor (See incident file S9-1131). Criminal history indicates cap of first and second degree murder, tendency to avoid permanent damage to property and persons. Creates advanced traps, mines, and other kinds of hidden weaponry. Has access to the technology of other Tinkers.

Further down was information on her history, tech, and known associates.

“Want me to send this all to you?” he asked.

“Sure.” I replied.

“Okay, just give me a second.” He turned the computer back towards him and pulled out a USB cord. “Hand me your PRT phone.”

I gave it to him and he connected it to his computer. He typed away for a few seconds then let out a hum.

“There’re a lot of files here. It’ll take a minute or two to transfer them all. Want me to summarize them in the meantime?”

“Go ahead.”

“Let’s see. It says here Iron Maiden first appeared in 1999. She attacked a high school, fatally
wounding two teenage girls. She went on to join Toybox, staying on for a few years. She later set up shop here in Philly, acting as the official East Coast distributor for Toybox, selling their Tinkertech to various criminal groups. This ended in late June 2011, following the destruction of Toybox by the Slaughterhouse Nine. She then shifted business models, acting as a middleman between several disparate Tinkers formerly associated with Toybox. She has also started selling her own stuff; booby traps, cages that spring out of nowhere, bombs disguised as guns, that sort of thing. A lot of her tech is reactive in nature, made to neutralize or overcome specific capes or power sets.”

He clicked to the next page.

“In terms of muscle, she relies mainly on hired guns and mercenaries. She also has a few capes working under her. The most notable of which is Styx, her right hand man.”

He rotated the screen to show the mugshot of a man in a sapphire blue domino mask, styled to resemble a pair of diamonds.

“He’s a Striker with the ability to replicate anything he touches. These duplicates possess all of the qualities of the original, from energy and momentum to chemical properties. How long these duplicates last depends on the size of the object and how many copies he makes. He started out as a drug dealer, selling hard drugs which would have all the effects of the original, but disappear from your system in a matter of minutes.”

“Huh. You’d think that, even if the drugs themselves disappeared, there’d still be changes in brain chemistry.”

“That’s how we caught him. Apparently a number of his ‘clients’ thought themselves safe to drive. We tracked the crashes back to him. He spent four years in prison, then got out on good behavior. Promised to stay out of the drug market. Technically speaking, he kept that promise.”

“By becoming an arms dealer?”

“Pretty much.”

He scrolled down.

“Aside from Styx, she frequently employs a pair of parahuman hitmen, Queen and Grateful Dead.”

He showed a photo of a dark skinned woman wearing a gold mask and an orange and red headwrap.

“Queen. On top of her enhanced reflexes and durability, she can touch two people and have them share pain and injuries for a 48 hour period. You know that senator whose tongue was cut out on live TV? That was her. Initially, she was very limited in how she could use her power, until she met her partner.”

The next image was of an extremely pale, emaciated man with dark circles under his eyes. A skull themed mask covered the lower half of his face. The number 65 was tattooed on his forehead. Next to this image was a photo of some sort of large cloth mannequin. It was dressed in the same clothes and had the same number on its head.

Taking a closer look, I realized they were before and after shots.

“Grateful Dead. One of those rare capes whose power makes him functionally immortal. He creates life-sized dolls like the one in this picture, each with a number. Whenever he dies, he becomes the next doll in the series. Or rather, the doll becomes him, with all of the memories he had up until the time of death. Obviously, this makes him very hard to capture.”
I looked back to the number on his head.

“I wonder what it’s like to die and come back 65 times. What does that do to a person?”

“To be fair, this is an old photo. I believe the current count is somewhere in the hundreds, mostly due to how well his and Queen’s powers work together.”
“A disturbing type of synergy.” I noted.

“You could say that. Anyway, aside from her subordinates, she also has access to Tinkertech from former Toybox capes across the country: Stinger, Stark, Dirt Nap, Jamestowner. In other words, you guys need to prepare for anything.”

“Actually, I’ll be going in alone.”

He looked up at me. “Alone? Like, by yourself?”

“That’s the plan.”

“You’re kidding, right? Did you miss the part about the Tinkertech booby traps? The parahuman hitmen?”

“No. It is exactly because of those things that I can’t involve anyone else. If I’m wrong, then I don’t want the others to pay for it.”

“How noble. I don’t suppose you’ve gotten Mangonel’s approval?”

“Mangonel doesn’t know about this, and he isn’t going to.” I did not say this harshly, nor with the intent to intimidate. That being said, if every bug in the vicinity began to let out a low menacing buzz, it wasn’t my fault.

Mel looked like he was about to say something, then thought better of it, the threat implicit. Not for the first time, I wondered what I must have seemed like. A villain? A renegade? A bully? My thoughts were interrupted by the dinging of the computer. Mel unplugged my phone and handed it to me.

“Look,” he said, “I don’t want to tell you your business, but this seems like a horrible idea. You’ve read the file, you know what Iron Maiden’s capable of. She’s killed people.”

“So have I.” I replied, instantly regretting it the moment the words left my mouth.

“Fine,” said Mel, unfazed, “Just please try not to die. That is not the kind of thing I need on my conscience.”

“Got it.” I said, “No dying. Thanks for the help.”

As I walked away, I heard him mumble under his breath.

“Well, this is gonna come back to bite me.”
Back in my quarters, I looked over the files. If I could trace all of Iron Maiden’s sightings to a small enough area, I could sweep it with my bugs and locate her hideout. Luckily, I still had my map on me; the same one Archive was kind enough to mark with all the abandoned buildings in the city. Browsing through the reports, I noticed an interesting trend. The most successful encounters with her were the ones which included new and visiting capes. I supposed that went along with what Mel had said about her power being reactive. She couldn’t prepare against a cape whose power she’d never encountered before. This worked in my favor. Then again, I recalled that the Philosopher Kings had a bug cape on their team. If I was wrong, and the two groups never had any dealings, then this would be easy. On the other hand, if I was right, I would certainly have my work cut out for me.

Turning my attention back to the map, I began marking down the various encounter locations. As I reached the end of the list, I started to notice certain clusters of activity. Taking out some highlighters, I began to fill in specific areas of the map based on their proximity to these clusters. When I was done, I had successfully identified several hotspots. It was a lot of ground to cover, but given the range of my power, I could probably search through it quickly. How long could it take?

Sitting at the back of the SEPTA bus, I watched as the sun inched lazily towards the horizon. I had set out in a similar manner as before, in plain clothes with my costume hidden underneath. This time however, I didn’t have PRT vans to drive me around. Instead, I had to rely on public transportation. As I cruised along the bus routes, my bugs swept through the surrounding area, searching for anything resembling a hidden lair. I kept a particular eye out for large underground complexes filled with bizarre futuristic technology. Having been inside my fair share of evil hideouts, it shouldn’t have been too hard. Still, the sun was almost setting, and I had yet to find anything even remotely lair-ish.

Undeterred, I took out the map and crossed off yet another hot spot. Clearly, I was going about this the wrong way. If finding Iron Maiden’s hideout was as simple as connecting a few dots, the PRT would have done it long ago. No, if I was going to beat a super villain, I’d have to start thinking like one again. If I were Iron Maiden, how would I operate? Obviously I’d have to maintain a presence, remind people who was in charge. I’d also require access to raw materials for my tech. At the same time, I’d need to protect my workshop, keep it hidden from rivals and the PRT. But where would I build it? It would have to be someplace close to population centers and supply chains, but far enough from the action to avoid detection. I turned my attention back to the map, ignoring the additions I’d made. I noticed a string of abandoned factories and warehouses by the river, no doubt remnants of the pre-Leviathan economy. It brought to mind the Undersiders’s old base in the Docks. I checked my watch. There were about five hours left in the day. Five hours to catch the Philosopher Kings in the act. I supposed it could be worth a shot.

I got off the bus a block away from the river, stepping into a rather run down part of town. On one side were vacant lots filled with overgrown plants and rubble. On the other were old brick buildings, boarded up and covered in graffiti. I couldn’t help but be reminded of home. Behind me stood the highway; cars and trucks roaring by in both directions. A section of it appeared under construction, heavy equipment and traffic cones scattered around the upturned earth. This definitely seemed like the last place you’d find a Tinker. I began my task of sweeping through the surrounding buildings, looking for anything suspicious. Most appeared completely uninhabited, if the sheer abundance of
bugs was any indicator. Others showed signs of occupancy; trash bags, empty beer bottles, shopping
carts full of clothing.

I walked for a long time along the road, methodically searching each building as it came into my
range. I was beginning to think this was a wasted effort, when I noticed something strange. One of
the buildings was completely free of bugs. Despite being fully in my range, I couldn’t detect a single
one. Crouching low behind the wild hedges that flanked the street, I went to get a closer look. That
didn’t prove hard. The structure stood alone, the adjacent lots filled with nothing but old shipping
containers and trash. I could see it was a wide brick building, about two stories tall, with a chain-link
fence surrounding it. On one end was a loading dock, and on the other a parking lot filled with white
vans and stacks of wooden pallets. A yellow and red sign was hung up on the side: Tiě nǚ Shipping
Corp.

Looking at the map, I saw that it wasn’t marked. That meant it wasn’t abandoned. Curious, I tried to
get some of my bugs inside. Try as I might, however, I couldn’t find any entrance points. There were
no cracks in the walls, no broken windows. Sending some of my swarm into the ventilation shafts, I
found they were blocked by metal bars, and beyond those a screen of fine wire mesh. Clearly,
whoever owned this facility wanted a completely sterile environment. That, in of itself, was
suspicious enough to investigate.

I began funneling my bugs into the vent, past the bars. The screen may have been able to hold off
individual bugs, but as my swarm collectively rammed it, it eventually gave way. Spreading my bugs
throughout the ventilation system, I immediately noticed that this was no ordinary warehouse. The
interior walls were cold and smooth, more like metal than brick. On top of that, the vents didn’t just
spread throughout the main room, they also went down. Way down. Dispersing through the many
twisting air ducts, my bugs found themselves in a complex series of sub-basements, stretching deeper
and deeper into the earth. In one of these rooms was a woman, dressed in a spandex suit, tinkering
away at some strange machine. I allowed myself a small breath of satisfaction. I had found my super
villain.
I felt a sense of vindication, knowing my job was half done. I had successfully located Iron Maiden’s lair. Now all I had to do was wait and gather intel. My hope was to find some sort of evidence linking the Philosopher Kings to the crime lord. If I was lucky, I might even catch one of them in person. On the other hand, I could simply return to HQ, inform Mangonel of what I’d found, and let the rest of the Protectorate deal with it. That would be the safe thing to do. What Tecton and Golem and all of the responsible Wards would do. But that would also mean waiting. Letting the opportunity slip by. Missing possibly the only chance to get hard evidence against the Philosopher Kings. My choice was obvious.

I glanced around, searching for a covert spot to begin my stakeout. I noticed a small stack of shipping containers sitting across from the building. The bottom pair were misaligned, creating an alcove just big enough for me to fit in. Making sure the coast was clear, I darted towards them and slipped into the little nook. Making sure the coast was clear, I began making into my street clothes and donning my mask and flight pack. As I did this, I continued the task of slowly flooding the lair with bugs, mapping out the rooms but making sure not to alert anyone to my presence. The lair seemed to be divided between workshops and storage, with a few administrative rooms here and there. There were about two dozen workers on the premises; pushing carts, monitoring feeds, and standing guard. I made sure to tag each of them. For a good hour or so I sat there between the shipping containers. Waiting. Watching.

Finally, I noticed some movement. The woman I identified as Iron Maiden tore herself away from the machine and picked up a nearby phone.

“Hello?” she said, “Yeah. Five minutes? Alright, you know where to find me.”

After a brief stretch, she put away her tools and headed off for the elevator. I followed her as she ascended to the first sub-basement and entered a room disconnected from the others around it. From the bugs I had scattered about, I could make out a bed, a television, and various other kinds of furniture. I realized belatedly that this was probably her bedroom. With an exaggerated sigh, she collapsed into a bean bag chair and picked up a laptop laying on the ground. As she sat there typing in silence, I noticed a van enter my range. I stayed stock-still as its headlights passed over my hiding spot. The vehicle stopped outside the entrance to the parking lot. As the driver got out to unlock the gate, I carefully sent a stream of bugs into the van. It was empty save for a stack of pizza boxes sitting in the passenger seat. The driver got back in the van and parked it. I followed him as he entered the building, boxes held under his arm. He entered the elevator and, after placing his hand against what I assumed was some sort of scanner, descended to Iron Maiden’s level.

“Who’s hungry?” he announced, entering the room.

“Many people, I assume.” replied the woman, not looking up from her computer, “It’s a big planet.”

“Don’t be like that.” the man said, holding out the box, “Look, I got your favorite.”

“I’m not in the mood for food.”

“Be honest with me, have you eaten anything today?”

“I had some coffee this morning.”

The man shook his head. “You can’t keep doing this to yourself, J.”
The woman scoffed, “Oh, so now you care.”

“Hey, keep up that attitude and I might just stop.”

“Sorry. It’s been a... frustrating day.”

“What’s wrong?”

“More like what isn’t wrong. Saint won’t return my calls. Epeios won’t stop calling me. Dirt Nap was supposed to report back on his meeting with Uppercrust yesterday, but I haven’t been able to reach him.”

“You don’t think he sold us out to the Elite, do you?”

“If he did, he’s a dead man. I won’t take something like that sitting down, and we can’t afford to lose New York.”

The man leaned against the wall. “What a shame. It’ll be hard to build bases without him. Still, at least we have the drones.”

“Actually, we may not be able to rely on them for much longer either. The drone maker’s broken down.”

“Again? Didn’t it just break down last week?”

“Yes, as it did two weeks before that and a month before that. I just don’t have the knowledge to fix it properly. I’d hoped that I could make do with just the maintenance notes, but...”

The man walked over and put his hand on her shoulder. “Maybe its time to just retire it like the rest. At this point, the output we’re getting from the old girl may not be worth the time put into repairing it; diminishing returns and all.”

“I know. I realize that I’ve been putting this off. That I should have moved on a long time ago. It’s just, having their tech up and running; it’s almost like having them around. Like there’s a piece of them that’s still alive. You know what I mean?”

“Kinda. I don’t really get your weird Tinker kinship thing, but I can sympathize wanting to hold on to the sweet weapons of your dead friends.”

The woman let out a shaky laugh. “You’re an asshole, you know that?”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

I was conflicted on whether or not I should keep listening. On the one hand, this was all potentially valuable information. On the other, I felt like a creep for eavesdropping on an unmistakably personal conversation. Not to mention, if they started talking about their non-cape identities, I would be technically breaking the unwritten rules. No, I couldn’t think about that now. I needed to find out what Iron Maiden knew about the Philosopher Kings, by any means necessary. I began funneling more bugs into the room, not wanting the miss a single word. That’s when it happened. The woman’s computer started beeping.

“The 2B vent alarm. It’s been triggered!” she said.

“This far down? Are you sure it’s not just dust?” the man asked, drawing a pair of throwing knives.

“Very sure. The motion sensors are programmed to ignore that kind of movement.”
“So you mean there’s someone in the vents?”

“So you mean there’s someone in the vents?”

“Or something. Look!” she turned the screen over to him.

“Ew. Are those... bugs?”

“It looks like we have an unexpected visitor.”

“Well, my cover’s been blown.” I thought. “Time for plan B.”

My bugs started to laugh. It was low at first, barely more than a whisper; but it slowly gained intensity as I gathered my swarm together in the center of the room, coalescing them into a swarm clone. “Heh heh heh, it took you long enough.”

I couldn’t see the looks on the two villains’ faces, but I could tell from their body language that they were more than a little unnerved by my sudden appearance. That was good. If I was going to deal with a Tinker crime lord, I couldn’t do it as a Ward. I’d have to rely on the skills I learned as Skitter.

“Who are you?” the woman asked, hand hovering over her belt.

“My name is Weaver. Don’t worry, I’m only here to talk.”

“Weaver. Yes, I know of you. Dragon’s pet project.” she spat the name. “Another villain selling out to the Protectorate.”

“That is your perspective, however I’m not here on Protectorate business. If fact, I’m sure Mangonel would throw a fit if he learned I had come.”

“Then why are you here?”

“Information.”

“If you want info go to a broker. I only deal in Tinkertech, and I don’t sell to heroes.”

“Is that a fact? In that case, I just need you to answer a single question.”

The woman crossed her arms. “What kind of question?”

“You’ll see. Have your partner give you the note in his back pocket.”

“The what?” The man reached back and pulled out the piece of paper I had slipped in his pocket while he was working on the gate. “Show off.” he muttered.

The woman took the note and unfolded it. Inside I had listed all the Tinkertech the Philosopher Kings had been reported using.

“Read this note carefully.” I said, “Does anything sound familiar? Have you sold any of this tech recently?”

“Is this a joke?” the woman asked. “Half the things on this list are impossible, and the other half are just stupid. I mean really, a ‘lightsaber’? How would that even...” She paused. “Actually, if you took some magnets... and the... with the coils...”

The man coughed, snapping her out of her fugue.

“ Anyway,” she continued, “None of this is mine. I’ve never seen nor sold any of this tech.”
“Then do you have any idea where it might have come from?”

“None at all, not unless...” she put a finger to her lip, “Hmm, yes. I suppose that is one possibility.”

“What is?”

“It’s just a hypothesis, no more than conjecture really, but I may have an explanation.”

“And are you willing to share it?”

“That depends. What’s it worth to you?”

Ah, there it was. A favor for a favor. Information for information. Villains didn’t work for free.

“Officially speaking,” I said, “I’m not authorized to make concessions to villains. That being said, I may have a few connections you’d be interested in. Have you ever heard of the Undersiders?”

I felt her head perk up at the mention of my former team.

“Vaguely.” she replied.

“They’re the current warlords of Brockton Bay; have been since the Leviathan attack. They control all the crime in the city, and I’m sure they’d be interested in some of your work. Tell me what I want to know, and I’ll put in a good word for you. I was the leader of the Undersiders, before I joined the Protectorate, and I still stay in touch with the current leader.”

That wasn’t completely true. I still occasionally got letters from the Undersiders, and we’d talked during the Cauldron meeting, but we weren’t exactly in close contact.

“I see.” said the woman, coldly, “As generous as your offer is, I’m afraid I must decline. I have no interest working with your Undersiders.”

Had I struck a nerve? I wasn’t aware of any conflict between her and the Undersiders. They were still dealing with Heartbreaker and the Red Hands.

“I’m sorry to hear that.” I said. “It’s... unfortunate. I’d hoped it wouldn’t come to this.”

“Is that a threat?” the woman asked, fists clenched, “Bad things happen to people who threaten me.”

“I wouldn’t call it a threat. More like, an apology. You see, the PRT’s expecting information on where this Tinkertech came from. And if I can’t give them that, I’ll just have to give them something else.” My bugs let out a low chuckle. “This is quite the secret base you have here. It’d be a shame if the PRT found out about it.”

She didn’t respond. She didn’t have to. Her antipathy was clear simply from her body language. The clenching of her fists. The sound of her terse breathing. I was worried that I had pushed her too far, when her computer let out another blip. “Target found.” it announced.

“Very well, Weaver. You’ve had your chance to talk. And I think I’ve heard quite enough.” she said, touching a button on her belt. In an instant, all of my bugs dropped dead. I recognized this sensation. It was the same electric pulse technology that Dragon and Defiant used. I had to get out of there.

As I rose, I felt something moving underground, disturbing the worms and subterranean insects. It was moving right towards me. At the same time, I noticed movement from the roof of the building. Sections of the roof slid apart, as what looked like small ballistas rose up from the interior. They too
were pointed in my direction. I didn’t have time to worry about that, however, as the burrowing object stopped underneath me. Activating the antigravity panels of my flight pack, I leaped out of my hiding spot. I was not a moment too soon, as a pair of metal jaws burst from the ground, clamping down on the spot where my foot had been seconds before. As I hovered through the night air, the ballistas swerved to follow me. They fired, their projectiles flying silently towards me. I put up a screen of bugs, hoping to predict their trajectory, if not alter it. As they passed through my swarm, I noticed a change in their shape. Whatever they were, they were opening up. I flitted left and right, dodging most of the barrage, but I couldn’t stop one from catching onto my right foot.

Up close, it resembled a mass of thin metal tentacles, like some kind of mechanical squid. I could feel it wrapping around my foot, clinging on to me no matter how hard I kicked. I swarmed it with bugs, hoping to clog up its vents or find some way into its circuitry. It emitted an electric charge in response. There was a crackling sound as my bugs were all fried, leaving nothing but the faint scent of burning. My leg, on the other hand, was unharmed, if a little numb. Not for the first time, I was glad I had an insulated suit. I reached down to pry it off, when it suddenly started moving. Stretching out its metal limbs it began climbing up my arms, leaking a strange tar-like substance as it went. The thick black liquid stuck to my costume and began spreading out, forming a glossy coating. As it hardened around my limbs, I found myself unable to move them. The metal squid moved on to my back, coating my flight pack in the inky black sludge. One by one the antigravity panels were consumed, causing me to drop faster and faster out of the sky. I skidded across the ground, grateful my flight pack only gave me minimal altitude. As I struggled to get to my feet, I noticed four other metal squids converging on my location. They didn’t attack, however, but instead formed a loose square around me. They stretched their limbs towards one another, extending them telescopically until they connected.

The resulting square let out a glow, as shimmering forcefield-like panels began to appear. I was distinctly reminded of the Azazel’s nanothorn barricades. I tried to get away, but the black substance had made its way to my legs, freezing them in place. The force fields rose up to box me in, the tops curving to form a pyramidal roof. A similar glowing panel appeared underneath me, lifting up slightly to form a floor. And like that, I was trapped. The impromptu cage started floating a few inches over the ground, hovering towards the base. It stopped just short of the fence, settling down on a perfectly ordinary patch of concrete. There was a rumbling noise and the concrete slab began to sink downwards, descending into a dark vertical passageway. It stopped about 30 feet down, adjacent to one of the underground rooms. The wall opened up like an elevator door, revealing the woman from before. She towered over me in a suit of sinister black power armor, spikes protruding from the shoulders and high-tech guns mounted on the arms. The masked helmet depicted a woman’s face, glaring in anger. Iron Maiden.

“Well, well, well.” she said, without a trace of humor, “It appears we’ve caught a pest.”

“Like a fly in a spider’s web.” said the man, now wearing a diamond mask. Styx. “Except, in this case it’s a spider in a person’s web. And the spider is also a person.”

Iron Maiden and I stared at him.

“Sorry.” He muttered, “I’ll just stand over there.”

As her partner walked off, the villain turned her attention back towards me.

“You have quite the audacity, attacking my base, threatening my operations. Tell me, who else knows you are here?”

Generally speaking, “does anyone else know about this” is a question you never answer no to. On the other hand, if I answered yes, it would basically kill any chance of negotiations. I decided to take
a third approach.

“What time is it?” I asked.

Iron Maiden responded by pressing a button on her wrist.

The black shell surrounding my body let out an electric shock, killing the few remaining bugs I’d stowed on my person. It felt strange, like a hundred electric eels writhing under my skin. It didn’t hurt, but she didn’t need to know that. I grit my teeth and let out a false cry of pain.

“Answer the question.” She demanded.

“The answer depends on what time it is.” I said between strained breaths.

She glanced at her wrist. “9:48”

“Then for the next twelve minutes, the answer is no. I set up a beacon somewhere in the area. If my bugs don’t push the right buttons every half hour, it’ll alert the Protectorate to my last known location. In this case, right outside your base. If you let me go and tell me what I want to know, I’ll forget I ever found this place. If not, you’ll have the entire Philadelphia Protectorate knocking at your door.”

Iron Maiden glared down at me.

“Do you think this is some kind of game? That I’ll just sit here and listen to the empty threats of a desperate girl?”

“They might be empty, but is that a chance you’re willing to take?”

“I could ask you the same question. If the Protectorate does come, I have you as a hostage.”

“I’ve been held captive by worse. You don’t scare me.”

“We’ll see about that.” She paced around the cage, studying me. Finally, she stopped right beside me. With a push of a button, the forcefield panels winked out. She took a vial out of her belt and started spraying my flight pack with it. Slowly, the black shell began to crack and break off.

“Hmm.” she muttered, examining my flight pack. “I recognize these wings. This is Stinger’s work. Don’t tell me she repurposed it.” She took out a knife and began cutting away the straps connecting it to my back. If my hands weren’t frozen or my bugs were still alive, I could have activated the propulsion or lashed out with the arms. Alas, I could do nothing but watch as she removed my flight pack and carried it over to a nearby workbench, the forcefields flickering back into place.

“You’re wasting your time.” I said. “That flight pack was designed specifically for me. No one else is able to use it.”

“No matter.” replied the villain, “I don’t plan on using it. If I’m lucky, I can salvage the original design. If not, I can always just recycle it for scrap.”

“What the hell is your problem? You’re not even trying to negotiate. I can understand hating the Protectorate, but what has that got to do with me?”

Iron Maiden stopped in her tracks. She turned to look at me. “Does the name Cranial mean anything to you?”

It didn’t ring a bell. “No.”

Then it hit me. Those were the Toybox capes who were killed by the Slaughterhouse Nine. After Dragon and Defiant chased them out of Boston. After they escaped from...

Fuck

She started walking towards me. “You said that the Undersiders controlled Brockton Bay? That you were in charge? If that was the case, then answer me this.”

She bent down, looking me in the eye.

“Why did you let Jack Slash get away?”

I didn’t respond. I couldn’t. Having said her piece, Iron Maiden pushed a button on her wrist, closing the wall and sealing me back inside the dark corridor. The platform began to descend, much faster than before. The elevator brought me so far down that I began to lose connection with my bugs on the surface. Finally, it lurched to a halt, stopping at the very last floor of the complex. Another wall opened up, revealing a room full glass cells. The forcefield cage hovered inside one of the cells, before flickering off. The metal squids detached and fled from the room, the clear door shutting behind them.

And that was that. I was trapped in a cell at the bottom of a super villain’s lair, no bugs, no flight pack, and no one coming to rescue me. I couldn’t even move my arms or legs. I had to hand it to Iron Maiden, she was good at what she did. But she had made one critical mistake.

She underestimated me.
March 20, 1999

“the first in a new trilogy of preceding sequels or “prequels” being released in May. In other news, two local high school students were killed in what the PRT are calling a supervillain attack. According to eyewitnesses, the two teenage girls, whose families wish to remain nameless, were apparently swallowed up by their lockers and, while trying to escape, fatally impaled by the machinery. The authorities do not have any leads at this time, however.”

The man turned off the TV.

“A helluva of a debut, if I’ve ever seen one.” he said, a slightly too cheerful smile on his face. He leaned his arms on the table, the one clean piece of furniture in the small dingy room they were meeting.

“It was an accident.” Jennifer murmured. It wasn’t supposed to be like this. She had only meant to hurt them. To scare them. To make them leave her alone.

“I doubt the PRT’d see it that way.” the man replied, his face turning into a grimace, “Given the amount of preparation, they’d probably rule it as premeditated.”

Jennifer didn’t respond, but merely continued to stare at the floor.

“Come on, lift your head up. What’s done it done. The thing you got to focus on now is what you’re gonna do next.” He took out a notepad. “Now, let’s see. You say your specialty is death traps?”

“I believe so.”

“Huh, that’s a tough one. A classic, sure; but not a lot of commercial use.”

“Does it even matter? It’s not like I can ever become a rogue. Not after this.”

“That’s not necessarily true. You’re young enough that, if you turned yourself in, you could be accepted as a Probationary Ward. It’d be a lot of hard work, you would have to keep your nose clean, but once you turn eighteen you’d be free as a bird. Of course, that would also mean working under all the PRT’s regulations. You’d have to run all your inventions by their military and science teams. Submit documentation, get it officially cleared, all that red tape. And given the nature of your specialty... It might not always work out the way you want it.”

“What are my other options?”

“Well, there’s the Elite.” the man said, switching back to cheerful, “They’re not so picky in who they take in; heroes, rogues, villains, so long as they’re useful. You’d also get a lot more leeway in what you can make. The Elite aren’t afraid of killing people. The downside is that you’d be spending half your time churning out Tinkertech for them. And of course, it’s a lifetime commitment. Once you join, you can never leave.”

Jennifer frowned. Neither of those sounded appealing. But she couldn’t go back to her old life. Or any normal life for that matter. Not with all these ideas floating around in her head. They were there whenever she closed her eyes. Traps. Cages. Complex mechanisms full of spikes and chains. The locker traps were just the tip of the iceberg, a mere sample of what she could really do, given enough time and resources.
She looked up at the man. She had no idea how he found her. Perhaps capes had a way of locating one another. Or some means of detecting the strange power source her inventions used. Either way, he had approached her after the locker incident, scaring the hell out of her in the process, and offered her a way out.

She looked at him. “What about your organization? What do you do?”

“Ah, I was hoping you’d ask that. You can think of Toybox as a sort of enclave. A refuge for Tinkers who would otherwise be shanghaied into gangs or the Protectorate. You’ll be able to make whatever you want, however you want, and you’ll be provided with funding and access to other Tinkers’ work. You can stay as long as you need and leave whenever, no questions asked.”

“That’s it?” Jennifer asked. “Sounds a little too good to be true.”

“Well, we are a smallish organization, so we mainly rely on bartering to keep ourselves afloat. You’ll be expected to sell some of your inventions, with a third of the profits going to the rest of the group.”

“Who do you sell to?”

“Basically everyone. We move around a lot, so there is no fixed market.”

“I mean, do you sell to villains?”

“Mostly, though there is the occasional rogue. What we’re doing isn’t exactly legal.”

Jennifer pursed her lips. She was hesitant to officially declare herself a villain. She was still holding on to a sliver of hope that maybe, once she learned how to better use her power, she’d be able to establish herself as a hero. Perhaps this could be the first step. She could join on for the time being, gaining whatever skills or experience she needed, then move on to a different city under a different identity. At this point, what did she have to lose?

The man gazed at her in concern.

“If you need some more time to think about it, that’s fine. This is a big decision and-.”

“No.” she said, “I’ve decided. I want to join.”

“Great!” he exclaimed, “I’ll call the others and let them know you’re in.”

He rose from his seat then immediately sat back down. “Oh, that’s right! I forgot to introduce myself.” He held out a hand. “The name’s Haywire. Professor Haywire. Welcome to Toybox.”

“Ferris.” she replied, “Jennifer Ferris.”

“Yeah...” he said, “I think your first task should be coming up with a cape name. Tends to come in handy.”

“Alright.” she replied, “I suppose I could think of something.”

April 13, 2009

Iron Maiden stared down at the boy, watching as he fidgeted in his seat. He couldn’t have been older than ten. From what the others had told her, he was a recent trigger, a foster kid who woke up one day with the knowledge to challenge the laws of physics. Or the guidelines of physics, as Haywire
used to call them. The villainess sighed. She missed the old madman. It seemed almost a lifetime ago since he was called in to recruit her. And now she was in his place, bringing on a new member to the team. She turned her attention to the boy.

“So,” she said, “Let’s start from the top. How long have you had powers?”

“A-about a month.” the boy stammered, “I tried to keep it a secret, but I needed to gather materials for my inventions, and then the gangs found out and...” he stopped, looking like he was on the verge of tears.

Iron Maiden reached out to comfort the boy, but he shrank back from her touch. She frowned. She hadn’t meant to frighten him. She was wearing her least threatening suit of armor.

“Say,” she said, “Why don’t you tell me about your inventions?”

“Um, okay.” He said, brightening up a bit, “It’s kind of hard to explain, but basically I can make this space between spaces, completely separate from the rest of the world, and then build devices to go there.”

Iron Maiden raised her eyebrows. “You mean like a pocket dimension?”

“I guess so.” he said.

“Interesting.” Interdimensional tech was in high demand. No wonder the gangs were after him. “I can tell you this. Should you decide to join Toybox, you’ll be given all the resources you need to design and develop your tech.”

The boy nodded, but didn’t say anything.

“You seem hesitant.”

“Sorry. This is all just happening so fast. A month ago I was a normal kid, and now all these people with superpowers are after me. I don’t know if I should join you or the Wards or just try to make it on my own.”

She raised a hand placatingly, “It’s okay if you don’t know off the bat what you want to do. That’s what we’re here to find out. If you don’t mind my asking; why haven’t you joined the Protectorate? You have a clean record.”

The boy stared at his feet. “I don’t know if I want to be a superhero. I don’t like fighting, and I’m scared that if I become a Ward, I could get hurt or worse. I’ve seen the videos. I know what happens when heroes go up against villains and Endbringers.” he sniffed, “I probably sound like a wuss, don’t I?”

“There’s nothing wrong with caring about your wellbeing.” said Iron Maiden, “And I can assure you that you’ll be perfectly safe at Toybox. We’re more focused on developing our Tinkertech than fighting, and we generally try to avoid conflict.”

“If you say so.” he said halfheartedly, the sullen expression returning to his face.

Iron Maiden gazed at the boy. She had been in his position once. Alone and afraid, with no one and nowhere to turn. What could she say to him? What would have helped her?

“Listen.” she began, but he didn’t appear to notice, seeming lost in thought.
“Hey!” she spoke a bit louder, snapping his attention back to her.

Undoing the latches connecting it to her armor, she removed her helmet, letting her long dark hair tumble down to her shoulders.

“Look at me.” she said, “I know things are rough right now, and it’s hard to know who to trust. Getting powers, it’s strange, confusing, and you find yourself doubting a lot of things you thought you knew. About people. The world. Yourself. But I’ve been where you are now, so you can believe me when I say that it gets better. Everything is going to be okay.” she gave a gentle smile, “I promise.”

June 30, 2011

There was a knock at the door.

“Hey Iron, you in there? It’s me, Styx.”

There was no reply.

“Okay, I’m just going to assume you’re there. Um, I heard the news. I’m sorry about what happened.”

Again, more silence.

“Listen, I know it’s not really my place, being new and all, but I’m here if you want to talk about it. Alright?” There was a pause. “Okay then. Stay strong, boss.”

The sound of footsteps started and slowly faded away. Iron Maiden grimaced.

“Strong.” she thought, “What does he know about strength?”

She looked back at the report. At the names of people she once knew. She had been visiting with them not a month before, joking, laughing. And now, just like that, they were dead. She hoped they were dead. The alternatives were too horrible to consider.

She glanced at the crates of tech she had brought back with her. It was all that was left of them. She couldn’t possibly sell it, and yet it seemed wrong to just let it all sit there and gather dust. That’s not what they would have wanted. She remembered there was some talk of combining their work, incorporating their tech into her traps, and vice versa. Now it seemed that idea would never be more than a pipe dream. Using another Tinker’s tech was difficult. Modifying it was even more-so. And straight up copying it was impossible. Unless of course you were someone like Dragon. Iron Maiden scowled. If only that Canadian shut-in hadn’t pushed the Nine to the brink. If only those idiots in Brockton Bay hadn’t let them escape. If only she hadn’t recruited Dodge in the first place!

Iron Maiden paused. There was something warm running down her cheeks. She realized belatedly that they were tears.

“Heh.” She murmured. “Guess I’m not as strong as I thought.”

June 16, 2012
Iron Maiden walked swiftly through the hallway of the abandoned hotel, Styx following close behind. He was singing softly to himself, not a care in the world. She found his insistently casual demeanor annoying. Far less so that she used to, but still enough that she almost regretted bringing him along. Almost.

They had come to hand off some goods. The client had requested Iron Maiden come personally. It was an unusual request, but not unusual enough to refuse. Under her arm was the suitcase of Tinkertech. She wasn’t worried about being targeted. She was wearing her newest set of power armor. She had gotten it custom-made from Stark, a rogue specializing in armor and metallurgy, in exchange for some of Stinger’s flight tech. The black metal panels were light, flexible, and completely indestructible, and the suit contained numerous hidden compartments for her weapons and Tinkertech. And with Styx tagging along to help, she was ready for anything.

They entered the remains of the hotel bar, the room stripped of everything but the counter and stools. Inside waited two members of the Dons, Sharp and some random grunt. The short supervillain was leaning against the bar, twirling an unlit cigar between his fingers. He looked up at the new arrivals.

“Iron Maiden. Styx.” he said, nodding at them in greeting.


The Don didn’t respond.

“What, no reaction this time? It’s no fun when you don’t get mad.”

“Ignore him” said Iron Maiden.

“Gladly. I don’t have time for jokes. Something big’s come up. Something that involves all of us.”

Iron Maiden was about to inquire further, when there was a knock at the door.

“Were you expecting more visitors?” she asked.

“No.” said Sharp, narrowing his eyes, “Were you followed?”

“Never.”

Sharp turned to his lackey and pointed to the door. As the man made his way across the room, there was another knock.

“Knock knock.” came a voice from the other side.

“Who’s there?” asked the Don.

“Hatch.”

The man turned to his boss, who shook his head. “Go away!”

“No no, you’re supposed to say ‘Hatch who’.”

“Gesundheit.” came a second voice.

“Thanks Nephe for stealing my joke.”

“Any time.”
Before the grunt could say anything more, there was another louder knock at the door. This knock was so hard that there was a crack and the door fell off its hinges.

“Oops.” said the person behind the door, a figure in black with a white comedy mask.

“Nice going.” said the figure to his right, a young girl in a light blue dress with a cloud pattern. “That’s the second one this week.”

“You know, it’s easy to criticize.” he replied. “You don’t see Gadfly complaining.” He gestured to the figure on his left, their body concealed beneath a large black cloak.

“Hey!” yelled Iron Maiden, drawing her 9mm.

The one in the white mask looked up. “Oh, right. We were doing a thing.”

“Who are you and why are you here?” the villain demanded, leveling her gun at the newcomer.

“Well, my name is Comedy. I’m a Gemini. Blood type AB. My hobbies include fighting crime and improv. As for why we’re here? That depends on who you ask. Plato believed that man’s purpose is attaining knowledge in its highest form. Camus on the other hand—”

Iron Maiden cut him off, firing two rounds into his chest.

Comedy let out a moan. “Oh, you got me. This looks like the end. Everything’s going dark.” he fell to floor, writhing in pain.

Iron Maiden turned her gun to the others, shouting. “You two! On your knees! Now!” They obeyed, kneeling down next to their fallen comrade who continued to wail.

“There's a bright light, someone's calling me. Applaud, my friends, the comedy is finished.”

Iron Maiden pointed her weapon at the cloaked cape. “How did you find out about this meeting?” There was a pause. “Answer me!”

“Um, they don’t talk” said the girl in the cloud dress. “They’re kind of the strong silent type.”

The villain turned the barrel towards the girl. “Very well. Then perhaps you can tell me why you’re here.”

The girl shrugged. “I just go where he goes.” she nodded her head at Comedy, who was still writhing in pain.

“Oh, I am slain.” he wailed, “Alas, poor Comedy! I knew him well; a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy.”

“Horatio.” said the girl.

Comedy stopped writhing. “What?”

“The line is ‘I knew him, Horatio.’”

Comedy sat up. “Oh shoot, really?” He turned to Iron Maiden. “Sorry, can we get a do over? I swear, this never happens.”

“A Brute.” said Iron Maiden, holstering her gun.

“Oh the contrary.” exclaimed Comedy, springing to his feet. “You will find that I am the perfect
gentleman. For example, give up now and I promise not to break your legs.”

“Like we’d give you the chance.” said Styx, stepping forward, knives in hand. “You’re going to regret threatening us.”

“It’s a fight then?” asked Comedy, “So be it. Nephelai, if you please.”

At his command, thick white clouds began filling the room, engulfing both the girl and her companions. The clouds encircled the villains, boxing them in. Sharp looked like he was about to say something, when a pair of arms emerged from the clouds and dragged him into the pillowy white mass.

“Boss!” yelled out Sharp’s lackey, dashing after him.

“Wait!” ordered Iron Maiden, “Don’t act rashly. We let them come to us.”

As she said this, the black cloaked cape burst out of the clouds. Styx threw a knife, which turned into a storm of knives, impaling the cape in multiple places. The cape dropped to the ground. Instead of blood however, bugs began streaming out of the cloak, forming into a massive swarm of insects. The bugs surged toward the villains, buzzing menacingly. Styx slashed ineffectually at the swarm, trying to ward it off. In response, the bugs released a steaming liquid from their bodies into his eyes. He let out a scream of pain, crouching down and clutching his face.

“Ooh, bombardiers. Nice touch.” said Comedy, stepping into the open. Iron Maiden ignored him, focusing on the swarm. She adjusted her arm cannon, setting it to wide beam, before firing one of Glace’s repurposed ice rays. The bugs were killed en masse, while Styx was left with only a harmless coating of frost.

The Don, meanwhile, confronted Comedy, who had picked up one of Styx’s replicated knives. The grunt, in a stunning display of pattern recognition, brandished his gun.

“Hmm.” murmured Comedy, glancing back and forth between his knife and the gun. “Well this isn’t fair at all. I know! How about I give you a handicap?”

In a flash, the cape dashed towards the Don, ducking behind him and plunging the knife into his spine. The man screamed in agony and crumpled to the ground.

“Eh? Eh? See what I did there?” Comedy chuckled. “It’s funny because he’ll never walk again.”

Iron Maiden adjusted her arm cannon again, setting it to maximum power, before firing at the laughing cape. The room lit up as a blast of lighting struck Comedy, throwing him back into the clouds. There were a few seconds of terse stillness, until he walked back out completely unharmed.

“Wow... That felt strange.” he held his hand out, watching as small streaks of electricity leapt from one finger to another. “Really strange. I wonder, what if...” he stuck a finger out at Styx. A small bolt of lighting leapt out from his finger and struck the villain, shocking him to his knees.

“Neat.” said Comedy.

Iron Maiden scowled. This battle was quickly becoming unwinnable. Using her suit’s enhanced strength, she scooped up the semi-conscious Styx and carried him towards the exit. After a few steps inside the mass of clouds however, she found herself back where she started, the Don bleeding on the ground and Comedy’s white mask smiling at her. She turned around and began running in the opposite direction, only to once again emerge back inside the circle of clouds.

“Perplexing, isn’t it.” said Comedy, “I know I was perplexed my first time. You can thank Nephelai
for this little trick.” He cupped his hands around his mouth. “Hey Nephe, tell them how you do the thing!”

Some of the clouds parted to show the girl Nephelai kneeling over Sharp. A stream of clouds was being funneled into his left ear and out of his right.

“Could you keep it down?” she asked, “I’m kind of in the middle of something.”

“What is she doing?” Iron Maiden demanded.

“Clouding his mind.” Comedy replied matter-of-factly, “Can’t have him remembering this little fight, now can we? Don’t worry, you two will have your turn.”

“Not happening.” said Iron Maiden, readying her weapons, “We’re walking out of here, one way or another.”

Comedy was silent for a moment, then began laughing.

“Did I say something amusing?” asked Iron Maiden.

“Honestly I don’t know what’s funnier, that you think you can stop us, or that you think this is the first time we’ve ever fought.”
Interlude: Iron Maiden - Part 2

Iron Maiden stared down the laughing cape, considering his words.

“You’re lying.” she said. He had to be. There was no way that she could have ever lost to a joker like him.

“Perhaps.” he replied, “Perhaps not. Who can say? Not you, that’s for sure. Now, are we going to keep talking or continue the fight? Because honestly, I could go either way. I’m easy like that.”

Iron Maiden evaluated her options. She only had a few traps on her that could deal with Brutes, none of which were made for such close quarters. Assuming her other weapons were equally ineffective, that eliminated the possibility of a straightforward offense. Likewise, so long as those clouds were in play, they wouldn’t be able to escape. She twisted her lips, desperately wishing she had brought the Orb with her. If neither fight not flight were options, all that was left was...

“Let’s negotiate.” she said.

Comedy perked up. “Hmm?”

“You heard me. There must be something you want. You wouldn’t be here otherwise.”

“Maybe. Or maybe promoting peace and justice is its own reward.”

“That’s bullshit.” she said, “If you’re not going to tell us what you want, then save us the theatrics and let us go.”

“Let you go? After I went to all this trouble? Now why would I do that? That’s not a rhetorical question, by the way. I’m honestly curious. In fact... Let’s play a game!”

“No games.” called Nephelai, switching from Sharp to his henchman. “It has been a long night and I do not have the patience.”

“Fine. You can’t play.” Comedy turned back to Iron Maiden. “It’ll be just you and me. If you win, I’ll let you both go free, no strings attached.”

Iron Maiden furrowed her brow skeptically. This was clearly a trick. But what other choice did she have?

“What kind of game?” she asked, almost certain she didn’t want to know.

“It’s very simple, really. All you have to do is convince me you deserve mercy. That your actions up until now have been justified, and that I should let you go about your business.”

The villain stared at him. “You must be joking.”

“Look at me. Do I seem like the joking kind?”

“Your name is Comedy.”

“Fair enough, fair enough. Though in my defense, I didn’t choose the name. None of us did. But that’s neither here nor there. The question stands. Do you accept?”

Iron Maiden considered the challenge. It would be a hard sell. She didn’t consider herself a moral
person by any standard. Rather, she was a pragmatist at heart, willing to go to any means if the end was justified. But maybe that could work for her. Pragmatism could be seen as just as much a virtue as idealism in many cases.

“Very well.” she said, “I accept.”

“Excellent.” he clapped his hands. “The first question goes to you. You are wanted by the PRT for a laundry list of crimes, you have a history of first and second degree murder, and you make your living selling unregistered Tinkertech to known supervillains. How do you justify this?”

“I do what I have to in order to survive.” said Iron Maiden. “I avoid harming innocents whenever possible, and I only sell as much as I need to stay in operation.”

“Survival, huh?” mused Comedy, “That seems like a rather selfish motivation. Many philosophers consider life a means to an end, rather than an end in of itself. Tell me, do you have a reason for living, or do you just do it because you’re afraid to die?”

Iron Maiden was taken aback. Who the hell was this guy?

“I’m not afraid of death.” she said. “But that doesn’t mean I’ll just roll over and die. I can’t. My work is too important.”

“Important? And how could it be any more important than what we heroes do every day?”

“Because heroes only help individuals. They’ll probably only save a handful of people any given week, people who could just as easily die the next day. My work has the capacity to help everyone, permanently. Technological progress is something that benefits all of humanity indiscriminately, its advantages far outweighing any short-term costs. Look at all we Tinkers have accomplished. Cold fusion. Nanomachines. Interdimensional travel. Tinkertech is centuries ahead of anything produced on Earth, and the closer we get to reverse engineering it, the closer we come to achieving a better world.”

“That was beautiful.” Comedy sniffled, “Also a load of garbage. If you really cared about advancing society, you would have joined the Protectorate the minute Toybox was destroyed and shared your technology with the world. Instead, you held on to your precious little toys, consolidated your power, and continued to sell dangerous weaponry to murderers and thieves.”

Iron Maiden clenched her teeth, holding back a long string of expletives. What did this idiot know about her? About what she’d been through?

“I apologize, that was going too far. Sorry if I hurt your feelings; I’m afraid those are the casualties in a battle of ideology. An injury not of the body, but of the soul. One that tears at your worldview, and makes you question your most sacred beliefs. If it’s any consolation, the shame you must be experiencing is nothing compared to the disappointment I’m feeling right now. I honestly thought I was going up against a truly great, nuanced villain. But instead, it turns out you’re just another thug with a fancy gun.” The only thing more insulting than his words was the nonchalant tone he said them in.

“Fuck you.” whispered Iron Maiden.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Fuck! You!” she shouted. “I don’t have to explain myself to you! I don’t have to justify what I do! Maybe I’m not doing everything I can to save the world. Maybe I’m not sacrificing everything to help others. But why should I? All the world has ever done is kick me when I’m down and rip away
the things I care about most. I don’t owe society anything, and I’m under no obligation to fix it.”

Comedy looked taken aback. “You dare reject the utilitarian fundamentalism which forms the philosophical basis of our society?”

“Maybe I do. It’s my choice to make.”

“Hmm...” Comedy tapped his chin, “You know what? I like it.”

“What?”

“I think that’s a fine motivation. So much more interesting than the desperate, greedy mooks we normally bring in.” He turned to his companions. “Come on, guys. Let’s grab our things and head out.”

The clouds began to dissipate and the remaining insects funneled themselves into the black cloak until it filled back up to person height. Nephelai and Gadfly each grabbed a Don and began dragging them towards the door. Comedy followed after them, then stopped.

“Oops.” he said, “Almost forgot.” He jogged back and swiped the suitcase of Tinkertech lying at Iron Maiden’s feet.

“That’s mine!” Iron Maiden snapped.

Comedy suddenly stood rigid. He spoke, facing away from Iron Maiden,

“You have put your head inside the wolf’s mouth and taken it out again in safety; that ought to be reward enough.”

And just like that he relaxed his shoulders and returned to his normal demeanor. “Wait for me.” he called, skipping after his companions.

“I wish you’d take these missions more seriously.” said Nephelai as he caught up.

“The day I take something seriously is the day I kill myself.” laughed Comedy. “And of course, that’d mean taking you guys with me.”

Gadfly let out a buzzing noise.

“Good point, pal.” Comedy replied, “Good point.”

July 29, 2012

“Why did you let Jack Slash get away?”

Iron Maiden looked the bug girl in the eye, daring her to speak. The Ward didn’t respond. That was fine by Iron Maiden; she didn’t want to hear her excuses. She tapped at her wrist computer, sealing the girl back inside the elevator shaft. She listened to the groan of the platform as it descended to the prison level, before letting out a deep breath.

“So...” said Styx, strolling forward. “What do we do now?”
“I’m thinking.” Iron Maiden replied, crossing her arms, “The fact that the girl found our base is troubling. It could pose a major threat to our operations.”

“Think we should kill her?”

There was the tink of metal upon metal as Iron Maiden drummed her armored fingers against her arm.

“No.” she said with an air of finality. “There’s a chance, albeit slim, that she really did set up some sort of beacon in the case of her capture. If the Protectorate are coming, then the last thing we need is a dead Ward on our hands. For now, we keep her in secure containment.”

“And in the meantime?”

“We evacuate.”

“Evacuate? Are you serious?”

“Dead. If the Protectorate are coming, I’m not going to waste resources on a prolonged battle.”

“So we’re just going to turn tail and run?”

“Consider it a strategic retreat. We gather everything and everyone valuable, and move to a temporary site. If the Protectorate don’t come for the girl within a week, we can assume the base is not compromised. Only then can we safely return and terminate her.”

“Fine.” said Styx, dropping his arms. “But let the record show I’d rather stay and fight than flee at the first sign of trouble.”

“You may get your wish.” Iron Maiden replied, tapping at her wrist computer. “I’m going to send some drones out to sweep the area. See if they can find this beacon. In the meantime, you gather the men and start loading everything for transport.”

He began to leave when she stopped him.

“Oh, and before I forget, take this.” She handed him a small device the size of an orange. “This is a personal electric pulse emitter. It will kill any insects within a three meter radius. The containment gel should have knocked the girl unconscious by now, but if not it’s best to be prepared. The device is low energy, so you should be able to make enough copies for each of the essential staff.”

“Thanks.” he said, taking the device.

As he left, Iron Maiden glanced at her computer. The drones were spreading out in a geometric fashion, scanning the surrounding area for any kind of suspicious electronics. She had also sent some into the vents, in case there were any insects still hiding there. The drones hadn’t found anything so far, but Iron Maiden knew better than to let her guard down. The villain sent a quick message to Queen, asking her to grab Grateful Dead and get over to the base as soon as possible. She wasn’t expecting a fight, but like hell would she be caught unawares.

With the immediate tasks taken care of, the Tinker was left with some time to gather her thoughts. All in all, this was not the worst thing that could possibly happen. If a fight did break out, it would be on her turf, where she was most powerful. Her specialty was a defensive one, and she had outfitted her lair accordingly, with traps and countermeasures against most of the capes in the city. On top of that, her base was stocked with enough Tinkertech weaponry to supply a small army, or at least a well sized militia. Even on short notice, she could take anything the PRT threw at her.
Assured in her security, Iron Maiden let her attention stray to the flight pack lying on the workbench. This probably wasn’t the best time to examine it. There were so many other things she could be doing. But on the other hand...

She scurried over to the workbench, drawing some tools from her belt. First impressions aside, the flight pack was a well put together piece of machinery. Close inspection showed that its constituent parts were of considerably different style, but were so seamlessly combined that one would think it was made by a single Tinker. There was a kind of elegance to it, the individual components working off one another and coming together to form something unique, like simple notes and chords forming a symphony. It was leagues ahead of the sloppy patch jobs she was capable of, she noted with a twinge of jealousy.

She continued to disassemble the apparatus, performing the task with the same type of morbid curiosity a schoolchild would have dissecting their first frog. Opening up a hatch on the back, she found a series of narrow tracks filled with dead bugs, each one lying next to a small switch. It appeared the device was meant to be operated via insect.

“How novel.” thought Iron Maiden, “It seems this truly was custom-built.”

Taking out her computer to jot down some notes, she got a look at the time. To her shock, It was almost 11. She had spent nearly an hour on this thing. Scolding herself for her errant carelessness, Iron Maiden checked the progress of the drones. It appeared that they had finished some time ago, not finding anything of note. The villain was considering messaging Queen and telling her not to come, when she heard a noise. It was a small beeping, almost imperceptible among the hum of computers and machinery. She followed the sound to a cluttered workbench in the corner. Looking closer, she found that it was coming from an old security sensor, one she hadn’t installed into the main system.

“Strange” she thought, “I haven’t received any alerts.”

Iron Maiden turned to her computer and brought up the security cameras. Nothing looked out of place. The water was still, the sky was clear, PRT Vans were pulling up to the base.

She paused. She looked back at the screen. Sure enough, there were several black vans surrounding her lair, PRT printed on the side.

“What the hell?” She activated the alarm. Nothing happened. She activated the base’s defenses. Nothing happened. “What the hell!”

Finally, she tried the PA system. That was operational.

“Attention everyone!” She announced throughout the base. “We are on Red Alert! The PRT are here. Repeat. The PRT are here. Security officers get to your stations, everyone else prepare for combat.”

Her announcement made, she turned her attention back to the lair’s automated defenses. They still weren’t operating. Scowling, she marched over to the nearby control panel and ripped it out from the wall. Beneath it was a mess of wires, crawling with insect. They were chewing at the cords, severing them and moving on to the next.

“Fucking Masters!” shouted Iron Maiden, slamming her metal fist into the wall. She took a deep breath and, ignoring the indentation she had made, activated her pulse emitter. The bugs dropped dead, falling from the wires they were clinging to.
She turned the PA back on. “If you were given an electric pulse emitter, activate it now. I repeat, if you have a pulse emitter, use it now!”

As she finished, Styx came running in.

“What’s going on?” he asked, panic in his voice. “Why are the PRT here? How did they find us? Why weren’t we given any warning?”

“It’s the girl, Weaver. Her bugs have been in the walls this whole time, sabotaging the system. Security’s down, weapons are down. We’re lucky the intercom’s working or we’d be completely vulnerable.”

“Are they attacking?”

“Not yet. I think they’re still gathering their forces, preparing for an all-out assault. I don’t think they know our defenses have been crippled. That works in our favor, buys us some time.”

“How do they even know we’re here?”

“Do you have to ask? Obviously our little prisoner told them. The one thing I’m uncertain of is how. I sent out the drones, and they couldn’t find anything even resembling a beacon.”

“You don’t think she could have contacted them during her capture, do you?”

“Impossible. The prism cage has a built-in signal jammer, and the containment gel should have fried any trackers on her.”

“Maybe she told them where we were beforehand?”

“If the PRT knew our location, they would have sent the entire Protectorate, not just one girl.”

“Kinda like what they’re doing now?” Styx pointed at computer.

Iron Maiden looked and saw that Mangonel had stepped out of a newly arrived van, followed by Crusher, Cuirass, and Toro.

“Are the men ready?” asked Iron Maiden.

“I dunno.” shrugged Styx.

Iron Maiden looked down at him.

“But... I can go check.” he said, starting to scurry off.

“No.” she stopped him, “You stay up here with me. The second we sent troops out is the second we show our hand. Queen and Grateful Dead will be here soon. If we wait for them to arrive, they can serve as a distraction while we escape with our tech.

“Are you saying we use them as bait?”

“That is what I’m suggesting, yes.”

Styx took a few seconds to ponder this. “Fine by me.” he declared, “Those guys are creeps.”
The two villains made their way to the top floor. They found their workers lined up waiting for them, fully armed and ready to go toe to toe with Philadelphia’s strongest heroes. Iron Maiden’s getaway van was there, currently being loaded up with her strongest and most valuable Tinkertech. She checked the security feed. The PRT had formed a perimeter a good distance away from the base, no doubt wary of any traps she had set. That was wise of them. Even with the system down, she was far from defenseless. Several workers were deploying Iron Maiden’s subterranean steel traps, burrowing devices made with Dirt Nap’s tech. Others were stocking up on scatter charges, handheld grenades which released a cluster of proximity mines on impact. It wouldn’t be a clean battle, but assuming nothing extraordinary happened, they’d be able to make a safe getaway. The only question that remained was who’d strike first. That question was answered several minutes later with an explosion large enough to shake the warehouse facade.

“That would be Mangonel.” said Iron Maiden. She turned to her workers. “All troops, move out!”

The doors to the warehouse opened and her men flooded out. They began forming rows and firing at the crowd of heroes and PRT Troopers. Those who didn’t dodge or duck behind cover were hit with a deluge of beams, lasers, and balls of fire. Mangonel returned fire, sending out blasts of energy which sent Iron Maiden’s troops flying off their feet. Crusher, meanwhile, had situated herself behind Toro, using him as cover as they approached from the side.

“Focus your fire on Crusher.” ordered Iron Maiden, “Don’t let her get within range.”

Toro’s forcefield protected the two of them from the overwhelming firepower. Just then, a pair of steel jaws emerged from the ground, sinking into his leg. He stumbled briefly, allowing a beam of plasma to slip past him and hit Crusher in the shoulder. She cried out in pain, but continued forward nonetheless. The workers aimed their weapons at her, but with a wave of her hand they were forced to the ground. Without their suppressive fire, Cuirass and the rest of the PRT troopers were free to advance. Cuirass ran ahead of the pack, her armor curved to be more aerodynamic. One of Iron Maiden’s men readied a scatter charge, aiming it straight at the hero. In response, she thrust out her arm, sending a shard of her armor flying out towards the man. It struck his hand, causing the device to fall to his feet. The worker and everyone around him dove out of the way, narrowly avoiding the randomized chain of miniature explosions.

Iron Maiden was afraid she’d have to get in there herself, when a figure darted onto the scene, heading towards the PRT. Iron Maiden recognized the gold mask and dark outfit. Queen had arrived. She weaved around the troopers, tapping them as she went. She dodged gunfire and jumped over streams of containment foam, before ending up in the center of the battlefield.

“Now!” she called as the PRT trained their guns on her.

At her call, Grateful Dead stepped out of the shadows, drawing a knife and slashing at his own wrist. As he did this, a dozen PRT troopers cried out and dropped their weapons, blood dripping from their wrists. The uninjured troops turned their guns to Grateful Dead. He responded by raising the knife to his exposed throat.

“Wait!” shouted Mangonel, holding out an arm. “Hold your fire!”

Queen turned to him. “Surrender!” she declared, “or these men’s lives are forfeit!”

“We can’t do that.” said Mangonel, “Iron Maiden’s kidnapped one of our Wards.”

“That is none of my concern.” replied Queen. “I’ve been ordered to dispose of you. One way or another.”
“We’re not leaving without Weaver.”

“Then you shall die.”

Normally, Iron Maiden disliked Queen’s overdramatic persona; but in this situation, it was useful. She gestured for Styx to ready the van, when she noticed something. It looked like a large concentration of smoke was drifting towards the base. No, not smoke... Clouds.

Both sides began taking notice of the white mass, readying their weapons as it hovered over the battlefield. Suddenly, something large and yellow dropped from the cloud. It looked like a person. The figure landed hard on the pavement, hitting the ground with two legs and a fist. As the smoke cleared, Iron Maiden could make out the yellow and orange costume, the mask styled after a lion. The cape looked up from the cracked concrete to the sea of guns all pointed at him.

He yelled up at the cloud. “This is the place.”

The mass of clouds began to descend and dissipate, ultimately revealing three people Iron Maiden had never wanted to see again.

The figure in the black cloak.

The girl with the cloud dress.

And of course, the man in the smiling mask.

“Hey there everybody!” Comedy exclaimed, “We’re the Philosopher Kings. And we’re here to save the day!”

Iron Maiden briefly considered ordering her men to attack, but thought better of it. She had no desire to get involved with those maniacs, especially if her theories about them were true. Queen, conversely, had other ideas.

“I don’t care why you’re here.” she said haughtily, “Do not interfere, or your corpses shall join theirs!”

This clearly incensed the cape in yellow, who clenched his fists in outrage.

“You would threaten innocent lives?” he asked, marching towards the villain.

“Nemean, don’t-” began the cloud girl, but it was too late. He was already within striking distance.

Queen dashed forward and delivered a solid blow to his chest, before jumping backwards to safety. At her signal, Grateful Dead plunged the knife into his ankle, sinking to the ground alongside the affected PRT troopers. Nemean, on the other hand, appeared unhurt. Queen tried again, sweeping in from the side and hitting him in the back. He seemed unfazed by the attack; and when Grateful Dead started stabbed the other leg, eliciting groans from himself and the unfortunate troopers; Nemean remained unmoved.

“How?” gaped Queen. “How are you still standing?

“No attack can pierce the invincible shield of Justice!” declared Nemean.

Queen stared at him.

“Damn it.” he muttered, face turning red, “Please just... forget I said that.”
“C’mon, keep going!” cheered Comedy, “You sounded so cool just then.”

“You and I have very different definitions of the word cool.” responded Nemean. He turned to Queen. “Look, I’m just going to level with you. We’re both Brutes. We’re both super durable. If we fought, it would drag on forever and basically be a huge waste of everyone’s time and energy. So how about you go one way, I go another, and we both find people we can actually hurt.”

“Are you serious?” asked Queen in disbelief.

“No.” he replied, “I’m a distraction.”

At his words, a column of clouds engulfed Grateful Dead, swallowing him whole. When it dissipated, he was gone.

“What did you do?” exclaimed Queen, “Where is my partner!”

“Somewhere he can harm neither himself nor others.” replied Nemean, “It was for the common good that he was removed from this battle.”

“How dare you!” cried Queen.

“That’s the trick.” said Comedy, walking forward, “He doesn’t need to dare, he simply does. I, on the other hand, can’t seem to stop daring.”

“And who are you?” asked Queen.

Comedy giggled. “That is my favorite question.”

Iron Maiden watched as the two capes bantered. She was almost grateful for their theatrics. It made for one hell of a diversion. She got into the van, Styx joining her in the passenger seat. Checking to make sure the coast was clear, she opened the side bay door and hit the gas. The van went flying out of the base, hitting the asphalt with a bump. Iron Maiden turned hard, bringing the van onto the unused backlot. All she had to do was get past the blockade and make it to the main road, slipping away before the PRT had time to pursue. Putting the pedal to the metal, she zoomed towards the street. Glancing out the corner of her eye, she saw the Protectorate had noticed her escape. Mangonel had thrust out his arm, and was lining up a shot. She needed to go faster. Reaching across the dashboard, she activated the nitrous oxide injection system.

“Whoo!” cheered Styx as the van underwent a brief but significant burst of acceleration, just missing the bolt of energy Mangonel had fired. Rocketing past the PRT vans, it looked like the two villains were in the clear. That was when it happened. There was a crash. A scream. Both villains were thrown forward in their seats, their seat belts catching hold of them. Iron Maiden’s airbag was deployed, only to be popped by the spikes on her armor. Shaking off the nausea well enough to get her bearings, she saw that they were no longer on the road, but a patch of grass and dirt. The van was crashed into a pole she swore had not been there moments before. Forcing open the door and stumbling out of the driver’s seat, Iron Maiden found herself surrounded by heroes and troopers alike. She saw Queen in the distance being apprehended by Cuirass. Crusher was lying on a stretcher having her burns treated. The Philosopher Kings were nowhere to be found.

Mangonel stepped forward. “Iron Maiden. You are under arrest.”

The villain staggered back, only to find herself back against the van.
“Give it up.” The Protectorate leader said. “There’s nowhere left to run. It’s over.”

“No.” she breathed out, “Not like this.” Reaching into her suit, she pulled out her second-to-last resort. A detonator. “Not a step closer!” she yelled, brandishing the device. “Not a fucking step! This base is loaded with 40kg of Pyrotechnical’s custom plastic explosives, enough to wipe out everything within a quarter mile. Make one more move, so much as look at me funny, and I’ll blow you all to hell and back.”

“You’d be killing yourself too.” pointed out Mangonel.

“My suit was designed to withstand blast yields far greater than that. I’ll be fine.”

“Don’t do this. You’ll be assigned a kill order. This is the kind of thing villains are sent to the Birdcage for.”

“I don’t care.” she spat, thumb hovering over the large red button, “I would rather die or be locked away than surrender to the likes of you!”

“Brave words.” came an almost musical voice. “You gotta admire that kind of determination.” Comedy strolled out of the darkness, stepping casually towards Iron Maiden.

“Don’t come any closer, kid.” warned Mangonel, “She’s threatening to blow us all up.”

“Really?” asked Comedy, “That’s odd. How’s she going to do it without this?” He held up the detonator.

“What?” Iron Maiden looked at her hand, which was now holding an ordinary television remote. “How did you do that?”

He held up a finger. “Ah, well you see...” He paused. “Huh.” he muttered, stroking his chin in confusion, “How did I do that?”

“Oh well.” He exclaimed, throwing his hands out. “I suppose it’s best not to think about it.” As he did so, the detonator slipped from his grasp and flew into the air. “Oops.”

Time seemed to slow as the remote flipped through air, falling ever closer to the ground.

Iron Maiden didn’t wait to see which side it landed on. She reached into her belt and activated her last resort. Dodge’s final invention. The Orb. Twisting the device, she braced herself as the world fell away and she was dragged into the space between spaces. Opening her eyes, she found herself lounging in a cushioned seat inside a metal sphere roughly two meters in diameter. This bathysphere like pod was part of Dodge’s last gift to her. The ultimate escape route. A single-use module moving through not one, but a hundred different miniature pocket dimensions; zipping back and forth between them in a completely randomized, totally untraceable path; ultimately ending up in one of several hidden safe houses around the continent. The pod was stocked with all of the essentials: food, water, first aid supplies, even a personal computer. Those would come in handy. The trip would last about six hours. Iron Maiden leaned back in her seat, considering what she’d do when it ended.

Best case scenario, her career was over. All of her subordinates would be arrested and interrogated, her tech confiscated, her files seized and her connections exposed. The reputation she had spent the last 13 years building up would be in tatters. Worst case scenario, she was now a mass murderer with a price on her head, wanted for the annihilation of both her men and an entire city’s Protectorate team. She wasn’t sure which possibility disturbed her most.

She decided to review her security feed, see where it all went wrong. The system was programmed
to download the feed into her wrist computer at regular intervals. Judging from the time stamp, this recording was from shortly before the battle began. She saw the PRT pull up outside the base, saw them organize, saw Mangonel fire the first warning shot. Nothing she hadn’t expected. Then she saw something that surprised her. Separate from the erupting battle, hidden amongst the trees, stood the cape Comedy. He didn’t attack the base. He didn’t help his fellow heroes. He simply stood there. Watching.
Trapped in bottom of Iron Maiden’s lair, I took in my surroundings through the clear walls of my cell. I appeared to be in some sort of prison area, with rows of glass cells similar to my own. The only exits seemed to be the lift I came in on, now concealed behind the false wall, and what looked to be an elevator on the far end of the room. I tried to turn and get a better view, but my body was still encased in the black shell, frozen like a statue from the neck down. For now, it seemed that my regular body would be useless, trapped as I was in this small transparent prison. I’d tried not to dwell on that fact. By no means was I claustrophobic, but at the same time, neither was I a fan of confined spaces; for obvious reasons. I instead focused on my bugs.

As I felt out with my powers, my immediate thought was how diminished my range had become. Normally, my range was like a sphere centered around my body, stretching out in every direction equally, extending when I was under exceptional stress. This far down however, the highest it could reach was about a few inches above the warehouse roof. Worse than that, as it got farther away from the center of the base, the vertical distance got shorter and shorter. By the time it reached the edge of the parking lot, I could only send my bugs a few inches above the ground. That not only hindered my ability to sense my surroundings, but also prevented me from gathering more bugs from the outside. I would just have to make do with the modest amount still spread throughout the base.

Interestingly enough, though I couldn’t access many bugs above the surface, it was a different story below. In the space around me I could feel ants, beetles, worms, and various types of larvae, all tucked deep into the earth. They probably wouldn't be that useful to me, but it was nice to know I wasn’t completely alone.

With that in mind, I began considering my next move. Diplomacy had clearly failed, and it seemed I wouldn’t be able to get any more information out of Iron Maiden. It seemed that the only thing left for me to do was escape. That, of course, would be a trial in and of itself. Assuming I could regain my mobility, break out of this cell, and make it into the no doubt booby-trapped and password-protected elevators; I’d still have to fight my way through a lair full of Tinkertech wielding henchmen and possibly Iron Maiden herself.

As embarrassing as it was, I had no choice but to call for help. Which, if I was being honest with myself, was much easier said than done. I couldn’t get to my PRT phone; and even if someone was checking the feed from my suit, Iron Maiden would have almost certainly have jammed the signal. Perhaps if I made a sign with my bugs, a big arrow floating over the lair pointing to me. That would certainly get people’s attention. Of course, that would require far more bugs and a much longer range than I had access to at the moment. Not to mention, if a huge swarm of insects appeared right outside the base, Iron Maiden would almost certainly notice. The one advantage I had was the element of surprise. Iron Maiden thought I was helpless. I could use that against her.

Focussing back on the task at hand, I began considering other means of contacting the Protectorate. I remembered the highway a short distance away, the construction site, the potentially occupied warehouses. If I could get enough bugs there, I could just possibly get someone’s attention. The only problem was concentrating enough bugs that far away. There were the subterranean bugs, burrowing through the earth all around me. Unfortunately, my range was so restricted that I had no way of sending them above ground. Then it hit me. If I couldn’t will my bugs to the surface, perhaps I could herd them there. I began forming them into rows, driving them upwards en masse. Whenever one left my range, another would follow right behind it, pushing it closer and closer to the surface. I wouldn’t be able to control them once they got up there, but I was willing to bet a flood of bugs erupting from the ground would warrant a call to the PRT. All I had to do was wait until they arrived.
Of course, that just opened the door to other problems. Even if I could contact the PRT, they’d have to fight through Iron Maiden’s entire base to get to me. A base filled with Tinkertech weapons and defenses designed by a cape whose very specialty was traps and countermeasures. If I wanted to get out safely, I’d need to find a way of shutting down Iron Maiden’s defenses.

I remembered those ballista-like devices on the roof. If I could get to them, I could probably follow the wires back to whatever system controlled them, and then possibly to whatever controlled the rest of Iron Maiden’s traps. It was just a matter of cutting wires until the system stopped working. Of course, to do all this, I’d need to get my bugs inside the walls. This also was easier said than done. As I moved my bugs throughout the vents, my intention to comb through each room until I found a point of entrance, I realized they weren’t alone. I could feel the vibrations along the metal of the shafts, the small tinks of something crawling on metal legs. She had sent her drones into the vents, no doubt the same ones that could kill my bugs on contact. I couldn’t let Iron Maiden figure out what I was up to; I’d have to navigate around them. It was difficult, trying to track the drones’ movements without being detected, hurrying my bugs back and forth, always staying just out of the drones’ range. Luckily this wasn’t the first time I had done this, my experience as the PRT’s hostage being remarkably similar. Nevertheless, I decided it would be best if I stayed clear of the vents as much as possible. This in mind, I had my bugs carefully sweep through each room, trying to find any kind of hole or aperture they could get through. I sent them behind outlets, inside light fixtures, anywhere that they might fit. Most of the potential openings were blocked by plastic or foam insulation. The rest were only large enough for a single bug to slip through at a time. Finally, I found a row of desks with built-in power strips. They were connected to the wall through holes large enough to accommodate the many cords; and more importantly, a large portion of my swarm.

I directed roughly three quarters of my swarm to the room, funneling them into the walls. Dodging beams, rebar, and insulation, my bugs ascended slowly but surely to the top of the base. I found the three ballistas in small compartments built into the roof, each loaded with compacted drones. They were pointed to the north, east, and west respectively, the southern side of the base protected by the river. Having found the various wires and cords controlling the ballistas, my bugs split up into small groups, following each back to the source. As they did so, I dispersed the rest of my swarm throughout the lair, spreading them thin enough not to attract attention, but dense enough that I could still monitor what was going on. From what I could tell, Iron Maiden’s workers were busy gathering and boxing her tech. Were they planning on leaving? If so, would they free me afterwards, or leave me to rot? I didn’t plan on staying to find out.

As my bugs worked their way through the building’s interior, I noticed something on the outside. The underground bugs I had sent towards the surface were crawling back down into my range. It seemed simply pushing them up wouldn’t be enough. I needed to find a way of sending them above ground and getting them to stay there. Maybe... I thought back to the trick I used on Arsène, using pheromones to track him outside my range. Perhaps I could do the same thing here. Many insects, in the case of rain or predators, released pheromones warning the rest of the colony to flee. These are what my bugs let out, each and every one of them, the entire swarm signaling the need to escape. Once they left my range, instinct would take over, driving the mass of bugs up into the open air. It was a long shot I realized, but all it took was one person. One driver glancing over the edge, one construction worker working late, one homeless person with a phone. I’d just have to be patient. Of course, it wasn’t like I truly had nothing to do.

A few moments before, my bugs in the walls had located what seemed to be a bank of servers or mainframes, connected to devices all across the base. My bugs got to work, gnawing at wires and cables, some electrocuting themselves in the process. It was a long, drawn out process, my bugs sometimes taking up to several minutes to sever a single cord. On top of that, I couldn’t see where any of these wires went, meaning this was entirely trial and error. Finally, after much guesswork and many cut wires, the whir of the machines began to cease. The drones in the vents stopped moving,
and after checking that they were truly inoperative, I was free to move my remaining bugs throughout the base. With her defenses down, I turned my attention to Iron Maiden’s security systems. Locating one of her security cameras, I traced the wires back to another bank of servers and repeated the same process as before. I was halfway through severing the cables, when I heard a loudspeaker sounding throughout the base.

“Attention everyone!” spoke Iron Maiden through the speaker, “We are on Red Alert! The PRT are here. Repeat. The PRT are here. Security officers get to your stations, everyone else prepare for combat.”

“That was fast.” I thought. Then again, I was so occupied with my sabotage that I wasn’t really sure how long I had been down here.

My thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a metal panel being ripped off its frame on one of the upper floors.

“Fucking Masters!” I heard Iron Maiden shout, followed by a loud thump. It looked like she had found me out. Before I had time to react to this, all of my bugs in the area died. It seemed she still had her pulse emitter on her. A few moments later, the rest the bugs I had scattered throughout the base began dying in droves. It seemed her men had also been equipped with pulse emitters. For the first time in a long while, I was almost completely out of bugs. All I had left were a thin layer on the ground outside of the warehouse. Barely enough to hear what was going on, let alone help. I supposed I’d just have to trust the Protectorate to beat Iron Maiden without me.

“Well, I had a good run.” I thought with the smallest hint of a smirk.

Just then, a loud crash rocked the top floors of the lair. Iron Maiden’s men began pouring out of the warehouse. I could hear the stomping of feet, feel the heat of energy bursts and laser fire. The battle had begun.

Using my scant few bugs, I tried to feel out what was happening. There was a lot of shooting and ducking, with the occasional explosion thrown in for good measure. There was an uncomfortable feeling in the pit of my stomach. The other heroes were out there risking their lives to save me, and all I could do was sit here and watch.

Just then, I noticed movement on the south side of the building. There was someone, no, a small group of people approaching from the bank of the river. They ran silently up to the side of the building, avoiding detection by any of the combatants. There were a series of thuds and a section of the wall caved inwards. I gathered my remaining bugs around the group, following as they climbed into the warehouse. As I tagged them with my swarm, I was able to better identify the intruders. One was short, most likely a child or young teenager. Another tall, muscular, and presumably male. The third was of a thinner build, similar to mine. They crept around the warehouse carefully, no doubt wary of any remaining henchmen. Ultimately, they gathered around the elevator Styx had used earlier. The tall one took to examining the fingerprint scanner, and after pulling out some tools, pried a compartment open and started messing with the wires. After a minute there was a ding and the doors opened. The three entered the elevator and began riding it down. I tried to listen to what they were saying, but there were too few bugs and too much background noise to make anything out. As they descended, I realized they were rapidly approaching my level. I wasn’t yet sure if they were friend or foe, so I braced myself for anything. As the doors slid open, I was surprised to see Duo, Masterwork, and Kinetic Lad step into the room. Masterwork was the first to spot me.

“Weaver!” she called, running over to my cell, “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” I replied, “Completely immobilized, but otherwise unharmed.”
“We’ll get you out of there as soon as we can.” said Duo, jogging up to the computer screen next to the cell. “Just need to break into the system and unlock the doors.”

“You know how to hack into computer systems?” I asked.

“No.” he replied, “But Archive does. She’s back at the base, walking me through it right now. The other me that is.” He typed away at the computer for a few moments, then frowned. “Yeah, this might take a bit longer than I thought. Masterwork, do you mind watching the door? There’s no telling whether they noticed us sneaking in or not, and I’d rather we not get caught with our pants down.”

“Affirmative.” the Ward leader replied, marching off towards the elevator.

I spoke up, “I don’t have many bugs left, but from what I can tell, it seems most of Iron Maiden’s forces are occupied outside. What’s going on up there?”

“Well,” said Kinetic Lad, “Mangonel and the rest are busy holding Iron Maiden and her flunkies back. The idea was to keep them distracted while we sneak in and save you.”

“How’d you get past all the fighting?” I asked.

“The river.” answered Masterwork from across the room. “I used a technique Rime taught me a few years back to freeze the surface so we could walk across.”

“Clever. I’m honestly surprised you were able to find me so fast.”

“Once Mangonel realized you were missing, he sent out an APB.” explained Kinetic Lad, “Eventually, we got a tip about a bunch of bugs piling up near the highway; so we loaded up into the vans and headed over. Sure enough, when we arrived there was a big arrow of bugs pointing to this warehouse.”

“What?” I hadn’t ordered my bugs to do that. Either my passenger was acting on it’s own or... “Who else is here?”

“Just us and Iron Maiden’s men. I think.” replied Kinetic Lad.

“I need to get back up there, now!”

“Easier said than done.” said Duo. “The elevator may not have been very high security, but Iron Maiden did not want anyone hacking into her computer systems. Archive’s never seen anything this complex. I know because she keeps on repeating it.”

Kinetic Lad tapped at the glass. “Want me to try and break through?” he asked.

“I don’t know.” replied Duo, “This stuff is reinforced Palladium microalloy. It can handle over 200 GPa of stress.”

“How does Archive know that?” I asked suspiciously.

“She doesn’t. It says so right here.” Duo pointed to a small label on the corner of the glass.

Kinetic Lad crossed his arms in thought. “I should have enough momentum in reserve.” he said, “But that will be it for the night, and quite possibly the next few days. I also may not be able to walk afterwards.”

Duo shrugged. “If you think you’re up to it, go right ahead.” Duo took a step back, allowing Kinetic
Lad to get a running start. He turned to me. “You may want to move out of the way.”

“Why?” I asked.

Duo smiled. “Let me answer that question with another question. How many 12-year-olds does it take to break an unbreakable glass?”

There was a blur, followed swiftly by a loud shattering sound.

“One, at sufficient velocity.” answered Kinetic Lad.

The first thing I noticed was that the Ward was now standing in the cell with me. The second was the large hole in the glass behind him.

“Huh...” I uttered, “Well that’s one problem taken care of. Though I doubt you’ll be able to do the same thing to this black stuff I’m trapped in.”

“Containment gel.” said Duo, “Iron Maiden’s attempt at replicating containment foam. Not much more than a cheap knockoff, really.”

“When was removing my flight pack, she used some sort of spray to break it off.” I said.

“We don’t have access to that.” said Masterwork, stepping forward, “However there is another way of removing it.” She drew her sword. I immediately disliked where this was going.

As she held the sword in her hand, it began to emit a dull red glow. She pressed the flat of the blade against my chest, and I began to feel heat radiating from it. “We’ve encountered this stuff before in our fights with her.” Masterwork explained. “According to the labs, it’s especially vulnerable to thermal shock.” She removed the sword and pulled out her quarterstaff, which began glowing with a soft blue light. As she held that against my body, the heat was quickly replaced with sudden chill. Masterwork began alternating between the hot sword and cold staff. Eventually, cracks began to form in the shiny black shell. The cracks grew, spreading from my chest to the rest of my body. I flexed my upper body, trying to expedite the process. Soon enough, bits of black shell began chipping off. Finally, with a loud crack, the shell broke apart, pieces of it scattering onto the ground.

I stretched my arms and legs, glad to be able to move again, only to notice how sore my muscles were from being in the same position for so long. I supposed I’d just have to work through the pain.

“Thanks.” I said, brushing the remaining bits off my suit. “Now let’s head back up there. The others’ll likely need my help.”

Duo raised an eyebrow. “Jumping right back into the action, huh? You’re certainly self-assured.” he remarked.

“I’ve tried the whole zero-confidence thing.” I replied, “Decided it wasn’t for me.”

As we made our way back up to the surface, I was relieved to feel the bugs re-enter my range. I quickly scoped out the battlefield. From what I could tell, battle was over. This was confirmed when I stepped outside. The parking lot was strewn with scorch marks and debris. PRT troopers milled about, standing guard or tending to the wounded. Iron Maiden’s men were being rounded up and led into a police van. Cuirass was personally escorting a cape in a golden mask, making especially sure to stay out of arm’s reach. Styx and a cape in a skull mask were being loaded onto stretchers. In the distance, I saw a white van that had crashed into a pole. I wondered what the story behind that was.
I scanned the crowd, I was relieved to catch sight of Mangonel. At least, until I saw who he was speaking to. Comedy. Of course he was here.

I stormed over, ignoring the protests of Duo and my fellow Wards. Comedy caught sight of my approach.

“Ah, Weaver!” he exclaimed. “We were just talking about you. I’d say all good things, but I make it a point not to lie.”

“What are you doing here?” I demanded.

“You mean existentially or—”

It took all my willpower not to punch him right then and there.

Seeing my frustration, he relented, “Ah, you mean what am I doing here! Well, I heard through the grapevine, and over a police scanner, that you had gotten yourself into a bit of trouble. So I thought, why not gather the team, head out into the night, and lend some neighborly assistance to my favorite out-of-towner?”

“How did you know where to find me?” I asked.

“Oh, that was simplicity itself. We merely followed the rush of the PRT vans.”

“You followed the PRT? Is that the story you’re sticking to?”

Comedy shrugged. “Why not? It’s the truth, isn’t it?”

Mangonel put a hand on my shoulder. “Weaver, a word?” He pulled me aside. “Look, I’m glad to see you’re unharmed, but maybe you should sit down and rest for a moment. You’ve just gone through a very traumatic experience, and you may not be thinking clearly.”

“Oh, no? Kinetic Lad mentioned that, upon arriving, you guys saw an arrow of bugs pointing to Iron Maiden’s lair. Is that right?”

“Yes.” the Protectorate leader said, “What are you getting at?”

“What I’m getting at is the Philosopher Kings are not what they say they are. I didn’t make that marker. I couldn’t. I was too far underground to control bugs on the surface. The only other bug cape in the city is a member of their team. That means the Philosopher Kings were here before you and knew that Iron Maiden was holding me hostage.”

“Comedy, the Philosopher Kings were helping us fight Iron Maiden. They saved a lot of lives.”

“Really? Because Kinetic Lad didn’t mention them participating. Tell me, were they helping out from the beginning, or did they only enter the fight when it was clear you were winning?”

“Actually, they arrived just in the nick of time. If they hadn’t subdued Grateful Dead, there’d have been a lot less casualties and a lot more fatalities.”

He pointed over to the skull themed cape, who was being loaded into an ambulance. I set a few bugs on him.

“That man’s not moving.” I stated critically.

“Oh, don’t worry about him.” Comedy cut in, “We just used an over-the-counter sedative. Not all of
us have access to fancy cages or containment foam. I figured that if it worked on Iblis and Icepick, it would work on him.”

“Hold up.” said Mangonel, “What was that about Iblis and Icepick?”

“Oh, we captured them earlier tonight. It’s why we were so late getting here. I’m surprised you didn’t get a call about it.”

“We were on radio silence.” he said in disbelief, pulling out his PRT phone. Looking over his shoulder, I saw that there was an urgent message for him. As he took it, I planted some bugs around his ear, allowing me to listen in.

“Sir, this is Photocell. I won’t be able to make it to the fight, something big’s come up. You won’t believe this, sir, but we got Icepick and Iblis. There was an anonymous tip that they’d been defeated, and sure enough we found them a few blocks away from HQ, unconscious and zip-tied to a telephone pole. Capoeira, High Wire, and I are currently transporting them to secure containment. I’ll let you know if anything else happens. Over and out.”

Mangonel put down the phone. “Well, I’ll be damned.”

“I do hope we didn’t step on your toes.” said Comedy. He glanced in my direction. “I’d hate to upstage the Protectorate.”

“No no it’s fine.” Mangonel replied, seeming not to notice the jab, ”But I have to ask. How did you manage to take out two of the city’s strongest villains at the same time?”

“Very carefully.” Comedy said with a laugh.

Mangonel sighed. “Yeah, that’s about what I expected. You four are a secretive bunch, I’ll give you that. Still, after all this time avoiding us, why have you only now chosen to work with the Protectorate?”

“Believe me, sir, if our two groups have never had the privilege of meeting previously; it is only a matter of circumstance, not intent.”

“That seems rather far-fetched” I said.

“I wouldn’t say so.” replied Comedy. “This is a big city, and our two groups share so few hours of patrol time. I can think of stranger things than two ships not passing in the night.”

“And you expect us to believe that?” I challenged.

“I believe I’ve been rather candid about my expectations, at least as far as politeness permits.” His words were light and airy, but there was a venom to them.

“Well, no need to restrain yourself on my account.” I snapped back, “By all means, tell us what you really think.”

“That’s enough, Weaver.” Mangonel said, stepping in between the two of us. “We’ve just won a hard battle. There’s no need to create more tension.”

“So you’re saying you don’t find any of this the least bit suspicious?”

“What I’m saying is that this isn’t the time to discuss it.”

“I don’t know, I’m gonna to have to side with Weaver on this one.” Comedy butted in, “We are by
far the most suspicious heroes in the city, and you’ll never have a better chance at beating us than now.”

“You be quiet!” I shouted, rapidly losing my composure.

Mangonel seemed not to sympathize with my plight.

“Weaver,” he began, slowly, “please help Cuirass escort the captured villains back to HQ.”

“But I-”

“Now.”

I would have fought back more, but given the recent situation, I realized I was in no position to defy orders. I reluctantly marched over to the departing PRT vans, making sure to leave enough bugs behind to eavesdrop.

“Sorry for that. “ Mangonel continued, “Outbursts aside, Weaver does make a good point. As thankful as I am for your help, there’s still the matter of your alleged misconduct. Would you object to coming back to the Protectorate HQ with us to answer some questions?”

“Not at all, I’d be delighted to-” It sounded like he was about to say something further, when he stopped. “Wait. Do you happen to have the time?”

Mangonel checked his phone. “Two minutes to midnight.”

“Ooh, sorry. We actually have to go.” Comedy said, “Like, right now.”

“Why can’t you be out after midnight?” Mangonel asked.

“Curfew.” he replied. “It is a school night after all.”

“Uh, I see. Very well then, I won’t keep you. That being said, I would appreciate it if you came in some time tomorrow or the next day to discuss your team. Does that sound agreeable?

“Oh, that would be just...” he paused, as if searching for the word.

...

...

“Copacetic.”
The next morning started out much like the one before, with me being called into Mangonel’s office. The difference was the mood. When I walked through the door, Mangonel did not seem happy to see me.

“Have a seat, Weaver.” he said, motioning to the chair. I sat. “I’ve been thinking a lot about last night.”

“Me too, sir.” I said, “From what I can tell, the Philosopher Kings had foreknowledge on Iron Maiden’s base and-”

Mangonel put up a hand and stopped me. “We’re not here to talk about the Philosopher Kings.” he said, “We’re here to talk about you.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. I explicitly told you not to pursue Iron Maiden, and what’s the first thing you do? Venture out on your own and get yourself captured.”

“She had tech that counteracted my bugs. If it wasn’t for that, I would have been able to defeat her easily.”

“That’s not the issue here.” he said, briefly resting a hand against his forehead, “You deliberately disobeyed a direct order, violated the terms of your probation, and most importantly, put yourself and your fellow heroes at risk.”

“I was doing my job.” I responded, “I was brought here to deal with the Philosopher Kings, and the only way to do that was to gather information on their possible associates.”

“And did it never occur to you that there might have been better ways to do that? Ways that didn’t result in a hostage situation?”

“That only happened because-”

“Because you were careless. Because you didn’t think the rules applied to you, or that you needed to listen to the advice of people who clearly knew what they were talking about. You could have died. We all could have. Did you even consider that before going out on your little escapade?”

“I... I didn’t think it would come to that.”

“No, you didn’t, did you?” he said, with a grim expression, “When you first got here, I was asked to trust you. How am I supposed to trust someone who won’t trust her teammates or superiors when they tell her she is in over her head?”

“Chevalier trusted me.”

“Well maybe Chevalier was wrong!” Mangonel shouted. He paused and took a deep breath. “I’m sorry, Weaver; but this just isn’t working out.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you’re off the case. This trial run is over. I put in a call to Revel; you’re flying back to Chicago this afternoon.”
I rose from my seat. “What?”

“I gave you a chance. I overlooked your record and allowed you a place alongside my Wards. But as capable as you are, as much as I respect you as a person, this team cannot accommodate someone who ignores orders and puts their teammates in harm’s way.”

I was at a loss for words. I knew I had fucked up, but I hadn’t expected this.

“You’re making a mistake.” I said earnestly, trying not to lose my composure, “The issue with the Philosopher Kings hasn’t been resolved. You still need my help.”

“With all due respect, I think I’ve had quite enough of your help. Take the next few hours to gather your things and say your goodbyes. I take no pleasure in this, Weaver, but it’s for the best.”

And with that, he motioned towards the door, declaring in all but words that the conversation was over. Nothing else to say, I left his office, my ego a little more than bruised.

As I walked solemnly through the halls, I passed Mel the intern, carrying a box of office supplies. He stopped as he noticed me.

“Hey.” he said, “Mangonel done chewing you out?”

“And then some.” I muttered with a frown, “I’ve been ordered back to Chicago. Effective immediately.”

“Well that’s too bad.” he replied, “I hate to say I told you so, but... I did tell you so.”

“Is that supposed to be reassuring?”

He shrugged. “If it makes you feel any better, you’re not the only one being punished for last night.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yep. I was fired this morning for helping you.”

I stared at him. “What?”

“Yeah, apparently supplying classified information to a probationary Ward is ‘against protocol’ and ‘grounds for immediate termination’. Go figure.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s not your fault. It’s just the kind of world we live in. Capes do what they want, and us normal people have to deal with it.” He adjusted the box he was holding and started walking away. “Anyway, catch you later.”

I wanted to say something, to offer some sort of further apology or assurance, but anything I said would have felt hollow. Instead, I watched silently as the intern made his way through the exit and out into the city beyond.

I found the Wards’ quarters empty, the other Wards no doubt on patrol or recovering from last night. I laid myself down across the couch, trying to put everything in perspective. I had promised Chevalier that I wouldn’t take any big risks, that I wouldn’t endanger my teammates. And I ended up doing just that. I thought that I had been making good progress, that I finally had this hero thing
down pat. And yet, here I was, waiting for them to ship me away so I couldn't cause any more damage. Why did it always have to be like this? Why did I always have to do things my way?

My wallowing was interrupted by a ringing sound. Sitting up, I saw that someone was calling on the computer. As I walked up to it, Dragon’s face appeared on the screen.

“Weaver.” she said, “I’m so glad to see you’re okay.”

“Glad to see you too.” I replied, “I take it you’ve heard about what happened?”

“Yes.” she said with a sympathetic look, “Mangonel told me this morning. He asked me to prepare the Dragonfly for your departure.”

“I suppose this is the part where you tell me how disappointed you are?”

“No, of course not. I mean yes, I’d prefer it if you followed the rules more and took less risks; but at the same time, that’s what makes you you. It’s what allows you to be such a capable hero in the first place.”

“I don’t suppose you could tell that to Mangonel?”

“I tried. Sadly, it’s out of my hands. I could put in a word with Chevalier if you really want.”

“No, no. I’d rather put off telling him about this whole mess as long as possible.”

“I can understand that. What about you? How are you holding up?”

“Fine.” I replied, “I managed to make it out uninjured.”

“That’s good; but what I meant is how do you feel about all this?”

“Hmm.” I paused in thought.

“If you don’t want to talk about it, I understand.”

“No, it’s just... I’m not really sure how to describe it. I feel angry, and frustrated; but not with Mangonel or anyone else. If anything, I’m angry at myself. And yet, I just can’t convince myself that what I did was wrong. That I didn’t make the best decision with all the information available to me.”

Dragon pursed her lips. “You know, Weaver,” she began, “there are times in life when you can weigh all the options and consider all the variables, and still end up making the wrong decision. It isn’t a reflection on you as a person, nor does it have anything to do with logic or morality. It’s just a matter of circumstance.”

“Getting captured by Iron Maiden was more than just circumstance.” I remarked. “I chose to go out alone, to ignore everyone’s advice and take on a powerful cape in her own stronghold.”

“I suppose that’s true.” she said, a thoughtful expression flashing across her face, “The way I see it, you took a chance. It’s something you tend to do, and in your defense, you have become very good at it. Sometimes those gambles pay off, and sometimes they don’t. What’s important is that you own up to them and face the consequences.”

“I’m not worried about the consequences of my mistakes. I’m more mad that I made these mistakes in the first place. I thought I was smarter than that.”

“Intelligence doesn’t mean never making mistakes. It means recognizing your mistakes and learning
from them. To never make the same mistake twice."

“I guess you’re right.” I muttered pensively.

I supposed I’d just have to accept my failure. Despite all the time and effort, I had learned next to nothing about the Philosopher Kings. Nothing about how their powers worked, about how they operated as a team. I never even got to see them all in action. Actually, now that I thought about it, I never really encountered any of them except Comedy. Not on patrols, the stakeout, or even when they supposedly helped against Iron Maiden. If I didn’t know any better...

And then it clicked. A hundred little clues and hints I had gathered, bits and pieces of information ignored in favor of the bigger picture, came flooding together. As the realization hit me, I began looking over the events of the past week, viewing them all in a completely new light.

“Oh my god.” I breathed.

“’Weaver?’ inquired Dragon.

“Oh my fucking god. It was so obvious.”

“’Weaver, are you okay?’ Dragon asked. ‘I’m beginning to be concerned.’

“I’m fine Dragon.” I replied, “I just... figured something out. You don’t have to worry about me; I’ll be heading home this afternoon. But before I do, I’m going to need a favor.”

The metal doors slid open with a hiss. As I entered the small room, my eyes immediately fell upon its only occupant. A man of average build, about 5’10”, leaning up on the bed. He looked up from his book.

“What do you want?” asked Arsène.

“To talk.” I said, stepping further inside as the door shut behind me.

“I thought I had made myself perfectly clear.” the villain replied, “I am not answering any more questions.”

“And why is that?”

A scowl planted itself on his lips. “I’d rather not say.”

“You are aware that cooperation could lead to leniency?”

“I am aware and my decision stands.”

“For reasons which you refuse to disclose.”

“If you have a point, make it. Otherwise I request you leave.” He waved his hand dismissively, but there was some trepidation behind it. He was acting aloof, almost overtly so. That told me he was hiding something.

“Very well. If you won’t do this the easy way...” I snapped my fingers. At my signal, Dragon deactivated the many cameras hidden throughout the cell. Arsène gave a sudden twitch.

“What are you doing?” he asked, eyes darting around cell.
“Making sure our conversation stays private. No bugs. No cameras. You won’t answers questions? That’s fine, I can respect that. Instead, I’ll list the facts of the case, and you can jump in whenever you like.” I raised a finger. “First. You are captured after a heist and offer to divulge information about one of the local hero teams in exchange for clemency.” I raised another finger. “Second. A recorded confession is held and then interrupted right before you reveal the team’s secret.” I raised a third finger. “Finally, you are knocked out for supposedly trying to escape your own confession. All additional attempts are met with noncompliance.” I crossed my arms. “Now, these facts lead to only two conclusions. Either you had no information, only pretending to in order to gain a chance at escape; or you had information and were intimidated into silence. I’m willing to bet on the later case; that you planned on confessing until you were threatened during the interruption. Either by someone in the PRT, or by someone who could infiltrate the Protectorate HQ without detection. Am I correct?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea what you’re rambling about.” He spoke in a calm tone, but I could detect a hint of fear in it. I had hit my mark.

“You’re afraid.” I said, “If not of me, then of someone else. So afraid that you’d rather risk jail time than cross this person. I can help you, but you need to work with me.”

Arsène turned away scornfully. “You think you’re so smart, don’t you? Well I hate to break it to you, hero, but you can’t help me. You can’t protect me from him.”

I took another step forward. “From who?”

“If I tell you, I’m a dead man.”

“And if you don’t, you’ll spend the rest of your life rotting in prison while innocent people suffer for it. You have information on the Philosopher Kings. You said that they weren’t something. Finish that sentence. What aren’t the Philosopher Kings?”

Arsène fixed his gaze on me, staring intently. “Fuck it.” he said, shaking his head, “If I’m going out, I might as well do it with dignity. You want to know about the Philosopher Kings? I’ll tell you. The secret is...” he leaned in close, almost conspiratorially, “They’re not real.”
The Appraiser looked over the jewels, examining each with a careful eye. He was an older man, with a businesslike air and the slightest hint of an accent. Arsène thought it might have been Swiss; it was where the two of them had first met after all. Arsène had no idea why he had relocated to the States. Still, he waited patiently as the man examined his payment. Finally, Appraiser paused, his hand hovering over a particularly brilliant sapphire. He plucked it up and gave it a look-over.

“This one’s fake,” he said, sparing a critical glance at Arsène.

“Is it?” replied the thief coolly, “I had no idea; they were all from the same set. An honest mistake, you understand.”

“Yes, I understand.” echoed Appraiser, sliding the false gem away from the others, “Even you’re not stupid enough to try and swindle me. Still, it wouldn’t kill you to use cash.”

“Money’s only good in the country it’s issued in, and traveler’s cheques leave a paper trail. Gold and jewels are much more practical.”

“You mean more indulgent.”

“Exactly. So, is it enough to cover your costs?”

“I suppose it might. Who can say?”

“Now who’s swindling whom?” asked Arsène. “You know exactly how much those are worth.”

“I know how much someone would pay for them. That doesn’t mean I’ll actually find a buyer. Especially with how hot these goods are.”

“Fair enough. I honestly couldn’t care less what you do with them, so long as you have what I’m looking for. You do have it, don’t you?”

“Naturally.” he slid across the table a thick manila envelope. “Inside you’ll find everything you could need. Floor plans, security codes, patrol routes; the works. Read this and you’ll be in and out before they even know you’re there.” Arsène reached over for the envelope, only for Appraiser to place his hand atop it. “One more thing. There’s a particular painting in the museum that I would prefer you not to touch. Vincent van Gogh’s *Sunflowers*. It has a certain personal importance to me, and I’d ask that you leave it be. As a professional courtesy, of course.”

“An odd request,” noted Arsène, “but one I can abide by. There’re plenty of other pieces just as valuable.” He held out a hand. “So, are we in agreement?”

Appraiser stared at the hand, then at Arsène, then back at the hand, before finally shaking it.

Arsène smiled. “Pleasure doing business with you.”

Arsène left the info broker’s office, walking out the back door into a dark alleyway. He was just about to begin the jump home, when he felt a pair of eyes on him. Cursing silently, he ducked behind a nearby dumpster. Out of sight, he considered his options. The adjacent roofs were too high to reach in a single jump, and the alley provided no other cover. He’d have to wait for an opening and chain
teleport. Stopping and listening, he could hear the sound of conversation.

“I’m just saying, it doesn’t count.” came a voice.

“How? How does it not count?” said a second voice.

“It’s not a cheesesteak without Cheez Whiz. It’s in the name.”

“And if I added provolone?”

“That would just be a steak sandwich with cheese.”

“That’s the exact same thing.”

“No, it’s not. If you walk down to Pat’s, where they invented the cheesesteak, you’ll see they use Whiz.”

“And if you go to Geno’s, where they improved on the cheesesteak significantly, you will find that they recommend provolone.”

“Which is why it is almost unanimously agreed that Pat’s is better than Geno’s”

“There do not exist words that could describe how wrong you are.”

“Nephelai, clear this up. Which is better, Pat’s or Geno’s?”

“I don’t know.” came a girl’s voice, “Personally, I always preferred Jim’s on South Street.”

There was a long pause.

“I thought I knew you, Nephe.” said the first voice.

As they talked, Arsène hazarded a glance down the alley. Poking his head out, he saw three capes standing in a row. Only one was looking in his direction, the one in the center with the white comedy mask.

Despite no doubt seeing Arsène, the cape continued talking as if he hadn’t noticed. “Look, the popularity argument is moot. The appeal to popularity is a logical fallacy of the most egregious kind.”

“But isn’t dismissing an argument because of a fallacy a form of fallacy in itself?” noted the second voice, a lion-themed cape in yellow, “Argumentum ad logicam, I believe the term is.”

“Don’t talk Latin at me. I literally taught you the language.”

“It’s not my fault Latin and Greek are the languages of logic.”

“Oh, you want to bring Greek into this too? Go on. Explain to me the Nicomachean Ethics of provolone cheese. No wait, you can’t. Because the foundation of virtue ethics is the concept of flourishing, of things serving their function and existing in their ideal form. And the purest, most elemental form of a Philly cheesesteak is one ‘Wiz Wit’, that is to say, with Cheez Whiz and onions.”

“Perhaps, but you forget that flourishing, or eudaimonia if you pardon my Greek, is based primarily on human happiness and welfare. And as provolone is a healthier alternative to that greasy processed sludge you call cheese, it is much more capable of promoting the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people, thus making it the superior choice vis-à-vis John Stuart Mill’s
utilitarianism.”

“I thought the Greatest Happiness Principle was Bentham’s hat.” said the girl in the cloud dress.

“Mill wore it better.”

Arsène couldn’t take much more. He’d suffered through inane conversations before, but this was just unbearable. Whoever these people were, they were clearly toying with him. Lacking any other options, he stepped out of hiding.

“Oh! It appears we have company.” exclaimed the cape in the comedy mask. As the cape’s friends all turned to look, Arsène immediately knew something was wrong. His teleportation power came with a restriction, one that prevented him from using it while observed. To compensate, it also allowed him to sense peoples’ line of sight. Right now, he could see the two other capes looking at him, but he couldn’t feel their eyes. Were they blind? He moved out from behind the dumpster, and to his confusion, the capes’ heads turned to follow him.

“Hey there, stranger.” spoke the cape in the white mask, “What's a nice guy like you doing in a place like this?”

“I could ask you the same thing.” responded Arsène, “Preferably with less subtext.”

“Oh, just general heroics. We’re the Philosopher King’s. I’m Comedy and these two are Nemean and Nephelai.”

“Congratulations.” replied Arsène, “What do you want?”

“Well, a little birdie told us that there was a new villain in town. A phantom thief named Arsène. He’s about your height, dresses in black, has a probable fondness for early 20th century French literature. You wouldn't've happened to see him around, would you?”

“Who wants to know?” asked Arsène.

“Well, we do.” answered Comedy. “I thought that was obvious.” His friends both sighed. “What, too literal?”

As Comedy turned to address his companions, Arsène let out a small gasp. By all accounts, Comedy had looked away. Arsène could see him now, casually chatting with his friends. And yet, Arsène could still feel his steady gaze, as if the cape’s eyes had subtly shifted themselves to the side of his head.

“What the fuck.” exclaimed Arsène, despite himself.

Comedy went rigid. “What was that?” he asked, slowly turning his head towards Arsène.

“Nothing.” replied the thief.

“No. No, that wasn’t nothing.” said Comedy, an ominous edge creeping into his voice. “That was most certainly something.”

“Comedy, calm down.” said Nemean, stepping forward, “It’s not important, just forget it.”

“No, I can’t forget. I can feel it, reverberating throughout my skull. Festering in my mind like a cancer.” As he said this, the lights along the alley and out in the street started to flicker. The sounds of the city began to fade out, until Arsène could hear nothing but his own heartbeat. As the shadows
began to grow and crowd around them, Comedy’s two companions shared a panicked look.

Nephelai raised her arm, “Comedy, don’t.” And then she froze, along with Nemean.

The two of them stood there, not moving, not making a sound. It was as if they had become statues, silent and motionless. Comedy, ignoring his friends’ still bodies, advanced slowly, the shadows coiling around his feet.

“Not a step closer!” shouted Arsène, drawing the pistol hidden in his belt. Comedy seemed undeterred, even as Arsène leveled the gun at his head. Seeing no other option, Arsène fired, hitting him square in the face. Comedy staggered back for a moment, before continuing on unhurt, his mask not even dented. Arsène swore and emptied the rest of the clip into the approaching cape. The bullets plunged into his body, but they might as well have been BB pellets, how little they impeded him.

“What is this, a horror movie?” thought Arsène, backing up against the wall.

This thought occupying his mind, Arsène watched as Comedy did the most terrifying thing he had ever seen.

He frowned.

Arsène tried to reconcile what he was seeing. Before his eyes, Comedy’s mask began to deform, its eyebrows knitting together in grief, its mouth curling down into a woeful grimace. As Comedy stalked ever closer, the sound of his footsteps echoing though the alleyway, Arsène started to notice smaller details: the bags under the eyes, the lines around the mouth. The realization hit him that what he was looking at wasn’t a mask.

Arsène swiftly decided he didn’t want to be here. He unpinned a flashbang from his belt, tossing it forward with one arm and shielding his eyes with the other. As the grenade went off, he could feel Comedy’s gaze finally leave him. Ignoring the ringing in his ears, Arsène took the opportunity and teleported out of there, jumping as quick as he could to the top of the building. Out of sight, he picked a direction and started running, teleporting from rooftop to rooftop, not stopping until he had left whatever that was far behind. He occasionally glanced behind him, just to make sure he wasn’t being followed. Once he was certain he had gotten away, he changed direction and headed for his hotel. He didn’t know what was going on in this city, and frankly he didn’t want to find out. After tomorrow’s heist, he was blowing this town; no matter what.

Arsène sat in the small interrogation room, watching the hero in front of him talk. He went through the usual confessionary spiel, going through the particulars of the case, the concessions they’d offer in exchange for his testimony. All the while, the PRT’s omnidirectional camera monitored the room, completely canceling out Arsène’s power. He was not surprised by these precautions; anything less would have insulted him. It wasn’t his first time in an interrogation room, and it wouldn’t be his last. Like all great thieves, he had contingencies in place in the event of his arrest. Of course, most of them depended on him being in Europe. That’s partly why he agreed to this confession; if he could get extradition out of it, it would be worth the hit to his pride. As he thought this, the hero turned to him, telling him he could proceed.

“Hello, my name is Arséne.” began the thief, “I am giving this statement willingly and of my own free will.” He took a deep breath. He was not above a bit of theatrics, and the bomb he was about to drop deserved some preamble. “The information I possess concerns a local hero group, the
Philosopher Kings. What I have to say is shocking, hard to believe even, but the fact of the matter is that they aren’t—”

And then it all went dark. The lights flickered and went out. He could feel the camera’s sight disappear from the room. This was either really good, or really bad. Then he heard it.

“Tsk tsk tsk. Come now Arséne, no one likes a tattletale.”

A chill ran down Arséne’s spine in response to a voice he had hoped to never hear again. His eyes darted around the room, trying desperately to locate the source.

“It’s you.” he breathed, voice barely above a whisper. “The one from the alley. Comedy.”

“You remembered! That’s great. My number one priority is always leaving an impression.”

“Where are you?” he cried.

“I’m right here, pal. Between your ears and behind your eyes. There was so much room, I’d thought there’d be no harm in hitching a ride. And what do you know? It turned out be an act of providence. After all, you were so very close to giving away our secret. And let me tell ya, what a mistake that would have been.”

“What do you want?” asked Arséne, terror creeping into his voice.

“Always with the questions. Can’t you people figure stuff out on your own?” Arséne heard a disembodied sigh, “If you must know, I’m here to kill you.”

“What?”

“You know, killing. It’s a thing people do to make other people not alive. You’re a super villain; you must have heard of it.”

Arséne looked to the hero, trusting on him to intervene. Unfortunately, he didn’t appear to hear Comedy. In fact, it seemed he hadn’t moved an inch since the camera went out.

“Oh? Turning towards a hero for help? That’s a great idea!”

Before Arséne could react, a blackish mist began seeping out of his own nose and mouth, floating towards the Protectorate cape. Arséne tried to cover his face, but it was too late; the smokey substance was already entering the hero.

“Now we’re talking.” said Comedy’s voice. “Photocell, be a dear and dispose of him, would you?”

At his command, the hero stood up, his hands clenched into fists. Arséne jumped out of his chair and staggered back, just as Photocell smashed the table in half with a mighty blow.

“Please, stop!” cried Arséne, back pressed against the wall.

“Stop?” mused Comedy, “Mmm... no. I don’t think I will. Can’t have you running your mouth to the wrong people.”

“I promise, I won’t tell anyone! Not a soul, I swear!”

There was a pause. “Well, why didn’t you say so?” exclaimed Comedy, “That changes things entirely.”
“Really?” murmur Arséne, feeling a small spark of hope even as Photocell stomped over the wreckage to loom over him.

“Of course. I trust people to keep secrets when it serves their best interest.”

Arséne exhaled, both out of relieve, and because of the fist plowing into his stomach. He slumped onto the ground, immobilized.

“Consider that a warning.” said Comedy, “The last one I’m willing to give. Expose me again, and I’ll know. After all... I'm in your head, and I will never go away.”

Those words echoed through Arséne’s head as his vision faded. The last thing he saw before blacking out was a swarm of bugs streaming out of the vent.

The bug girl looked down at him.

“What do you mean they’re not real?”

“I mean there are no Philosopher Kings. It’s just the one guy, Comedy. The others, I don’t even know what they are. Puppets? Projections?”

He told her everything, about the alley and the confession. She listened intently, occasionally stopping for questions, but overall giving him time to gather his thoughts and tell his story. When he was finished, she made no comment, merely nodding her head.

“Are you satisfied?” he asked impatiently.

“Yes.” She replied. “That’s all I needed to hear.”

“Then I expect you to keep up your end of the bargain. I want protection. If it gets out that I helped you-”

“It won’t. I guarantee it.”

“You don’t know that. That freak could be anywhere. He could be listening right now.”

“Alright.” She said, turning towards the door, “If that is the case, then leave him a message. Tell him that I know who he is; I know what he can do; and I’m coming for him.”
“Did you get all that?” I asked as I returned to the Wards’ quarters.

“Processing now.” answered Dragon. “The program’s new; Defiant hasn’t finished optimizing it yet.”

I glanced at the security cameras. They were all pointing to the center of the room, where my swarm floated in the shape of a person. The bug clone wasn’t in my likeness however, but was instead mimicking Arséne.

The interesting thing about controlling bugs is that it gives you access to creatures all but invisible to the naked eye. Fleas, lice, dust mites; pests so small you could plant them on someone without being noticed. While in the cell, I did just that; subtly tagging Arséne with my bugs; sneaking them to key points on his face and body like markers in motion capture. I had copied the relative positions of these bugs with the swarm clone in the Wards’ quarters, perfectly simulating Arséne’s body language. From the moment I had snapped my fingers, the security cameras had been observing my clone, gathering data.

We were using an upgraded version of Defiant’s lie detection software. He had integrated features from his combat predictor, creating a program that drew more accurate readings from less data. By using my bugs as data points, along with audio recorded from the cell; we’d be able to determine the truth of Arséne’s story, even without video.

Admittedly, it would have probably been much less complicated to just record our conversation normally, but Arséne would have detected any cameras on him, and I imagined he’d be much more open if he thought we were unmonitored.

I looked at the computer, watching the program transcribe the interrogation as it analyzed his voice, gestures, and facial expressions. I stood there with bated breath, waiting for the computer to announce any lies or falsehoods. It never did. The program reached the end of the conversation, before printing out in bold green letters:

100% True

“Interesting...” I murmured, my mind racing.

“Are these not the results you expected?” asked Dragon.

“No, I thought this might be the case.” I replied, “Tell me, did you happen to view Photocell’s interview with Archive?”

“Bringing it up now.” said Dragon. There was a brief pause. “Hmm.” she finally responded, “This is strange. Photocell’s account of the event was completely different, contradictory even. And yet Archive signed off on its veracity.”

“Exactly. What does that tell you?”

“My first guess would be that either Archive or the lie detection software were incorrect, however unlikely that may be.”
“Perhaps. But what if they weren’t? What if both Photocell and Arséne were telling the truth?”

“That seems impossible, given the circumstances.”

“It’s not impossible. In fact, answering this riddle may be the key to this whole mess.” I crossed my arms. “The way I see it, there’s only one way that this scenario makes sense. Only one way two people could truthfully give different accounts of the same event. And that’s if neither of them saw what really happened.”

“Are you saying they were hallucinating?”

“I’m saying they were each shown a different series of events, false impressions obscuring what actually occurred. This cape, Comedy. The files say that he’s been using all these different powers. But what if that’s not true? What if he’s only been pretending to? What if that’s his power; pretending? Faking? Creating illusions that trick people into thinking he’s some mysterious, reality warping anti-hero? That would explain why he’s so elusive. If people realized what his power was, they’d realize everything he did was fake. It’s why he never used his powers around me, and why I never saw any of the other Philosopher Kings. I would realize they were illusions the minute I tried to sense them with my bugs. It would explain the gang war behind the Dons and Archfiends. Neither admitted to attacking the other because neither of them actually did. It was just Comedy, impersonating their leaders to goad them into a fight.”

“If that is true,” said Dragon, “then it means he was in the interrogation room during Arséne’s confession. It means there’s been a Master/Stranger lurking around the Philadelphia HQ this whole time, completely unnoticed. I need to contact Chevalier about this.”

“That’s a good idea, I replied. “I’ll go talk to Mangonel. Let him know what’s really been going on in his city.”

“Good luck.” said Dragon, preparing to log off, “Make sure to stay in contact. If you’re right, and I think you just may be, then there’s no telling where this cape may be, or what he’ll do when he finds out you know.”

With that, Dragon’s face disappeared from the screen, leaving me alone with my bugs. I set out to warn Mangonel, exiting into the hallway. After a few seconds, I managed to find him. He was walking with Masterwork towards the Wards’ quarters. I broke out into a jog, rushing to meet him halfway.

Mangonel stopped as he saw me. “Hello, Weaver. I was just explaining to Masterwork the current situation; specifically on how well you’ve been handling it.”

“That’s great. Listen, we have to put the building on Master/Stranger lockdown.”

Mangonel frowned, “Weaver, I can understand if you’re upset about leaving but—”

“What? No, I couldn’t care less about that. It’s Comedy; his power is illusions. He’s been using it to infiltrate the Protectorate HQ and mess with peoples’ heads.”

Mangonel and Masterwork exchanged glances.

“That’s... quite the claim.” spoke the Protectorate leader.

“I realize that, and I have proof. Just follow me to the Wards’ quarters and I can explain everything.”

I turned around before they could respond and started speed walking back. I felt them hesitate for a
second before following after me.

“So, what kind of proof?” asked Masterwork, falling into step beside me.

“I managed to get a second confession out of Arséne.”

“You did what, now?” exclaimed Mangonel two steps behind.

“Dragon approved and supervised it.” I said.

“And you didn’t think of asking for my approval?”

“If I asked, would you have said yes?”

“No.”

“That’s why I didn’t ask.”

“You know, Weaver; I’m beginning to think you have a problem with authority.”

Reaching the Wards’ quarters, I stepped aside so Masterwork and Mangonel could enter. I was just about to shut the metal doors, when I heard a voice.

“Hey, wait up!”

Glancing down the hall, I saw Flame Master trudging forward with a large cardboard box. I held the door for him, waiting for him to get inside before allowing it to slide close.

“Thanks.” he said, setting the box down. “What’s going on?”

“Weaver says she’s figured out Comedy’s superpower.” said Masterwork.

“For real? How’d you manage to do that?”

I pointed over to the computer, where Mangonel was reviewing the interrogation’s transcript.

“Weaver. Is all of this correct?” asked Mangonel.

“Yes. It was confirmed with Defiant’s personal lie detection software.”

“Then it is very concerning. However, it doesn’t conclusively point to Comedy being an illusionist.”

“It’s the only explanation that makes sense. Think about it. You yourself mentioned that none of the other Philosopher Kings have ever been caught on camera. What if that’s because they were never there in the first place? If it were all illusions, he could have whatever powers he wanted, be as many people as he wanted. The only ones who could tell the difference would be those whose power granted them alternate forms of sensing, like me or Arséne. That’s why he went as far as to interrupt the original confession.”

“That still doesn’t explain how he disabled the cameras.” noted Masterwork, “Illusions couldn’t do that.”

I nodded in agreement. “That’s what stumped me at first. Then I realized you don’t need superpowers to create an EMP. Mangonel, aren’t all PRT bases equipped with standard tinker-made
loadouts? Specifically those yellow grenades with the lightning bolt on them?”

Masterwork’s eyes widened. “You’re saying that he used one of our EMP grenades to disable the cameras, knowing that Photocell would be blamed?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

“Impossible.” said Mangonel. “Those grenade’s can’t be used without the right gloves or fingerprints. And our armor and weapons are kept in separate rooms with separate passwords. It’s been official policy since some villain in Brockton Bay broke into a supply room last year and grabbed a grenade launcher.”

I turned to Flame Master. “Didn’t you mention losing a glove the morning before the confession?”

Flame Master, who had been oddly quiet, perked up. “Did I?”

“You did.” said Masterwork, “I remember you complaining about it.”

“Oh, uh. I guess so.” he replied.

“What if you didn’t lose it?” I asked, “What if it was stolen?”

“Even if that’s true, could Flame Master’s glove even be used to operate the grenade?” asked Masterwork.

Mangonel crossed his arms. “Our weapons are programmed only to work for the Protectorate or PRT. Wards are part of the Protectorate, so technically speaking, Flame Master’s finger and glove prints should be acceptable. That being said, all PRT Tinkertech is geotrackable, including the grenades. He wouldn’t be able to leave the premises with them without us knowing.”

“Meaning they’re still somewhere in the building.” I said, reaching out with my bugs. This didn't take very long; my bugs were already spread throughout the headquarters as a matter of precaution. I hadn’t noticed anything unusual up to this point, so I started searching in more out-of-the-way places: behind walls, inside furniture, and beneath floorboards. I eventually found something suspicious in the ceiling several rooms away. It was vaguely cylindrical and felt like cloth. A cursory check revealed a zipper, along with several hard objects bulging from the sides.

Purpose in my step, I quickly strode to the object’s location, the other three following behind. We found ourselves outside one of the men’s restrooms. Unsecured and free from cameras; it was the perfect place to hide something. I glanced at Mangonel, who nodded and gestured for me to go forward.

“Coming in!” I announced, loudly knocking on the door as I entered. Luckily, the restroom appeared to be empty. I’d hate for any awkwardness to ruin what had so far been a fairly successful summation. I hadn’t noticed anything unusual up to this point, so I started searching in more out-of-the-way places: behind walls, inside furniture, and beneath floorboards. I eventually found something suspicious in the ceiling several rooms away. It was vaguely cylindrical and felt like cloth. A cursory check revealed a zipper, along with several hard objects bulging from the sides.

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“Found it.” I called, steadying myself with one arm while reaching out with the other. Grabbing onto the bag, I slowly, carefully pulled it out from the ceiling; careful not to drop it on the floor or, heaven forbid, in the toilet. As I cautiously climbed down, the others and I were able to get a good look at the bag. It was a small, dark green duffel bag, the kind you carried clothes in. Glancing at everyone
in turn, I reached down and zipped it open. Inside was a multitude of PRT equipment: A communicator and radio. A regulation stun gun and pepper spray. All kinds of security cards.

“Is that what I think it is?” asked Masterwork, pointing inside.

“Looks like it.” I replied, holding up a bright red glove.

“I mean, yeah. It’s a red glove.” said Flame Master, “but that doesn’t necessarily mean its mine.”

I noticed something flat sticking out of the cuff. Searching inside, I found what looked like a playing card. Closer inspection revealed it to be a holographic Mouse Protector card.

“You were saying?” I asked, holding the card up to him. “I seem to recall that you kept trading cards in your costume. You know, for luck.”

“Huh. That was a thing I said, wasn’t it.”

Turning back to the bag, I sifted though its contents until I found what I was really looking for; a yellow grenade with a lightning bolt and the letters E.M. stenciled on.

“Son of a gun.” muttered Mangonel as I pulled it out, “Looks like you were right. How am I going to tell Chevalier about this?”

“Preferably as soon as possible.” I replied. “So long as Comedy doesn’t know we’re on to him, he’s at a disadvantage. We need to come up with a plan while we still have the element of surprise.”

There was agreement all around, and we started back towards the Wards’ quarters. While en route, I continued rooting through the bag, looking for anything incriminating. My hand found its way to a thin notebook. Curious, I flipped it open to the first page.

W. Smith
Alias: Mangonel
Power: Blaster/Thinker, long-range energy blasts/advanced spatial awareness
Appearance: black male, 6’ 2″, lean build, brown eyes, black hair
POB: Philadelphia, PA
POR: Society Hill

Eyes narrowing, I turned the page

N. Twain
Alias: Duo
Power: Brute/Breaker/Thinker, linked bodies/can transfer injuries and fatigue
Appearance: white male(s), 6’ 1″, muscular build, brown eyes, brown hair
I spoke up. “Mangonel, I think you’ll want to see this.”

The Protectorate leader, who had just passed through the security terminal into the Wards’ quarters, looked up. “Hm?” He glanced over the pages. A crease appeared on his forehead. “Oh shit.”

“This is what I was afraid of.” I said. “It seems Comedy didn’t just infiltrate the PRT, he was a part of it.”

“Like a mole?” asked Masterwork.

“I’m not sure,” I replied, “but it would explain a lot. When I first encountered him, he was able to immediately guess my identity. I assumed it was a Thinker ability, but looking back, it’s more than likely he simply had access to my PRT file. On top of that, it was no coincidence that I found him near the one dark alley in the area. He was there because he knew about the ambush. Hell, he was probably there when we planned it.”

“Does that mean you’ve figured out who he is?” asked Flame Master.

“I think so. He’d have to be someone nondescript. Someone who could go around unnoticed, beneath notice; hidden in plain sight. Someone with access to the records and databases, and who could fudge them if necessary. Someone who’s been watching from the beginning, making sure I didn’t get too close to the truth; even sending me on the wrong track. And most importantly, someone who was there during the confession to interrupt it. Taking all this into consideration, there’s only one person Comedy could be. His identity, his real identity, is none other than Mel the intern!”

I was expecting some surprised expressions, maybe even a muffled gasp or two. All I received were looks of confusion.

It was Masterwork who broke the silence. “Who?”

I stared back at her. “You know, Mel. He was there, recording the confession.”

Flame Master shrugged. “I’ve never heard of him.”

“You were speaking with him before, about your glove.”

“I spoke with you, Weaver. No one else was around.”

“I don’t know what to tell you, Weaver.” said Mangonel, “There isn’t anyone by that name working here.”

I took a step back. What in the world was going on?

“Perplexing, isn’t it?” came a voice.

I whirled around, my eyes falling upon the cape in the black suit and smiling white mask, lounging on the couch.

“Are you perplexed?” asked Comedy, “I know I’d be if this were happening to me.”
I glared at Comedy, reclining leisurely on the couch.

“What are you doing here?” I demanded.

He looked down at himself, then back up to me. “Is that a trick question?”

Deciding not to put up with his bullshit, I immediately summoned my swarm.

“And here come the bugs.” he said, not bothering to move. “My goodness, you are one-note.”

As my swarm descended on him, I found that it wasn’t able to touch him, each bug passing through his body like he wasn’t even there. An illusion.

“Where’s the real Comedy?” I asked.

“I am the real me.” replied the illusion, “Or at least, the closest possible approximation.”

I turned to my teammates, looking for support. Unfortunately, they didn’t seem to react to Comedy. In fact, they weren’t moving at all, standing motionlessly in place. Were they illusions too? No, I had tagged them previously as a matter of habit. I could still feel them now, even as they stood there silently with blank expressions on their faces. Illusions on top of the real thing, perhaps. Flame Master was closest to me, so I grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him back and forth.

“Wake up!” I shouted, “Comedy’s right here.”

“They can’t hear you.” said Comedy as Flame Master failed to react, “They only perceive what I wish them to perceive. And right now, they’re engaged in a rather thrilling discussion on how to catch me. It’s a shame you can’t hear it; I’m making some rather salient points on your behalf.”

I ignored Comedy. I couldn’t let him distract me. He may have been able to ensnare the others, but he couldn’t fool me. The real Comedy had to be somewhere close by. I began gathering my swarm in order to search for him. The illusory Comedy seemed to have anticipated this, however; and with a snap of his fingers, my entire swarm died.

“Neat, huh?” he said, “Just a little trick I picked up from Iron Maiden last night. I’m sure she won’t mind.”

“I don’t need my bugs to beat you.” I said.

“Oh, I believe that.” he said, “Which is why I’m not here to fight you. Quite the opposite, in fact. I’m here to continue our game. If I recall, you still have one guess left.”

I clenched my fists. “I’m done playing your games.”

“That’s fine.” he replied, springing to his feet, “You’re free to quit, if you so desire. Simply say the word and I’m gone. I’ll release your friends, disband the Philosopher Kings, and leave the city forever. You’ll never have to see me again, and you can return home having completed your mission.” He started walking towards the door, then stopped. “Of course, that would also mean letting me go. Never finding out who I really am or what I really want. I wonder if you can live with that.”

“I know who you are. You’re Mel the intern.”
Comedy made a noise reminiscent of sucking air through his teeth. “Ooh, so close and yet so far. I will admit, that’s probably the best guess you could have reasonably come up with. I suppose you’ll never know the truth, unless you finish my game.” His body began to fade away. “If you wish to continue, meet me at the lightning bolt statue in the park across the street. Do be quick about it, though. Who knows what trouble I can get into on my own?” And with that, he vanished.

The moment he was gone, I dashed for the console. I had to tell Dragon what was going on. Before I could reach the keyboard, however, I heard a pop. Comedy reappeared next to me, leaning casually against the wall.

“One last thing,” he said, “This game is just between you and me. Ask for help, and I’ll consider it an act of surrender. Just thought you’d like to know. Toodle-oo!” And then he was gone.

I stood there, considering my options. It would be so easy just to ignore Comedy’s ramblings and call for backup. I could see through his illusions, as could presumably Dragon. And now that we knew what he could do, we could prepare countermeasures in case he ever came back.

But what if he didn’t come back? What if he did try to leave the city. With his power, he could disguise himself as anyone or anything. He could be one person or ten. He could appear to have any power, so long as no one looked too closely. If he got away, what were the odds we would ever find him again, provided we could even afford to expend the resources? He was leading me into a trap, that much was obvious; but walking into it may have been my only way of catching him.

I turned my attention to the park. It was well within my range and crawling with bugs. It was almost too ideal. I couldn’t fathom what he was planning. Then again, that was nothing new.

Gathering my resolve, I set out for the park. I felt bad leaving my teammates in their current state, but I assured myself that they’d be safe once I lured Comedy away from them. Renewing my swarm from outside, I began erecting light tripwires in front of the doorways. It stood to reason that, having activated Iron Maiden’s electric pulse emitter, Comedy must be somewhere inside the building. I couldn’t get close to him with my bugs; but if he got snagged on enough lines, I’d be able to entangle him from a distance.

As I walked out of HQ, I saw why he had chosen the park. It was crowded with children and families; strolling through the playground, sitting by the fountain, and generally enjoying the good weather. With so many civilians, I couldn’t risk starting a fight.

I spotted the statue at the far end of the park, and began making my way over. I got a few stares, but overall no one was too surprised to see a cape coming out of the Protectorate Headquarters. As I walked, I kept my focus on HQ. I had left some bugs on strands connected to the tripwires, safely outside the pulse emitter’s range. If someone walked through them, the vibrations would travel through the strands and alert me. As it was, I felt a figure moving from the Wards’ quarters to the exit. I wasn’t completely sure, but it was a safe bet that this was the real Comedy.

I stood under the statue, watching the entrance. Sure enough, Comedy soon came walking out. He held a black cane in his hand, swinging it in front of his legs as he walked. As he passed over where I had laid my tripwire, the thread snagged on the cane instead of his leg. I frowned. He had clearly read my file. How many other of my tricks did he know? I sent a small series of bugs as close to him as I could in order to gauge the range of his pulse emitter. It seemed to be a little over three meters in diameter. That would be a problem. I couldn’t get close to him with my bugs, and there were too many obstacles in the area to make a suitably lengthed tripwire. It seemed for the moment, fighting was out of the question.

“Ah, Weaver. You came. That’s great.” exclaimed Comedy as he came into talking distance, close
enough to kill all the bugs on my person, but otherwise just out of reach, “You know, I was worried for a second there. I thought you might be tempted to throw in the towel. But here you are!”

“Yes, I’m here.” I replied, “What happens now?”

“Now we finish the game. The objective, if you recall, was to guess the Philosopher Kings’ secret. Though at this point, I don’t think you have to guess.”

“No.” I said, “The secret is that there are no Philosopher Kings. The other capes were all just illusions you created to mask your power.”

Comedy leaned in close. “Is that your final answer?”

“Yes.”

“Well...” he said, drawing it out, “That answer is... Correct!” He clapped his hands. “Congrats. Only a real top-tier cape could have figured that out in less than a week. I’m impressed.” He nodded his head. “Now, as per our agreement, you’re entitled to one straight answer. Choose your question wisely, though. I’ve never given a serious response before, and I doubt I’ll be inclined to do so again.”

I considered it. At this point, there wasn’t much to ask. I already knew his power, his team’s secret, and his plot to hide both; and even if I was wrong about his identity, that wouldn’t stop me from taking him down. That only left one question.

“Why?” I asked.

He tilted his head. “Why what?”

“Why all of this? Why all the scheming and deception? Why invent a team and infiltrate the Protectorate just to hide your power? Why lead me around on this wild goose chase? What’s the point? The purpose? The goal? What are you trying to achieve with this game of yours, and why drag me into it?”

“Hmm... Why indeed.” muttered Comedy, his voice losing its light, melodic tone.

He looked up at me. “Tell me, Weaver. Do you play chess?”

“On occasion.” I replied, unsure of where he was going with this.

“And what, in your mind, is the goal of chess?”

“To capture the king.”

“And why do you capture the king?”

“Because that’s the objective of the game.” I answered, growing impatient.

“And why do you play the game? Is it to capture the king or complete the objective? Or are the king and objective just means to an end? Be honest, there’s no wrong answer.”

“I didn’t come here for philosophy.” I said, “Get to the point.”

“And there we have our answer. You play chess to win, while I play for the joy of playing. When I met you that night, it wasn’t to fulfill some complex scheme; it was because I wanted to meet you. When I tricked the Dons and Archfiends into fighting, I didn’t have any goal behind it. I simply
I stared at him. “You think you can call yourself a hero, after everything you’ve done?”

He shrugged. “Why not? It’s not like I was hurting anyone. Or at least, no one who didn’t deserve it. And really, what kind of hero doesn’t fight bad guys? A rather poor hero in my book.”

“What about Photocell, who was under investigation for four days? Or High Wire, who had to go to the ER? Or all the PRT troopers who were hurt in the fight with Iron Maiden?”

“Regrettable, but not my fault. I didn’t force those people to risk their lives, they did so of their own free will. I merely set the stage. I’m no more responsible for their actions than you are for mine.”

“How about the fact that I just caught you in the Protectorate Headquarters, Mastering four of its capes.”

“I think that illusions technically fall under the Shaker classification, though who can really say with these things?” he gave a chuckle, “Arbitrary classifications aside, it’s not like I was harming them. My ability is, in fact, completely harmless. And there’s certainly no law against using your powers, at least so long as it’s not in the commission of a crime.”

“Say that to the PRT when they find the notebook you filled with the Philadelphia Protectorate’s secret identities.”

“I doubt any PRT official will care about a blank book.” he replied with a short giggle.

“There’s still the fact that you snuck into a secure Protectorate facility.”

“Snuck? I was invited, remember? You even held the door for me.”

“What are you-”

And then I remembered Flame Master, struggling into the Wards’ quarters with a large box.

“That was you.” I said, “You were Flame Master.” And then the second realization hit me. I looked back at Comedy. “What was in that box?”

“Oh, just a little insurance.” he replied, carelessly pulling out what looked like a detonator. “Nothing for you to worry about. The others, however...”

My swarm buzzed in fury, unintentionally startling several families.

“If you hurt them...”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” replied Comedy nonchalantly, “Still, if you want this remote, by all means... Come and get it.”

As he said that, the realization hit me. I set my swarm on him, and instead of dying, it passed right through him. He’d been stalling. For what, I had no idea; but I had to find Comedy before he got away. I swept through the park with my bugs, careful to avoid any bystanders. I had just made it to the outer edges, when a group of my bugs died on the spot near the northwest entrance. I dashed in
that direction. I couldn’t see anyone, but I knew Comedy had to be somewhere around there. Spreading my bugs out like a minefield, I was able to detect the perimeter of his pulse emitter. He seemed to be sneaking away, crossing through traffic to an empty sidewalk under an overpass. I sped after him, rushing passed pedestrians and narrowly dodging vehicles in my pursuit. As I approached, he appeared to take notice, his movements suddenly increasing in speed. Even so, it looked like he wasn’t much of a runner, the distance between us closing rapidly.

Suddenly, a wall of fire appeared in front of me. I stopped reflexively, before realizing it was just another illusion. I kept running, the flames passing over me harmlessly. I had only just cleared the fire when a brick wall sprang up in my path. Not falling for the same trick twice, I kept running, plowing through the wall like I would a thick fog.

“Weaver, wait!”

Looking back, I saw Mangonel chasing after me.

“This’s all just a misunderstanding. Come back to HQ and we can talk about it.”

I faced forward and kept running.

Just then, Chevalier stepped into my path, his cannonblade drawn.

“Weaver, stop! That’s an order.” he bellowed. “Take one more step and I’ll send you back to prison!”

I ignored him and kept running.

“Skitter, over here!”

I spotted Grue on the other side of the road, riding atop a mutant dog alongside Bitch and Tattletale.

“Don’t go. It’s a trap!”

I turned my head and kept running.

There was a scream, and I saw Jack Slash slicing apart a group of schoolchildren.

I kept running.

The sky darkened and lightning clashed as colossal tidal wave rose over the horizon, Leviathan at its head.

I kept running.

Suddenly, I wasn’t in the city anymore. I was on the edge of a massive cliff, a thousand-foot drop looming before me.

I kept running.

I was in a war zone, bombs bursting and bullet flying all around me. The wounded lay at my feet, begging for help.

I kept running.

I was in the dark. There was no sound. No light. Only the void, an infinite expanse of emptiness.
I kept running.

“Taylor.”

I stopped.

I was in the city, but not the same one as before. I took in the familiar buildings. The familiar street. The house I had lived in for fifteen years. My dad stood on the steps, his arms outstretched, a warm smile on his face.

“Hey kiddo.” he said. “Please, just stop running. Come home. You’ve done a good job, you deserve a rest.”

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and kept running.

I didn’t need to see. I didn’t need to hear. Comedy was ahead of me, and that was all I needed to know. I broke out into a sprint, determined to catch up no matter what. My heart thumped and my muscles ached, but I refused to slow down. As the bugs on my person began to die, I knew I was right on top of him. Using the last of my energy, I charged forward with my shoulder, colliding with what felt like another person. I stopped, just barely keeping my balance, as I heard something fall to the ground.

When I opened my eyes, the illusions were gone. I was back in Philadelphia; Comedy sprawled at my feet. He was breathing heavily on his hands and knees, clearly in no shape to keep running. Then again, this could have just been another illusion. I gave him a sharp kick in the side, just to be sure. He seemed solid enough, and his cries of pain sounded genuine. On the other hand, you could never be too careful. I gave another harder kick, just to be safe. I was lining up a third, when he put his hand out.

“Okay.” he gasped between breathes. “You got me.” He put a hand to his chest. “So this is what pain feels like. How do you people put up with this?”

“We learn to live with it. Now shut up and don’t move!” I removed a cord of silk from my costume. “Stand up slowly.” I ordered, “And keep your hands where I can see them!”

“As you wish.” he replied, locking eyes with me. He rose slowly, hands held out in front of him. “Still, it is rather interesting...”

“What? How I was able to catch you?”

“No. How I was able to catch you!”

At his words, a gun materialized in his hand, pointed straight at my head. I didn’t give him the chance to use it. Relying on my training, I grabbed his wrist with one hand and twisted the gun away with another. Finally, I raised my leg and planted a strong kick to the center of his chest, sending him staggering away.

He groaned as he fell onto his back. “Ugh. So that’s why you’re not supposed to call your attacks.”

“Give it up.” I said, “It’s over.”

He looked up at me, and gave a low laugh. “Yes, it is.”

There was a click as he pressed the detonator in his other hand, followed swiftly by the sound of an explosion. It wasn’t coming from HQ, however, but from right in front of me.
I barely had time to process as everything went white, the gun in my hand having burst apart. I was blasted to the ground, every inch of my body erupting in agony. I couldn’t move. Couldn’t think. All I could do was lay there as my consciousness slowly slipped away.
Welcome to the Parahumans Online message boards.

You are currently logged in, **Melt_Man**

♦ Joined Group Conversation: darklordhorus, 69sharks

**Melt_Man**: Hey guys, what’s up?

**darklordhorus**: Yo.

**69sharks**: hey man

**69sharks**: n much

**Melt_Man**: You guys free to hang out this weekend?

**69sharks**: sorry busy

**darklordhorus**: Same. Have to go to a funeral.

**Melt_Man**: Oh, condolences.

**69sharks**: yeah sorry to hear that bro

**69sharks**: guess youre gonna miss daves party

**darklordhorus**: Dude.

**69sharks**: what

**Melt_Man**: Dave’s having a party?

**69sharks**: yeah this saturday

**69sharks**: he invited everyone b

**69sharks**: ooooh

**69sharks**: oops

**darklordhorus**: Nice going jackass.

**Melt_Man**: And you guys just decided not to tell me?

**darklordhorus**: It wasn’t really a decision on our part.

**69sharks**: we forgot

**darklordhorus**: Dave just felt that everyone would be a lot more comfortable if you didn’t come.

**69sharks**: that too
Melt_Man: Are you saying I make people uncomfortable?
darklordhorus: No.
69sharks: yes
darklordhorus: Well...
darklordhorus: You do have a tendency to act kind of creepy?
Melt_Man: What do you mean creepy?
69sharks: he means you act like a creep
darklordhorus: Dude!
69sharks: what
Melt_Man: And how would you define a creep?
69sharks: one who acts creepy
Melt_Man: That’s stupid. And circular.
darklordhorus: Look, it’s not really something you can apply logic to. It’s just how people feel.
Melt_Man: Well how do I act creepy? What specifically am I doing?
darklordhorus: It’s a lot of things.
Melt_Man: Name an example.
darklordhorus: Okay. Remember at homecoming last year, when there was that big thing in the gym? Everyone was dancing and having fun, and you were just standing in the corner watching.
Melt_Man: I don’t like crowds.
69sharks: or that time on halloween you were hitting on those roxborough girls
Melt_Man: Who?
69sharks: the short one and the one with the thing on her face
Melt_Man: I wasn’t hitting on them, I was just trying to start conversation.
69sharks: you walked up to them said hello then spent the next five minutes just staring at them
Melt_Man: I was trying to think of something to say.
darklordhorus: Why do you even want to go the party? You always look miserable when you’re at them.
Melt_Man: I do?
darklordhorus: You get that sour look on your face.
69sharks: like you smelled a fart
darklordhorus: And you’re always checking your phone like you’re counting down the minutes until it’s over. You clearly don’t enjoy them, so why do you even care if you’re invited?

Melt_Man: I don’t know, it’s the principle.

Melt_Man: If there’s something exciting going on, I don’t see why I have to be left out.

darklordhorus: You’re not going to be missing much. It’s just one party.

Melt_Man: Yeah? And how many more parties won’t I be invited to?

Melt_Man: How many other events have you guys “forgotten” to tell me about?

darklordhorus: Dude, calm down. It’s nothing personal.

69sharks: its just that we cant be seen with you in public

darklordhorus: ...

Melt_Man: You’re not going to say anything to that?

darklordhorus: I mean...

Melt_Man: I see.

Melt_Man: Nice talking with you guys.

Melt_Man has left the conversation.

69sharks: k later man

69sharks: i think that went well

The young man stared blankly at the computer screen.

“Some friends.” he muttered to himself as he logged off of PHO. Who were they to judge him? It wasn’t like he enjoyed being the way he was.

He clenched his jaw in frustration, before opening up a familiar document. He didn’t need friends; not when he had his stories. The fantastic adventures of the brave Sir Lionheart, the wise Princess of Clouds, and the enigmatic Lord of the Flies. Writing always made him feel better, let him forget the tedium of the outside world.

The worlds he created were so much better. Inside his dreamscape things were exciting, people were interesting, and all problems had solutions. Most importantly, though, it was safe. There was no anxiety, no awkwardness. He could show his true colors without fear of judgement or making a fool of himself. It was the kind of outlet that didn’t exist in the outside world.

Sighing, he reached forward to wipe a speck of dust off the monitor. As his fingers touched the screen, a thought occurred to him. All that was separating him from his words was that thin pane of glass. A window displaying all his greatest fantasies, but preventing him from touching them. It reminded him of how he felt when he was around others; how there was this invisible wall
separating him from everyone else. If either barrier was broken, he’d be happy.

No. That wasn’t true. As much as he hated to admit it, the real world scared him. It was not a primal fear, but rather a constant anxiety. An omnipresent specter, always lingering just out of sight. Even if he could make friends, even if he was popular and well liked, he’d still feel its icy grip on his shoulder.

Perhaps that was what made stories so appealing. They were an escape, a sanctuary, a power fantasy where he could be anyone but himself.

Not that it mattered in the end. Every story was just that, a story. Escapism wouldn’t solve his problems. If anything, it merely served as a distraction. No matter how far he ran, no matter how deeply he delved into fiction, he was stuck with himself.

Sighing in frustration, he slammed his computer shut and began readying for bed. This wasn’t the kind of thing he needed to be dwelling on. He was just about to go to sleep, when he was hit by a sudden urge to check PHO. He wanted to see if they were still talking about him, maybe get one last word in edgewise.

He opened his laptop, only to find a black screen. Strange, he didn’t recall shutting it off. He pressed the power button and waited. Nothing happened. He pressed it again. Still nothing. He held his finger on the power button, a feeling of panic slowly creeping up on him. When the computer failed to turn on, he checked to see if it was connected to the charger. It was. He checked if the charger was plugged into the wall. It was. He plugged his cellphone charger into the wall to see if the outlet was working. It was.

His panic turned to dread as the realization hit him. It was gone. All of it. All of his worlds. All of his characters. All of his jokes, one-liners, and plot twists. All of the foreshadowing that wouldn’t make sense until several books in. It was all erased; lost to time like dust in the wind, tears in the rain, or some third cliché. It was like he had never written anything in the first place, like all the time and effort he had put into his work had been for nothing.

He shut his eyes and laid his head down in despair, wondering how it had come to this. Had he shut his computer too hard? Had he downloaded a virus? Or perhaps it was because he hadn’t installed the latest update? Guilt and anguish consumed his thoughts, crushing him under the pressure of his own hopelessness.

It was only as he reopened his eyes that he noticed something sticking out from under his laptop. Lifting it up, he saw that it was the battery.

He held his breath, and slowly reached out for it. It must have popped out of place when he shut the laptop. Carefully snapping the battery back in place, he was greeted with the sight of his computer lighting back up.

To say he was relieved was an understatement. He was overjoyed. Perhaps, a little too overjoyed...

The thought of losing his stories was devastating, heartbreaking even. He wasn’t half as upset when his friends ditched him. It was almost as if he didn’t care about them. He knew that couldn’t be true; and yet, the more he thought about it, the more sense it made. Having friends never made him happy. All the time he spent with them, all the memories they shared, it all meant less to him than the adventures taking place in his head. He didn’t want to admit it, didn’t even want to consider it, but it was quickly becoming undeniable. He cared more for his characters than he did his real life friends.

It was pathetic, perhaps the most pathetic thing he had ever heard; and as the realization washed over...
him, he began to feel nauseous. Staggering away from his desk, he crawled into bed and began drifting off, unaware that it would be the last time he ever slept.

Waking up the next morning, he had the feeling that something was different. He had had the strangest dream, the exact details of which escaped him. All he could remember was that it involved something vast. Two somethings in fact, equal and opposite, as distinct and inseparable as night and day. Left and right. Yin and Yang.

He darted over to his desk, hoping to capture this inspiration before it left him. As his computer booted up, he closed his eyes and tried to visualize a scenario. He pictured two stone monoliths, age-old relics from a time long past. He imagined them on a wide open plain, untouched by civilization and populated only by intermittent patches of green and brown grass. In one direction, rolling hills stretched out as far as the eye could see. In another, narrow trees could be seen; swaying in the wind like dancers. Over the northern horizon loomed a dark mountain range, stretching up into the vast azure sky. The entire scene was captured in his mind, saved like a snow globe on the shelf.

Upon hearing his computer start-up, he opened his eyes, only to fall out of his chair in shock. What he saw left him speechless. He wasn’t in his bedroom anymore. The landscape he envisioned was laid out in front of him. He struggled to his feet, frantically trying to process what he was seeing. Every detail was perfect, from the texture of the grass to the color of the sky. He could even hear the faint whisper of the breeze.

“I think I’m having a stroke.” he muttered to himself.

Hesitantly, he took a step forward. The ground was solid beneath his feet. Unsure of what else to do, he picked a direction and began walking. He got about five feet before colliding with the wall. His hand immediately went to his nose, and before he knew it he was back in his bedroom. Ignoring the pain, he looked around the room. It seemed the same as always. Curious, he tried imagining one of the monoliths. As the image took shape, the massive stone appeared before his eyes, just barely fitting below the ceiling. He tried conjuring something different. An electric fan came to mind; and sure enough, once he pictured it, a tall alternating fan appeared. He could see it moving back and forth, the whirr of the blades filling his ears. With a thought, he dismissed both objects and focused on something bigger. After a moment, a shiny red sports car sprung into existence. He stared at the gleaming vehicle, a look of awe forming on his face.

“I don’t believe it.” he said, “I’m a cape.”

He reached for his creation, only to stumble forward as his hand went right through the hood. Before he knew it, he was up to his waist in car.

“Oh.” he muttered to himself, “It’s fake.” He focused and tried to recreate the fantasy landscape from before. As it returned, he reached out towards the sky. All he felt, however, was the cold wall of his bedroom. Sighing, he dismissed the illusion and fell back in his chair.

Some capes could lift buildings, soar among the heavens, or even alter the very fabric of time and space. He finally got powers, something that made him special, that made him stand out in a good way, and could do nothing. Literally nothing. He couldn’t create, couldn’t destroy. He probably couldn’t even move a pencil from one side of his desk to the other. He tried. He saw the pencil roll, heard its movements; but the moment he stopped concentrating, it popped right back to where it was before. It was fitting, in a way. Super powers were the one thing that made reality interesting, and all he could do with his was design more fantasies. He could appreciate the irony.
As he sat there in silence, a peculiar idea emerged from some deep, dark corner of mind. What if he could use his power on others?

The next day, he lingered outside the entrance of the local deli. It was a tiny place, the kind you stopped at for a quick breakfast or lunch. Right now, however, it’s quaint brick exterior seemed more like the gates of hell. He gathered his resolve, grasping the $5 bill in his hand, and entered. Casually, he strolled over to the drink cooler, grabbed a bottle of chocolate milk, and brought it to the counter. The cashier scanned it, took his money, then handed him both the bottle and his change. It was a simple transaction; he didn’t even have to speak.

He waited until he was a block away before counting his change. The amount he received would be an indicator of the plan’s success. As he handed the cashier his money, he had imagined as hard as he could that it was a $10 bill. That was the highest value of bill he could use without the possibility of them checking for counterfeits. A bottle of milk cost around $2, including tax. If the cashier saw through his illusion, he’d be given $3 in change. If not, he’d receive $8.

Sure enough, as he counted the money in his hand, he had $3 more than he started with. Getting over the shock of his success, he began to consider the possibilities. There were about 10 different markets, delis, and convenience stores in the area. If he stopped at each once a day, he’d make total profit of $30, plus ten bottles of chocolate milk. That didn’t seem like much, but surely he could optimize the formula to get the greatest possible value with the lowest possible cost. Or at least, the lowest cost to him. This wasn’t a balanced economic transaction. What he was doing was more along the lines of theft; and even if there were no short-term consequences, in the long run there’d definitely be a cost.

These were small, family run businesses. If he stole $3 from them every single day, that would add up. It might not mean anything today, but in a month it would be $33. In a year it’d be over $1,000. That much might mean the difference between making rent or paying a child’s tuition. Furthermore, if a business had to shut down because of him, that wouldn’t just hurt the owners, but everyone who frequented that business too.

He could try going for larger companies or corporations, those who could afford such a hit, but they likely had security protocols in place against enterprising capes. That left only one target, the only groups with excess funds without a legal recourse for pursuing him: the gangs.

Before he could continue that particular train of thought, self-preservation reared its head in the form of his conscience. Perhaps there was a more responsible use of his powers than defrauding businesses. It was somewhat troubling that, after finally getting superpowers, the first thing he used them for was his own personal gain. Clearly, if he wanted to go about this right, he’d have to consult a higher moral authority.

Moral philosophy was never his strong suit. Luckily, half an hour on the internet could make one an expert in anything. While scanning through the works of the great Greek thinkers, he stumbled upon something called the Ring of Gyges. It was an artifact, discussed by Plato in his Republic, that granted its user invisibility, and by extension, complete impunity for their actions. One could kill and steal to their heart’s content, and face no personal consequences. That didn’t seem too different from his situation.

He read further; seeing that, while it was argued only a fool would pass up such power, Plato concluded that one who abuses their power has in fact enslaved themselves to their appetites, while
one who choses not to remains in control of their rationality.

He could see that happening. There were plenty of examples in real life. Powerful capes losing control and becoming little more than monsters. His power was weak, harmless even, but there was still that chance of him being consumed by it. If he dedicated himself to being a hero, to putting the needs of others before his own, would he still be able to resist the temptation his power provided?

As he dwelt on this conundrum, an interesting thought came to mind. Doing the right thing was hard. Doing the wrong thing was self-destructive. But doing nothing? That was simplicity itself.

He’d gone his whole life without having super powers, why start now? There was no rule saying he had to be a cape. No law forcing him to go out in a costume and tights. What was stopping him from just going on with his life? After all, he never needed powers before; and if he didn’t use his abilities, there’d be no fear of misusing them.

He nodded to himself, satisfied with this plan of inaction. It may not have been the most heroic strategy, but it was certainly the least strenuous. When it came down to it, he just wasn’t the hero type; and it was far safer to continue his life as it was, free from the danger and excitement of capes. Anyone else would have thought him an idiot for giving up that kind of opportunity; but he was sure that down the line, he’d be a lot happier as he was.

Head down and shoulders clenched, he hurried through the open door. It was the kind of place where you could sit down and rest, get your mind together, separate the inside from the out. He settled into the couch and breathed, holding in the coming anxiety attack. It wasn’t always like this. He didn’t always have this kind of fear, the kind that necessitated taking refuge in an out-of-the-way bookstore. There was really no explanation for it, no traumatic event or malady. One day, it just hit him. The fear. The panic. The sudden anxiety, like someone or something was out to get him. It struck whenever he was out in public, and made him wish he could disappear. The worst part was, he could disappear. Any time he wanted, he could erase his presence, paint over his existence, replace himself with a vacant corner or an empty chair.

He shook that thought from his head. That was a box he was not prepared to open. He wanted a normal life, a simple life, untouched by drama and politics of heroes and villains. Becoming a ghost, although appealing, was not conducive to a normal lifestyle. Now that he thought about it, it was only since gaining powers that these attacks started happening. Though that may have been more correlation than causation. After all, that was also around the time that he stopped being able to sleep.

Insomnia was nothing new to him. The kind of insomnia that lasted six months, on the other hand, was a bit more troubling. Nothing he did, nothing he took, could help him as he lay awake at night, his mind brimming with activity. Eventually, he stopped trying to sleep, and spent his nights browsing the net. It was amazing how much there was to learn about when you had the time to look for it. History. Literature. World events. He even took another stab at philosophy. Of course, all this did nothing to help him once day broke.

He had resolved to live a normal life, and every day that resolve was being tested. Sitting there in that bookstore, he was more tempted than ever. Taking a deep breath, he gathered his nerves and prepared himself for the walk home. As he made his way to the exit, he passed a small cart of seasonal merchandise. The store was selling masks and costumes in preparation for Halloween. Something on the cart caught his eye. Pausing for a moment, he stepped over to examine it.

It was a white mask. Plastic, with wry smile on its face, like the comedy mask in theatre. It reminded him of the dream he had months ago. Of the duality. Light and dark. Positive and negative. Comedy
and tragedy. Before he knew it, he was holding the mask in his hands. It was fitting, in a way. A smiling mask for someone who so rarely smiled. Removing the tag, he turned it over and placed it on his face.
The young man strolled down the street, white mask planted firmly on his face. He didn’t feel self-conscious; quite the opposite. He couldn’t remember the last time he felt so at ease. It was as if he were someone else; someone nameless, faceless, who didn’t care what people thought of him. He was so caught up in this feeling, that he didn’t think about where he was going. It wasn’t until minutes later that he noticed he had wandered into the less-than-savory part of town. The street was deserted, the surrounding buildings dark or boarded up, and he quickly decided that he didn’t want to be there. He was just about to turn around and retrace his steps, when he heard the sounds of a struggle. Glancing around, he found that it was coming from a nearby alleyway.

He advanced slowly towards the alley, careful not to make a sound. As he approached, he heard shouting in a language he didn’t understand. Peaking around the corner, he saw a young teenager shoved against the wall, a backpack held tight against his chest. He was being held there by his neck by an older girl in a leather jacket, an inverted cross on the sleeve. She was yelling something at the kid, pointing to the bag in his arms, and his only response was to tremble and sob.

The young man in the mask saw all of this, quietly watching from behind the corner. He didn’t know what they were saying, but it didn’t take a genius to know that this was a shakedown. His first instinct was to run and call the police, let them deal with it. But at the same time, a reckless thought wormed its way into his head. This was an opportunity. A chance to do something useful with his powers, something heroic.

He pondered what his characters would do. If Sir Lionheart was there, he’d storm in all knight-in-shining-armor and save the day. He imagined the knight; tall, broad-shouldered, and brimming with muscles. He imagined the armor; golden and gleaming like the rays of the sun. No, that wouldn’t do. His imaginary hero might get mistaken for Chevalier, which would raise far too many questions.

He closed his eyes and thought of a more modern appearance. He pictured a spandex suit, yellow and orange, with a bit of brown around the neck like a mane. The mask would be lion-themed, covering half the face, allowing for a bit of emotion without revealing too much of the face. When he opened his eyes, his hero was right in front of him, standing proud and confident in the dim city light.

He marched the hero into the alley way, remaining behind the corner to watch.

“What’s going on here?” shouted the hero in a deep commanding voice, alerting the alley’s two occupants to his presence.

The girl turned her head and cursed.

“Back off!” she shouted, body going rigid, “This’s none of your fucking business.”

“People in trouble is my business.” the hero declared, taking a step forward.

“I said back off!” repeated the girl, pulling a gun from the waistband of her jeans.

“Hey, now.” warned the hero, putting up a hand, “Let's not do something we'll regret. Why don’t you put the gun down and we can talk about this.” He took another step.

“Don’t move!” shouted the girl, fear in her voice as she leveled her weapon at the hero, “I’ll shoot, I mean it!”
The young man knew a bluff when he heard it, and willed the illusion to continue forward. That made it all the more surprising when the gunshot rang out and a bullet shot by not two feet from his head. He froze, brain slowly registering the fact that he had almost just died. The illusion stopped too, not reacting to the bullet that just passed through its chest. He reached into the folds of his costume and pulled out a flattened bullet.

“Why do they always think that’ll work?” he muttered aloud. He turned back to her. “Now, are you going to come quietly or do I have to use force?”

He had expected her to run away or surrender at this point. It’s what he would have done. Instead, she grabbed the teenager away from the wall and placed him between her and the hero, pressing the gun against the kid’s head.

He froze again. This was rapidly getting out of hand. He had only wanted to play hero a bit, and now he was in a hostage situation, completely unsure of what to do.

“Not another step!” the girl yelled shakily, “I’ll shoot.”

He had no idea what to say, so he replied simply, “No you won’t.”

“Fuck you, I won’t! You don’t know me.”

“I don’t have to. All I have to know is that you won’t shoot him.”

“And why’s that?” challenged the girl.

“Because if you do, you’ll no longer have a hostage.”

“I- What?” the girl faltered.

“I mean, he’s the only thing stopping me from getting to you, so naturally you’d want to keep him alive.”

“I don’t think you understand. I’m threatening to kill him.”

“Yes, which would be worse for you than it would for me. My well-being is not dependent on his survival. Yours, on the other hand, most certainly is.”

“What kind of hero are you? Don’t you care if he dies?”

“Of course I do, but not as much as you should. If I fail to save someone, I’ll feel bad. If you lose your hostage, you’ll be badly beaten and sent to jail for murder. It’s basic game theory.”

This line of reasoning was not really something a hero should have been dealing in. Luckily, the hostage heard none of it. Instead, he heard a voice a few inches from his ear.

“Listen.”

“Wha-” he squeaked.

“Shh! Don’t speak. Everything’s gonna be okay. I can help, but you’ll need to do exactly as I say. When I stick my arm out, you’re going to have to go limp. Completely limp, like you’re dead. Understand?”

The kid nodded his head slowly.
“Great. Here we go.”

The hero raised his arm and a beam of light shot out of his palm, spearing through the hostage’s chest. As instructed, the kid went limp, his body slumping in the girl’s grasp.

“What the fuck?” cried the girl, dropping the body in shock.

“What? I’m simply demonstrating my point. Your hostage is gone, and you now lack any kind of leverage.”

“You’re insane.” breathed the girl, backing away slowly.

“Perhaps. At least I haven’t resorted to name calling.”

The girl didn’t bother responding, instead opting to make a hasty retreat.

He waited until the sound of her footsteps faded away before turning his attention back to the victim.

“It’s safe now. She’s gone.”

“T-thank you.” said the kid, no longer playing dead.

As the teenager struggled to his feet, the young man in the mask scurried into the alley until he was standing in the same spot as the hero, the illusion overlapping with his real body.

Are you okay?” he asked, offering a hand.

“Yes, I think so.” the kid said, taking it, “Thank you, really. If you hadn’t come along...” he trailed off.

“All in a day’s work.” he replied. Or rather, the hero replied. The illusion was a good foot taller than his real body, so its voice came from right above his head. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, there is more justice to be done.”

“Wait.” said the kid, faltering slightly “Uh, before you go... Could you tell me your name?”

“My name?” he paused in thought, “Yes, of course. My name. You can call me... Nemean.”

“Say, you know that feeling that gets you out of bed in the morning? The one that pushes you through the day, and makes life seem worth living?”

“Yes?”

“What’s it like?”

There was no response.

The young man sighed and waved his hand, dispelling the lion-themed cape in front of him. Of course the illusion wouldn’t have anything to say. It could only ever know what he did.

He had taken to talking to his illusions, conversing with them as if they were real people. It probably wasn’t the healthiest thing, mentally speaking, but it helped him organize his thoughts. And right
now, he had a lot of thoughts in need of organizing.

It had been a few days since the encounter in the alley, and his mind was still reeling. He’d actually done it. He’d actually gone out in costume and fought crime. And it felt good. Better than good, it was amazing. The exhilaration of being a cape was nothing like he’d ever felt before. Compared to that night, everything else felt so pointless.

But every feeling of excitement also came with a twinge of guilt. He had broken his rule. He’d used his power, enforced his will over someone else. More than that, he’d been careless in doing so. He’d had no plan, no strategy. No backup in case something went wrong. If he had messed up, it wouldn’t just have been his life on the line, but the victim’s life too. Furthermore, if someone had tried to touch Lionheart, the illusion would be exposed.

Nemean, he corrected himself. That was the hero’s name, now that he was a cape and not a medieval knight. He had chosen it on a whim, something that spoke of strength and durability, and that went with the lion motif. His mind had instantly gone to the myth of the Nemean Lion, a beast known for its unbreakable hide. Once he had a name, the costume and mannerisms had come to mind easily. It helped that he already had the character in his head, the hero long existing in his imagination.

His gaze turned down to the mask in his hand, its smiling face staring back at him. There was something about its expression, equal parts playful and malicious, like it was laughing at him. He tried to imagine what kind of character would wear this mask. It would probably be some sort of trickster, one who would rather mock the heroes than help or hinder them. More of a fool than an actual threat.

He pictured the mask on a jester’s outfit, the kind with the colorful stripes and the multi-horned hat. No, that didn’t fit. The costume would need to be monochrome, to match the plain white mask. Something simple, but with personality. Like a suit. No, a tuxedo, the kind a magician would wear. That seemed appropriate. Magic was just another kind of illusion, after all.

The picture fully formed in his mind’s eye, he looked up to see his creation standing before him.

“Not bad.” he mused, “Now what should I call you?”

“I don’t know.” he had the illusion reply, its voice a lighter, more melodious imitation of his own, “What do you call a cape in a comedy mask?”

“Farce? Jocular? Comedy of Errors?”

“Why not just Comedy?”

“Seems a bit on the nose.”

“Perhaps. Better than some obscure noun or historical reference.”

“Fair enough.” he replied, shutting the thesaurus he had open on his lap, “So tell me, Comedy, do you have an answer to my dilemma?”

“Possibly. It can’t hurt to try.” he crossed his legs and began sitting in the air, like he was lounging on an invisible chair, “Why don’t you start from the beginning?”

“Well, for the longest time I was hesitant to use my power. There were so many ways it could be misused, so many ways I could succumb to temptation, that I was scared to even try it.”
“Hmm.” the illusory cape hummed, the sound coming out almost like a growl, “Well, clearly that was your first mistake. You allowed fear of failure to get in the way of your potential; thinking only of what could go horribly wrong, instead of what could go horribly right.”

“Perhaps, but it’s too late to dwell on that now. I’ve already opened that box, already experienced the thrill of going out in costume.”

Comedy leaned in close. “And how did it feel?”

“Great! I’d never felt so powerful, so in control. After a night like that, I don’t think I could go back to a normal life.”

“Then don’t.” he clapped his hands, “Problem solved!”

“It’s not that simple. I don’t think I can handle being a hero. And I don’t just mean that in a reluctant YA protagonist sort of way. This is not a lack of confidence thing, I literally do not want to be a hero. There’s so much responsibility. So much pressure to always do your best, to always give it 100%. Any less, and people could die and it’ll all be your fault. That is not the kind of stress I am capable of dealing with on a daily basis. And that’s not even getting into gang wars, super villains, or Endbringer fights.”

“You’ve put a lot of thought into this.”

“Well, I’m trying to put together a strong enough case to compete with ‘life without superpowers’”

“Have you considered that you might be looking at this problem from too narrow a perspective?”

“I have, but go on.”

“You say you don’t want to be a hero, but do you even know what a hero is?”

“I should think so, I’ve written plenty.”

“And how would you define a hero?”

“Someone who puts the needs of others before their own?”

“Is that really heroic, or just selfless? Consider what you know of the world. Are all selfless people heroes? Furthermore, are all heroes selfless?”

“I suppose not. In that case... it’d be someone brave. Someone who does great things; who can defeat the foes and accomplish the feats no one else can. Not just with strength though, but through ingenuity. Like with the Nemean Lion. No weapon could pierce its hide, so Hercules beat it by strangling it. A hero is someone skilled or creative enough that, when faced with an impossible choice, they can always find a third option.”

Comedy nodded. “I see. So if bravery and ingenuity are the only requirements of a hero, honor and glory their only reward, what need is there to agonize over the common good? Protecting the weak may be the result of a hero’s work, but must it be one’s primary motivation?”

“Huh.” This wasn’t the conclusion he thought the conversation was heading towards. He didn’t remember telling Comedy to say that, but he must have. The illusion was just a mouthpiece for his mind, after all. A puppet he could speak with to organize his thoughts. It wouldn’t be saying these things unless he subconsciously thought them to be true.
“What exactly are you saying?” he asked.

“Simply this,” replied Comedy, “A hero’s motivations may appear altruistic, but must they be? Is there any harm in doing the right things for the wrong reasons?”

“To appear just while behaving unjust. That seems rather ‘Ring of Gyges’ to me. If I took this advice to heart, would I not be giving in to my baser appetites? Surrendering my rationality to vice?”

“What is justice? Who is to say what is virtue and vice?”

“I mean, sure, if you’re not gonna asking any difficult questions.”

“Tell me this: Does hunger not exist to be sated? If men had no appetites, what would they do with their lives? What would they devote their time to in this vast and indifferent universe? What is the point of life if not finding new and exiting ways to satisfy those insatiable urges we are all born with?”

He hated to admit it, but his subconscious had a point. He had suffered greatly doing what he thought was the safe and noble thing. But in this sacrifice, had he also given up the very desires and impulses that made him human?

He shook his head, sincerely wishing every passing moment of reflection didn’t inevitably lead to an existential crisis. It was times like this that he wished he had a therapist. He imagined a lot of capes would benefit from one.

Comedy stood outside the entrance to the Protectorate HQ. That was what he was calling himself, now that he finally decided on being a cape. It wasn’t hard, choosing this from among his other potential identities. He was an illusionist, so it only made sense for him to dress like one. A black suit was easy enough to obtain, and he already had the mask. He had considered adding a cape and top hat to the mix, but ultimately decided that would have been just a bit too over the top. Not that it mattered. His power eliminated the need for close-combat, so it wasn’t like he required an overly practical costume. No, what he lacked was knowledge. Understanding of the cape scene, of the rules and customs that dominated the world of superheroes. To venture out again without this insight would be putting his own life and the lives of others at an unacceptable amount of risk.

That was why he was here, at the Protectorate’s doorstep. If he was accepted into the Wards, he’d have the chance to learn from other, more successful capes. He could gain proper experience, without putting himself in excess danger.

He strode into the lobby, extruding a level of confidence he could have never displayed without the mask. He wondered if he should have called ahead, letting them know to expect him as a potential recruit. No, better to keep them on their toes. The spontaneity would add to his mystique. He walked straight to the front desk, ignoring the guards eyeing him as he entered.

“Hello there.” he greeted the woman at the front desk, “The name’s Comedy. I’m a new cape, and I was hoping to sign up for the Wards Program.”

“Of course.” replied the desk lady cheerfully, “Do you have an appointment?”

“I’m afraid not.” he said, instantly regretting not calling ahead, “I hope that’s not an issue.”

“Not at all. We accept walk-ins from 9-4 every day but Sunday.”
“Well, thank God it’s not Sunday,” he laughed.

The receptionist smiled and bent over to retrieve some forms from the desk. As she did so, he allowed himself a small breath to steady his nerves. Despite his confident demeanor, he was terrified. Up until this point, being a cape was optional. At any time he could bail out, hang up his mask, return to his boring but safe life. Joining the Wards was a commitment. He’d be part of the system. Part of the brand. Once he was in, there’d be no going back.

Logically, he shouldn’t have felt worried. The Wards were a training program, after all; meant to keep young heroes out of harm’s way. Chances were he wouldn’t have to do much more than walk a few patrol routes and attend some school assemblies. Even so, the permanency of the endeavor scared him, far more than the potential threat to his life. Perhaps this was a bad idea.

“No,” he thought, shaking his head, “this is a good thing. Heroes are those who have courage. Courage means persisting in the face of fear. Ergo, heroes need fear, and to be afraid is to be presented with a chance to be a hero. Q.E.D.”

This in mind, he quickly regained his composure. He did his best to appear calm, untroubled, joyful even. No need to burden the desk lady with his anxieties. It wasn’t like she needed them. He couldn’t imagine having a worse job than managing the front desk in a building full of superheroes.

As he thought this, the receptionist came back up with a clipboard and a pen.

“I’ll page one of the on-site heroes and let them know you’re here to enroll. In the meantime, could you follow me?” She led him through a locked door to a back room filled with desks and chairs. Each desk had a divider set up, no doubt for additional privacy.

“If you’ll just have a seat and fill out these forms, someone will be over shortly.”

She handed him the clipboard and pen and left him to the forms. It was fairly standard stuff: cape name, age, prior experience. He scanned the documents carefully, mindful not to give away anything too personal. He trusted the Protectorate, but he still valued his anonymity. He read through the forms without issue, until he reached the section on powers. That gave him pause.

Illusions were easy enough to explain. He could make people see and hear things that weren’t really there. But if they knew that those things weren’t there, what was the point? If the girl from a few nights ago had known that Nemean wasn’t real, would he have been able to stop her? Or would she have just ignored him and continued her crime.

Instead of dwelling on this, he skipped the question and moved on to the criminal history section. He was just about finished perusing the documents, when there was a knock at the door. He looked up from the clipboard, only for his breath to catch in his throat. He had anticipated meeting one of the Wards, maybe even their leader, Photocell. He never expected to see Chevalier himself standing before him. He stared at the armored cape, towering stalwartly in the doorway like a great golden statue.

“Hello,” greeted the Protectorate leader warmly, “I’m told that you are interested in joining the Wards.

“You were told correctly,” he replied, rising and advancing towards the hero. Ordinarily, he wouldn’t have had the courage to just walk up to one of the most powerful capes in the country; but he wasn’t his ordinary self. He was Comedy. “And I must say, if you pardon the stock phrase, it is an honor and a privilege to meet you in person. You’ve always been one of my favorite heroes; both on account of your work, and ’cause I’m a sucker for the knights errant.”
“I’m pleased to be thought of so highly. I do try my best to serve as an example to aspiring heroes. May I ask, have you decided on a name?”

“Right now, I’m going by Comedy. A bit obvious, I know, but subtlety’s overrated.”

“Well, should you join the Wards, you’ll be given plenty of resources to help develop your cape identity. I find that is often a priority for young, up-and-coming heroes. I can give you a tour of our PR department once we’re done with power testing.”

Comedy winced and sucked his teeth. This was what he had been dreading. “About that... How essential is power testing, exactly?”

“I would say rather essential. If you plan on going out into the field, you’ll want to know the extent of your abilities.”

“No no, what I mean to say is, must I demonstrate my powers in front of an audience? Can I not keep the nature of my abilities a secret?”

Although Chevalier’s armor hid his face, from his body language Comedy could tell he was taken slightly aback.

“I’m sorry, I don’t think I understand. We can’t let you into the Wards without knowing what your power is.”

“Are you sure you can’t make an exception?”

“I’m afraid that’s not up to me.” the hero explained, his firm voice betraying the tiniest hint of hesitation. “Official policy requires us to keep records on all of our capes. We can keep certain details confidential, locked away in classified files with only the bare minimum released to the general public; but you will have to disclose your power set if you want to be accepted into the Protectorate.”

Comedy winced. This was it, the moment of truth. It was said the biggest mistakes capes made were those early in their career. Would this be his? His power depended on people not knowing what it was. If he joined the Protectorate, that would mean broadcasting his power to the world. Even if the PRT tried to cover it up or spin it as something different, someone somewhere would eventually figure it out. If he didn’t join the Protectorate, he’d have to get by without their knowledge and resources. He could picture a thousand ways that could go poorly. It was like being was on a knife’s edge. He didn’t want to give up the freedom of being an independent cape. He didn’t want to lose out on the security provided by the Protectorate. If only there was a third option. Then it hit him. From that deep, dark corner of his mind, an idea sprang.

Comedy clicked his tongue. “Yes, see, I’m afraid that might be a deal breaker.”

“May I ask why?”

“You may, but I can’t promise a satisfying answer.”

“If you’re worried about your secret identity, I can assure you that the Protectorate takes the utmost care to protect our heroes’ privacy. Any personal information you entrust to us will be kept under the tightest security.”

“I do not doubt your tightness, and my reservations are not based on anything personal. I simply don’t wish to disclose my powers.”
Chevalier shook his head sadly. “I hate to say it, but that’s simply not an option. As secretive as cape business tends to be, the Protectorate was founded on the idea of accountability. I can understand your desire for privacy, but we need to maintain some measure of oversight.

“Oversight? Yes, I suppose that’s what this was.” Comedy said seriously, before switching back to a chipper tone, “Well, that’s a shame. I was really looking forward to my own trading cards. I suppose I’ll just have to make do without the Protectorate at my back.” He turned towards the exit.

“Wait.” said Chevalier. Comedy waited. “You’re absolutely committed to not revealing your power?”

“Uncompromisingly.” he replied, not looking back.

“Then I wish you the best of luck. I may not be able to change the rules, but I can respect your resolve.”

“Thank you.” said Comedy, continuing on, “I appreciate that.”

“And a word of caution.” added Chevalier, “Being a cape is dangerous work, particularly for those who operate alone. There are other, more independent teams in the city. Perhaps they’ll have what you’re looking for.”

“Perhaps.” Comedy replied as he left, “I suppose it’s something to think about.” he began to chuckle, “And who knows? Maybe I could start my own team?”

The receptionist from before walked through the door, clipboard in hand. It seemed that in the few months since his first visit, she’d been elevated above desk duty. Now she was in charge of welcoming the new interns.

“Thank you for arriving so early Mr.-” she squinted down at her clipboard, “Pom-een?”

“Pomene.” he replied in a bored tone, as if he’d spent his whole life explaining this, “It’s Greek. You can just call me Mel.”

“Well, it’s good to have you on-board. I’m not sure if they mentioned this during the interview, but we’ve been really short staffed lately, and we’re glad to have all the help we can get.” She gave a small smile, then glanced back down at her notes. “Now, it says here that you have experience with database and spreadsheet software, correct?”

“That’s right.” he replied.

“Great. Most of the higher-ups tend to be the older, military type; and between you and me, they’re not exactly the best with new technology.” She gave a conspiratorial smile.

He nodded in understanding. He had specifically applied for the technology internship, hoping that it would help him gain access to the Protectorate and PRT’s systems. Their records and databases would give him everything he needed to be a successful cape. It was all part of his plan.

By day, he’d be Mel the intern, quietly observing the ins and outs of cape life from the safety of a console. By night, he’d be Comedy, tracelessly ridding the city of crime. It was such an amazing idea, he couldn’t believe no other capes had ever thought of it.
This rare moment of self-satisfaction lasted a few precious seconds, just long enough to be broken as Chevalier passed into the room. He stopped, taking notice of Mel.

“Hello,” the armored hero greeted in a congenial fashion, “I don’t recall seeing you before.” He stepped closer.

“This is Mel, one of the new interns.” explained the woman. She didn’t seem at all fazed by the Protectorate leader’s presence. Mel supposed he shouldn’t be either.

“Pleased to meet you.” he said, offering a hand. Chevalier glanced at it.

There was a pause; brief, but just long enough for Mel to be concerned. There was no way that Chevalier recognized him, right? Mel was completely different from Comedy. He had a different voice, different mannerisms, even different body language: more sluggish and withdrawn than the loud and animated cape. Chevalier couldn’t possibly tell that the two were one and the same, especially after all this time. Still, Mel couldn’t help but feel the familiar specter of anxiety creeping up his shoulder. He decided to be proactive.

“Is something wrong?” he asked in a neutral tone.

“Nothing at all.” Chevalier replied benignly, taking his hand, “Welcome to the Protectorate.”
Interlude: Comedy - Part 3

Comedy strolled cheerfully through the city. He had a lot to be cheerful for. After all, he’d just been mugged. This wasn’t an unusual occurrence; it was all part of the routine.

Comedy had made a habit of wandering through the dangerous parts of town at night. Sometimes, he was in the form of a frail old man. Other times, he took on the guise of a lost teenage girl. Tonight, he had been a wealthy looking woman: nice coat, fancy shoes, designer handbag. The handbag was the most important part; it was what the thieves went for. They were drawn to it, like moths to a bug zapper. He had relieved it from a purse-snatcher earlier in his career and, unable to locate its owner, decided to incorporate it into his act. It was filled with miscellaneous clutter he had picked up over time: pens, business cards, car keys. The pills were his. He’d long since stopped taking them. Aside from these were items of actual perceived value. There was a fake smartphone of the latest model, as well as a pocketbook with petty cash and a variety of canceled credit cards. These were necessary, lest the thief abandon the purse and go on his or her way.

Tonight’s thief had been especially feisty, slapping the pepper spray bottle right out of Comedy’s hand. That had peaked the cape’s interest. He loved the ones that put up a fight.

Pulling out his phone, he began moving towards his assailant's location. There was a tracking chip planted in the purse, as well as inside the dummy phone. They weren’t cheap, but it was well worth it not to have to track criminals down the old-fashioned way.

He found the thief crouched in an alleyway, digging through the bag. Shivering in anticipation, he began to set the scene. First, the lights. He made the streetlights in the background appear to flicker and go out, followed by the lights in the storefronts. The thief didn’t notice. That was fine. Comedy wasn’t doing this for him. As the small lantern in the alley was extinguished, the thief finally reacted, standing up and glancing around at what he perceived to be overpowering darkness.

“Now, come the introductions.” thought Comedy, summoning the voices of Nemean and himself. They rang out from the darkness, establishing their characters while arguing about nothing. There was a certain bathos to their mundane ramblings that Comedy relished; though it did serve a practical purpose. The sheer indifference of the capes to their situation tended to unnerve foes, as if the criminals were so insignificant that the heroes would rather debate semantics than acknowledge their existence.

It seemed to be working, as the thief hesitated before mustering up the courage to speak. On cue, Comedy created a flash, restoring the lights and conjuring two capes into the alleyway. They introduced themselves and began to grill the thief on the bag, trying to intimidate him into cooperation. It was all a formality, of course. There was no chance the thief was going to come quietly, just as there was no chance that Comedy was going to let him get away. Unless he felt like it. It all depended on what was most entertaining.

Sure enough, the thief began to go through the same predictable patterns, trying to distract the heroes and make a break for it. Comedy allowed him to get over the fence, before appearing on the other side among a wall of flames. He had to be careful with things like fire. It was effective at triggering fear or panic, but if he let his foes get too close to it, they might notice the lack of heat. Fortunately, the thief didn’t seem interested in approaching either Comedy or the fire, and started scrambling back up the fence.

As he did so, Comedy took the time to pull out his sledgehammer. He had purchased it on a whim, during one of his hardware store supply runs. It was light, collapsible, and most importantly, fit in the
cup holder of his black 10-speed. He had originally thought of using it as a prop, maybe making a pun about philosophizing with a hammer, but later found that it was an excellent substitute for super strength. It turned out that many superpowers had perfectly adequate substitutes. Anyone with hairspray and a lighter could be a pyrokinetic, just like anyone with a smartphone could be a Thinker. Electricity powers could be simulated with a taser, and acid powers with Mace. And who needed ice powers when liquid nitrogen was as cheap as milk? If sufficiently advanced technology was indistinguishable from magic, then surely sufficiently hidden technology was indistinguishable from superpowers.

By this point, the thief had just made it over the fence. As he reached the other side, Comedy decided to give him just a glimmer of hope, clearing the way and giving him a straight shot to freedom. The thief took it, sprinting towards the street. Comedy let him get about halfway, before sticking his leg out. The thief tripped, hitting the ground and leaving himself wide open. Comedy took advantage of this, raising his sledgehammer and bringing it down on the thief’s leg. There was an odd crunching sound, and the thief let out a groan of agony. Comedy summoned Nemean and himself to soothe the downed criminal with a debate on the morality of excessive force. They argued back and forth, misinterpreting or outright ignoring the thief’s pleas.

As he watched the injured man suffer, the only emotion Comedy could produce was a feeling of deep and profound disappointment. This used to be fun. Back when he was starting out, fighting evil lent him a sense of adventure, of cops and robbers, good guys vs bad guys. Now it just felt like a chore, slogging through one predictable encounter after another. There was no sense of accomplishment fighting against foes this predictable, and there were only so many ways you could trick someone with illusions and have it be interesting. What he needed were better opponents. Stronger opponents. More... He couldn’t think of a third thing, but it was somewhere along the lines of better and stronger.

Two capes walked into a bar. The bartender barely looked up. Why would he? This was their turf. The shorter of the two, Sharp, walked past the bar stools and lurched into a booth. Icepick took the seat across from him, spreading his arms in a relaxed manner. Without being asked, the bartender brought over a bottle and two glasses.

“Thanks, Paulie.” said Icepick, “Why don’t you go take a smoke break.”

The bartender nodded and gave the two capes their privacy.

Sharp waited for the man to leave, then spoke. “So, what’s this about, kid? I assume you wouldn’t pull me away just to shoot the shit. Something going down?”

“No, nothing like that.” replied Icepick, dropping his casual demeanor, “The thing is, I need some advice. Personal advice.”

Sharp smirked. “Heh. And you’re coming to me? Never thought I’d see the day.” He plucked a cigar from his suit pocket and began twirling it between his fingers.

“Yeah, well... It’s about Time Zone.”

“Hm? Are the two lovebirds not getting along?”

“No, we’re doing great. More than great, really. And I... I was thinking of asking her to...” he trailed off.

“Well, to marry me.” said Icepick, a certain resolution seeping into his voice.

“Why? You knock her up?”

“No! Fuck no, don’t even joke about that.”

“Then what’s the hurry? You’ve only been together ‘bout a year.”

“Well, you’ve heard the rumors. The end of the world. I don’t think it’s actually gonna happen but, if it does, I don’t want any regrets.”

“And you think getting hitched’ll give you less regrets? Heh, what an enchanted world you must live in.”

“Do you have any actual advice for me or are you just gonna be an asshole?”

“Don’t think I can’t do both.” Sharp said with a crooked grin, “Now, on the subject of marriage, I can say this much: Prostitutes are cheaper than wives.”

Icepick stood up from the table. “I should’ve asked someone else.”

“Hey now, sit down.” said Sharp, waving him back, “You asked for my two cents, I’m giving them to you. You don’t have to like or agree with what I’m saying, but at least hear me out. Believe it or not, I do actually know a thing or two about marriage. I’ve certainly gone through plenty.”

Scowling, Icepick sat back down. Sharp nodded then crossed his arms, as if in thought.

“Let’s see,” spoke the older cape, “First thing you gotta know about love is that everything you see in TV and movies is a lie. It’s all horseshit. Love isn’t unconditional, it doesn’t make you feel wonderful, and it won’t magically solve all your problems. It takes a lotta time and a lotta work, and usually, a whole lotta money. You feel awful when you’re together and you feel worse when you’re apart, and the world doesn’t slow down a second to help you deal with it. It’s a living hell; but despite all that, it’s something everybody wants, something people kill and die for. If that’s not a perfect metaphor for the human condition, I don’t know what is.” he let out a small laugh. “Now, you want to marry this girl. I won’t ask if you love her; we wouldn’t be here if you didn’t think you did. Just know that, when someone becomes a major part of your life, you’re going to have to be with them at both their best and their worst. And trust me, their worst will pop up more often than you think. And you’re gonna have to love and support them anyway, just like they’ll have to love and support you. It’s why it’s called a partnership.”

Sharp fell silent, waiting to hear his teammate’s response.

“Huh.” said Icepick after mulling this over a moment. “It’s strange.”

Sharp frowned. “What is?”

“Some of that was actually pretty helpful.”

The older cape chuckled to himself. “What can I say? I’m just full of surprises.”

“You’re full of something.” Icepick muttered, getting up, “Still, thanks for the help.”

“Yeah well, don’t spread it around. I don’t need every schmo in this outfit coming to me with their lady problems.”
“Ah, you shouldn’t’a told me that.” remarked Icepick with a sly grin, “I was looking for something to blackmail you with.”

“Eh, fuck off.” Sharp said affectionately. He lingered a bit as his teammate made his way for the door, then spoke up. “Oh, and Frank.”

“Yeah?” replied Icepick, looking back.

“You’re a good kid. Your old man would be proud.”

Icepick’s expression didn’t change, but he nodded. “Thanks.”

Comedy watched the field leader of the Dons exit the bar. It was an open secret on the streets that this place was in the Dons’ pocket, and he’d heard from the rabble that a couple of the higher-ups were meeting tonight. All Comedy had to do was wait and listen. He’d spent many a night prowling the streets of Philly, spying on the criminal element and learning their secrets. Tonight, he’d hit the jackpot.

As the door swung to a close, he turned his attention back to notebook in his hand.

Icepick

RN: Frank O

Power: Brute/Striker. Super strength and freezing touch

Appearance: white male, 6’0”, lean build, blue eyes, dark blonde hair

Relationships: Serious relationship with Time Zone. Considering marriage

Family: Father former gang member. Either dead or incarcerated. Galvanate?

Jotting this down, he moved on to Sharp’s page. He hadn’t learned much that he didn’t already know about the older cape, though he had seen the cigar twirling enough to assume it was a regular habit. He made a small note of it in his plastic comb-bound notebook. There was a rumor that Sharp could not just control small pieces of metal, but also sense the metal around him. Comedy had not found enough evidence to confirm or deny this, but he figured it was better safe than sorry.

It occurred to Comedy, not for the first time, how easy it would have been to slip something into the two villains’ drinks, then haul their unconscious bodies to the Protectorate’s door. He’d be ridding the city of two of its worst criminals, without them even putting up a fight.

Of course, if he did manage that, he’d likely never be able to again. People would get suspicious, be wary of spiked drinks and invisible strangers, and might possibly even get a clue as to what his power was. It was probably better to hold on to that little trick until he could best make use of it.

Besides, it wasn’t his style. He wasn’t the kind of cloak-and-dagger hero that took out villains in secret. That’d just be unfair. Worse, it’d be anti-climactic. If he was going to defeat a super villain, he’d do so with flair. Panache. Make a real show of it. Otherwise, what was the point of super
villains?

On the other hand, would a straightforward confrontation be enjoyable if he knew there was an easier alternative? There was no point to a fight if both participants weren’t giving it their all, using every trick and tool at their disposal. He wanted a challenge, not a handicap. No, if he wanted a proper fight, he’d need an opponent he couldn’t just sneak up on. Someone powerful. Untouchable. A monolith for him to knock down. The only problem was finding this person.

As he thought this, he noticed Sharp reaching for his phone.

“Hey,” said the Don, “It’s Sharp. Meet me on the corner of 21st and Lombard. We need to have a talk with the Appraiser.

“Are you sure about this?” asked the info broker, staring intently at the photograph, “This kind of thing is frowned upon.” He glanced tiredly up at the villain sitting across from him. Sharp had dropped in unannounced, calling in an old favor. He was accompanied by a henchman, standing guard by the door just out of earshot.

“Let me worry about that,” replied Sharp, arms crossed, “Just find everything you can on her. Where she’s from, who she’s friends with, if she was approached by any other gangs before joining us.”

Appraiser raised an eyebrow. “I would’ve assumed your boss had already vetted her.”

“The boss and I don’t always agree on everything. Just because he trusts her, doesn't mean I do.”

“And does he approve of you coming to me?”

“If he disapproved, he’d have let me know by now. And that’s all I’m gonna say on the matter.”

Appraiser shrugged. “Very well, I’ll see what I can dig up.”

Their business concluded, Sharp and his lackey left Appraiser to his work. The info broker waited a few moments after they left, before speaking up.

“You gonna come out or what?”

There was no response.

“There’s no use hiding,” the broker called out, “I could smell your cheap suit the moment you walked in.”

“Well, it seems I’ve been getting sloppy.” came a voice, as Comedy stepped out from behind a curtain. “I suppose introductions are in order. The name’s—”

“Comedy, of the Philosopher Kings.” finished Appraiser.

“Oh!” exclaimed Comedy, “It seems my reputation precedes me. Are you perhaps a fan?”

“Hardly. I make it my business to know every cape in the city.”
“Heh. Literally.” quiped Comedy.

The broker said nothing.

“You know, because of your vocation. It’s your literal business.”

“I get it.” said Appraiser dryly.

“Okay.” replied Comedy, “It’s just that you weren’t laughing, so I was worried it might have gone over your head.”

“Did you want something, or did you just break into my office and spy on my confidential meeting for the hell of it?”

“Eh, a little column A, a lot of column B. I heard you were the guy in the know, so I figured, why not stop by and see what I could learn?”

“Well, I’m not sure what you’ve heard, but this isn’t a library. Anything you want to know, you’ve got to pay for.”

“Oh, trust me. Payment is not an issue.”

As he said this, he slipped a small notebook out of his pocket. Appraiser didn’t seem impressed at first, but as he eyed the notebook from afar, his brow rose in interest.

“I know that kind of look.” said Comedy, “You’re intrigued.”

“Vaguely.” replied Appraiser, “What is in that book?”

“Secrets.” explained Comedy mirthfully, “Good secrets. Bad secrets. Secrets people would pay to know. Secrets people would pay more to have not known.”

“Those wouldn’t happen to be cape secrets, would they?” Appraiser inquired in a careful tone.

“They would, they would.” replied Comedy.

“You’re playing with fire, carrying something like that.” warned the broker, “This business ain’t all cops and robbers. There are rules.”

“Rules you don’t seem too scared of braking.” Comedy jeered, “Besides, there’s no harm in simply knowing things. If you think what’s in here is too dangerous, you never have to use it.” Saying this, he carelessly tossed the notebook onto Appraiser’s desk.

“Very well,” replied the broker, carefully examining the cover, “And what do you want in return?”

“For now, just some advice. I’m a bit of an entertainer, you see, and I’m in need of some new material. In your opinion, who would you say are the strongest villains in the city?”

“That’s a difficult question. In terms of organization, probably the Dons. In terms of sheer firepower, the Archfiends.”

“Eh, been there, done that.” waved Comedy dismissively, “How about this? Which villain do you think would be the hardest to defeat?”

“Hmm, in that case, I’d say Iron Maiden. Her network of allies and associates is extensive; and she has so many weapons and resources, it would take a small army to take her down. Why do you
Two capes walked into a bar. It had long since been abandoned, along with the rest of the hotel. Comedy was waiting for them, disguised in the form of Sharp and a lackey. He gazed at Iron Maiden’s approaching armored form. He wanted a challenge, and he was about to get one. The Tinker was arguably the strongest villain in the city, more dangerous than the Archfiends and more resourceful than the Dons. If anyone could give him a good fight, it was her.

He greeted the villains in Sharp’s voice, doing his best to emulate the man’s mannerisms and body language. Iron Maiden and her partner didn’t seem to notice the difference. He was a bit thrown off when Styx greeted the illusion with an unfamiliar nickname, but was able to play it off enough to set up the scene. Sure enough, just as Sharp was about to say something potentially important, there was a knock at the door.

What followed was the usual song and dance. Jokes. Introductions. Obscure references. Falling on the ground. He didn’t care if the setup was all old hat, the fight would make up for it.

When Iron Maiden declared her intention to fight, Comedy filled the room with illusory clouds, making it seem like the villains were boxed in. All the while Comedy stood safely behind Iron Maiden and Styx, hidden in plain sight as Sharp’s henchman. He had learned early on the importance of controlling the environment, making sure his physical body was in the last place his opponents would attack. It wouldn’t do for him to be caught by a stray bullet or misplaced knife.

He was quick to remove Sharp from the fight, pulling the fake villain into the clouds and eliminating a distracting element. He had Gadfly swarm towards the duo, close enough to antagonize them but too far to make physical contact. All the while, he kept his hands on his tools, eager to find an opportunity to use them.

As Styx slashed uselessly at the imaginary swarm, Comedy readied his pepper spray, unleashing it right in the villain’s face. When Iron Maiden blasted at Comedy’s double with a lightning gun, he took the initiative and tazed Styx to his knees. Just like that, Comedy had reduced his foes by half, all without them catching on to his tricks.

Iron Maiden saw her downed partner and tried to escape with him, but a little smoke and mirrors was enough to convince her she was going in circles. Comedy taunted her all the while, messing with her head, doing all he could to back her into a corner. She would have no choice but to go all out, to use whatever secret weapon or trump card she had up her sleeve. As Comedy watched the panic sneak into her body language, he knew it was time. After all this waiting, after all this repetition, he was finally getting the showdown he’d been yearning for.

“Let’s negotiate.” said the villainess.

“What!? ” thought Comedy. His elation turned to rage, and it took all his willpower to maintain the usual carefree attitude.

“You heard me.” replied Iron Maiden, “There must be something you want. You wouldn’t be here otherwise.”
“What I want is a fight!” Comedy thought furiously. Except he couldn’t say that. Heroes were reactive, not proactive. He couldn’t go asking for a fight, no matter how much he wanted one. No matter how much he needed one.

“If you’re not going to tell us what you want, then save us the theatrics and let us go.” Iron Maiden demanded.

Let her go? After all this trouble? Why would he do that? Then it hit him. If she wasn’t going to give him a fair fight, they’d play a different kind of game. He suggested as such.

“It’s very simple, really,” he explained, “All you have to do is convince me you deserve mercy. That your actions up until now have been justified, and that I should let you go about your business.”

He watched her parse this, desperately wishing he could see the look on her face. Nothing shook one’s confidence in something more than being pressured to defend it. Forcing someone to justify their own existence? He couldn’t think of a worse punishment.

She began tentatively trying to explain herself, offering excuses for her criminal behavior. He shot each and every one down. It wasn’t too difficult. Everyone was motivated by some philosophy; and every philosophy had holes in it. Poke at those holes, and even the greatest heroes could seem like monsters. And Iron Maiden was far from a hero. She tried to justify her actions, tried to argue how her work was benefitting the world; but the truth was, Comedy didn’t care about her motivations. He just wanted to get under her skin.

“If it’s any consolation,” he taunted, “The shame you must be experiencing is nothing compared to the disappointment I’m feeling right now. I honestly thought I was going up against a truly great, nuanced villain. But instead, it turns out you’re just another thug with a fancy gun.”

“Fuck you.” Iron Maiden whispered back.

“I beg your pardon?” he replied, barely able to contain his laughter.

“Fuck! You!” she shouted. “I don’t have to explain myself to you! I don’t have to justify what I do! Maybe I’m not doing everything I can to save the world. Maybe I’m not sacrificing everything to help others. But why should I? All the world has ever done is kick me when I’m down and rip away the things I care about most. I don’t owe society anything, and I’m under no obligation to fix it.”

“And now this has dissolved into a shouting match.” Comedy thought with disgust. He had held such high hopes for Iron Maiden; was this really the best she had to offer? Was this really the best Philly had to offer? He suppressed a sigh. The night had been the fruit of so many labors, but now he had lost his appetite.

“This was a waste of time.”

Pretending to accept the villain’s response, Comedy prepared to make his exit, having his illusionary teammates drag away the illusionary Dons as a distraction. He made a point to grab Iron Maiden’s suitcase on the way out.

“That’s mine!” Iron Maiden shouted in response.

The rage returned, and Comedy didn’t have the energy to hold it in. He stopped, and spoke:

“You have put your head inside the wolf’s mouth and taken it out again in safety; that ought to be reward enough.”
Standing there a few more seconds, he recovered from his outburst and slipped away under the cover of his illusions.

After putting a good distance between the villains and himself, Comedy paused to examine his prize. Undoing the side latches, he lifted open the case and examined with glee what was inside. The fight may have been a bust, but at least he wouldn’t be walking away completely empty-handed. Not with a suitcase full of Epeios’ hacking tech.

Mel sat at the front desk, head in his hands. He knew it was unprofessional, but it was all he could do to maintain his composure. He was exhausted, not physically, but mentally. He wished he could still feel physically tired, to be able to lay down and enjoy a few precious hours free of cognitive thought. Instead, he had the unique experience of 24/7 consciousness; aware, every second of every day, of what he had done. He could hear it now, the sickening crunch of sledgehammer meeting leg. The groans of a man in pain. He had gone too far.

“Too far, or not far enough?” came a thought from the dark part of his mind.

He shook his head, trying to dispel the notion. He was having these intrusive thoughts more and more frequently, as if his cape-half was growing more and more restless. He had thought that defeating Iron Maiden would have been enough to sate his less humanitarian urges, but all the encounter had done was show him the futility of the endeavor. It was foolish of him to take notions like strength at face value. He should have realized that all those PHO debates on power ratings and classifications were purely academic. In the real world, anyone could defeat anyone, given the right circumstances. Hell, Alexandria herself had been beaten by some girl with bug powers. What was her name again?

A quick internet search showed it to be Skitter. Why did that name sound so familiar? A little further investigation revealed why. She was Weaver, the cape from the New Delhi video. The ex-villain had been a bit of a celebrity a year ago. The girl who conquered a city, killed one of the Triumvirate, and was given a position on the Wards for her efforts. Intrigued, Mel kept reading. For someone with such a short cape career, people had a lot to say about her, both good and bad.

As he read down the list of her so-called ‘feats’, he began to feel a bit green around the gills. Murder. Dismemberment. Maggots in the eyeballs. Not the kind of person you’d want to meet in a dark alley.

“Meh, I could take her.”

Fumbling in his pocket, he pulled out his phone and wireless earbuds. He selected an old Iggy Pop song; one that, for some reason, always pacified the dark thoughts and set his mind at ease. As the music started, he allowed himself a moment to relax, a moment to forget the stress and escalation of the cape world. That moment was cut short by the sound of buzzing around his ear. He jerked back, just noticing a fly hovering an inch from his face. He swatted at it, but only managed to knock the glasses off his face. Mel knelt down quickly to grab them, dismayingly hoping no one had seen that embarrassing display. He grabbed the nearby fly swatter and bug spray and rose to repair his dignity, only to freeze. His blood ran cold as he saw who had just walked into the lobby.

“Fuuuuck!”
Two capes walked into a bar. Weaver stepped in first, sweeping across the room with a single glance. It was all she needed. Comedy had seen the videos, the way she moved like a person possessed. It was another thing entirely to see it in person. There was a confidence to her walk, the kind born from a complete awareness of one’s surroundings.

Comedy had to be careful with his powers. If he made anything in an empty space, Weaver’s bugs would go right through it. He could overlay his illusions on a solid surface, like he did with Nemean, but it couldn’t be anything too remarkable or she would notice it when she reviewed the footage of her body cam. In many ways, Weaver’s powers were a complete counter to his. Luckily there were workarounds. For example, making the two of them appear like normal teenagers to bystanders instead of capes.

Approaching the bar, Comedy offered the Ward a seat, then set about making himself comfortable. He ordered a pair of drinks for himself. He probably wouldn’t have time to finish them both, what with the fight about to break out, but he saw no reason not to treat himself. He’d gone to a lot of trouble organizing this night, it would be a shame if he didn’t enjoy it to the fullest.

As expected, Weaver soon shifted their pleasant conversation into an interrogation, making a point to list all his apparent infractions. It was interesting, hearing about all his exploits from an outside perspective. He could definitely see where someone could misinterpret his actions as villainous. He tried not to take it personally. There were so many dangerously insane capes out there, many completely lacking in self-awareness, that it was easy to pigeonhole the few independents that simply didn’t fit the standard superhero mold.

Luckily, Comedy had come prepared, offering adequate explanations for his admittedly dubious behaviour. It should have been enough to appease any interested parties in the PRT. Surprisingly, however, Weaver wasn’t interested in his excuses. She refused to let up, pressing him for every detail, scrutinizing his every word.

It was just a friendly conversation, but it felt like he was thrust into the middle of a fight. And Weaver was going for the throat. She ignored his jokes, pointed out every inconsistency, and didn’t hesitate to call him out on his bullshit. She wasn’t just playing the game, she was trying to win.

And though all this, Comedy felt that spark; that surge of excitement he had been chasing night after night. He realized, with bated breath, that this was what he’d been looking for. A real opponent. A worthy opponent. Comedy had found his super villain.
Punchline 4.4

“Stop me if you’ve heard this one.”

That was the first thing that came to me as I slowly drifted back into consciousness. How long had I been out? It might have been minutes, but it felt like years.

“A man gets a call from his doctor. The doctor says he has bad news and worse news.”

I shuddered as I recognized the voice. Or at least I tried to. The moment I began to move, my body was wracked with searing pain. I had a pretty high pain tolerance, but this was bad.

“‘The bad news’, says the doctor, ‘Is that you only have 24 hours to live.’”

I slowly opened my eyes, trying to get a view of my surroundings. My vision was blurry, and I was having trouble focusing on anything. I hoped this wasn’t a concussion. Tecton would give me hell if I came back with another.

“The man cries, ‘What could be worse than that?’”

Where were my bugs? Gathering my senses, I could feel some small, weak ones in my hair, no doubt having gathered there while I was knocked out; but I couldn’t sense anything in my suit. Focussing my vision downward, I understood why.

“I’ve been trying to contact you since yesterday!”

My suit was gone. I was down to my undershirt and jogging shorts, some gauze bandages covering my arms, shoulders, and upper chest. I was also, I noticed, tied to a chair.

“‘Heard that one, have you? That’s fine, that’s fine. This next one’s a killer.’”

I struggled against my bonds, trying to see if I could pull a limb free. The rope held, biting into my arms, and as pain erupted through my skin, I was unable to stop myself from groaning.

“Oh, and speaking of killers, it seems our guest is awake. Just in time. I was getting antsy.”

There was a snicker, and I lifted my head regretfully to take a look at my captor. Sure enough, there was Comedy, tittering to himself like an idiot. We appeared to be in some small, concrete building, no more than ten feet long on either side. The room was dim, the only light filtering in from a small window on the left. Leaning beside the window was a sledgehammer, and on the opposite wall lay a heavy metal door.

“Where are we?” I rasped, my voice hoarse as pain welled up in my chest.

“Hello to you, too.” replied Comedy, “I’m doing fine, thanks for asking.”

“Answer me.” I demanded.
“Come now, you’re the one with the Thinker rating. Why don’t you tell me?”

I didn’t want to play his games, but the alternative was talking to him. I expanded my senses, reaching out to every bug I could. They were surprisingly abundant; and I immediately urged them to congregate on my location. As they did so, I began to get a feel for the area. It was similar to where I was held before, a concrete landscape dotted with warehouses and shipping containers. Farther out, I could detect huge metal hulls, gently rocking over what I felt to be a large mass of running water.

“A shipyard.” I said, hoping to occupy Comedy’s attention while I gathered my swarm, “With a river nearby.”

“The Delaware, in fact.” Comedy replied proudly, “A historic body of water. According to legend, George Washington once stood on these very shores and tossed a silver dollar all the way across the river and into New Jersey.”

As he spoke, I focused on my swarm, trying to take inventory of what bugs I had at my disposal.

“Now, I know what you’re thinking.” he went on, “How could that be possible? Washington wasn’t a cape.”

Of the bugs I had on my person, most were the small harmless sort; gnats and ants; nothing I could use offensively. Still, I sent them to map out the room’s interior.

“But, here’s the thing you’ve got to remember.” Comedy continued, “A dollar went a lot farther in those days.”

I winced internally. The bomb was one thing, but this was an entirely different kind of pain. I made a point to add some bees to the swarm

“Come on Weaver, lighten up.” Comedy chided, “It’s not fair if I’m the only one having fun.”

“I’d have a lot more fun if I weren’t strapped to a chair.” I replied dryly.

“You’re not mad about that, are you?” he asked in an obnoxiously innocent tone, “It was a necessary precaution. Couldn’t have you moving around with those injuries of yours.”

I glanced back down at my upper body, still covered in gauze. The few inches of exposed skin I could see looked burned but intact. It hurt like hell, but I didn’t seem to be in critical condition. It appeared that, whatever explosive Comedy used, my suit absorbed most of the damage. As I noted that, an important question came to mind.

“Where’s my costume.” I demanded. I didn’t like the idea of someone like him going through it.

“In a bag, on a bus, bearing back to Brockton Bay.” he recited nonchalantly, “The PRT are no doubt tracking it as we speak. I bet they’ll be in for a surprise when they find it.”

I must have betrayed some of my irritation, as he shook his head. “Now, don’t make that face.” he tutted, “It wouldn’t have done you much good. Not with what was left of it.”

I had to suppress a growl. He wouldn’t be getting another reaction out of me.

“I’m sorry, was the suit important to you?” he asked in false concern, “Oh, what am I saying? Of
course it was! It was Taylor-made after all.”

Bees were too good for him. I needed wasps.

“What do you want with me?” I asked.

“Want? What makes you think I want something? Perhaps I simply enjoy your company?”

“There are easier ways to make friends.” I replied curtly.

“You’d think so. And yet,” he shrugged, “Here we are.”

“You sure this isn’t all part of some ingenious plan you’re just dying to share with me?”

“Tsk, tsk, tsk.” Comedy shook his head, “It’s always plans and schemes with you. Is it so hard to believe that some of us are just living our lives, taking it day by day? I’ll admit to stacking the dominoes from time to time, but no more than the average person, and certainly for no greater reason than the pleasure of watching them fall.”

“So why me?”

“Why you…” he echoed, “That’s the question, isn’t it?” He stepped forward, leaning uncomfortably close, his mask’s black eyeholes boring into me. “Why you, Taylor Hebert? What makes you so special? Whenever something big happens, you’re involved. The doomsday prediction. The Nine’s big defeat. The Echidna Incident. Behemoth’s destruction. All these huge, worldshaking events, and you’re always there. You stumble out of nowhere onto the cape scene, and in a matter of months you’re ruling a city. You kill one of the Protectorate’s oldest and strongest capes, and what do they do? They give you a badge and an airship, and suddenly you’re the most talked-about cape in the country.” As he spoke, his voice rose in volume and intensity, his composure rapidly breaking down. “And now, you come literally flying into Philly, acting like you own the place. Defeating all the villains, befriending all the Wards, impressing the entire Protectorate. Hogging all the glory and excitement. Stealing the fights that don’t belong to you. Inserting yourself into my story!”

At this point he was actively shouting. I raised an eyebrow. And people thought I was volatile.

In an instant, he had backed away, his tone and body language returning to normal. “Of course, I’d never hold that against you. I do, in fact, hold you in the highest regard.”

I felt the other eyebrow go up. Was this an act, meant to keep me off-balance, or was he actually this unhinged?

“I don’t suppose letting me go is out of the question, then?” I asked.

To my surprise, he shook his head. “Not at all. You’re free to leave at any time; I won’t stop you.”

I glanced down at my bonds, then back up at him. He wasn’t getting in my way, but neither was he moving to untie me. Of course he’d be a wise-ass about this.

At this point, my gathered swarm had approached. Half I formed into a giant floating arrow, pointing down at the building. The rest I was quick to disperse around the exterior; all manner of bugs skittering across the surface, staying just out of sight of the window. I searched for cracks, holes; any point of entry. There were none. The building was solid, unbroken concrete; smooth from the roof
down to the foundation. A small air vent was built into one of the walls, but as I sent my bugs inside, they came into contact with some kind of taut plastic barrier. It was cool and slightly pliable, like the lining of a garbage bag. Try as I might, I couldn’t push past it, my bugs merely rebounding off the surface. I tried for the metal door on the right, sending bugs inside the keyhole and the gaps around the frame. What I found, however, was some kind of dried putty, blocking the way. Comedy had planned for this, I realized, stowing me in a room my bugs couldn’t reach.

“It’s worth saying, you won’t be getting away with this.” I warned, trying to buy time, “The PRT will find me.”

“Well, look at you!” he exclaimed, “Waiting for the PRT to come to your rescue. They really have made a Ward out of you, haven’t they?”

“Don’t misunderstand. I don’t need them to save me; not this time. I’m just letting you know that, no matter how this ends, you won’t be walking away. Whatever deniability you had, plausible or otherwise, you lost kidnapping me. And the Protectorate? They know who you are and how you work. They’ll be on the lookout for capes with illusions or something similar. You have nowhere to run, and few places to hide. You’d be better off surrendering now and saving them the trouble of hunting you down.”

Comedy listened to what I had to say, then he made a sound. I would have called it laughter, but I had heard him laugh, and it wasn’t anything like that. His laughter was light, airy, joyous. This was low and dark, menacing even. It was a hungry sound.

“You know,” he said, his voice descending in tone, “that’s what I like about you, Weaver. You think you understand everything, yet you’re always just one step off the right path. Nowhere to run? Nowhere to hide? Does it look like I’m interested in doing either? I’m right where I want to be.”

“Bold words for someone hiding out in a cement shed.”

“Hiding? Moi? Tell me, Weaver. Have you ever wondered whether Duo was originally one person or two? Or what happens when Archive uses her power on a person? I don’t, because I know the answers. I know all the Protectorate’s dirty little secrets. I’ve got them all locked up in the ol’ noggin; and that’s where they’ll stay, so long as the PRT doesn’t get in my way.”

“You’re going to blackmail the PRT? I can’t believe I’m saying this, but you’re underestimating their commitment to the job.”

“And you’re underestimating how far people will go protect the status quo. You’ve seen the bureaucracy. The big guys up top are more than willing to let a few minor infractions slip through the cracks, if it means preserving order in the long run. Heck, with enough dirt, they’d probably let you get away with…” he gave me a long look, “Murder.”

“Was that a threat?” I asked, “Or a jab at my kill count.”

“One or the other. Maybe even both. We’ve got time.”

“You’re not the only one who’s browsed the PRT’s databases. I’ve seen your file. You injure, sometimes even maim, but you aren’t a killer.”

“You know what, Weaver?” he giggled, “You’re right! I’m not a killer.” He leaned forward, mask inches from my face, and whispered: “That’s why I need you to make me one.”
I went rigid. That was definitely a threat.

“Try the other leg, it’s got bells.” I said, working up my defiance, “If you were going to kill me, you’d have done it by now.”

“My my, always jumping to conclusions. Whoever said I was going to do it?”

“If not you, who else?”

“Why, a mutual acquaintance, of course. I’m sure you’re familiar with Mel the intern?”

“What are you talking about? You’re Mel. Or if not him, then someone using that identity as a cover.”

The not-laugh continued, and Comedy shook his head. “Oh, Weaver. I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again: So close,” he took a long breath, “yet so very very far.”

As he said this, I tried to quietly plant a gnat on his shoulder. It flew right through. An illusion.

“So then what’s the truth?” I challenged, “Who’s the real Comedy?”

“I’m the real Comedy.” the illusion insisted, “I don’t see why I have to keep repeating that. I don’t shun repetition, mind you, but that’s only because I work in threes.”

“Enough with the smoke and mirrors. That’s just an illusion, standing in front of me.”

“So what if I’m an illusion?” asked Comedy earnestly, “Does that necessarily mean I’m not real? Some of the realest stuff in the world is little more than what you’d call smoke and mirrors.”

“I’m not interested in philosophy.” I replied.

“Then you’ve come to the wrong kidnapping. You see, as the ancient philosopher Protagoras once said: ‘Man is the measure of all things. Of the things that are, that they are. Of the things that are not, that they are not.’ In other words, truth is a matter of perception. And he who controls perception, determines what is true.”

“So because you can make illusions, you think you control reality?”

“I mean, those are your words, not mine. I won’t say they’re inaccurate, but…”

As he trailed off, my ants reached the other end of the room, and ran into an object. I couldn’t see it, but with my bugs I began making out a shape. It was a person, crouched against the wall opposite me. They weren’t moving, barely breathing, but their gaze was fixed on me.

“I’m tired of these games.” I said, “That’s you, isn’t it. The real you.” I inclined my head toward the figure. “The person leaning against the wall.”

“Don’t compare me to that worm!” snapped Comedy, not a hint of humor in his voice.

I paused; surprised. It seemed I had hit a nerve.
“Apologies, apologies.” breathed Comedy, mirth seeping back into his voice as he regained his composure. “I sometimes forget myself, as unbelievable as that may seem.” He let out a brief chuckle, before straightening up, “I am sorry for the harsh language, regardless of how accurate it may be.”

“What are you.” He held up a finger and my voice cut out. I could feel the vibrations in my throat, but there was no sound. He had muted me.

“Please hold all questions until the end of the monologue.” he said, “Where was I? Oh yes, accurate. Accurate, because what better description is there for such a spineless creature? A being so meek that it fears its own power. Do you know what that coward did, when he first got his powers? Nothing! The ability to reshape the world, and he did nothing with it! For six months, six tedious months, I had to watch him mope around bemoaning the fact that he was special. And when I finally got him to put on the mask, finally pushed him to join the Protectorate, he quit and ran at the first hint of inconvenience. So don’t dare conflate me with that living tragedy. I’m the real me, the only one there’ll ever be.” He took a breath I knew he didn’t need. “Any questions?”

“Just one.” I said, “Is this a joke; or are you legitimately insane?”

“Technically that’s two questions. In regards to the first, I like to think of everything as a joke. There’s a kind of inherent absurdity to it all, you know? As for the second, well… That’s a hard question to answer. After all, no sane man would ever think himself mad. And no madman would be cognizant enough to realize he wasn’t sane.” he tilted his head slightly, “So in a way, I guess that’s actually a very easy question to answer. The answer is no, I am not insane, to the extent of my self-awareness.”

“Splendid.” I thought, “I’ve been outsmarted and captured by an actual crazy person. What does that say about me?”

Still, despite his erratic behavior, there was a method to the madness. He seemed to despise being conflated with his civilian identity, acting as if they were two separate people, as if Mel wasn’t the one in control. He was focused on roles, on him being the hero and everyone who opposed him a villain. He didn’t care about making money or stopping crime or spreading some sort of message. All that mattered to him was the game. The cops and robbers struggle that our passengers made us addicted to.

As I thought this, the pieces in my head began to come together. His obsession with games. His need for conflict. The way he sabotaged himself for the sake of a challenge. I recalled the video I’d once seen of me as Skitter, my body moving without my knowledge, my bugs using tricks I hadn’t learned. I thought of Rachel, whose powers messed with her ability to communicate. I thought of Echidna, who up until the end thought she was Noelle. I came to a realization. It was absurd, completely beyond the bounds of what was possible; but even still, I found myself speaking the words aloud.

“You’re not Mel.” I spoke, my voice faint in disbelief, “You’re his passenger.”

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