Hope Comes to Brockton Bay

by Axxor

Summary

When a strange being arrives in Brockton Bay, she is initially treated with suspicion. However, it turns out that she has a super-power sadly lacking in the Wormverse; being nice.

Notes

Hope Comes to Brockton Bay was my first fanfic. It's not particularly great as fanfics go; the protagonist, Hope, was once a RPG character of mine. She's extremely Mary Sue; in fact, she was designed that way for the game.

This story has been posted up elsewhere, but this is the first posting that includes the NSFW extras that I wrote up for it, but never included. (These excerpts can be found separate from the story in Questionable Questing. Here, they are included in the story itself).
In Which Hope visits Brockton Bay, to a friendly welcoming committee

Chapter Notes

Note#0: This was my first serious fanfic. While writing it, NSFW elements crept in and had to be excised. This is the full version (the sex really kicks in between chapters 104 and 114).

Note #1: This story is set within the Worm universe. All significant aspects of that universe are owned by its creator, Wildbow. I'm just using it for a bit.

Note #2: The parahuman known as Hope portrayed in this story is an original character, created by me for a GURPS roleplaying game. She is unfailingly pleasant and optimistic, and is used to being treated with respect and consideration by those around her. Boy, is she in for a shock.

Note #3: Hope was born an ordinary human girl, although albino and rather slender and petite. Her father was abusive, and her mother left them both when Hope was 8. When Hope was 14, she ran away from home too, for various reasons (which will come out in the story). After two years on the streets, Hope underwent a drastic metamorphosis into her new form, at the same time as many other people were manifesting super-powers. She never actually got an explanation for any of this.

Despite being born female, and still having that point of view, her new form is essentially genderless. Her looks are utterly androgynous; she could be an undeveloped girl or a slender boy. She stands about five feet six in height, is extremely slender, and has two pairs of wings, with crystalline feathers, extending from her back. Her skin is a pearlescent silvery-blue and emits a steady glow; she can consciously moderate the level of light, but usually doesn't bother. Her hair is silver-white, while her irises and lips are silver. Her looks are utterly perfect, but it's the perfection of a statue rather than that of a supermodel; she draws the admiration of aesthetic appreciation rather than sexual attraction. Her voice is equally beautiful and equally inhuman; when she speaks, it sounds like crystalline chimes.

She also has other abilities; see below.

Note that her powerset was actually established long before this story was ever written.

Note #4: This story begins about a week after the Leviathan attack on Brockton Bay. Any continuity mistakes are mine.

Note #5: In the first few episodes, Hope comes across as rather Mary-Sueish. I apologise for that. I'm still working on striking the balance between 'competent' and 'OMG she can do everything'.

Note #6: Hope's current classification is: Breaker 3, Brute 2, Mover 4, Striker 10, Thinker 4, Master 0.

This breaks down into:

Breaker 3 – She has an ongoing regenerative capability which can heal even severe wounds in half an hour or less. In addition, nothing can be made to stick to her skin. See also her Mover ability.
Brute 2 – She has skin that can withstand small-arms fire, and wings that can deflect rifle shots. She is also strong enough to lift half a ton.

Mover 4 – While her winged flight is not overly fast, she is more maneuverable than anything with wings ought to be.

Striker 10 – She is able to diagnose ills at a touch, heal injuries (and some minor diseases), halt the progress of poisons, negate pain, and quite literally bring people back from the dead. In addition, her wings can work as clubs when she’s not actually flying, and can strike at people outside of her arms’ reach.

Thinker 4 – She can understand any language, written or spoken, in just a few seconds. At the same time, she internalises the customs and mores of the person she is speaking to. Her eyes can adjust to pick up the spectrum from low infrared to high ultraviolet. And she is able to reach out to detect the presence of intelligent biological beings around her.

Master 0 – While she has no actual power to cover this, she does have a truly sweet nature, a stunningly beautiful appearance and voice, and a charismatic personality. Add to this her Thinker ability to ensure that no verbal misunderstandings or culturally-based problems creep in, and people tend to go along with what she asks them to do. (Note that this is not a compulsion; if someone has already decided not to do what she wants, they are free not to.)

Note #7: I will accept any legitimate criticism of my work. However, I reserve the right to ignore anyone who says "That's wrong" without showing how it is wrong, and suggesting how it can be made right. Posting negative reviews from an anonymous account is a good way to get said reviews deleted.

Now, on to the story!

The horizon was covered by clouds. Suspended high above the surface of the planet, the Simurgh orbited. Like a rose unfurled, comprised of wings without pairs, a starburst or snowflake of bent angles; a grim star on the horizon, one that stargazers avoided looking at too closely.

Her eyes were wide open, but they did not move to track any of the cloud formations far, far below. She slept.

But higher intelligences such as that of the Simurgh had varying levels of dormancy, and the dreams of the Destroying Angel were alien and vast.

There was a discontinuity in the pressure of control, the pressure that forced her into conflict with the beings on the planet below. For a precious few moments, she was able to act independently.

Dreaming, the Simurgh reached out. A mind’s arm shuffling pieces on the board, seeking elements to alter the playing field. To add new players to the game.

Finding one, she turned it over in her sight. It intrigued her. Alien. Different. Like her, it lacked the
shards that swam through the many realities. It was different. But it felt the same.

The Simurgh reached out, and took hold of this fascinating difference. And with a pull, added it to the scenario, nudging it towards other elements.

At the last minute, she added a caveat. None shall harm her. Only a very few were equipped to hear it, and those that did, never recalled doing so.

Control returned. It was as though it had never been lifted. But things were very subtly different now. There was a new player on the board.

The paradigm had changed.

Still dreaming, the Simurgh changed orbit. A tight-beam signal from a satellite was disrupted very slightly, corrupting an image.

In a building far below, alarms sounded.

Hope soared.

The sky was broad and blue, and the only clouds were small and soft and the temperature was perfect. The sun glinted on her outspread wings. She pulled into a long, high loop, the air keening between the crystals that acted as her feathers, as much a part of her world as breathing and eating.

All she knew was that she loved to fly. Of all the changes that had come over her due to her transformation, her wings were the ones that set her apart most, and yet afforded her the most joy. They let her step away from the earth, separate herself from the memories of living in the gutter, see the world as a wider place –

- a jolt, just as she was at the highest point of the arc. An instant of disorientation, of pain, of a strangeltwisting sensation -

- and then she felt the wind on her wings, the sun on her skin again. She was flying again (still?), albeit inverted. A flick of a wing corrected that; now she was gliding right side up.

What? What the heck was that? She took stock. Arms, legs, four wings ... all eight limbs accounted for... no blood. There was no one around, no one in the air at all. And she was high enough off the ground –

She looked down. Off the ocean. She was offshore by some miles. There was a city ahead of her. One she didn’t recognise from this angle.

"Okay, where the heck am I?"

Miss Militia sprinted across the landing stage, scrambled into the helicopter. It lifted off even as she pulled herself into a seat. Someone handed her a headset; she pulled her scarf down so that she could speak into it.

"Report. What do we have?"

Kid Win spoke up from where he was pacing the chopper from a hundred yards out. He had
upgraded his flying skateboard into a flying ... surfboard? It wasn't important. She concentrated on his words.

"I was on the roof calibrating some gear when I got the satellite alert. An anomaly, gravitic and electromagnetic, eight miles offshore, fifteen thousand feet or so. I managed to swing around and get a bead on it, just before it went pop. Big burst, fraction of a second. When it cleared ... \textit{that} was there."

"What was there?" she asked.

Weld was in the next seat. Silently, he passed her a tablet with an image on screen. She stared at the overhead satellite image, a chill running down her spine. The picture was scattered, blurry, but the impression of multiple wings was plain. When she spoke next, her words were slow and careful.

"Tell me that doesn't look just a little bit like the Simurgh."

"I can't," replied Kid Win. "Hasn't started singing yet, but there's those wings, and that skin. I don't know what it is, but we can't rule out the possibility of it being some sort of mini-Endbringer."

"Christ," she swore. "So Leviathan left a week ago, and now the Simurgh's sending her little sister to say hi?"

"She's never done that sort of thing before," said Assault, from farther back in the helicopter.

"She's surprised us all before, more than once," retorted Miss Militia. "Are you willing to risk everyone's lives on this not being another trick of hers?"

He wasn't, of course. No-one was. "Position?" she said next.

"Just made landfall," reported Kid Win. "Flying low. Turned left to fly down Lord Street." He paused. "Good news, it's heading for us. Bad news, there's some work crews in between us and it."

\underline{This isn't New York State ... and that doesn't look like New York City.} She glided across the shoreline, noted a mass of wrecked ships to her right, pushed up against an equally wrecked set of docks, and what looked like an Atlantic City style boardwalk below, torn and shredded.

\underline{Has this place been hit by a hurricane?}

She searched for familiar landmarks, but the buildings, the layout, the land, it was all different. Unfamiliar.

\underline{Okay. I'm not in New York any more. But that's okay. Maybe this is a test. Maybe Mr Goodkind, or Risi, put me somewhere else, to see how I do under stress. Find my way back, that sort of thing.}

But even as she told herself that, she felt the distant niggle of worry. She had been up and down the east coast of the United States a couple of times. If it was still the same time of day – the early-afternoon sun had not moved appreciably – this was still the east coast. Or… she was pretty sure…

And yet, she did not recognise this city.

Maybe they stranded her in a different country, with a different language and customs. \underline{That's silly}, she told herself. \underline{But maybe they did it anyway.}

"Oh well," she said out loud. "I guess I'll just land and ask for directions then."
Wings chiming as she flapped a couple of times to regain speed and a little altitude, she aimed herself down one of the major streets. Off to the right, she saw sunlight glinting off a wide expanse of water, in the middle of the city. She would have thought it a natural or even artificial lake, were it not for the ruined buildings protruding from the water here and there. Is that a sinkhole? Did part of this city just subside?

As she dropped lower again, all four wings spread wide, she frowned. This place looks like it was hit by more than a hurricane. Debris in the streets, water damage everywhere, a sinkhole, collapsed buildings. Hurricane plus earthquake plus tidal wave? Below her, a jagged crack ran down the middle of the road, bearing silent witness to the power of whatever cataclysm had befallen this place.

In her six months as one of the Empowered, she had helped with search and rescue efforts after several disasters, but she had never encountered anything of this magnitude. And she certainly had not heard of such a natural disaster occurring like this in the last few days.

So where am I?

Looking up, she saw a helicopter heading her way over the rooftops. There's someone. I'll go ask them.

As she flapped her wings to gain speed and altitude again, she looked down at the crack in the road. What could have done that?

She was still distracted by that question when the thunderbolt hit her in the back and smashed her to the ground.

A gold and white blur whipped past, cutting between Kid Win and the helicopter. Miss Militia only caught the briefest glimpse of a slim female form before it was gone, but she knew who it was.

"Can anyone tell me," she said crisply, "what Glory Girl is doing here?"

"Uh, I called her?" ventured Kid Win. "I thought we might need some firepower?"

"Firepower is good. A loose cannon, not so much," snapped Miss Militia. "You are aware, are you not, that she's lost a cousin and an uncle, and that her father is suffering massive brain damage from the fight a week ago? That she's an emotional powder keg right now, and that you've just told her of what may be another Endbringer attack on the city? How did you expect her to react?"

Glory Girl flew low across the city, as fast as she had ever travelled. Her face was grim, her lips set, her mind a turmoil of angry thoughts.

They killed Eric. They killed Uncle Neil. They hurt Dad. Why can't these fuckers at least stay away long enough for us to mourn our dead?

Whatever this one is, it's not going to get the chance to hurt anyone else. I'll die first.

Pulling up hard, she grimaced as the G-forces contested her hard loop. But there she - it - was. Wings extended, arms pointed forward, toes pointed backward, gliding down toward the ground.

Coming out of the loop, she drove down hard at the unsuspecting being's back. But the closer she got, the more it looked like a slender human and not like an Endbringer at all. The skin wasn't white, but instead glowed a gentle silver-blue. There were wings, yes, but not the crazy mismatched pinions of the Simurgh; these were composed of some sort of crystal, and were quite functional.
So, at the very last moment, she pulled her attack; she still struck, and struck hard, but she didn't use all the force at her disposal. Her elbow smashed into the middle of the being's back, driving it toward the ground.

Whatever had hit her took her off guard; she never saw the blow coming. But she was still conscious when she hit the street, so her wings had time to fold protectively around her. Crystal chimed as her wings took the brunt of the collision with the ground, tumbling over and over, until she finally skidded to a stop ... and when she finally unfolded her wings from around her, they had held.

The helicopter swooped over Lord Street just in time for its passengers to witness Glory Girl's smashing blow, and the subsequent tumble of the winged person to the ground.

"Set us down, now!" snapped Miss Militia. The chopper came in for a fast landing, the rotor-wash scattering sand and spraying water far and wide. The capes burst out of each door as Kid Win landed his flying surfboard nearby. Miss Militia took up station with a long-barrelled rifle as the figure rolled to a halt.

Crystalline wings unfolded from around its body and head, and it - she - looked around dazedly, then tried to get up.

Keeping out of Miss Militia's line of fire, Clockblocker got there first.

She was unhurt, except for a stabbing pain in the back when she tried to breathe. *Yup, a fractured rib.* A little dazed, she got up on to one knee, in time to see a white-clad feminine figure circling overhead, and the helicopter on the street ahead, rotors spooling up to take off. Costumed figures were moving forward from the chopper. *Okay, what the heck -?*

But she had little time to take it in, because there was now a man standing in front of her. A teenager, rather. Maybe her own age, maybe a little older. He had a weird costume on, all white with an opaque faceplate, covered in clock faces. Some of them moved. In her rattled condition, she was fascinated by that tiny detail. *How does he get that effect?*

"Are you all right?" he asked. "Here, let me help you up." He extended his hand. Automatically she took it –

"Nicely done," said Miss Militia, looking at the kneeling figure, angelic in appearance, with partially-open wings and an upraised hand.

"Seriously, it wasn't hard," said Clockblocker. "Took my hand, just like that." He traded a high-five with Kid Win.

"Celebrate later," Miss Militia said mildly. "For now, we need to contain her ... him ... it? Containment foam is en route, but your power might wear off before then."

"I got this," said Kid Win. He moved over toward a stack of rebar, apparently left over from reconstruction efforts. Pulling out his spark pistol, he began to reconfigure it on the fly.

Thirty seconds later, he was spot-welding together a crude cage from the rebar, as others held the metal in place. Miss Militia shared a glance with Battery. *Tinkers.* They could be so very irritating, but they could also be so very useful.
Abruptly, a cage surrounded her. Many more people were around her now, mostly costumed, some in armour and dark uniforms - the Army? The SWAT team? The boy who had begun to help her up was standing, watching her intently. He didn't hold a gun, but some of the others did.

"- should be coming out of it by now," he was saying. "Ah, we have movement." He stepped forward; she couldn't see his face but his voice was pleasant. He could have been smiling. "Sorry about that, but when we got a report that someone bearing a strong resemblance to the Simurgh was flying in, we couldn't take any chances."

"Wait, what?" she said. When he heard her voice, the guy with the clock-face costume stepped back, and some guns came up. "No, wait, really. What is this? What's a Simurgh? And why did you attack me?" She looked around, through the bars of the hastily-cobbled-together cage, at the damaged buildings, the evidence of water damage. Then she looked back at the group of people surrounding her, wavering between hostility and ... curiosity?

"… Where am I?"

Dennis blinked. He had never heard a voice like that. It was all crystal tones, sweet and lovely. A voice he could listen to all day ... and thus something he distrusted. But it didn't seem to be twisting his mind, and it wasn't the psychic song of the Simurgh, so he stepped forward again.

Belatedly, he realised something. She's talking. The Simurgh never talks.

"You don't know where you are?" he asked.

"No," she said, those bewitching tones making the single word into a thing of beauty. "Can you please tell me?"

I don't see why not, he thought. Seeing as she asked so politely and all.

He told her. Two words.

It didn't help her confusion any.

Where the heck is Brockton Bay?

"Okay," said Director Piggot, "so fill me in. What do we have here?"

Miss Militia spoke first. "Subject is a teenage – girl? – with pale, glowing skin, and multiple wings. Initial images strongly resembled the Simurgh, so we scrambled, fast. I took Clockblocker, Kid Win, Weld, Assault and Battery to investigate; when we got eyes on, we figured it wasn't her. However, no-one got word to Glory Girl in time. So, when she dropped below the level of the buildings, Glory Girl hit her from behind. This dropped her to the ground, and we landed immediately after. She got straight up, so Clockblocker froze her, and Kid Win built a cage around her before she unfroze. She's a little confused, but not aggressive. However, given her initial resemblance to the Simurgh …"

"What," persisted Piggot, "do we know for certain?"

"She's… alien?" said Panacea. "I don't understand all of it, her physiology. Some of it is just out of place on a human, but the rest crosses over into some kind of biological-mineral middle ground." She paused for thought. "I'm not even entirely certain she is a… a 'she'. There are analogue organs in the right places, but they aren't for reproduction, I think. Maybe."
"The important question being," noted the Director. "is she human, or is she something else? Does her DNA register as human?" She pointed out the monitor which displayed the newcomer sitting in a cell, fidgeting just a little nervously.

"Yes, Director," said Panacea. "It does."

"We were able to confirm that, though we weren't able to get a blood sample. Her skin was too hard to get a needle through," confessed the PRT medic. "It's flexible and sensitive, but extremely resistant to intrusion. Quite possibly resistant to small-arms fire. We eventually had to take swabs from the mouth. Also, the stress tests we put her through indicate she could lift perhaps half a ton, if pressed. And no, we don't know how she glows, but it's linked in some way to her emotional state."

"So, a low-level Brute," noted Piggot.

"Oh, and that's another thing," said Panacea. "Vick-Glory Girl hit her fairly hard, and she seemed to be favouring her back when she first got up, but by the time I got to her, there was only a fading bruise. She's a regenerator."

"Don't forget the wings," added Miss Militia. "They'd make her a Mover. They're also very strong and very flexible." She looked at Panacea, who took up the explanation.

"They're made up of some sort of organic crystal-analogue that rivals diamond on the hardness scale," reported the healer. "And," she added for emphasis, "apart from, you know, being wings, they aren't really like the Simurgh's wings. Though the muscular systems she's got in place to make them work ..."

"So ... her wings are bulletproof?" asked the Director, cutting her off. "She could use them as a shield?"

"That's exactly what she did when Glory Girl brought her down," confirmed Miss Militia. "They cushioned her prior to impact with the ground."

"Oh, this just keeps getting better," scowled the Director.

"There's more," said the PRT medic. "We had Doctor Yamada run a basic psych evaluation on her. She's either the scariest, most convincing charismatic psychopath since Jack Slash ... or she's a truly sweet, innocent, caring, nice teenage girl who happens to have wings and glowing skin."

"You're kidding me," said Weld, speaking for the first time as he looked at the picture on the monitor. "That's a pure psychopath?"

"She could be just a nice kid with powers," objected Miss Militia.

"Don't make me laugh," scoffed Piggot. "With that level of power? There has to be something wrong with her."

A short silence, all of them watching the monitor.

"Panacea," asked Weld, "did she have any identifying marks? Tattoos, birthmarks, anything like that?"

"No," said Panacea. "Nothing. Not even a scar, anywhere on her. Why?"

"Just curious."
Weld looked hard at the image on the monitor.

*If you're not a Case 53 ... who are you?*

"I'm still not sure why we have to turn up to investigate this strange new cape in person," commented Legend.

"The case interests me," said Alexandria. "If you want to go and speak to the Director, Eidolon and I will get on with it."

"Sure, okay,' said Legend.

Alexandria waited till he was out of sight before turning to Eidolon. "You've checked that she's not one of ours?"

"Twice," Eidolon assured her. "Doctor Mother swears there's nothing that could do this in our inventory."

"And the medical examinations?"

Eidolon shrugged. "No tattoo."

"Well then," said Alexandria. "It looks like I'm going to have to talk to our mystery guest."

Alexandria walked into the interview room. There was a plastic jug of water on the table, along with two plastic cups.

The girl – Alexandria found that her mind insisted on calling her that, despite Panacea's report on her unique anatomy – looked up at her. Her face was perfect, androgynous, ethereally beautiful. White hair, silver irises and lips.

"Please," she said, in that beautiful crystal-chime voice that the others had reported. "My name is Hope. I don't understand what I'm doing here. I don't understand what I've done wrong."

"Hope," repeated Alexandria as she swept her cape to one side and sat down. "Is that your actual name or your cape name?"

"I don't wear a cape," objected Hope. "It's just the name I use. It's the name I was born with. What's your name? And why do people keep asking me questions but never giving me any answers?"

Alexandria noted the quite human frustration in her voice.

"Hope," she said. "My name is Alexandria. You're here because people thought you may have some connection with the Simurgh. We had to take all these precautions until we could be sure you had nothing to do with her. Do you understand?"

"No!" retorted Hope, frustration still evident in her voice. "People keep telling me that too, but no-one ever tells me what a Simurgh is, or why it's so bad I look like one."

Alexandria blinked.

"You don't know what the Simurgh is?" she asked blankly.
"She had no idea," she said later. Leaning back in a comfortable office chair, she closed her eyes momentarily. Legend sat nearby, watching her intently. Eidolon stood off to the side, apparently lost in his own thoughts, but Alexandria knew he'd be listening. Director Piggott sat at her desk, her face immobile.

"No idea about what?" asked Legend.

"About the Endbringers. About the Slaughterhouse Nine. About the Protectorate." A significant silence.

"Ah," interjected Eidolon. "She's from an alternate."

"She's from an alternate," agreed Alexandria. "According to her, super-powers have only been around for about six months. She was one of the first Empowered – as she says – who went public after it happened. Everyone with powers apparently got their abilities at the same time. It wasn't really a trigger event; there was no trauma involved. She says she was a teenage runaway, sleeping on the streets, and one day – ping – she triggered."

"Just like that," Legend said, his voice tinged with scepticism.

"Just like that," Alexandria echoed. "She says it hurt when the wings grew out, but that was over quickly. And ever since, she's been happy to use her powers to help people. And to fly. She says that being able to fly is the best thing that ever happened to her."

"I scanned her while you were interviewing her," said Eidolon slowly, "and her emotions and attitudes seem to match what you have reported. Despite her less-than-stellar beginnings, this 'Hope' appears to be just as friendly and outgoing as you say she is."

"Well," said Director Piggot, "that settles it. She's definitely from an alternate."

"Why do you say that?" asked Alexandria.

"Do you have to ask?" snorted Piggot. "A teenage runaway, and she's this well-adjusted? Come on."

"It's just a routine check," said the PRT officer soothingly. There were capes standing by, and this new parahuman was only about five foot six, but he didn't want her getting nervous and deciding to lash out. Although her two pairs of wings were currently neatly furled, they didn't have to stay that way if she didn't want them to, and they looked like they could stretch out to six or seven feet in length. Also, they looked heavy.

"We just need to get your fingerprints for our files," he went on. "For one thing, that may tell us if you have any counterparts on Earth Bet."

"I'm not arguing with that," Hope said agreeably. "I'm just saying that you're wasting your time. Especially if you try to fingerprint me using an ink pad."

"Let me be the judge of that, okay?" The PRT officer handed her the ink pad. "Roll each finger on the pad and then on the paper in the correct space, please."

Hope raised one perfect silver-white eyebrow and quirked a smile, but did as he requested. Her finger – the neatly trimmed nail adding a faint pinkish hue to the pearlescent silvery-blue glow of her skin – pressed firmly down on the ink pad as she rolled it from side to side. Then she placed her finger on the paper and rolled it in the same way. When she lifted it away, there was not a mark on the paper. It was as clean, in fact, as her fingertip.
The officer stared at the paper, then at her fingertip. He had watched her roll her finger on it. Reaching over, he dabbed his pinky on the pad. It came away stained purple.

"Okay," he said wearily as he wiped the ink off on a paper towel, "suppose you tell me how you did that?"

Hope shrugged; the motion made her wings ripple a gentle chime. "Nothing sticks to my skin," she said. "Water, mud, ink, glue, duct tape – it all falls off me."

The PRT officer made a faint growling sound in his throat. "I guess," he said heavily, "that we're going to have to wait till the digital fingerprint pad is free. That doesn't use ink, at least."

"Um ..." said Hope.

"What?"

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Open file

Addenda to Temporary File: HOPE.

Subject possesses no discernible fingerprints.

Recommendation:

Assess powers, induct into Wards with provisional status until further notice.

Close file
"Come in and sit down."

Miss Militia entered and seated herself before Director Piggot's desk.

"Now then," said Piggot, "I hear you've been running your newest recruit through her paces. Tell me, how's it going with her?"

The tone of her voice said more than her words. Miss Militia knew without asking that Piggot had taken a dislike to Hope; this was strange, because she liked the kid. In fact, it was hard to spend time in Hope's company without coming to like her. She was a nice kid, and it showed. There was none of the world-weary edge that Miss Militia had more or less come to expect from experienced parahumans, in the Wards and Protectorate alike. It was a welcome change.

None of this showed on her face as she replied to the Director.

"She's doing just fine, Madam Director," she said evenly. "Alexandria tried her out on aerial tactics. Now, here's the funny thing. One would think that in serious aerial maneuvers, those two pairs of wings of hers would get in the way. But ..."

"Okay," said Alexandria briskly. She and Hope hovered some two hundred feet off the ground, above a complex of buildings. The buildings were relatively close together; some made dead-ends, while the rest made up a dense maze. "The game is tag. The object is to last five minutes without being tagged by your opponent. The person being chased must not go above the level of the buildings." She nodded at the buildings below. "You don't venture out of the area of the buildings. Is this understood?"

Hope nodded, studying the layout below. "Are there speed limits?"

Alexandria shook her head. "No. You can go just as fast as you want, so long as you don't actually hit anything. Note that some of the buildings do have lines strung between them at random heights."

"Noted," replied Hope briskly. "Who goes first?"

"First ..." said Alexandria, " ... let's say you have to catch me. Five second head start, starting now."

So saying, she dropped away into the complex of buildings. Over her shoulder, she saw Hope, still hovering, her crystalline wings a glitter of light in the morning sun.

"Nice kid," she thought. "Earnest. I hope I don't have to ease up too much to let her catch me. Don't want to break her spirit this early."

And then the counter she had been running in the back of her mind reached five seconds, and Hope folded her wings, and dived.

Alexandria sped away, accelerating on the straightaway, then braking for the turns. She knew this complex well, and could lead anyone a merry chase for minutes on end without ever hitting a dead end –
"Whoo! This is fun!"

A startled glance over her shoulder. Hope was right there, and gaining fast! How did she -?

She notched up the speed, pulled a scraping turn around the next corner, and the next as well ... but the rhythmic chiming behind her never faltered, and got louder again.

She's not slowing for the turns! How's she doing this?

I need to use my superior speed to outdistance her. I need a straightaway.

With Hope barely two lengths behind, Alexandria whipped around a corner into the 'street' that ran the length of the complex and accelerated recklessly, hearing the wingbeats fall behind gratifyingly quickly.

Another couple of turns and I can lose her ... No longer was she thinking of 'going easy' on the newbie. Hope was good at this.

A gut-wrenching deceleration, then around the turn. Hope was out of sight. Another turn, then another, to throw her off. Alexandria found her heart rate accelerating. This was the most challenge she'd had in the maze for a long time.

Time to slow down before I hit something ...

"Tag! You're it!"

With a sense of utter shock, Alexandria felt a crystalline wingtip tap her on the shoulder, as Hope's voice burst laughingly on her eardrums.

How the hell-?

But it was already too late. Hope was in the same 'alley' Alexandria was in, but accelerating hard in the other direction, her wings chiming triumphantly. She pulled herself to a stop, then reversed direction.

She must have glided over the tops of the buildings, and come down just where I was. But how did she pinpoint me?

As agile as she was, Hope was not as fast as Alexandria, and she did not have the sheer speed the older hero could call upon. In addition, Alexandria knew this maze like the back of her hand.

All the agility in the world won't save you if you're in a dead end.

But that agility was maddeningly effective, all the same. Alexandria managed to keep a line of sight on Hope, but time after time, when she was so close to reaching out to lay a hand on the winged girl's trailing feet, Hope would pull some unexpected midair maneuver, or throw out a wing and take a turn at impossible speeds. Gritting her teeth, Alexandria was forced to revise her estimate on Hope's capabilities upward, over and over.

However, at last, she managed to herd Hope into one of the cul-de-sacs that lay around the complex. Now I've got you.

Hope never slowed. She flew straight at the blank wall, as if she intended to crash into it. Above and below, lines criss-crossed the alleyway, making flight hazardous in the extreme for all areas except
this one lane where Alexandria and Hope were flying.

The timer only had a few seconds before the five minutes were up. Alexandria reached forward –
- and then Hope did the impossible. Again. Of course. Rolling up on to one wingtip, she threw out
her crystalline pinions, then furled her wings and dropped. Right through the tangle of lines. The last
thing Alexandria saw, before she had to apply all of her efforts to stopping before she hit the brick
wall, was the winged form of her student skimming the ground, barely two feet off the asphalt, on
the way out of the alley.

The timer went off. A klaxon sounded to alert them that the exercise was over. Alexandria flew out
of the alley, to find Hope sitting demurely on the edge of a building. "Hey!" she called. "That was
fun! Can we go again?"

Alexandria hovered in front of Hope, studying her. Hope's eyes were bright, her smile genuine. But
there was not a trace of triumph, of malicious glee, of superiority. Hope had treated the whole thing
as a game, and had won handily.

"No, it's all right," she said wearily, seating herself beside Hope. "But I would really appreciate it if
you could tell me exactly how you managed that."

"Well," said Hope cheerfully, "I was always worried about tight turns and stuff like that, so I used to
practise by flying through Chinatown, at about the level of their washing lines." She giggled. "You
only need to get one wet shirt across the face before you learn to avoid everything in your way. And
as for how I found you ..."

"... it turns out she can detect where people are," Miss Militia concluded. "She caught up with
Alexandria in the maze only because she knew where she was at all times."

"And she never told anyone about this?" frowned Piggot, making a note. "This sounds like a breach
of trust to me."

Miss Militia shook her head. "Actually, when I asked her, she just gave me that innocent stare and
said, 'no-one asked me'. And it was true. No-one had - then. Everyone was focusing on the physical
aspects of her powers."

Piggot made another note. "I presume you're going to rectify that." Her gaze narrowed. "I don't like
surprises, especially when they come from strange parahumans."

"Well, yes," said Miss Militia. "She passed her flight tests with, well, flying colours, and her hand to
hand skills are ... let's say, quite good. I have her training with the Wards. She's not as aggressive as
some, but it turns out that her wings ..."

"Okay, Hope and ... Weld," said Miss Militia briskly. "Five-minute spar. Full contact. Go."

Hope moved forward, her hands up in an approximation of a defensive posture. "Is that really metal
skin, or does it just look like it?" she asked. "I don't want to really hurt you, is all."

"Don't worry about it," Weld replied with a grin. "Doubt you'll even make a dent – whoa!"

He jumped back a pace; Hope had skipped forward and, her wings half-spread for balance, flicked a
kick toward his face – and then, her wings planted firmly on the floor, she had performed a
backward somersault, to land on her feet again. Her hands had never moved from the defensive
posture. As she placed her feet on the ground, her wings re-furled.

Weld shook his head. The kick had missed, but he suspected it was meant to. It had rattled his self-confidence, which he suspected was also the intent.

He moved forward again, determined not to be put off by any showy kicks or acrobatics. Hope let him get close, then flicked a punch at his face. He blocked it automatically, then felt the impact of one of her wings crashing into his ribs. **God, she's using those things like clubs!** He wasn't hurt, just taken off guard by the unexpected attack. And she wasn't giving him a moment to recover; as he tried, she sent a second wing lashing at his face. He narrowly avoided this, but in his moment of distraction, he felt a powerful impact at ankle level which took him off balance altogether, and he crashed to the mat.

Hope leaned over him, extending a hand. "Are you all right?" she said solicitously. He took it and allowed her to lift him to his feet; although he'd read her file, the power in her slight frame was somewhat surprising.

"Sure," he said. "But what the hell was that?"

"Was I not supposed to use my wings in the sparring ring?" she asked anxiously, glancing at Alexandria.

Miss Militia shrugged. "Well, we never said you couldn't, just that you couldn't use them to fly. So sure, go ahead."

"Okay," said Hope cheerfully. "Ready when you are?" She skipped backward a few feet.

Weld, for his part, moved in more cautiously. He had to watch her hands, her feet, and now her goddamn wings. They packed a punch too; if he didn't have steel-hard skin, he'd be bruised if not worse. And fast – he'd rarely seen anyone but a speedster throw so many aimed hits in a row.

But now it was time to see if she could take a hit. He got in range and threw a good solid punch; like Alexandria before him, he was rapidly revising his estimate of her capabilities – upward.

She slipped aside from the first punch, but his second was well on target – at least, until her wing interceded. Metal fist met crystalline wingfeathers with the sound of a great chime sounding throughout the gymnasium. Every head turned at the sound. Weld threw another punch; again it was intercepted, with a similar clash of sound. She backpedaled under his onslaught; the wings were flexible, but absorbed and deflected his blows sufficiently that he could not lay a punch on her.

She let him throw two more punches, then all of a sudden she did her wing-flurry thing again; just as he was beginning to think that he had her on the defensive, her wings pummeled his head from all angles, then he felt a foot hook behind his ankle and he went down again.

"Wow," he said, nursing his ringing head. She had not hurt him, but the battering had sounded like the inside of a cathedral bell as it was being rung. "You've really got a thing going there, don't you?"

She reached down a hand to help him up again. "Well, I try to," she said. "I've had training from people who are really good at this sort of thing, and I guess I've learned some of it." She looked carefully at him. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

Weld rubbed his hands over his ears. "Once my hearing comes back, I'll be good," he said, half-jokingly. "But I'll be fine. I heal fast."

Hope grinned at him. "Any time you want a rematch, just say so."
"Yeah," said Weld. "One of these days."

"So she can use her wings as independent limbs in combat?" said Piggot, watching a slow-motion clip of the fight on her tablet. "Was Weld holding back there? It seems she beat him awfully easily."

Miss Militia shook her head. "I asked him, after the fight, in private. He said no. At first he was thinking of going easy on her, he said, but after that first hit, he went full on. It didn't help." She paused. "Of course, she couldn't hurt him, but she certainly took him down twice."

Piggot narrowed her eyes. "I don't like this. She's exhibiting too many new capabilities at once. I don't like surprises."

"Well, Madam Director, you might want to brace yourself for this next bit. She went out on patrol with the Wards yesterday ..."
In Which Hope Goes On Patrol

"So Hope went on patrol with some of the Wards?" asked Director Piggot. "How did that go?"

"Well, first she was introduced to the Wards she had not yet met ..." began Miss Militia.

"Hi, Weld," said Hope with a cheerful wave. Then she turned to another member of the team. "Wait a minute ... I remember you. The day I arrived here ...

"Yeah," he said. "I froze you till Kid Win could build a cage around you. No hard feelings, right?"

"Oh, no, no hard feelings," Hope assured him. "I've heard a bit about how hard things are around here, so you're certainly justified in not taking any chances."

He blinked. "Well, uh, good," he said. "I'm ... uh, my name is Clockblocker." For the first time since he had chosen that name, he hesitated in speaking it out loud. Hope seemed so ... clean, so wholesome, that it almost seemed rude to say something like that to her, for fear of offending her.

To his surprise, however, the implied joke went straight over her head. "Okay," she said with a smile. "You block time. Cool. Neat power. Caught me right off guard." And then she turned to the next member of the team, leaving Clockblocker feeling oddly off-balance, as though he'd gone to put his foot down another step, and there'd been no step there.

"Hi, Hope," said the young man in the red-and-gold metallic armour. "I'm Kid Win, the one who built the cage. As you can see, I'm a tinker." He extended a hand; Hope shook it.

"Wow," she said. "That's really impressive. You designed and made all of this?"

"Sure thing," he said. "It's more or less what I do. And you?"

Hope shrugged, causing her 'wingfeathers' to tinkle softly. "I guess ... I fly, and I help people. Lift cars, things like that. They say I'm a Mover, Brute and Thinker, or something like that." She made a slightly helpless gesture with her hands. "Your power classifications are weird. I just like to think of myself as an angel with crystal wings."

"A Thinker?" asked Kid Win, with interest. "What do you do for that?"

"Oh, uh, they tell me it's because I can feel where people are," said Hope. "I can tell where they are, even through walls." She smiled. "It's really helpful if people are trapped in a burning building and I need to find them in a hurry."

"Well, that's definitely useful," said Kid Win, looking at Hope with renewed respect. "Let's just hope we don't have one of those on this patrol." He chuckled and slapped her on the shoulder as he moved off to chat with Weld.

"I certainly hope not," laughed Hope, as she turned to the last member of the Wards who was to come out with her. "Hi, I'm Hope. You would be ... Shadow Stalker?"

Shadow Stalker gave her a hostile glare. "I know who you are," she hissed. "And I don't care. You can put on your little miss innocent act all you like, but you will do me a favour and stay out of my way. Or you will regret it." She stalked away, ignoring Hope's outstretched hand, and leaned up against the wall, arms crossed.
"Wow," said Hope, glancing at Clockblocker. "Did I do something wrong?"

"Ah, no," Clockblocker reassured her. "It's not you, exactly. She prefers to do solo patrols, and she was pulled in to do this group one instead. Ignore her; she's just pissed at the world."

Hope's eyebrows rose. "So I see," she agreed. "Oh well, I suppose me apologising for being here wouldn't make matters any better."

"It would not," affirmed Clockblocker. "I'd advise you to just keep your head down and do what you need to do. This should work itself out."

"I can do that," replied Hope cheerfully.

"So, Hope's first patrol did not start off on a good note?" asked Piggot rhetorically.

"Not as such," replied Miss Militia. "But from all accounts, it was Shadow Stalker who initiated the hostilities."

Piggot's lips pursed. "Still, she's been effective in the past ..."

And she's been trouble in the past, too, thought Miss Militia, quite loudly. From the sour look on Director Piggot's face, she had picked up on it.

Miss Militia went on. "In any case, once they got moving, things actually went quite well there for a while, except for a little bickering ..."

Hope soared over the street, while below, the sturdy open-top four-wheel-drive crunched over the broken asphalt. She could see where pipes had burst, blasting bits of the street through houses, making the street itself an obstacle course.

Kid Win loped alongside the 4WD as Clockblocker drove, with Weld in the passenger seat. Now that she knew of the peculiarities of Weld's powers, she understood why all the metal panelling was covered in taped-on foam rubber. And off to the side, Shadow Stalker ran and leaped from rooftop to rooftop. She wasn't sure what the dark-clad Ward had against her, but she couldn't let it distract her from the job at hand. Maybe she could talk to Weld, get him to let Shadow Stalker go back on solo patrols, if she liked it more. It was no skin off of her nose either way, but if Shadow Stalker was so unhappy on a group patrol ...

She flapped her wings a few times, generating a series of chimes, and climbed higher, looking over the rooftops to the left and right. She loved flying; it was the very best part of her powers.

"Weld, this is Shadow Stalker," she heard on the earbud comm, "could you please get Flashy McFlashFlash to stop alerting everyone in a three-mile radius that we're coming? She's not exactly stealthy up there."

Hope blinked. I thought our job was to show the flag, let people know we're on the job, she thought in mild confusion.

"Uh, I can fly lower," she said tentatively.

"And they'll still hear you coming a mile away, with all the jangling your wings make," came the sarcastic rejoinder from Shadow Stalker.
My wings do not jangle, they chime, thought Hope rebelliously. But others were already speaking up.

"Shadow Stalker, I do not see a problem with the way Hope is flying," said Clockblocker from the driver's seat.

"No, no," said Weld's calm voice. "Shadow Stalker has a point. We are a team. We must stay together. Hope, come down and ride in the vehicle, please."

Hope felt a sudden jolt of confusion. I thought it was Shadow Stalker that didn't like me. Why is Weld picking on me too?

But she obediently let herself drop lower, landing gently in the back of the rugged four-wheel-drive, carefully furling her wings as she did so.

"Okay, Clockblocker, stop the car. Kid Win, get in," said Weld.

The vehicle eased to a halt. "Wait, what?" said Kid Win. "I'm good out here."

"No, we must stick together. Shadow Stalker's made her point. Get in the car."

Grumbling, Kid Win climbed in also.

"And Shadow Stalker, you too," said Weld. "Come on down, you're too exposed up there. We have to stick together."

"What?" exclaimed Shadow Stalker. "You're f**king kidding me. I'm not riding in the goddamn car!"

"Get down here, Shadow Stalker," Weld pressed her. "If Hope has to ride in the car, and Kid Win has to ride in the car, then you have to ride in the car." He paused. "That's an order, Shadow Stalker."

"Oh, for fuck's sake," snarled Shadow Stalker. "Be that fucking way. Hope can fly all she fucking likes."

"I'm sorry, Shadow Stalker," said Weld, his voice quiet but very forceful. "The decision is no longer yours. You have now refused a direct order twice in a row. This is no longer about Hope. It's about you. Refuse my order a third time, in the field, and you violate your probation. What's it going to be, Shadow Stalker?"

Ten seconds later, Shadow Stalker climbed into the back seat of the four-wheel-drive, her face like thunder. She refused to look at Hope, or at Kid Win, or even at Clockblocker. If she had possessed, say, laser vision, Weld would have been a puddle on the floor. Of course, from the glares that Kid Win was directing at Shadow Stalker, she wasn't winning Miss Popularity any time soon either.

"Okay," said Weld, as if there were not two angry parahumans in the vehicle with him, "Clockblocker, drive on."

The vehicle, now somewhat more weighed down than before, crunched on.

"She refused a direct order?" asked Piggot.

Steadfastly, Miss Militia nodded. "Twice, to be precise."

"Well, it was a petty thing to make her ride in the vehicle," the Director allowed.
"Any more petty than complaining about Hope attracting attention by flying too high?" asked Miss Militia. "I always thought that superheroes were supposed to be visible, not skulking in the shadows."

Piggot frowned. "Did Clockblocker and Kid Win sign off on that part of the report?"

Miss Militia nodded firmly. "They did."

A wordless *Hm.*

Then: "So, what happened next?"

"That ..." said Miss Militia, "... is where it gets interesting."
In Which Hope Performs Surgery

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The four-wheel-drive moved slowly down the street, its occupants scanning the buildings on either side, where they weren't sulking or glaring at one another. Puddles still lay in the dips and hollows where asphalt had been eroded away, or subsided, in the aftermath of the Leviathan attack. Hope leaned on the side of the vehicle and let her eyes slip into their wide-range scanning mode. At the same time, her senses expanded, feeling the life-sparks of her teammates – and more besides.

*People in that building up ahead, one coming out fast.*

"Clockblocker, stop!" she said urgently.

"What? Why?" said Clockblocker, but he was already reflexively standing on the brakes. The jeep squealed to a halt, just as a large, mustachioed man burst from a doorway just off to the side and ran in front of them. He waved his arms frantically and babbled in a language none of them understood.

Even as he appeared, Shadow Stalker stood bolt upright in the back of the jeep, both crossbows pointed straight at the man's face. "Don't move!" she screamed.

"Christ, Shadow Stalker, ease up!" exclaimed Clockblocker. "It's just a civilian! He's not even armed!" This was not entirely true; there was a knife large enough to skin a small elephant in a sheath at his belt, but this was not being used to threaten them.

As he spoke, Weld was climbing from the vehicle and approaching the man. Not entirely by mistake, he placed himself between the man and any 'accidental' shots that Shadow Stalker might make.

"Calm down, sir," he said soothingly. "What's the problem?"

The man, obviously upset about something, tried to slow his torrent of speech, but it was hard going. Weld caught the word 'leg' a couple of times, but could make no headway.

And then Hope climbed out of the jeep and walked around to where Weld was talking to the man.

"Извинете ме, сър," she said fluently, in whatever language he was speaking, "Какъв е проблемът?"

"О, слава Богу!" he exclaimed, clutching at her shoulders. "Някой, който говори цивилизован език. Жена ми стоеше на остър стик и отиде в крака, а сега тя е заразен. Тя има треска."

"Oh, that's not good," she said. "Weld, do we have a medical kit? His wife's got an infected wound in her leg. We should look at it."

"You speak that language?" asked Weld, dumbfounded. "What is it?"

"I have no idea," she replied absently. "Sounds Eastern European. Medical kit, yes, no?"

"Right, right," said Weld. "Everyone out of the car. Kid Win, under the back seat, should be the medical kit. Bring it." He turned, but Hope was already following the man into the building. "Clockblocker, watch the car. Let us know if anything happens. Shadow Stalker, with me."

He followed Hope into the building, through a series of rooms where children with wary eyes
watched them pass, into a dark bedroom where a middle-aged woman lay with a filthy bandage around her left ankle. The limb was badly swollen, and even in this dim light, Weld could see the streak of red up toward the lymph glands in her groin.

Hope was bending over the woman, smoothing her brow with one cool, glowing hand. She looked up as they entered. "She's in a bad way. There's three or four pieces of wood in her ankle and foot, and it's infected badly. If they don't come out, right now, she's going to lose her foot at least, and maybe die from blood poisoning." Her glow intensified, and he could see the room more clearly now. "Right now, Weld."

"Ah ... right," he said. "Ah ... I don't know if my first aid training covered this, exactly," he hedged. He damn well knew that it didn't.

"It's all good," said Hope briskly. "I've done this sort of thing before. I'll need a bucket, a scalpel, and a lot of sterile water. Also, alcohol and swabs, if the medical kit has any." She turned to the man – obviously the woman's husband. "Ще трябва една кофа."

He hustled off, and quickly found a bright red plastic bucket. At the same time, Kid Win was rifling through the medical kit, and came up with a scalpel, its blade wrapped in sterile paper. He handed this to Hope, followed by an alcohol bottle and swabs. Weld stood by, indecisive, unable to touch anything metal for fear it would stick to his skin.

"Help me move her," Hope said to Weld. "But first we have to deal with the pain."

"I can do that, at least," said Shadow Stalker, stepping forward from where she'd been glowering with folded arms. She flipped a tranquilizing quarrel from her quiver, reversed it, and jabbed its point down toward the woman's leg –

- only to have her wrist slap into Hope's hand.

"Not that way, I think," murmured Hope. "We do not know how she will react to the sedative. I have a better way."

"Let go of me," snarled Shadow Stalker, turning insubstantial and pulling away.

"Shadow Stalker, back off," said Weld. "Hope seems to know what she's doing." At least, I hope so. At the time, he didn't even notice the accidental pun.

With another poisonous glare at Hope, Shadow Stalker stepped back out of the way.

"Thank you, Shadow Stalker," said Hope, apparently sincerely, and then carefully laid her hands on the swollen reddish flesh. A pulse of silver-blue energy, accompanied by a soft crystal chime, passed from her hands into the woman's leg, and immediately the patient's harsh breathing eased.

"Is she out?" asked Weld, his voice unnaturally loud in the small room.

"Nah," said Hope, watching the woman carefully, "but she won't be feeling any pain at all for the next few minutes. So let's get this done."

With Weld's help, she moved the woman so her leg was off the bed, the heel supported by a chair that Kid Win moved into position. With a pair of scissors from the medical kit, she snipped off the bandage. Weld drew in his breath sharply at the red and yellow raw flesh under it. On the floor directly under the infected area of the leg, Hope carefully placed the bucket. "I still need that water," she said.
"I'll sterilise some," said Kid Win. "Come on, Shadow Stalker, let's give them some room." They exited to find the kitchen, leaving Hope and Weld with the husband and wife.

"Remind me to hug Kid Win sometime," murmured Hope to Weld, then took an alcohol swab and wiped down the infected area. The woman looked on with interest, as if the swollen limb belonged to someone else. Then Hope took up the scalpel and stripped the paper from it.

"Аз отивам да се изрежат на инфекцията сега," she told the woman. "моля да ми кажете, ако се чувствате никаква болка на всички."

The woman nodded doubtfully, and the man took her hand, squeezing tightly.

Hope laid one hand on the leg, placed the scalpel, and cut deeply. The woman made no demur, even as blood and other horrid fluids spurted from the wound. Weld's gorge rose at the sight, but he made shift to hold the bucket under the flow. Hope cut farther, then stopped and pried into the wound with her fingers.

"Shouldn't – shouldn't you be using gloves?" Weld said, trying to keep his voice steady.

"Wouldn't matter," Hope said cheerfully. "My skin is always sterile. It's a power thing." She pulled her fingers out of the wound, and placed a three-inch piece of blackened wood on the chair. "Number one." She cut again, probed again, pulled out another piece, smaller. "Number two." Another cut, a ghastly rush of rotting material. "And ... number three." A third piece of wood joined the other two.

The woman gasped something, and Hope immediately pumped another burst of silver-blue light into her leg. "Well," she announced, "that's the worst of it. I've exposed all the infected areas; all we need now is the water."

Weld could not help but notice, as she massaged the woman's leg to get as much pus and corruption from it as possible, that any fluids that contacted her fingers slid straight off again. **Sterile skin,** he thought to distract himself. **Nothing sticks. How does that even work?**

Kid Win re-entered the room; he immediately slapped his faceplate shut and apparently went on to internal air supply. "God," he exclaimed. "Smells like something died in her leg!"

"It very nearly did," Hope replied primly. "Do me a favour, please, and pour the water into the wound. Flush it out properly."

With Hope holding the wound open, and Weld making sure the bucket caught the flow, the woman's leg was soon flushed out to Hope's satisfaction. Then she pressed the edges of the wound together and concentrated for a moment.

Her wings chimed softly, and silver-blue light built around the pair of them.

And when she pulled her hands back ... the wound was gone. All that was left was a faint pink line. Lying along this line were a few tiny pieces of blackened wood, and just a faint ooze of pus.

"You're ... you're a healer?" said Weld disbelievingly. "And a doctor too?"

"Not a doctor," said Hope hastily. "But I can fake it, with my powers." She used a swab to clean off the newly healed leg. "Не използвайте крака за два дни.," she told the woman firmly, "и отидете в болница, ако тя се заразява отново."

The man and woman both agreed fervently, clutching at her hands. She smiled, and reassured them,
"So she's a healer as well as a regenerator," said Piggot flatly. "And she can perform some sort of anesthetic mumbo-jumbo as well. And perform surgery." Her voice was the very epitome of sarcasm. "Oh joy of joys. I wonder where she got her degree from. Or if she even has a degree. That's going to go down well – one of our probationary Wards performing life-saving surgery in a broken-down hovel, without any sort of formal medical training. I wonder if we'll survive the lawsuits."

"That's ... not all there is to it, Director," said Miss Militia carefully. "The report clearly states that, had they not acted, the woman would have been far worse off. The waiting list even on critical cases is far longer than it should be, and medical stocks are running out faster than we can ship them in. Plus, there's more in the report about this."

"Oh, do tell," Piggot gushed, savagely sarcastic. "I can't wait for this bit."

Outside, as Kid Win stowed the medical kit, Hope stood enjoying the sunlight as she stretched her arms and wings out to the side. "Well, that feels good," she said. "I know it was a bit rough and ready, but all the infected areas were gone when we were done ..."

She was somewhat unprepared for Shadow Stalker slamming her against the wall of the building. Her wings tensed, ready to shove her back against Shadow Stalker's push, but she quelled the impulse. Better to let her get it out of her system.

"Don't you ever goddamn well do that to me again!" hissed the girl. "You're nothing! Just a probationary recruit! I'm a Ward! I've got seniority! If you ever –"

"Shadow Stalker," said Weld, from right behind the girl, "how about you go help Kid Win with the medical kit. I'd like to have a close and personal chat with our newest recruit."

His voice brooked no argument. Shadow Stalker went, but not without a backward glare full of anger and spite.

"Okay," he said to Hope, quietly enough that the others could not hear, "spill. All of it. What the hell was that in there?"

"What part?" asked Hope innocently. "I looked at her leg, found the wood splinters, and we got them out."

Weld drew a long breath, then let it out. "Okay, from the start. How is it that you speak their language?"

"I don't," said Hope simply.

"She doesn't?" asked Piggot skeptically.

"Apparently not," said Miss Militia. "I thought it was a bit of a coincidence too, but apparently it's no coincidence at all. She apparently has the ability to absorb language from someone speaking to her. According to what Weld says here, she was speaking the man's language fluently in just seconds."

"Is that even possible?" asked the Director blankly.
Miss Militia shrugged. "I've since spoken with her. She showed no sign of knowing Farsi before I met her, and within moments, she was speaking it with no more of an accent than I have." She raised a finger. "And, apparently, she also picks up the cultural mores of the people she's talking to; she was addressing me as younger female family member to respected older female."

"You have got to be kidding me," said Piggot flatly.

Miss Militia shrugged. "Well, it explains her story of why the United Nations was willing to offer her exorbitant amounts just to work for them, back on her Earth," she said. She picked up the report. "In any case ..."

"So you're telling me that you can 'see' what's wrong with a person's body just by touching them?" Weld said, trying to keep his tone level.

"Yes," said Hope patiently. "Wounds, poisons, infections, foreign bodies, general state of health. Essentially, anything my healing can fix."

"Which same healing is just a straight fix. You don't ... uh, modify the body in any way?" he pressed.

"Of course not," she said. "I wouldn't even know how to do something like that. Or want to, for that matter. I'm happy just healing them."

"So you touched her leg, 'saw' the infected area and the bits of wood in there, so you knew where to cut," Weld concluded.

"Exactly," Hope agreed.

"So why – why – didn't you tell us you could do this before?" asked Weld, trying hard not to let frustration overwhelm him.

Hope paused, uncomfortably. "I'd ... rather not say."

"Well," said Weld quite firmly, "I would rather you did say."

"Okay ..." said Hope. "It's a long story. I'd rather not go into it right now. But at least part of it was misunderstanding and miscommunication." She shrugged; her wings tinkled musically. "When they asked me, I told them I was a healer. They saw my bruises healing, and they said, all wise and knowing, that the term was 'regenerator'. So I figured, they knew best. I don't know the terms you use. As far as I am concerned, my pain blocker ability is part and parcel of my healing and my regeneration. As well as my poison stopper."

"Your what?" asked Weld, trying to keep on top of the conversation.

"It's part of my healing ability," explained Hope. "If someone's been poisoned, I hit them with it. If it's ingested poison, they throw up everything from the toenails on upward. If it's not, they don't. In both cases, they become immune to the effects of the poison for as long as it takes to metabolise it."

"Wow," said Weld. "That's ... useful."

Hope nodded. "I've found it so." She grimaced. "And that's the other thing. I like you people, I really do," she said. "But you don't know me. I'm not new at this," she said. "But your people insist on treating me as though I am. Every time I try to tell them something about myself, they smile and tuck it into the box of their own preconceptions."
Weld blinked, somewhat taken aback by the frustration that accompanied her words. "Okay ..." he said slowly. "Suppose you tell me what powers you have that you have not already told us about, or demonstrated?"

"Sure," she said readily. "Okay, for starters, I can tune my eyes to a wider spectrum," her eyes began to glow a deep blue, "which takes in the higher ultraviolet all the way through to the lower infrared. But it makes normal colours look weird." She paused, and the glow faded. "I don't sleep much – maybe three or four hours a night. But I don't even know if that's a real power. I don't need to eat or drink much ... maybe one good meal a week. And I don't sweat, or if I do, it doesn't smell bad. I can wear the same clothes for weeks, if I don't get them dirty."

"Go on," said Weld encouragingly. "This is good so far."

"Ah, this next one, I don't much like to advertise," said Hope. She grimaced. "It draws way too much attention, and I really don't like having to demonstrate it."

More than having crystal wings and glowing skin? Weld silently asked himself.

"Okay," he said. "Let's have it."

"Well, it goes like this," she started reluctantly. "I can –"

And that's when the gunfire shattered the silence, from just down the street and around the corner.

Chapter End Notes

The foreign language sections are Bulgarian, and translate as follows:

(1) "Excuse me sir," she said fluently, in whatever language he was speaking, "What is the problem?"

"Oh, thank God!" he exclaimed, clutching at her shoulders. "Someone who speaks a civilized language. My wife stood on a sharp stick and it went into her leg and now she is infected. She has a fever."

(2) She turned to the man – obviously the woman's husband. "We'll need a bucket."

(3) "I am going to cut out the infection now," she told the woman. "Please tell me if you feel any pain at all."

(4) She used a swab to clean off the newly healed leg. "Do not use the leg for two days," she told the woman firmly, "and go to the hospital if it becomes infected again."
In Which Hope Exceeds Expectations

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the short chapter.

The gunfire drove all thought of the current conversation from Weld's mind.

"Move!" he barked.

Shadow Stalker was already running across the road; she would scale the wall or peek around the corner, whichever worked better for her. Hope leaped into the air with an explosion of crystalline chimes, going for altitude. Clockblocker and Kid Win followed Weld toward the corner. There was no sign of Shadow Stalker; presumably she had already entered the building.

Hope's voice came over the radio link. "We have people shooting from either side of the street. Looks like a gang conflict. People down in the middle of the road. Tango count is six on the left, seven on the right. All on the lower floors. I'm going after the civilians."

"You heard her," said Weld, loud enough to be picked up by his radio. "Let's do this."

They rounded the corner to see two building facades on their way to becoming fairly well pockmarked with bullet holes. Where are they getting all these automatic weapons? It was a problem for another time. Gunfire came from each side; in the middle was a couple with a child; Hope was hunched over them, her wings doing their best to shield them from the bullets coming in from either side. This left her, unfortunately, uncovered.

"Smoke grenades, incoming," said Kid Win, and did something with the oversized gauntlets he wore. Tiny missiles scorched off miniature racks and volleyed down the street, then cut left and right into the windows. Muffled explosions were followed by loud and profane yelling. Grey and yellow smoke roiled out the windows. But the shooting stopped.

Weld went left, Kid Win went right. Clockblocker strolled thoughtfully over to the doorway of one of the buildings, and took up position beside it. A convenient piece of timber lay nearby; he froze it so that it projected across the doorway. Anyone running out would clothesline himself.

One did. Several more climbed out the windows, or staggered out through the door more slowly, coughing and holding their hands up. Shadow Stalker dragged one out, while Weld carried out three more; Kid Win carried three from his side. Altogether, the count matched nicely.

"Well done," Weld said to the others. He moved over to where Hope still hunched over the civilians. "Hope, you can get up now."

Hope slowly came up on to her knees, supported by her wings. The front of her plain white tunic was covered in blood.

"Jesus Christ, are you okay?" he asked, staring at her.

"I'm fine," she said, although she didn't sound it. "Some scrapes and bruises, nothing I can't deal with." She looked down at the man in front of her. He had thrown himself protectively over a
woman and child. The blood was his.

Carefully, Weld turned the man over. He had taken three to the chest; they had gone through and through. It was likely he'd been hit even before the heroes got on the scene, and had bled to death while Hope tried to protect him against further gunfire. There was no breathing, no heartbeat. No chance.

"You tried," he said, placing a hand on her shoulder. "No-one wins every time."

She looked up at him, her gaze suddenly fierce. "But he doesn't deserve to die. Not like this. Not protecting his family."

"Hope," said Weld firmly. "You can't change things. You don't have a choice in the matter."

"Yes," she said distantly. "Yes, I do."

Still kneeling, she trailed her hand over the man's face, then bent over him, her wings spreading out to cover them both in a mockery of her attempt to protect them both before. The man's wife and child, still in shock, watched wordlessly.

Hope's wings began to shimmer with the silvery blue light, and a chime rose from the crystals. The light grew brighter, and the chime sharper, until it peaked in a triumphant peal that drew echoes from nearby buildings. The intensity of the light was almost painful for that instant, but it died away as fast as the crystalline chime.

Hope's wings furled, and she stood, swaying. A little unsteady on her feet, she reached to Weld for support.

On the ground, the man drew a shuddering breath, and opened his eyes. Weld could see a strange silver mark, just over his right eyebrow, about the size and shape that a pair of lips would make.

"Holy shit," said Weld.

Piggot paused for a long moment.

"So she can bring dead people back to life?"

Miss Militia nodded. "Apparently so."

"This makes her an undeniable asset. Especially in the case of an Endbringer attack."

Miss Militia nodded. "I cannot argue with that."

"We need her in the Wards. More to the point, we need her under our control."

"Yes, Director."

"Have her sent to my office. I want to talk to her."
"Sit down, Hope."

Hope sat.

Director Piggot eyed her balefully from across the desk.

"Do you know why you're here?"

Hope toyed with answering flippantly – *is this place affecting me this badly already?* - then decided to go with blunt honesty.

"Yes, Madam Director. I made use of powers you didn't know I had. You want to know why I've been holding back on you. And you'd like to know if I have any more powers I'll be pulling out of ... thin air, in the future."

Director Piggot frowned, then nodded. "Essentially correct. I have questions I'd like answered. You have those answers. This *is* being recorded. So kindly fill in the blanks for me."

Hope had a mental image of an old war movie, with the German antagonist sneering, *"We haff vays of makink you dalk,"* but she fought it down. Giggling at this point would be a really, really bad idea.

"Okay," she said clearly. "All my powers have been explained to you, or demonstrated sufficiently that you know what they are. That's ... all I've got. There's nothing more to show you."

Piggot nodded. "All right," she said. "Incidentally, we have the man you ... brought back, under observation in our clinic. He seems to be in fair health. Can you do that to ... anyone?"

Hope nodded, cautiously. "Within limits," she said. "There's a time limit. Fifteen minutes or so. Also, the body has to be relatively intact. It won't bring back missing bits. So a headshot will more or less make it impossible."

She took a breath. "And the second limit is more stringent. I can only do it once to any one person. They only get the one go-around."

"And the ... silver mark?" asked the Director.

"I have to ... kiss them," said Hope, looking a little uncomfortable. "Actually press my lips to their skin, and really, really want it to happen. And it leaves me kind of drained. The silver mark stays with them. As far as I know, it doesn't come off. It's why I call it the kiss of life. And there's a third limit, too," she added.

"Which is?" prompted the Director.

"When I do it to someone ... there's a cost. They're never quite the same, after. It depends on what killed them. That man, yesterday ... he has scarring on his lungs and heart. He's never going to be quite as strong, quite as healthy as he was before."

She shrugged. "Most everyone I've brought back has considered it a fair trade for being alive again."

"You've done this a lot?" asked Piggot curiously.

"Enough that there's an online community, back home, called the Second Chance Club. They kind
of ..." she grimaced, "... look up to me. A little too much."

"That doesn't seem such a bad thing," observed Piggott.

"It does if some of them go a little over the top, and start advocating a crusade to spread The Word According to Hope," said Hope, somehow slotting the capitals into place. "I have to talk them out of it occasionally." She paused. "But we're getting off topic, here."

"We are," confirmed Director Piggot. "You were about to tell me why you've been holding back on us."

"I was," agreed Hope. "The reason is simple. I didn't fully trust you. I didn't know if you were the bad guys or the good guys."

For a moment, Piggot stared at her. Then, in a voice that could have scraped shavings off steel, she said, "Go on."

"Look at it from my point of view," said Hope. "I arrived here, not knowing what was going on, what your history was. Almost immediately, I was attacked and incarcerated, for my resemblance to your Simurgh. Even after you determined that I wasn't her, I was kept in custody, poked, prodded, scanned and asked many detailed and quite rude questions. I don't like lying, but until I had it figured out one way or the other, I thought I should hold some things back, just in case. So when people asked me, I put on my puppy-dog eyes look –" she blinked her eyelashes at Piggot, looking utterly innocent and just a little mournful, "- and gave incomplete answers. And apparently I have enough powers that they thought those were all I had."

She looked Piggot in the eyes. "I do apologise for all that. I have since come to the conclusion that you are the good guys, as much as good guys exist in this world. So ... yes. No more prevarications, no more evasions, no more holding back. What you see is what you get." She paused. "But ... I'm not entirely sure that I want to be in the Wards. Not after yesterday. I didn't ... get along with all of the team, and that caused a bit of disruption. She ... they have been in the Wards longer, so I don't want to –"

"Stop," commanded Director Piggot, holding one hand up to reinforce the word. Hope shut up.

"We know about your clashes with Shadow Stalker," the Director informed her. "It was all in Weld's report. But let's not change the subject." Her glare had returned. "The fact remains that you concealed important information from us. That ... disappoints me. I thought you were better than that."

"But I –" began Hope.

"Let me finish," snapped Director Piggot in a harsh tone. "These are the facts. You are underage. You have no support structure or resources, save that which the PRT can provide. You are legally obliged to go to school. Being a superhero does not change that ... and the PRT has a lot of resources it can offer you, especially with your wide range of useful abilities."

She steepled her fingers and looked at Hope over them. "In addition, we have people who have some experience with opening portals to other worlds. If you join the Wards, they will be able to work closely with you on finding a way home."

Home. Hope felt her heart leap in her chest. But Piggot was still speaking.

"Of course, all of this is contingent on you assisting us," she said. "If you join the Wards, it becomes very easy indeed. If you don't ..." she let her voice trail off, allowing Hope to fill in the sentence. It
could get very hard for me.

Hope wasn't good at reading faces or telling if someone was bluffing. She herself was a very open person, and rarely needed to hide the truth about anything. And so, she took Piggot's statement entirely at face value. She had no choice.

She bowed her head. Almost inaudibly, she said, "I'll join the Wards."

"I'm sorry," said the Director. "I didn't hear that."

Hope raised her head and looked her directly in the eye. "I said, I will join the Wards. I will follow all the rules. I will obey orders." And I've just given my word. To people I'm no longer sure are the good guys anymore.

Director Piggot smiled. "Good choice. Welcome aboard, Hope."
In Which Hope Doesn't Sleep Well

Hope soared.
She flapped her wings once, twice, revelling in the pure chimes that the crystal wingfeathers struck on one another. Up she flew, over into a loop. She loved this, she loved having wings, having the freedom, being able to fly –

She jerked awake.

A dog sniffed at her foot and wandered away. She scratched; more bugs had gotten under her clothing while she slept. Alleys were the worst, that way. She tried to recall the fragments of her dream; something about flying, having crystal wings. Being an angel. Being adored and looked up to by hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands. She tried to recapture the feeling of exhilaration, of happiness.

Nada.

It was just her, just Hope. In the alleyway, with five days' worth of dirt on her, in last week's clothing.

Still, she had some money in her pocket, and she'd visit the laundromat when she was sure the gangbangers were not gonna show. And then she'd get maybe a pack of chips from McDonalds, eat them down at the waterfront with her feet dangling off the dock.

Some days were good days, even on the street.
Better by far than what she'd had at home, with Dad –

She jerked awake.

The closet was cramped and pitch black. Her head ached; the involuntary movement when she awoke had bumped, hard, against the door.

"What the hell are you doing in there?"

She froze. Him.

"You trying to get out, you little bitch?"

Oh crap.

"Oh, I'll let you out all right. And maybe this time you'll play nice with me."

She recalled vaguely him pawing at her clothes, she struggling, scratching his face, a fist that came out of nowhere and sent her plunging into darkness ...

The lock grated, and the closet door cracked open, a bright white knife of light that seared straight to her brainstem; she locked up in a whole-body flinch, her eyes tight shut. A large hand closed over her wrist, dragged her from the closet. Fingers fumbled with her buttons.

"You'll play nice with Daddy this time, won't you?" His voice was half-coaxing, half-threatening.
Buttons popped open; his greedy fingers slid over her cringing skin, probing, cupping –

She jerked awake. Screaming. Her hands were outstretched before her, fingers spread wide.

Silvery-blue skin. Glowing.

Oh, thank God.

She slumped down, heart still hammering. Somehow she had managed to cram herself right up into the corner, her wings pressed flat against the wall.

Why is the room so large?

She didn't recall going to sleep in an aircraft hangar, and this room was at least that large ...

"Are you okay now?"

Two figures in the distance, looking at her anxiously. Vista and Flechette.

"I ... I think so," she said slowly.

The room's dimensions abruptly shrank, until the two girls, both wearing night apparel, were standing just a few feet away.

"I'm sorry," said Vista, "but we heard you screaming and came in to see what was the matter. You were thrashing around, and Flechette tried to restrain you, but you threw her across the room. So I made the room larger."

Hope immediately felt a rush of remorse. "I'm really sorry," she said in a small voice. "I get these nightmares sometimes. Usually when I'm feeling trapped. It's not ... fun." She looked over at Flechette. "Are you okay?"

Flechette winced, holding her hand to her ribs. "I guess."

"Here, let me see," said Hope, moving forward. Fletchette stepped back.

"Flechette," said Vista, "Hope's a healer."

"Oh," said Flechette. "Okay." She let Hope approach her. "So, do I need to take my top off or something?"

Hope smiled. "No, just give me your hand." She took the girl's proffered hand and held it for a moment. "A cracked rib." A faint crystalline tone, and a pulse of silver-blue light. "Should be fine now." She released Flechette's hand.

Flechette blinked, and felt her ribs. "Good as new, I guess."

Feet thundered in the hallway, and the door jerked partly open, then closed again hurriedly. A fierce whispered conversation took place outside the door. Weld's voice called out, "Hope? Are you okay? We heard you screaming."

"Aren't you glad you didn't take your top off now?" murmured Vista, and giggled. Flechette blushed.

"It's all right," Vista called out. "Hope had a nightmare, but we've dealt with it. She's all good now."
"If you're sure you're okay," called out Clockblocker through the door.

"I - I'm okay," Hope called out. "Thanks anyway."

"We'll be going back to bed now," said Vista, patting Hope on the shoulder. "If you need to talk or something ... just knock on the door, okay?" Outside, footsteps trooped away along the corridor, Clockblocker's light steps interspersed with Weld's heavy thumps.

"Okay," said Hope in a wan voice. "Thanks."

The two girls left, and the door closed behind them. Hope lay down on her bed again, but she didn't feel sleepy anymore. What she felt like was a night-time flight. Something to blow the cobwebs away. So she got up, and slipped out of the door. It wasn't until she was in the corridor that she realised something.

Shadow Stalker had not come stomping along the corridor to complain. It was very much something she would do. Hope suspected that she would even take pleasure in blasting Hope for another imagined slight.

Pausing, Hope extended her senses into the rooms along the corridor. Clockblocker was still moving around in his room, preparing to go back to bed, she presumed. Weld was settled down; apparently he didn't sleep, so he was probably studying or listening to music or something. Flechette and Vista were in their rooms by now. But Shadow Stalker's room read as empty to her.

Where was Shadow Stalker?

She made it to the roof fairly quickly; she had made a point of knowing how to get there, earlier. From this point of view, she let her senses flow out again. Sleeping or nearly-sleeping minds in the building. One in the monitor room. And one, just slipping off the property, moving slowly and stealthily.

Dimming her natural light as much as possible, Hope crept to the edge of the roof, and peered over. The moonlight was not that strong, but her full-spectrum vision picked up the slack. The height, the mode of dress, the stride; it all added up to Shadow Stalker.

*Where are you going?*
In Which Hope Follows Shadow Stalker

Hope didn't know where Shadow Stalker was slipping off to.

What do I do?

I'll go after her, stay out of the way. If she's on legitimate business, I'll be giving her teamwork and support. Weld was big on that. If not ...

She didn't like the implications of that last thought, liked it even less that she was thinking this of a teammate. Even a teammate who was as mean to her as Shadow Stalker was.

I'll be watching and observing a teammate. Not spying. She told herself that very firmly. She almost believed it, too.

By this time, Shadow Stalker had crossed the street, and was halfway up the building on the far side.

I'm going to have to be very careful about this. For the first time, she was painfully aware of just how noisy the crystal feathers in her wings were.

Running to the far side of the building, she leaped off, spreading her wings to glide away. Very slowly and carefully, she began to beat her wings; to her ears, the crystalline chimes were deafening. I have to find a quieter way to follow someone.

A long, lazy loop, with her wings beating slowly and steadily for the least amount of noise – she hoped – took her back over the area where Shadow Stalker had taken to the rooftops. At first, she did not see anyone – darn, I've lost her – and then, off to the side, she saw the figure moving fast over the rooftops.

The night was dark and cold and still.

The dark usually meant little to Hope; her natural illumination meant that she was never without a means to see by. But for this purpose, she did not want to be seen, and so she was having to concentrate to keep her glow down to a faint glimmer. Fortunately, her wide-spectrum vision gave her enough of a chance to see the figure on the rooftop without venturing too close.

Nor did the cold bother her overmuch; while she was not immune to freezing temperatures, she could stand them pretty well. And so, wearing a nightgown and little else, she felt the chill, but was not hampered by it. And it did her a favour; the figure below was putting out lots of heat, blazing nicely in the infrared end of the spectrum, especially in contrast with her surroundings.

The stillness perhaps caused her the most problems. There was no wind that she could coast upon, to make a little noise to cover the gentle chimes of her wingbeats. Sound travels a long way on a cold night, and Hope was constantly biting her lip, trying hard to keep contact with Shadow Stalker without coming too close.

And then Shadow Stalker disappeared. One second she was there, the next she was gone. Hope blinked. She's seen me, she's bolted.

Keeping her altitude, she glided forward, over the area. There was an alley down there. And on the ground, lying sprawled ... a human figure. Shadow Stalker.

A turn, not too sharp, careful not to lose too much altitude, and she swept over the alley again. It was
Shadow Stalker, and she was lying altogether too still for Hope's liking. It looked like she was lying face down, body awkwardly twisted.

*Oh god, the supposition leaped to her mind, she saw me, was distracted, jumped off, landed awkwardly, and she's hurt herself!*

The picture was too vivid in her mind. She could not rid herself of the possibility. *If she's hurt, and I just go back to base, she could lie there all night. She could die.*

*I can't do that.*

*I have to see if she's all right.*

*Even if she calls me out on it. I have to make sure she's not hurt.*

She swooped down, landed on the roof edge with a faint chime of crystalline wingfeathers.

Shadow Stalker lay in the alley, motionless. Hope could not even see if she was breathing. A crossbow lay near her outflung hand. At her belt, her bolt case had sprung open, bolts spilling on to the grimy concrete.

Hope had spent far too many hours trying to sleep in alleys just like this to be able to look at the scene with total equanimity or detachment. Shadow Stalker still blazed with heat, but even if she was already dead, her body temperature would not show a noticeable drop for minutes yet.

*It looks like she's badly hurt. I can't leave her here. I have to help her.*

Spreading her wings, she dropped down into the alleyway, no longer concerned with concealment. Her glow blazed forth, filling the alley with silvery-blue radiance. Her wings chimed as she beat them once, halting her downward momentum, then she flexed her ankles and landed. Furling her wings, she knelt over Shadow Stalker's supine body.

"Shadow Stalker," she said out loud. "It's Hope. Are you …"

As she spoke, she reached out to lay her hand on Shadow Stalker's exposed jaw, where her mask had become partially dislodged. The touch told her all she needed to know, all she should have known.

Shadow Stalker was both unhurt and fully conscious.

As Hope blinked in surprise, Shadow Stalker rolled over at her touch. Her left hand, previously hidden under her body, held a crossbow bolt by the shaft. Its head was razor-sharp, deadly. Not a knockout bolt.

"Gotcha, bitch," she grunted, and buried the bolt in Hope's stomach.

It was the most pain that Hope had felt since she had gained her powers. She stared down stupidly at the shaft protruding from her abdomen, just below her breastbone. Blood, thick and red, welled around the shaft, soaking into her thin nightgown.

Shadow Stalker rolled away, snatching up the crossbow and slapping a bolt into it. She sat up, aiming the bolt between Hope's eyes, and laughed harshly.

"F**k, you look stupid, bitch," she said. "I can't believe you thought I wouldn't see you up there."

Hope pressed her hand to the spreading redness, trying to hold the bolt still, and reached out with her
other hand, appealing to Shadow Stalker. She tried to talk, but her diaphragm protested; she could barely breathe.

"Why?" she breathed; it was all she could manage.

"Why?" repeated Shadow Stalker mockingly. "Why the f**k not? You f**ked with me, bitch, and everyone who f**ks with me gets theirs. It's a dog eat dog world, and I'm a goddamn predator. There's no room in this world for some little nice bitch that everyone likes and wants to help everyone. You kill or be killed. You kick ass, or get your ass kicked. And you," she sneered, "just got your ass kicked. Permanently."

Hope gritted her teeth. She was bleeding out too fast. She had to do something. Her regeneration would deal with the wound, but not with the arrow still in there. But even touching the shaft sent lightning bolts of agony throughout her entire torso.

Blackness gathered at the edges of her vision. Even her glow seemed to be dimming, failing to illuminate all the way down the alleyway.

*I'm dying.*

Shadow Stalker leaned closer, watching her features intently. Hope tried to stare back defiantly, but there was too much pain. She was growing weaker by the second.

And then the darkness bloomed, sweeping down the alleyway. And a voice spoke from it.

"Leave her alone, Shadow Stalker!"

Shadow Stalker spun around, already halfway to her feet, snarling, crossbow leveled at the cloud of black fog. She was distracted, her attention diverted. Hope fell sideways, freeing her wing from where it had been trapped against the wall. Despite the utter, tearing agony, she lashed out. And contacted. Shadow Stalker reeled away, dazed.

Then, merciful blackness descended.

Hope came to. She was lying on a couch, and could smell the subtle scent of decay and abandonment. She blinked a couple of times.

*Not dead.*

*Wow, okay. I'll go with that.*

A voice spoke off to the side. "You're awake. How are you feeling?"

She looked over, to see Shadow Stalker, apparently unconscious, bound hand and foot. Standing over her were five teenagers, or young adults, she could not really tell. Two guys, three girls. One of the guys was tall, with a black costume and helmet with a sort of skull design on it; the other dark-haired and good-looking, with a ren-faire style outfit which included a sort of coronet on his head. He carried a heavy-looking sceptre.

The three girls were a study in contrast; one had a whole-body costume in greys and blacks with a full-face mask that made her look like some sort of insect, another had a domino mask and a costume with a lot of purple in it, and the third wore street clothes, and had three dogs sitting at her feet.

It was the girl in purple who had spoken; she walked over to Hope and crouched beside her.
Hope looked up at her, as she levered herself upright. Moving still sent tiny jabs of pain through her abdomen, but no longer evoked tearing agony. She looked down at where the arrow had been; it had been removed, and there was now a neat bandage around her torso.

"A lot better, actually," said Hope with a tentative smile. "You ... uh, took the arrow out and bandaged me up, I take it?"

As she spoke, all eyes turned to her; the dark-haired guy whistled softly under his breath.

"Yes, we did," said the girl. "We, uh, persuaded Shadow Stalker to do it, actually. Once it was out, you started regenerating, but we put the bandage on to keep the bleeding down. As soon as you're healed up, it should be safe to take off."

She did not elaborate on what form the 'persuasion' took, and Hope found it hard to ask about it; yes, it had probably been unpleasant for Shadow Stalker, but after all, it had saved Hope's life.

"Uh, thanks," she said. "Uh, wow, where are my manners? My name is Hope, and –"

"- you're the latest recruit for the Wards, yes," said the girl cheerfully. Hope blinked at her.

"Uh, how did you know -?" she began.

"Because Tattletale knows everything about you, now that she's met you," said the dark-haired guy in a lazy drawl. "Shoe size, hat size, what you had for breakfast this morning –"

"- you didn't eat breakfast this morning, because you only eat about once every three or four days, and you had steak and eggs yesterday." supplied Tattletale, without missing a beat. She regarded Hope, and blinked a few times. Hope stared at her with equal surprise.

"Holy crap," said Tattletale at last.

"What?" said Hope.

"Never mind, never mind," said Tattletale, standing and offering Hope her hand. Taking it, Hope stood, feeling just a little woozy. With the amount of blood soaking her nightdress, she wasn't surprised. But even that was passing; her body was making up the remainder, replacing the wooziness with a sharp pang of hunger.

"You're going to have to eat again, and soon," said Tattletale with a grin.

Hope was shaken; twice now, Tattletale had spoken what was on her mind. "Are you reading my thoughts?" she asked, a little more sharply than she'd intended.

"Silly Hope," said Tattletale playfully. "No-one can read anyone's thoughts. Not on this world, anyway. On your world, maybe. But not here."

"On ... her world?" asked the guy in black.

"Sure," said Tattletale. "She's not from 'round here. Fell through some sort of midair portal about eight days ago. They thought she was the Simurgh at first, but after they captured her, they discovered their mistake."

"Okay, Tattletale, enough showing off." This time, it was the girl in the insect costume who had spoken, just a little sharply. Hope looked at her properly, and for the first time she realised that insects of all kinds were crawling over her, and also on the walls of the building. Her face was
covered by the insectoid mask; even the eyes had yellowish lenses obscuring them as they observed her. Hope found her steady gaze just a little creepy. "We've got to figure out what we're doing now."

"What?" asked the dark-haired guy. "We're changing the plan? I liked the plan."

"Shut up, Regent." It was the insect girl and the guy in black who had spoken, in almost perfect unison; Hope guessed they said it a lot.

Tattletale turned back to Hope. "You see," she said brightly, "we were setting a trap for Shadow Stalker over there, and we were going to –"

"Tattletale!" snapped the insect girl.

"- make sure she stopped trying to kill any of us on her midnight runs," amended Tattletale, looking a little put out.

"Especially Skitter," added Regent.

"Especially Skitter," agreed Tattletale.

"What?" asked Hope. "Why ... why was she even trying to kill Skitter ...?" She looked at the insect girl, making the connection, and gesturing at her as she asked the question. *Is that you?*

The insect girl – Skitter – nodded curtly. "Because she's psychotic, and because I found out her secret identity," she said.

Hope nodded. "I have to agree," she said, "she's not the nicest person ..."

"... understatement of the century ..." murmured Regent.

"... but what are you going to do with her now?" concluded Hope.

"See, that's the problem now," said Tattletale. "If we try to take her away, you're going to try to stop us, because you've just now figured out that we're not actually heroes ..."

Hope blinked, having actually made that connection at that very second. She looked around at the assembled group. She was good; she knew that. Against the five of them, with unknown capabilities? This would not be any kind of easy.

"This doesn't have to end in a fight," she said.

"We could just kill her," said the girl with the dogs. Her words lacked inherent malice; they were just a pragmatic statement of fact.

"I don't want to do that," said Tattletale and Skitter at the same time. They looked at each other. "You first," said Skitter.

"I don't want to kill her," said Tattletale, "because ... she's a genuinely nice person, who doesn't want to fight, but will do so to protect Shadow Stalker, because she's a helpless prisoner. She's nice and kind and decent, and I really don't want to kill someone like that." She gestured to Skitter to speak.

"I don't want to kill her," said Skitter, "because Shadow Stalker wanted to kill her, and if we kill her, we're doing what Shadow Stalker wants. And I will never do that."

"Well, okay," said Hope. "So you're not going to kill me. What *are* you going to do?"
Everyone but Skitter looked at Tattletale. Tattletale looked at Skitter. Skitter looked at Hope.

"We're going to give her back to you," she said. "We have the arrow. It has your blood on it, along with Shadow Stalker's fingerprints." Hope looked at Shadow Stalker and saw that, yes, her gloves had been removed, and blood - presumably Hope's - still stained them. "You're going to take it, and her, back to the Wards' headquarters, and wake up your commanding officer, and give him the whole story. I am reasonably certain that this will end Shadow Stalker's career. Permanently."

Her head turned to face Regent; Hope noticed that she had dark curly hair. It was the most human feature Hope had seen on her yet. "Perhaps more permanently than our plan would have done."

Regent shrugged, and waggled his hand from side to side. "Maybe so, but I still liked the first plan better." He caught everyone looking at him and threw up his hands. "Okay, fine! We'll use the new plan!"

And so it went. She had the arrow, wrapped in cloth, in one hand. In the other, she held the back of Shadow Stalker's combat harness. The disgraced Ward was still unconscious; Tattletale had told her that she'd had a dose from one of her own knockout quarrels.

"Um," she said, "I just want to say, thanks?"

Skitter inclined her head. "No thanks necessary," she said.

In the background, the girl with the dogs – Hope had not actually learned her name – was doing something with them. She could swear they were growing larger. The two guys were moving off as well, each holding a large cardboard box. But Tattletale was speaking with her now.

"Just one thing before you go," she said, her eyes twinkling with mischief. "The options that Director Piggot offered you? She left out a few. Look around. Ask some questions. You'll find out."

"How did you know about –" Hope began, but Tattletale just waved and moved toward one of the doors out of the building. And then the black smoke, or fog, or whatever it was – it blocked all Hope's senses, even her spark-of-life sense – billowed out and covered them all.

So Hope found another exit and took wing, heading back toward Ward Headquarters.

Shadow Stalker was still unconscious when she got there, though her life signs were still steady.

Weld was not best pleased to be pulled away from his studies at what proved to be three-thirty in the morning. But he was a fair man; he listened to her story. And then he looked at the arrow in the cloth. And he made a few calls, and woke up other people who were likewise unhappy to be awakened.

By the time the sun rose, Hope was still answering questions (although she'd been allowed to change into clean clothes; her perforated and bloodstained nightdress was taken as evidence) and Shadow Stalker, now conscious and apparently incandescent with rage, was confined to a cell, with some sort of weird cuffs on her wrists to stop her from ghosting out.

Virtually everyone in the chain of command had been contacted, and the sequence of events had been pretty well established.

But the storm was only just beginning.
In Which Hope is Questioned about the Undersiders

Hope sat in a chair in Director Piggot's office. Beside her, the small table held a sandwich plate (she had already eaten the sandwiches) and a pitcher of cold water (she had half-drained that as well). She was comfortable, no longer hungry or thirsty, and felt alert. Those who sat around her and bombarded her with questions did so without raising their voices, and the questions themselves were politely worded. However, she still felt as though she was undergoing an intense interrogation. Which, to be honest, was exactly what was happening.

"Why, exactly, were you following Shadow Stalker?"

This was Miss Militia; her voice was calm and lacked any suspicion of accusation, but Hope understood that she really did want to know the answer.

"I'm not really sure," she said, after considering the question. "The way she was acting, she was sneaking out without permission – but then again, so was I," she added with perfect honesty. "I had just woken up from a nightmare and wanted to take a night-time lap of the city to clear my head. But when I saw her leaving ... I don't know."

She chewed her lip. "I thought it quite possible she was going out on some legitimate business, but I just could not be certain about that. So I decided to tag along. If she wasn't doing anything wrong, then I would have my flight and go back to headquarters. If she was ... I didn't want to think about that."

She shook her head. "I don't like spying on people. I don't like thinking that way. I don't like being suspicious." A helpless shrug, accompanied by a gentle tinkle. "Before I came here, it would not have occurred to me to think this way, about a teammate. But ... if she was going out to do something wrong, I knew that ignoring it, letting it happen, would be worse. So ... I followed."

Behind her desk, Director Piggot made notes, her pen scratching on the paper.

Weld: "Why didn't you alert me, or another one of the Wards? One who could follow her more quietly?"

Hope looked at him and grimaced. "I didn't know that she was doing anything wrong. I didn't want a huge fuss to be made about a simple night-time excursion. And besides, by the time I got to you and told you what was going on, she would have been well on her way. The only way to find her then would have been to call out everyone and scour the city. And I didn't want that."

"Well, maybe if we had, we could have caught up with the Undersiders," commented Clockblocker, sitting alongside Weld. Weld elbowed him unobtrusively.

"Ah yes, the Undersiders," said Director Piggot, laying down her pen. "Am I to understand that you were face to face with them, had several minutes of dialogue with them, and then left without attempting to take them into custody?" Unlike Miss Militia's voice, hers held a certain amount of censure.

"Madam Director," said Hope carefully, "for the first part, I did not know who they were, did not realise that they were villains until partway through the conversation. When I did realise this, there was still the factor that I was outnumbered five to one, not even counting the dogs."

"That should have been no obstacle to you," scoffed Piggot. "You have shown yourself to possess so many powers over this last week; surely you could take them all on and win handily."
Hope saw the capes in the room shift a little, but she answered readily. "That's not always the case," she replied. "Against five unpowered street thugs, yes, of course. Against five powered individuals... not so much. Especially if they know how to work together. If the group you are facing has practised teamwork, the whole is usually greater than the sum of the parts. I have not had a chance to read their files; I do not and did not know their capabilities. They were not offering to harm me, or even commit a crime in front of me. They even handed Shadow Stalker back to me; somehow, they knew that I would not let them take her without a fight."

Another shrug. "And besides, suppose I had subdued them all. I am good, but I'm not that good. I had no way to transport six prisoners back to Headquarters." Clockblocker chuckled under his breath, to be elbowed again by Weld.

Weld spoke up. "You say you woke up in a building, not in the alleyway you were attacked in. Could you find that building again? And did it seem to be their actual base?"

"I believe I could, yes," said Hope. "But it seemed to me to be a convenient place for them to get off the street. It was... an apartment, but it had been fairly well cleaned out by the previous occupants."

A pause for thought. "There was furniture, but it was old. There was dust everywhere. I got the impression they had only just walked in. A neutral spot to talk to me."

Miss Militia spoke next. "There is the matter which has not yet been covered," she said quietly. "The Undersiders undoubtedly saved your life. Could it be that you did not attempt to capture them because you felt some level of gratitude?"

"Well, of course I felt gratitude," replied Hope at once. "Wouldn't you?" Without waiting for an answer, she went on. "And yes, that was part of it. They did not have to save my life. They chose to do so. I believe they deserved some level of consideration for that. But if they had then chosen to commit a crime – such as kidnapping Shadow Stalker – I would have had to intervene. And they knew it."

Director Piggot cleared her throat. "So," she said ominously, "do you feel so much gratitude that if you saw them in the street, you would not try to capture them?"

Hope blinked at her. "I'm sorry, Madam Director," she said, "but I can't even begin to answer that question until you give me a specific example. If they were committing a crime? Certainly I would try to capture them. If they were minding their own business, and they could be taken without endangering innocents? I can't say for sure. If they were assisting in dealing with a danger, such as one of your Endbringers? Probably not, as I understand you have a sort of understanding along those lines anyway." She opened her hands questioningly. "Or do you have a more specific scenario in mind?"

Piggot began to speak, but Hope never heard the question.

Because at that moment, the alarms went off.
In which the Undersiders attack

Hope jerked her head up at the klaxons resounding through the room. "What's that?"

Weld looked around, confused. "Fire alarm?" he said. "Is there a fire drill that I didn't know about?"

One of the PRT officers standing at the periphery of the room spoke urgently into a comm. He tried again, and got nothing. "That's a duress alarm! And the security station isn't responding!"

Miss Militia was the first to the door. Weld and Clockblocker were right behind her. Hope stood too, then glanced at Weld. He paused, shrugged and nodded. "Okay, come on." Glancing at the PRT officer, he added, "Once we're out, secure this room."

By the time Hope got to the door, the other three were already running. This, of course, was the downside of needing wings to fly; relatively narrow spaces gave her no leeway. Here, Hope would have to run like everyone else. And she wasn't all that good at running. Miss Militia was already out of sight; Weld and Clockblocker were close behind, leaving Hope in their wake.

She was a little out of breath when she turned the corner to see Flechette unconscious on the floor, with a familiar-looking bolt stuck in her arm. Hope went down to one knee, and plucked the bolt – one of Shadow Stalker's tranquiliser versions – out of Flechette's arm, then applied a pulse of cool blue light to her. *That should deal with the poison.*

Just then, she sensed movement from the corner of her eye, and turned just in time to block a flying bolt with her wing. A second one flashed in, however, and struck her in the ribs. It broke, and fell to the floor, its contents spreading over the tiles.


Hope didn't even bother answering; she stepped in, slashing across with her wing when she was still a good six feet away. Shadow Stalker had just finished fumbling a bolt into her crossbow when it was batted from her hand, to fly down the corridor.

"What are you doing out of your cell?" she demanded. "And why did you attack Flechette? She's done nothing to you!"

Shadow Stalker just smirked, as though she knew the punchline to a joke, leaped up to the ceiling, and ghosted through an air vent.

On the ground, Flechette coughed and groaned; Hope gave her a hand to get up.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"Better all the time," said Flechette. "She caught me by surprise. She won't do that twice."

"I have absolutely no idea what's going on here," confessed Hope. "All I know is that the alarm is giving me a headache, and the security post isn't reporting in. Miss Militia, Weld and Clockblocker went to see what's going on."

"Well," said Flechette, readying her arbalest, "let's go."

She led the way down the corridor; Hope followed. However, they had not gone more than ten yards before Hope heard a hissing sound from behind them. She half-turned, only to catch a large blob of
foam in the face. More followed, splattering over her body and wings, as she instinctively spread them to shield Flechette from the spray. Just before her sight was blotted out, she recognised Shadow Stalker, holding a container with a spray nozzle.

Containment foam. She'd heard of this stuff, but not actually seen it in action until now. Incredibly sticky, a little flexible, and very tough. It would hold all but the strongest parahumans in place, and its flexibility prevented it from being torn too easily after it set in place.

With a yell, Flechette shot a bolt past Hope that must have nailed the containment foam tank, for a rushing *whoosh* resulted. Then she heard the same unsettling laughter as Shadow Stalker apparently disappeared once more into the air vents.

"Oh my god!" gasped Flechette. "Hope, can you breathe?"

Hope reached up, feeling the foam coating her left arm pull away with a little reluctance, then peeled away the coating of foam from her face and hair, leaving a perfect impression of her features on the inside of the now-set blob.

"Now I can," she said with a smile, then took the promised breath. "Don't touch; this stuff's really tacky." She peeled away the foam from her wings, then grimaced as she had to tear her clothes to get it off her body. "Darn. I liked that top."

Now free of the foam, but entirely naked, she glanced at Flechette. "Well? Let's get going." She had kept the foam that had splattered her face, and she was thoughtfully molding it into a mass about half the size of a basketball, passing it from hand to hand. "What?"

Flechette was staring at her, but then shook her head. "Nothing. Let's go."

They went.

The main lobby of the building was a battlefield. The security area was wrecked, with desks overturned and equipment strewn everywhere. There was a mass of containment foam - possibly from another exploded container - which had Miss Militia trapped, with neither hand showing.


Off to the side was the tall guy in motorbike leathers and skull-face helmet from the Undersiders – Hope remembered being told that his name was Grue. He was frozen in an attitude of movement. Not far from him, Clockblocker was likewise trapped in containment foam.

But the main action was happening down toward the elevators; Kid Win and Weld were fighting the girl with the dogs and Shadow Stalker. The girl with the dogs – Hope had been told her name was Hellhound – was accompanied by three monstrous creatures, which looked like what Godzilla would look like if he was a dog. They were each the size of a Prius, if not larger, and their strength was undeniable. The only reason they weren't able to truly come to grips with their two opponents was Vista; she was stretching and shrinking the landscape inside the room, in eye-twisting directions, to give her teammates the best advantage.

Flechette drew two slim throwing darts, and hurled them in a single motion; Hellhound looked down in surprise as her boots were nailed to the ground by the sides of the soles. She looked around and pointed, and shouted something to Shadow Stalker, inaudible to Hope over the thunderous barking of the dogs.

"What the hell?" yelled Shadow Stalker. "I tranked Flechette, and I foamed Hope! Come on, some
Hope had no idea who she was speaking to, but a few seconds later, insects converged on Hope and Flechette from all directions. Flechette recoiled with a yelp, but Hope wasn't particularlysquicked out by bugs, so she started moving forward with purpose.

After the first few tried - and failed - to sting her uncovered skin, they began to converge on her face. Her wings made this difficult; she fanned the air about her, creating strong gusts and currents, which made them tumble about, out of control, but many reached her face all the same. She paused, shut her eyes and mouth, and rolled the ball of foam across her face. It came away covered with bugs. She waved it through the swarm, and then rolled it over her head and across her face again. By the time she had finished, there were very few bugs on her, and the glob of foam was thick with insect bodies, tiny black legs wriggling pathetically.

Hope stepped forward again, the glob of foam ready in her hand. A sudden silence fell, the sort that can occur in a crowded room when everyone pauses from speaking at the same instant. Someone had even shut off the duress alarm.

"I strongly suggest," said Hope firmly, "that you surrender."
"Not in the game plan," snapped Hellhound. She jerked her foot sideways, ripping a chunk of rubber away as she pulled free of the dart nailing her boot to the floor, and then pointed at Hope, emitting a shrill whistle as she did so.

One of the bone-encrusted van-sized dogs broke free of the melee around Kid Win and Weld, and bounded toward Hope. It barked ferociously as it came, and Hope took a step back; she liked dogs well enough, but not ones that were taller than she was. And she'd had one or two bad experiences with guard dogs, back in the day ...

It slammed into her, crocodile-sized jaws clamping on to her arm and worrying her like a kitten. The large teeth could not penetrate her skin, but they could certainly bruise her, and that they were doing. Her wings battered the dog around its head and shoulders, but it just hunched down and kept shaking her. Its stertorous breathing huffed in and out of giant nostrils, more or less right in her face. *Whew, talk about dog breath.*

So then she plastered the insect-covered glob of containment foam over the dog's nostrils, sealing them shut. Then she braced against the dog's massive jaws and wrenched, hard.

Her arm came free; the sudden distraction that came from blocking its nostrils had caused the monstrous dog's grip to weaken momentarily, just enough for her to get free. She danced away from the massive creature, which was at that moment attempting to peer cross-eyed at whatever it was that was blocking up its nostrils. In a moment, it would remember that it was supposed to be attacking her and continue doing so; right now, she had a momentary breathing space. She chanced a look around.

It wasn't good. Flechette was curled on the ground, her face in her arms. As she watched, Vista staggered back from an assault by another swarm of insects, and the warping of space ceased. Shadow Stalker ghosted up to Weld and jammed an arrow into his eye. It stuck, being metal; fortunately, Weld did not seem overly injured by this. However, it did impair his sight in that eye.

The dog leaped at her again. This time, she was ready; leaping up, she unfurled her wings and flapped once. The ceiling clearance was just enough for her to skim over the top of the hulking creature as it charged beneath her. She took the opportunity to glide closer to the melee.

And then the elevator doors opened, and the rest of the Undersiders emerged.

*Oh, great.*

And then darkness billowed out from Grue, filling the entire room.

*... and he's up, too. Wonderful.*

Even at full intensity, her internal glow could not pierce this strange, almost palpable darkness. Her extended spectrum sight did not make a dent in it; nor did her ability to sense people nearby.

*I think ... I spoke too soon.*

There was a shrill whistle, somehow muted in the blackness, and an answering bark; the massive dog bounded past her, almost knocking her down in its hurry. She regained her balance, then tried to get her bearings.

*Nothing. I'm blind and deaf.*
And then the smoke cleared somewhat, in just a small area around her. And Tattletale stood there. "Hi, Hope," she said with a somewhat vulpine smile. "How are you feeling, today?"

"Quite well, thank you," said Hope, a little stiffly. "You realise, I should be grabbing you about now."

"Maybe," replied Tattletale, "but if you try, Grue will just fog you in again, and you'll never hear what I've got to say. Trust me, it's something you'll want to hear."

"Keep talking," said Hope, grimly.

"You know what I said about options? Check this out. You may find that it will open your eyes," said Tattletale, tossing something across the space that separated them. Reflexively, Hope caught it. Opening her hand, she realised that she held a USB drive.

"Oh," said Tattletale, "and we'll leave you Shadow Stalker too. After all, she did try to kill you, before."

She began to leave, then turned. "You can consider this a settlement of your debt to us," she said. "Letting us go like this."

Hope shook her head. It doesn't work that way, she thought. But she made no move to stop Tattletale from disappearing into the fog.

And then it cleared, and the lobby only held friendlies. And Shadow Stalker, who seemed strangely dazed.

So then she set to work, reviving those who had been tranquillised, and assisting those suffering from insect stings and other problems. She ensured that everyone was all right, so that when PRT reinforcements thundered into the lobby, she was able to request the chance to go to her locker and put on some clothes. And the USB drive that she had kept concealed in her left hand all this time went into her locker.

In the aftermath, she learned that Shadow Stalker had somehow defeated her restraint cuffs and escaped her cell, taking out the guards before they could raise the alarm. Then, armed and costumed, she went to the security station and did much the same there. In that position, she had opened the doors and let the Undersiders walk straight in. Hellhound, Grue and Shadow Stalker had been left to secure the exit, while the others travelled down to the Wards' headquarters, and apparently accessed the computers.

The mystery of Shadow Stalker's apparent defection was solved when she was informed of Regent's ability; specifically, to control someone's movements like a puppet. It usually took a little while to gain complete control over a person's body, but Hope thought back to when she'd woken up in the alleyway.

I was out for some time. And they even told me that they'd had to persuade Shadow Stalker to remove the arrow from my stomach. So while I was out ... Regent was bending her to his will.

The thought gave her the shivers.

In the meantime, there was the USB drive which Tattletale had given her; she had not yet built up the resolve to actually view it. She had no idea what it was, but considering how she had been manipulated into bringing back Shadow Stalker to be an inside agent, she was reluctant to look at something else that quite likely would be another attempt to manipulate her actions.
And then there would be the after-action review of the fight, and the fact that this would be the second recorded instance of her standing by while the Undersiders escaped.

This would not be a very enjoyable debriefing.
"This is how it happened. The Undersiders subverted Shadow Stalker, and Hope very kindly brought her back to us – the murder attempt was all too real, and so distracted us from the actual deception. Skitter had bugs concealed on Shadow Stalker, something that could wriggle into the inner workings of her shock-cuffs and short-circuit them. Our techs found charred insect bodies inside the cuffs."

Miss Militia paused to make sure that Director Piggot was taking this in, then went on. "Shadow Stalker was never actually sedated; Regent was merely making her play possum until she 'came to', and then she was abusive to everyone who came past, so that she could not be questioned and tripped up. After all, a prisoner is not usually a security risk. She got free, took out the guards, took out the guards at the security station, and let the Undersiders in through the front door. They were already inside when a guard came to the security station and saw Shadow Stalker before she saw him. She tranked him, but not before he had a chance to hit the duress alarm. The damage to the security station happened in the ensuing battle.

"And the rest you know."

Director Piggot steepled her fingers before her and stared at the head of the Brockton Bay Protectorate contingent. After a long moment, she said, "So, was it ignorance or complicity?"

Miss Militia blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"With regard to our newest recruit," said Director Piggot patiently. "She is the one who brought Shadow Stalker right into our midst after she, Shadow Stalker, had been subverted. I am told that Hope has many and varied powers, some of which venture quite close to actual mind reading. Did the Undersiders fool her, or was she cooperating with them in their scheme?"

Miss Militia considered this. "I have spoken to Hope, at length, on this subject," she said. "I, personally, believe that she was taken in by their deception. Remember that Tattletale is a very adept manipulator, and while Hope isn't particularly gullible, nor is she overly suspicious. She has a very honest outlook; I doubt that there is a deceptive bone in her body."

Hope clicked the mouse and the screen refreshed with another sheet of information on the Undersiders. She brought up another tab, and another, until the screen was a confusing mass of data. Then she took the USB drive from her pocket and, with a guilty look around, inserted it into the slot.

There was only one folder on the drive; it was called, mundanely enough, "Homework". Hope clicked it open.

Inside the folder, Hope saw two files. One was a large word file marked "Statistics", while the other was a smaller text file entitled "Notes". Hope considered this, clicked over a few more tabs of data, then brought up the drive folder again and clicked on "Notes".

Immediately, a small text box opened.

*Hi, Hope.*
Glad you finally got around to reading this.

Just so you know, when you had your talk with She Who Shall Not Be Named, all of the options she mentioned were viable – but she didn't necessarily tell you about the other things you could be doing with your life.

I mean, I'm about 99.999 percent sure you aren't about to make a career as a villain, but there are shades between "Protectorate Ward" and "villain" that she probably didn't cover for you.

Personally, I think everyone should have an honest choice.

So, in the other file, you will find a whole range of possibilities that are currently open to you. Because strangely enough, you are not legally compelled to do anything that She Who Must Be Obeyed tells you to do. You are only there because you chose to be. Would you like another choice? Have a look.

Best wishes,

Tt.

PS: if you want to meet and talk about, well, anything, there's a list of times and places we can get together. Because I really do think we need to talk.

Hope read it through three times, then took a notepad and scribbled down the places and times. Then she erased the text file.

Next, she opened the word file and started reading.

"My guess is," said Miss Militia, "that if Hope had not noticed Shadow Stalker sneaking out – and it was only by pure chance that she did – the Undersiders would have lured Shadow Stalker into a trap, where they could have subverted her at their leisure. And then ..." She shrugged. "Shadow Stalker comes back with the Undersiders as her prisoners, and brings them straight into the base."

"Would that have worked?" asked Director Piggot, a little warily. "Don't you have Master/Stranger protocols in place?"

"We do," confirmed Miss Militia, "but like all protocols, they depend on human judgement. And human judgement is fallible. Perhaps they would have caught the deception, perhaps not. We'll never know."

Hope sat back from the computer, her mind racing. She carefully popped the USB drive from the slot and slipped it into her pocket, then deleted tabs until she had only one screen of data showing.

As she scrolled down that page, there came a step behind her.

"Oh hey, Hope," said Clockblocker. "How are you feeling?"

"Not bad," replied Hope, her heart rate picking up. Had he seen the drive? "Hellhound's dog threw me around like a rag doll." She paused, then added, "I feel a bit embarrassed. I didn't do much of anything. You froze Grue, at least."

"Not that it helped, in the end," replied Clockblocker ruefully. "Good team support there with Flechette, by the way. And I heard about the foam. It really doesn't stick to you?"
Hope shrugged. "That's about the only thing I really did right," she said dismissively. "For the most part there, I was playing keep-away with a dog that could have played fetch with a Volkswagen Beetle."

Clockblocker chuckled. "For the most part, I was stuck in a mass of containment foam. So count yourself lucky." He leaned over the back of her chair. "What are you reading up on?"

"The Undersiders," replied Hope truthfully. "I hadn't had the chance to read their files, but since I've had two close encounters with them inside twelve hours, I thought I should get caught up on who they are and what they can do."

"They're a goddamn nightmare to fight, that's what they are," said Clockblocker feelingly. "I went up against them, along with Kid Win, Aegis, Glory Girl, Panacea, Vista, Gallant and Browbeat. That was when they pulled that bank job awhile back. We outnumbered them eight to five, not counting those damn dogs, and they still got away. Skitter and Tattletale took out Glory Girl and Panacea all by themselves."

His tone became serious. "You might think controlling bugs is a stupid power. Don't. Imagine every time you've ever had a bug walk across the back of your neck, then multiply that by a thousand. And imagine that every bug knows exactly what it's doing. Scared? You should be. Skitter's the most recent member of the Undersiders, but in some ways she's by far the scariest. Every bug you've ever had the heebie-jeebies about, she's got a dozen waiting just to freak you out with."

"I'll remember," said Hope, quietly. "When I saw her ... after I woke up. She was just staring at me. Blank eyes. It gave me the creeps."

Clockblocker nodded and clapped her on the shoulder. "Well, that's the right attitude," he said. "Let me know the next time you're due to go out on patrol. That last time was a blast."

Hope shrugged slightly. "I've been taken off patrols for the time being," she said quietly. "Until they can determine whether I'm trustworthy or not, I guess. After all, the Undersiders have walked away from me twice."

Clockblocker's snort echoed inside his helmet. "Yeah, right," he said. "See you around, Hope." He walked off. Hope watched him go, then turned back to her screen.

**Hellhound. Real name: Rachel Lindt. Classification: Striker, possible Master ...**

The late afternoon sun glinted on Hope's wings as she swooped in toward the Boardwalk. She beat her wings once, made a perfect landing, and furled her wings.

With some interest, she looked around at the view. Off to the east, the ocean, or rather the eponymous Brockton Bay. Along the Boardwalk, various kiosks sold foodstuffs or souvenirs. In a damaged city, life still went on.

People were staring or taking pictures. She smiled, opened her wings a little, and posed just a little. The Protectorate had spread the word that she was not the Simurgh's little sister, but it never hurt to spread a little PR.

Finally, she strolled over to the nearest kiosk; it sold hot sausages in a bun. As Hope sorted through her change, a teenaged girl stepped in beside her. "I'd recommend the fried onion," she said. "It's delicious."

"Thank you, I will," replied Hope, and got some.
As they walked away, the girl with a cola and her own sausage, Hope said tentatively, "Are you ..."

"Tattletale," said the girl. "That's me." She gave Hope her vulpine grin. "No hard feelings about the Shadow Stalker thing, I hope?"

"That," said Hope severely, "was mean. But I know you didn't plan specifically to get me in trouble. So no, no hard feelings." She paused. "What is it that you want to talk to me about? I mean, I've read the file you sent me, and I see now what you were hinting to me about, but what do you want to talk to me about?"

"Your future," said Tattletale. "I've known for some time that there's trouble down the line for Brockton Bay and the world. You change some things. Your very presence alters probabilities. Some things are no longer certain." She eyed Hope keenly. "I want to talk to you at length, with the rest of the Undersiders there as well. Even a chance remark might open up new information. But we can't do that here and now. Are you interested in meeting the rest of the group, just to talk?"

Hope felt as though she were walking a tightrope over an abyss. One misstep could spell doom.

She made a leap of faith. "Sure," she said. "Let's do it."
In which Hope is under surveillance

DIRECTOR'S EYES ONLY

Surveillance Report

June 5, 2011

Subject: Parahuman "Hope", no last name.

Classification: Breaker 3, Brute 2, Mover 4, Striker 10, Thinker 4.

Subject HOPE, being on temporary suspended duty, received permission from team leader WELD to take the afternoon off and fly around the city. Surveillance units followed at discreet distance; subject HOPE is an extremely easy target to follow. No attempt to evade surveillance; no indication that Subject was even aware of possibility of surveillance.

Subject overflew Captain's Hill and other landmarks before landing at Boardwalk. As area was open, surveillance was carried out at distance with binoculars and telephoto lenses. Subject posed for photographs from passers-by before purchasing food from kiosk. Reaction to Subject HOPE appeared to range from curious to friendly.

An appended note read: Strongly suggest you bring subject into PR photo shoots ASAP. The kid is a natural in front of the camera.

Director Piggot snorted and went through the photos. Then she went back to the report.

Hope leaned on the rail and finished her sausage in a bun. As Tattletale had suggested, the fried onion was delicious.

Tattletale, a few yards away, considered telling her that she was under surveillance.

No, she decided. She'll start looking for it. As nice as she is, she's got the paranoid instincts of a friendly kitten.

Instead, she pulled out her phone. "Is it okay if I take a photo of you?" she asked. "It would look kind of funny if I didn't."

"Sure," said Hope. "Where do you want me to stand?"

"Just there will be fine. Here, I'll put your napkin in the bin."

Tattletale took Hope's napkin and dropped it in the bin with her own, and the cola bottle. Then she came back and started taking pictures, hamming it up with kneeling shots and the like. At no time did she face the direction the surveillance was watching from.

Hope laughed, and responded by striking more and more extravagant and mock-heroic poses. Other passers-by stopped and joined in taking photos; by the time they started to thin out again, Tattletale was gone.

That more or less broke the ice; Hope found herself surrounded by people who were curious about her, what she had done and where she was from. She answered the questions readily, in a bright and
friendly manner which drew more questions. People started posing with her for their friends' cameras, which she quite cheerfully went along with.

And then she heard the child crying.

Excusing herself, she pushed her way through the crowd to where a mother was attempting to comfort a young boy, who had apparently slipped and skinned his knee. The injury was insignificant, merely some torn skin, with a little blood showing, but the child was howling lustily, as children will do.

Hope went down on one knee before the child, who paused in his crying to stare at her in some astonishment; his mother was scarcely less surprised. She smiled gently, touched two fingers to her own lips, and then touched them to the scrape. There was the gentlest pulse of silver-blue light imaginable, her wings sang a dying chord of soft beauty, and the skin healed over without a trace of a scar or bruise.

At least half a dozen phones pointed at her recorded the moment of healing, as well as the child's squeal of joy and the spontaneous hug that he then gave Hope.

Direct line of sight on the subject was lost at this point, but there are seven Youtube videos which capture the moment in varying detail. URL addresses are appended.

Director Piggot took a moment to view one of them. The detail, due to Hope's soft glow adding light to the scene, was excellent. The mother's look of gratitude was captured perfectly.

The view counter told the story; this clip had gone viral, as had all the rest.

She made a small sound of irritation, and went back to the report.

Abruptly, Hope stood up. How could I have been so selfish? she asked herself.

"Thank you," she said to the surprised mother. "Thank you," she repeated to the boy, who was now smiling, as she ruffled his hair. She looked back to the mother. "Which way is the nearest hospital?" she asked.

Shortly thereafter, Subject flew away, on a straight-line course for Brockton Bay General Hospital. In the course of the next hour, subject apparently treated the majority of the childrens' ward to the extent that they were able to be released into their parents' care. Minor injuries were eliminated or reduced to negligible status, major injuries were minimised, and many cases of illness were dealt with altogether. Pre-existing oncology cases were less tractable, according to hospital records, but Subject was able to apply some level of palliation to their symptoms. Subject appeared to be quite weary after approximately one hour of this sustained treatment.

Hope sat on a chair in a private area off the main concourse, trying and failing to catch her breath. The sweet scent of jasmine filled the air around her; this was her body's version of heavy perspiration. She was unutterably weary; each successive burst of healing had taken a little more out of her, until she was stumbling from patient to patient. The nurses had eventually guided her out and sat her down, with the firm admonishment to not get up until she felt better. Even her glow was weak, softer than normal. She sipped water from a cup one of them had brought her, and wished she was stronger. So many people suffering in this city. I want to help them all.
Distinctive footsteps sounded in the corridor, and she looked up to see Weld standing there.

"Hi," she said weakly. "What are you doing here?"

"I've come to fetch you home," he said. "The hospital called. If you go back to healing people in the state you're in, you're going to kill yourself."

Her mouth twitched in a tired laugh. "I wasn't about to," she said. "I was just building up enough strength so I could fly back."

"Well, I brought a car, so you can ride back in style," said Weld bluntly. "You look like hell."

She shrugged. "It's not about me," she said. "It's about helping people."

Weld let that one go, then helped her to her feet. He guided her out into the corridor, which seemed to be jam-packed with people, all apparently in high spirits.

"What's this?" asked Hope, gesturing at the crowd.

"All those kids you healed?" said Weld succinctly. "They have parents, who have just now come to pick them up. Congratulations, you're a celebrity."

She chuckled tiredly. "Already was. Back home, that is."

"And now," said Weld thoughtfully, "I can see why."

Deftly, he managed to get her past most of the crowds, but enough people saw her and wanted to thank her that it was another fifteen minutes before they got out of the hospital.

The same four wheel drive that they had used on the patrol was waiting in the carpark. Clockblocker was waiting behind the wheel. Weld helped Hope into the front seat, and climbed into the back.

"Let's go home," he said, "before our celebrity here decides to take a victory lap of the city."

Clockblocker laughed, and let in the clutch.

Hope was asleep before they got out of the carpark.
In which Hope sneaks out

Hope awoke with a jolt and a gasp. She lay quietly for a moment, unsure where she was, then memories clicked into place. *I'm in that other world. In the Wards.*

She checked the cheap electric alarm clock on the bedside table. *Eleven o'clock. Wow. I must have been wiped.*

Getting out of bed, she dropped her clothes on the bed and stepped into the shower. She didn't need it for cleanliness, but hot water sluicing over the skin has a way of calming the mind and ordering the thoughts. Besides, she *liked* it.

Clouds of steam were billowing through the room by the time she finished. As the shower cut off, the last water droplets slid from her skin into the shower cubicle. Not even a towel was needed for her hair; she was dry from top to toe. *It's a useful trick sometimes.*

Dressing in a backless top and jeans, she picked up the pants she'd been wearing before and hooked the scrap of paper out of the pocket where she'd tucked it earlier. Tattletale had slipped it to her when taking the napkin from her hand, and she had casually transferred it to her pocket once Tattletale had gone. *I'm not good at being sneaky, but I can take a hint. Why is everyone so paranoid around here, anyway?*

The note bore an address and the word "Midnight".

She memorised the address, then pulled out a city directory from her bedside table and flicked through it to find out exactly where that was. By the time she figured she would be able to find it, even at night, her clock read 11:17. *I'd better get going.*

The closet held several generic items of clothing; one was a hoodie that was about three sizes too big for her (extremely) petite frame. She took it out anyway and bundled it under her arm. Then she headed out, closing her door behind her carefully.

Up on the roof, she was so intent on looking around and orienting herself in relation to the map of the city she had been studying, that she did not pay attention to her surroundings. Thus, when the dark form stepped out from behind an air-conditioning vent and cleared its throat, she nearly jumped out of her glowing skin.

"Eep!" she squeaked, her throat constricting before she could let out a full-blooded yelp.

Her glow flared and her full-spectrum vision kicked in, revealing the newcomer to be Weld.

"Good God, don't *do* that!" she whispered fiercely. "You scared me!"

"Uh huh," he said, stepping closer. "So what are you doing up here? Going somewhere in the middle of the night?"

Hope started guiltily. "Um," she ventured, "just a moonlight flight? Clear my head?"

Even *she* didn't believe that one. Weld just stared at her, his metallic features absolutely steady.

"I'm ... going to meet someone," she said finally, in a small voice.

"The same someone who gave you this?" he asked, holding out a hand, palm up, on which lay a
very familiar USB drive. "Hope, are you defecting? Leaving the Wards? Has someone gotten to you?"

The suspicion in his voice tore at her heart. He had accepted her, trusted her, backed her up.

"No, it's nothing like that," she said, forcing her voice to be steady, rational. "Yes, I am going to talk to the people who gave me that. I want to ask some questions about some of the groups, some of the organisations in that list. Because when I spoke to the Director, she didn't tell me about any of that before I agreed to join." She gave him a stare that wasn't quite defiance, but nor was it far off it either. "And I think I should have been given an honest choice, don't you?" That's the way Tattletale phrased it. Is she manipulating me, somehow?

But then Weld was speaking again. "I can't deny," he said slowly, "that it would only have been fair to fill you in properly on the parahuman situation before giving you the choice. I will also not deny that I would be very unhappy if you left; you are smart, compassionate, and decent. Just the sort of cape we need to get through these hard times." He paused. "Who gave you this list?" he asked. "I think I know who – or at least I have a very short list – but I'd like to hear it from you."

Hope bit her lip. He would know, all right. It was kind of obvious. "The Undersiders," she confirmed.

"Dammit!" he exploded, but quietly. "Those people are dangerous! What do you think you're doing, going out there to meet with them alone?"

"Those people also saved my life," pointed out Hope, "when they did not have to. I owe them that. So when Tattletale said she wanted to set up a meet, I agreed. If I refuse to trust them on this, I'm basically kicking them in the teeth." She shrugged, and gave him a crooked grin. "And hey, I might even learn something worthwhile."

Weld appeared to be struggling with his emotions. "You are," he said clearly, "the nicest, sweetest, most compassionate cape with whom I have ever had the good fortune to work alongside – and you are also, by far, the most exasperating. Must you do this alone?"

She shrugged slightly, eliciting a small tinkle of crystal. "I can't see any other way. I admit, it could be a clever trap, but I can't see Tattletale setting up something like this just to capture or kill me."

He growled something under his breath, but she didn't catch it. "I really don't like it. There's a strange feeling in the city tonight, like something's about to touch off, but we don't know what yet. If you can find out what that is ..." He grimaced. "Otherwise ... be careful. Be really careful. And knock on my door as soon as you get back. Okay?"

Relief swelled in her chest. He was going to let her go; she wasn't going to have to defy him and just fly off. Before he could say another word, she grabbed him in a tight hug – he grunted in surprise – and then launched herself off the rooftop in a steadily ascending series of chimes.

As Hope's glow faded into the distance, the door to the roof opened and Clockblocker stepped out.

"So, the Undersiders?" he asked.

"Looks like it," said Weld. "Listen, thanks for that heads-up, okay?"

Clockblocker shrugged as if it had been nothing, but that was far from the case. He'd overheard the mention of a search of Hope's effects while she was out on her 'afternoon off', and had wasted no time in telling Weld. Weld was, after all, the local Ward team leader, and Hope, probationary recruit
or not, was a Ward.

Weld had gotten there just in time, making it look like he'd been ordered to be there himself as well. The PRT officer had been a little dubious, but he'd opened the room using his override key, and helped them begin the search. There weren't that many places, and Hope didn't have much stuff, but he'd spotted the USB drive and managed to palm it before anyone else saw it.

Normally, he would have done nothing of the sort, but the high-handed action of searching a probationary recruit's belongings, when that recruit was not even present, was probably illegal as hell. Although he would not bet that Piggot had not found some regulation that would allow her to pull off such a thing. But Hope was his team member, and by God, he'd deal with her in his own way, when the time came.

On checking out the contents of the drive, he was dubious until he opened the word file and started checking the contents. The reports on each of the factions apart from the Protectorate and the Wards were dry, factual and comprehensive. It was the work of someone who wanted Hope to have the best possible chance to choose what she wanted to do, rather than what people told her she had to do.

He had talked it over with Clockblocker, and they had decided the best plan was for Weld to try to talk her out of going, but if she insisted, to relent. If he outright banned her from going, she may well go anyway, and that would be bad for everyone. But he had intended to get as much information as he could from her before she went, and so he had.

And now, all he wanted was for her to get back safely.

Hope glided over the sleeping rooftops of Brockton Bay. It was a little windier than the night that she'd taken out after Shadow Stalker, but this time round she wasn't trying to follow a stealthy vigilante over the rooftops. This time, she was looking for a fixed location.

It took her three passes to find it, but eventually she was sure she had the right place. *It must be close to midnight by now. Hope I'm not late.*

Gliding down to a relatively stealthy landing about a block away, she furled her wings tightly and pulled the overlarge hoodie over her head. Her wings made her look a little hunchbacked, but with the hood pulled low, her hands in her pocket, and her glow muted as far as she could make it go, she didn't look too far out of place.

As she walked up the street, she looked around. This place, too, had suffered from the Endbringer attack. *This whole city is hurting,* she realised. *No one person can fix it. No matter how hard they try. This has to be a team effort.*

She mounted the steps to the building she figured corresponded to the address she had been given. Letting her senses flow out, she felt people within. *I count six,* she thought.

*Wait a moment – I thought there were only five in the Undersiders. Who –*

And then, the strangest thing happened. When she concentrated on the signals she was getting, there were only five after all. *What was I thinking? The strain must be getting to me.*

Shaking her head slightly to clear it, she knocked on the door. A presence on the other side of the door came closer. A mosquito whined past her face, and she noticed a couple of bugs on the sleeve of her hoodie. *Either I'm learning to be paranoid, or Skitter has just checked me out.*
This thought was replaced a couple of seconds later with, *I hope she doesn't think I'm hostile.* It was a chilling one; she didn't have any way to deal with a swarm, here. Clockblocker's warnings came back to her. *Be scared.*

*I'm scared, I'm scared.*

The lock clicked and the door opened a few inches.

"Who is it?" The voice in the darkness was masculine, gruff, suspicious.

For answer, Hope pushed back her hood and let her glow amp up a little.

"Right." The door opened farther. "Get in here. Skitter says the area's clear, but not for long."

Stepping inside, Hope came face to face with the tall man in the motorcycle leathers and the skull-faced helmet. Grue.

Behind him, standing in a rough semi-circle, were Skitter, Hellhound (with three dogs sitting in a row before her), Tattletale and Regent.

As Grue closed the door behind her, Hope pulled off the hoodie, letting her wings out in the open. She shook them out a little, letting the crystalline 'feathers' tinkle gently.

"Hi," she said, treating them all to her most winning smile. "I'm very pleased to meet you all properly for the first time." She tilted her head. "I mean, I've met you before, but I didn't even know who Grue and Hellhound were, then."

"Bitch," said Hellhound flatly.

"I'm sorry," said Hope, blinking. "Did I offend you somehow? I didn't mean to."

Tattletale raised her hand. "Ah, sorry, no, she was just correcting you. Rachel prefers to be called 'Bitch'. 'Hellhound' is the name the PRT hung on her."

Hope raised an eyebrow, then nodded. "Well," she said, "I've certainly seen and heard stranger things since I arrived here. Bitch it is, then. And of course, I'm Hope."

"And you're a Ward," retorted Bitch. "Why did you come here?"

"Because Tattletale asked me to," Hope replied promptly. "Because I thought it might be a good idea to talk, instead of just fighting every time we run into each other. And because I wanted to actually meet you, see what sort of people you really are. All I've had to go on is the files. They don't tell me any of the important stuff."

"You know," said Grue, close by her shoulder, "some people might say that getting to know us makes it harder to fight us when it comes down to that."

"Some people might," said Hope. "I prefer to think that if I get to know someone now, it will be easier for both of us to avoid a fight in the future." She opened her hands in an unfolding motion. "If someone really doesn't want to negotiate, really wants to fight, I will oblige them. I can do that, and I will. But in most conflicts, there is usually a compromise that can be reached. I like to find that middle ground, and bring both parties to it."

"And on that note," said Tattletale, "let's go through and sit down." She herded them through into a large sitting room, which had been furnished with several large sofas. Hope seated herself on one,
Grue and Skitter on another, and Bitch and her dogs colonised a third. On the fourth sofa, Tattletale sat down, looking at them all.

"I suppose you are wondering why I called you all here tonight," she began.
In which Hope finds out more than she bargained for

Grue stared at Tattletale. "You have got to be kidding."

Solemnly, Tattletale shook her head. "Scout's honor."

Grue snorted. "You were never a Scout. Or a Girl Guide, for that matter."

"I might have been," said Tattletale. "You never know."

"Wait a moment," protested Hope, sitting forward. "What do you mean, I am personally important to the future of the world? How is that possible?"

"I don't know," said Tattletale. "I only know two things. One is that an impeccable source told me that 'the angel girl' is the most important person in Brockton Bay right now, and if she dies, the world ends in two years. And the other is that I personally feel that you're going to be taking a significant hand in matters, especially the ones that will be unfolding soon, right here in Brockton Bay."

Hope shook her head. "It's all too much," she said. "Maybe there's another 'angel girl' out there somewhere who this refers to. Not me."

Tattletale shook her own head in turn. "No, Hope. It's you. That, I know for a fact."

"You could be wrong?" ventured Hope.

A snort of laughter, which quickly became a full-on cackle, jolted Hope to her heels, because it came from a teenage girl wearing a mask with cute little horns. She was sitting on the same sofa as Hope, and laughing uproariously. *Where did she come from?*

Hope looked across at Tattletale. "Sorry, my mind wandered for a moment. What were we saying?"

Tattletale seemed to have a twitch at the corner of her mouth. "Hope, you'll have to trust me when I say that I am very intuitive. I make connections quickly. And you are the 'angel girl' that my source referred to. Also, apparently, Mannequin doesn't like what you have been doing."

"Mannequin?" asked Hope, trying to keep up. "He's in the Slaughterhouse Nine, right?" She had read up on them, in between researching the Undersiders.

"Yes," said Tattletale seriously. "He lost his family in an Endbringer attack. So he went off the rails, and rebuilt his vital organs into a totally-recycled robotic body. And he hates it when people make life better for others, because he can never get back what he had. So he goes after them."

*And not to give them flowers,* Hope understood.

"Well then," she said slowly. "It looks like I'm going to have a problem if he ever comes to town."

"That's the other thing," said Tattletale soberly. "We found out earlier. Slaughterhouse Nine is already in town."

A chill went all the way down Hope's back. She searched Tattletale's face for a grin, for any sign that the girl in the purple costume was making an incredibly ill-timed joke, but there was no such luck.

"Oh, god," she whispered. "Oh, dear god." She paused, looking around at the Undersiders. For some reason, she felt the need to explain her reaction. "I've read about what they've done, and it
sounds like a horror movie. I mean, I have faced bad guys before, but they're just *mundane* bad guys, you know? People you can talk down, or people who are more sad than evil. I've never had to go up against someone who's just ... deliberately evil. I've always been able to hold back, talk them down, take them alive."

She stared blankly into space. "But if it comes to innocent lives or their lives, I'll have to make the choice and follow it through. I just hope I'm up to it. And I hope I'll be able to live with myself afterward."

Abruptly, Skitter spoke up. "There are always hard choices to make, Hope," she said. "Always. What matters is how you face those choices. Running away from them just means that someone else will make them for you. And that usually ends badly."

Hope nodded somberly. "I'm getting that impression, from your world," she said. "It's all ... dark. No light, no hope, no chance."

"Well, now you're here, so at least we can say we've got Hope," said Tattletale with a chuckle. Grue laughed as well, and Hope thought she caught a snicker from Skitter, though the mask made it difficult to tell. Regent just looked bored, and Bitch didn't seem to get it. She was paying more attention to her dogs, petting and stroking them – no, correcting their posture as they sat there. And doing something else ... they seemed to be growing larger.

"Oh, and one other thing, Hope," said Tattletale seriously. "I know you'll be talking to your field commander about this meeting, so listen carefully. We – the villains – are taking over this city, starting from tomorrow."

"Wait, what?" blurted Hope, startled and somewhat stunned.

"Taking the place over," repeated Tattletale. "There are already gangs preying on people, in all the damaged areas, and some that are not. They are hurting people, dealing drugs and doing worse, and causing matters to go from bad to catastrophic. We know the police and PRT are stretched to breaking point as it is. So we're going to take matters out of your hands. As of tomorrow, we are each of us laying claim to a section of city, and we will be administering it. Food and medical supplies will be coming in, and we will be distributing it in a fair and equitable fashion. Gangs not willing to work within our rules will leave, or they will regret it."

Her eyes bored into Hope's. "This is a **done deal**, Hope. It's going to happen. I'm just telling you this as a courtesy. Spread the word up the line. The Wards and the Protectorate are welcome to come and observe, but if they interfere ... that will change matters."

Hope's head was spinning. This was a lot to take in. "Where will you be getting ... food and medical supplies from?" she asked at last.

"That, I'm afraid, is a trade secret," said Tattletale with her mischievous grin. "But we won't be stealing it. Let's just say ... we have resources." Her grin widened. "Crime does pay, after all."

Hope could tell that the matter was closed, so she let it drop. "Okay," she said. "I'll pass it on. I can't guarantee that the reaction will be positive – I'm a little dubious about it myself – but I'll tell them exactly what you told me." She paused. "I'm just curious – why are you telling me all this, anyway? Why me?"

"Because you're the first member of the Wards I felt comfortable with meeting," said Tattletale. "Most every other one would be considering how to turn this to their best advantage, or telling us how 'they really can't make deals with criminals' or other some such. You came to this without any
preconceptions or ulterior motives. And that's vanishingly rare, in these times."

"Well," said Hope, "I'm glad I was able to do this. If you're going to be doing this, I really think we should keep communication lines open."

"I like the way you think," said Tattletale. "If we --"

Skitter raised her head, and a hand. "Wait," she said. "There's something ... people outside ..." She paused. "Lots of people. PRT uniforms. Mobile ... floodlights, I think. They're parked ... about a block away. They know we're here. They're surrounding the house from all sides. Nothing in the air."

Everyone was on their feet. Every Undersider turned to stare at Hope. She let her own senses spread out, feeling the life-sparks all around the building. Idiot, she told herself. I should have kept a lookout.

"It wasn't me!" she squeaked in fear and surprise, raising her hands to shoulder level.

"No, it wasn't," affirmed Tattletale. "I'm guessing they planted a radio tracker on you. Just like they had you under surveillance yesterday." She was already on her knees beside Hope, fiddling with her jeans cuff. With a huh of triumph, she came up with a small button-sized metal object, and tossed it on to the table. "I'm guessing this is Piggot's doing. Lovely people you work for, aren't they?"

And then, floodlights blazed in through all the windows, and a bullhorn voice bellowed, "EVERYONE IN THE HOUSE, COME OUT NOW, IN SINGLE FILE, WITH YOUR HANDS ON YOUR HEADS. IF YOU DO NOT COME OUT, WE WILL COME IN, AND LETHAL FORCE WILL BE AUTHORISED. YOU HAVE THIRTY SECONDS."

Hope blinked at the object, and then at her. "I had no idea --"

"I know, but save it. We have to get out of this. Roof?"

"Roof," agreed Skitter. "They don't have anyone there yet. No capes that I can see. This looks like a purely PRT operation."

"TWENTY SECONDS."

The Undersiders started toward the stairs; Hope followed. Tattletale had a quick, murmured conversation with Grue and Bitch.

"TEN SECONDS."


Imp? wondered Hope, but didn't ask silly questions; she was already struggling back into the oversized hoodie. When her head emerged from the neck of it, she thought the hood had fallen over her eyes, but then she realised that Grue was using his power. It was dark, and so quiet. Even close-by sounds were muted, muffled.

She felt a hand grab hers, and lead her along. Up some stairs. More stairs. From far away, she heard, quite faintly, "TIME'S UP. YOU HAD YOUR CHANCE. MOVE IN. WEAPONS FREE. ANY RESISTANCE, SHOOT TO KILL."

Faintly, as they gained the roof, she heard the crashing and splintering of door and windows giving way. Dull thumps heralded flashbangs and other, possibly more lethal, ordnance. They knew I was in
there, and they're still willing to use lethal force?

A little thought gave her the solution. Ah. They know I'm a regenerator, and they've probably been given specific orders regarding my safety. But they really, really want to get the Undersiders. And if I got caught talking to criminals like that, they would have so much leverage over me.

Grue's smoke/fog cleared slightly, and Hope found herself staring at Bitch, who was now flanked by three of the monster dogs she had been using in the attack. Grue was holding still, apparently working to keep his fog effect as broad as possible.

"Any minute now ..." said Tattletale.

And then, as if in answer, there was a loud pop and crackle; electrical sparks danced around from somewhere below. There were shouts of alarm, and then the floodlights wavered and went out. Hope blinked. What happened?

Whatever it was, the others seemed unfazed. "Let's go," said Tattletale. Bitch climbed on to one of her dogs. Grue let his effect drop, and climbed onto another. Regent climbed on to the third. Skitter climbed on behind Grue, and Tattletale climbed on behind Bitch.

Hope eyed the monster dog that Regent was sitting astride. It was huge; bony plates and spikes covered it, along with other, less identifiable things.

"Any time now, Hope," said Grue, looking down at her.

"Unless you're scared," Regent grinned.

"Shut up, Regent," said Skitter and Grue in unison. But Hope was already moving, climbing up behind Regent. She hooked one knee around a bone spike, perched her other foot on another one and said, "Okay, let's do this thing."

She had time for a fleeting thought: My wings are trapped under this hoodie. If I fall, I fall.

And then she was hanging on for dear life, as the enormous misshapen parody of a dog took half a dozen running strides across the rooftop – and leaped.

It was like flying, and yet it was not. She wanted to whoop with joy, but drawing the attention of so many armed men was not the best idea in the world. Instead, she concentrated on hanging on as best she could.

The dog landed on another rooftop, ran, jumped, ran, jumped. By the time they stopped, the mayhem was far behind, and Hope was breathing hard with both the exertion of hanging on and the exhilaration.

"That," she said as she fell/slid down off the enormous dog, "was almost as good as flying."

"It's probably better at night," agreed Tattletale. "You can't see how far down the ground is." She turned serious. "Tell them what I told you. Slaughterhouse Nine is in town, and we're taking over our territories. And we will defend them against all comers."

"Are those two events ... connected?" asked Hope dubiously.

Tattletale shook her head. "We would have done this anyway, S-Nine or no S-Nine. In fact, they're likely to complicate matters."
"Why?" asked Hope, even as Tattletale began to turn her dog away.

"Because they're here to recruit new members."

And with that, she urged the massive dog onward, off into the night. The other two followed, leaving Hope alone on a quiet street.

She stripped off the hoodie and flew back to base, keeping low and keeping her glow repressed as much as possible.

Landing on the roof, she went downstairs. Weld was in his room; or at least, someone was. She knocked. His voice came from within. "Come in."

She opened the door and entered. He closed the book he was reading and turned to her, relief pouring over his face. "Oh, thank God," he said. "I heard PRT moving out awhile ago, but they didn't notify us of any night movements, so I had no idea what was going on."

She raised an eyebrow in silent acknowledgement. *Well, Tattletale, you were right again.*

He was looking at her intently. "So, what happened? How did it go?"

She shook her head. "You are seriously not gonna believe this ..."
Director Piggot’s scowl was a tangible thing; Weld felt that if he got up and walked out of the room, he would still feel it on his back after he closed the door.

He did no such thing, of course; he had been invited into this closed meeting with the Director and Miss Militia, and there was no way he was backing out of this. Even if the Director looked like she was biting into a very tart lemon.

"... so the information, even as eleventh-hour as it was, came as a very welcome heads-up," Miss Militia concluded. "We were able to send out team members to the designated locations to observe the proceedings. It all went surprisingly smoothly, considering. With the prior warning, we were even able to equip them with recording gear."

She tapped a remote, and footage came up of a crowd gathering around a truck piled high with boxes of food and other supplies. Atop the boxes, Skitter, surrounded by a swarm of insects, spoke to the crowd. She was brief, almost curt, and to the point. But people listened. They did what she said. And when a man pulled a knife and threatened to cause problems ... she let him strike her. The attacks looked deadly, but Skitter barely flinched. And then the man was on the ground, and she held the knife. For a moment it looked as though she intended to use it on him, but then the person with the camera spoke to her – Weld wasn't sure, but it sounded like Battery – and she tossed the knife over. A few words were passed, and then Battery left.

More scenes, similar to that one, were played out in other locations, as members of the Undersiders formally took possession of large swathes of Brockton Bay. Other locations were taken up by members of the Travelers. Some were more impressive than others; none ended up being quite as impressive as Skitter.

"So, with this information verified," Miss Militia went on, "it makes it much –"

"Just a minute," interrupted Director Piggot. "I have not yet been apprised of the exact origin of all of this information." She shrugged, massively. "Some of it may be true, to mislead us into believing false data. If you could tell me the source of this information, we could make a more informed decision."

Miss Militia raised an eyebrow over her face-concealing scarf. "Weld? I'll let you answer this one."

Weld sighed inwardly, and spoke carefully. "Director Piggot, Miss Militia," he began. "The information you have was gained from a new confidential source, highly placed in the hierarchy of the Brockton Bay underworld. This source has specifically requested that his – or her," he added, apparently as an afterthought, "identity be kept strictly secret, not to be recorded in any way, or even spoken aloud if possible. After all, we have lost control of sensitive data before today." There was a movement behind Miss Militia's scarf that could have been her lips pursing. Director Piggot's scowl deepened. He forged on. "So, until that source proves unreliable, I shall honour that wish."

After a moment, Miss Militia nodded. "That is a reasonable request," she said. "I will accept that. Madam Director?"

Weld had not thought Director Piggot could look more irritated. She surprised him. But at last, reluctantly, she nodded her assent.

However, before Miss Militia could get the topic back on track, she pounced – metaphorically, of
"Actually," she said, "while we are on the topic of mysterious goings-on, I understand that one of your Wards left the building last night."

Weld noticed Miss Militia's attention picking up again. She was, of course, no dummy.

"Ah, yes," he replied, trying to keep his voice smooth. "Our new recruit, Hope. She doesn't sleep much, and she likes to fly at night. So I sent her to pick up the information from our contact. She can fly fast and low if she needs to; she would have been in and out before anyone knew she was even there."

"Do you have any idea who she would have met with?" rumbled the Director ominously.

"The contact, I presume," replied Weld blandly. "As I said, in and out." He paused, frowning. "Actually," he added. "On this topic, I believe the PRT held some sort of night exercise last night. Comings and goings till about two in the morning. But you never asked any of the Wards to step up and help out. Didn't even let us know what was going on there. Care to fill us in about it?"

Miss Militia leaned forward, looking interested. "A night exercise?" she asked. "That's strange. We weren't notified either."

Director Piggot shot Weld a poisonous glance, and cleared her throat. "It was nothing much," she said hastily. "A shakedown run for some of our newer gear. Making sure it was all field capable, and that our training in it matched the reality of the gear."

She took a deep breath, apparently resigned herself to the fact that the topic of Hope's night-time flight was well and truly exhausted, and went on. "You were saying, Miss Militia, about the other information?"

"Ah, yes," said Miss Militia. She was eyeing Weld with more than a little speculation; Weld had the uncomfortable impression that she had just connected the dots and gained a more-accurate-than-not picture of what had gone on last night.

"The next part of the information," said Miss Militia, "covers a more alarming topic. That of the Slaughterhouse Nine. Your contact," she said, looking directly at Weld, "claims that they are in Brockton Bay, right now. And that they are here to recruit."

"I don't know," said Weld. "Not for sure. But if my contact says it, I am very strongly inclined to believe it."

"Which means that the very first thing we have to do," said Miss Militia forcefully, "is to spread the word for everyone – all of our citizens – to take precautions. Because you know what they do to announce their arrival in a new area."

Weld nodded. "Shatterbird."

"Indeed," replied Miss Militia. "We have to spread the word. Every window, every mirror, every piece of glass or silicon – everything. Take it down, pack it away, throw it out – get rid of it. People have to stay off the beach ..." Her voice trailed off.

"What?" asked Weld.

"Hope has crystalline wingfeathers," Miss Militia said slowly. "Would those be vulnerable to Shatterbird's power?"
"Kid Win says not," replied Weld. "He's analysed their structure as best he can, and he says they don't have silicon in them at all. In fact, according to a rather boring report he gave me on the subject, they are comprised of a complex organic polycarbonate, not unlike Lexan. He's actually been trying to replicate it, for his armour visor, but it's not cooperating. Hope appears rather amused by the whole affair, but she's giving him the samples he asks for."

"Well, I'm glad someone is enjoying the situation," said Director Piggot acidly.

And on that note, the meeting adjourned.

Outside, Miss Militia stopped Weld after they had gone a little way down the corridor.

"Am I to understand," she said quietly, "that the information in the report you gave to Director Piggot did not necessarily contain all the information that was in the report you gave to me?"

Weld hesitated, then nodded. "I did not think it entirely necessary to bring it up right at that moment. And she seemed to have enough of a problem with Hope as it was, without throwing that into the mix as well."

"That is true," agreed Miss Militia gravely. "And as for Hope ... I make no accusations, but I get the impression that neither you nor Director Piggot were being entirely honest about what happened last night?"

Weld kept his face blank, his voice even. "One might come to that conclusion, yes."

Miss Militia smiled behind her scarf. But her voice, when she spoke was cool and professional. "Well, I believe that it is a good idea to keep lines of communication open. So if your 'contact' happens to have any more information for us, at any time, I want to know about it immediately. Is that clear?"

Weld nodded. " Entirely so."

Miss Militia nodded, turned, and walked away, leaving Weld alone with his thoughts.
In which Hope meets the Merchants

Hope's wings were *tired*.

She flew a lot; any time she could justify doing it, if she was honest with herself. But most of that was longer-distance flying, where she built up speed and then glided for a while, letting her muscles rest before picking up the pace again. So her wings were used to the work. But over the last day, all she had been doing was taking off in relatively confined areas, flying a short distance, and landing again. Over and over. It was the equivalent, so she imagined, of doing reps in the gym; one or two didn't bother you, but keep going and it starts to hurt.

Still, she had covered a lot of territory, spoken to nearly all the people she had meant to get in touch with. And she'd probably be doing it over again. But that was okay; she was really starting to get a feel for the layout of the city and how widespread the damage was. And she'd had a chance to help people today.

Well ... not *all* of them.

Her thoughts were troubled in that regard. She had tried, she really had. But some of the people she had dropped in to see ...

Weld had approached her that morning, and given her the good news. She was on the duty roster, effective immediately. Officially, she was now a fully-fledged Ward, although the actual paperwork had yet to come through, and the ceremony might have to wait a little while.

"So, for your duty roster, you'll be doing a wider patrol than we'd usually have you on. Here's a list of addresses for outlying relief centers, their primary coordinators - and a map. Now, you'll have Kid Win along with you, keeping a look out. If you see a villain, don't start anything. If someone starts something, you run. Don't fight, run. We have other teams doing search-and-rescue all over the city, you run and call for backup. Someone will be minutes away.

"Now... If one of the gangs decides to talk to you, I'm sure I'm busy enough that the report won't get written," Weld said. "I can't stop you, and we have bigger problems. Piggot knows we don't need someone else to fight right now, she'll turn a blind eye as long as she has plausible deniability. If they pass on information you think I'd like to hear, I expect to hear it, clear?"

"Yup."

"All right then."

He handed her a large shoulder bag, heavy with its contents. "Insulin packs and asthma inhalers; these are pretty-well universal. Hand them out as needed; get lists of people who need more."

"I'll do my best."

He had smiled and clapped her on the shoulder. "I know. I have faith in you."

The warm feeling from that had lasted all the way to the first point of call. She had deliberately decided to leave the Undersiders till last, as she figured that her visits to them would be more like a social call than a diplomatic mission. Besides, they seemed to have their territories fairly well organised already, especially Skitter.
So she checked her map and made her decision. Kid Win paralleled her, his flying surfboard easily keeping up with her steady wingbeats.

After about five minutes, he cleared his throat over their private radio link. "Uh, are you sure you're going the right way?"

"Sure," she said. Her end of the link was an earplug which transmitted her voice via bone conduction. "We're going to Merchants territory first."

"No, wait, no, no," he protested. "They're not on our approved list. They're scum of the earth. They're lower than low."

"And they're still people," said Hope. "Human beings."

"Barely," muttered Kid Win. "I can't believe you're giving these wastes of space a chance."

"If it saves one life, helps one person," retorted Hope, "I will give them that one chance."

He turned his armoured head to stare at her; she gave him a cool look in return. And despite his protests, she flew steadily onward, and so he had no choice but to follow on.

The visit did not go well.

The Merchants - her research into the gang had left her with the impression that the word 'Drug' needed to be inserted into the title to make it entirely accurate - had made their base in a derelict shopping mall, surrounded by somewhat-vandalised construction vehicles. Kid Win landed on a nearby building, ready to swoop in and support her, while she approached the mall directly.

Flying in low, she had made a sufficiently-noisy landing outside what seemed to be the front entrance. A few people sprawled on the ground out here, apparently under the influence of one narcotic or another. She was just checking on one – he was alive, but totally out of it – when four people stepped out through the front doors.

She straightened up, and moved toward them with a polite expression on her face. "Good morning," she said. "My name is Hope; I'm –"

"I know who you are," grunted the leader, a man whose name, she knew, was Skidmark. He wore a tight-fitting blue costume, stained here and there, with a mask that covered the top half of his face. The exposed half of his face did not impress her, what with the recent stubble and the bad teeth. He twitched occasionally; she recalled that he was apparently a meth addict. "So what the goddam f**k you doing here, pukestain?"

"I'm here to see if any of your people need medical attention," replied Hope, forcing her voice to stay pleasant. "I have insulin and asthma inhalers if anyone –"

"You got drugs?" broke in the woman in an irritatingly nasal voice. She was dressed ... trashy. Her too-tight shorts and top showed oil stains, as did her ratty hair. Her makeup had apparently been applied with a trowel, in bad light. The bags under her eyes, impossible to hide even by the strata of powder that covered them, indicated that her question was more than just idle curiosity. Hope recalled that her name was Squealer, and she was a tinker specialising in vehicles. "Skidmark, he – she – there's gotta be drugs in that bag!"

Skidmark nodded. "Mush, Trainwreck, get the bag."
The last two members of the group moved forward, spreading out to each side. Hope didn't get it, until she tried to take a step back, and couldn't. Of course – Skidmark. There was a glow covering the ground all the way up to his feet, and a little distance behind her.

Skidmark's capability was to create an area of one-way friction. It was sort of a gradient effect; one way, movement was easy. The other, very hard indeed. And he'd applied it so that she could only move toward him. Mush and Trainwreck were there to make sure she didn't escape out the side of the effect.

Trainwreck was big, bulky, all mechanical limbs. Mush was ... well, she'd seen the Lord of the Rings movies with her friends only a month ago, and she'd been severely creeped out by the sneaking, crawling creature which had pursued Frodo across Middle-Earth. And Mush looked like him. Non-stick skin or not, she did not want that touching her.

She took another reluctant step toward Skidmark, and the Merchant grinned.

"Hope!" said Kid Win over the radio link. "I'm coming!" She heard the whoosh as his flying surfboard took off.

Dammit, thought Hope in disgust. "I'm good," she replied, and took to the air.

The effect vanished, of course; Skidmark's ability only worked at ground level. She hovered half a dozen metres up, looking down at the four who stood, regarding her with frustrated anger. Kid Win moved in and hovered alongside her; at least four different weapon systems lined up on the people below.

"Can we not work something out?" she called down to them, over the regular chiming of her wings. "I'm willing to chalk this up as a learning experience if you are. But I'd like to make sure your people are getting proper medical care; I'll do a bit myself if necessary." She paused. "Really, I'm here to help!"

"F**k you, you can come down here and gargle my knob, you boy-girl whatever-you-are!" yelled Skidmark. "And yer boyfriend too! You don't mess with the Merchants, you hear me?"

"I got it, I got it," said Hope. "You don't want my help." Her lips tightened. She was sure people would be dying of malnutrition and other factors, here in this territory; if not right now, then not far in the future. But it was not her job right now to do something about it. She had to get around to the other gangs, see how they were managing matters.

But knowing that didn't make matters any easier.

She turned in midair, about to go, then paused, remembering.

"One more thing!" she called out. "Slaughterhouse Nine is in town! Get rid of all your glass, or pack it away! Remember Shatterbird!"

There was no response; at least, none that she wanted to bother responding to.

Gaining altitude, she headed off for her next stop. With evident outward relief, Kid Win fell in beside her. As she flew, tears flowed down her cheeks, for those in the area she was leaving behind, those who would sicken and die before she was able to assist them, to save them.

And she could do not a thing about it.
"You went where?" sputtered Weld.

"To the Merchants' base," repeated Hope. She used a matter-of-fact tone in the vague hope that it might calm him down slightly.

"What the hell possessed you to go and see those lowlives?" snapped Weld. It didn't seem to be working. He turned on Kid Win. "You! You've got better sense than this! Why didn't you stop her --"

"I tried!" interrupted Kid Win, holding his hands up defensively. "I told her, not on the approved list. I said we shouldn't go there --"

"He did," affirmed Hope. "He really did. It's not his fault. I was the one who chose to go there; what could he do but watch my back?"

"But you still should not have gone there," snapped Weld. "It was a waste of time, and dangerous besides."

"I had to," Hope said simply. Weld stared at her, his eyebrows raising. Hope went on. "People like that ... people who have lost all hope, all dignity, all sense of civilisation, everything that separates us from the animals ... I was very nearly there myself, once. I can't turn my back on that sort of thing. I can't ignore it, or dismiss it as 'not my problem', or dehumanise them, say they aren't worth my time. Because if my visit had helped one person, had changed one life ... it would have been worth it."

"It didn't, though, did it?"

Hope shook her head. "No. I admit that it didn't work. But it's always worth it to try, even if you don't succeed. Because you never truly know if you're going to succeed until you make the effort." Her mouth twisted in a wry smile. "Mind you, I'm not one to bang my head against a brick wall. They made it clear I wasn't welcome, and so Kid Win and I left. And I won't be back, not until we've gotten everything more important out of the way."

"Hm." Weld considered that. "Well, maybe you learned something. So perhaps it wasn't a wasted trip after all. Just not in the way you expected.." He considered for a moment. "Okay, so where did you go next?"

"Well," said Kid Win, "I decided that it would be better if we visited someone who was likely to be friendly this time."

They landed on a rooftop across the street from a distribution centre; people moved here and there, and they moved with purpose.

"Whose territory is this?" asked Hope, trying to find it on her map.

"One of the Travelers," replied Kid Win. "Sundancer."

"Okay," said Hope. "I remember that name. She's the one who can manifest a small sun, right?"

"That's correct," said Kid Win. "She doesn't pull that stunt unless she's really desperate though, so don't get aggressive with her."
Hope raised an eyebrow. "I don't do aggression."

Kid Win chuckled. "I saw your fight with Weld. You could have fooled me."

Hope rolled her eyes. "That was just sparring. It didn't mean anything, really."

"Sure, sure." Kid Win took a step toward the edge of the rooftop, then launched the flying surfboard off it. Sighing, Hope took wing after him.

The distribution centre did not look overly impressive, but someone moved to the doorway and called out; moments later, a girl wearing a red and black costume stepped out. She was blonde, with delicate features; as Hope landed in the street a polite distance away, she noted that the 'costume' was actually black body armour, emblazoned with red suns.

"Hello?" Sundancer said doubtfully, glancing around as if other members of the Wards were waiting to pounce on her.

Hope glanced sideways at Kid Win; he gave her a fractional nod, and a slight gesture of the hand; go on, it's your show.

"Hi," she said with a smile, stepping forward. "I don't know if you know me; my name is Hope ...?"


Hope shrugged. "It happens. I'm kind of flashy." Her wings spread slightly, shook themselves out, and then re-furled with a tinkling of chimes. She tapped the bag. "We're here to see how the distribution is going, and to find out if there's any specific medical needs that aren't being met in your area. I've got insulin packs and asthma inhalers here, and I can take a list of anything else needed back to base – oof!"

She trailed off at that point, because Sundancer had jumped forward and hugged her almost violently. "Thank you, thank you," she said, once she'd let Hope go. "We have several diabetics here, and their insulin has been running really low, and we weren't sure where to get any more."

Hope nodded. "Well, this should tide them over," she said, fishing a couple of insulin packs out of the bag. "Also, are there any injuries or infections that won't clear up? I can have a look at them for you if you want ...

"Oh god, yes, please," Sundancer almost begged, grabbing Hope by the hand and dragging her into the building. Several large and muscular men watched her go by, but made no move to stop her. Kid Win made to follow, but one of the men barred his way. "Invite wasn't for you," said the guy.

"You know, I could probably walk straight over the top of you," said Kid Win calmly.

"You could," agreed the guy. "But how would that look? 'Superhero attacks a man guarding a distribution centre.'" He hooked his head back toward the interior of the building. "Your partner's safe. Chill."

Kid Win stepped back, but subvocalised over his radio, "Hope, is everything all right in there?"

"I'm fine," Hope replied a little impatiently. "There's some people here needing medical attention, is all. I'll be out shortly."
She turned her attention back to the people in the makeshift hospital beds. Sundancer was still talking. "... thought we could handle it, but antibiotics are running low, and we're having to ration them. These are the worst."

Hope laid a cool hand on the brow of a woman with angry-looking streaks running up her arm from a bandaged forearm. The infection was savage, her immune system weakened. Setting her hand over the woman's brow, she concentrated. A silvery-blue glow passed into the woman's body, and her wings shivered a pearly chime into the air. The woman's fitful breathing eased, and she seemed to lie more peacefully.

"You're going to have a mess to clean up under that bandage, but I pushed all the infection out, and closed the original wound," said Hope. "She'll be weak, of course. She'll need a day of bed rest, but she'll be fine."

As she went from bed to bed, Sundancer walked alongside, chattering away. This had been obviously weighing on her mind a lot, and now that Hope was helping with the problem, she was feeling somewhat giddy with relief.

"... when I found out we were taking over areas of the city, I was more than a bit surprised. But I didn't want to let Trickster and the others down, so I'm doing my best. I think it's mainly the knowledge of what I can do that keeps people like the Merchants out of my territory."

Hope nodded, leaning over a young boy with a swollen foot. The end of a shard of glass could be seen protruding from the swelling.

"He won't let us touch it," said Sundancer. "It hurts too much."

Hope brushed her hand across his head, and nodded. "It's lodged into a nerve plexus. But if I ..."

She concentrated; once again, a silvery-blue pulse of light surged into the boy. He gasped, and looked at her in wonder. "It won't hurt now," she assured him. Taking hold of the end of the glass splinter, she drew it out, stemming the rush of pus with a cloth Sundancer handed her. She then applied another burst of power, and the wound expelled the rest of the corruption into the cloth before closing over.

She dropped the cloth into a bin and turned back to Sundancer. "Yes, I've met the Merchants," she said with distaste. "I knew people could live like that, but never thought they would do it from choice."

"Things are bad here in Brockton Bay," Sundancer replied. "Since Leviathan and all ..." Her voice trailed off.

Hope nodded seriously. "You need to tell your people, and the rest of the Travelers as well, that it's going to get worse. The Slaughterhouse Nine are in town, and they're here to recruit a new member. So right now they're on the down-low, but sooner or later they are going to announce themselves. Shatterbird will sing, and all the glass everywhere will shatter. So get rid of all the glass you can, as soon as you can."

"I'll get right on it," said Sundancer, looking pale. "Thanks for the heads-up." She paused. "Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?"

"Sure," said Hope, beginning to unload insulin packs and asthma inhalers into a bar fridge apparently being run by a generator; she could hear it thumping away somewhere out of sight. "I've got no secrets."
"Okay," said Sundancer with a chuckle. "My question is this: are you a guy or a girl? Because I really can't tell."

Hope tilted her head with a wry grin. "That's a good question. Physically, I'm neither." Forestalling Sundancer's next question, she added, "It happened when I got my powers."

Sundancer blinked and shook her head. "And I thought my life was weird. That must have been a nasty trigger event to do that to you."

"Oh, I never really had a trigger event," said Hope. "One minute I was normal, the next ... this." She shrugged. "The real hassle came about when I ended up here."

"' Ended up' here?" asked Sundancer curiously. "Where from?"

"My world," replied Hope with another shrug. "I don't know if it's been detected from here yet. It's got capes, or Empowered as we call ourselves, but it's not as ... messed up as this place is."

"Wow," exclaimed Sundancer, staring at Hope. "You're from another world too?"

"... too?" repeated Hope, with a raised eyebrow.

"... oh," said Sundancer. "I ... shouldn't have said that."

"Why not?" asked Hope. "Where are you from?"

"... Earth Aleph," said Sundancer reluctantly. "Look, don't tell anyone, okay? It's not something we need anyone knowing. At all. Ever." The urgency and worry in her tone told Hope she was utterly serious.

"Okay, sure, sure," she said. "Lips are sealed." She tilted her head, looking at Sundancer. "If you had the chance, would you go back home?"

"In a heartbeat," replied Sundancer fervently.

"Well," said Hope, "good luck with getting there."

"Yeah, you too," said Sundancer. She paused. "So ... what else can you do with that light-pulse you use to heal people with?"

Hope tilted her head to one side. "I can purge poisons, stop pain, cure infections, cure disease, and heal wounds," she said. "Plus ... one or two other applications." She decided to keep the 'bring people back from the dead' aspect quiet for the moment. "Why do you ask?"

Sundancer blinked. "Wow, all of that?" She paused, considering. "It's just that ... I have a ... a friend. She has a ... body problem. I was just wondering if you could maybe ... help, sometime. It's just that ... she's something like you, her body's changed with her powers, and ... I don't know. Maybe you can help, maybe you can't. But I'd appreciate it if ..." She trailed off.

Hope spread her hands. "Of course. I can't promise anything, but if I can help, I will. Just drop me a line, whenever."

"Oh, I will, I will," said Sundancer. She gave Hope another hug, which was warmly returned. "And thanks again for everything."

"It is seriously not any sort of a problem," Hope assured her. "Just don't forget to pass on the word about the Nine, and the glass."
"Oh, don't worry about that," Sundancer replied. "I'll get right on it."

Moments later, Hope and Kid Win lifted off again; Sundancer stood in the street, waving as they left.

"Well," said Kid Win as they gained altitude. "That went a lot better than it did with the Merchants, don't you think?"

"That's right," retorted Hope. "Rub it in. You were right, I was wrong."

Hope was impressed. She hadn't known someone could whistle nonchalantly inside power armor.
"So, where did you go after that?" asked Weld. "Somewhere sensible, I hope."

"Well, it depends on what you call 'sensible'," replied Kid Win. "We figured that Sundancer would be calling the rest of the Travelers and filling them in, so we decided to make a call elsewhere."

"You're kidding," said Kid Win. "The Chosen?"

"Sure," said Hope. "Why not? They're not as bad as the Merchants, right?"

"No," admitted Kid Win, "but that's because no-one is as bad as the Merchants."

"Look," said Hope, "they are in control of a distribution point, so it's a good idea to talk to them. Also, if the Nine decide to hit the city hard, we're going to need them on side, not standing off because it's none of their business."

"Oh, if it comes to a fight, they'll fight," Kid Win assured her. "Hookwolf's many things, but a coward he most definitely is not."

"Yes," said Hope patiently, "but which side do you want him fighting on?"

The building had housed some sort of art studio or gymnasium on the third floor; floor-to-ceiling windows offered a view of everything that lay inside.

For the moment, this was Hookwolf and a large selection of his Chosen, apparently exercising, sparring, or just resting between bouts. Of course, all attention turned to Hope and Kid Win as they came to a hover outside the windows.

Hookwolf strode over to the windows, his outer surface reforming, covering itself with blades and metallic plates as he walked. He shouted something, gesturing. Hope could not hear him, but she guessed his words to be something like 'leave', if not much more forceful.

"Back off," she said over the radio link. "I need to talk to him, and I think you'll just complicate matters."

"But –" began Kid Win.

"Please," she added.

"Okay," he said, "fine." Turning the surfboard, he moved away, and landed on a nearby rooftop.

Hope cupped her hands and shouted, "I need to speak with you! It's urgent!"

"Leave, now!" came the answering bellow. "You are not welcome in Chosen territory!"

With the words came a sense of the man, a feeling of how to approach this. "I call a warrior's truce!" she shouted back. "We must parley!"

He paused for a long moment, then pointed upward. "The roof!" he shouted. "We will speak there!"
She landed on the rooftop; a moment later, the door to the roof opened, and Hookwolf stepped out. He strode over to her, and stood looking down at her, most of his skin still obscured by metal implements and plates.

"My name is Hope," she began. "I thank you for –"

"Warrior's truce," he snorted. "You look like no warrior to me. You look to be a healer, not a fighter."

She looked him coolly in the eye. "So, you know a warrior instantly when you see one?" she asked. "I would parley with you, Hookwolf, in a matter that concerns you and your Chosen."

He considered that a moment longer, then turned abruptly. "You speak like a warrior. Come down, and we shall parley." He strode toward the roof access. Over his shoulder, he called, "But first, you will prove that you are indeed a warrior, and worthy to parley with the Chosen!"

Inwardly, Hope groaned. Oh boy, what have I gotten myself into here?

"What's going on?" asked Kid Win over the radio link.

"Nothing," replied Hope innocently. "He just wants to compare dick sizes. It's all good."

"Wait, what?" snapped Kid Win. "What did you say?"

"I said," replied Hope as she descended the stairs, "that it's all good. We're gonna parley in a few minutes. I hope, she added mentally.

In the gym (for it was a gym, she saw now), the remainder of the Chosen were gathered around a sparring mat. Hope stood in the middle of the clear area, wings furled tightly to her body, looking small and vulnerable and about twelve years old. Hookwolf stood off to one side, considering his options.

"Menja," he said abruptly. "You are a warrior; this Hope claims to also be a warrior. You will see if this is true or not." He smiled thinly. "You may use your powers ... a little."

Menja stepped forward, a long spear in her hands. She twirled it once, like a cheerleader's baton. She had the looks for one too, Hope decided. Or maybe a Playboy model.

As she stepped forward, she grew, until she towered to nine feet tall, holding the spear in one hand. "Don't worry, little one," she said. "I won't hurt you ... much."

Hope watched her warily. At that height, she had immense reach, especially with that spear in hand. Greater than Hope's own, anyway. She'll want to play keep-away, so I'm going to have to get in close.

Abruptly, the spear swept down, the butt end swinging for Hope's head. She deflected it with a wing – the hard wood eliciting a harsh chime from the crystalline feathers – and darted forward rather than back. Another wing swept in toward Menja's ankles, trying to take her legs out from under her, but the Amazonian-proportioned woman merely leaped into the air, clearing the strike with ease.

Even as she landed, Menja turned sideways and lashed out with a side-kick at Hope's abdomen; Hope twisted around it, then smashed an elbow down on the exposed knee joint. Menja grunted, pulling the leg back, and brought around the spear again. This time it was the razor sharp head that swept in at Hope.
She saw it coming, and interposed another wing, but the spear barely made contact; Menja had faked her out, which Hope only realised when a backfist caught her upside the head.

She stumbled back, her head ringing, arms and wings up to block any further blows until she could focus again. Menja also stepped back, moving gingerly on the leg Hope had struck, watching her warily.

"Enough!" called Hookwolf, stepping forward. Hope shook her head to clear the dizziness, and looked over at him.

"You have courage, and you can fight, and you can take a blow, that much is obvious," Hookwolf went on. "You are a warrior. We shall parley."

"I thank you," replied Hope, unconsciously using the slightly formalised phraseology that her power told her that Hookwolf would respond best to. "But first; with your permission?" she indicated Menja.

Silently, Hookwolf nodded, and watched with hooded eyes as Hope approached Menja. "Your knee," she said. "How does it feel?"

"I can walk upon it," replied Menja grudgingly.

"I can help you with that, if you will accept my aid," Hope told her.

Menja glanced at Hookwolf, who returned a tight nod. She turned back to Hope. "Very well," she said. "Do what you will."

Hope knelt before Menja, who had assumed normal human stature once more, and ran her hands over the knee joint. There was a little damage there; Menja would be hampered in any kind of heavy exertion. It would heal eventually, but ... she placed her hands over the joint, and concentrated. Her wings sang a quiet chime, and the silvery-blue pulse of energy sank into Menja's knee. Hope stood; she already knew that the knee was back to full capability.

Menja lifted her leg and flexed the joint a few times, then tried her weight upon it. "It will suffice," she said, with a nod to Hookwolf.

"Very well," said Hookwolf. "Speak with me of your matters then," he said to Hope. "You have earned a hearing. But I promise no action."

"That's fair," said Hope. "First things first; are there any people in your territory who need medical attention, asthmatics, diabetics, anyone like that? We can bring in ..."

She trailed off; Hookwolf was shaking his head. "Weaklings are not permitted to remain in Chosen territory," he growled. "You become strong, or you die."

"Ah," said Hope. "Of course. Well then, you are going to need to be as strong as possible then, because the Slaughterhouse Nine are in town."

Hookwolf's head came up, and he stared at her. "You are certain of this?" he asked.

"As certain as I can be without seeing them for myself," Hope replied candidly.

"Hm," said Hookwolf. "This bears thinking on."

"Well, just as a suggestion," said Hope, "you may want to think on doing something about all that
"glass there." She pointed at the floor to ceiling windows that even now let in the late-morning light. "When they officially announce their presence in town, Shatterbird will be screaming. And this room will officially become a meatgrinder. You'll be fine, and most of your capes, but all the other Chosen, the ones you've worked so hard to train? Probably not."

Everyone within earshot of her turned to look at the windows, realising the truth of her words. Hookwolf nodded sharply. "Your point is made. Is there anything else?"

Hope pondered, then shook her head. "No," she said, "I think that was it."

"Very well," said Hookwolf. "This parley is at an end. You will be –"

He broke off, looking thoughtful. "Knee injuries are hard to heal," he said after a moment. "But you repaired Menja's with little trouble, yes?"

"Uh, yes," said Hope, not sure where this was going. "If all the pieces are there, I can usually get them back together in the right order."

Hookwolf nodded. "Well then, you can pay for your intrusion into my affairs by doing me a service." He began to stride across the room, gesturing for her to follow. "Come."

Shrugging, Hope followed.

"What's going on?" asked Kid Win over the radio link.

"Finished the chat," she whispered. "Now he wants me for something else. It's all good."

"Just be careful," he replied. "Weld will kill me if you get hurt!"

She did not answer, because she saw where Hookwolf was taking her. Off to the side of the gym, a brawny shirtless man was sitting on a bench, doing reps. His muscles bulged and sweat slicked his skin; he'd obviously been at it awhile.

"Stormtiger," said Hookwolf curtly. "Show Hope your knee."

Obligingly, Stormtiger extended one leg. Hope stepped up and laid her hand on it. There was damage there; it had once been more extensive, although curiously concentrated. Gunshot damage?

In any case, while there had been some healing, scar tissue and shards of bone were interfering with the proper regeneration process; if it were left on its own, this knee would never regain its full capability.

"I can't fix this as is," she began, and saw Hookwolf begin to speak. "- because it's healed, just wrongly," she hurried to explain. "Like a broken arm that heals badly because it was never set. Actually," she went on, "a lot like that. To make this come together properly now, it's going to have to be re-broken."

"That," said Hookwolf, "will not be a problem." There was a grinding metal sound, and when Hope looked around, he had formed a massive hammer from part of his metal body.

Hope blinked, looking from Hookwolf, who held the hammer poised, to Stormtiger, who didn't seem more than mildly apprehensive.

"You're okay with this?" she asked Stormtiger.

"Will my knee work as well as it did before?" he asked in return.
She nodded slowly. "To the best of my ability ... yes."

"Very well then," said Stormtiger, "We will do this."

Hookwolf raised the hammer. "Wait!" said Hope. "We have to do this properly. Stormtiger, get down on the ground. Your knee needs to be solidly supported for this." She paused, suspecting the answer but asking anyway. "I can also take away the pain for you, if you wish."

Stormtiger wordlessly lay down on the floor, his knee pressed against the floorboards and his other leg out of the way. "I will take the pain," he said. "I am a warrior. Pain is my due."

Nodding in approval, Hookwolf raised his hammer once more. Hope knelt, holding Stormtiger's leg steady. Stormtiger looked up at Hookwolf, staring his leader straight in the eye. "Strike true," he said.

Hookwolf brought the hammer down, shattering Stormtiger's knee like a walnut. Hope felt the pulse of agony, the scream bitten off before it could emerge from Stormtiger's throat. But then she was dealing with the new injury.

Over the radio link, Kid Win shouted, "Hope? Hope? Are you there? What just happened?"

"Shh!" she snapped. "I'm busy!"

She had to say, Hookwolf was thorough. No two parts of the previously healed knee were together. The knee was a mess of fragments. She closed her eyes, concentrating, and sent her healing energies into the destroyed joint.

Silvery-blue light pulsed, illuminating Stormtiger's rigid features. Her wings sang a tight refrain of crystalline beauty. Hope strained, feeling the damage, forcing the knee joint to reassert itself as it had once been, whole, entire. Bone shards clicked together, muscles reattached, torn ligaments reformed.

And then, an eternity later, it was done. Hope breathed heavily, removing her hands from the now-whole limb. She sat back on her heels, bracing herself with her wings.

"That ..." she said, pausing for a breath, "... should do it."

Stormtiger blinked, then ran his hand over his knee. He flexed it a couple of times experimentally, then climbed to his feet. "Hah!" he shouted, leaping into the air and launching a full-extension kick.

Hope began to climb wearily to her feet, then found a hand supporting her arm. Looking up in surprise, she saw it was Menja, who afforded her a grave nod. "He might want to ..." she began, then trailed off as he smashed a full roundhouse kick into a hanging bag. "... stay off it for a while," she finished belatedly. "Or not. I guess."

"We are warriors here," Hookwolf told her, watching Stormtiger. "We do not accept weakness in any way."

"So I see," sighed Hope. "Well, I hope that turns out well for you."

"That will be our business, not yours," Hookwolf replied. "You may leave now. And take these medicines. We do not need them."

She accepted the shoulder bag and headed for the stairs to the roof. At a gesture from Hookwolf, Menja escorted her up and out of the building.

"Well," said Hope. "See you around, I guess."
"Until we fight again," replied Menja.

"Uh, yeah, okay," said Hope, and took off. Looking back, she saw Menja descending into the stairwell, not even glancing backward to see Hope go.

Kid Win took off as well, and fell in beside her as she flew on.

"What happened in there? I thought Hookwolf had brained you!"

Hope shook her head. "I'll tell you later. Just ... never ask Hookwolf to assist with corrective surgery."

Kid Win considered that for a long moment.

"Right," he said at last.

They flew on.
In which we get a Shadow Stalker update

Chapter Notes

This chapter is not part of the main storyline

Shadow Stalker sat in semi-darkness. Her cuffs were chained to the floor of the small compartment in two places, and an electrical cord ran along the chain to power the cuffs, protected by a flexible metal sleeve.

They were taking no chances of her escaping; her attempted murder of Hope, as well as her other activities, had put her high on the 'potential threat' scale.

The transport rumbled along the road leading out of Brockton Bay. Just a few miles ahead was the secure airfield where they would meet Dragon's aircraft, which would whisk her away to the Birdcage.

The four PRT guards who each occupied a corner of the compartment did not speak to her, but she overheard occasional bursts of static and indecipherable speech from within their helmet earpieces. She had tried to make conversation at the beginning of the trip. There had not even been a response.

So now she was resigned to the trip. Or at least, as resigned as she was ever going to get. There was still the bone-deep resentment, the feeling that it had all been set up to make sure she failed. The conviction that she deserved better than this. She was a *predator*, dammit!

So lost in her thoughts was she that she missed the first signs of trouble.

The first she actually knew of it, in fact, was when the shriek reverberated through the vehicle, compounded by the sound of shattering glass. The transport swerved, tilted, dropped back on its wheels, then apparently skidded off the road and hit something hard. Shadow Stalker was jolted in her chair, but the restraints actually held her in place. The guards were thrown forward, but they grabbed at bars apparently set up for just this purpose, then readied their weapons. Their radios had gone silent; presumably, any microchips in there had just exploded. Because Shadow Stalker knew exactly who had done this. And so did the PRT men. *Shatterbird*. So when they trained their guns on the rear doors, they were ready to fire on the instant.

It didn't help them in the slightest.

There was a rending crash, and the side of the transport – sheet steel, as far as Shadow Stalker knew – was torn off and thrown away. Crawler appeared in the hole thus made, grabbed one of the guards, and disappeared out of sight with him. Wild firing was replaced by horrified screams, replaced by ... silence.

And then the white, oddly-jointed figure of Mannequin appeared in the side of the transport. Even before the guards could level their weapons, he was among them, blades extending from his arms, arms extending from his shoulders on chains. Spinning, slashing, killing.

Within seconds, it was over.

Shadow Stalker blinked a guard's blood from her eyes and looked up at the ever-silent Mannequin,
expecting to die next.

But she didn't.

Instead, other people appeared in the gap made by Crawler. Jack Slash helped Bonesaw up, then climbed up himself. Shatterbird, cloaked in stained-glass armour, landed in the gap. Cherish scrambled up, followed by Burnscar. And then the Siberian leaped lightly in, and went to stand near Bonesaw. Outside, Shadow Stalker could hear a wet, crunching sound. She had a horrible notion that she knew exactly what it was ... and she could only hope that Crawler was killing the guards before he ate them.

"Well now," said Jack Slash, looking down at her with what appeared to be mild benevolence. "Fancy meeting someone like you in a place like this."

Shadow Stalker tried to speak, but her throat was far too dry. She cleared her throat and tried again. "What ... what do you want? With me, I mean?"

Bonesaw giggled, and looked up at Jack Slash. "She'd be fun to play with in the laboratory. Imagine all the interesting hybrids I could make!" A cold chill ran down Shadow Stalker's spine.

Jack Slash chuckled and patted her on the head. "Ah, ah, ahh," he chided her. "First, we have to see who's willing to sponsor you. They have to set up the test for you, you see." He turned to Bonesaw. "You get first pick. Yes or no?"

Bonesaw pouted. "I wanted to dissect her, not recruit her," she said sulkily. "Besides, I have someone else in mind."

"Okay," said Jack Slash. "That's a no. Anyone else?"

Shatterbird considered her, then shook her head. "No."

Mannequin, still standing impassive, shook his head silently.

Burnscar sneered.

The Siberian eyed her closely, then shook her head.

Cherish seemed to be about to say yes, then wrinkled her nose. "My brother's been at her," she said. "I could never be sure that he wasn't making her do things."

"And you do not want to be Crawler's pick," Jack Slash assured her. "Ah well, it looks like it's up to me, then."
"You'll sponsor me into the group?" asked Shadow Stalker, hope rising in her like a blossoming flower.

"Good god no, girl," he said scornfully. "You're a three-time loser. I could maybe tolerate someone else's attempts to recruit you, but really! If you made it into the Nine, I would probably have to kill you within two months, either for being an embarrassment to the group, or for trying to kill one of us."

"So I can have her for the laboratory, then?" asked Bonesaw eagerly.

"I don't see –" began Jack Slash, then paused. "On the other hand, no. Reinforcements are incoming. They will likely arrive before we are able to rig a way to contain her. Let us be gone."

Siberian stepped up next to Shadow Stalker and drew her hand back in preparation for an obviously lethal blow. She looked at Jack Slash questioningly.

"No, no," he said. "Don't kill her. I have something much worse in mind." He jumped down from the transport and slid a voice recorder across the floor; it came to rest just inches away from where her reach ended. A tiny red LED was blinking on its face.

"I do so love modern technology," he said cheerfully, as the rest of his team left the transport. "I just recorded the entire conversation. Including the part where you offered to join us ... and where we turned you down." His smile turned as razor-edged as the knives he habitually carried. "Enjoy your stay in the Birdcage, why don't you?"

And then he was gone.

"You could at least let me loose!" she screamed.

There was no answer except, perhaps, a mocking laugh.

And then Shadow Stalker was left alone, in her restraints, with the digital recorder at her feet, and the sound of incoming helicopters.

*They're leaving me. I'm going to the Birdcage after all.*

She had heard horror stories about the Birdcage, how it was inescapable. How there were not even any guards inside. How the prisoners ran the show.

She knew from her time in juvie hall that going into any prison, anywhere, how you were treated depended on how much cred you had. If you had cred, if people respected you, then you got along pretty well. If you only had a little cred, it could get hard. And if you had none ... you were screwed. Badly.

*And he just destroyed any cred I could have made, ever. I'm going to be the lowest of the low there. Everyone's bitch.*

*I can't take that. I'll fight back. They'll push me till I fight back.*

*Then I'll get shanked, some dark night, by someone who never heard of Shadow Stalker, doesn't give a damn who I am.*

*Jack Slash just killed me, and he never even had to lay a hand on me.*

The realization crowded in on her, as the helicopter rotors came closer. Her arrogance, her assurance,
finally cracked, and she saw for the first time what her life had truly become. Nausea rose in her throat.

_I am so screwed._

Her eyelids squeezed shut, even as tears leaked through.

She had never felt more alone in her life.
In which Hope meets a worried father

Hope banked over the city, her wings flaring wide. She looked around at the blue sky, the clouds scattered here and there, and for a long moment felt nothing but happiness and serenity.

And then Kid Win's voice crackled in her earpiece.

"Okay, hotshot. Where would you like to go next?"

She considered the list they had. Faultline's Crew, the rest of the Travelers, the Pure, the Undersiders ...

"I'd love to just fly around for awhile, but I guess you have a fuel budget," she replied, grinning mischievously.

"You're not wrong," he replied. "In fact, I'd like to get back for refuelling sometime soon. But we can make one more stop."

"Excellent," she said. "We can pick up some more stuff while we're there. But for now ..."

She looked down at the Docklands, over which they where now traversing. It had been fairly hard hit by the Leviathan attack. But ...

"Hey, looks like someone's doing some recovery work down there. Why don't we stop in and say hi?"

Kid Win looked down, and somehow managed to express a shrug inside a quarter ton of power armour. "Sure," he said. "Why not?"

The workers looked up as Kid Win and Hope came in for a landing. Kid Win spun the surfboard and flared his jets at the last moment, before cutting them out and dropping six inches to the broken pavement. Hope flapped her wings twice in a beautiful crystal symphony, touched down as light as thistledown, and then furled her wings neatly upon her back, lower pinions first and then upper.

It was quite the dramatic entrance.

As the workers – men and women both, all dressed in heavy work gear, and obviously not unused to manual labour – paused in their activities, one of them made his way over to the two capes. He was thin, fortyish, balding, and wore glasses. But for all that, he had on the same tough work clothes as the others, and his boots and gloves were just as scuffed and muddy.

"Hi," he said, pulling off a glove and holding out his hand to shake. "Kid Win, right? What's up?"

"Nothing much up," said Kid Win, carefully shaking his hand. "We saw you on the way over, and my partner here decided to drop in and say hello, see how you were doing."

The man looked over at Hope, and he frowned slightly. "I've seen you on TV, haven't I?" he asked.

"Uh, yeah," she said. "That happens to me a lot." She held out her hand, and he shook it. "Hope. I'm kind of new in town."

"Danny Hebert. Nice to meet you, Hope."
"Same to you," replied Hope. "So, what's happening here? Are you working with emergency services?"

"Yeah, that'll happen, eventually," he said with a wry chuckle, "but they haven't got things properly organised in this area yet. So I got in touch with the rest of the Dockworkers' Association – I'm the chairman – and we just decided to get out and make a start. Get the worst of the rubble cleared away, things like that."

"Sounds reasonable to me," Hope conceded. "Listen, could you do me a favour and ask around your people to see if there's anyone in their families who needs insulin or asthma inhalers? Because I have some right here, if they're needed."

"Sure thing," said Danny, and gestured a couple of the other workers over. Soon they were discussing and comparing notes, and deciding who needed the medications, and who could get along without them. Danny had a notebook in his hand, writing down each name as they decided on them. Finally, he tore off the page and gave it to Hope; it held two columns, one for insulin and one for asthma inhalers.

She went down the list, and decided that she still had that many of both. "Do you have somewhere to keep them cool?" she asked.

"Sure thing," he said. "Lou's got a cooler in his truck."

"That'll be perfect," she agreed, and together they stashed the appropriate number of both insulin packs and asthma inhalers in the cooler. "Any other medical conditions that need addressing? I can see about getting hold of things you need, until regular supplies are available."

"I don't know of anything right now," said Danny, "but I can ask around and find out. How do I get hold of you?"

"Contact the Wards through this number," said Kid Win, proffering a card. "They'll get any messages to us."

"Thanks," said Danny, accepting it and tucking it into his wallet. "This will mean a lot to quite a few people." He looked at Hope and frowned. "Aren't you a little ... young, to be doing this?"

Hope shrugged; her wings tinkled musically. "I guess I'll grow out of it. So to speak. But I think I've been holding my own so far."

"I'll say," muttered Kid Win off to the side, then said "What?" in an innocent tone when Hope and Danny glanced over at him.

"Uh, listen," said Danny. "You're going around town, checking in with the various groups, right?"

"More or less, yes," replied Hope. "Why?"

"Uh, if you happen to see my daughter, could you please ask her to get in touch with me?" he asked. He opened his wallet and extracted a small photo, slightly creased, of a girl with curly brown hair and glasses, laughing at something. "Her name's Taylor, and she's run away from home. She's only fifteen." His voice betrayed the worry that he felt.

Hope eyed him carefully. He didn't seem to show the signs, the behaviour pattern, of an abusive father. Or at least, she didn't think so. And he seemed genuinely worried. However ...

"Mr Hebert," she said, "I ran away from home myself, at fourteen. At the time, I considered that I
had a very good reason. I still think I did. I suspect that your daughter – Taylor? – also believes that she has a good reason. If you want me to speak to her, I think I need to know the reason she had for running away from home."

"I'm not sure," he said wretchedly. "She was being bullied, at school, for a long time. I supported her, and we tried to get it dealt with, but one of the girls, her father is a lawyer, and when he put pressure on the principal and staff, they basically just folded. So she was going through that stress, and the Leviathan attack ... she found new friends awhile back, and was spending more and more time with them. I became concerned when I found she was skipping school, but I suppose some of that was the bullying ..." His voice trailed off.

"And then ... I guess it was stupid of me, but I tried to stage an intervention, to get her to talk to me about what was bothering her. But she left, and she hasn't been back. I've seen her since, spoken to her a couple of times, but ... not long enough. I need to know that she's safe, is all."

Hope nodded sympathetically. "Well, if I see her, I will give her your message. Can I see that photo again?" He showed her, and she stared at it, frowning. Something about that photo reminded her of someone she had met recently ...

... no, it wasn't coming to her. She shook her head. "If I see her, I'll talk to her," she promised.

Kid Win stepped away from where he had been talking to some of the other members of the Dockworkers' Association - presumably about the Slaughterhouse Nine, and Shatterbird in particular - activated his surfboard, and took off. Hope unfurled her wings and launched herself into the air after him.

Once they were at altitude, he asked, "What was that all about?"

"Oh," she said, "He was worried about his daughter. She ran away from home."

"Oh, that's gotta suck," Kid Win replied. "What's her name?"

"Taylor," said Hope. "Taylor Hebert."

"Ah, okay," he said. "Doesn't ring a bell, but we can keep a lookout."

As they flew back toward base, Hope could not get it out of her mind that the photo reminded her of someone.

Who it was, she could not place.
Bitch heard the barking and howling of the dogs before she heard the other noises. They sounded like a jet roaring overhead, and a windchime in a strong breeze ... or something. They didn't sound exactly like either of those, but she couldn't describe them any closer.

But she did know this much; they were landing right outside the gates of her small compound. In her territory.

She whistled, loud and sharp. Dogs, wherever they were, turned, pricked up their ears, and galloped her way. Even as she made her way to the front gate, Bentley and Bruno were swelling, their skins splitting, muscles growing beneath.

By the time she got to the front gate of her compound, the noises had stopped, but the dogs were still barking. Behind her, Bentley and Bruno were both the size of Volkswagens, and her other dogs were increasing in size as well. She opened the gate.

There were two people outside, on the street. She knew them both; the power armour looked to be Kid Win's make, and the other one was Hope, the new Ward that Skitter and Tattletale seemed to think was worth talking to. But now she'd brought the Wards here, to Bitch's territory. She felt a surge of anger. Bentley had tossed Hope around once before, and this time she didn't have any containment foam to rub into his nose ...

"What are you doing here?" she yelled sharply. The tone of her voice brought all of her dogs to full alert; their ears went up and they growled, loops of drool hanging from the misshapen teeth of the dogs that had grown the largest.

Hope got off the two large dun-coloured bags she had been perching on, and picked up a couple of paper shopping bags from the road beside. Kid Win was standing beside another couple of large bags with his arms folded.

"Hi," called Hope. "We come bearing gifts. May we come in?"

Bitch frowned. What the f**k?

Hope slapped the side of the nearest bag – they had to be a hundred pounds apiece – and a faint dust arose. And a moment later, Bitch smelled it. Dry dog food. A lot of dry dog food. If all four bags had dog food in them ...

"Okay," she said. "Hope can come in. You, stay outside." She gestured at Kid Win. "Do anything stupid and my dogs will rip you right out of that armour."

"Why do I have to eat at the little kids' table all the time?" grumbled Kid Win. Bitch had no idea what he meant by that.

"Shush," admonished Hope, and gripped two of the bags in one hand, then took hold of the two Kid Win had been standing by in the other. Hefting them with just a little effort, she walked into the gateway and set the bags down, returning for the shopping bags.

"As I said," she said to Bitch, handing her the shopping bags, "gifts. Dog food – I don't know what brand you prefer, so I just got what was going in bulk." She picked up the four bags again as Bitch pushed the gates closed again. "Where do you want them?"
Wordlessly, Bitch pointed at where she kept such things, while Hope kept talking. She was always talking. "I also got some other stuff I thought you might like. Tinned dog food, if any of your dogs prefer that." Bitch had already found that, and was looking through the other bags. "Flea treatment, stuff for ticks, worming tablets, anything that looked useful." A lot of it did look very useful. Bitch said nothing.

Hope paused at the doorway and glanced back; Bitch nodded. So she stepped inside and put the bags down against the wall. "The last bag's some treats I found for them. Rubber balls, squeaky toys, and rawhide bones. I don't know much about dogs, but I understand they like that sort of thing."

Bitch put the bags down on the table, and glared at Hope. "What's all this for?" she growled. "What do you want out of me?"

Hope smiled, but she didn't show her teeth. Nor did she raise her eyes to meet Bitch's squarely. In fact, she was showing all the signs of a submissive female to an alpha female in the pack. The more Bitch spoke to her, the more she acted in a way that felt comfortable to Bitch.

"It's not a bribe," she said. "It's a gift, an offer of friendship. This is what friends do, they help each other out."

"Well, don't expect anything from me," muttered Bitch. The dogs had begun to reduce in size, now that the urgency had gone out of the air; she called Bentley over and tossed him a squeaky rubber toy. He lay down and began to chew it ecstatically.

"I don't," said Hope. "I'd like to have a talk with you, is all. Spare a few minutes?"

"Only if you help me clean up some dog crap while we're talking," Bitch countered. Hope was so clean, so neat, so fresh. She'd never stoop to –

"Okay," said Hope. "Lead the way."

Bitch blinked a little at that, but Hope was serious. She took the bucket Bitch gave her, and was soon industriously scooping up dog crap alongside Bitch. Inside the building, Bitch's minions were sorting out the contents of the bags and storing them where they were needed.

As they worked, Hope talked. "So, I brought over some things like insulin and asthma inhalers ... does anyone in this area have medical needs like that?"

"No," Bitch growled shortly. "No-one lives in the area. If they do, I chase them out."

"Oh, okay," said Hope. She lifted her foot, where she'd stepped on a dog turd, picked up the offending piece of excrement, and dropped it in the bucket. None had gotten on her foot, or her hand; Bitch couldn't see how. "Well, the other thing I wanted to talk to you about was the Slaughterhouse Nine."

"What about them?" snapped Bitch.

"Well, you and I both know they're in town. But are you remembering what they do when they first announce themselves in a new town?"

Bitch frowned. She should know this one. But she'd been distracted lately ...

"Shatterbird sings," Hope said. Bitch couldn't tell if she was being helpful, sarcastic or mocking.

"I know that," snapped Bitch. "She sings, and breaks windows."
"All the windows, all glass," replied Hope with a nod. "Everywhere in town." She pointed at the building, with the hand not currently holding a piece of dog crap. "All those windows? They'll become shrapnel. If your dogs don't get hurt by it, it'll be a pure miracle."

"I know that, too," Bitch growled. "Why are you telling me this?"

"So you can prepare," said Hope. "They're in town, but they haven't made their move yet. The Protectorate thinks they want to recruit first, then announce their presence. They haven't yet, but when they do ..."

Bitch nodded. Even with her imperfect knowledge of human interaction, she could fill in that blank. "I'll start them taking the windows out. But I'll ask you one more time. Why. Are you telling me about this. Now?"

"Because we're going around town, telling everyone," said Hope. "Everyone needs to know. People think Slaughterhouse Nine, they don't always remember about Shatterbird."

"Well, I'm not stupid," Bitch retorted.

"No," said Hope, "you're not. A stupid person would not be able to look after all these dogs."

Bitch was a little taken aback. Normally when she said that, the other person would go on the defensive, with some insincere-sounding crap like I never said you were. Which, really, sounded like they were thinking it.

But Hope didn't say things like that. More and more, Bitch was beginning to get the impression that Hope said what she meant, and meant what she said. She was a long way from trusting Hope – I'm not an idiot! But she didn't distrust her quite so much as before. And that was a strange feeling.

"And that's the last in this area," said Hope, dropping said piece of dog excrement into the mostly-full bucket. All the time she was talking, she had not paused once in her work.

"Was that all you wanted to talk to me about?" asked Bitch, accepting the bucket from her. Her hands were still as clean as when she'd started.

"Basically, yes," said Hope. "Oh, uh, and if you happen to run into a teenage runaway called Taylor Hebert, could you do me a favour and tell her that her father really wants to get into contact?"

Bitch gave her a strange look. Does she know that Taylor is Skitter? "I can do that," she said grudgingly.

"Thanks," said Hope. "And I hope the dogs like the treats." She grinned down at Bentley, still happily chewing the squeaky toy.

"I suppose they might," allowed Bitch. She walked Hope back across the yard to the front gates, and opened them.

Hope stepped outside. "Well, goodbye," she said.

"Mhm," grunted Bitch. She closed the gates and waited for the sounds of crystal chandeliers and jetwash to fade away.

They could have landed right here in the yard, she realised. But they didn't. They probably knew I'd get mad.
I bet it was Hope's idea to land outside.

She went back to work with the dogs, frowning occasionally. *I don't know what to think about Hope,* she thought. *She seems ... nice.* *I know how to deal with assholes. I don't know how to deal with nice.*
The name of the nightclub was "Palanquin"; it stood on a hill, so that the water still lying here and there in the streets did not come close to it. Kid Win and Hope landed on a nearby rooftop to survey the area.

"A nightclub? Really?" asked Hope, even though she'd read the file. "That's kind of ... different."

"Most secure club in town," Kid Win assured her. "No one starts a fight in line. Trust me on this."

Hope nodded judiciously. "Makes sense," she agreed. She shifted the strap of the shoulderbag, and looked up at the sun; it was getting toward late afternoon. "A couple more stops, and we're done for the day?" she suggested. An ache in her shoulder-blades told her that her wings would hate her for this, later.

"Sounds good to me," replied Kid Win. "I'll be glad to get this armour off. It's starting to smell like week-old dirty socks in here."

"So wash your socks more often," said Hope mischievously, and took off from the rooftop with a laugh that blended in with the crystalline chime from her wings.

Kid Win followed, a wry grin on his face under the helmet. He found himself wondering if Hope's smartass nature was just now reasserting itself, or whether she had picked up the habit since reaching Earth Bet. Probably from Clockblocker, he thought. He's been smartass central since they let him keep the name.

Hope landed in front of the nightclub's closed doors. As Kid Win landed behind her, she stepped forward and rapped sharply on one of the doors.

Nothing happened.

"I think they might not be open," Kid Win offered diffidently.

She ignored him, and knocked again.

"They might actually be closed," he clarified.

From inside, there came the sound of locks being opened, and then the door swung open slightly. A large hand, with slightly translucent skin, brownish nails, and strange whorled shells attached to the skin here and there, appeared around the door, pushing it farther open. It was followed by an equally large face, round and hairless, with more of the spiral shells placed on it.

"The club," said the large man in a vaguely Scandinavian accent, "it is not open. You read the opening times, yes?"

"Oh, we don't want the nightclub," said Hope cheerfully. "We just want to talk to someone here." She smiled at him. "You're Gregor, right?"

"That is me," said Gregor ponderously, pushing the door farther open, and revealing a large round torso, straining somewhat at a rather oversized sweatshirt. His head came into the light, his
translucent skin and flesh revealing the lines of his skull underneath. "What is it you want to talk about?"

A voice sounded from farther back in the building. "Hey, Gregor, who's at the door?"

"Some people from the Wards," replied Gregor without turning his head. "They want to talk to us."

"Hang on," called the owner of the hidden voice, "I'll let Faultline know, then I'll be right there."

"Faultline," Gregor related to Hope and Kid Win, "will be out in a moment, if it is to her you wish to speak."

"Well," said Hope, "okay." She held out her hand. "I'm Hope, by the way."

Gregor took it solemnly and shook it once. "I know," he said simply. "I have seen you on the television."

The glow from her skin percolated oddly through his translucent flesh, making the bones in his hand stand out sharply.

"Wow," said Hope, looking at his hand. "That's really cool." She grinned at him. "You have a really amazing body."

From Kid Win's direction came something that sounded suspiciously like a snort turned hastily into a cough. Hope ignored him.

Gregor stared at her. "I beg your pardon?"

"Your internal organs," Hope clarified. "When I come into contact with someone, I get a sort of diagnostic readout, not in words but in impressions, of their state of health. Injuries, diseases, poison in the system, the state of various internal organs, and so on. You've got internal organs that don't match anything in my experience. I have no idea what they do." She grinned again. "That's really, really cool."

Before Gregor could formulate an answer, a young man with bright orange skin and cobalt-blue hair came out the door and eased around Gregor without touching him. A long prehensile tail protruded from the seat of his Levis.

"Newter," acknowledged Kid Win with a nod.

"Kid Win," replied Newter. "This is your new recruit, huh? Hope, right?"

"That's right," said Hope. "As I recall, you have a thing where hallucinogens ooze from your skin?"

"That's right," grinned Newter. "So I'd shake hands, but you'd end up drooling on the pavement, and Kid Win would be all sorts of pissed at me."

"Only if I used my hand," replied Hope with a return grin. Her right-hand upper wing unfurled and the tip extended toward Newter. He caught on, grasped the longest crystalline 'feather' at the very tip, and shook it before letting it go.

"Cute trick," he said as she refurled the wing. "I'd wipe that off before touching it, though."

Hope smiled. "It'll be fine. You and Gregor both have pretty wild powers."

"Yeah," said Newter, losing a bit of his good humour. "If you don't mind being treated as a freak
everywhere you go."

Hope was about to speak, but Gregor got in first. "I think Hope knows a little about that. We are not so different, the three of us."

"Oh, come on now!" burst out Newter. "I see the wings and the skin and all, but the looks, seriously! Supermodels would sell their souls to look that good!"

"We share the burden of the monstrous," Gregor pointed out. "All we have to do is prove our detractors wrong. Keep our heads down, do nothing wrong, we are eventually forgotten. Hope bears the burden of perfection. Bright, shiny, obvious, never forgotten. If we admire someone, we project our expectations upon them, and when they fail of those expectations, we blame them, not ourselves."

"That's ... happened, once or twice," admitted Hope. "Religious groups mainly, especially fundamentalist Christians, who expected me to smite the ungodly." She shrugged, eliciting a musical tinkle. "And ... I sort of accidentally started a cult, who wanted to start a crusade to spread the way I think to the masses. I had to talk really fast to calm that one down." A shake of the head. "I love being who I am, but sometimes ... having everyone look up to you can cause problems all of its own."

Gregor laid a large shell-encrusted hand on her shoulder. "I do not share your particular problem, little Hope, but you have my sympathy, for what it is worth."

"Thanks, Gregor," said Hope, and impulsively hugged him. It wasn't easy; her arms only made it halfway around him. But then she unfurled first her lower wings, which reached all the way around his lower torso, and then her upper wings, which enfolded him with room to spare. Gregor found himself being as thoroughly hugged as he ever had been, in what he could remember of his life.

After a few moments, his heavy arms found their way around Hope, and he hugged her back.

Newter caught Kid Win's eye; his face assumed a dopey lovey-dovey expression, and he made as if to hug the hero. Kid Win shook his head firmly. Ostentatiously, one of his nonlethal weapon systems unlimbered and tracked on to Newter, who snickered and held up his hands in mock surrender.

Gregor and Hope released one another from the hug, Hope's wings furling neatly on to her back. Hope seemed to be concealing a sniffle, while Gregor cleared his throat noisily.

"Well then," said Gregor, as if nothing untoward had happened, "what was it you wished to talk about?"

"Yeah," said a voice from the doorway. "What did you want to talk to us about?"

Faultline stood there, wearing body armour and what looked like a welder's mask with a crack through the visor. A black ponytail trailed down over her shoulders.

"Ah, hi, Faultline," said Hope, stepping forward. "I'm –"

"I know who you are, Hope," interrupted Faultline. She shook Hope's hand briskly. "Nice to meet you." Despite her brusque manner, she actually seemed to mean it. "So what is it you want?"

"Ah, two things," said Hope. "First off: we have insulin packs and asthma inhalers for anyone in your area, or even in your crew, who needs such things. I can leave some with you, and you can let us know if you need more, as well as any other medical needs. Also, if anyone's got any ongoing injury or infection, I can deal with it."
Faultline tilted her head. "That's uncommonly kind of you," she said. Hope took several inhalers and insulin packs from the shoulderbag, and handed them over, Faultline took them, but looked narrowly at her.

"Where are you getting the cash to hand out all this?"

Hope's mouth quirked. "Part of it's money I got our PR guy to liberate from the budget. It is in the interests of public relations, after all. Well," she corrected herself, "it's not for public relations, but it'll have that effect."

"And the rest?"

"Uh, I got an advance on my pay," Hope confessed.

Everyone, even Kid Win, stared at her. "You what?" he asked.

"Not this stuff," Hope explained. "The stuff I got Bitch. Glenn wouldn't okay that in the budget."

Kid Win shook his head. "I'm just trying to decide whether that's really stupid or really cool."

"My god, a cape who's willing to put your money where your mouth is," said Faultline, deadpan. "I'm liking you more by the second, Hope. What's the next bit?"

"That's the big one," said Hope. She took a deep breath. "The Slaughterhouse Nine is in town. To recruit."

The conversation paused for a beat, while the other three digested that.

"Oh shit," said Newter.

"Something like that, yes," said Gregor.

"And of course," Kid Win supplied, "Shatterbird is with them. So, when they choose to announce themselves ..."

Faultline didn't need to be told; she glanced up at the windows of the building looming over them. "I got it," she said. "Thanks for the heads-up. I mean it." She looked closely at Hope. "Now, can you answer me a question?"

"Sure, if I can," replied Hope promptly.

"Why is it, when I got out here, you were hugging one of my crew?"

Hope looked her straight in the eye – or at least, stared her straight in the mask. "Because he's the same as me, and I'm the same as him," she explained, in the same deadpan tone that Faultline had used earlier.

Faultline stared first at Hope, and then at Gregor, perplexity mounting in her face.

"Just ... go," she said eventually, making vague shooing motions. "And yeah, thanks. I'll get right on it."

They went.

Faultline, after watching the pair leave, turned towards her crew. "So, Gregor," she said, "You like
Gregor considered that as he continued watching the two dots in the sky. "I am... I do believe, yes."

"Oooooo..." Newter said beside him.

Gregor turned towards Newter. "I also know you know exactly what I mean." There was a pause as he looked towards the two members of his crew. "Although, I also do believe that you are still going to, as they say, wear out the joke."

"Awww, my big grumpy friend, don't say that. We who are different have to stick up for each other." Newter grinned. "But I do approve. So very approve."

"That is exactly what I mean."

Chapter End Notes

Props to wkz for supplying the last paragraph of dialogue.
"So," said Hope as she glided above Brockton Bay, the setting sun glinting red off her wings, "where do you think we should go for our last stop for the day?"

"I'm thinking ... Skitter," replied Kid Win. "She comes across as a real hardass, but I'm interested in seeing if she's capable of having a civil conversation, face to face."

"I'm sure she is," replied Hope. "Let's go say hi." Tilting one wing slightly, she banked gracefully and headed away on the new course.

"So where is Skitter's base?" asked Hope as she pulled into a long turning bank.

"It's gotta be somewhere around here," Kid Win replied, frustration clear even over the radio link. "This area correlates to the greatest number of Skitter sightings." He was paralleling Hope's circle, about two blocks over.

Hope sighed. "And I did want to talk to her, too."

"Maybe another day."

Hope looked down to the street; a teenage girl had just turned a corner and was now walking down the pavement. "I see someone," she said. "I'll go down and see if she can help us out."

"Be careful," said Kid Win.

"I'm never anything but," Hope retorted, and folded her wings.

She was only ten yards away, just about to flare her wings and land, when the girl heard her; she spun around, grabbing at something in the small of her back. When she saw who it was, however, she relaxed.

"Hello?" she said. "Can I help you?"

She wore a brown spaghetti-strap top, black pants and tan rain boots. Her hair was dark and curly. She seemed altogether too composed for someone being accosted by a strange cape on a lonely street. Perhaps she recognised Hope as one of the good guys; maybe that accounted for it.

As Hope landed in front of her, she noted that the girl was at least half a head taller than her, though almost as slender. "Hi," she said. "I'm Hope; I'm with the Wards."

"I know," said the girl. Hope blinked; there was something familiar about her.

"Listen," she said, "I've been going around getting in contact with the people who have taken charge of the damaged areas of Brockton Bay. Would you know how I can get hold of Skitter?"

"Skitter? Why do you want to get hold of Skitter?" said the girl, and something about the way she moved her head gave Hope the clue. She wasn't wearing glasses, and the hair was a little longer, but the line of the jaw was the same.

"You're Taylor Hebert, aren't you?" she blurted out. "You ... you work for Skitter?"
The girl - Taylor - blinked, but said nothing for a long moment. "Skitter is a good boss," she said cautiously. "Takes care of her people. This is the safest area in Brockton Bay."

"I know," said Hope. "That's why I want to talk to her." She indicated the shoulderbag. "I have asthma inhalers and insulin packs for those who might need them immediately, and if other people in this territory have other urgent medical needs, we can meet those too. Plus," she added, "I can help out myself, with any ongoing injuries or infections or diseases."

Taylor tilted her head to one side. "That's ... very generous of you." She paused. "But ... how did you know my name?"

"I spoke to your father earlier today," Hope replied. "He's very worried about you. Showed me a picture. Asked me to talk to you, if I saw you. He wants you to contact him."

"Dad?" Taylor said, looking lost. "How was he? Is he okay?"

"Sure," replied Hope. "He was with the Dockworkers' Association, cleaning up the streets. Seemed to be getting along okay. We had a nice chat." She paused, recalling the conversation. "He told me you were getting bullied at school."

Abruptly, Kid Win's voice came in over the earpiece. "Hope, am I hearing this right? Have you found that runaway?"

"Sure," replied Hope. "We're just chatting. She knows Skitter."

"Excellent. Did you give her the message?"

"Yeah. Look, I'm gonna turn the mic off again for a bit, okay? Girl talk."

"But you're not even a –"

His voice went dead as she tapped the earpiece. "Boring conversation anyway."

Taylor eyed her narrowly. "Was that a Star Wars reference?"

"Well, yeah," said Hope. "One of the best movies ever, in my opinion. I only saw it for the first time a few months ago."

"But how could you not have seen Star Wars before then?"

"Long story," said Hope. "Listen, we're mainly here to see if the people in your area need medical supplies, or medical attention." She gave Taylor a direct look. "But I'd also like to talk to you about that bullying."

"Well, we do actually have medical supplies and food coming in, so most of that's already taken care of," said Taylor. "And as for the rest, I'd love to stay and chat, but I really do have to be somewhere soon."

"Not a problem," replied Hope. "I can give you a lift, and we can talk on the way."

Taylor sighed. "You're not going to let it go, are you?"

"Nope," answered Hope. "This sort of crap needs straightening out. Would you like that lift?"

"Okay, fine," agreed Taylor. "But no sneaky tricks like flying me to a police station or something. I really do need to get where I'm going to."
Hope chuckled. "Okay, promise." Tapping her earpiece on, she added to Kid Win. "I'm giving her a lift to where she needs to go. You can follow on. I'll have my earpiece off."

"Okay, fine." Kid Win sounded resigned. "But I'll be wanting details, later."

Once they were in the air, Taylor cradled in Hope's arms, the teenager holding the knife she'd had tucked down the back of her waistband, Hope broached the subject.

"So. Your father mentioned you being bullied."

"Yes." Taylor sounded weary. "But it's all too late now. School's been out since the Leviathan attack. If you'd turned up a year ago ..."

"Sorry," said Hope. "But I only got my powers six months ago. Anyway, we can't change what's happened, but we can draw attention to what might happen in the future. Who was bullying you? What are their names?"

"Emma Barnes," said Taylor, her voice almost too low to be heard. "Madison Clements. And Sophia Hess."

"Wait, I know that name," said Hope. "Sophia ... isn't she ..." She shut up. She'd learned about how bad it was to 'out' another cape, even one who was as mean and nasty as Shadow Stalker.

"Shadow Stalker, yes," replied Taylor. She turned her head to look Hope in the eye. "And now you know why no-one in authority would stop it. Wow, Hope thought. Taylor knows who she is?

Hope blinked. "Sorry, I'm not connecting at all. What's Sophia being a member of the Wards got to do with her getting away with bullying you?"

"Everything," growled Taylor. "I'm guessing the school knew that she was in the Wards program, so she was being given extra-special treatment. They couldn't give her any punishments that would hamper her extracurricular activities, so they chose to sweep it all under the carpet instead. And Emma's father is a lawyer, so between that and Sophia being a Ward, they all got a free ride."

"But that's terrible!" Hope burst out. "That's just wrong!"

"Excuse me?" said Taylor, searching her face. "Are you sure you're a real superhero? You're the first one I've seen yet who was even vaguely interested in my side of the story."

"I'm sorry," said Hope. "Maybe I'm naive. But I don't think even superheroes should get away with that sort of thing. Ever."

"Well, I wish more people thought like you do," sighed Taylor. "But they don't, so the world keeps on rolling on the way it is." She pointed. "That's my stop, the shelter down there."

Hope started reducing altitude. "Listen," she said. "I'd really like to get in touch with Skitter. If there's anything I can help either of you with, just give me a call. Okay? I even have my own mobile, these days." She raised an eyebrow. "Heck, if there's anything I can help you with right now, just say so." As she spoke, Hope came in to a smooth landing, back-winging so as to cut her speed. She set Taylor on to her feet.

"Sorry," said Taylor. "You're a bit flashy for where we're going to. But I won't say no to a helping hand in future." She accepted the card Hope handed her. "Thanks for the lift."
"It's not a problem, not at all," said Hope. "Good luck, whatever you're doing."

She watched Taylor walking toward the shelter, then turned toward where Kid Win was descending toward the street. He pointed at the side of his head. Obediently, she tapped her earpiece back into life.

"Okay," said Kid Win. "Spill."

"Nothing much to spill," said Hope carefully. "She works for Skitter, so she's going to pass on the message. We just needed to talk about private matters. Like I said, girl stuff." She gave Kid Win a direct stare. "Unless you really want to hear all the gruesome details?"

Kid Win considered. "Yeah, no," he said at last. "I know that if you think it's important, you'll tell me about it. So, ready to head back to the barn?"

"Sounds good to me," replied Hope.

It was much later that night, as Hope was relaxing on her bed and contemplating a hot shower just for the hell of it, when her mobile rang. She frowned, picking it up.

"Hope here," she said.

"Hope," she heard in response. "It's Taylor. You said you'd help me out if I needed it?" She sounded tired – no, exhausted.

Hope sat up on the bed, fatigue banished. "Sure," she said promptly. "What do you need?"

"We've got injured. Bad. I'll give you the address where we can meet. How soon can you get there?"

Hope was already grabbing for her jeans, and the long-sleeved dark top with the back cut out for her wings. "I'll be in the air in one minute," she said.

She pushed herself getting there, moving fast and low over the rooftops, dodging telegraph poles and TV antennae with the ease of long practise. Taylor's voice on the phone ... she had sounded close to desperation.

She landed at the address in question; Taylor was outside, her brown top splashed a deeper colour with what could have been paint, but which Hope's extended senses told her was not. Also outside were two men, armed. Taylor waved them away. "You came," she said. "Thank god."

"You asked me to," Hope said simply. "Are you hurt?"

"Not really," said Taylor. "But ... come on." She led the way to a door, opened it. "Through here."

The front of the building was a doctor's office. A short corridor led to a surgery. A teenaged boy with a bloodstained bandage around one hand was lying on one table, while an older man sweated as he worked on a large and bulky man stretched on another. Two more bulky men sat on chairs, nursing minor injuries. A couple of teenaged girls were in the room also; one sat on a chair on her own, while the other assisted the doctor as best she could.

Hope made straight for the man on the table. "Let me see," she said.

At her voice, all faces turned to her. The two large men shot to their feet, reaching for weapons, but Taylor raised her voice. "It's good. She's with me." Reluctantly, they sat down again.
The teenaged girl assisting the doctor said, "Oh, thank god you're here." She made way for Hope, who assessed the situation. A touch told her the story. The man had taken a nasty stab wound under the ribs; it had lacerated several internal organs, and the bleeding was life-threatening. *How did he survive this far?* Hope didn't bother asking questions. She simply did what was needed. Both of her hands on the man's torn flesh, she concentrated. Her wings sang a high sharp note, as her hands pulsed a silvery-blue light that filled the surgery. The wound closed, even as she felt the internal organs sealing themselves shut. The man's breathing eased.

"He'll be fine," she said. She turned to the other table. The doctor was already unwinding the bandage, to show a hand maimed, missing two fingers. "I can't make it grow back," she said. "But I can close it, make sure the rest works."

"That will do," said the doctor.

Hope nodded, and concentrated; the chime, the pulse of silvery-blue light, and the wound healed over, fresh skin growing into place in mere seconds. "Infection was a distinct possibility," she reported, "but it's gone now."

"Good, good," said the doctor. "We just have minor injuries now. Nothing life-threatening."

Hope spent a few minutes closing cuts and healing bruises; even Taylor had a cut on the back of her arm, and everyone else was showing signs of having been in a fight of some sort. At last, however, she pronounced everyone healthy.

"Now," she said, "can someone tell me what this was all about?"

The three men looked at the girl who had been helping the doctor. Something about her voice, her face, was familiar. This wasn't Bitch; she hadn't been wearing a mask, either time Hope had met her. And then it clicked. This was Tattletale; Hope had met her once before with her mask off, on the Boardwalk.

"We just rescued Bryce, here, from the Merchants," she told Hope. "They had other ideas."

"Oh," said Hope blankly. "Well, I'm glad you got out alive."

"So are we," said Tattletale fervently. "So are we."

The doctor began to make shooing motions to get them all out of his surgery, now that they were all healthy. Once they were outside, Taylor took Hope's arm to lead her away from the rest a little way.

"Look, thanks for coming," she said. "I really appreciate it."

"It's not a problem," said Hope. "I'm glad you're okay." She paused. "Just in case you're wondering, Shadow Stalker faced a judicial hearing this morning. I understand they're sending her to the Birdcage."

"Huh," said Taylor. She went to say something, then stopped. "Well, I'm glad that's over. Skitter said to say hi, but she had to get going."

Hope grinned, and gently knuckled the top of her head. "Try to stay out of trouble from now on, okay?"

"Yeah, *that's* gonna happen," muttered Taylor, rolling her eyes.

"And call your dad," Hope reminded her. "He worries."
"Yes, mother," Taylor replied in a robotic monotone. She shifted to a more normal tone of voice as she continued. "You'd better get back. I think you're out past your bedtime."

"I think you're right," Hope admitted. She gave Taylor a quick hug. "Don't be a stranger, okay?"

"I don't think that's possible around you," muttered Taylor, mostly under her breath.

Hope grinned as she took wing. *Well, I try.*

Now, all she had to do was sneak back into Ward headquarters ...
In which Hope and Weld come to an understanding

Hope winged her way across the city, keeping low, and flying slowly so as to not make too much noise. Ahead loomed the Wards' headquarters, silent and dark in the night.

_I might have even gotten away with it, _she thought with relief. _I really shouldn't do this any more._

She landed and immediately headed for the roof entrance. Her hand was almost on the door handle when a dark figure stepped around the corner and laid a hand on her arm.

She yelped and jumped back, her wing lashing out reflexively. But even as she did so, she realized who it was, and aborted her strike.

"Weld!" she gasped. "Don't do that!"

Weld raised one metallic eyebrow. "Jumpy, much?" he asked. "Come on, we need to talk."

"You really can't do this anymore," Weld said patiently. They were seated across from each other in his room, and Hope was holding a hot cup of cocoa. "Even if I see fit to keep turning a blind eye – and I'm not at all sure that I should – others will start taking notice. Official notice. Director Piggot already considers you a security risk, considering the number of contacts you have had with the Undersiders. Keep sneaking out like this, and you may just give her the ammunition to do something about it."

Hope hung her head meekly. "I know," she said. "I'd already decided not to go out again. I wouldn't have gone out at all, except she asked me for help."

"Who asked you for help?" asked Weld curiously.

"Skitter," said Hope.

"Skitter?" Weld was shaking his head. "Hope, if I didn't know –"

"Okay, not Skitter _herself_," Hope corrected. "I gave out my number to Taylor, a girl I met. She works for Skitter and tonight she helped rescue a boy from the Merchants, and there were injuries, and Taylor called me on Skitter's behalf to ask if I could help out. That's all."

"Why didn't you _tell _me?" asked Weld.

"Because they needed me _right then_," Hope said. "Look, I know I did the wrong thing. But I did it for the right reasons. And I'm not going to do it again. If I have to go out again, I will talk to you first. And if you say no ..." She paused, as if the words were painful for her to say, "I ... I won't go."

Weld considered that. "I suppose that's fair," he allowed. "Now, about your patrol this afternoon. Kid Win's given me his report. You haven't finished the report you were going to give me. What were you talking to Taylor about?"

"I've been writing it up properly, trying to get it straight in my head."

"So give it to me now. The gist, I mean."

Hope looked up from the cocoa. "I don't think you're going to like it," she warned him.
"Try me," challenged Weld.

"Well, she told me that she had been bullied at school by three girls. She ended up skipping school to get away from them. From what she said, it wasn't a one-off thing. It was ongoing. At least a year." Hope gave Weld a direct look. "I've been bullied. You don't forget it. It leaves scars."

Weld nodded. "I imagine it does. And while I certainly don't approve, I don't see what the buildup is all about."

"Because," Hope said clearly, "one of the three girls was called Sophia Hess."

There was a moment's silence. Hope sipped her cocoa, her eyes never leaving Weld's.

When he spoke, his voice was flat. "You're talking about Shadow Stalker."

"I am."

"You can't know that it's the same Sophia Hess."

"No," said Hope. "But I do know that I can check up school files and see which school Taylor Hebert attended, and which school Shadow Stalker attended, and see if they are one and the same. And I know that even in the few days I knew Shadow Stalker, she was nothing other than mean to me and everyone around her, if she didn't get her own way." She eyed Weld challengingly. "Tell me I'm wrong."

Weld sighed. "You're probably not wrong. Before ... before all this started, before I was brought in from the Boston Wards, Shadow Stalker was a lone vigilante. She nailed a guy to the wall with one of her arrows, but he nearly bled out. She faced juvenile hall, or the Wards. She chose the Wards, but she was on probation. And I'm not sure, but I think she was giving Vista a hard time. I was trying to figure out how to handle it, when you dropped into our laps."

"So is it true that the schools know which of their students are Wards?" pressed Hope. "Do they give them preferential treatment?"

"They're informed, yes, so they can be pulled out of class at a moment's notice," Weld confirmed. "But ... preferential treatment? I shouldn't think so."

"Well," said Hope, "it appears that someone thought so. Shadow Stalker got away with bullying a normal girl for more than a year, and not even official intervention served to stop her." She finished her cocoa and put it down. "Superhero or not, that's wrong. And it's worse that she got away with it because she was a superhero."

"Well," said Weld, "supposing you're right—"

"Really?" snapped Hope. "Supposing? Weld, I had thought better of you. That's a word a politician would use." She leaned forward in her chair. "Look me in the eye and tell me that you honestly believe that Shadow Stalker was not bullying Taylor Hebert."

Silvery eyes met dark metallic ones. The gaze held for long moments. And then Weld looked away.

"Okay, fine," he said. "The pieces all fit. Shadow Stalker's definitely got the personality for it." He lifted his hands in the air helplessly. "But what can we do about it? Shadow Stalker's faced the inquiry for something far worse than bullying. That problem's closed and done."

"Except that it's not," said Hope. "Many things can be done. An apology can be issued to the
Heberts by the Wards, and by the school. Maybe compensation paid. The other two girls can be charged and punished. And most important," she added, "oversight needs to be put in place to make sure this never happens again. Because I've noticed that getting powers around here seems to go hand-in-hand with a certain harshness of attitude. People get mean. So this probably isn't the first time it's happened, and it's likely not going to be the last. And it's probably happening right now, in any city that has a Wards program."

Weld thought about that for a long while.

"Well," he said at length, "I hate to admit it, but you're probably right. In the morning, I believe I shall have a long talk with Miss Militia about it." He stood from his chair. "But it's time you got to bed, young lady. And no more midnight excursions. You got me?"

"Message received and understood, boss," replied Hope with a grin.

Weld watched the door close behind her. He thought back to the number of people he'd spoken to over the last few days who had expressed the opinion that Hope was 'soft' or 'weak' because of her gentle heart and sheer kindness of spirit.

"Jesus Christ," he muttered to himself. "Are they ever wrong."
In which one life is saved and another taken

Chapter Notes

The second part of this post may seem extremely familiar. This is because entire paragraphs have been lifted from Worm Interlude 11e. The ending, however, is different.

"Hope!"

Hope buried her face in the pillow. "Wstgfl."

A hand on her shoulder, shaking. "Hope! Wake up!"

She turned her head, blinking. The light in her room was on. Weld was shaking her. She focused on the cheap electric alarm clock on her bedside table.

"Weld? Why are you waking me at ..." She rechecked. "four fifteen in the morning?"

"Because you have to get up now," Weld said urgently.

Hope was already sitting up, swinging her legs over the side of the bed. "Why? What's the matter?"

"It's Armsmaster," said Weld, his face taut with anxiety. "You'd better hurry. It's bad."

Hope wondered absently, in this world of cape battling cape, what counted as 'bad'. But she hurried anyway.

Weld was right. It was bad.

Armsmaster lay on a surgical table – Hope was forcibly reminded of her late-night foray, just one interrupted sleep ago – with tubes and wires connecting him to various machines. Two surgeons worked on him, their movements sure, their voices low but just as urgent as Weld's had been.

He was a big man, vital. This was possibly all that was keeping him alive. A stab wound to the eye, several to the abdomen. They looked deep, and serious. The surgeons had him open, trying to fix the worst of the damage. One arm was gone, but that looked to be a pre-existing condition.

Hope slipped into a gap, laid a cool hand on Armsmaster's exposed skin. She gasped as the sensations flooded in. She took a deep breath. This was going to take all she had.

"Gentlemen," she said clearly, "please remove everything from the wounds. I need to work."

The surgeons turned and stared at her. "These are all that are keeping him alive −" one began to expostulate, but the other laid a hand on his arm.

"It's good, I think," he said. "She's a healer."

The other gave him a dubious look, but they did what she said. She took another deep breath, held it, laid her other hand on his skin, and concentrated.
Silvery blue light build up around her hands, and poured into the patient. Her wings vibrated a high, sharp chime, that built and built.

First, the blood vessels.

She felt them close, felt them stop pouring Armstrong's life into his body cavity.

Then, the lungs.

The tissues knitted, the alveoli repaired themselves, and the lungs reinflated.

The silvery-blue light intensified. The chime sang higher and sharper.

Major organs.

Hope felt the creeping fatigue, would not let herself stop. He can still die. I will not allow that.

One by one, each of Armstrong's vital organs healed itself, reasserted its normal functions. The chime now sounding through the surgery held a triumphant note.

Close the wounds.

The gaping wounds in his torso pulled themselves closed, sealing without a scar. The blood vessels reconnected without demur.

She felt darkness fluttering at the edges of her vision, but she pressed doggedly on.

Scavenge the blood. Restart the heart.

Within the body cavity, the tissues absorbed the blood. Dead matter went into the digestive system, live cells back into the bloodstream. With a jolt, the heart kicked over. Blood flowed. The lungs took a shuddering breath.

With the last of her concentration, she confirmed that Armstrong was out of danger. There was more healing to do, but that was minor, a matter of bed rest.

The song of her wings died away. The silvery-blue glow faded.

"He'll live," she said faintly, and then crumpled to the floor.

She never felt the hands lift her, carry her, place her gently upon a bed.

The Lair of Fenrir's Chosen, later the same day.

Cricket reached to her side and picked up a small silver tube. She pressed it to the base of her throat, and her voice came out sounding distorted and digital. "Something's wrong."

"With the fight?" Hookwolf asked, raising one eyebrow.

Cricket opened her mouth and pressed the tube to her throat to reply, but didn't get a chance. There was an explosive CRACK, and the rectangular stack in the corner of the room ... shifted.

Every pane of glass that had been in the windows was now in that stack. Hookwolf knew, because he had overseen the removal of the glass, the wrapping in heavy tarpaulins, the stacking of their heaviest weights atop them. He had no doubt that once they unwrapped the tarpaulins, there would
be nothing but fragmented glass there. All other glass items were in the lockers at one side of the room.

Glass that would otherwise have torn through the room like so much shrapnel.

Hookwolf tapped into his core, the ‘heart’ from which his metal sprouted inside his body. He could feel it start to churn with activity, and the metal he already had encasing each of his muscles began to stir. Soon it was lancing in and out of his pores, criss-crossing, some blades or needlepoints sliding against others with the sounds of whetted knives. In a few seconds, he had covered his body, to protect himself from further attacks.

"Shatterbird!" he roared, once he knew he was secure. There was no reply. Of course. She was attacking from a safe position.

An attack from her meant an attack from the rest of the Slaughterhouse Nine. Daunting, but not impossible. He was virtually invincible in this form. That left few that could actively hurt him. Burnscar. The Siberian. Crawler. There was Hatchet Face, the boogeyman of capes. With the exception of Hatchet Face, the group wouldn't be able to do much harm to him unless he was forced to stay still.

More troubling were the Nine he couldn't put down. The Siberian was untouchable, an immovable object, invincible in a way that even Alexandria wasn't. Even if he were capable of hurting Crawler, he wouldn't want to. Mannequin, he wasn't sure about. He knew the crazed tinker had encased himself in a nearly indestructible shell. As strong as Hookwolf was, he faced that distant possibility that any of these people could pin him down or set him up to be taken out by others.

Who else? He wracked his brain. Jack Slash was the brains and leader of the operation. Not a threat unto himself. Shatterbird couldn't harm him, he was almost certain.

Bonesaw. She was the wild card, the most unpredictable element in terms of what she could bring to the table. So often the case with tinkers.

He strode across the room to the windows and gazed out at the city block surrounding the home base of the Chosen. They had worked all night, but the vast majority of the glass in the windows of the surrounding buildings had been taken down, sealed behind doors. There had been much grumbling, but never where he could officially hear it. He himself had had doubts, but then he had reminded himself of Hope's warning.Only an idiot leaves a weapon lying around that an enemy can use.

"Cricket," he called out. "You said something was wrong. What did you notice?"

"Sound. The glass was singing. Still is." She pointed at one wall. Hookwolf followed the line to a building across the street and a little ways to one side.

His ears were ringing from the explosive detonation, but he doubted that was it. It would be something subsonic that Cricket noticed with her power, then.

"You come with me, then. Menja, Stormtiger, arrange our defenses."

"On it," Menja said, echoed closely by Stormtiger. They began to organise the rest of the Chosen.

Orders given, Hookwolf drew the majority of his flesh into a condensed point in his 'core', felt himself come alive as more metal spilled forth. Only his eyes remained where they were, set in recessed sockets, behind a screen of shifting blades. He was half-blind until the movement of the blades hit a rhythm, moving fast enough that they zipped over the surface of his eye at speeds faster than an eyeblink.
He let himself fall from the third floor window and hit the ground in a state that was more liquid than solid. Blades, spears, hooks and other twisted metal shapes all pooled on the pavement, absorbing the impact.

He pulled himself together, in his favored quadruped form. Looking up to the window, he created a tall spear from between his 'shoulders'. Cricket leaped out and caught the pole, slid down until she could hop off and land beside him.

Cricket pointed, and he led the way with her following directly behind him. As he walked, he wasn't moving his limbs quite so much as it might appear at first glance. Instead, he extended one growth of metal as he retracted another, only generating the illusion. A hundred new parts growing each second to suggest shifting musculature, a cohesive form, when he was anything but. Only the core skeleton, the shafts of metal that formed the limbs from the shoulders or hips to his knees, actually moved without retracting or extending.

As he moved, he looked around for his enemies. He could see none of them, which puzzled him. Crawler would have been attacking already. Siberian, Mannequin, these were front-line fighters, hard (or impossible) to hurt, formidable in their own right. So where are they?

Glass flew in from the surrounding area, from windows that had not been removed because they were too far away, to fit together into a window that floated in the air and he smashed through it with one of his forelimbs. Another barrier appeared, thicker, and he smashed that as well. The glass began to form into dozens, even hundreds of barriers. He quickly found one strike wasn't enough to clear the way.

Through the mess of dozens of dirty and wet panes of glass, he saw her. Shatterbird. A sand nigger, going by memory and the color of her exposed skin. The upper half of her head was covered in a helmet of colored glass, and her body was covered with a flowing garment made of tiny glass shards, like scales.

Is it only her? Why? He dismissed the question, even as he posed it. She came alone. Her mistake.

He rose onto two feet, standing straight, and reconfigured his arms. With spears as big around as telephone poles, he punched through thirty or forty panes of glass all at once, then did the same with his opposite hand. It was slow progress, as the glass constantly reformed and pieced itself back together a few feet ahead of him, but he was closing in.

She abruptly dropped the barriers and changed tactics. The majority of the glass in the area formed into one shape, a cone of solid glass, pointing towards the center of the purple-red sky, two and a half stories tall.

Raising one hand, she shot it straight up into the sky above, until it was just a speck.

Hookwolf lunged for her, only to find that she had moved more glass on to the ground underfoot, and it was denying him traction. His metal claws failed to find grip, failed to crack the glass, even with the heavy impacts and his impressive weight. Closing the distance proved slower than he'd hoped.

The massive spike of glass plummeted from the sky. He knew it was coming, had kept an eye out for it, and timed a leap to coincide with its descent.

And then a gale blew up out of nowhere. She was driven down into the street, hard. The glass spike wavered, tumbled, and then smashed into the ground nearby. Hookwolf and Cricket ducked flying shards.
Hookwolf would have laughed if he could. He looked at his headquarters and saw Stormtiger standing in the open window, where Hookwolf had jumped from. Stormtiger wouldn't interfere where it counted, but he would give Hookwolf the opportunity to confront his opponent. He turned, leaped, and landed near Shatterbird. She held one leg while laying on her back. She'd fallen badly.

She raised one hand, then frowned, her lips pursing together. "Hm."

Cricket, nearby, laughed quietly, rasping in her throat.

"Pride goeth before the fall," Hookwolf said, striding towards his enemy. "Seems as though Cricket can use her subsonics to cancel you out."

"Seems so," Shatterbird answered, watching him approach. "But I'm not here to kill you. I'm here to recruit you." She had a British accent. He could hear her trying to keep the fear out of her voice. _She's miscalculated, badly._

He placed one large metallic clawed foot on her chest, the sharp edges drawing blood from her chest.

"That's where we differ." His right hand and arm began to form into a spear-pointed blade, razor-sharp.

"Go ahead," she said, straining at the weight on her body. "Kill me. But –"

He drove the blade through her throat.

"Not interested."

Moments later, he held up the severed head of Shatterbird, held it high by the long dark hair.

"CHosen!" he roared to the sky, his metallic shell amplifying his voice and giving it an unearthly timbre. "CHosen!"

And the roar came back from his people, lined up along the window, and in the street below.

"HOOKWOLF! HOOKWOLF!"

At that moment, he would have challenged Scion himself. He was _invincible._
In which Hope meets new friends

Hope's eyelids fluttered open.

She was lying in a bed not her own, in surroundings unfamiliar to her. But there was a blanket over her, and she was warm and drowsy and comfortable, and ready to stay there forever. With a contented sigh, she rolled over and prepared to snuggle in for about the next ten years or so.

"Hey, you're awake!"

The voice came from the bed next to her, a rich deep baritone that she did not recognise. With mild curiosity, she lifted her head and looked.

At first, she did not recall the face looking back at her, until she recalled that the last she had seen him was with an air mask over it, while most of his chest cavity and abdomen had been open to the air. He was leaning up in bed on one elbow – his only elbow – and smiling at her. Ever ready to be friendly, she smiled back. He had a pleasant face, with dark hair and a neatly trimmed beard. She also noted a slightly unfocused look, and wondered what sort of painkillers they had him on.

"Ah – Armsmaster, right?" she said. Memories of that healing session were filtering back to her.

He nodded. "That's right. But you can call me Colin. After all, you kind of saved my life. I appreciate that, I really do." He paused. "Hope, right?"

"Yes," she said. "Cape name Hope, real name Hope. Makes it easy to remember."

He chuckled appreciatively. "That it does."

She noticed that one eye still had a bandage over it. "I'm sorry, I'm not good with eyes," she said apologetically. "If they take too much of a hit, the eye basically isn't there any more, and my healing just tells the body to clean up the remains rather than fix it."

He shrugged, as well as one can do while leaning on one elbow. "Believe me, that's the least of my problems. Once they decide I'm fully recovered, I'll get fitted with a prosthetic that'll probably outperform the real one." He waved his stump. "About the same time, I'll get a replacement for this, too." A grin. "Being a tinker – and knowing other tinkers – is exceptionally handy for this sort of thing."

"I suppose it is," she said. She paused. "What time is it, anyway? The last thing I remember is making sure that I'd put you back together right, then I think I passed out or something."

"That you did," he said. "According to the orderlies, you did your healing-hands thing, looked up, said that I'd live, then keeled over. So they put you to bed, where you've been doing a fair impression of a nightlight. As far as I can tell, that was eight hours ago."

She sat up straight in bed, eliciting creaks of pain from every joint, especially her wings. "Eight hours? I've missed my patrol schedule!"

An orderly came hurrying over. "Calm down, Hope," he said soothingly. "Weld told me to tell you that he's got Kid Win and Vista filling in your patrol schedule until you're feeling better, and that he'd come and see you as soon as you woke up."

Hope climbed out of the bed, feeling about a hundred and ninety years old. When she cautiously
stretched her wings, she could feel the pops of the joints as they flexed. "Well, I'm up," she said. "Could you get Weld to bring me some clothes? I'll go out on the afternoon patrol."

"Wow," said Colin, watching her as she cautiously worked her body, wincing as more joints popped. "You know, you can rest and relax once in a while. You don't want to push things too hard, or you'll burn yourself out."

"I know, I know," she said to him. "But I feel I'm really starting to build a rapport with the groups out there. If I can get them to trust us more, we can really work together against the Nine when things start to get hairy." She turned to the orderly. "I need a hot shower. Where can I get one?"

"Uh, I'll need to find you a towel –"

"Don't need one. Showers. Where?"

"Uh, women's showers are down that way –"

Hope flashed him a grin. "Good enough." She turned an apologetic look on Armsmaster. "Sorry, Colin, but I've got to get under a hot shower before my joints lock up on me altogether. If I tried to fly like this, I'd probably spiral into the ground."

Armsmaster chuckled. "Go. Shower. I'll talk to you when you get back."

As Hope headed in the indicated direction, he nodded to the orderly. "Certainly eager to please, isn't she? He? I can't tell."

The orderly shrugged; his nametag read 'Harrison'. "Word is, no gender. But she prefers 'she'."

"Right, right." He chuckled again. "The way she sat up when I told her how long she'd been out." A shake of the head. "How long since I was that young and full of energy?"

"I don't know, sir," said Harrison. "But when we put her to bed after healing you, her glow was just about out, and there were bruises all over her arms. She pushed herself to the limit healing your ass, sir. So you be sure to rest up, and get well."

"I will," said Armsmaster, laying back down and getting comfortable. "I owe her my life. Now, how the hell do I pay something like that off?"

Harrison, wisely, treated that like the rhetorical question that it was.

When Hope returned, the only evidence of her having taken a shower was an added spring to her step. Weld was waiting, with clean clothes, quietly chatting to Armsmaster. Also present was a woman in power armour; or at least, a set of power armour shaped to suggest that the pilot was a woman.

"Weld!" she said happily. "It's great to see you!" She looked curiously at the armoured woman.

"Dragon," said the woman, stepping forward and clasping Hope's hands in hers. And then, apparently because this was not enough, she wrapped her arms around Hope and hugged her. "Thank you," she said softly, "for saving Colin's life." Hope hugged her back, feeling only a little strange. After all, this was not the weirdest thing that had happened to her since getting here.

"Uh, you're welcome?" said Hope, once Dragon released her. She stared quizzically at the powersuit. Am I supposed to mention the fact that there's no-one in there, or is it one of those things
that everyone knows but no-one talks about?

This world is so confusing.

Weld cleared his throat, holding up her clothes. Hope was abruptly reminded that she was still wearing her nightclothes. She took the clothes from him, stepped in next to her bed, and began changing. Armsmaster coughed, and hastily averted his eyes.

"Don't be silly, Colin," she said, pulling on her pants. "There's nothing to see here. I'm about as naughty as a Barbie doll." She looked over at Weld. "Please tell me I can go out on the afternoon patrol. There's some people out there I said I'd get back to, and I don't want them to think I'm letting them down. And I'm sure there's some who haven't been warned about the Nine yet, or Shatterbird."

"Ah, yeah, about that," said Weld. "This is confidential so far, pending confirmation, but word came in about half an hour ago." He looked from Armsmaster to Hope to Dragon, then nodded significantly to the orderly, and gestured him away.

When he was sure it was just the four of them, he said quietly, "Shatterbird engaged the Chosen this morning." He cleared his throat. "Apparently someone warned them ahead of time. So they made preparations." A long pause, deliberately drawing out the tension. Then he gave a grim smile. "Hookwolf took her down. All the way."


Dragon nodded. "With the kill order, and Shatterbird's body count, the reward's likely to be in the millions."

Weld grinned. "The PRT's gonna scream when it comes time to pay." Hope came forward, fully dressed, and Weld laid a hand on her shoulder. "Sorry about this. You're not even gonna be getting a cut for assisting."

Hope shrugged. "It's no biggie," she said quietly. " Didn't expect anything, anyway."

Armsmaster looked at Weld, then back at Hope. "Am I missing something?" he asked. "Hope was right here when it happened."

"Yeah," said Weld, "but yesterday, she was out and about with Kid Win. And they dropped in on the Chosen. And apparently, she got close enough to share information with them --"

Armsmaster stared at Hope. "The Chosen?" he repeated, interrupting Weld. "You went in there without half the team for backup?"

Hope shrugged, uncomfortably. "You've just gotta ... know how to talk to them," she said. "I'm good at talking to people."

"She really is," confirmed Weld. "Anyway, she told them about Slaughterhouse Nine being in town, and warned them about the possibility of a Shatterbird scream, and then apparently assisted in healing Stormtiger back up to combat capability." He gave the other two a smile and a shrug. "And today, they took down Shatterbird. You join the dots."

There was a silence, during which time Colin continued to stare at Hope. Then he shook his head. "Christ almighty," he said at last. "Kid, you've got some big brass ones. Weld, you'd better keep an eye on her; you've got a live one here."

Weld had to laugh. "You have no idea, Colin. Trust me on this. You really have no idea."
Armsmaster started to ask a question, but Dragon cut him off. "Colin, you need to rest," she said firmly. "You were stabbed nearly to death just this morning. Healing or no healing, your body needs to recuperate from that." She gave Weld and Hope a significant look. "I'll stay with him," she said. "I suppose we'll see you two later?"

Weld took the hint, and nodded to Hope. "Let's get out of here," he said. "C'mon, Hope, you're probably hungry."

"Yeah," said Hope. "I could eat a whole hamburger. Bye, Colin, Dragon. It was nice meeting you two."

"Goodbye, Hope," said Dragon. "Thank you again for saving Colin."

"Yeah, see you later," said Armsmaster. "Watch that kid, Weld, she'll go far."

"Oh, don't I know it," said Weld, and ushered Hope away.

"With Shatterbird gone," he said, as they stepped into the elevator, "that's one big weight off our shoulders."

A helicopter lay smoking on the desert sand. Nothing living stirred in the wreck. Inside, restraints designed to hold insubstantial parahumans hung empty from chains.

On the outskirts of Brockton Bay, a shadow flitted from building to building.

_I'm baaa-aaack..._
In which there is a meeting and a terrifying encounter

Earlier that day

"Sit down, both of you."

Weld and Miss Militia sat.

"I've called you here to inform you of a startling development. Twenty minutes ago, we received an email consisting of a phone-camera image. It is not the best quality, but this is what came through."

Director Piggot handed over a sheet of paper, bearing the printout of a photo. It wasn't the sharpest of images, but it was clear enough. The subject was Hookwolf, surrounded by members of the Chosen. To his immediate left was Menja; to his right was Stormtiger. His right foot rested on what appeared to be the body of a woman, surrounded by shards of glass. The body was missing a head; this was because Hookwolf was holding it up by the hair. The staring eyes were directly facing the camera.

"Oh, god," muttered Weld, recoiling slightly. Miss Militia did not seem to have reacted at all, but the scarf covering her mouth twitched slightly.

"Facial recognition software gives an eighty-nine percent match to images of Shatterbird," Piggot went on. "Assuming image quality to being at fault, my people calculate the chances of this being a genuine image at between ninety-five and ninety-eight percent."

"So Hookwolf – or the Chosen, at least – have killed Shatterbird," said Miss Militia.

"So it appears," replied Director Piggot.

"That's going to put a crimp in the Nine's plans," muttered Weld. He looked up. "Is this information free to disseminate?"

"Let's just say ... it's classified at the moment," said Piggot. "Wards, Protectorate, or affiliated capes. But it's not to go to the papers or the other newsfeeds, not until we've verified it." She looked at the image again, and grimaced. "We do not want this turning up on the front page."

"Unless they've already emailed it in themselves," noted Weld. This earned him a glare, but then the Director collected herself.

"Let us hope not," she said. "Now, another matter, about which Dragon has informed me personally. You recall the matter of Shadow Stalker?"

Miss Militia nodded. "Juvenile hall was deemed too lenient for her offenses. She was sent to the Birdcage." Weld looked up, a presentiment growing as a cold chill down his spine.

"Well," said Director Piggot with a certain amount of dark satisfaction, "she never made it. The transport carrying her to the aifield was attacked by the Slaughterhouse Nine, who left everyone except Shadow Stalker dead; by the on-site report from the reinforcements Dragon sent, she was even still restrained."

She paused, turning over the page of a document on her desk. "They took her on by helicopter. Contact was lost with the aircraft while it was still an hour out from the Birdcage. Search teams found the helicopter, crashed and destroyed. The crew was dead, with wounds that did not jibe exactly with a helicopter crash. The restraints were still on board, and still active. There was no sign
of Shadow Stalker. No footprints were found around the wreck."

Weld blinked, trying to take it in. "That's ... I don't even have a word for that. Shadow Stalker somehow got out of her restraints, brought the chopper down, and escaped?" He shook his head. *This is insane.*

Miss Militia was more prosaic. "What do your people think her next moves are going to be?" she asked.

"Well," snapped Director Piggot, "I would think that answering that question would be your job, seeing as it's your cape gone bad who's out there. Maybe she's dead? Maybe she's going to give herself up?" Her voice was sardonic. "Either of those outcomes would be acceptable. But somehow, I strongly suspect that we are not going to be nearly that lucky." She affixed Miss Militia and Weld with a hard glare. "But until we have something – anything – to go on, this stays under wraps. Is that perfectly clear?"

She waited; Miss Militia nodded. Weld followed suit, a little reluctantly.

"Good. That's all for now. You can go."

Miss Militia rose; Weld went to do so as well, but caught himself.

"Actually, Madam Director, Miss Militia, there was something I have been meaning to bring up, and now that we're all here, it seems as good a time as any."

Miss Militia paused, and Director Piggot frowned. "What is it?"

"It's about bullying in schools with a Ward presence. Specifically, in the school Shadow Stalker was attending."

Director Piggot's frown deepened. "You know that the Wards are not required to attend to such matters where it might compromise their secret identities."

Weld shook his head. "It's not about the Wards stopping bullying. It's about the Wards being the cause of bullying."

Piggot opened her mouth, then shut it again, looking thoughtful. Miss Militia took her seat again.

"Tell me more," invited Director Piggot.

"Just so you know," said Weld hastily, "this does involve Hope. I got this information from her. But I did check it out for myself."

"So noted," replied Director Piggot, just a little coolly. "Continue."

"Well, on her patrol yesterday, she encountered a teenage girl, Taylor Hebert by name, who reported being bullied at her high school by three other girls; Emma Barnes, Madison Clements ... and Sophia Hess. This was going on for at least a year, before the Leviathan attack."

Miss Militia was listening intently now. Director Piggot blinked, but said nothing. She made a hand motion for Weld to continue.

"I checked it up. Winslow High had a T. Hebert attending classes for the last few years. In the same age group, there was also an E. Barnes and an M. Clements. And we already have record of Sophia Hess attending Winslow, from the Wards side of things."
He took a deep breath. "And a while ago, there was an ... incident. A locker, filled with ... filth. Miss Hebert was forced into the locker, which was then locked from the outside, and she was left there. For hours. When she was let out, she had undergone a mental breakdown, and was hospitalised for a time. No-one was ever punished."

Another deep breath. "More recently, we have a report, filed by Shadow Stalker. An incident, in a shopping mall. Miss Hebert encountered Miss Barnes. Apparently without provocation, Miss Hebert assaulted Miss Barnes, and was promptly subdued and restrained by Shadow Stalker, who was on the scene, and escorted from the store."

The Director tilted her head. "In fairness, Miss Hebert would seem to be at fault in this incident."

"Not if Miss Barnes happened to make a casual comment to Miss Hebert, one that seemed innocuous but recalled to her the bullying that she was undergoing at the hands of Miss Barnes and her cronies," replied Weld. "In any case, this led to an inquiry by the school. The Hebert, Barnes and Clements girls were called in, as was Shadow Stalker, in her civilian identity. Apparently Miss Hebert had named them all as being at fault. The report of the actual meeting is quite bland, but apparently the whole matter was laid to rest with no actual punishment."

"That's ... unusual," murmured Miss Militia.

Weld nodded. "As is the fact that Miss Hebert was already skipping school before that point, and essentially quit going altogether, afterward." He leaned forward. "We all know that the school was informed that Sophia Hess was in the Wards program. What if they reacted by giving her preferential treatment? She has a very aggressive personality already; once she realised that she could get away with bullying tactics, simply by virtue of being a Ward ..." He let the sentence trail off.

"You paint a very damaging picture," said Piggot. "But the truth of the matter is, no matter what actually happened, Shadow Stalker's case has been dealt with."

"Yes," replied Weld, "but think of this. There are other Wards programs around America, with people in the local schools. If Winslow High could give Wards preferential treatment, then so could others. Similar cases could be going on, all around the country, right now, and we wouldn't know about it. Not until someone spoke up. And even then, such as in this case, it still might not come to our attention." He took a deep breath, and stopped talking with an effort. You've said what you had to. Now it's up to Piggot.

Director Piggot nodded slowly. "I take your point," she said. "I do take it, indeed." She nodded again, more sharply. "This sort of thing can not be allowed to happen. I will be speaking with other PRT directors around the country. And if possible," she added, nodding to Weld, "I would like you to ask Hope to see if she can locate Miss Hebert for an interview. If this sort of thing is really going on, then I would like to hear details from her, personally." She shook her head. "We don't need this sort of bad publicity, not now of all times."

She picked up the phone, then glanced at the other two. "Did you have anything else you wanted to bring up? With this, and with Mannequin's attack on Armsmaster, I'm going to have to move things along."

Miss Militia took the hint, and rose again. Weld rose also. "Ah, no, Madam Director," he said. "Thanks for listening."

As they exited, Weld heard her say, "Ah, Director Costa-Brown. I need to talk to you about something ..."
Later that day

"- eight solid hours!" exclaimed Hope. "I've never slept that long before. Not since I got my powers, anyway."

She beat her wings a couple of times to maintain altitude, and then extended them to continue the long glide. Below, Vista continued to move in her eye-twisting fashion, causing space before her to shrink so that she could step from rooftop to rooftop over a gap that would normally span a hundred feet or more, then letting it snap back into shape behind her.

"So how long do you normally sleep?" she asked.

"Oh, about three and a half to four hours," replied Hope. "Five, if I'm really tired. But four's my usual."

"Huh," said Vista. "Powers can be weird like that. I'm told that Miss Militia doesn't really sleep, at all. Doesn't seem to bother her. And Weld barely sleeps at all, either. Apparently he listens to music a lot."

"That would be weird," agreed Hope. "He does seem to spend a lot of time reading as well." She beat her wings a few more times. "Listen, uh, about Shadow Stalker ..."

"What about Shadow Stalker?" asked Vista, her voice going defensive.

"Did you, well, get along with her?" asked Hope. "Because, seriously, I didn't. Could not figure out how to get on her good side. And that was before she stuck an arrow in me."

Vista hesitated for a long moment before replying. "I don't think she really had a good side, you know?" Her voice was quiet. "She used to give me a hard time. It was, like, she was trying to toughen me up or something. But I'd never have a chance to get anything right. She was always riding my case, or pushing me around, unless Aegis was there to stop her."

"That's gotta suck," said Hope. "You get powers, you join the Wards, you put on a costume, you'd think you were due some respect from your teammates, am I right?"

"... yeah," replied Vista. "Yeah, you're right. She never really got to me, but it was like she was always waiting, watching, looking for a weakness."

"Yeah, I think I see what you mean," said Hope quietly. "When I was young, before I got powers, at school I was either ignored or picked on. I preferred being ignored." She smiled, just a little. "It hasn't happened so much, after."

"You're lucky," said Vista. "Your powers are cool. I mean, you're like this gorgeous angel with crystal wings. I've lost count of the number of Youtube videos there are with you in them."

"Yeah, I do like my powers," replied Hope. "But what if I just wanted to be anonymous for a while?" Another few wingbeats, while Vista considered her answer.

"That ... wouldn't be so much fun, would it?" she ventured at last.

"Not usually, no," said Hope. "But tell you what. Let's have a girl's night in sometime. We'll paint your toenails and vent about what we hate the most, and laugh at silly movies. We'll invite Flechette as well."

"That sounds like fun," said Vista, with the hint of a giggle. "But aren't you ... not a girl?"
"Well, I'm sure as heck not a guy either, so we can pretend for one night," chuckled Hope.

And that's when they heard the screams.

They had been reprising the patrol route Hope and Kid Win had taken the previous day, so at this point they were crossing over the Trainyards, not far from Bitch's main base of operations. The screams came from that direction.

Hope immediately beat her wings hard, pushing for altitude and speed. She banked savagely, shooting away at a tangent.

"Wait up, Hope!" called Vista. "Don't get too far ahead!"

Recalling Weld's orders, Hope slowed down to let Vista keep within a reasonable distance, even as she began to glide down toward the run-down looking building from which Bitch operated. She spread out her senses, feeling for human minds, detecting several in the building ahead, Vista behind, but nothing anywhere else nearby –

"Break left! Break left!"

Instinctively, reacting to Vista's frantic warning, she twisted sideways, pulling a ninety-degree turn in somewhat less than her body length. Her wings beat heavily at the air as she strained for altitude. And something flashed past her, reaching for her but thrown off by her sudden maneuvering. Something that was striped black and white, shaped like a naked woman, fingers reaching like claws, missing by bare fragments of an inch.

The Siberian.

And then she was higher than the Siberian could leap; there was a twelve-inch tear in her top, a sudden sting where blood oozed to the surface of a faint graze.

*That was too close,* she thought.

"Hope ..." she heard over the earpiece. "A little help here ..."

*Vista.*

The young Ward was retreating, stepping farther and faster than Hope had seen her go before, but the Siberian was already in pursuit, covering distance with a dismaying speed. Even if she could not catch up quite now – and that was not necessarily true, Hope realised – she could run Vista down as the latter tired.

*Not if I can help it.*

Her wings slammed at the air as she accelerated, diving to gain extra speed. Over her radio link, she could hear Vista's rapid breathing, the grunt of effort as she leaped a gap that would normally have spanned a hundred yards.

"I'm on the way, Vista," she said clearly. "Just keep going the way you are."

"Hurry," replied Vista. "You need to hurry." Her voice was forced calm. She snatched a glance over her shoulder, and missed a step; the Siberian gained a terrifying amount, cutting her lead in half. "Hope," she said tensely, "any time now. Seriously."

Throwing caution to the wind, Hope dived, folding her wings back along her torso. As she swept
over the Siberian's head, she registered the tiger-striped face snapping up to look at her. But she could not worry about that.

"Vista!" she shouted. "Look up!"

She shot over Vista's head at a comparative altitude of twenty feet. Vista looked up, reached up – and her hand slapped into Hope's. Hope gathered her in, holding her fiercely. Her wings chimed as she slashed them through the air, reaching for the sky.

Behind them, the Siberian leaped.

Vista drew in a sharp breath.

Hope felt, for the tiniest fraction of a second, a tug on one wingtip.

There came a sound like fingernails on blackboard, just for an instant.

And then they were safe and clear, and the Siberian was falling away.

She landed on a telephone line and stood, staring up at them. Anger? Frustration? Hope couldn't tell. But then she turned and bounded away across the rooftops, before disappearing between the buildings.

Hope gradually spiralled down to a rooftop; a high rooftop, with a good view in all directions. She examined her wingtip.

The longest 'feather', extending a good foot farther than any of its fellows, now sported a groove in it, the width of a human finger, and a good two inches long.

"That material," said Hope steadily, "will withstand concentrated rifle fire. She cut it like butter." She hoped her voice was not shaking. "That was far too close."

Vista did not reply at once; she was shivering too violently, but working to control her reaction. Hope held her close.

"Listen," she said softly. "We need to check out what made those screams. Do you want to come with, or stay here on lookout for me?"

Vista drew in a deep breath. "I'll come with," she said at last.

"Okay," said Hope. "Let's go."

They scouted the area carefully, before hovering in the courtyard. There was no sign of the Siberian. *She's probably long gone,* Hope told herself. *Please god she's long gone.*

But even as she was starting to descend, she heard familiar barking. Bitch came sweeping up the street, riding one dog with more flanking her. They leaped over the gate – Hope had to hurriedly lift up a dozen yards to avoid a collision – and skidded to a halt.

"What the hell are you doing here?" shouted Bitch. "Just because you gave me stuff doesn't mean you can come back anytime!"

Hope descended, with Vista still clinging to her.

"It's the Siberian," she said, as she landed. "She attacked your people. We heard screams."
Bitch nodded, apparently unsurprised. "What's with her?" she asked, indicating Vista.

"She attacked us too. We only just got away," explained Hope. She could feel that part of her mind that wanted to gibber and curl up in a little ball, but forced it down again. "If your people are still alive, I can heal them, if you want."

"We'll see." Bitch slid off the enormous dog, and stalked into the building. Hope followed, with Vista close behind.

Inside, Hope was somewhat surprised to find no corpses. But everyone in the building was injured in some way. Bitch did not object as Hope went from one person to another, healing them as she went. The injuries were disfiguring – or would have been, without her healing capability – but mainly superficial.

When she looked around, Bitch was holding a cardboard box in her hands. It had apparently been in the middle of the floor. She did not open it.

"Okay, fine, you've healed them, you can go now. Get out of my territory," snapped Bitch.

"Okay," said Hope. "Your territory, your rules." She slid a card on to the counter. "If you ever need to get in touch, call this number."

"Like that's gonna happen. Go, now, before I tell Bentley you're his new chew-toy."

Hope gestured to Vista and they headed outside. Vista was reluctant to move around anywhere near ground level – and to be honest, Hope could not blame her – so she picked up the younger girl and took off into the afternoon sky.

"I think we can call this patrol over and done, don't you?" she asked.

Vista nodded. "I think I need that silly movie. And all the ice-cream we have in the freezer."

"I'll help you eat it," agreed Hope.

And as they set course for the Wards' headquarters, a question was running around and around in Hope's head.

*Why didn't I detect her?*
In which there is ice cream and popcorn and silliness

Hope was laughing so hard that Flechette had to pause the DVD to give her time to recover. Vista wasn't in much better shape, despite the fact that she'd seen Blazing Saddles before. Grinning mischievously, Flechette ran the player back thirty seconds or so, and restarted it; the raucous flatulence coming from the speakers broke Hope up all over again, while Vista giggled wildly, almost falling off her beanbag.

"Come on, Hope, it can't be that funny," chuckled Flechette. She found it funny herself – just not that funny. "Fart jokes are only funny the first few times."

"It's – the – first – time – I've – seen – it," gasped Hope, wiping her streaming eyes. She took a deep breath and tried to compose herself, with only middling success. Picking up her tub of chocolate ice cream – she had unilaterally deemed all chocolate ice cream tubs in the freezer to be her own personal property, and declared her intent to defend them to the death – she took a spoonful, then kept talking through it.

"I hffn't ffn mffny mffvies, so anyffmg I see these days is new to me." She swallowed, then continued. "And I know fart jokes are crude, but they're still funny."

Vista retrieved her popcorn – she'd wisely placed it well out of reach before the laughter got too bad – and crunched some down. "Do you even fart, Hope?" she asked curiously. "As far as I can tell, you don't get BO, and you don't get morning breath."

"Once in a long, long while," admitted Hope with a giggle. "But it doesn't smell like other people's farts. It doesn't smell much like anything, really."

So then Flechette told the joke about the woman who went into the doctor's office to complain about her scentless flatulence. When she got to the punchline - "Well, that's fixed your nose, now let's have a look at your other end!" – Hope and Vista were laughing all over again.

Once they'd calmed down a little, as the movie ran its course, Vista got up to put more popcorn in the microwave. She came back and sat down, but fell silent as the others laughed at the various idiotic in-jokes that made the movie so funny. Hope noticed, and scooted her beanbag a little closer to Vista's, so that she could reach out and take the younger girl's hand.

"You okay, kiddo?" she asked quietly, even as, on-screen, Mongo declared, "Mongo straight!"

"Yeah, I'm good," replied Vista, squeezing her hand and then releasing it, so that she could take a piece of popcorn from her bowl and flick it across to strike Flechette in the ear.

Flechette, of course, squeaked in protest and took a large spoonful of ice cream in order to launch it at Vista. All of a sudden, the room was two hundred feet across, with Hope in the middle, Vista to the far left, and Flechette to the far right. The spoonful of ice cream fell woefully short, and Vista snapped the room back to its proper dimensions with a lordly sniff.

Hope was just getting ready to separate the two, when Flechette said, "Wait a second, Missy. You just pushed us both apart – with Hope in the middle. Have you ever had someone in the middle of your stretching effect before?"

Vista blinked. "No, I've never done that before. The Manton effect always stopped me." Experimentally, she stretched the room again; Hope found herself at one end of an echoing aircraft hangar, then at the other end, then in the middle once more, the only person able to still view the TV,
as Vista and Flechette were at either end of said hangar.

"Please, stop," she begged at last. "I'm not sure which way is up, any more." She looked curiously from Flechette to Vista. "What are you talking about, anyway? Is this more of that our-powers-are-needlessly-complicated crap?"

"No!" denied Flechette indignantly. "You're the one with weird and complicated powers – Thinker, Mover, Brute, Striker, whatever else you are! The Manton effect is a scientifically documented fact. It's what stops teleporters from 'porting you into a block of stone, or Strangers with ghosting powers from reaching into your chest and pulling out your heart."

"Yeah," said Vista. "I've only ever been able to stretch or shrink areas that didn't have people in them. So I wouldn't be able to do it in a crowd. But now ..."

She experimented one more time, stretching the room out to the side, and then back again, and farther, so that she, Hope and Flechette found themselves basically sharing Hope's beanbag.

Flechette took the opportunity to drop a dollop of strawberry crush ice cream down Vista's neck.

Vista retaliated with a handful of popcorn down Flechette's top.

It went downhill from there.

Hope had the advantage in the resultant rough-and-tumble in that nothing smeared on her skin stayed there, but there was still her top (buttoned above and below her wings) and pants that food could be dropped down, and Vista used her power mercilessly to do darting attack runs. Flechette's aim was impeccable, when she got a chance to hit, and Hope refused to use her wings to defend herself.

The fight ended with Flechette and Vista holding Hope down and tickling her mercilessly. All three had liberal splashings of ice cream on their nightclothes, with popcorn stuck to them; Flechette and Vista also had the same stuck to their faces and in their tousled hair.

All three looked up guiltily as they heard the knock on the door. In the sudden quiet, the DVD proclaimed, "Piss on you! I work for Mel Brooks!"

"Ladies? Are you decent?" called out Weld.

Flechette and Vista hurriedly adjusted tops that had slipped a little during the melee; Hope wriggled to pull up her pants slightly, as they had drifted southward. "Never!" they chorused, amid giggles.

He opened the door anyway, saw the mess, and sighed theatrically. "Children," he proclaimed. "I'm in charge of a bunch of delinquent children."

With an effort, Hope pulled her arm free from Vista's determined grip and propped her chin on one hand. "What's up, doc?" she enquired with a grin. Vista giggled; Flechette snorted.

"Hope ..." began Weld, and stopped, shaking his head. He began again. "There's an event going on tomorrow night. I've decided to bring you along. It's extremely important, and need-to-know only. So, if you can locate your maturity sometime between now and seven PM tomorrow night, I'll see you there."

"I have to grow old," declared Hope in a dramatic voice, pulling her other hand free of Flechette's equally determined grip, and waving her finger in the air. "But I don't have to grow up!"

"Yeah ..." sighed Weld. "That's what I was afraid of. Lobby, tomorrow night. Seven PM." He pulled
the door shut behind him, and headed for his room, shaking his head.

*If I didn't know that was the same person who read me off last night over bullying issues, he thought, I'd be calling for Master/Stranger protocols right about now.*

Back in the room, Hope and the two girls looked at each other.

"And we didn't even tell him about my breakthrough!" exclaimed Vista.

For some reason, they all thought that was tremendously hilarious.

It was hours later. The party had drawn to a close. Spilled ice cream and popcorn had been cleaned up, benches wiped down, and night clothes had been put in the laundry in favour of fresh ones. All three had showered again; Flechette and Vista because they had to, and Hope because she just plain liked hot showers.

Hope was relaxing in bed, just sliding off to that level of drowsiness which can so easily lead to sleep, when her door quietly opened. She blinked in mild surprise; her eyes flared blue, to show her that Vista was standing there.

"What's up, kiddo?" she asked quietly.

"Can – can I sleep in your bed?" whispered the younger girl. "I don't want to be alone, and I don't want to be in the dark. Not right now."

Hope scooted back and moved the blankets away to make room for Vista. "Sure," she said softly. "Climb right in."

Vista did so, climbing on to the bed and snuggling up to Hope, spoon-fashion. Hope, in her turn, slid a wing over Vista, encasing her in warmth.

"Mmmm," murmured Vista drowsily. "I like your wings."

"I do too, kiddo," whispered Hope into her ear. "Now try to get some sleep. Tomorrow's a big day."

"Wonder what the event is," mumbled Vista. "Tell me everything?"

"Every detail," promised Hope, planting a kiss in Vista's hair. "Night, Missy."

"Night, Hope."

They lay like that for a while; Hope had thought Vista was asleep, but she gradually became aware of gentle, almost soundless sobbing. She said nothing, but slid her arm around Vista's waist and pulled her in close. Into Vista's ear she hummed a simple, soothing tune, her unique powers transforming it into a gentle crystalline lullaby.

She kept this up, feeling Vista's sobs die away, the younger girl relaxing and finally going to sleep. It was a couple hours more before she herself dropped off, staring into space and reliving those few moments of sheer terror, over and over.

*We're both alive,* she reminded herself. *We survived.*

And eventually, she slept.
"After the incident with the Siberian yesterday," said Weld, "I'm inclined to not let you go out again for a few more days. At least, not until tonight's done with."

"So what is tonight about?" asked Hope ingenuously.

"Sorry," said Weld. "Need to know."

Hope resisted the urge to roll her eyes. "Look," she said, changing the subject back again, "Kid Win can escort me like the first time. With Shatterbird gone, the Nine don't pose an air threat any more –"

"- except with yesterday, when the Siberian nearly took you and Vista out of the picture," rejoined Weld meaningfully.

Hope closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them and looked at Weld. "I know there are risks," she said. "I wouldn't even be asking this if I didn't think we needed to show the people out there, the villains, that we're willing to make the first move, to give them the benefit of the doubt. If we go all standoffish, now, they'll go their own way and we'll be playing catch-up. Give them actual physical support, rather than just leaving them alone under the terms of the truce, and they'll see us in a more positive light and be more willing to deal with us in good faith."

"But the Nine is starting to make their move," Weld reminded her. "There's more than just the villains to worry about."

"We'll be careful," she promised. "I'll keep a close lookout, and only land if I can actually see the people I'm coming to see. And if I see the Nine –"

"- you do not engage," Weld said definitively. "No heroics, no trying to talk to them. Got me?"

"Got you," she replied meekly. "I certainly don't want Siberian getting her hands on me again. Twice was far too many times."

"Once is generally enough for most people," Weld replied, deadpan. "Now go tell Kid Win. Get going before I change my mind."

She paused. "Just one thing before I go. Something's been bothering me."

He looked at her curiously. "Shoot."

"What do Dragon and the Siberian have in common?"

A startled glance. "What? What do you mean?"

Hope hesitated. "Neither of them show up when I scan for people. It's like they're not there at all. That's how the Siberian nearly managed to ambush me."

Weld frowned. "That's ... very interesting." He tilted his head. "Why didn't you bring this up before?"

"Because Dragon's a really respected cape," confessed Hope. "I didn't want to make it sound like I was trying to accuse her of something, and really, I'm not. But she didn't show up, and Siberian didn't show up, and I'm wondering why that is. Maybe it means something, or maybe it just means that they both know how to block that power."
"Maybe ..." said Weld, considering. "Well, get going. I'll pass on that observation. Someone might just find it significant."

"Okay, see you later."

Hope soared over the city. Kid Win kept pace nearby.

"So, I hear that Vista's got a new level of power now," he commented.

"Yeah," said Hope. "It came up last night. I'm not sure what the fuss is about, but everyone else seems to think it's a big deal."

"It can be a really big deal," Kid Win replied. "But I'm just glad that Vista's okay. And you too, of course. It sounded like a close call yesterday, with the Siberian."

"Thanks," replied Hope. "It was, kinda. I'm glad she's okay too. She's a really nice kid."

"You're a good influence," said Kid Win. He paused. "So, what's on the itinerary today?"

"Just a general look around, I guess," said Hope. "Maybe drop in on people, let them know that Shatterbird's out of the picture. Tell them they can uncover their windows now."

"Oh, you don't have to worry about that," chuckled Kid Win. "That story's already all over town."

"Wow, really?" asked Hope. "Already?"

"You would not believe the grapevine we've got going on here in Brockton Bay," replied Kid Win. "I bet the Undersiders knew before we did."

"That's kind of --" began Hope, but Kid Win cut her off.

"Hold on," he said tersely. "Base calling." She heard the crackle of voices, transmitted through his microphone. "Kid Win here. What's the problem?"

More crackle.

"Ah, okay. Roger, message received. Kid Win, out."

"What?" asked Hope. "What's going on?"

"We're going home," said Kid Win grimly. "Slaughterhouse Nine has been sighted. We just got a report that they're attacking Faultline's Crew."

"Wait, what?" said Hope. "We're only a little way from there. We could go and --"

"No!" snapped Kid Win. "Orders are, we do not engage the Nine."

"So we go and observe," Hope argued. "We stay high. Nothing can get to us, and maybe we can help somehow."

"No, we're supposed to -- Hope!"

Hope had already turned and was heading at best speed toward where Faultline's Crew was based. "I can't just stand by!" she said over the radio link. "I can't!"

Kid Win swore viciously and followed.
Hope was hovering well over Palanquin when Kid Win arrived. Below, the roadway was a maze of flames burning here and there, with a figure in a red dress moving through them as if she were a veritable part of the fire.

A shot rang out, and Hope saw Gregor launch a stream of slime toward where the girl in red crouched.

"That's Burnscar," reported Kid Win. "Slaughterhouse Nine is definitely on site."

Hope was looking around. "Can you see anyone else?"

"What?"

"Can you see any other members of the Nine, or is it Burnscar only?"

Kid Win paused, and scanned the area.

"No ..." he said. "Just her, by the looks of it. Why?"

Moving quickly and efficiently, she slipped the bag off her shoulder, holding it by the strap while she undid her top and shrugged out of it, stuffing it and her earpiece into the bag.

Kid Win blinked as she began to skin out of her pants. "Why are you taking your clothes off?" he asked in a strangled voice.

"I'm more fireproof than they are," she said in a matter of fact tone, stuffing the pants into the bag and zipping it up. "Catch."

"Yeah, but – Hope!"

Even as he caught the bag, she had folded her wings and dived.

Kid Win swore again. *If I go down there, Burnscar will toast me in my armour.*

**Damn you, Hope. Don't get killed. Please.**

An explosion rocked the street, sending Faultline, Gregor and Shamrock – an attractive, red-headed girl – tumbling through the air. Hope swooped in, saving Faultline from a hard landing, even as Shamrock touched down rolling, and Gregor landed with a heavy thud.

"Hi," she said. "Did I arrive at a bad time?"

"Never," Faultline replied.

Newter, clinging to a building, threw a bag of trash with his tail. Burnscar blasted from the air with a fireball. Then she turned to the newcomer.

Hope moved in fast, stepping through the flames as they licked at her skin. It was uncomfortably hot, but she could take that sort of thing; she'd done it before.

Burnscar lobbed a fireball at her, then turned and sent a blast of flame at Newter, causing him to retreat up the wall. Hope brought up a wing; the fireball splashed off of it, causing her to stagger
backward. Off to the side, Spitfire – a girl in red and black, wearing a gasmask – struggled to climb to her feet. Burnscar moved in her direction, and Hope darted forward. "Hey!"

It had been a feint; as Hope moved past a patch of flame, Burnscar stepped out of it and blasted her at close range with a concentrated wave of fire. She had no chance to deflect it with a wing; searing flame washed over her unprotected skin. She felt her epidermis beginning to redden, and her eyebrows beginning to crisp. Only her arms in front of her eyes saved her sight, and even then she felt the moisture evaporating off her eyeballs as she blinked.

Hope fell back, finally managing to bring a wing around to interrupt the torrent of fire. But Burnscar simply stepped around her, blasting her again. She paused briefly to chivvy Newter up the wall a little farther, and to spread flames so that Gregor and Faultline were driven farther back, and then renewed the assault on Hope.

Which was exactly what Hope wanted.

This was highly uncomfortable, bordering on the painful, but she had been in building fires before. The superheated air scorched her lungs, but she could breathe it. Micro-structures in her sinuses and throat caught and trapped smoke particles before they could infest her breathing passages. Burnscar's flame, at full power, was strong enough to hurt her, but she would recover. And while she was attacking Hope so strongly, she was only able to keep the others honest, rather than going on the offensive once more.

Holding one arm over her tightly shut eyes, Hope staggered forward, swinging blindly with her other arm. Burnscar stepped backward into a wall of flame, and appeared behind Hope, smashing her with another fireball, driving her forward to her knees.

Stumbling to her feet, weaving from side to side, Hope swung clumsily at Burnscar again. She lifted her arm away from her eyes just long enough to confirm her placement, and then stumbled, falling to both knees and one hand, her head down, chest heaving for breath. Her wings were curled around before her in an attempt to stem the blast of flame hammering at her.

And Burnscar reacted the way Hope wanted her to.

It's very easy for a fighter to fall into a pattern of movements, especially if that pattern comes up with a positive result. It's why martial artists develop combinations; when they can pull them off, they can be devastatingly effective.

But it's also a very bad idea to continue acting in that pattern when someone has developed a counter.

Burnscar stepped out of the flame behind Hope, on the side away from where her wings were protecting her, and began to launch a powerful fireball at her unprotected rear quarter.

But even as she had stepped into the flame, and Hope's awareness of her life-spark had blinked out from in front of her and reappeared behind her, Hope was acting.

Burnscar was beyond the reach of a kick or a punch; she wasn't that stupid.

But she didn't know about the reach of Hope's wings, or Hope's level of control with them.

Even as she stepped from the flames, Hope's upper right wing was arcing around, its seven-foot
reach just sufficient to intersect Burnscar's position. Hope braced herself with her other wings, swinging as hard as she could.

The wing – a heavy club consisting mainly of diamond-hard crystalline material – smashed into Burnscar's torso just under her short ribs. The blow was hard driven and lifted her off her feet, sending her flying backward. She landed hard, the breath pummeled from her. Fortuitously, she landed in an area clear of flame; before she could draw her wits together – or even gather her breath – Newter leaped down from the wall and slapped his tail across her face.

Hope staggered to her feet. Her impression of weakness had not been altogether feigned; that fight had taken quite a bit out of her. She moved over to where Burnscar lay, staring at nothing, twitching slightly. Newter was looking thoughtfully down at the pyrokinetic, apparently considering wrapping his tail around her neck and finishing her off.

Faultline, Gregor and Shamrock approached; Gregor was supporting a dazed-looking Spitfire. Kid Win landed nearby, his jetwash putting out the flames in his immediate vicinity.

Faultline was the first to speak. "Well, shit. We just took down a member of Slaughterhouse Nine."
She looked directly at Hope. "Correction. You just took down a member of the Nine."

"Don't forget Newter," Hope said immediately. "If it wasn't for him, she'd still be up and fighting."
Faultline nodded, acknowledging that. "So, what do we do now? She's got a kill order, right? We just off her?"

"No," said Hope and Kid Win at the same time. Kid Win continued. "She's our prisoner. We take her in. We have means to contain her."

Faultline grimaced as she considered this, then nodded. "Fair enough," she said. "Thanks for the assist, by the way. When I called up, I didn't even know if anyone would respond."

"That's what I gave you the number for," Hope said. "Looks like you guys are a bit the worse for wear. I can help you with that if you want ...?"
Faultline shrugged. "Won't say no."

Hope healed Faultline first, then Shamrock and Spitfire; the latter had more in the way of gravel rash and bruises rather than burn damage. When she got to Gregor, she grinned and said, "So how you doing, big guy?"

"I have had better days, little Hope," he replied in his deep, ponderous tones. "I will heal. I do not need your help if it tires you."

"Shut up and hold still," she told him in a firm voice. Laying a cool hand on Gregor's skin, she sent a silvery-blue pulse of healing energy into his body.

And he lit up, from the inside.

As she watched, fascinated, the silvery-blue light dispersed down his nervous system, through his lymphatic nodes and along what must be his blood system. Almost his whole body was outlined, from the inside, for just a moment, before it concentrated on the burned areas, sizzling and sparking within his skin, dying away as the flesh healed itself.

"Wow, that looked kind of awesome," she said in wonder. "Feeling better?"
"Much, yes, thank you," he said.

The fires on the street, without Burnscar to keep them active, were dying down now. Hope accepted her clothes back from Kid Win and dressed without comment, inserting the earpiece last of all.

"Well, I think it's time to get back to base," she said cheerfully. She nodded to Faultline, who nodded back.

"Thanks again," Faultline said.

"Anytime."

Hope picked up Burnscar's limp body and slung it over her shoulder. "If she wakes up in flight, you can foam her," she told Kid Win.

"If she wakes up in flight," retorted Kid Win, "you can drop her from two hundred feet up."

"It's all good," Newter remarked. "The dose I gave her, she'll be giggling and twitching for hours."

Hope smiled at him. "Well, thanks for your help."

"The least I could do."

As they flew off, Faultline watched them go, then turned to Gregor. "So that's where you got her number from."

Gregor shrugged massively. "She gave it to me. I thought it would help."

"Oh, it did, it did," grinned Newter. "But when she came in to fight Burnscar, she was nekkid."

Gregor covered his eyes with his hand. "This joke is not going to get old, is it?"

"That," Newter assured him, "is what friends are for."

"This is what I am afraid of."
In which we see a previous encounter

Chapter Notes

I had been considering this post for a while, but did not figure out how to make it work till a short while ago. Events have since moved past this point, thus the flashback.

Flashback: Two Days Ago

Hope and Kid Win landed on the roof of the apartment building. Sliding the strap of the shoulder-bag over her head, Hope handed it to Kid Win. "Hold on to this," she said. "I'll just go in and have a talk with Purity. See how things are going in the area controlled by the Pure." She smiled at him. "Sorry, but in your armour, you're more likely to put her on edge."

Kid Win sighed. "Fine. Just don't take too long, okay?"

With a crystalline chuckle, she patted him on the shoulder. "I'll be in and out in a second."

They had timed it so that they would catch Purity – also known as Kayden Anders – as she came home from shopping. Hope stepped off the side of the building, and let herself drop to the pavement with a chime of wingbeats. She landed a dozen paces from Kayden, who recoiled in alarm.

"Hi," said Hope cheerfully, ignoring the way the woman's eyes began to glow. "I'm Hope; you might have seen me on TV recently?"

Kayden blinked a few times, and the glow receded. "Uh ... yes, yes, I recall that. You've shown up a few times, on Youtube too. My step-son is quite the fan." A look of suspicion came over her face. "But you're in the Wards, if I am not much mistaken. Why are you here?"

"Well, you see," said Hope, "... look, can I help you with your shopping? I just wanted to talk to you about how things are being managed in your territory. See if there's any way the Wards, the Protectorate or the PRT could help the Pure to make life easier there."

Kayden reluctantly allowed Hope to take on the heavier part of her shopping. "Well, okay," she said. "We can talk. But ... I can't promise any actual agreements." She paused. "Tell you what. Come on up, meet Theo. Like I said, he's a terrific fan of yours. We can discuss it over a cup of tea, like civilised people, and then I'll give you my answer. Does that sound fair to you?"

"Entirely," said Hope. "Tea sounds perfect."

"Tea?" asked Kid Win over the radio. "Seriously?"

Hope chuckled. "Tea really, really sounds good to me right now."

Kid Win made a rude noise. "So much for you being nice all the time. You suck."

She grinned, but made no answer.

They paused at the front door to the apartment. Kayden dug out her phone and pressed the speed
dial. "I'll just get Theo to buzz the door open, and then he'll be coming down to help with the groceries." She gave Hope an impish smile. "He'll be rapt to see you."

They waited; nothing happened.

Kayden frowned. "He must be changing the baby."

"Oh, you have a child?"

Kayden's face transformed into pure happiness. "Aster. She's wonderful. I would give my life for her, in an instant."

Hope smiled. "Well, I'm going to have to meet Aster as well, aren't I?"

Kayden sighed, and dug out her keys. "Looks like Theo's busy." She unlocked the door; Hope carried the shopping inside. "Let's get upstairs."

Hope looked around with interest as she carried the shopping along the corridor to Kayden's apartment. Kayden bent to put the key in the lock, and Hope blinked. Kayden had mentioned two people; her stepson and her daughter. She hadn't mentioned a third, or a fourth.

The door swung open; Kayden started in, already saying, "Theo, I've got someone you'd –"

Hope was right behind her; Kayden was taller by several inches, and so blocked her view for the crucial few seconds. And then Kayden made a gurgling, choking sound, and fell face-forward on to the floor.

And that's when Hope came face to face with Jack Slash.

He was tall, taller than her. Taller than Kayden, who was even now scrabbling at the carpet, bleeding out in great gouts. His hair was long and greasy, his beard once neatly trimmed, but now a little scruffy around the edges. He wore a dress shirt, open down his chest, and low-slung trousers. Over his left shoulder was a naked man, dripping with blood and water. And in his right hand was a knife, the blade as clean and as sharp as the day it was forged.

"Come in, come in," said Jack Slash. He waved the knife negligently at the teenage boy who lay on the floor behind him, with an infant child clutched in his arms. Both were bleeding freely from wounds which, Hope could tell, were quite serious. "Close the door – quickly now, or I kill the child!"

Hope obeyed him. Too many hurt people, she told herself.

"Your name is Hope, is it not?" said Jack Slash cheerfully. Hope nodded.

"Kid Win is on the roof. I could call him down here ... but this man has killed armoured heroes before. He would kill Kid Win as well. I have to play this by ear."

As if reading her mind, Jack Slash gestured with his free hand. "Ah, you are wearing an earpiece. I see the outer part of it. Do me the favour of turning it off."

She set down the shopping, and turned off the earpiece.

"That's better. Now, Hope, I want you to play a little game with me." He smiled, quite charmingly, but she only saw the bared fangs of the serpent, the snarl of the cougar.

"What are the rules?" she asked, her throat dry, aware of Kayden's diminishing struggles at her feet.
She pointed at the man over Jack Slash's shoulder. "And ... who is that?"

Jack Slash smiled. It almost looked kind. "He ... is an idiot, who thought he was good enough for the Nine. He is not." His eyes crinkled. "Now, for the game. You are a healer, are you not? Well, you may pick two of these people to heal. The third one will die. You must live with the choice of letting one person die before your eyes."

Hope blinked. "You are a very cruel man," she said clearly. *He doesn't know.*

He laughed delightedly. "That I am, chicky. That I am. Now quickly, pick the two that will live."

Hope looked down at Kayden, then at the boy – Theo, and a fan of hers – and at the baby, Aster. Kayden's voice came back to her. "*I would give my life for her.*"

She pointed. "The boy and the infant."

Jack Slash blinked in turn. Apparently, he had not expected her to make her choice so quickly. "Well then," he said, stepping forward. "You had best set about saving their lives." He gave her a snappy salute. "I look forward to our next meeting, dear Hope."

Hope didn't bother answering; she went past him, fell to her knees next to Theo and Aster. She was vaguely aware of Jack Slash, pausing as he stood over Kayden, but then she was pouring healing power into the baby, closing her wounds and restoring her body to its untouched state. The baby gasped, and began to wail.

The door closed behind Jack Slash. Hope didn't care. *I am sorry for that other man, but I cannot help him.* She turned to Theo. He was farther gone than Aster had been, and it took her more time, more effort, to bring him back from the brink.

When she was sure he was breathing steadily, heartbeat regular, she climbed to her feet and went back to Kayden. *Perhaps she's still ...*

But he had been thorough. As well as the wound which had taken out her throat, Jack Slash had punched holes through her heart and kidneys, and had severed her spine just below the base of her neck. Any one of those wounds would have been fatal.

*It is a mercy and a gift that he did not know that I can do this,* she thought. She carefully rolled Kayden over, and took a deep breath. As she bent over the woman's body, she could see Theo beginning to sit up, taking hold of Aster.

Hope pressed her lips to Purity's brow, and willed, *prayed,* for her to be restored to life. Unlike the act of simple healing, this did not draw energy from herself; it drew it from the victim. Forever afterward, that person would be just a little ... less ... than before. It was a price to be paid, she knew. No-one she had ever done this to would begrudge that gift, that price.

*Live,* she thought. *Live, so that one day, you will spit in Jack Slash's face.*

Her wings, tented over Kayden and herself, chimed higher and higher notes, melodies from beyond the ken of man. Theo, still dazed from the near-fatal wounds, watched, barely comprehending. The glow from Hope's body suffused the room.

And then it died away to normal levels. The song of Hope's wings trilled away to silence. Hope sat up, looking at Kayden's face.
And she opened her eyes and looked up at Hope.

Comprehension took a few moments to creep back into her face. Then she desperately struggled to sit up. "Aster..." she croaked. "Aster!"

Hope helped her up. "Aster is fine. Theo is fine," she soothed Kayden. "They're both fine."

Theo stumbled to his feet, with Aster in his arms. Kayden met him halfway, laughing and crying both. Hope was there to steady them, help them down on to the sofa.

"I'm really sorry about the blood," she said. "I can't do much about that. But you're all going to need a hot meal. Plenty of protein."

Kayden looked up at her. "It was Jack Slash," she said. "He was here."

Hope nodded. "I'm sorry," she said again. "I had to make a choice. Him or your lives. I chose you."

Kayden nodded. "I... heard some of that," she said. "He made you play a game. Pick two to live."

She paused, looking puzzled. "How are we all alive?"

Hope took a deep breath. "I picked Theo and Aster."

After a long moment, Kayden blinked. "Then I..."

"Jack Slash killed you," Hope said flatly. "Several wounds. He did not take any chances."

She smiled wanly. "But there is something he did not know about me."

It took a little more explanation, with Theo telling Kayden what he had seen, before she believed Hope. The mirror in the bathroom gave the final evidence; the silver mark of the 'kiss of life', as Hope called it. It would never wear off, never fade.

"You will find yourself a little... less able, than before," she told Kayden. "Perhaps a little weaker, a little slower... it is hard to predict. It has to do with the death and revival. I'm sorry; I can't do anything about that either."

"Oh, for god's sake, stop apologising!" Kayden burst out. "You have saved our lives, given me my baby back." She reached out and hugged Hope close to her. "The Pure are in debt to you," she said. "We will cooperate with your plans." She tapped Hope in the middle of the forehead. "Not the PRT, not the Protectorate, not the Wards. You. Personally."

"Um, okay?" said Hope, feeling extremely uncomfortable. "I... please don't tell people about this? I'd rather it stay undercover for as long as possible."

Kayden nodded. "That works for me." She smiled. "You know, now that I've met you? I can see why Theo's a fan."

Hope nodded. "Theo? You do know why you've got to keep this quiet, right? No telling anyone, even your friends?"

"Y-yes, ma'am - uh, Hope," stammered Theo. He drew in a deep breath. "It's really great to meet you."

Hope smiled. "It's good to meet you, too. But I have to be going now. Kid Win will be getting impatient."
And sure enough, when she tapped the earpiece back into life, the first thing she heard was his voice.

"-id Win calling Hope. Are you finished your little tea party yet?"

"On my way up now," reported Hope. "I'll meet you on the roof."

"Roger."

As she climbed up to the roof access, Hope pondered what she would tell Kid Win.

_I just had to let a supervillain go so I could save the life of another supervillain._

_I had Jack Slash in my sights, but I didn't call you in because I was scared you'd get hurt._

_I just brought Purity back to life and now a violent white supremacist organisation owes me a huge debt of thanks._

The door opened, and Kid Win was standing there.

"Well?" he asked. "How did it go?"

"Well," she said carefully, "she's on board. The Pure is going to cooperate all the way."

"Wow," he said. "Good work. I don't know how you do it."

"Trust me," she said. "It's harder than it looks."

_And yet another secret I have to keep._

She sighed. Life in Earth Bet was getting more complicated by the day.
"What the hell did you think you were doing, engaging Burnscar like that?"

In the short time Hope had been in the Wards, she had seen Weld happy, she had seen him exasperated, she had seen him irritated, she had seen him surprised, and she had seen him approving. This was the first time she had seen him honestly and truly angry.

"I wasn't ... thinking, not in the way you're saying," she said meekly. "You said not to engage the Slaughterhouse Nine. I wasn't going to, I didn't ..." She paused, eyes downcast, not meeting his gaze, not wanting to see the disappointment in his eyes. She had let him down. This hurt her more than all of Burnscar's flame.

She tried again, tried to fill the disapproving silence.

"When Kid Win said that they were attacking Faultline's Crew, I thought maybe ... maybe we could get people out of the way, save someone. At the very least, observe. Stay high. See which way they went. Not just ..." Her hands fluttered in midair. "Not just run away, from the very mention of them."

He said nothing.

She took a deep breath, continued.

"So ... we went there." A pause. "I went there. Kid Win had to follow, to back me up."

Weld spoke, anger and just a little irony colouring his voice. "That does seem to be the pattern around you."

She ducked her head. Her voice became a little more indistinct. "Sorry."

He waved his hand, then realised that she wasn't watching him. "Keep going."

Another deep breath. "When we got there, it was ... I saw it was just Burnscar. She was ... she was going through them like a bandsaw. Like a hot knife through butter. I thought ..." She paused again. "I didn't think, not really. I just knew that I can handle fire. I got rid of everything that would be ruined, and ..."

"In the process, stripping yourself naked." She couldn't tell if he was disapproving or amused.

Looking up for the first time, she shrugged. "It's not like anyone would see anything. I'm comfortable with being seen without my clothes on."

His mouth quirked. "Continue."

"So ... I had ... sort of, a plan. But I asked Kid Win first, to scan the area. Just in case. If the rest of the Nine had been there ... I wouldn't have gone down. But they weren't. So ... I went down. And I tried to tag Burnscar, but she ... kept stepping. Kept moving. So ... I had to draw her attention, wait till she stepped into the right place." She shrugged. "She did it once, and then she did it again. And I took my chance."
"And damn near got burned to a crisp in the meantime." Weld's voice was hard. "I've already spoken to Kid Win. He knows I'm not thrilled with him, either."

"But it's not his fault!" Hope protested, raising her voice for the first time. "I'm the one who went there. He couldn't just leave me go on my own."

"No," Weld was still harsh, implacable. "But he should have been able to pull rank. Order you and make it stick. He didn't. He went along. You made him look bad, with what you did. Do you understand that?"

Hope's eyes dropped. Her voice was barely audible, and sounded close to tears. "Yes."

Weld rolled his eyes. "Oh, do sit up," he said, irritated. "Disciplining you is like kicking a puppy. You did the wrong thing, and you know it and I know it, and there's no sense in beating a dead horse." A sigh of mild frustration. "Besides, I can't really be too mad at you. After all, you brought in Burnscar, when all is said and done."

Hope looked up, her face looking a little less woebegone. "How's she doing? What's going to happen to her? Can I see her?"

"She's alive, and in good health, though apparently not very communicative since she came out of the drug haze. Dragon wants to put her in the Birdcage, Director Piggot wants to have her summarily executed, Miss Militia's undecided, and I don't get a say." He raised an eyebrow. "You want to see her? Really? After she tried to make you into buffalo wings?"

Hope shrugged, her wings tinkling gently. "I know you said not to stop and talk to the Slaughterhouse Nine if I ever met them, but this is a special circumstance, isn't it?"

"It's also," growled Weld, "you pushing the boundaries. Again."

"Sorry," replied Hope meekly. "I just wanted to ... understand her. Talk to her. I want to see how she got the way she is."

"Well," said Weld contemplatively. "I suppose, as she's under restraints ... it can't hurt. Though what you'll get out of it, I have no idea."

"I don't know what I'll get out of it either," Hope said. "I rarely do. But it doesn't stop me from trying anyway."

On the corridor to the special holding area, Hope noted multiple "No Naked Flames" signs. The guard outside the airlock looked askance at her, but did not question her request. He took up a ready stance, gun pointed at the doorway, as his partner buzzed it open. The outer door clicked, and swung open a fraction. Hope stepped inside, pushing it closed behind her.

Once it was securely seated, the inner door clicked, and Hope pushed it open. The fisheye lens inside the cell had shown Burnscar on the outside monitor, sitting on the bench. There were heavy metal restraints clamped on to her arms, covering them from the elbows to her fingertips. A chain led from the restraint to a ringbolt in the floor.

As Hope entered, she did not get up, did not look up. Hope pushed the door closed and sat on the bench next to her, arranging her wings so that they trailed down to the floor.

"Hi," she said.
"Burnscar? Mimi? My name's Hope."

A mumble.

Hope looked over at Burnscar, the downcast face, the hair hanging down. The prison sweats with SPECIAL down the arm, to denote a powered prisoner. Without her red dress, she looked ... less. Reduced.

"I'm sorry, Mimi," she said apologetically. "I didn't get that?"

Burnscar looked up. She appeared as though she had not slept properly for weeks or months; great dark circles under each eye attested to this. But it was the row of circular scars leading down from each eye to the jawline that caught the eye.

"I said," she muttered, "I know who you are. All the Nine know who you are."

"Oh," said Hope. "That's nice."

"Not for you, it isn't," muttered Burnscar.

Hope tilted her head. "Why is that?"

Burnscar looked at her, gaining a trifle of animation in her expression as she did so. Hope could not tell whether it was anger or sadness, or a combination thereof. "It's not nice for you," she said, "because Mannequin wants to kill you, and Bonesaw wants to cut you up and see how you tick. Jack Slash wants to play games with you, see if he can break your mind."

She paused, thinking. "Shatterbird wanted to see how well you could fly with shattered wings, but she's dead now. Cherish wants to see if she can make you into a serial killer. Crawler doesn't care, but if you fought him he'd kill you. And Siberian ... she nearly got you yesterday. If you come near her again, she will try again, and this time she'll succeed."

Hope blinked at the information. "Wow," she said. "That's ... a lot of hate. All directed at me. What did I do to deserve that?"

Burnscar rolled her eyes. "You're a good guy, duh," she said. "Not just a good guy, but a good guy. Jack Slash doesn't like having good people around ... scratch that. He likes good people well enough. He really likes corrupting them into bad people. Screwing with their principles. Making you pick two people to save out of three, for instance. Making you choose a person for death, and then watch them die."

Hope did not comment. "And Mannequin?"

"Mannequin," explained Burnscar, "once tried to make the world right for everyone. He was a good man. But he lost his family in an Endbringer attack, and so he went off the rails. If the world won't go right for him, it won't go right for anyone. And he intends to make sure of that. Anyone who helps people, anyone who conspicuously does the right thing, he makes a point of killing." She snorted. "We had to replace the TV after he saw the clip of you healing that little boy's knee."

"Hm," mused Hope. She paused, looking at Burnscar. "And you," she said. "What's your motivation in all this? Why do you go after people?"

Burnscar lifted her hands, encased in the restraints. The chain leading to the ring-bolt clanked. After
a moment, she let them fall to her knees again.

"I ... burn people," she said. "If there's fire around, I use my power to make it expand, play with it."
She raised her eyes to the ceiling of the cell; Hope's gaze followed her, to the discreet nozzles there.
"Half of those are containment foam, the other half are argon. Even if I managed to start something in here, it would be extinguished and I would be encased in about two seconds flat."

She took a deep breath, released it. "Not that that's a danger, right now. I ... when I use fire, my self-control goes. I ... don't feel. No guilt. No restraint. Just the fire. So the more I use it, the more I want to use it." She turned haunted eyes to Hope. "And god help me, while I'm in it ... I love it. I can't get enough of it."

"Huh," said Hope. She paused. "So ... who did that to your face ... and with what?"

Burnscar ducked her head for a moment. "Cigarette burns. Self-inflicted. Even before I triggered, I was ... troubled. I was not in a good place. Literally. They institutionalised me. That's where I met Elle." She tried to gesture with her hands, but the restraints were too heavy. "Every time I hurt her, yelled at her, I punished myself."

Hope blinked in mild puzzlement. "Elle?"

"Labyrinth," explained Burnscar. "In Faultline's Crew. She was in the same institution. Triggered around the same time as me. We were friends, of a sort. If we came off the drugs at the same time, were lucid around the same time, we'd ... talk. Tell stories. Swap jokes." She grimaced. "I wasn't a really good friend. Sometimes I'd be coming off a bad episode, and I'd swear at her, threaten her. But I never meant ... never meant to hurt her feelings." She looked at Hope and snorted. "But you've never been in a place like that, so how would you know?"

Hope moved closer to Burnscar. "If it helps," she said softly, "my father locked me in a closet every night from when I was twelve to when I was fourteen."

Burnscar stared at her. "And what happened when you were fourteen? Did you trigger?"

Hope shook her head. "No such luck. That's when I managed to run away from home." She looked up at the cell walls and ceiling. "I still don't like cramped, dark places all that much. I can tolerate them, but I don't like them."

Despite herself, Burnscar was curious. "So ... what happened then?"

Hope shrugged slightly. "I lived on the streets for two years." She gestured at herself. "Imagine me, without wings, without the glowing skin or the looks. I was scrawny, almost emaciated. Albino, but not really cute with it. If I went out in the sun, I burned. My father had tried to molest me, so I was terrified of that too. I kept as far away from human contact as I could. Stole food when I could, begged for some when I had to. Slept in little out-of-the-way corners. Never more than two or three hours at a time."

She paused. "I was never really very healthy. I think, toward the end, I had a lung infection coming on. I doubt I would have lasted another year. Just another statistic."

Burnscar was staring at her. Hope managed a small smile. "So yeah, I think I do have an idea of what it's like to have nowhere to go."

Burnscar shook her head. "Jesus f**k. And look at you now. How are you not more messed up than I am?"
Hope shook her head. "I'm not sure. I think part of it's attitude. I don't want to hurt other people, and I don't like being hurt. I just kept my head down, stayed out of the way. It kept me alive. And when I got my powers ..." She smiled; it was like the sun coming out. "Being able to fly is the very best thing in all the world. You get up there where the air is clear and fresh, and you leave all your troubles behind. I just feel so ... free."

Burnscar was shaking her head. "Damn. I wish I had your powers. Sure as hell would suck less than mine do."

Hope scooted over and put an arm around her shoulders, gave her a warm hug. Burnscar tensed at first, then relaxed. "Well, of course my powers are the best powers in the world," Hope said cheerfully. "But I might be just a little bit biased."

Burnscar muttered something under her breath, something that sounded like 'f**k all powers anyway'. Hope chose to let that one pass.

"So anyway," she said, "what's with attacking Faultline's Crew anyway? I mean, what do you get out of it? And correct me if I'm wrong, but with the fire you were putting my way, you could have wiped them out, killed them all."

"Didn't want to kill them," replied Burnscar, her head down. "Just wanted to see Elle."

Hope blinked. "Oh, okay," she said. "Did you want to ... recruit her? I understand that's what the Nine are doing here in town."

Burnscar shook her head violently. "No, no, just to talk to her. See her again. She's one of the only friends I ever had." She turned her head, looked Hope in the face. "She understands me. Not many people do. But she wouldn't fly as a recruit for the Nine. And I wouldn't do that to her." She drew a deep, shuddering breath. "I wouldn't let Jack Slash get his hands on her." A long pause. "I'd kill him before I'd let him hurt her. Or I'd die trying."

Hope made a sympathetic noise.

Burnscar took a deep breath. "My power ... makes me want to use it more. Like a drug. But ... I have to be in a certain state, a certain zone, for that to kick in. Otherwise ... I don't care enough about anything to use my power. Or I'm so crazy I'm burning everything. Jack Slash ... every time we go out to do something ... he points me, like a gun. Boom."

Hope hugged her again, more tightly. "Mimi ... I'm sorry."

Burnscar leaned her head on Hope's shoulder. "Don't be. I've done what I've done, and I deserve whatever punishment I get. And to be honest ... you're the first person who's ever sat down with me, and just ... talked. And listened. And understood." She rubbed her head against Hope's. "Thank you for that. And could you pass on a message for me?"

Hope smiled. "Of course."

"Could you tell Elle ... that I said I was sorry? For hurting her friends? For all the nasty things I ever said to her? She was my best friend, you know. Even though I didn't have any real friends, she was the best one I never had."

Hope let go of the hug, ruffled Burnscar's hair. "I can do that for you. I'll tell her personally."

Burnscar closed her eyes and sniffled, trying to stop the sudden tears. Hope wiped them away. "What, what's the matter?"
Burnscar spoke between gathering sobs. "It's just you ... me ... everything. No matter ... what happens ... to me ... I'm free ... of Jack Slash ... at last. Thank you ... thank you ... for that."

Hope held her while she cried, and wiped her tears away. Afterward, Burnscar said she was tired and wanted to go to sleep. So Hope helped her to get comfortable on the bench, then leaned over and kissed her tenderly on the forehead. Burnscar smiled drowsily as Hope got up and waved at the camera. The inner door opened, and she exited the cell.

As the inner door closed, Mimi whispered, "Good night, Elle."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Racheakt for helpful editing.
Weld had specified seven PM; Hope was there at six thirty, just to make sure she wasn't late. At six forty-five, Clockblocker came in.

"Hey, Hope," he said. "I hear you've been having an interesting time of it."

"Hey, Clock," she replied. "I guess so. Luck of the draw, I suppose."

He chuckled, though no expression showed on his smooth white visor, and walked around her, inspecting her closely.

"What?" she said, half amused and half irritated. "I ironed this outfit myself. I know it's clean and tidy."

"Oh, it wasn't that," Clockblocker assured her. "I was just checking to see how big a bite Weld took out of your ass for the Burnscar thing."

"Oh great," she groused, rolling her eyes. "Not you too. Enough about Burnscar, okay?"

"I've watched the take from Kid Win's helmet cam," Clockblocker informed her. "That was one hell of a fight, right there. Most anyone else, they would have been pan-fried and ready for the plate, but you, you walked out without a hair out of place. How the hell do you do that?"

"Look again," she retorted, pushing back her fringe. "My eyebrows are just about extinct right now. I have to wait for them to grow back in."

"Poor baby. Maybe you should try eyebrow pencil," he ventured in a mock-serious tone of voice. She jabbed him in the ribs with her elbow. "Oof! Watch it, I'm not Burnscar!" She went to jab him again, playfully, and he danced out of range, hands held up in front of him. "You are mean and uncouth. I'm not going to play with you anymore."

"Good," said Weld, entering the lobby. "Maybe we can get some work done around here after all." He looked Hope and Clockblocker over. "Are you done assaulting this poor innocent superhero?" he asked.

"I object to that question on the grounds that it calls Clockblocker innocent," stated Hope with a grin.

"Hey ... " objected Clockblocker.

"Sustained," sighed Weld. "Your point is valid. The question is withdrawn."

"Hey!" repeated Clockblocker, more loudly.

"So," said Weld to Hope, ignoring Clockblocker's interjection, "you may be interested to know that after your little talk with Burnscar, she opened communications with us. Sang like a canary. Chapter and verse. Gave us the location the Nine have been using, and other stuff as well. The PRT, along with Protectorate capes, swarmed the location, but they were already gone. I suspect they'd started the evac before you even got her back here. But they were in a hurry, and left stuff behind." He smiled. "I think we're really starting to put the pressure on them."

"That's not necessarily a good thing," objected Clockblocker. "Do you really want Jack Slash to feel like he's under pressure?"
"Well, it's done now," Weld said. "And honestly, we either fold or we hit them as hard as we can, and keep hitting till something gives."

"And pray it isn't us," added Clockblocker.

Weld looked briefly annoyed, as though Clockblocker had made a tasteless joke, but Hope could see the point to it.

"Ah," said Weld. "One other thing, Hope. I spoke to Dragon. She tells me that sometimes she pilots remote suits when she has to stay in and get things done — be in more than one place at a time, as it were. So that's why you didn't pick up a presence with that. As for the Siberian ... not sure. Maybe it is just a power thing after all."

"Probably," replied Hope with a sigh. "It just means that I'm going to have to be extra careful to avoid ambush by her, that's all."

"No more than the rest of us," Weld reminded her.

Shortly, a rushing roar outside signalled the arrival of a Protectorate transport. On board, when Weld, Clockblocker and Hope exited, were Miss Militia and two other Protectorate capes, a man and a woman. Hope greeted Miss Militia in her native Farsi.

"[You remembered!]" Miss Militia said happily in the same language.

"[It is more that I did not forget,]" Hope replied with a grin. "[I keep such languages as I learn until another one overwrites them.]"

"Ah, I see," Miss Militia said, reverting to English. "Hope, have you met Battery and Triumph yet?"

Both capes looked at Hope with some interest. "No, I don't believe so," Hope said. "Very pleased to meet you," she added, holding out her hand.

Battery was intense-looking, wearing a skin-tight costume covered in a circuitry-style pattern. Triumph was tall, athletic and well-built. His costume looked like gladiator armour, with a lion's-head mask. The lion's mouth was open, no doubt to allow Triumph to deliver his devastating shouts.

"I've been hearing a bit about you, Hope," said Triumph, shaking her hand with a firm grip. She returned the grip just as firmly and gave him a smile. "Including how you took down Burnscar today. That was some kind of ballsy."

"That," muttered Weld, just loudly enough to be heard over the transport's engines, "was going against orders."

"Oh, ease up," Triumph said with a chuckle. "Haven't you ever heard of 'easier to beg forgiveness than permission'?"

"Uh, Triumph?" ventured Hope.

"Call me Rory," he said easily.

"Uh, Rory ..." she said with a grimace. "I did actually screw up there. Even though I did capture Burnscar ... if it had gone wrong, if it had been a trap, I could have easily been killed, and Kid Win with me. I was lucky, and it's stupid to depend on luck. I know that now."

From the corner of her eye, she could see Weld trying hard to conceal his expression of surprise.
Even Clockblocker was momentarily bereft of wisecracks.

"Well," said Triumph at last, his voice slightly uncertain. "It seems like you're teaching them the right stuff after all, Weld."

"I try," rejoined Weld, trying hard to keep the satisfaction out of his voice.

The transport grounded on the shore of the huge, roughly circular lake that had been formed when some of Brockton Bay had subsided during the Leviathan attack. Hope had flown over it several times by now, and was still astonished by the sheer scale of devastation occasioned by the attack. When she had first mentioned it, Weld had suggested she Google Newfoundland and Kyushu. She'd had to read the entries several times before the import sank in. Leviathan could sink land masses. It was entirely out of her experience.

But for all of that, when she flew over the lake, she still felt the same sense of awe. Perhaps it was because the lake was here, visible. The ruins of Newfoundland and Kyushu were elsewhere, out of sight. Although, Hope had to remind herself, the death and destruction and devastation of millions of lives were all too real.

There was a boat, drawn up on the shore, attended by a couple of PRT soldiers. They saluted as Miss Militia approached.

"All quiet?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am," answered one of the soldiers. "Been some flashes out over the middle of the lake, but that's about it."

"Excellent," she said. "Carry on."

They climbed into the boat; Weld handed Hope a blanket to use to cloak her glow for the trip across the lake. "This is sort of a secret mission, so we don't want to be too visible for it," he explained. He then carefully sat down in the exact centre of the boat, so as to not unbalance it.

The soldiers pushed the boat out into the lake; Triumph started the engine, and the sturdy craft surged forward. Hope was bursting with questions, but the presence of the Protectorate capes inhibited her urge to ask them all at once.

When they were partway out on to the lake, three distinct flashes showed from ahead.

"Three flashes in return," said Miss Militia; Battery held up a waterproof lantern and directed three powerful blinks of light back in the direction of the flashes.

Without needing direction, Triumph steered in the direction of the original flashes. A few moments later, Miss Militia said to Battery, "Three more flashes, please."

Battery obeyed, to be answered by three flashes from quite close ahead.

"Slow ahead, Triumph," said Miss Militia. "We don't want to startle these people."

What people? Hope wanted to know.

When they got closer, she got her answer.

It was the top of a building that had not collapsed with the subsidence of the land beneath; the roof
stood out from the water, although uneven settling of the foundations had put a significant lean on it. One corner was more or less in the water, providing a landing stage, while the opposite corner was somewhat above water. Pulled up on this makeshift shore were several boats, ranging from simple outboards to a monstrosity sporting Tesla coils and who knew what else; Hope was getting good at spotting Tinker work, but this was ridiculous.

And on the rooftop itself ... were the villains. All the villains.

Hope did a rough count and ended up at thirty-some people, arranged in a rough circle on the artificial island. She recognised most of them, which heartened her.

Triumph picked an empty spot and ran the nose of the boat up on to shore; Miss Militia, in the bow, stepped out. Battery jumped out next; there was a blur as she activated her power, dragging the boat on to dry land, before she rejoined Miss Militia. Weld and Clockblocker climbed out, and Hope shucked off the blanket and joined them. More than a few faces turned toward her, and the frozen looks around the group – perhaps they had been arguing – seemed to thaw slightly.

"Uh, Weld," she whispered. "Is it okay if I go say hi? I've got a message to pass on to Labyrinth."

Weld frowned, and moved up beside Miss Militia, apparently passing on the request. Miss Militia frowned in her turn, and glanced back at Hope. She seemed to consider for a long moment, then nodded. Weld gave her a high sign, and nodded back to her.

Well, asking permission seems to work, she decided.

The newcomer group was slotting in between what looked like the Pure and the Undersiders; she traded nods with Skitter and Tattletale. Bitch didn't look up; she was occupied with a puppy, which was vigorously savaging a familiar-looking rawhide bone. Hope received a nod from Grue, and a lazy wave from Regent as she moved past.

Faultline came to meet her, and shook her hand. "Hi," she murmured. "Decided to join the dark side?"

"No such luck," replied Hope with a grin. "Got a message for Labyrinth."

Hearing her name, the quiet-looking girl in the green gown glanced over. Hope moved to her side, noticing that the gown actually held an intricate maze pattern. Leaning in close, she lowered her voice. "Elle," she said. "I spoke to Mimi after we got her back to headquarters."

Labyrinth did not raise her head to meet Hope's eyes. "How is she?" she asked tonelessly.

"She's in good health. She asked me to give you a message."

"Yes. She told me to tell you that she's sorry for what she did to your friends, and all the times she was mean to you at the institution. She told me that she didn't have any friends there, not really, but you were the best friend she never had." She tilted her head to one side. "Does that make sense to you?"

There was a catch in Labyrinth's breath. "Yes," she said, raising her face at last to look Hope in the eye. "Yes, it does." A faint smile crossed her face. "Thank you."

"That's okay," said Hope, and moved on.
"Little Hope," greeted Gregor; she clasped his hand briefly. Newter she gave a high-five with her right-hand lower wingtip. Shamrock returned her nod with a half-smile.

She was about to return to her group when she found herself standing face to face with Hookwolf, who had moved forward from where the Chosen held the highest point of the building, and held it proudly indeed. Three floating slabs of rock backed up the position, a silent and deadly threat.

"You are a warrior indeed," he greeted her, holding out his hand. Instinctively, she went for the arm-clasp; his grip was strong, but not oppressively so. There were metal barbs standing out here and there from his skin, but mainly he was cloaked in flesh. His wolf mask completed his ensemble.

"I live by your example," she told him.

He nodded, accepting the compliment. "I have heard about how you saved a comrade from the Siberian, and braved the flames to take Burnscar captive. On your next visit you will have to tell us the tale."

"Only if you will tell me of the battle against Shatterbird," she agreed. Moving on, she nodded to Menja, who stood twelve feet tall atop one of the floating rocks, behind Rune, who sat on the edge with her legs dangling off. Menja slapped her longspear against the breastplate she wore in answer. Stormtiger, hovering in midair, gave her a grave salute. She was pleased to see that his legs looked straight and strong. Othala, Victor and Cricket were sitting on the edge of the roof; they gave her measured nods.

Well, she thought, I may as well keep going. Don't want to antagonise anyone now.

The next group in the circle were the Merchants, who sneered as she passed them by.

Well, any more than they were already, she silently amended. She enumerated them anyway; Skidmark, Squealer, Mush and Trainwreck she already knew. There was a teenage boy, a lady with long hair, and a man that she didn't know. There was obviously no 'forgive and forget' ethos among them, from the poisonous looks they gave her.

Moving on quickly, she came to the Travelers. Sundancer greeted her gladly, Ballistic gave her a nod, and Trickster raised his hat. Something roiled in the water alongside the roof, and she glanced over. "What's that?"

"Oh, that's Genesis," Sundancer said.

Hope stared into the dark water, her eyes flaring blue. She could see the movement ... but there was no answering spark of intelligence. Which was odd, because she recalled from the files that Genesis was a Shifter. Lowering he voice, she said cautiously, "I'm ... not picking up an intelligent mind. When she changes shape, does she lose her intelligence?"


"Oh, okay," Hope replied equably. However, she made a note to think about this later. It reminded her of something, but she could quite recall what ... Later.

Next was a man standing on his own; he was tall and slender, and wore a skintight black costume, covering his body and face both, with a white snake design winding down it. In the darkness, the snake looked like it was floating in midair. She recognised Coil from the file photo, but recalled little enough about him. She gave him a half-smile and moved on.

Purity met her with a handclasp and a kiss on the cheek. Hope gave her a brief hug. "Aster's okay?"
she breathed into Purity's ear as they separated.

Purity nodded. "Her and Theo both," she confirmed in just as low a tone. Continuing in the low tone, she introduced Hope to Night and Fog – apparently a married couple – and Crusader. They greeted her with variations on 'pleased to meet you' and managed to sound mostly sincere. The glances they gave her even held a modicum of respect.

"Sorry," she said to Purity, "but I have to get back to my people."

"Of course," she said. "Come by any time. I think Theo wants your autograph this time."

Hope grinned and moved across to where the Protectorate and Ward capes had been watching her progress around the circle. Weld was trying not to look impatient, Clockblocker was of course impassive behind his visor, Battery looked as deadpan as ever, and Miss Militia was studying her speculatively. She couldn't see Triumph's eyes, but she caught a snatch of what Clockblocker was murmuring to him.

"- thought she was joking when she said she started a cult back home, but holy shit –"

As she stepped into place with a murmured apology to Weld, she glanced across and caught Tattletale's eyes. They were wide, staring at her with several unspoken surmises clear in them. Hope shrugged slightly and spread her hands just a little. *What can I say?*

Miss Militia cleared her throat, and everyone began to pay attention.

"As you are no doubt aware," she said, "we have a mutual problem ..."
In which there is an argument, a revelation and an ejection

Chapter Notes

Please excuse the strong language, but I had to give Skidmark a speaking part, and we all know that never ends well.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"We do," Hookwolf said. "Two problems, actually."

"Two?" That was Purity.

Hookwolf pointed at the Travelers, then at the Undersiders. "They're being cocky, think they're being clever. Figure we should get all this out in the open, at least so you're aware. You too, Coil, Miss Militia."

"Perhaps you'd better explain," Coil responded.

What's going on? Hope wondered.

Hookwolf pointed at each of the Undersiders in turn. "Grue has been making attacks against my people in the upper downtown area. Howling has been heard in the Trainyard. Bitch. Regent was sighted in the college neighborhoods. Skitter made a move to take over the Boardwalk and claim it for herself. Tattletale is either abstaining, or more likely, putting herself in the middle of the Docks and keeping her head down."

"So?" Tattletale asked.

Oh, great, thought Hope. Internal divisions already. Come on, guys.

Hookwolf ignored Tattletale's interjection. "Downtown we've got Ballistic attacking my people in the upper downtown neighbourhoods, north of this lake here. Sundancer was spotted in the shopping district, Genesis at the downtown coast, near the south ferry station. Trickster has been driving looters out of the heart of downtown, the towers. You seeing the pattern? All of them alone. Most of them making moves to take a piece of the city for themselves."

"We already knew they were talking territory," Miss Militia responded. "This isn't a priority. The Nine."

"They haven't taken territory," Hookwolf snapped back. "They're taking the city. Split it up all nice and proper between them, and now they're taking advantage of the distraction the Nine are giving them to secure their positions before we f**king catch on."

But they're also making things better for the people there, Hope told herself silently. But she did not speak up; she was just a junior cape here.

Trickster spoke up. "We didn't know the Nine were around before we put this into motion."

There was a flicker of surprise on Purity's face. "So Hookwolf is right. You are taking over."
"Something like that," Grue responded.

"This isn't of any concern to us," Miss Militia put in. Her voice was stern. "The only reason we're here is to get information on the Slaughterhouse Nine, their motives, and strategies for responding."

"That might help you in the next week or two, but a month from now you'll be regretting it," Hookwolf retorted.

"Quite frankly, I don't think we have any other choice," Miss Militia replied.

"We do," Hookwolf said. "They want us to lose our territories to them while we busy ourselves dealing with the Nine-"

"That's not our intent," Trickster cut him off.

"Pigshit," Skidmark muttered.

Hookwolf said, "Then agree to a truce. So long as the Nine are here, you're hands off your territories, no fighting, no business. We can arrange something, maybe you all stay at a nice hotel on the Protectorate's tab until this is dealt with. That'll mean we can all focus on the real threat."

_That's not going to happen_, thought Hope. They've got to watch over their areas, take care of their people.

"I'm inclined to agree," Coil answered, after a pause. "Perhaps now is an opportune time to share this information: I have sources that inform me that should Jack Slash survive his visit to Brockton Bay, it bodes ill for everyone."

"That's vague," Faultline commented.

"I'll be more specific," said Coil. "Should Jack Slash not die before he leaves Brockton Bay, it is very likely the world will end in a matter of years."

"Bullshit," Skidmark answered.

Hope barely heard him. Tattletale had told her that she was crucial to the fate of the world ... and now Coil was saying that Jack Slash was crucial to it also, in the opposite way.

_Am I supposed to kill him? Is that why I was brought here, to this world?_

But Miss Militia was speaking. "You contacted us to say something very similar a couple of days ago." she said, "But I have the same questions now that I did then. Do you have sources? Can you verify this? Or provide more information?"

Behind her, Weld reached into his pocket and withdrew his smartphone.

"More information?" replied Coil. "Yes. I have sought further details and pieced together a general picture of things. Jack Slash is the catalyst for this event, not the cause. At some point in the coming years, Jack Slash kills, talks to, meets or influences someone. This causes a chain of events to occur, leading to the deaths of anywhere from thirty-three to ninety-six percent of the world's population."

Hope went cold all over. _And I have to stop this. Oh god._ She tried not to hyperventilate. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Tattletale watching her with concern.

Coil went on, "If Jack Slash is killed, the event is likely to occur at some point in the more distant
future instead. Or perhaps not at all.” Was it her imagination, or did he glance her way?

"Dinah Alcott," Weld interjected. All eyes turned to him.

"Beg pardon?" Coil asked.

"Thursday, April fourteenth of this year, Dinah Alcott was kidnapped from her home and has not been seen since. Dinah had missed several weeks of classes with crippling headaches in the months before her disappearance. Investigation found no clear medical causes. Police interviewed her friends. She had confided to them that she thought she could see the future, but doing so hurt her."

"You think Dinah is Coil's source. That makes a lot of sense." Miss Militia turned from Weld to Coil, and her voice was heavy with accusation. "Coil?"

"I did not kidnap her," stated Coil. "I offered Dinah training and relief from the drawbacks of her abilities on the contingency that she immediately cut off all contact with her family and friends and provide me a year of service."

Is that a lie, or is he telling the truth? While Hope was trying to decide which, Coil added, "She took a week to decide, then contacted me during one of her attacks."

Miss Militia's mouth moved behind her scarf; perhaps she was pursing her lips. "Could I contact her to verify this?"

"No. For one thing, I have no reason to let you. Also, the process of gaining control of her power requires that she be kept strictly isolated from outside elements. A simple phone call would set her back weeks."

Hope was no expert, but that sounded like an evasion.

"So Coil has a precog," Hookwolf growled, "That explains how he always seemed to fucking get the upper hand when he pit his mercenaries against the Empire."

Coil clasped his hands in front of him, "I knew you might come to these conclusions if I volunteered this information. You all should already know I am not a stupid man. Would I weaken my position if I did not wholeheartedly believe that what I was saying was correct? Jack Slash must die, or we all die."

"And to maximize our chances for this to happen," Hookwolf added, "The alliance of the Travellers and the Undersiders must concede to our terms. They hold no territory until the Nine are dead."

Coil seemed to think about that. "I think this makes the most sense."

Skidmark and Purity nodded as well.

Oh, no, Hope thought. We're back to that.

"Easy decision for you guys to make," Trickster said, chuckling wryly, "You're not giving anything up. In fact, if we went with your plan, there'd be nothing stopping you from sneaking a little territory, passing on word to your underlings to prey on our people, consolidating your forces and preparing them for war, all while we're cooped up in that hotel or wherever."

He was right, Hope knew. They all knew it. They just weren't admitting to it, in the name of getting to the real business of the meeting.
Skitter murmured something that Hope did not catch. Grue said it louder; "No."

"No?" Coil asked, his voice sharp with surprise.

Hope's head came up. Why did he sound so surprised? Did he expect the Undersiders and the Travellers to agree to having their territories left undefended? There's something going on here, she told herself. Something under the surface.

Grue shook his head. "We'll help against the Nine. That's fine, sensible. But Trickster is right. If we abandoned our territories in the meantime, we'd be putting ourselves in an ugly situation. That's ridiculous and unnecessary."

Trickster nodded at his words.

"If you keep them you'll be putting yourself in an advantageous position," Purity objected.

"Don't be stupid, Undersiders, Travellers." Faultline cut in, "You can't put money, power and control at a higher priority than our collective survival. If Coil's precog is right, we have to band together against the Nine the same way we would against an Endbringer. For the same reasons."

"And we will," Trickster said. "We just won't give up our territory to do it."

"Because you're hoping to expand further and faster while the Nine occupy the rest of us," Hookwolf growled. "We agree to this like you want, and you attack us from behind."

"We haven't given you any reason to think we'll betray a truce," Grue told him, his voice echoing hollowly, edged with anger. Hope could see the darkness spreading out from him, roiling in response to his emotions.

"You have," Purity shot back. "You're refusing the terms."

This was getting too sharp, too heated. Too soon now, someone would say something that went just a little too far, and then no amount of reasoned debate would bring it back to an even keel.

Hope stepped forward and snapped her wings out wide with a sharp crystalline chime; it was the best way she could thing of to get everyone's attention.

"Excuse me, please?" she asked.

Everyone turned to look at her. Everyone.

"I have a suggestion. A compromise," she said clearly into the silence, as her wings slowly refolded on to her back.

"... we're listening," said Trickster, at last.

She walked into the middle of the roof, turning to look at everyone, one at a time. "You are worried that the Undersiders and the Travellers will continue to take up territory while the Slaughterhouse Nine are in town." She inclined her head. "That's something that could happen – not that I'm saying it will happen, but it could." She then looked directly at each of the aforementioned groups, and added, "And you are worried that if you back off and leave your areas while this is going on, that some of the other gangs will start pushing into your areas. Am I correct so far?"

There was a muttered chorus of "yes" and "that's true" from around the circle, then everyone fell silent, waiting on her next words. Already, she felt the heat of anger leaching out of the circle, as her
words of reason percolated through.

"Okay, how about this then," she said, firming up the concept in her mind even as she spoke the words. "I, personally, keep an eye on the Undersiders and Travellers, and make sure they don't take any more territory while this is going on." She looked around the various groups. "If they do, then I'll smack 'em on the wrist and make them give it back." A few people chuckled; not many, but it was a start.

She paused, nodding first to the Undersiders and then to the Travellers. "So if I do this, it means business as usual for you, but you have to keep hands-off everyone else's stuff. Are you okay with that? I mean, sure, if anyone pushes into your area, you defend, but you don't go pushing outward?" She paused again. "And if I call you out on anything, you'll pull back without argument?"

Skitter nodded and said firmly, "I will."

Grue echoed her gesture. "Me too."

Tattletale's expression was unreadable, but she nodded also. "Likewise."

Regent smiled and nodded. "That's fair."

Bitch said nothing, till Grue elbowed her. Then she looked up from the puppy and said, "Yeah, okay."

As Hope turned to the Travellers, Trickster was already nodding. "Of course we will."

Ballistic nodded sharply. "What he said."

And Sundancer added, "Yes, of course." She leaned back and looked over the edge of the roof. There was a splash, spraying her with water. She sputtered a little, wiping it out of her eyes. "And Genesis says yes."

A chuckle ran around the assembled group, easing the tension even farther.

"Well then," said Hope, looking at Hookwolf then at Purity. "I'm willing to keep an eye on them, and they're willing to do what I say. Is that good enough for you guys?"

Hookwolf looked torn. *He really wants to carry this through*, Hope realised. *He really wants to bring the Undersiders and Travellers up short.*

*Well, there's a time for politics, and this isn't it.*

"I'll trust you there, Hope," said Purity suddenly. "If you say you'll do it, I believe you." Hope glanced her way, and saw her lips moving silently. She was no lip reader, but she thought she read the words *For Aster.*

"Oh, what the heck," added Faultline. "My crew will support you all the way. You've done right by us, so sure, we'll stand by you." Hope saw Gregor and Newter nodding in agreement. *Thanks, guys.*

Surprised murmuring sprang up between the Undersiders, the Travellers and the Protectorate capes, but Hope ignored it. She turned to Hookwolf and the Chosen once more, stepping forward until she stood before them.

"You don't have to do it, not this way," she murmured.

Hookwolf growled softly. "Would you call upon our debt to you, force me to change my decision or
forswear my honor?"

"I will not do that to you," Hope replied. "That's up to you to decide. I'm just asking you to do the right thing."

"The right thing —" began Hookwolf, but he was interrupted.

"Sodding bollocks, is anyone asking us what we fucking think?" It was Skidmark, of the Merchants. "You're all standing around, making goo-goo eyes at this ... this fucking glow-in-the-dark douche, like he, she, or it, is something so goddamn special! Fuck, you're all so fucking stupid! Just tell it to fuck off so we can get on with fucking business!"

Hookwolf turned so fast that Hope had to step back in order to not be struck by his trailing elbow. He took three long strides toward the Merchants, strides mirrored by Purity, forcing Coil to step aside hurriedly. Her hand was glowing ominously.

"You will apologise to Hope, immediately, and then you will keep quiet," snarled Hookwolf. Many more blades were appearing upon his body now, and his voice sounded more like steel grating on steel than anything that came from a human throat. The Chosen had all turned that way, and Menja lithely jumped off the rock slab to land behind Hookwolf, silently backing him up.

"Agreed," snapped Purity. Her eyes met Hookwolf's, in a kind of surprised recognition, and then both recommenced their glare at Skidmark. Night and Fog glanced at one another, shrugged, and moved up to support Purity.

"Hey, hey, this is nothing to do with you guys," Skidmark said hastily. "Couple days ago, that little pukestain came into my territory, free as you please, dissed us all, an' then just flew away again."

Purity and Hookwolf glanced over at Hope.

"I came in peace, offering medical supplies and healing, and you tried to capture me and steal the medicine," she retorted.

All eyes returned to the Merchants, and there was little friendliness there.

"Well, big surprise there," blustered Skidmark. "My goddamn territory, my goddamn rules."

"Not. One. More. Word," snarled Hookwolf. "Hope is a warrior with honor, and came to you offering peaceful terms, and you broke treaty." He pointed at the boats. "Leave, now, in peace ... or leave in pieces."

"Oh, for fuck —" began Skidmark, but he got no farther before Hookwolf caught him a backhand that sprawled him on the roof. Fortunately for Skidmark, Hookwolf had retracted the blades; however, blood sprayed and teeth scattered on the rooftop.

"I retract my earlier statement," Hookwolf stated loudly. "I accept Hope's offer, and trust her to keep the Undersiders and Travellers in check. I accept Hope's offer, and trust her to keep the Undersiders and Travellers in check."

With not a little obscenity, but moving as fast as they could with the dazed Skidmark, the Merchants moved to their monstrosity of a boat and boarded it. Squealer yelled something uncomplimentary, just as she started the engines, which thankfully drowned out her words. The boat ground backward, nudging a couple of the others fairly hard, and then headed off into the darkness, sounding like a car crash in the middle of a crowded disco playing thrash metal.
Hope looked at Purity, and at Hookwolf, and nodded to each in turn. *Thank you.*

She received a nod and smile from Purity, and a single, curt, nod from Hookwolf. *Do not disappoint me.*

*Well, I'll try not to.*

She returned to her place next to Clockblocker and Weld. The latter's expression was unreadable, but the look in his eyes promised that they would have a long talk in the near future. "Miss Militia, I believe that there were things that you needed to say?" she prompted.

"Ah, yes," said Miss Militia, recovering valiantly. "For the first part, I propose a truce between all of us here. You keep your ... business ... to a minimum, no assaulting or attacking civilians. We still have to protect this city, there's no give there. Don't give us a reason to bother with you, and we'll be focused wholly on the Slaughterhouse Nine in the meantime."

Hookwolf nodded, and each of the other remaining groups followed his lead. "That's acceptable," he said.

"Well then, to business," said Miss Militia. "For a start, we need to discuss where they have already attacked, and where they are likely to go next ..."

**Chapter End Notes**

As this is the point where the story diverges irrevocably from canon, this will be the last point at which I will draw material from the original story. Thank you for being patient.
"We already know," continued Miss Militia, "that Shatterbird attacked the Chosen, and Burnscar attacked Faultline's Crew ... and we know how those turned out." A grim chuckle passed around the circle; Hookwolf stepped forward with one metallic fist held up in a triumphant gesture, and got a round of applause. Faultline and her crew looked to Hope, to see if she would also step forward, but she merely shook her head slightly; she wasn't in this for the glory.

"Mannequin attacked Armsmaster, but he survived and is now in good condition. Hope and Vista reported the Siberian's attack on Hellhound's people –" Miss Militia paused when Hope cleared her throat. "Yes, Hope? You have something to add?"

"Ah, she prefers to be called Bitch," Hope said quietly.

Miss Militia did not argue; she simply nodded and went on. "That is, Bitch's people. No fatalities, which I find frankly surprising. Bitch, do you have anything to add to this?"

Bitch looked up from restraining the pup; it had been snapping at the tail of another of her three dogs. "No," she said shortly.

"Hm, okay," replied Miss Militia, obviously not overly impressed, but not having anything to go on. "Has anyone else encountered members of the Nine?"

There was a pause, the Regent raised a hand. "My sister tried to recruit me. I don't think she was serious; it was more to piss me off than anything else."

Hope frowned and leaned over to Weld. "His sister?" she whispered.

"Yeah," Weld replied, just as quietly. "Cherish."

"Oh. Oh, I see now." Hope had read that in the files, but not all of it had stuck.

Coil was also raising a hand. "Crawler attacked my base. Fortunately, my people and I were able to reach a place of safety and wait out the attack."

There was muttering around the circle now. *What does Coil have that can hold off Crawler?* wondered Hope.

There was a pause. "Anyone else?" prompted Miss Militia. "Jack Slash and Bonesaw are still unaccounted for, here."

Another long pause. Purity caught Hope's eye, a question in her gaze. *She wants to know whether to tell about Jack Slash.* She paused, irresolute. *I'll tell them about it later. Not right now.* Very slightly, she shook her head. Purity nodded, just as imperceptibly.

"Well, then, if no-one's seen either of those, they're probably staying under the radar. Or targeting someone who isn't represented her," concluded Miss Militia. "In which case, we need to decide on strategies to pursue in relation to the members of the Nine." She looked around the group. "Does anyone have any insights about Crawler that they want to share?"

While she spoke, and others answered, with not much to say except in a negative fashion, Hope stood back and, for the first time, started thinking about things she'd found curious.
How Genesis, Siberian and Dragon all failed to show up to her sentient-mind sense. *Dragon was using a remote unit. But what's that got to do with the other two?*

She recalled Sundancer saying something about the huge form in the water being 'not really' Genesis. Suddenly, pieces meshed and she thought she saw part of a picture.

*What if...*

She stepped forward. Miss Militia had shifted topics to the Siberian. "Remember that she can't be hurt, and she can hurt anyone she gets her hands on. So rule number one is, avoid –"

"Excuse me, Miss Militia?" said Hope. "I think I've just had an idea about the Siberian. It could be really important."

And then there was a hand on her shoulder, fingers digging in. "I very much doubt," said Battery coldly, "that you can add much to the discussion."

Hope twisted free, stepped forward again. "No, really, this is important!" she exclaimed. She looked around the group; murmurs of interest arose.

Miss Militia stepped forward. "Let's hear this," she said.

"It's just an idea," began Hope. "I met a cape awhile ago who I thought at first was a Shifter, but I think now she's actually not that at all. I think she makes up a physical construct with her mind and sends it out. Stays at home and controls it remotely. Does that make sense? Is that a thing, here?"

There was a blur, and Battery was in front of her, hand on her chest, pushing her back. "We don't need uninformed speculation here," she snapped. "We need hard facts. You're just wasting our time."

And then Miss Militia was standing alongside her, frowning at Battery. "I believe I said, let her speak," she told Battery in a voice that was pitched low but still held the snap of command. To Hope, more loudly, she added, "Yes, they're called projectors. What are you getting at ..." She stopped; Hope saw her expression change as she got it.

There was a stir among the capes present. "Are you saying," said Trickster, "that the Siberian might be a projection, not a Brute?"

"Ridiculous!" snapped Battery. "Do you actually have any evidence for this wild theory of yours?"

"Uh, actually," ventured Hope, "Yes I do. I have a power that lets me detect nearby sentient minds. The cape I mentioned before doesn't show up on it ... and nor does the Siberian. I found that out, the hard way."

"And actually," announced Tattletale, carefully not looking over at the Travelers, "I believe I know exactly which cape you speak of, and yes, she is a projector. Which firms up the probability of the Siberian being one as well." She pondered for a moment. "I'd call it ... ninety-five percent. Or better." There was a distinct murmur around the circle at that.

Miss Militia raised her voice, drowned it out. "If this is true, we need to know - really need to know - who the projector is."

Tattletale spoke thoughtfully. "Most projectors create shapes, or monsters, or distorted or idealised forms. Siberian is basically ... a naked woman. If you didn't know who she was, you'd think she was just a naked woman in body paint. No distortion. Every detail exact."
"So you think the projection might be an emulation of someone the projector knows?" asked Miss Militia into the silence that followed.

"Yes," replied Tattletale flatly. "Or maybe the projector herself."

Weld was busy on his smartphone. Presently, he looked up. "I've just just been in contact with Dragon. She ran an image search, comparing all possible shots of the Siberian's face, minus the stripes, with everything she could find online and in our databanks." He handed the phone to Miss Militia. "Look who she came up with."

Miss Militia took the phone and studied the image, flipping back and forward between several pages. Very quietly, she said, "You're sure of this?"

"It's the only one she keeps coming back to," confirmed Weld.

"I see." Miss Militia turned to the assembled group. "We now know who the projector is," she announced. "Some of you may have heard of him. Doctor William Manton. The discoverer of the Manton Effect." She looked back at the phone, as if to ensure that it still showed the same information, then up once more. "He lost his wife and daughter not long before the Siberian appeared. The projection of the Siberian is a near-perfect copy of his daughter."

"Only," muttered Newter to Gregor, "with a little more - oof!" Faultline never looked around, but her clothed elbow caught him in the ribs. He cradled them, giving her an injured look. No-one laughed.

"So," said Miss Militia, handing the phone back to Weld, "if the Siberian is indeed a projection by William Manton, what does this mean in terms of fighting her?"

"Projectors typically have fairly short range," supplied Trickster. "So he's got to be in the city. And most projectors can't project and stay active at the same time. So while the Siberian's active ...

"... William Manton's lying somewhere, in a motel room or something, more or less helpless," continued Faultline.

"Which would be an ideal time to track him down," finished Grue.

"I've got our most recent image of Manton on my phone now," said Weld. "I'm sending it now to whoever I've got numbers for. Everyone who gets it, pass it on. Flood the city with it."

Miss Militia nodded. "If Manton takes a walk to stretch his legs, we'll want to know yesterday." Weld tapped the phone, and a variety of ringtones sounded around the circle. People checked their phones, then put them away again.

"I'm just wondering ..." said Hookwolf, "why Battery just tried to steer us off that track." He stepped forward, his gaze fixed on the Protectorate cape.

Hope sighed. "Hookwolf, please, it's all right," she said. "I don't mind, really. She just didn't know what I was getting at, did you, Battery?"

Battery gave her a non-committal grunt, that sounded vaguely negative.

Hookwolf paused. "If you say so," he said at last, and stepped back, Menja and Stormtiger flanking him.

With an ironic murmur of "Thank you," to Hope, Miss Militia began to speak again.
"Okay, this sounds pretty conclusive. We'll put it out there, see if we can get any recent hits on Manton. It'll mean a whole new way of fighting the Siberian."

She let that hang in the air a moment. "Okay, moving on. Mannequin."

Battery stepped forward alongside her. "We've been reviewing the security footage of his attack on Armsmaster," she said crisply. "He's able to pull apart his robot chassis; the head comes off, the arms pop out of their sockets, and so do the legs. The torso separates lengthwise. All sections are joined by chains that can extend and retract several yards. These chains can be detached, and he can control the limbs remotely. All four limbs are fitted with retractable blades and quite possibly other mechanisms. He's a tinker; he probably rebuilds his torso every time he comes across a new trick to work into it."

Tattletale raised her hand. "You missed the important point."

"Which is?"

"He specifically targets people who are seen to regularly help others."

All eyes turned to Hope.

"... I knew that," she admitted quietly. "I've been told this. I've been told, in fact, that everything I do, everything I stand for, makes me a target for all of the Slaughterhouse Nine. Well, I'm sorry," she said, her voice growing stronger, "but if they want to be unhappy about it, that's their lookout. Because I'm not going to let them bully me into not helping people."

There was silence for a moment. Then Faultline spoke up. "You do realise," she said, her voice almost gentle, "that they aren't just going to be passively unhappy about it. That they are likely to target you? Try to kill you, or worse?"

Hope wondered what 'worse' might be, then decided she didn't really want to know.

"In which case," grated Hookwolf, "we kill them first. All of them."

"That being," Miss Militia said smoothly, "the purpose of this meeting. Okay, that's Mannequin. Just remember, Hope, he rarely comes at his targets face to face; he usually strikes from ambush. So be careful."

Hope nodded. "I will. Who's next?" she asked.

"Cherish," said Miss Militia. "Does anyone have anything on her? Regent?"

"Only the usual," said Regent, stepping forward. "She can detect emotions, and figure out what they're about. Her range for this is fairly good. But to affect emotions, she has to be a good bit closer."

His eyes roved around the circle. "Do not underestimate her powers. She can reach into you and find that little tiny bit of you that wants to cut loose and slaughter all your workmates, and make it the driving goal of your life. Most everyone has got lots of emotions going on at once – it's called being alive. Here in Brockton Bay, there's a lot more negative emotions than normal going around. For Cherie, it's a paradise."

He grinned without humour. "She hates me because I'm immune to her power. Likewise, she's immune to mine. I suppose, if that wasn't true, Dad would have one less kid, or maybe two."

A shrug. "So if you see her, kill her and kill her hard. Do not stop to think about it, even for a
moment, because she will pick up on that emotion, and then you'll be her sock puppet.” He stepped back into the ranks of the Undersiders.

There was silence, as everyone digested this.

"Thank you, Regent," said Miss Militia. "Next ... Bonesaw."

Trickster stepped forward. "Bio-tinker, right? Takes people, does things to them?"

Miss Militia nodded. "Yes. She's also a child, but don't let that fool you. She's got bio-mech robots that protect her, and quite possibly other things. There have been reports of low-level capes going missing recently, and one interpretation is that she's been gathering ... material."

She paused. "Also, she may well be ... reinventing her self. Improving her body, and those of her teammates. Making them harder to hurt, harder to kill. That's not exactly a factor when it comes to Crawler, and Mannequin deals with his own matters, and Siberian doesn't need it, but the others ... quite possibly."

Hookwolf nodded abruptly. "I blunted three blades before I managed to decapitate Shatterbird. I was wondering about that. It makes sense."

Miss Militia nodded. "Thank you, Hookwolf. It's good to have confirmation." She took a deep breath. "And now we come to the last item on the agenda. Jack Slash."

It seemed to Hope that an almost visceral shudder ran around the group. She had met the man, but she only felt revulsion for him, not the primal fear that seemed to be a given, whenever his name came up.

"I've read the file," she said as everyone else fell silent, "but I don't get it. He can cut people at a distance. Why's he so scary? What's so great about him?"

This garnered her looks of surprise from nearly everyone.

"Good god, where have you been, the last few years?" asked Newter.

Hope shrugged, her crystalline feathers tinkling softly. "I'm ... not from around here. Two weeks ago, I'd never heard of Jack Slash, or the Slaughterhouse Nine." She made a noise of distaste. "Really, I wish I still hadn't. They've killed lots of people. He's killed lots of people. I'm sure that everyone who's anyone has tried to catch him. How come they haven't? How come he's still alive?"

"The man is either goddamn lucky, or goddamn charismatic, or both," stated Ballistic flatly. "He started out as a small-time low-level cape, ended up as the leader of the Nine. Since then he's managed to keep eight unstable psychopaths in line, going where he wants, doing what he wants. Anytime anyone tries to take him on, he manages to step aside, find the loophole, slip out of the way. And if you slip up, make yourself vulnerable just once –" He mimed cutting his own throat.

Miss Militia cleared her throat. "That's not totally accurate," she said judiciously. "King was running a gang back in the eighties. Jack joined it, let King call the shots for awhile, then made his move and killed him in eighty-seven, took over the gang and changed the name. They came to Brockton Bay in the nineties, before they'd built up the reputation they have now. People died, including some criminals who associated with them." She gestured to Ballistic. "The rest is fundamentally correct, yes."

"I ... got a hint of that, when I spoke to Burnscar," Hope admitted. "She told me that he was able to point her like a gun and let her do the rest." She tilted her head. "Is that a power he's got? Being able
"Not ... as such," replied Miss Militia. "But he's obviously very good at finding people's weak points and manipulating them. And he takes a positive enjoyment in hurting people on as large a scale as possible. But he doesn't do it indiscriminately; he seems to prefer doing it ... artistically."

Hope shivered. "I don't much like the idea of killing people," she said, "but he – he sounds like a very nasty man." *Careful*, she chided herself. *Nearly let slip there.*

"Well, yes," said Miss Militia. "There's a kill order on him, and all of the Nine, for a reason." She raised her voice. "I want to talk to the leader of each group for a moment, then we'll wrap this up, I think. Everyone else, take five."

The groups split up, people mingling and chatting; even Hookwolf came forward to have a word about something with Faultline. Hope moved off to the side in the direction of the Travelers, and came face to face with Coil.

"Hi," she said. "I don't think we've been introduced yet. You're Coil, of course."

"And you're Hope," he replied politely. "You have been certainly making a difference around here in the last few days. I don't know many other people who could get so many gangs on side in such a short time." A tilt of the dark-clad head. "Building your own little empire, there?"

"Oh, no," said Hope hurriedly, shaking her own head. "That's not it at all. I'm just ... trying to do the right thing. Helping people. Making the world a better place, you know?"

He studied her for a moment. "You are quite remarkable, in what you have achieved here. You do know that, don't you?"

Hope shrugged. "I just try to do the right thing," she said. She glanced over her shoulder. "Uh, I think Miss Militia is waiting on you," she said.

"Ah, of course," he replied, and moved away.

*I need to know more about that one*, he thought. *There's something about her ...*

Hope watched him go, and then jumped a little at a touch on her arm. She turned to see Grue standing there.

"Uh, hi," she said with a smile. "How have you been? I haven't had a chance to drop in and chat since, well, Shadow Stalker."

"That's all right," he replied, his voice made slightly hollow by the closed helmet. "Things have been fairly hectic anyway. I just wanted to say thanks for stepping up for us, back there."

Hope tilted her head slightly in acknowledgement. "That's not a problem at all," she said brightly. "I really hate that sort of thing happening, you know? But just remember," she said, poking him playfully in the middle of the chest with her forefinger, "you've gotta carry out your end of the deal too. Don't go making *me* look bad."

She twitched her left lower wing back into place.

Grue nodded, the helmet moving ponderously. "You got it," he assured her. "'Um – just one thing. Hookwolf's people sometimes stage dogfights. Bitch has a real problem with that sort of thing. If we're not going to have more trouble with that, you might have to speak to Hookwolf about it."
Her lower right wing seemed to have drifted out of place; she re-furled that too. "Um, okay?" she said a little uncertainly. "He seems to ... approve of me? But I really don't know how far that's gonna go." She took a deep breath. "But I'll do my best."

"That's all we can ask for," replied Grue. "I'll talk to the other Undersiders and the Travelers for you, make sure they're all on board with this."

"Thanks," said Hope. "I appreciate it." Grue nodded and moved off; as she turned away, Hookwolf left the small group around Miss Militia and approached her. The leader of the Chosen had retracted most of the blades extending from his skin, and looked mostly human for once.

"Hope," he said in a voice that was quiet, for him.

"Hookwolf," she responded. "I haven't congratulated you yet on beating Shatterbird." And decapitating her, her inner voice reminded her. It tried to show visuals as well, but she firmly repressed them.

He inclined his head slightly, acknowledging this. "It really needs telling in proper company," he said. "But for now, accept this from the Chosen." He held out one large hand, palm up. On it was a flat oval-shaped shard of glass, deep red in colour, about the size of Hope's entire hand. Part of it was encrusted with a blackish substance.

She took it, examining it closely. She already had a sickly feeling about what the substance was.

"It is the shard of glass that was closest to her heart when she died," Hookwolf explained. "Your contribution aided our victory greatly, and so this is yours by right."

Yup, she thought. And that's her blood on it. Ew.

"Thank you," she said, trying not to let the queasiness show in her voice. "This is a ... uh, a great honour. I will remember this moment always. Even if I try really, really hard to forget. Ew.

Apparently satisfied, Hookwolf inclined his head once more and returned to the Chosen. Hope watched him go, and thought suddenly, Darn, I should have said something about the dogfights. But the moment had passed. Maybe next time I see him. She looked down at the shard of glass again, and at the blood on it. Ew.

"Admiring your trophy?" asked Tattletale, stepping up alongside her.

"Yeah," said Hope, letting a little sarcasm creep into her voice. "It's great. With dried blood all over it. Lovely."

Tattletale tilted her head. "For a healer, that's a little squeamish, isn't it?"

"It's not the blood," said Hope. "I have no problem with blood. It's that it's the blood of someone who was murdered. And that Hookwolf probably put the blood on there to make it more ... impressive of a trophy." She looked Tattletale in the eye. "The Chosen killed Shatterbird, and I helped. And I'm really not sure I like that."

Tattletale shrugged. "It's a rough world, kiddo. Sometimes we have to do things we aren't comfortable with." She put her arm around Hope's shoulders. "Any time you want to drop by and talk about things, feel free." A comforting squeeze. "I see you've been all kinds of busy already. I'm seriously impressed."

"I didn't do it all on purpose," Hope protested. "Things just ... happened." She gestured, taking in the
meeting. "I just ... tried to do the right thing, is all."

Tattletale chuckled and leaned her head against Hope's. "Well, whatever you're doing," she said, "keep it up." She looked around. "Looks like we're getting ready to go," she said. "Keep in touch, 'kay?"

"Count on it," Hope assured her. She turned to head back to the Protectorate capes. Trickster approached her first.

"I just want to say thanks," he said in a low voice. "For standing up for us, and for not outing Genesis."

Hope smiled. "That's okay," she said. "Just keep things on the down-low for a while, all right?"

"That's the deal," he said, tipped his hat to her, and moved back to rejoin his group.

The heroes and villains re-boarded their respective modes of transport, and left the island, traveling in various directions.

Once they'd gotten out away from the island, Hope realised that the others were looking at her oddly.

"What?" she asked.

After a moment, Clockblocker spoke. "No-one else wants to say this, so I will. I've been in the Brockton Bay Wards for a while now. Battery's been in the Protectorate for years, and so has Miss Militia. Weld doesn't count, because he came in from Boston."

"Hey!" objected Weld.

Clockblocker ignored him. "But we've all been here for years, and the most – the absolute most – we've managed to arrange with the local villains is a strained politeness. Endbringer Truces, things like that. Hell, this meet tonight had about a one in four chance of ending up as a firefight. But you ... you roll into town –"

"Fly into town," interjected Weld.

"- fly into town, and inside of two weeks, you've got them palling up to you like they've known you all their lives. What gives?"

Hope blinked. "Um ... I'm nice to them?" she ventured.

Silence, except for the thrumming of the motor. The other capes looked at each other, and then back to her.

"And that works?" asked Clockblocker, in tones that meant Is that all?

Hope blinked. "Well, it does for me," she said at last.

"Hmm," said Miss Militia after a few moments. "I'm going to have to think about this. It's an interesting approach." She turned to Clockblocker. "Get us back to shore. We've got work to do."

"Aye, aye, ma'am," said Clockblocker, and the boat surged forward.
"Well, *that* was an interesting experience," Miss Militia sighed as she re-settled the scarf about her face. Her hair was still wet after the shower, but it would dry.

"You're not kidding," replied Triumph, pulling his lions-head helmet off and running his hand through his hair. "Five villain gangs – well, four plus Coil – after they threw the Merchants out. I wouldn't have believed it if I didn't see it. When we first turned up, it was like they were all gearing up for a firefight, with us as the targets of opportunity. And then Hope got out of the boat, and they were like, 'Oh, you brought *her*! Why didn't you say so?'

"You're kidding," said Assault.

Battery shook her head. "No, love. It happened just like that." She kissed him on the top of the head. "I'm going to go get a shower and change."

Miss Militia went to the fridge, got a pack of yoghurt, offered one to Triumph and another to Assault.

Triumph shook his head. "Thanks, I'm good." Assault accepted one.

She nodded, peeled back the strip. "And when she asked permission to go and give Faultline's Crew a message from Burnscar? That was weird enough. Except that she then ended up going round the whole circle, spoke to all of them – except the Merchants, for which I am unsurprised – and they were treating her like an old school friend." She snorted. "Hookwolf and the Chosen greeted her like she was one of them."

Assault raised an eyebrow. "*Hookwolf* did that?"

Triumph nodded. "Sure as hell he did."

Miss Militia took a spoonful and closed her eyes for a moment, savouring the taste. "And even when tempers got short, all she had to do was spread those wings of hers, and ask everyone to calm down – and they did. All of them."

"Even Hookwolf?" Assault sounded disbelieving.

"Even Hookwolf."

"I would not have believed it if I wasn't there," confirmed Triumph. "But that's the way it went down."

"And ... the rest of it?" asked Assault. "The stuff about Manton projecting the Siberian? What Dragon found? That's all legitimate?"
She nodded soberly. "All of it."

Assault shook his head slightly. "This is big. This is really big."

Triumph got up, his helmet under his arm. "The biggest."

A ringtone.

A hand picked up the phone, hit 'answer'.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Coil. It's me."

"Tattletale. I presume you have some tidbit for me?"

"Indeed I do. There's someone we need information out of."

"Who?"

"Before I answer that, I want whatever you get from this."

A sigh. "Very well. Who, and what about?"

"Battery. She was reacting a bit strongly to Hope's little revelation at the meeting tonight."

"Oh? I had figured that for nerves. Or maybe she just doesn't like Hope."

"Think again. She was definitely trying to steer attention away from that topic. What I want to know is, why? Who wants to keep people from finding out things about the Siberian?"

"An extremely cogent question. Give me a moment, and I will ask Dinah."

"Don't take too long. I wouldn't want to get the impression you're trying to make up a story I'll believe."

"You wound me."

"If you try to hang us out to dry again like you did at the meeting, I'll do more than wound you."

"Now, now, that was just business."

The phone went silent for a moment. Then he returned.

"I have your answer. But I am not sure that you will like it."

"Oh?"

"Have you ever heard of an organisation called Cauldron?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because they not only gave Battery her powers, but they also told her that the Siberian must leave Brockton Bay alive."

"Well, now. That is interesting. Thank you, Coil."
"Tattletale, what are you –"

"Bye, Coil. Talk to you later."

"Tattletale -!"

click

"It appears that our visit to Brockton Bay has been plagued by misfortune." Jack Slash paced across the motel room, and back again.

Bonesaw lay back on the bed, her legs hanging over the edge. Now and again, she kicked them up, just to see her toes appear. Cherish lounged in an armchair, watching the both of them. "Really?" she asked. "Don't we usually lose one or two people every time we attack somewhere?"

"No." A shake of the head. "Not like this. Not before we've properly got started." Jack Slash spread his hands; a flick of the wrist, and a knife appeared between his fingers. He twirled it, flickering light in the cheap fluorescent lights. "The Chosen shouldn't have been able to take down Shatterbird. Hope wasn't supposed to be on site to take out Burnscar." His lips tightened. "I can't get a read on Hope. Never where she's supposed to be. She turned up at the Anders place, and I had to improvise on the fly. She's a complication, a glitch."

Cherish's expression was amused. "And people really do like her."

Jack Slash rolled his eyes. "She's popular, I'll give her that. And very personable, face to face." He paused, musing. "I managed to get past her, once. But it might be harder, a second time, without innocents to distract her."

"So what's our next move?" asked Cherish. "Are we going to go after this little complication of yours, or something else?"

Jack Slash dismissed the problem with a wave of his hand. "I would have let Shatterbird scream tonight, but we'll have to announce ourselves another way. Tomorrow night." He paused, thinking.

"Did you know," pointed out Cherish, "that the Chosen have Shatterbird's head on a pole in front of their headquarters?"

"Do they?" asked Jack Slash. "Do they really?" He smiled. It was almost cheerful. "Well, then. They think they can disrespect the Nine that blatantly? We'll just have to do something about that."

Bonesaw sat up, looking interested.

Cherish raised one eyebrow. "And Hope?"

"I'll tell Mannequin he's got free rein to go after her."

"Oh, he'll just hate that." Bonesaw's voice was sardonic, and somehow filled with childlike glee.

"Won't he just."

A darkened room, lights turned down. The only real illumination the glow of a laptop screen. Battery sat, typing.

"Coming to bed soon, honey?"
"With you in a moment, sweetie. Just got to get this email sent away."

"Sure thing."

A knock on the door. Battery looked up from the screen. "Ethan, could you get that, please?"

"Okay, honey."

Assault opened the door. Miss Militia tagged him with a tranquilliser dart at a range of three feet; Triumph caught him and eased him to the floor. They slid inside. Triumph closed the door quietly.

"Sweetie? Who's at the door?"

She looked around at the lack of answer, found herself staring into a very wide-barreled weapon, aimed at her by Miss Militia. Triumph stood beside Miss Militia.

"What is this?"

Miss Militia sighed. "Hands away from the laptop please, Battery. I was wondering why you reacted the way to Hope's information at the meeting ... and just now, we got an anonymous message telling us that you're working with an organisation called Cauldron, whom I had previously thought just a rumour, and that you've got orders from them to make sure the Siberian leaves Brockton Bay alive."

"Wait!" protested Battery. "That's not how it is!"

"Battery." Triumph stepped forward, shaking his head. "Don't. Please ... don't." And then he spun toward Miss Militia.

She realised the danger just too late, and tried to leap out of the way. He let out his deafening scream, and the sonic wave blasted her into the wall. She crumpled into a heap, motionless.

Battery stared. "What the hell?"

Triumph stepped forward. "We haven't much time," he said urgently. "Cauldron sent me a message to give you all the assistance you needed. What's going on?"

Battery slowly rose and faced him. "Cauldron contacted me before the meeting. They want the Siberian to get out of the city alive." An edge came into her voice. "But I'm not going to do it. I don't care what Cauldron does, I'm not helping the Nine kill more people, ever."

"Don't you get it?" he snapped. "This is Cauldron! We owe them our powers! Without them, we're nothing!" He glanced toward the laptop. "What are you sending there?"

"Information about the meeting. But I'm leaving out the bit about the Siberian." She bit the words out. "They don't need to know that."

Silence fell for several seconds, and then suddenly he opened his mouth to shout at her. She blazed into blurring speed, dodging sideways, punching him with a fist that nearly broke the speed of sound. He rolled away, letting his armour take the impact. Another scream, and another; Battery whipped aside with more than human speed, pummeling him with hammer-blows. But suddenly her speed faltered, and his next attack caught her squarely, smashing her across the room. She hit the wall and fell to the floor.

"Right," he said grimly, seating himself at the laptop. "Let's just add in that information, shall we?"

In his concentration, he did not notice the weapon shifting in Miss Militia's hand.
And then a hail of beanbag rounds smashed into him, blasting him sideways and off the chair. Miss Militia climbed painfully to her feet, holding her ribs; she was sure a few were broken. "Don't ever turn your back on a fallen enemy," she grated in her own language. Staggering over to where the laptop sat askew on the desk, she took the time to put a dart into each of them, then scanned the text on the screen.

"Well, now," she muttered. "Hasn't been sent. Let's see about telling them what I want them to think."

And after that, she told herself, Master/Stranger protocols for both of these two until I can find out what's happened here.

Tattletale closed her phone, put it away. "That should put the cat among the pigeons," she murmured with satisfaction. She turned to Skitter. "So, what do you think of how the meeting turned out?"

Skitter didn't answer for a moment. "I think ..." she said at last, "... that if Hope hadn't spoken up for us, we would have been gone, not the Merchants."

Tattletale nodded. "Oh, without a doubt. Us and the Travelers both. And then we'd all be on the outs, not knowing what the others were planning to do about the Nine, unable to assist, and possibly in the line of fire."

Skitter shook her head slowly. "I still can't believe how she talked them all down," she murmured. "Especially Hookwolf."

Tattletale smiled her vulpine smile. "I ... kinda figured it would go that way," she admitted. "No surprise there," muttered Skitter.

"No, really," insisted Tattletale. "When she did her little meet-and-greet around the circle the first time? Didn't you see the respect everyone was giving her?"

"Everyone except the Merchants," Skitter pointed out.

"And what happened to them?" Tattletale prompted her.

"They ... got thrown out," Skitter answered slowly.

"Go to the top of the class," Tattletale told her. "From the moment Hope arrived to the moment she left, she was in control of that meeting ... whether they knew it or not. Whether she knew it or not." She shook her head. "People call me a manipulator. I've got nothing on Hope. And the most bizarre part? She doesn't even know it."

Skitter's face was hidden behind her mask, but Tattletale knew she was staring at her. "That doesn't make any sense."

"Doesn't it?" asked Tattletale. "She's a nice kid. Stunningly beautiful, appealing manner, totally approachable. She drifts along her happy way, unselfishly doing right by others. Heals people without being asked, figures out what people need and takes it to them. Like her little care package to Bitch."

"Yeah, I heard something about that," admitted Skitter.

Tattletale nodded. "Exactly. She does stuff for people. Never asks for anything in return. But she's

"Seems to, for her," pointed out Tattletale. "You see how Hookwolf and Purity reacted to Skidmark?"

Skitter nodded. "They were about ready to feed Skidmark his own feet. And I was thinking about helping them. So was Grue. But you said not to worry about it."

Tattletale grinned wider. "Exactly. We weren't needed. But I bet you didn't see Gregor and Newter. They were about to jump in too, but Faultline held them back, because they weren't needed either. And I saw Trickster telling Sundancer to stand down as well."

"Wow," said Skitter again. "I never realised."

"Most everyone else missed it too," Tattletale noted. "But I think we're going to have to keep an eye on our little Hope. She's just full of surprises."

[Author's note: It appears that Skidmark has entered the narrative once more. You have my apologies in advance. Security has been notified.]

"That turd-gargling, monkey-buggering little glow-stick!" ranted Skidmark. His voice was a little muffled, through the cloth he was holding to his mouth, but the general meaning got through to the rest of his group with remarkable ease. "Fuckin' got us thrown out of that goddamn circle-jerk just for sayin' what was in front of everyone's faces!"

"So what are we gonna do about it, honey-bear?" asked Squealer, pulling her too-short skirt down a fraction.

"We're gonna fix those knob-jockeys, that's what we're gonna do," snarled Skidmark vengefully.

"What, we're gonna go tell the Nine about their meeting?" Squealer sounded alarmed.

Skidmark recoiled. "Christ, no! Do I look suicidal? I'm gonna stay as far away from those goddamn maniacs as possible." He shook his head. "And that means not steppin' in or helpin' in any way if they come out in the open. We got chucked out, we don't do jack to help and of those dickbrains. They can all take barbed-wire enemas for all I care. An' if it so happens that the Nine kills every other fucking ruptured hemorrhoid in a cape before leavin' town ... that leaves the whole place open for the fuckin' Merchants to lay claim to the lot of it."

He paused for breath, and for thought. "Hell no, we're gonna do something else. We're not in on their little goddamn truce, are we? We aren't held back from attackin' anyone, are we?"

"No," admitted Squealer, "but ..."

"But," went on Skidmark, "if we attack one of the goddamn gangs that was there, they'll come down on us like pedophiles on Viagra at a kindergarten open day. So, we hit someone else." He turned to Squealer. "Your chopper ready to roll?"

"Needs a bit more work, but should be ready to go by tomorrow afternoon," she told him.
"Tomorrow then," he said. "We hit that weak sister Parian, wipe her off the map like a turd in a wind tunnel." He wiped blood from his mouth again. "God fucking damn that little cock-sucking glowstick!"

And Squealer knew he didn't mean Parian.

[So I lied about Hope not appearing. Sue me ]

"What I don't get about this whole thing was this," said Clockblocker, holding up his coffee cup to the light, as if he could see through it. "How come no-one ever twigged to the resemblance between the Siberian and Manton's daughter before now?"

"Well, think about it," Weld replied from the other chair in his room. "Manton's wife and daughter were killed back in the eighties, right? Siberian appears shortly after. She quickly makes a name for herself, and pretty soon they're trying to find out who she is at home, because everyone figures her for a Brute, not a projector. But the internet hadn't really gotten off the ground back then, and even if someone found a passing resemblance between her and Manton's dead daughter, it obviously wasn't her, because she's dead."

"Okay ..." said Clockblocker slowly. "I can get that."

"Also," Weld went on, warming to his subject, "when you look at it, it's not a perfect match. Siberian is like Manton's daughter, only adult and more ..." He gestured, a vaguely hourglass motion.


"Exactly," agreed Weld. "So the resemblance wasn't really obvious until Dragon used her latest facial recognition software."

"Gotcha," said Clockblocker with a nod. "But ... I'm gonna have to say this."

"What?"

"Am I the only one who thinks it's creepy that Manton is presenting himself to the world as his over-sexualised naked daughter, in tiger stripes?"

"No," said Weld firmly. "You are not."

There was a knock on the door.

"Yes?" Weld called out.

The door opened, and Hope put her head around it. "Oh!" she said. "I'm sorry, I'll come back later."

"No, no, come in," said Weld.

"I was just going anyway," Clockblocker added. He finished his coffee and put the cup down, rising from his chair. "You did good tonight, Hope. I'm really glad you came along."

Hope grinned in an embarrassed fashion, and ducked her head slightly. "I didn't do all that much," she said.

"Maybe, maybe not," said Clockblocker, "but you being there definitely didn't hurt." He let himself out the door. "See you tomorrow."
Hope and Weld echoed together, "'Night, Clockblocker," and then Weld gestured to the chair. "Sit."

She sat.

Weld eyed her for a long moment, then cleared his throat. "So, what have you done this time?"

She blinked, startled. "What?"

Weld gave her a level stare. "Hope. I've only known you for about ten days, but I've come to learn your tells. You have about as much guile as a week-old puppy. When you think you've done the wrong thing, you look like that very same puppy that knows it's about to get its nose rubbed in something. You've obviously come in here to confess about something. What is it?"

Hope took a deep breath and let it out again. When she spoke, her voice was low, and she wouldn't meet Weld's eyes.

"There's something I didn't raise at the meeting, maybe I should have." Another deep breath. "I ran into Jack Slash two days ago, on patrol."

"What?" Weld was startled out of his complacent attitude. "When? Where? What happened? Why didn't you tell me?"

Hope shrank into herself. Her voice dropped to near-inaudibility. "Kid Win and I were visiting Purity. I went inside with her, he waited on the roof. Jack Slash was inside. He'd wounded her baby and her stepson badly. As she walked in the door, he cut her throat."

She related the incident in a monotone. "I didn't want to call in Kid Win, because his armour wasn't closed all the way around. Jack Slash has taken down armoured heroes before, and I didn't want to take the chance."

She paused. "Also, my kiss of life always takes something out of people, and I didn't want to have to explain that at the meeting; Purity does not need anyone thinking she's weaker, right now."

Weld struggled for control. "So, you brought Purity back to life, and the children ... they're okay?"

She nodded, mustering a faint smile. "She told me so, at the meeting."

"Good god, no wonder she stepped up to your defense," muttered Weld. "She must think you walk on water." He caught himself, and glared at her again. "This does not explain why you did not tell me about this. Or Kid Win, after the fact. Both of us, even. Someone!"

She shook her head slowly, hopelessly. "I couldn't. Once I started to keep it back, it got harder and harder to figure out a way to tell you that wouldn't get me in trouble and make you keep me from going on patrols and helping people."

Weld leaned back, lips compressed. "You're damned right I would have taken you off patrol schedule. For a stunt like that? Hell yes. In fact, you're off patrol schedule until farther notice. I don't know what disciplinary action I'm going to take, but –"

"Uh, that's the other thing," Hope interrupted him, looking even more unhappy than before. "I like you. I like all of you here at the Wards. Miss Militia's nice, too. But ... I don't fit in here. I want to follow your orders, but ... when it comes down to a choice between helping people and following orders ... helping people wins out, every time." She shook her head. "You can't trust me to follow orders if I think I need to help people, instead."
Weld stared at her. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that it's best for everyone if I leave the Wards."
In which Coil asks important questions and gets unpleasant answers

Chapter Notes

Two more side-stories. But no more Skidmark for a while. I promise.

Coil’s Lair

Coil sighed and closed his phone. He felt a momentary surge of aggravation toward Tattletale, but then, that was what she did. She aggravated people, and then pulled clues out of their responses.

He had not had time to go through his normal routine of capturing the subject and interrogating them over days, so instead he had asked Dinah, and she had told him.

It wasn't as satisfying as being there, seeing and hearing the subject, but she had given him the information he needed. She had then told him what Tattletale would do with the information, which made him smile a little grimly; the Protectorate had needed a shakeup for months. Maybe this would keep them off balance for a while longer ...

But now, he had to find something else out. He had to find out about Hope.

So he thought about what he would do. And then, behind his eyes, he split the universe in two.

"Pet," he asked Dinah, "what percentage of my operations will be affected negatively by Hope's actions, if she is left unchecked? Over the next four weeks, say."

"In one week, zero point three percent," she replied. "In two weeks, six point four percent. In three weeks, twelve point seven percent. In four weeks, seventeen point six percent." She paused. "May I have some candy?"

He discarded that universe and thought about the answers, then re-engaged his power.

Then he asked her about the chance of Hope's actions continuing to affect his operations if she dropped dead of natural causes on the morrow.

Her influence would continue on for a while after she died, he learned but it would be reduced. In two weeks, her residual influence would have a four point three percent chance of disrupting his operations. In three weeks, eight point nine percent. In four weeks, ten point one percent. After seven weeks, there would be a less than one percent chance that any of his operations would be affected by her previous actions.

He considered that, eyed her strained face, and collapsed that universe.

Opening another alternate, he tried once more.

"What are the chances of failure if someone attempted to assassinate Hope using ... say ... a sniper rifle?"

There was an eighty-four point three percent chance of failure on the first attempt, Dinah informed him. On subsequent attempts, that would rise to ninety-eight point nine percent. Further questioning
elicited the information that there was a seventy-six point seven percent chance of the sniper being captured, and a sixty-four point six percent chance of his subsequently giving up Coil's name as his paymaster.

He collapsed that universe, and opened another line of inquiry. This was bothersome, but Dinah was so easily strained these days.

He thought hard about the information he already had. "Pet," he said, "If Hope saw an injured person on the ground, calling for help, as she flew over, what is the probability that she would land and provide assistance?"

Her answer was immediate and positive. The trap he had in mind, using a decoy, would have a ninety-seven point three percent chance of working. However, further questions garnered him the information that neither tear gas nor tranquiliser darts would be efficacious ... but that containment foam would be effective, but only if she was completely engulfed in it.

He collapsed that universe and paused for thought. I can get containment foam, he thought. Now for the hard questions.

He split the universe again.

_Time for a test question_, he thought.

"Let's play a game of 'let's pretend', pet," he said. "If I had Hope killed tomorrow, and hid the body without anyone knowing that I had it done, what are the percentage chances of my ongoing operations being disrupted by her current actions? Give me a week by week analysis, please."

Dinah blinked, and paused for a long moment. "I can't get an answer. The question is meaningless."

He stared at her. "What do you mean, pet?"

"If you have Hope killed, there is a ..." She blinked, puzzled. "A ... one hundred percent chance that you are uncovered as the agent of her death."

"One hundred percent?" he asked, incredulous. "How is that possible?"

"I don't know," she said.

He felt a cold chill down his spine.

"What is the percentage chance that I go to prison for that?" he asked.

"Zero," she replied flatly.

It took careful questioning, and occasional collapsing of the current universe and a re-opening of a secondary one, but he got his answers, and they worried him.

In ninety-eight point four percent of the cases, he would be killed. Seventy-six percent of the time, Dinah would also be killed. In every single case, the killers would be the capes of Brockton Bay, sometimes even the members of the Undersiders or the Travelers. In that one point six percent of the cases, where he was not killed, he would be forced to flee Brockton Bay before they got to him.

If he stayed in the United States, there was a ninety-three point four percent chance of being hunted down and killed by a parahuman from Brockton Bay. Leaving the country, would drop that to a thirty-two point six percent chance.
He felt he was on the endgame as he opened yet another parallel universe.

"Pet, if I had Hope killed, and promptly fled the country, evading all pursuit, what percentage chance do I have of rebuilding my power base elsewhere?"

She gave him an eighty-two point nine percent chance of rebuilding his power base to a level equivalent to what he had now within two years.

"Oh? What happens in two years?"

"We both die."

Another chill chased down his spine. "Are you certain about that?"

"One hundred percent." Her face was drawn and white. "No more, please," she whispered.

He dismissed that universe. He had learned enough.

Leaning back in his chair, he stared into space; Dinah knew nothing about the series of questions he had just asked her, and he preferred it that way.

He had learned many things. But one stood above all others.

*Something uncovers my involvement in Hope's death, no matter what. Hope has a guardian angel of her own. But who?*

He dismissed that line of inquiry as useless.

*If Hope cannot be beaten, or killed ... perhaps she can be co-opted.*

*Everyone has their price, after all.*

Many miles above, in low Earth orbit, the Simurgh smiled in her sleep.

"Pet?" he asked idly.

"Yes?"

"What are the odds of Hope agreeing to work for me if I asked her to?"

Pause. He amused himself by trying to guess the answer. Low twenties, he imagined.

"Ninety-seven point three percent."

He nearly fell out of the chair.

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**Elsewhere in Brockton Bay**

The room lay still and quiet. Bodies were scattered about the floor, in poses indicating violent death. Blood spattered the walls, gradually cooling and drying. Pools of it lay on the floor. Jagged wounds, still oozing gore, told of the method of death.

Shadows also lay heavy in the room.

Until they stirred, drew together, formed a human shape, forced the change, became human in totality.
Sophia Hess staggered, gasped in air, leaned on a table. The prison sweats, with SPECIAL across the back and down the sleeve, hung loosely on her. She was skinnier than before, the bones of her face standing out more sharply.

She fell into a chair, ignoring the death around her. Hurriedly, almost frantically, she stuffed food into her mouth, chewing and swallowing as fast as she could. A jug of water sat on the table; she poured clumsily, slopping water on the table, and drank thirstily. She ate hungrily, eschewing cutlery for fingers, almost whimpering with each mouthful that she managed to swallow. More water went into the cup, and she drank again, spilling some down her front but never noticing.

When the plate was empty, she scooted to the next plate over and started on that one. And then she froze for an instant, letting out a cry of protest and dismay. Grabbing a dinner roll, she tried to cram it into her mouth.

And abruptly, Sophia Hess was no longer sitting at the table. Shadows flowed and ebbed about the room. And the dinner roll dropped to the tabletop, fell off, and landed in the blood pooled there.

The shadow roiled about the table for a few moments, and then flowed out the half-open door. A voice unheard by human ears whispered, "So hungry ..."

And then, there were only the corpses and the cooling blood.
"Out of the question!"

Director Piggot's hand slapped down on the desk top with a sound like a pistol shot. Despite herself, Hope flinched. Miss Militia sat unruffled. Weld had started slightly, but not as badly as Hope had.

Piggot glared at Hope. "Do you have any idea how bad your timing is on this? The Slaughterhouse Nine are in town, and we are in a crisis situation at this very moment." She gestured at her computer, and her phone. Even the inbox tray on her desk was overflowing with papers. "I do not have time for this sort of self-serving nonsense. Whatever your problem is, pay, living conditions, whatever, we can sort it out after the crisis is done. But don't come in here wasting my time with empty threats to quit the Wards unless you get your way." She snorted. "I've had that happen too many times before today; I'm not going to stand it from you."

Hope blinked, and looked slightly shocked. "Madam Director, this is not what you think. I'm serious. I want to leave the Wards. I don't believe that my place is with them, not any more."

She indicated the other two in the room. "Miss Militia and Weld agreed to come along, to reassure you that they are aware of my decision."

Director Piggot stared at Miss Militia and Weld. "Is this true? She really just wants to quit?"

Miss Militia nodded, and gestured for Weld to speak.

"Uh, yes, Madam Director," Weld said carefully. "We were talking over certain matters last night, and Hope brought it up. She raised valid points about her current record of failure to follow orders and regulations, and told me that she thought it best if she left the Wards, as there are things she considers more important than following orders."

"More important than following orders?" repeated Piggot blankly. "There's no such thing."

"To me there is, Madam Director," explained Hope patiently. "Helping people. Over the last few days, I've ignored orders because people were hurt or in trouble, or just plain needed my help. And it's turned out okay for me. But it's not always going to be that way. Sometime, my luck is going to fail. I do get that."

She shrugged helplessly. "But helping people is ... the way I am, I guess. And if I'd followed orders, done what I was supposed to, then maybe the Chosen wouldn't have beaten Shatterbird. Maybe Burnscar would have gotten away." She spread her hands. "Maybe, maybe not. We'll never know. But I did what I did, for what seemed like good reasons. And I'd probably do it again, the same way. But ... I don't want someone else getting hurt following my lead, or trying to emulate me. So I think it's best that I leave the Wards before that happens."

Director Piggot looked over to Miss Militia. "Do you endorse this?" she asked.

Miss Militia nodded. "I do," she said. "Weld and Hope brought this matter to me early this morning, and we talked it out. Once I had been made aware of the number of times that Hope has been in violation of orders and regulations, I understood her reasoning, and consider that she is correct in her conclusions."

She tilted her head slightly. "Given that she has only just recently become a Ward, it should not be particularly arduous to grant her a release from her service with us."
"So," said Piggot, her brows lowering dangerously, "you propose to reward her misdeeds by giving her what she wants; a ticket out of the Wards. Wouldn't it be more appropriate to make her serve out a term of discipline first?"

Hope shook her head slightly. "Madam Director," she said pleadingly. Her entire manner was one of entreaty. "Please. I've done the right thing here. I've come in here to tell you I want to leave. Are you going to lock me up? I hope you don't, but if you try, I will resist. I don't want to be in the Wards anymore."

She glanced at Miss Militia. "And I don't think you're allowed to make me if I haven't done anything wrong."

"She's right, you know," put in Miss Militia. "Shadow Stalker was a special case. There is no legal requirement for Hope to be in the Wards."

Director Piggot turned her lowering gaze on Hope. "Do you recall the discussion we had in this very office, the day you agreed to join the Wards?" she prompted Hope. It was the last shot in her locker, and it fell woefully short.

"Yes, I do," replied Hope brightly. "I also recall getting information – from Tattletale, as it happens – about the other options facing a teenage cape in Brockton Bay. I can be a villain. I can be a rogue. I can even join a team that's not affiliated with the Wards. What I don't have to do is be in the Wards, if I don't want to be."

"You got this information from Tattletale?" Piggot's voice was cutting, sarcastic. "A remarkably suspect source, if you ask me."

"You'd think so," Hope answered in the same cheerful tone. "But she also told me that I was under surveillance by your people."

"That's ridiculous!" snapped the Director. "How can you even join a team that's not affiliated with the Wards?"

"You're right of course," agreed Hope. "Except for the radio tracking bug that she found attached to my pants leg."

"Really?" asked Miss Militia. "You bugged her?"

"Where is this bug now?" snapped Director Piggot. "Do you have it? Do you have any proof at all of your accusations?"

"No, she doesn't," said Weld. "She told me about it, but she had to leave it behind. However, on the same night that she found it, I personally witnessed PRT personnel searching her locker. In fact, I opened it for them."

Miss Militia was on her feet. "You had one of my Wards under surveillance? You bugged her? You had her locker searched without either her or myself being present, without even getting my permission?" Her eyes blazed. Unbidden, her right hand enfolded around the grip of a multi-barrel rifle that could probably put down a charging elephant. "Who the hell do you think you are?"

"We had ... suspicions," Director Piggot began defensively. "She's ... different. The way she acts ... I had no idea if we could even trust her. Her encounters with the Undersiders ... they could have been chance, or they could have been part of a deeper plan. To have her in the Wards, an unknown quantity, it was dangerous. We had to know. So ... we acted. I acted."

Her tone of voice strengthened, became defiant, self-righteous. "And I was right. I know I was. The
way she's been colluding with the gangs ... no-one could be so friendly with them without having been part of them.”

"You're wrong, Madam Director." Hope's voice was soft, but it held conviction. "They're people. All of them. Many of them have issues, but underneath, they all want the same things you and I do. Respect. Trust. Security. You just have to know how to talk to them." Behind her back, Weld and Miss Militia traded glances, then Miss Militia stepped forward.

"Be that as it may," she snapped, "this was a gross overstepping of your authority. I don't care what deal you may or may not have bulldozed Hope into agreeing to when she first joined the Wards – it's null and void. As far as I'm concerned, she's free to go."

"But you don't understand," protested the Director. "If Hope leaves ... have you seen our approval ratings recently? Since Hope joined, the Protectorate has gone up nearly forty-five percent. And the PRT's thirty percent higher than two weeks ago!"

"So you want to ride her personal charm and kindness to a higher popularity rating," said Miss Militia, her voice as dry as desert sand. "What she does out of the sheer goodness of her heart, you want to milk for profit."

"Not as such, no," Piggot denied, but her heart was no longer in it.

"Which translates as 'yes', I believe," observed Miss Militia. She shook her head, and holstered the Desert Eagle at her right hip. "Come on, Hope. I believe we have finished our business here."

Hope and Weld rose, and were almost at the door when Piggot tried one last time. "You have no residence. Everything you've been issued is Protectorate property. If you leave now, all of that will be confiscated. Where will you go? Where will you live? What will you eat?"

Hope turned and smiled gently at the fuming Director. "Thank you for worrying about me, Madam Director, but I think I'll do fine. I have friends, out there in the city. I'm sure they'll be pleased to see me."

"You mean —" began Director Piggot, then stopped.

"Yes," said Hope. Her laugh was cheerful, carefree. "I'm going to go live with the villains."

Lisa looked up from her phone call. Brooks had pushed in through the curtain separating the cubicle from the rest of the room, and was waiting to get her attention. "What is it?" she asked, covering the mouthpiece.

"You're never gonna believe who's here," he said, and then left again, without explaining further.

Frowning, Lisa got up and walked to the curtain. Pushing it aside, she peered out into the shelter. Almost immediately, she saw the cause of Brooks' interruption. Farther across the interior of the shelter, where the sick and injured were being cared for, was a familiar figure. Surrounded by a halo of silvery-blue light, which her wings broke into thousands of shards of rainbow glory, Hope leaned over a bed, speaking to one of the patients. All around, people were looking toward her, and in some cases, gravitating her way.

"Taylor," she said to the phone, "I'm gonna have to call you back. Hope just dropped in for a visit."

Pocketing the phone, she strolled in that direction.
When she got there, Hope was helping a boy stand up. His broken leg, previously immobilised by an inflatable cast, was now able to hold his weight with ease. She looked around at Lisa and smiled brilliantly. "Hi," she said. "Got a spare bed for an ex-Ward?"

"You're joking," said Taylor.

"Not a word," Lisa assured her.

"She left the Wards?"

"Surely did. I'm getting the impression that the rules and regulations were too confining for her."

There was a pause.

"Did you happen to mention that the Undersiders aren't big on rules and regulations?"

Lisa laughed. "Something like that."

"What did she say?"

"That she wanted to stay a free agent; not just be a part of any one gang. She wanted to be part of all of us, so she could help all the people in Brockton Bay as best she could."

"Could anyone even pull that off?" asked Taylor.

"I doubt if anyone else could," said Lisa, "but I'm not going to bet against Hope."

"Well," said Weld, "that's that. Hope's gone." He shook his head. "I think everyone's going to miss her."

"I know I will," said Miss Militia. "Here, something that may interest you." She turned her computer monitor around.

Weld scanned the text; it appeared to be the current dossier on Hope. It seemed the same as it had been, until he reached something that was unfamiliar. He paused, and read through it more slowly.

"Due to her extremely persuasive nature, subject HOPE qualifies for a rating of MASTER, for her observed ability to bring together quite dissimilar personality types in amicable agreement."

Weld looked at Miss Militia. "That would be the meeting."

Miss Militia nodded. "Yes. Keep reading."

Weld did so. "As this is not linked to any specific power, but born of several inherent qualities, subject HOPE is the first ever observed MASTER 0."

"Certified, E. Piggot, Regional Director, Parahuman Response Teams."

Weld shook his head. "Well, I'll be damned. That was nice of her."

Miss Militia looked thoughtful. "I'm not so sure."

"What do you mean?"
"It could also serve as a warning."

"Ah."
"So, let's talk."

Miss Militia sat at her desk. Monitors had been set up on it, along with speakers. The throat mic she wore was voice-activated; with the press of a button on the desk before her, she could transmit her voice to either of the cells shown on the monitors, or both at once.

On the left-hand monitor, Triumph stood and paced restlessly. He had been fitted with a tinker-made electronic gag; wearing it, he could speak and even eat, but any sound he emitted over seventy decibels was damped out by sound nullifiers, and translated into an electric shock to the back of his neck.

To the right, Battery sat on the bench with her elbows on her knees, head down. She had freedom of movement, but the inertial sensors within the cuffs fitted to her wrists and ankles would sense any movement over fifteen miles an hour and administer an appropriate level of electrical shock.

Both prisoners had been warned of the properties of their restraints. Battery had not attempted to exceed her limits even once. Triumph had tried three times.

Next to the images on the monitors were graphs and readouts, monitoring the cells and the restraints. Assault had wanted to be there for the interrogation, but Miss Militia had decided against it.

Triumph looked up at the camera. "What about?" he asked defiantly. Miss Militia double-checked her settings; Battery and Triumph could hear her and each other, but Battery had not responded.

"About you betraying the Protectorate," she replied coolly. "About Cauldron."

"Cauldron?" repeated Triumph. He barked a harsh laugh. "Good luck with that. They'll chew you up and spit you out."

Battery stirred in her cell, but did not speak. Miss Militia drew a deep breath and continued. "So, they are real. Good to know. Now, have you been a sleeper agent for them, all this time?"

"Hell, no," snapped Triumph. "I joined the Protectorate in good faith."

"Up until you attacked me, last night," Miss Militia reminded him.

"That was different!" he protested. "I got orders from Cauldron to give Battery all the assistance I could give her. I didn't even know what that meant until you came to me and told me about the message you got. And I didn't give you a lethal blast," he added belatedly.

"So who or what is Cauldron?" pressed Miss Militia.

Battery raised her head. "They gave me my powers," she said dully. "They give people powers for money. Lots of money. They're powerful, and they're secretive, and they hold it over you if you don't have enough money to pay them out all at once."

"Listen!" shouted Triumph; his voice took on an oddly flat note at the end of the word, and he jerked and fell against the wall for a moment. Then he recovered himself.

"Listen," he repeated, more quietly. "My dad got me my powers from Cauldron. I barely even knew anything about them. But getting my powers was the best day of my life. With powers, I can be
someone, I can help make the world a better place. Without them ... I'm nothing. Nobody. So when they contacted me and said that I had to help Battery, no matter what, or they'd take away my powers as easily as they gave them to me, I had no choice. Not really." He shook his head. "I didn't like it, and I argued, but they made the choice clear. Help Battery, or lose my powers."

"So, Battery," said Miss Militia, "what were you supposed to be doing?"

"They contacted me after Shatterbird was killed," she replied. "They told me that the Siberian had to survive to leave Brockton Bay. No word about any of the rest of the Nine. I hated the idea, but I figured, hell, who's going to be able to stop her anyway? So I basically accepted that that's the way it was going to be. I didn't like it, but I was over a barrel. But then, there was the meeting, and there was Hope with her insight."

"Why did you try to stop her from talking?" asked Miss Militia curiously.

"Because I didn't want to even think about the Siberian!" burst out Battery. "I'd been going around and around in circles, and I'd almost convinced myself that I was doing the right thing. And then there she was, all bright and cheerful, with an actual solution. I nearly hated her, right then, for coming up with a solution that I hadn't managed to find for myself."

She drew a deep breath. "And on the way back, I did a lot of thinking. And Cauldron or no, I couldn't think of a single good reason for letting any of those bastards leave Brockton Bay alive. Especially if it's actually possible to kill the Siberian."

"So you decided to betray the people who gave you your powers," sneered Triumph.

"And you decided to betray the people who are actually trying to stop the Nine," retorted Battery, starting to show signs of life. "Yes, I was going to do what I was told, as long as it seemed that I had no choice. But the moment I had a choice, I went for it."

Her voice went soft, introspective. "Ethan gave up being a villain to be a hero, to prove his love for me. How can I betray that?"

"Triumph?" prompted Miss Militia.

"What the hell do you want me to say?" he snapped. "Am I sorry I tried to do what I was told? I don't know. Would I have done things differently if I knew Battery wasn't going to follow through with her orders? Maybe." His voice turned pleading. "I just want to be a hero, to do the right thing. And sometimes doing the right thing means making really hard choices. Can't you see that?"

"Not really," murmured Miss Militia. But ... she could see his point of view; he was proud of being a hero, proud of doing the right thing. But he'd been hit in his one weak spot, threatened with the loss of his powers – could this Cauldron even do that? – against the escape of one supervillain, who could be tracked down and killed later anyway. He was young enough, brash enough, and this was possibly the first really hard choice he'd been faced with in his life.

She could see the arguments for and against what he'd done, and she wasn't altogether certain she'd make the right choice in his place. She hoped she would. She also hoped she'd never have to find out.

"So, about this Cauldron organisation. What can you tell me about them? Their strengths, their weaknesses. Their location. Anything about their defenses and resources."

She didn't see the doorway open behind her.
Vista squealed and flung herself at Hope, who had to brace herself to avoid being physically knocked back by the violence of the hug. She returned it, chuckling at the bemused look on Flechette's face. Eventually, Vista pulled back and looked at Hope's face from an arm's length away.

"You left us!" she accused. "You didn't even give us a chance to say goodbye!"

"I did say goodbye," Hope protested. "I made sure of it."

"She means, saying goodbye properly," explained Flechette. "Clockblocker wanted to throw a party."

Hope shuddered theatrically. "I think we're better off without a party planned by Clockblocker," she said, and turned back to Vista. "I'm sorry," she added contritely. "But there were so many things I had to do, and papers I had to sign. I was a bit distracted. But Weld did say I could come back and visit anytime."

"That's correct," nodded Weld. "Miss Militia managed to arrange a permanent visitor's clearance for her."

"It's not gonna be the same!" wailed Vista. "I already miss you!"

Flechette rolled her eyes tolerantly; Weld nudged her with his elbow. "What's this, miss cool-calm-and-collected? I seem to recall you were a bit upset too, when you found out."

"Hah!" snapped Vista.

Flechette muttered something indistinct and stuck out her tongue at Vista.

"Um," said Hope, even though she was enjoying the interplay, "not that I'm not pleased to see you guys ... but what are you doing here? I've only been gone what, six hours?"

"Blame her," Weld said, indicating Vista. "Ever since she had her power breakthrough, she's been wanting to come out and see how much she's improved. And so, after she found out where you'd gone to, she talked me into a patrol with her and Flechette, where she provided the transport. And guess where she wanted to come first." He gave Hope a mock glower. "You've taught her bad habits. She's proving to be almost as persuasive as you are."

"Oh, yeah, did you hear?" added Flechette. "Your classification's been upgraded."

"Oh?" said Hope curiously. "What am I now?"

Vista giggled. "Master zero."

Hope frowned. "Zero? How does that work?"

Weld cleared his throat. "The 'zero' classification is for when you don't have an actual power doing the work, but you're so talented or skilled that it looks like it. And anyone who can be simultaneously on good terms with Miss Militia, Skitter, Hookwolf, Purity and Faultline has got something a bit more than good luck and clean living going for them."

Hope shook her head slightly. "I still think your power classifications are weird." And then she brightened. "But if you're actually on patrol," she added, "I was going to go over to Parian's area with Skitter, to let her know I'll be dropping in from time to time. Also, to take some cloth over to her." She plucked at her top. "I've only got the one outfit, and it's sort of a unique pattern, so I was going to ask if she could make me some more."
Weld frowned. "Sorry about that," he said. "But Director Piggot insisted on having everything confiscated that you didn't arrive with."

"Oh, that's okay," said Hope airily. "They've already given me a new phone. All I need is spare clothes that fit, and I'm good." She grinned at him. "So, you want to come with?"

Weld paused, and rubbed his chin. "Skitter's coming along?" he said. "I'm not so sure about this."

Hope chuckled. "Scared of the big bad Undersider villain?" she teased. "Skitter's not that bad. Creepy, yes. Bad, no." She knocked on his forehead with her knuckles. "Besides, what have you got to worry about?" Tilting her head to one side, she added, "She's not going to do a thing. I vouched for you when you arrived. You're my guests."

Weld frowned again, his pride stung. She had to vouch for us to Skitter? Then he glanced at the other two Wards, who were staring at him intently.

"If you say no," growled Flechette, "I will shoot you in the middle of the forehead, with a metal arrow. So it makes you look like a unicorn, only stupider."

"And I'll make you walk home," added Vista. "And I'll make it twice as far as it really is, and all uphill."

Weld rolled his eyes and turned back to Hope. "Mutiny," he complained. "Sedition. See what a bad influence you are?" A smile split his face. "Of course we'll come along. Let's just hope I don't end up regretting it."

Vista squealed again, and hugged him. Flechette merely smiled slightly to herself.

The interior of the aircraft was impossibly noisy. Squealer had heard about the concept of elegance of design, but had never given it more than a passing thought. The way she built vehicles, bigger was better, and noisier was far more desirable than quiet. Thus, her jury-built monster chuntered through the sky, rotor-blades protruding at odd angles from the fuselage, and other oddities of design ensuring that everyone who saw it knew that a tinker had been at work. Its ability to stay airborne owed more to sheer brute force than to aerodynamics.

Of course, it had given Skidmark a nasty moment or two when she'd popped off the cover of the control console and rebuilt part of it while the aircraft was in flight. But they hadn't swerved more than a bit here and there, and it hadn't dipped closer than a few yards to the nearest building, so she'd given him a thumbs-up, snapped it back into place, and taken up the controls once more.

Oh yeah, and she'd been steering with her knees the whole time.

This was a simple smash-and-grab, he'd told his people, with appropriate eloquence. Go in there, beat up any opposition, grab any women, kids, and guys who didn't look like they could fight back, shove them into the cargo bay, and head back to Merchants territory. If the doll girl showed up, they'd keep her busy, or take her out if they could. Capturing her would be too dangerous. But if they could take her out, they could maybe start pushing into her territory. And maybe people would start respecting the Merchants again.

Easy as pie.

What could go wrong, anyway? Even if one or two of the Undersiders showed up, the Merchants still had enough firepower to put them away or keep them at a distance.
They had it in the bag.

The huge bonfires below silhouetted Jack Slash as he stood at the edge of the roof, looking down. The Chosen were down there, all of them as far as he could tell, dancing and celebrating. Drinks were doing the rounds, but – as far as he could tell – no drugs. In a strange way, he had to admire that. They used alcohol, but nothing harder.

Between the bonfires, on a wooden pole, was a dark, lumpy object with hair streaming away from it in the errant air currents; Shatterbird’s head. It was their trophy, indirectly the reason they were celebrating. He shook his head; no doubt the reward had been cleared with the PRT, and they were celebrating their sudden burst of solvency.

Shatterbird had been an idiot to press the attack when they had been so obviously ready for her ... but then, she didn't see things the way he did. But still ... a head on a pole. That was such a blatant challenge.

He glanced back to the remainder of the Nine, waiting on the rooftop behind him. A Chosen sentry lay lifeless nearby, his blood pooling on the rough gravel surface. The Siberian stood impassive, holding Bonesaw on her shoulders, the girl braiding her long hair. Crawler looked eager to get to the killing, but that was nothing out of the ordinary. And Cherish looked pensive, but the emotions from below were starting to fire her blood.

"Anyone seen Mannequin?" he asked.

Crawler shrugged massively. Cherish shook her head. "I think he was going out after Hope."

He frowned. He should have dealt with her, and caught up with us by now.

Ah well. It's not like we need him, for this sorry lot.

"None of the Chosen must escape," he said softly. "The insult to our name will be cleared."

Turning to the Siberian, he said, "Shall we, my dear?"

She reached out and took his hand. On her other side, Cherish gulped as she accepted Siberian's grip on her arm.

They jumped.
In which Miss Militia meets the Number Man, and Triumph shows his true colours

Miss Militia didn't see the doorway opening behind her. But she did see the reflection of it in the two monitors that she was viewing. Her office wall was dark; the doorway was lit from within.

So she was already turning, gun coming up, as the man in the three-piece suit stepped through the portal.

The intruder had a spring-steel baton in hand, and even as Miss Militia brought the gun to bear, he slashed it downward. It struck Miss Militia on the wrist with a sickening crack, and she cried out, dropping the gun.

And then it was in her left hand, transformed from a Glock 17 to an Uzi. The man went over Miss Militia's desk in a long dive as the stubby machine-pistol snarled and stabbed fingers of fire at him, and the casings rattled out on to the carpet. Firing one-handed and in pain, Miss Militia was less able to handle the vicious recoil than she usually was, and the bullets tracked across the wall, missing her attacker's heels by the barest fractions of an inch.

She was on her feet in a second, moving to get around the desk and bring her sights to bear on the intruder. But there was no sign of the man; he had obviously scuttled around to the other end of the desk, keeping low.

In her hand, the gun transformed again, into a Glock 18 with a laser sight. She stepped backward away from the desk, sweeping the gun from left to right to cover both sides – and taser wires lanced out from under the desk, nailing into her ankle. Electricity crackled and she fell to the floor, convulsing. Dimly, she saw the man rolling out from beneath her desk. The gun in her lax hand responded to her thoughts, angling to line on the man, but then a sharp blow to the head brought it all to darkness.

The Number Man scrambled to his feet and moved toward the desk. Two Cauldron guards stepped through the portal, guns leveled at the office door.

Doctor Mother stepped through the portal after the guards. Stepping behind the desk, the Number Man pressed the button that electronically locked the door, then moved over to Miss Militia and plucked the throat mic from her neck. Back to the computer, he handed the mic to the Doctor.

"Triumph," said Doctor Mother. "Battery. This is Cauldron. What do you have to say for yourselves?"

"What the hell?" snapped Triumph. "Is this some kind of trap?"

"No," she replied. "What has happened here? Why are you incarcerated?"

"Because I followed damn orders," replied Triumph.

"And got caught, obviously."

There was silence. Doctor Mother glanced at the Number Man, then went on. "Battery?"

On the monitor, Battery looked up. "I'm done," she said tiredly. "I can't let the Siberian go. There's too much death involved."
"Very well," observed Doctor Mother. "Triumph? Do you wish extraction?"

Triumph considered for a long moment.

"... no," he said. "It's taken me a while to figure it out, but no. I'd rather stay, and face the music." He turned to look at the camera. "And I don't care if you can take my powers away. Screw you. Don't come asking me for any more favours. Because of you, I nearly killed someone I have a lot of respect for. Never again."

"As you wish," snapped Doctor Mother. She glanced at the Number Man again, who leaned over the keyboard. Commands rippled out under his staccato fingertips, and the words EMERGENCY OVERRIDE came up in red on each monitor.

On the monitors, Triumph and Battery convulsed as their restraints began to fry their nervous systems with strobing pulses of electricity.

At the same time, there came a pounding on the door.

"You'd better go," said the Number Man quietly.

Doctor Mother nodded, and said quietly, "Door." The portal opened, and she stepped into it, the guards following.

Now just the loose ends, thought the Number Man, and set about wiping every last scrap of information that Miss Militia's computer had on Cauldron.

Legend became aware of the shouting and confusion shortly after he entered the base of the Brockton Bay Protectorate. Following the noise, he ended up outside the door to Miss Militia's office, where several members of the PRT were trying to get it open, and failing.

"What's going on here?" he demanded. He'd been told by Cauldron that there existed the possibility of a security leak in Brockton Bay, and he had arrived in the expectation of smoothing things over with the local Protectorate head. This was somewhat more public than he'd anticipated.

"Gunfire from inside," said one of the PRT men, coming to attention. "Door's locked from inside. We're trying to get it open."

"Stand back," said Legend, "and cover your eyes."

They obeyed, and coruscating light shot from the palm of his right hand, and smashed into the door lock. The material was tough, but his beams were powerful enough to do the job. The lock was carved out of the door in seconds. He pushed the door open just far enough to see the Number Man, standing at the desk. He finished whatever he was doing, and stepped toward Miss Militia's crumpled form, baton raised.

He's going to kill her, he realised. "No!" he shouted. But even as he raised his hand to fire a beam - which would have taken the baton from the Number Man's hand, not attacked the man himself - a portal appeared beside the Number Man and he dived through it. The beam passed through the space a split-second after the portal closed.

Miss Militia scrambled to her feet with Legend's help. Her head ached abominably, and her right wrist felt all wrong. "What ... where did he go?" she mumbled, shaking her head to clear it. She immediately regretted it; the maniac playing the bongos behind her eyes switched up to bass drums and redoubled his tempo.
"Don't know," he said with a shrug. "When I came in, he disappeared. Some sort of portal or doorway or something." All of this was actually true, he reflected.

"This wasn't a random attack," she added. "This was about Cauldron. They must have gotten wind that we're asking questions about them."

"Cauldron?" he scoffed, putting his best incredulous tone into it. "Do you still believe that old urban myth?"

"Don't you?" she asked with a wince, putting her hand up to gingerly feel the welt on her scalp.

"Not in a million years," he assured her. "Didn't you know? There's a number of villain groups that stay under the radar by using that name as a cover. Not affiliated with each other, but they spread the word and keep it alive so that law enforcement agencies chase this mythical Cauldron rather than themselves."

"But –" she began, and then swayed as a low rumble caused the building to shake. "Was that me or –"

But Legend was staring at the monitors, and at the glaring red EMERGENCY OVERRIDE text on them. One showed Triumph's cell, minus Triumph. A massive hole in one wall showed the reason for the absence.

The other monitor showed Battery's cell, also with a massive hole in one wall, and with the missing Triumph as well as Battery herself.

As they watched, Triumph prepared to unleash a scream at Battery, who seemed too stunned, shocked, or just plain indifferent to get out of the way.

When the electrical pulses bit into Triumph's neck, he knew exactly what was going on. *They're getting rid of us. Killing us with our own restraints. Elegant.*

He screamed. He couldn't help but scream. But he kept it behind his clenched teeth so that his restraints' own triggers would not increase the shocks.

But he heard screams anyway. *Battery. She must be in the next cell over.*

*They're killing her too.*

*I'm already dead. I kind of deserve this. But she doesn't.*

*I can't let this happen.*

His thoughts came in sharp bursts, between the electrical shocks, but he knew what he had to do. He struggled to his knees, faced the wall separating him from Battery ... and screamed. All the fear, all the pain, all the anger, he released against that wall, in one shattering burst.

The feedback blinded him, nearly knocking him out. When he clawed his way upright again, he felt warm trickles running from his nostrils and ears. But there was a hole in the wall.

Twitching, convulsing, trying not to scream again, he half-crawled, half-fell through the hole.

Battery was in there, her limbs flailing as she tried to control them and failed.

"Hold ... still," he grunted. "I've ... got this."
She stared at him between convulsions, unable to talk, and obviously thinking he was there to finish her off.

"Trust me," he grated.

She stared into his eyes ... and held still.

With the very last of his control, the last of his energy, all that he had going for him, Triumph went for one last heroic effort. He had to scream, but he had to focus it. More, he had to tune it, to a specific set of frequencies. He'd tried this before, and always failed.

This time, he had to succeed. He had no choice, no fallbacks.

He screamed.

And every piece of semi-conductor, every piece of silicon, every chip and micro-switch in front of Triumph ... disintegrated.

It didn't come apart explosively a la Shatterbird, but merely shivered into its component molecules, ceasing to be a coherent entity.

Battery's restraints stopped receiving instructions, and ceased shocking her. She collapsed, more dead than alive.

The relevant components in Triumph's collar were behind his head, and thus out of range of his shout. They were unaffected, and thus gave him full punishment for the scream he had just unleashed.

PRT guards burst into the cell one minute later. They found Battery, lying unconscious on her back with ruined restraints on her wrists and ankles, breathing shallowly but alive.

They also found Triumph, face-down, body still twitching from the regular shocks coursing through his system. One of the guards applied the cutoff signal from a handheld remote. Miss Milita and Legend entered the cell at that moment, Legend having carried her from her office.

The PRT officer looked up from Triumph's body, where two of his men were even now attempting CPR. "No vital signs, ma'am," he reported. "Looks like he's gone."

"Not necessarily," she said grimly. "Put the word out for Clockblocker. He's going to keep Triumph in stasis until we can get hold of Hope."

*She's the only chance he's got.*

*And I need to know what he knows about Cauldron.* A sideways glance at Legend. *Mythical or not.*
In which the Nine meet the Chosen

The two bonfires roared and crackled, lighting the area for dozens of yards in all directions. Derelict cars had been cleared away to form a rough circle around the bonfires and the grisly trophy between them, and Rune had stacked them two high in places to provide a crude amphitheatre effect. Coolers of beer were available, and spirits were high, in more ways than one.

Hookwolf lounged against a car trunk, with the rest of the powered Chosen arrayed around him. He was feeling good; the PRT had finally, reluctantly, acknowledged his victory over Shatterbird. Over four million dollars had gone into the bank account held by Fenrir's Chosen; this would give them a vast advantage when they began to expand farther into Brockton Bay, after the Nine were dealt with. He took a long drink from his beer, and belched.

Menja leaned over toward him. She had to raise her voice to be heard over the celebratory whoops and battle-cries. "Are we not being just a little complacent here?" she asked. "After all, you killed a member of Slaughterhouse Nine, and her head is displayed on a pole for all to see. They may take that a little ... amiss."

"Perhaps," allowed Hookwolf. He swigged from his beer again. "But think about it. They have lost two of their members already since coming to Brockton Bay. This leaves them no more than seven, perhaps six. Would they risk attacking us while we are arrayed in force?" He shrugged, the metallic flanges protruding from his shoulders clashing together in syncopation. "I think not. Besides, I killed her in fair combat. If they take offense to that, then they are no true warriors."

"Among that number," Menja reminded him, "are Crawler, and the Siberian."

Hookwolf nodded seriously. "Granted. But the rest are less ... formidable. If they attack, no matter what damage those two do, we should be able to kill one or more of their other members. Perhaps even Jack Slash himself." He grinned. "Imagine the reward for his head." He finished off the beer, and tossed it over his shoulder, to land behind the cars. "And they will undoubtedly know this. I doubt they will be taking such a chance."

Menja frowned. There seemed to be a flaw in her leader's logic, but she could not pick it out.

"And besides," Hookwolf added, "we have taken precautions. Sentries on the rooftops, and man-traps in the darkness. Trust me, we have nothing to worry about."

And at that moment, because the universe loves a good punchline, Crawler landed in the farther bonfire.

The phrase 'all hell broke loose' seems rather apposite at this moment. But it is also a considerable understatement.

Launched from a high rooftop, Crawler's bulk slammed into the bonfire, sending burning logs and beams scattering far and wide into the crowd. People screamed and fell away from the rain of fire. He bellowed laughter, loud and grating; Crawler was one of the few beings whose voice clashed with itself.

Hookwolf took but an instant to assimilate what was happening, and then bellowed, "To arms! To arms! We are under attack! To arms!"
At the same time, metal sheeted from his skin, covering his body from head to toe in moving blades. His mask snapped over his face, and that of him which was flesh retreated to its place of safety deep within his metal carapace.

Menja slammed her helm over her head – she was already wearing the rest of her armour – and grabbed her longspear before commencing to grow, her size increasing dramatically. On her left arm, her shield was lifted before her to protect from any incoming attack.

Rune, sitting in the interstice between two cars, tapped both of them, and then reached up to lay her hand on a third; all three derelict vehicles began to rise into the air.

Stormtiger lifted into the air himself, supported on a pillar of whirling wind. He sent slashing claws of air at Crawler, who bellowed once more with mirth as the gashes and rents closed faster than Stormtiger could open them. And then he jerked in midair, as slashes appeared across his chest, wide and deep. The final cut gouged his throat open to the bone, and he fell to earth, spraying crimson across the crowd below.

Cricket appeared from nowhere, bounded over a car, and disappeared into the darkness.

Othala and Victor, sitting together, glanced at each other. She laid a hand on his arm, transferring power into him, and then gave him a nod. He leaped lightly down from where they had been perched, and followed more slowly after Cricket.

Cherish could not suppress a yelp of fear as they fell to earth, but the landing took no impact whatsoever. Bonesaw's mechanical spiders swarmed out of the surrounding darkness; three climbed her slight frame, while others ranged out before them. The Siberian strode forward, tripwires snapping and man-traps clashing shut on her impervious legs. Jack Slash, with Bonesaw and Cherish, strolled along behind. He saw Stormtiger rise up in the firelight, flicked his wrist several times, and watched the man fall once more.

Cricket came dancing out of the darkness, blades gleaming darkly in her hands. The Siberian lunged for her, but the mute girl was all speed and agility, twisting away and leaping over the slashing attack. She didn't bother matching her capabilities against the naked woman, but instead moved in toward Jack Slash and his two companions. Bonesaw's spiders swarmed in toward her, but she evaded them as lithely as she had the Siberian. She was just a yard or two away from Jack Slash when Hack Job appeared directly behind her, arms already closing over her arms and body. Her reaction was instant, slashing backward with her curved blades, plunging them deeply into Hack Job's body – but he had already teleported on, leaving a simulacrum behind. And that held together just long enough for Bonesaw's spiders to latch on and start climbing. She screamed, harsh and ragged, as the first injectors jetted venom into her femoral artery.

Hookwolf slammed a massive blade on the end of a prehensile chain into Crawler's body; the abomination took the blow, and lunged toward him. One of Rune's floating cars smashed down upon Crawler, driving him into the ground. He laughed again, bellowing, "More! MORE!" and pushed himself upward, toward Hookwolf.

Hookwolf expanded his body farther, and swung a massive metallic fist that crushed in the front of Crawler's face, and stopped him for a moment. But the flesh was already healing. He reared up and lunged a second time at Hookwolf.

Menja, now thirty feet tall, lowered her longspear and took Crawler in the underbelly with a strident battle-cry. The spear-point, hard driven, punched through his armour plates and transfixed him,
lifting him half off the ground.

Othala tried to rally the surging Chosen, but she could not make them listen, could not make them remember their discipline. Something was blowing the fear in their hearts out of all proportion. And then she remembered; Cherish. And she understood.

In the darkness, Cherish grinned.

The Siberian stepped into the outer edges of the firelight, Jack Slash and the girls not far behind. Rune threw a car at her; it struck her dead on, and sheared in half lengthwise, not causing her to take even a single step back. The halves of the car landed on either side of Jack Slash, merely inches from Cherish and Bonesaw.

Victor stepped up to challenge the Siberian. "You cannot hurt me, monster!" he bellowed, and threw a combination of blows, dazzling in execution.

They rebounded from her, but she took a step back, shaking her head as if dizzied.

She returned with blows of her own, which he ducked, or parried; his grin widened. *I am impervious, invulnerable,* he told himself. *Othala's gift protects me.*

And then, he felt the slightest tap in the centre of his chest. He looked down, and her arm was extended straight out toward him, her outstretched hand buried to the wrist in his torso. And then he realised the truth. *She was just playing with me. Just a particularly cruel cat, with a particularly stupid mouse.*

And with that understanding, he died.

Victor's body, a gaping wound in the chest, flew from the darkness and landed asprawl half within one of the bonfires. There was no way anyone could survive a wound like that. Othala saw this, and knew grief.

And Cherish felt that grief, and seized upon it.

And before it could transform itself into anger, and thirst for revenge, it grew and swallowed her. She lost all urge to live, all urge to strike back.

Ignoring the conflict raging about her, ignoring the panicked crowd around her, she bent and picked up Victor's broken body.

And stepped into the bonfire.

Rune threw a second car, aiming it at Jack Slash and his two companions. But despite the rage and power in her attack, he stepped aside at the very last moment.

And then, in her moment of distraction, Hack Job appeared behind her on the floating car. His axe was already in motion; it slammed into her spine, driving her forward.

As she died, as the car fell, the body of Hack Job was already elsewhere, leaving just another simulacrum behind.

The car crushed more than a dozen people as it fell.
Othala, still clinging to Victor's body, writhed and died in the flames.

Hookwolf smashed another blow into Crawler, and another. The monster jeered and laughed, and began to pull himself down the spear, to get at Menja. She let out another cry of battle, of rage, and plunged forward, forcing Crawler backward through the crowd, through the cars, and into the side of a building. The wall shattered and gave way, and they plunged into the darkness within.

Complicated sounds of destruction arose.

Siberian stepped up and faced Hookwolf. He tried to ignore the frisson of fear. I am Hookwolf. I have defeated all my foes. Shatterbird herself fell before me. Looking past her, he saw Jack Slash, and sent a razor-tipped spearhead toward the leader of the Nine. Jack leaned his head to one side, and it skidded past his ear. And then the Siberian grabbed the chain to which the spear was attached, and yanked hard on it. Hookwolf stumbled forward a step, before severing the chain and regaining his balance.

Already, Bonesaw's spiders were spreading out, herding the non-powered together, driving them back toward the bonfires. Those who tried to run, those who resisted, were swarmed and injected, and dragged back. Hack Job, too, was there to cut down those who resisted most fiercely.

Hookwolf looked around, and saw the destruction of all he had worked for, all he believed in. And he knew his fate.

I will die.

But I will die as a warrior dies.

On my feet. Facing the enemy. Fighting.

He did his best.

His most powerfully-driven blows shattered against the Siberian's skin. Her lightest touches gouged great rents in his steel armour. Any time he attempted to strike out at either Bonesaw or Cherish, Hack Job was there to intercept the attack. Jack Slash was untouchable; attacks intended to strike him never seemed to hit home.

And there was the Siberian, pressing him, hounding him, pushing him harder and harder. He smashed at her with everything he had, never giving up, even as his metallic fists, his steel jaws, broke and shattered on her naked body.

And when she finally seized him in an unbreakable grip, tore apart his metallic body, and reached in to tear out his beating heart ... it was almost a mercy.

The last sight that his dimming eyes beheld was the Siberian standing triumphant over him, his heart in her bloodied hand, as she sank her teeth into it, took a bite, and swallowed.

She consumes my strength, was his last thought. As is fitting.

And then Hookwolf was dead, and Fenrir's Chosen with him.

Bricks shifted aside, rubble parted, as Crawler emerged from the collapsed building. In his jaws, he
held a human arm, which he chewed and swallowed with evident relish, along with the shield that had been strapped to it.

"Menja?" asked Jack Slash, though he knew the answer.

"She's dead," confirmed Crawler in his multi-toned voice. "Gave me a hell of a fight, though." He sounded pleased with himself.

"Good," said Jack Slash lightly. "Don't say I never take you anywhere nice." He looked around and raised his voice. "Build a monument. Use the live ones. I want all who see it to know and understand the consequences of dealing with the Nine. I want the city to shit its goddamn pants when it sees what we've done here."

"Jack!" said Bonesaw, sounding shocked. "For shame! Swearing in front of a little girl like that!" Even the Siberian gave him a disapproving look.

"Sorry," he said, sounding contrite. "I got carried away. It won't happen again. Now, get to work. I want them to spit out their orange juice when they see this on the morning news."

"Yes, sir."

Bonesaw did her best to make the monument, built from the still-living bodies of the members of Fenrir's Chosen, to look as macabre as possible. And she had some little talent in that area. Atop it was Hookwolf's metal wolfs-head mask; impaling the mask and standing higher still was the pole upon which Shatterbird's head still resided.

"That should give them the right message," decided Jack Slash. He looked around, frowning. "Mannequin should have gotten here by now. Where has he got to?"
In which there are discussions between Hope, Skitter and the Wards

It was obvious that Weld was more than a little uncomfortable with the concept of cooperating, even in this minor endeavour, with a somewhat notorious supervillain. As such, he didn't speak much, and not at all to Skitter, as they walked casually over the rooftops, covering fifty yards or more per step, thanks to Vista's improved powers.

Vista, on the other hand, had no such inhibitions.

"So what's it like being a supervillain?" she asked, casually contracting space before them, and letting it expand to its normal dimensions behind. "Do you have to live in a creepy underground base?"

"Why not?" replied Skitter equably. "You do."

"Yeah, but ... that's different, okay?" replied Vista.

"Yes, it is," replied Skitter, a faintly teasing note in her voice. "I've got it better than you."

"How so?" demanded Vista.

"Well," Skitter told her, "I get to pick my room, and decorate my base any way I like. You have to live downstairs from the adults."

Flechette laughed out loud. "She's got you there, Vista."

Vista stuck her tongue out at Flechette.

"Actually, I have an idea," said Skitter. "Why don't you two join the Undersiders? We've always got room for new recruits."

Her tone was joking, and both Vista and Flechette were chuckling.

Then she gathered a swarm of insects around her – where they had come from, Hope had no idea – and said in a flat tone, "Come to the dark side ..." The insects buzzed in tune with her voice. It sounded utterly, totally, creepy. Both Vista and Flechette burst out laughing.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Weld asked in an undertone, watching as the two girls joked with Skitter. Hope was chuckling too, but she sobered as she turned to him.

"Yes, I do think so," she said firmly. "Or are you scared of letting them see that villains are human too?"

Off to the side, Vista said, "That's awesome! Do another Vader line!"

"I ... dunno," said Weld, obviously torn between his fears and his honesty. "Vista and Flechette are good people, solid. But it feels wrong, just ... hanging with villains, when there's not an Endbringer situation happening. We're supposed to be ..."

"At each other's throats?" suggested Hope gently. She shifted the bolts of cloth she was holding to her other arm. "Not building any sort of real trust? Treating each other like the scum of the earth?"
"Luuuuke, I am your faaaaather ..."

"That," managed Flechette between fits of giggles, "is so wrong on so many levels. Do another one."

Weld frowned. "That's not fair. You're putting words in my mouth."

"So tell me the words you were going to use," Hope prompted. "Or have you just been conditioned so long into believing that heroes are heroes and villains are villains, and never the twain shall meet, that you cannot imagine any other way?"

"I find your lack of faith .. disturbing ..."

"Oh god, stop," gasped Vista. "You're killing me." She was laughing so hard she had to stop and double over to catch her breath. Tears were running down her face. Flechette was in almost as bad a state.

"You have a way," Weld said severely to Hope, "of making me question my own beliefs. Please stop." He patted Vista on the back until she could breathe properly, then bent an accusatory eye on Skitter, who was standing there, looking as innocent as one could when enshrouded in insects. "I think we'll lay off the Star Wars impressions for the moment, shall we?" he added. "I don't want Vista to lose concentration in the middle of a step across a wide street."

Skitter tilted her head. "If you say so," she agreed, in a more normal tone. "Actually," she added, "there was something I wanted to speak to you about."

Weld blinked; he glanced at Hope, who looked back at him blandly. Clearly, he was not going to get any help from that direction. "Uh, okay," he said at last. "What's the problem?"

"There's been some killings," Skitter said, as Vista started the group moving once more. "Odd ones."

"The Nine, do you think?" asked Weld. "They've been quiet, these last couple of days."

"Not ... their style, exactly," replied Skitter. "A family slaughtered just as they were sitting down to dinner. Cuts and gashes all over their bodies. Not as clean and precise as Mannequin would make, not as artistic as Jack Slash leaves behind. There were whole bodies, so it wasn't Crawler, and there were no parts missing, so we can rule out Bonesaw."

"You've been doing your research," said Weld, reluctantly approving.

"When the Slaughterhouse Nine come to town, it has a way of focusing a person's mind wonderfully," Skitter misquoted.

"How do you know they were just sitting down to dinner?" asked Weld.

"Plates of food on the table, untouched. But that's the strange thing," she added. "All but two plates were untouched. One was empty, wiped clean. Another was half-eaten, as if in haste – some food was spilled on the floor. Cutlery was clean, so they were eating with their fingers. But all the bodies had clean hands."

"So ..." said Weld slowly, "the killer or killers came in, slashed everyone to death, ate a full meal in some haste, and then walked out again?"
"Not walked in or out," Skitter corrected him. "There were people in the area, they say they would have seen anyone strange coming or going."

"Okay, that is odd," admitted Weld. "Have the police been notified?"

"Yes," replied Skitter, and her flat tone made him imagine that she was rolling her eyes behind her mask. "We were put in a queue."

"Even for a multiple murder?"

"Even for that."

Weld shook his head. "Get me the details, and I'll make sure it gets looked into. If there's another cape going around killing people, this needs to be stopped."

"I can do that," Skitter assured him. "And there's another one that's a lot stranger."

"Okay," Weld said cautiously. "Define 'stranger'."

"A bunch of people in a house not one mile from the first house. It looked like a drug hangout, to be honest. Some sort of Merchants offshoot. People heard shouting, screaming, loud noises. They went in and looked around after everything went quiet. A dozen people, men and women, all dead."

"How did they die?"

Skitter shrugged. "We have no idea. From the looks on their faces, they died of terror. Or maybe they were just scared of dying." A pause, and it sounded like she was grimacing. "Their bodies were all ... contorted. However they died, it wasn't pleasant."

Weld was silent a moment, absorbing this. "I'll need the details on that one, too," he said at length. "If it wasn't just an overdose on something new and horrible, if there's two new parahuman murderers in town, we need to step on them, hard. And if they're working together ..." He didn't need to finish the thought.

"Agreed," said Skitter immediately. "I'll get all the details to Hope. People listen to her."

Weld nodded slowly, and was about to make a comment, when Vista spoke up. "Uh, guys? That's not one of ours, is it?"

Ahead, circling into a landing, was the most bizarre monstrosity of an aircraft that any of them had ever seen. Rotor blades protruding at odd angles hauled it through the sky by sheer brute force; even now, they could hear the chuntering roar of the engines.

"That's tinker-built," said Flechette flatly.

"That's the Merchants," added Weld and Skitter together, with Hope chiming in half a second late. Vista and Flechette looked at them curiously. "How can you tell?" asked Vista.

"If you'd seen their boat," Hope said with an attempt at levity, "you wouldn't need to ask."

"But what are they doing over Parian's territory?" asked Flechette, her voice tense.

"I have a suggestion," said Hope brightly. She carefully placed the bolts of cloth on the rooftop. "Let's go ask them."
In which the battle with the Merchants ends with a bang

The ungainly aircraft swooped and dived and stuttered its way to a landing, some distance ahead. Vista began to close the distance, her face grim with purpose. And that was when they saw the gorilla.

It was huge, and made of cloth, and Parian rode its back like a very small jockey on a very large and unruly horse. Under her direction, it was knuckling its way rapidly across the rooftops in the direction that the aircraft had disappeared.

"We need to talk to her," Skitter said suddenly. "We need to find out what's going on."

Vista glanced at Weld, who frowned.

"It's a good idea," Hope said encouragingly. "If the Merchants are making a move on her, I'm bound to help her defend her territory."

"But she wasn't at the meeting," Weld objected. "She's not party to the truce."

"Yes, she is," Skitter stated flatly. "She's allied to the Undersiders. Any agreement we took part in, she's bound by as well."

"And if she's bound by it, she deserves the protection of it as well," Hope said. "I'm going to stand by that. She gestured toward where the aircraft had disappeared. "The Merchants have been nothing but mean ever since I met them. Do you honestly think they are doing anything nice over there?"

Weld sighed. "Good point. Let's go talk to her."

They caught up with Parian just short of where the helicopter had come down. There was a small park there, with what looked like a tent city of sorts. Hope recognised the signs of a distribution centre for the resources that were keeping these people alive. The landing had crushed a dozen tents, and the rotor-wash had blown more of them away. People were lying dazed here and there, some injured.

Up close, the tinker-made aircraft looked even more mismatched than before. There were rotor blades above as well as below, some appearing liable to strike the ground on a bad takeoff. Squealer could be seen through a bulging canopy toward the front of the craft, sitting before a bewildering array of controls. At the back end of the craft, there was a large ramp, currently in the down position, glowing with the effects of Skidmark's power. Skidmark himself stood beside it, directing affairs.

As they watched, Trainwreck grabbed a young woman and tossed her on to the ramp. The field caught hold of her and whipped her, screaming, into the cavernous depths of the cargo hold. Mush grabbed another and did the same; unlike the last time Hope had seen him, he was now covered with layer after layer of garbage of all kinds, making him much larger and stronger than normal.

"They've been doing this all over my territory," Parian told them; while her white dolls-face mask showed no emotion, her voice shook with rage and frustration. "Land, grab people, take off. I've tried to stop them, but they're always ready for me."

Ranging out from the grounded aircraft were two of the Merchants who had attended the meeting; a teenage boy with glowing white hair, and a woman with long flowing clothes in violently clashing colours. "The boy does something with a white flash of light, and it destroys any of my animals it
"hits," she went on. "The woman creates telekinetic whirlwinds and blows them away."

"The boy's name is Scrub," Skitter put in grimly. "He's only new. He isn't too good at aiming his bursts, but they disintegrate anything they touch. Including people."

"We have to do something, and fast," Hope said urgently. "If I go down and grab Skidmark, maybe the rest of them will give up." As she spoke, she spread her wings, readying to launch herself off the roof.

Weld made a quick decision. "We'll give you cover," he agreed. "I'll take on Mush; if Skitter can provide a distraction with her bugs, Parian can deal with Trainwreck."

Skitter nodded. "I'll need to get to ground level as well," she said.

"I can handle that," replied Vista with a grin. "We'll stay up here and provide overwatch," she added.

"And covering fire," put in Flechette, slotting a bolt into her arbalest and cranking the string back.

"Let's do this," said Hope, and launched herself into the air.

Skitter must have spent every moment since they identified the helicopter in gathering her swarm, Hope decided later. Even as she took to the air in a symphony of crystalline chimes, insects of all descriptions were swarming over the canopy of the aircraft, as well as zeroing in on the villains below. They probably couldn't get to Squealer, but they could certainly block her line of sight.

Not a single bug of any description touched her as she arrowed through the criss-crossing swarms. Trainwreck brushed away insects from his mouth and nose, the only place where his steam-powered carapace did not protect his body. Steam burst in fits and starts from his exhaust outlet, blasting out clumps of insect corpses, as bugs apparently tried their best to block the opening with their bodies.

Mush seemed basically unaffected by the insect swarm; perhaps the compacted-garbage exoskeleton he bore afforded him some protection. Hope saw them swarming around Scrub, but the boy was already blasting at random around himself, the bursts of white light destroying insects in spherical volumes, some quite substantial. White smoke poured from his eyes and mouth, apparently driving off or destroying more insects.

The woman with telekinesis blew up a miniature windstorm to keep the bugs away from her. Skidmark was not so lucky; he was already beginning to brush them frantically away as Hope swooped in toward him. But suddenly, she had problems of her own, as the telekinetic extended her windstorm to Hope. Enveloped by a howling dust-laden vortex, it was all she could do to remain airborne.

Weld stepped off the edge of the building, already forming his arms into large knobbly clubs of metal, the better to deal with someone of Mush's capabilities. The distance, originally forty feet or more, suddenly decreased to just one foot, courtesy of Vista. Skitter stepped down as well, and moved off to the side, a swarm accompanying her and blurring her outline. The huge gorilla knuckled away in the direction of Trainwreck. The building was abruptly four storeys high once more.

"Impressive," said Flechette admiringly.

"You ain't seen nothing yet," grinned Vista, and pretended to crack her knuckles.
Weld ran at Mush; the trash-covered supervillain tried to flee, but suddenly the distance reduced dramatically. Before Mush could evade the blow, Weld's swinging arm-club caught him amidships, smashing litter everywhere and creating a deep divot in Mush's personal collection of garbage.

Despite his personal difficulties, Trainwreck ran toward where Weld was swinging his first blows at Mush. Space warped, and Trainwreck suddenly found himself much farther away, and sharing close personal space with an enraged animated gorilla.

"Hope's in trouble!" snapped Flechette, and aimed a shot at the telekinetic, intending to pin her to a wall by way of her flowing draperies. The bolt flew true, but in the last few yards, it swerved aside, caught in the same powerful air currents that had ensnared Hope. Flechette growled and aimed another shot, this time mindful to compensate for that. But before she could loose the bolt, there was a cloud of dust and loose trash in the air between her and the telekinetic, and she no longer had a clean shot.

"I've got it," Parian assured her. Abruptly, the windstorm died. As it did so, the dust cloud cleared, to show the woman lying on the ground, quite literally trussed up like a mummy, with even her head covered. "Loose, flowing gown, my butt," muttered Parian. "That is so out of fashion, these days."

Hope found herself able to control her own flight patterns once more, but by the time she had gotten her bearings, Skidmark was acting. Ducking under the belly of the imposing aircraft, he climbed up into the aircraft via some sort of hatch on the underside. She couldn't hear what he was evidently saying from this distance, but in the cockpit, Squealer was reacting, pulling some controls and pushing others. The rear ramp started to motor into a closed position, trapping the Merchants' captives within, even as the heavy rotor blades began to turn.

Once Skidmark opened the hatch into the interior of the craft, Skitter was able to direct some of the numerous bugs she had plaguing the Merchant leader on to Squealer. Even as she attempted to get the massive craft into the air, she found herself being stung, bitten and generally harassed by creatures smaller than her thumbnail but nonetheless very hard to ignore. That is, until Skidmark dropped the hatch closed, and Squealer slammed her fist down on a single red button, emblazoned with a crude rendition of a bug. Blue lightning danced throughout the aircraft, briefly illuminating it from within. When it receded, both Squealer and Skidmark had hair that was standing wildly in all directions ... but every insect, every bug, within the aircraft was dead.

Parian's gorilla grappled Trainwreck, hoisting him high in the air, and preparing to throw him bodily at a brick wall. The metal-clad villain tried to struggle free, but the pseudo-ape was too strong, and had too good a grip. Steam hissed from his pistons and joints as he strained uselessly to escape.

Weld smashed away at Mush, ripping away more and more of the protective outer covering of trash. The misshapen little man cringed as his real face and jaw were exposed; Weld transformed one club into a normal-sized fist, and drew it back.

"How do we deal with Scrub?" asked Flechette. "I can't just shoot him."

"Can you make him hold still?" asked Parian.

"That," said Flechette, "I can do." She raised her arbalest and loosed a shot which nailed the side of
Scrub’s trainer to the broken pavement. Scrub tried to pull free, with no success whatsoever. With his attention focused on the bolt holding his shoe to the ground, he didn’t see what came next.

Weld punched out Mush, then looked around just in time to see Parian's gorilla throw Trainwreck bodily a good twenty feet. At the same time the distance between Scrub and the gorilla was suddenly reduced back to what it had been before the fight began – roughly twenty feet. Trainwreck impacted with Scrub, knocking him flat and tearing the trainer right off his foot, before landing hard himself and slamming into a wall. Scrub was clearly unconscious; Trainwreck tried to rise, but steam hissed ominously from a ruptured cylinder and he subsided, cursing.

Weld looked around, as the rotors gained speed, and the ungainly aircraft began to rise from the ground.

I have to save these people.

Hope didn’t hesitate; dodging the accelerating rotor blades, she swooped down to where the large rear hatch was still motoring closed. Landing on the very edge of the ramp, she went to brace herself against the upper frame of the hatchway – but she had forgotten about one important factor.

Skidmark had treated the ramp with his power.

With a yelp, she found herself propelled inside, losing her grip on the upper edge of the hatchway, and ending up inside the cargo bay with about two dozen captives. It was a fairly cramped space, particularly when shared with twenty-odd people in various levels of panic.

Well, crap.

"They've got Hope!" It was a toss-up as to who said it first.

Weld ran, knowing it was too late, but determined to try anyway; the massive aircraft was already lumbering into the air. One arm lengthened, grew spikes, and curved back on itself; a makeshift grappling hook.

Parian’s gorilla lumbered forward, covering a surprising amount of ground.

Flechette loaded a bolt, cranking back the string, and sighted on Squealer’s head, visible through the thick bubble canopy. I don't want to kill her, but if it's that or let the Merchants have Hope ...

Vista sweated, biting her lip. The helicopter should be lifting off far faster than this, but she was straining even the extreme limits of her newfound level of capability, reducing the distance from it to the ground, over and over.

As Hope tumbled to a stop, the people within stared at her.

"Who are you?" asked one woman, incipient panic edging her voice.

Hope climbed to her feet. Don't let them see your fear. "My name is Hope," she said clearly. "I'm here to help you."
Skitter didn't move at all. But a truly impressive swarm of insects swept in from where they had been dealing with other problems, divided into two great masses – and dived headlong into the twin turbines that powered this airborne monstrosity.

The turbines had mesh screens over them sufficient to prevent birds from being sucked in. But they proved no barrier at all to tens of thousands of determined insects. And Squealer had not thought to shield her turbines against bugs.

The insects struck, massed, and clogged the turbines with their sheer numbers. The engines coughed, caught, raced, coughed again, choked ... and stalled. Black smoke arose from the left-hand turbine; the right-hand one chose to dispense with the wishy-washy stuff, and burst into flame.

Half the rotors on the craft stopped dead; the other half continued to run at half efficiency. This did no favours at all for the stability – already markedly poor – of the Merchants' helicopter. It lurched, spun and careened in a wobbly circle, before the left-hand turbine gave up the ghost and exploded into shards of high-velocity shrapnel.

Several pieces struck Weld, and stuck into his metal skin. Parian's gorilla abruptly sagged, deflating, as three separate pieces went through it, tearing great holes with their passage. Other people suffered minor injuries, nothing life-threatening.

Within the craft, Hope felt the lurching motions, and heard the all-too-close explosion, and felt fear for those around her. "Everyone down!" she shouted. "Brace yourselves!" People turned their faces to her; this was the first confident, assured voice they'd heard since being captured, and they found themselves obeying her. She followed her own advice, bracing against impact.

And impact came.

The helicopter described one more erratic orbit of the park, before losing all power and slamming down to the ground with a teeth-jarring impact. The landing gear, not yet retracted, snapped off under the heavy jolt, and the craft crunched onto the ground, canted over on one side.

The low-set rotors took the impact first. Spinning fast enough to be a blur, they struck the ground as the craft tilted, and transformed themselves into vicious shrapnel, large enough to cut a man in half.

Weld was no ordinary man, which was the only thing that saved his life. One of the rotor blades smashed into him as it spun across the park toward much less durable civilians. It lifted him off his feet, left a dent inches deep in his abdomen, and drove him back hard against a free-standing streetlight pole. The pole shuddered and took on a slight lean, but otherwise it weathered the impact admirably. Dazed by the double impact, Weld slumped against the pole as the rotor blade dropped to the ground.

Skitter, farther away, got warning via her bugs and dropped flat behind an ornamental garden bed; she escaped injury altogether.

The other bits of rotor blade, their trajectories mainly upward due to the tilt of the craft, slammed into walls and broke windows around the edge of the park. But one struck the parapet just feet from where Parian, Vista and Flechette were providing overwatch. Brickwork shattered, spraying chunks of masonry at the girls.

Flechette saw it coming, saw that Parian hadn't. Without thought of her own safety, she threw herself at the doll-faced villain, bearing her to the ground and out of the way of the damage. Vista reacted
instinctively, her powers kicking in before her conscious mind was aware of the danger. Immediately, she and the others were several hundred feet away from the blasting hail of broken bricks. As a result, she was only clipped by one small piece, and Flechette was hit by several fist-size pieces; had they remained in place, all three would likely have been killed by a hail of head-sized masonry chunks.

Space on the rooftop snapped back to its normal dimensions, and Vista groaned, rubbing the side of her head where a chunk of brick had clipped her on the way past. There was blood on her fingertips when she inspected them, but not overly much. She decided that she was going to live, and turned to look at the other two, just as Parian grunted and shoved Flechette's limp body off of her.

"Are you all right?" gasped Vista.

"I'm fine," Parian responded. "Flechette pushed me down. I think she got hit bad."

She felt for a pulse, then groaned in frustration and pulled Flechette's mask up.

"Hey!" snapped Vista. "No unmasking!"

"Relax," Parian said, feeling for a pulse. "She's already shown me her face. Her name's Lily. Mine's Sabah." She looked up, worried. "And I don't think she's breathing." Hurriedly, she pulled her own mask off, revealing a face streaked with dust and sweat, and bent close to Flechette's face. Then she took a deep breath and blew air into Flechette's lungs, following it up with chest compressions.

Flechette gasped, choked, and began to breathe again. Parian settled back on her knees, wiping sweat off her face with the back of her hand.

After a moment, Flechette's eyes fluttered open. "Urgh," she muttered. "Did anyone get the number of that train?"

"You're okay!" exclaimed Parian, cradling Flechette's head on her lap. Her expression became worried again. "Are you okay?"


"What?" asked Parian, leaning forward. "What?"

Flechette's left arm curled up around the back of Parian's neck and pulled her down. And she kissed her.

Parian's eyes flew wide open, but she did not struggle, did not pull away. A moment later, she responded, her arms going around Flechette's body and pulling her close.

"Well, she's definitely okay now," muttered Vista, and then cleared her throat. "Hey, you two! Get a room, or get your heads back in the game! We've still got problems down there!"

Parian and Flechette separated, albeit reluctantly. "Oh," said Flechette.

"Right," added Parian.

"Sorry," they said in unison. In some little embarrassment, they pulled their masks back into place and went back to the roof edge, where the parapet was somewhat more ragged than before.

Down below, the crashed helicopter had smoke pouring out of it; bits of its fuselage had broken off, cluttering the ground around it. Skitter was moving over to Weld, who had not gotten up from where
"What's the matter with him?" asked Parian. "He's nearly impossible to hurt, isn't he?"

Flechette burst into chuckles, but subsided as she held her ribs. "Ow. Yeah, but if he touches metal, he's got a tendency for it to bond to him."

"You're kidding," said Skitter.

"Afraid not," grunted Weld. "It's up to you and the others, now." He strained at the pole behind him. "It's going to take an hour or more to get unstuck from this thing now." He gestured at the helicopter. "And Hope's still in there. Along with anyone the Merchants might have captured."

"Twenty-three of them," said Skitter. "I got bugs in there after the crash sprang the rear hatch just a little. Everyone's up and moving, so that's good at least."

"The thing's on fire," Weld pointed out, as smoke billowed anew from the downed craft. "They're going to have to hurry."

"I'm working on that," Skitter replied.

Hope shook her head and climbed to her feet again. Smoke wreathed throughout the cargo bay, and she heard coughing, but it wasn't too bad yet. Her eyes flared blue, and she could see, after a fashion. "Is anyone not okay?" she called out. "Is anyone near someone who's unconscious or unable to move?"

There was a chorus of answers that indicated that everyone was conscious and able to move, though she suspected a few broken bones. *Still, that's better than being dead.* She herself felt a sharp stabbing pain in her lower left wing that wasn't going away; she thought it might be dislocated or even broken. It had to be shelved for the moment; she wasn't going to be taking to the air any time soon anyway.

Making her way down the canting floor to the rear hatch, she saw a very narrow gap up at the top, through which wisps of smoke were escaping. It had obviously sprung on impact with the ground. Unfortunately, Skidmark's power effect still glowed on it. She tried a kick at the door; the kinetic field caught her foot even as it contacted the door, and whipped it down painfully hard against the floor. The door shook slightly, but showed no other effect.

"We're trapped!" shouted a teenage boy. "We're gonna burn to death!"

"We are not trapped," Hope contradicted him, just as loudly, with firm resolve in her voice. "We will get out of here. I promise you."

Eyes turned toward her, as she amped up her glow so that all could see her through the drifting smoke. "Just outside here," she added, "there's Parian, and Skitter, and three of the Brockton Bay Wards. If I can't figure out a way out of here with their help, then I'm not much of a superhero, am I?"

There was a general lightening of the mood; no-one laughed, but a few people smiled.

And then Hope noticed a string of insects circling her head at eye level, all orbiting clockwise. She turned her head, puzzled. *Skitter? What's she doing?*
As she turned, the insects slowed their orbit, until they were hovering before her. Then they flew directly away from her. She followed, edging past people who were watching her with hope and expectation in their eyes. "Excuse me," she said brightly. "Coming through."

The hatch in the forward wall was low-set and partially concealed by a bulkhead, but the insects led her directly to it. The smoke in here was getting thicker, and the coughing was getting worse.

"We have a way out!" she called. "Give me room so I can ring the doorbell!" People stepped back obediently, and she lashed out with her primary wings; one, two. And again: one, two. The impacts rang crystalline chimes throughout the hold, and people covered their ears. But on the second set of strikes, the hatch burst open, letting in a fresh influx of smoke, which quickly rose toward the ceiling.

The insects hanging in midair formed an arrow pointing straight down. Looking in that direction, Hope saw a square hatch; it must have been what Skidmark used to get into the aircraft. It wasn't locked; a turn of the handle allowed her to open it wide. Below was grass that had been trampled into wet mud. But it was outside of the aircraft. *Skitter, when I see you next, I am gonna hug you so hard ...*

"Okay," she called out. "Everyone, one at a time, come forward. As soon as you are out, move away from the aircraft. Keep going until you reach the buildings. Help anyone who needs helping. One at a time now, no shoving. You *will* get out."

She reached into the cargo bay and pulled the first person – a teenage girl – through, helping her down into the hatchway. The girl dropped on to the grass and scrambled out of sight. The next person came through, and followed suit. Fresh air poured up through the hatch, clearing eyes and minds, and the people followed Hope's instructions, her cheerful presence keeping order where panic might otherwise have prevailed.

The people came stumbling out from beneath the grounded helicopter and made their way toward the edge of the park. One at a time they came, unsteady on their feet but helping one another to move away from the crashed aircraft.

"She found a way out!" said Vista jubilantly.

"Oh, thank god," said Parian weakly. "Get me down to ground level, please. I need to help them."

Vista nodded, and the roof level now seemed just a foot above ground level. All three girls stepped off on to the pavement, Flechette moving a little painfully but keeping her feet well. Skitter was moving to assist people away from the crash site, and they joined her.

"Have you seen Hope?" Flechette asked Skitter.

"She's all right," Skitter assured her. "I think she's going to get Skidmark and Squealer."

"Really?" asked Parian. "She wants to save them? After all they've done?"

"It's how she is," replied Skitter with a shrug. "It's what she does."

"This is true," agreed Flechette.

The last few people were lining up to climb down out of the hatch, so Hope felt free to go forward after the two people who were behind all this trouble. The smoke was thickening and the crackle of flames louder, so she didn't want to take too much time, but she could feel that they were still alive,
and she could not let them burn to death.

When she reached them, Squealer was trying to get Skidmark to his feet; the leader of the Merchants was groggy, but recovering. They both looked around at her with loathing. Skidmark went to say something, and attempted to use his power at the same time. She was faster; her right primary wing lashed out, smacking him upside the head. He reeled back, eyes unfocused.

"I don't have time for this," said Hope coolly. "I'm getting you out of here, and into lawful custody."

Squealer tried to pull a gun on her; it was large and bulky, and seemed to have been born of an illicit liaison between a Desert Eagle and a Jetsons-style ray gun. Hope used her left primary to smash it from Squealer's grasp; then she stepped in, took Squealer's right wrist in her left hand and twisted in a distinctly painful fashion.

"This thing is on fire!" she shouted. "Stop fighting me!"

Someone fell out of the hatch below the downed craft. Someone else fell on top of them. Then Hope dropped down – easily discernible via her glowing skin – and dragged them both clear.

Skitter, Vista and Flechette were there to meet her; Parian was busy making repairs on her deflated gorilla. They looked down at the unconscious villains.

"They kept trying to fight me until they passed out from smoke inhalation," she explained with a shrug. "They're alive. I'll treat them when I get the chance." There was a glint in her eye. "After I treat everyone else who needs help." She looked around. "So, it's all mopped up out here?"

"As Weld says," Flechette told her, "it's all over bar the shouting."

And then the helicopter exploded.
In which Hope meets Mannequin, and only one survives

The helicopter had come to rest tilted on a distinct angle. Its partially-collapsed landing gear had left it propped up on one side. This was the only thing that saved their lives.

Something flew out of the gathering dark, something metallic and sharp. It struck the fuel line where it ran under the skin of the aircraft. The contents of the fuel line were extremely volatile; Squealer had formulated something with more kick than military-grade jet fuel. In a fine spray, it spurted out on to the burning right-hand turbine. Safety cutoffs had prevented a blowback from the turbine, but this defeated that safety measure, as was the intent.

The spray caught in a bare instant, ignited, and flashed back into the fuel line, and along to the massive tanks built into the centreline of the aircraft. The helicopter was canted up with the left side higher than the right, and thus when the fuel vapours ignited and blew out the top of the fuel tank, the initial explosion was facing slightly away from Hope and the others.

A fraction of a second later, air swept into the cavity thus created, and oxygen came into contact with superheated liquid fuel. It barely even needed the trigger of red-hot metal edging the hole created by the initial explosion.

The resultant series of explosions destroyed the helicopter altogether, and sent a shattering blast-wave in all directions. Everyone around had moved back out of the way; even the escapees from the cargo hold had heeded Hope's advice and kept moving. And so, the only ones in range of the blast proper were Hope, Skitter, Flechette, Vista, and Parian, as well as the two Merchants.

The first explosion provided just enough warning, even as Weld called out urgently, and Parian shoved power into her just-repaired gorilla, reinflating it. Hope had just stooped to grab Skidmark and Squealer once more; when the light pressure wave from the first explosion washed over her, she wasted no time, throwing them as far as she could away from the helicopter.

Then she leaped toward Skitter, Flechette and Vista, wings spreading wide to envelop them. Skidmark and Squealer were still in the air as she wrapped her arms and wings about the other three. Parian's gorilla snatched up its master and bounded toward cover, using its bulk to shield her from the blast.

Skidmark and Squealer landed thirty feet away, bounced, and rolled limply. Hope bore Skitter, Parian and Vista to the ground, covering them as best as she could with her wings. And then the second blast front reached them.

A raging storm of flame and debris roared about them, following the sledgehammer-blow of compressed air. They tumbled over and over; however, Hope's wings took the brunt of the worst of the impacts.

The only one not protected or cushioned by the wings was Hope herself. She felt objects strike her back and head, but not much did more than bruise; that is, until a searing pain in one calf ripped an agonised scream from her lungs.

The storm passed; the raging blast wave rolled over them and spent itself on the buildings surrounding the park, then dissipated. In its wake it left debris, all of it smoking and some still actually on fire, strewn as far as the eye could see. Not a window remained unbroken, not a blade of
Hope shakily unwrapped her wings from around the three girls and looked around. The light-pole to which Weld was bonded had fallen over, with him still attached. Others, out near the perimeter of the park, were stirring and starting to move. She hadn't felt anyone die. *That's a blessing.*

Skitter groaned and sat up, followed by Vista. "I'm sorry," whispered the younger girl – or at least it sounded like she was whispering, with the explosion still drumming in Hope's ears. "I got hit on the head before, and it feels a bit funny. I couldn't react in time."

Flechette was struggling to sit up with her right arm apparently not working too well; Hope rolled over to give her a hand, and gasped in pain as something sent a white-hot spike of pain right up her left leg. She looked down to see a piece of jagged metal the length of her arm protruding from her calf.

And at that moment, the pall of smoke hanging over the park parted, and she saw someone walking toward them. Slow, purposeful strides, as if the person had all day.

**Who is that?** she wondered, and then the smoke parted a little farther, and she saw who it was.

**Mannequin.**

Skitter was already on her feet. All the bugs in the region of the park were likely dead or disabled, but already more were swarming in from all points. Hope reached over and laid her hand on Flechette's shoulder; silver-blue energy pulsed, and there was a muted *crack* as the bones in the girl's forearm knitted together, followed by her ribs.

"Flechette," she managed through clenched teeth, "I need you to pull this thing out of my leg. I can't fight with it there."

Skitter had a small knife in her hand as she went forward to meet Mannequin; in response, the white doll-like form extended a foot-long blade from each of its arms. Bugs formed a swarm around Mannequin's body and head. He didn't react, striding through them as if they did not exist.

Flechette laid her hand on the length of metal; Hope nearly screamed again as it grated against her shinbone. "This is going to hurt," warned the young Ward.

"Do it," grunted Hope. *It can't hurt worse than it already does.*

In a moment, she was proven wrong.

Skitter ducked as Mannequin swung his arm at her, the limb extending on a chain, the blade gleaming wickedly in the dying light. His other arm came up, a blade springing from that limb with a soft *chuff*, leaping across the distance between to catch Skitter in the throat as she was off-balance from dodging the first time. Skitter fell.

Flechette put one hand on Hope's calf; with the other, she firmed her grip on the shard of metal. Then she sent power into the metal, and pulled.

Hope's flesh was already beginning to swell around the intruding item; even though Flechette's ability made it possible to pull it free without doing further damage, it still wrenched a scream of
purest agony from Hope's lips. But it came free.

Hope came to her feet, bracing herself with her three good wings, ignoring the pain still radiating up and down the leg. She could not stand on the injured leg, but at least the jagged metal was no longer in the wound.

Mannequin was only yards away; he stepped over the prone Skitter and kept coming. But Hope knew something that he didn't; specifically, that the strike to the throat had not killed Skitter, or even seriously wounded her. Her life-sign still burned brightly, even as she sat up stealthily behind the robotic villain.


Flechette helped Vista up. "Arbalest is broken. Bolts are scattered to hell and gone. All I've got left is hand to hand. And I'm healthy. You're not." Vista stretched space, and abruptly Mannequin was more than fifty feet away. She herself took a step, and was a hundred feet away, on the other side of the park.

Mannequin shook his head, as if in annoyance, and began to run toward them, his limbs blurring with his speed. In Hope's ear, she heard Vista's voice speaking softly.

"Three ... two ... one ..."

Divining Vista's meaning, Hope half-fell sideways, supported by Flechette. Her right primary slashed around at neck height, just as Vista reduced the distance between Mannequin and herself once more. She also adjusted the lateral distance, exaggerating Hope's sideways movement.

Mannequin blurred past Hope ... and met her wings, coming the other way. She was nearly jolted off her feet, even with the bracing Flechette was providing. He was less lucky; her right secondary met and deflected his passing blow with a shower of sparks and a chiming of crystal, and her primary clotheslined him neatly. His feet went out from under him, and he landed heavily on his back. His head extended from the neck by over two yards, held on by a chain.

Mannequin began to get up; Hope stamped on the chain, just as it began to retract. She leaned her weight on it, and smashed downward at his back with her right primary wing. With her wounded left leg, and her damaged left secondary, she could not turn fast, and so she had to strike backward to hit Mannequin, but still she hit him hard enough to drive him into the ground again. Plus, she couldn't be sure, but she thought there might be a dent there. She desperately wanted to turn, to face Mannequin properly, but to do that, she'd have to take her foot off the chain.

And then, strands of web began to settle over Mannequin. Shreds of cloth also, connected to dozens of insects by fine white webbing strands. These began to wrap around Mannequin from all angles.

Mannequin disconnected the chain that was hooked into his neck hole – obviously his head was not essential to his operation – and backed off before getting up. He was showing Hope a wary respect now, but he knew the reach of her wings, and she was under no illusions that he was going to give up right now.

"We need to turn ..." muttered Flechette softly.

Hope nodded, and stepped back with her right foot, removing it from the chain. Flechette stepped forward, and they pivoted around her wounded leg, which she raised off the ground, supporting herself on her left primary.
Bugs were now swooping around Mannequin, depositing strand after strand of web on his outer carapace. More were doing their best to climb into the neck-hole where the head had been connected. He still seemed to be oblivious to their presence, apart from attempting to pull away some of the small squares of cloth that clung with a tacky persistence.

Mannequin held out both arms, articulated fingers twitching and writhing like something found under a rock, and then four blades snapped out of the wrists of each one. They began to spin, faster and faster, as if his arms held airplane propellers. Web strands, pieces of cloth, parted and shredded as the blades became blurs. He started forward once more; Hope knew her skin was tough, but a blade that sharp and moving at that speed would slice her open like a ripe peach.

He moved forward a little faster, a little more sure of himself ... but Hope noticed that his gait was a little forced, as if he had to work just a bit harder to take each step. *Webs*, she realised. Skitter's bugs were spinning webs around his knee and hip joints, crawling into the articulated areas, doing their best to hamper his movements.

*Whatever you're doing, Skitter*, she thought, very loudly indeed, *keep it up.*

Mannequin came at them, arm-blades spinning. A lot of things happened very fast indeed.

As he came in, Mannequin altered his stance. The spinning blades on his left arm retracted, while a single foot-long blade extended from his forearm.

He changed direction abruptly, sweeping his right arm, with its blades spinning at eviscerating speed, at Flechette's head and neck.

"No!" shouted Hope, pushing Flechette aside and bringing up her left primary to protect the young archer from the vicious attack.

The spinning blades whined off the crystal feathers, sending sparks flying far in the early evening dimness, cracking two of the diamond-hard crystals, and snapping off a blade neatly.

But then Hope realised it had all – or at least partly – been a ruse. For Mannequin's left arm was swinging down at her with all his strength, the gleaming blade darting at her head, her face.

She ducked her head, felt the blow on her forehead, and then an explosion of pain in her right eye; blindly, she lashed out, striking him heavily with her right primary, driving him backward.

The pain was indescribable. She fell to her knees; the only thing preventing her from collapsing altogether was Flechette's support. With her right hand, she tried to wipe the blood from her right eye, so she could see properly. Her probing fingers found ... nothing. No eye. Just a soft mush that dribbled down her face.

"Oh god," choked Flechette. "Don't touch it. You've lost the eye."

She regained her feet an eternity later. Her left eye was still working fine, so she could see Skitter duelling with Mannequin, some distance away – Vista must have seen her distress and had extended the distance. Skitter was ducking and evading him as best she could, using masses of insects gathered in humanoid form to confuse him. Occasionally it even worked. Her costume saved her from more than one fatal or at least dangerous wound, on the occasions where it did not.

And more insects, bearing more webbing, more cloth, settled around Mannequin's body, his limbs. His movements became more and more laboured.
Hope fancied that the pain in her leg had decreased; she peered down, and decided that the blood loss had slowed. Testing the leg, she found that it could bear her weight.

"Flechette," she said softly, "get that shard you pulled out of my leg. It's time we finished this."
Flechette looked at her, startled, and saw that she was using the leg. Awkwardly, but she was using it.

"Vista," said Hope out loud. "Get me close in three ... two ... one."

Flechette grabbed up the shard and stood ready; Mannequin managed to knock down the real Skitter, and poised a spinning arc of blades above her neck.

Vista collapsed the space between Hope and Mannequin. Hope reached out, grabbed his left arm in both hands, and hauled him toward her, swinging him around, using herself as an axis. He reacted fast, but Flechette was faster. Even as he swung the spinning blades toward Hope, the young archer threw the shard of metal. It punched straight through the armour in his torso, and fixed itself in there.

Mannequin convulsed in Hope's grip. His arms, his legs, swivelled in all directions. His fingers flexed like the legs of a dying spider. The arm she held released from the shoulder joint and ran out to the full length of the chain.

She took a good grip and yanked sharply on it, wrenching the chain and the rewinding mechanism out of his shoulder; released from the support, he fell heavily.

But yet, he was not done.

Somehow, Mannequin managed to regain a vestige of control. Climbing to his feet, the metal shard still protruding from his chest, he reached into his neck-hole and came out with a strange-looking knife, short and stubby.

He activated it; a grey fuzz surrounded the blade. Lurching forward, he swung it at Hope.

"No!" shouted Skitter. "It'll cut anything!"

Almost too late, Hope registered the warning, and fell back away instead. She couldn't pull her wing away fast enough; the grey field sheared away two crystalline feathers, and she felt a stinging pain in the wingtip, but it was not too bad, perhaps a shallow cut. The sound as it sliced through the diamond-hard crystal was subsonic, but jarred her teeth all the same.

One of the shards fell near Flechette; she picked it up without a second thought, and flung it, straight and true. It nailed him through the wrist joint, and the knife fell from his hand. Even as he tried to grab it, a bunch of insects swooped through the space and snagged it in a net of webs holding a piece of cloth. Some of the web, some of the cloth, two of the insects were caught in the grey field; enough survived to bear it away, out of his reach. The instant it was clear of Mannequin, Vista snapped it toward Skitter.

He didn't get the chance to go after it. Hope stepped in, face grim, and smashed a primary against his chest, while the other hooked around behind his legs. When he fell, she planted a foot on his torso, took hold of his left leg and wrenched it from the socket.

Even as blades extended from the leg in an attempt to slash at her, she dropped the loose limb and took hold of the chain thus exposed. Setting one foot on his torso and one on the ground, she hauled
the chain out, working hand over hand against the resistance of the rewinding mechanism, until something snapped and the end of the chain popped free.

Webs wound around the two remaining limbs, binding them to his torso or clogging the ball-joints, no matter how many blades popped out of them. Mannequin’s struggles continued, but Hope held him in place. Skitter approached, holding out the knife.

"No," said Hope. "You've earned it."

So Skitter leaned over Mannequin, and activated the knife with the strange grey field around the blade, and drew it over the white carapace. Mannequin tried to thrash, to pull away, but Hope held him down. The armour plating parted, like a hot knife carving through soft butter; Hope could see wet flesh, twitching organs within. Skitter readied the weapon for a final strike …

Hope said, "Wait."

Skitter looked at her curiously. "Last-minute scruples? Hope, this is a member of the Nine. Even the Protectorate has a kill order out on him. We can't just leave him alive."

Hope nodded sadly. "I know. I'm learning about things like that." She leaned forward, edged her fingers through the gap in the armour until her fingers touched what was within. Silver-blue fire flashed briefly.

"What was that?" asked Flechette warily. "Did you just heal him?"

Hope shook her head. "No. I just made sure he would feel no pain." She nodded to Skitter. "Do it."

Skitter didn't hesitate. She cut swiftly with the knife, peeling armour away like the shell of a crab. Then she slashed at the exposed organs. Mannequin convulsed one last time, and then something horrible splashed on Hope's foot.

Hope felt the light, the spark, of his life go out, forever.

She wasn't sure how she felt about this. On the one hand, it was murder. Pure, cold-blooded murder of a vanquished foe. But seen another way, it was an execution, a retribution for the deaths of so many others. And seen yet another way …

In a very real way, she told herself, it was a mercy killing. Mannequin had been a tortured soul, a man in torment within a polished self-made cage. And between them, they had ended that torment forever. She could only hope that he was at peace now.

The four girls clustered about her in concern as she moved away from that which had once been Mannequin. "Are you all right?" asked Skitter. "You look like hell."

"And your eye," added Parian, her voice breaking.

"I'll be fine," said Hope wearily. "It'll heal, or it won't. I can't help that. Just … let me sit down for a moment, and go and find those people who are hurt worst, and bring them to me. I'll do what I can to fix them."

Vista and Flechette helped her to a seat on the edge of an ornamental garden bed near to where Weld lay on his back, still attached to the fallen light pole. Skitter and Parian were moving around, checking on people. So far, no-one seemed to be hurt too badly. At least, they weren't sending them Hope's way.
"Either of you have a working phone?" asked Hope. "Mine's trashed."

"What for?" asked Flechette, but she pulled hers out anyway; while her arbalet and bolts had suffered from the battle, the padded pouch seemed to have done its job.

"A solution to Weld's current problem," replied Hope with a tired grin. While she dialled, Flechette pulled out a roll of bandage from another pouch and wrapped it around Hope's head, covering her wounded eye. The skin of her face below the wound was already free of blood.

The phone rang three times, then picked up. "Hello, Faultline speaking," said the voice on the other end. There was a pause. "Who is this?"

"It's Hope," she answered. "Hi, Faultline. I have a favour to ask, if you're willing."

"What favour?" asked Faultline, but not in a hostile manner.

"Could you come over to Parian's territory, give us a hand dealing with the aftermath of an attack? There are people hurt, and more specifically, Weld has need of your … unique talents." She grinned slightly at this.

Weld heard the name 'Faultline' and waved his hands frantically, mouthing, "No" at Hope. She ignored him, listening to Faultline's reply.

"Sure," she said. "Who attacked?"

"The Merchants. Then Mannequin."

There was a very long moment of silence. Hope waited patiently. Faultline spoke carefully. "Who died?" Not 'did someone die?', because it was an article of faith that someone would have died, after an incident like that.

Hope paused before answering. "One fatality. Mannequin. But we were lucky."

"Holy. Shit." Faultline was silent for another long moment. "Okay, I really, really want to see this. Where do I go?"

"I'll ask Skitter to come get you with Vista. Good enough?"

"I trust you … and yeah, I trust Skitter. Good enough." She paused. "Is this going to piss off Weld and the Wards?"

Hope grinned again. "That's probably an affirmative."

"Good. I'll see you soon."

"See you then." Hope closed the phone and handed it back to Flechette. "Can you get Skitter to come and see me, please?" she asked. Then she glanced at Vista. "Up to another trip, with Skitter as escort, kiddo?"

Vista said, "Sure, okay."

At the same time, Weld said, "No!"

Hope gave Weld a level stare. "Until you get free of that thing, you are dead weight here. Faultline can cut you free in seconds. If the rest of the Nine get here looking for Mannequin, we can't move you fast enough to get away. Do the math."
Weld drew a deep breath, let it out in a long sigh. "Fine. But don't expect me to like it."

Hope shrugged. "Okay. But I can try to make sure you live to dislike it."

Skitter arrived, with a nod for Hope. "How's the eye?"

"Hurts. Flechette fill you in?"

"Something about a road trip."

"I need you to go get Faultline. Maybe Gregor, too. Get the fires put out, and Parian's going to need help rebuilding here. Plus, Weld needs someone to cut him free from the pole."

Skitter leaned in close. "You know," she said in a low voice, "I could cut him free with this knife. It'll go through that metal like - well, like a hot knife through butter."

"I figured," Hope agreed, just as quietly. "But I really want to do it this way. You good for it?"

Skitter snorted, a sound suspiciously similar to a laugh. "Sure, if Vista's up to it."

Vista grinned. "I'm game if you are."

"Well, let's go then."

Vista nodded, and moments later they were gone.

Weld gave Hope a look half exasperated, half worried. "I hope we both don't end up regretting this."

"I think we'd regret it more if we didn't give it a try," Hope replied. She lowered her head and closed her remaining eye. "Is it okay if I rest a bit? My eye kind of hurts a bit. And my wing. And my leg."

"Okay," replied Weld. "You do that." He watched her; bruised and battered and yet strangely unmarked by her ordeals. But he knew what she'd been through, had seen most of it. No dirt, no grime, no blood. If I didn't know any better, I'd think she needed no help at all. That gave him pause to think. That must be problematic for her, from time to time.

Then he strained again against the bond that held him to the fallen pole. But she's right. I'd never get loose in time. Even if I don't like it, it's necessary. But I'll never hear the end of it.

Hope felt her focus wavering. She knew her body was healing, but the pain was still making her dizzy, making it hard to fix on the now. It was so easy to slip away, let someone else take care of the details.

Parian and Flechette were busy assisting the victims of the attack. Skitter and Vista were not back yet. So it was Weld who saw the portal open, saw the dark-clad woman step out of it.

"Hey!" he snapped. "Who are you? What do you want?"

She ignored him, grabbed Hope under the arms, began to drag her into the portal.

"HEY!" bellowed Weld. "Let her go! Leave her alone!" He scrabbled for a stone, threw it awkwardly from his reclining angle. The woman moved her head aside just as it flew past and disappeared into the portal. Then she pulled Hope all the way inside and the portal closed. Flechette and Parian came running up. Weld didn't spot, then, the way they ran side by side, hands almost
touching.

"Who was that?" Flechette demanded. "Where did she take Hope?"

"I wish I knew," replied Weld honestly. "But there's going to be hell to pay for this."

Parian looked around at the gathering dark. "Everyone likes Hope. We'll find her, wherever they've taken her."

But somehow, Weld knew that it wouldn't be as simple as that.
"Well, we have Hope," said Doctor Mother. "What next?"

Contessa paused. "We've made a mistake," she stated flatly.

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Doctor Mother. "The interventions went off smoothly enough. Granted, I would rather have had you instead of the Number Man with me, but he defeated Miss Militia easily enough. He didn't manage to eliminate her at the end, but that was because Legend intervened." She sighed. "Although Legend knows little enough about our true operations, he may well have raised awkward questions, had we carried through with the elimination of Miss Militia."

"I'm not talking about that," replied Contessa. "I'm talking about Hope. It was a mistake to snatch her."

Doctor Mother shook her head. "That was your operation, from beginning to end. I asked you to formulate a way to end her interference in our plans –"

"With respect, Doctor, you did not," interrupted Contessa. "You asked me to find a way to get her into our hands with minimal delay and number of witnesses. I did that."

Doctor Mother frowned. "And yet, you were witnessed by three people, two of whom are members of good standing in the Wards. Could you not have captured or killed her with no-one watching?"

Contessa grimaced. "No. And do not think I did not try to find a way. But that was my very best path for capturing Hope. Every other path had more witnesses, or resistance by Hope herself." Her tone turned frustrated. "I do not see all the alternatives to my power's solutions, but it seems to me that there is a force working behind the scenes, a force working against us and for Hope."

"Protecting her?" asked Doctor Mother sharply.

"Not … as such," replied Contessa carefully. "It seems that it does more to ensure that anyone acting against her suffers a backlash, one that raises more problems than it solves." She paused. "And yet … she herself seems entirely unaware of this factor."

"So …" said Doctor Mother after a moment of thought, "it appears that Brockton Bay's guardian angel has a guardian angel of her own?"

"That," agreed Contessa, "seems to be the gist of it."

"Well then," replied Doctor Mother in some little frustration, "you're our problem solver. Solve this problem. How do we deal with her now without bringing on more complications? Do we kill her, hold her incommunicado?"

"We let her go," said Contessa promptly.

"You're kidding," replied Doctor Mother in disbelief.

Contessa shook her head. "You underestimate the amount of influence that she's had on the city in the time she's been here. This 'Hope' has sparked the public imagination in ways that only Scion or the Triumvirate have managed before now. And she's far more accessible; she goes out and helps people."
She gestured at Doctor Mother's computer. "Her Youtube videos have gone viral; there are three separate Facebook pages dedicated to her exploits, and the Parahumans Online forums have put up several dedicated threads just for discussions regarding her."

"Perhaps if public opinion were to be manipulated against her?"

Contessa shook her head. "Difficult, if not impossible. Once in a while, someone tries that, on the boards. Each and every time, they get flamed into a greasy spot." She gave Doctor Mother a direct look. "They love her. And for good reason. She's done nothing but good since she got here."

"So what do we do with her?" asked Doctor Mother in frustration. "How do we stop her from causing more interference with our plans?"

"I … think that's the wrong question," replied Contessa slowly.

Doctor Mother said nothing; just looked at her quizzically.

"I think," Contessa went on, "that we should ask ourselves how Hope can assist us in our plans. After all," she added, "what is our long-term goal here?"

Doctor Mother looked confused, but answered promptly. "To ensure that the Siberian –"

"No," interrupted Contessa. "The long-term goal."

"To ensure that the apocalypse starts –"

But Contessa was shaking her head. Doctor Mother stopped, thought, started again.

"Ah," she said. "I see. I think I see. Our long term goal is to ensure the survival of the human race, by whatever means."

Contessa nodded. "I think we have begun to lose sight of that, now and again," she said. "It's a good idea to remind ourselves of it." She smiled. "And if we can make use of the Slaughterhouse Nine to fulfil our ends, then surely we can make use of someone like Hope."

Doctor Mother nodded slowly. "I like it. If she has the influence to hamper us so badly, all unknowing, then if we can co-opt her, that influence should work in our favour."

"Just remember," Contessa cautioned, "that Hope is a nice person. Sacrificing some for the greater good is not something she is likely to be at all comfortable with. Especially on the scale we have been planning for."

Doctor Mother nodded again. "Ah, naïve, I understand. Well, I am sure you have a plan in motion to deal with any problems."

"I do." *Step one, complete*, thought Contessa.

The park in Parian's territory was a hive of activity. Skitter and Vista had returned with Faultline and Gregor, as well as Newter and Spitfire; Shamrock and Labyrinth had chosen to remain behind. Weld had been freed from his unconventional attachment, although he still carried a section of the pole on his back, still slowly absorbing it. Skitter and Vista and the arriving Crew had reacted with shock and anger to the news of Hope's abduction, and Skitter had immediately sent her bugs ranging through the area, to little effect.

Weld had managed to contact the Protectorate base, and a craft had arrived to take away the
Merchants. They had also brought the news of the Nine's devastating attack on Fenrir's Chosen. Miss Militia had set up a temporary command post, and was working with the various groups to keep things organised. Light stands had been brought in, powered by portable generators supplied by the PRT.

Members of other groups had arrived; Purity had shown up for the Pure, while several members of New Wave had also made an appearance. Glory Girl was there, but when quizzed about the chances of Panacea being there – there were still injuries that needed attention – she simply shook her head and looked grim. Most of the rest of the Undersiders had made an appearance, although Tattletale and Faultline were studiously avoiding each other, as were any other capes that bore grudges with one another.

Food and medical supplies appeared more or less mysteriously, and within an hour or so, those who needed assistance most urgently were receiving it. Parian was mending those tents that could be fixed, and those with nothing better to do were clearing away the wreckage.

Alexandria and Eidolon observed the scene from far above.

"The last time I saw this level of cooperation was during an Endbringer attack," commented Alexandria. "Do you see? There's no bickering, no backbiting. They're just getting the job done."

"Indeed," agreed Eidolon. "Is all this due to Hope's influence, do you think?"

Alexandria shook her head, but more in disbelief than denial. "I can't think of another explanation. Those that have encountered her are setting the example, and the rest have seen how she acts." A grimace. "Director Piggot knew what she was doing when she gave Hope that Master rating."

Eidolon gave her a curious look. "You sound like you don't like it." He nodded toward the park below. "Do you think we should go down and help?"

Alexandria made an angry gesture. "Now you're starting to sound like Hope. No, we don't go down and help. We go see what's happening at Cauldron." She addressed the empty air. "Doorway, please."

A portal appeared before them, and they disappeared into it.

Hope slowly eased her way back to consciousness.

She was seated in a rather comfortable chair, and free of pain; it seemed that her wounds had healed while she had been unconscious. But when she tried to blink her eyes and focus, there was something obscuring her right eye. She tried to reach up, and discovered the restraints for the first time. Both hands were strapped down to the chair arms. Her head was strapped to the rest; she discovered this when she tried to look down at her hands. There was a strap around her upper arms and torso, two more over her thighs, and two more over her calves.

Attempting to move her wings also brought her no joy; although her left secondary no longer pained her. There was the faintest tinkle of crystalline feathers, but she felt a sense of confinement when she tried to flex her pinions.

She tried, cautiously at first, then with greater and greater determination, to break the straps that held her in place; however, even with her strongest efforts, the straps creaked but did not show signs of
weakening. At last, she subsided, panting slightly. Over time, she was reasonably sure she could work her way free, but it would not be a quick process.

In the meantime, she was a prisoner.

Relaxing, she reviewed the room in which the chair had been placed. There was a door to the left, a table directly ahead, with a chair on the other side, and a large mirror set into the wall on the right. The wall directly ahead of her was blank.

A wry grin twisted her mouth. She hadn't watched that many police shows, but she had a fairly good idea as to what that mirror meant. Letting her senses flow out, she nodded to herself, as much as she could with her head strapped back. There were four sparks of intelligent life behind the one-way glass, no doubt observing her. Just as a check, her eyes briefly flared blue, and she nodded to herself again. The glass had some sort of special treatment on it; nothing between the low infrared and the high ultraviolet seemed to penetrate it – her way. She had no doubt that whoever was behind there could see her as clearly as daylight, and quite likely had sound and other sensors on her as well.

Well, no sense in beating about the bush.

"Excuse me," she said clearly. "May I speak to whoever is in charge?" She smiled politely. "Any one of you four will do."

Doctor Mother started in surprise. "She can see us?"

"She can sense us," Alexandria corrected her. "She can detect intelligent biological life within a certain range." She grimaced. "I found that out the hard way, while we were testing her capabilities."

"Can she identify us?" demanded Doctor Mother.

"Not ... to the best of my knowledge," admitted Alexandria. "She can detect a thinking mind, the direction and distance, but as far as I know, she cannot distinguish between different minds."

"Well, she obviously knows we are here now, even if she does not know who we are," offered Eidolon. "She has met both Alexandria and I, so it falls to one of you two to speak to her. If you wish to speak to her, that is."

"Is talking to her the best option?" asked Alexandria. "I personally think we should kill her and be done with it."

"I thought you liked her," Eidolon objected.

"I do, but that's immaterial," Alexandria stated flatly. "If we let her live, she poses far too many complications."

"Contessa advises me," ventured Doctor Mother carefully, "that killing her – or, for that matter, doing anything other than releasing her sooner rather than later – could cause other complications to arise, worse ones than she currently poses."

Contessa said nothing, watching the two members of the Triumvirate.

"Complications can be overcome," Alexandria maintained.

"But Hope can be made use of," Doctor Mother insisted. "Consider if we brought her on side. Working with us, instead of against us."
Alexandria opened her mouth as if to reply, then paused. A long moment passed. She looked very thoughtful indeed.

"It's … worth a try," she conceded.

Hope straightened up fractionally when the door opened. She had observed the movement of the life-spark around to the door, and was interested in seeing what her captor looked like.

"Hi," she said cheerfully. "I'm not entirely sure why you have me strapped down like this, but I'm sure you have your reasons." She smiled disarmingly. "I'd be interested in hearing them, if you're willing to share?"

Doctor Mother blinked. She had observed Hope from a distance many times, and in this chair since her capture, but this was the first time she had spoken to Hope face to face. It made for quite a difference.

"You are here," she said formally, attempting to keep a level of detachment in her voice, "because you pose a certain level of difficulty to me. Specifically, you are interfering with my plans to save the world."

Hope blinked. "I must admit," she replied frankly, "that of all the replies I was expecting, that one didn't even make the cut." She frowned. "By 'save the world', did you actually mean 'take over the world', sort of saving it by ruling it, by any chance? Because that would actually make a certain kind of sense."

Doctor Mother shook her head. "No," she said bluntly. "I meant saving the world in the most direct, literal sense. If my plans are not carried through, the world will end in fourteen years, more or less. Or in two years, but that likelihood is reducing every day, due to your interference."

Hope tried to shake her head, failed due to the restraining straps. "I'm not sure I understand. You're saying the world not ending in two years is a bad thing?"

"If the world-ending catastrophe occurs in two years," Doctor Mother said patiently, "there will still be sufficient capes to possibly overcome the danger. Though there will be terrible loss of life, no matter what we do." Her voice was gentle, almost kindly. "I'm sorry, Hope, but it's unavoidable."

"It's always avoidable," said Hope stubbornly. She paused. "What causes this great disaster, anyway?"

Doctor Mother nearly answered her, then paused. "I ... don't think I should tell you that, right at this moment," she answered. "But if you could avert this disaster altogether, even if it cost you everything, would you do it?"

"Of course," said Hope simply.

And Doctor Mother could see that she meant exactly what she said.

"By the way," said Hope, "I do know about the world-ending event, but not what causes it. But I also know about Jack Slash."

"Jack Slash?" asked Doctor Mother.

"Yes," said Hope. "Apparently he's the key. If he leaves Brockton Bay alive, things happen within two years. If not, it's stretched to fourteen years."
Doctor Mother blinked. "This is information I did not previously possess," she said slowly. "Are you sure of your source?"

"Extremely," Hope replied. "Tattletale verified it."

Doctor Mother cupped her chin in her hand, thinking. Hope's information clarified matters considerably. But ... "Why did you just tell me that?" she asked. "Are you so fearful of interrogation?"

"You say you want to save the world," Hope said simply. "I want to save the world, too. If I held out, we would end up working at cross-purposes. You needed a reason to trust me. I don't believe in playing power games."

"But why are you trusting me?" asked Doctor Mother blankly. "For all you know, I could be an enemy, seeking to trick just that information out of you."

"An enemy seeking to trick me would offer to let me go," Hope pointed out. "And you didn't know about Jack Slash's role in this before I told you, so you couldn't know to trick it out of me. And I'm trusting you because I tend to trust people who don't try to attack me on sight."

"But I have you strapped to a chair!" objected Doctor Mother.

In the observation room, Alexandria made a mental note. The Wards attacked Hope when she arrived. The Undersiders saved her life when she met them. This actually explains a great deal.

"Excuse me," said Hope politely, "but are you trying to tell me not to trust you?" She chuckled. "I can think of several reasons why people who are trying to do the right thing might keep me restrained until they know my true motivations." She strained at a bond by way of demonstration. "Nope, still having trouble breaking free."

She smiled at Doctor Mother. "I can't break free, and I can't talk you into letting me free without a very good reason. So, until you decide that your interests are best met by letting me free, then here I stay. So my best chance is to try to convince you that I really do want to help you save the world. And in turn, I will trust that you are acting for the good, as you see it. So," she concluded brightly, "how can I help you save the world?"

Doctor Mother sighed. "I was not convinced that you could, or would, before," she admitted. "But I am, now. My colleague will tell you what you need to know." She walked to the door. "But understand this. Whatever passes within these walls, must not be aired elsewhere. We have secrets that others would kill to possess – and secrets that others would kill us for simply having."

"Oh, I understand about secrets," said Hope seriously. "I don't like them, but I know how to keep them."

Doctor Mother opened the door and stepped out; as she did so, Contessa entered in her place.

"I hope you know what you're doing," muttered Doctor Mother under her breath.

"I always do," replied Contessa in a perfectly matter-of-fact tone. She closed the door and turned to Hope. Step two, complete, she thought.

"Well, then, Hope," she said blandly, "so you want to help us save the world."
"I do," Hope agreed. "With as little life lost as possible, please."

Contessa could see the steps extending before her. When she incorporated Hope into the pool of factors of which she could make use, the range of various futures became ... interesting. Impossibilities became possible.

"Very well," she said quietly, and began to undo the straps holding Hope to the chair.

Hope made no movement, but she did raise one perfect silver eyebrow. "Are you not afraid I might attack you, or attempt escape?" she asked.

Contessa glanced up at her, as she freed the straps around her legs. "No," she said, and kept at her task. When she had finished, she stepped back, and Hope stood and stretched, flexing her wings in a cascade of crystal symphony.

"Oh, that's better," said Hope. "It's a comfortable chair, but not being able to move at all is a bit of a pain." She smiled at Contessa. "Thank you."

"You're entirely welcome," she replied. "You may call me Contessa. Please, take a seat; this is likely to take some time, and you must listen carefully." So saying, she pulled out the chair from the other side of the table and sat down.

"Okay," said Hope, and resumed her seat in the comfortable chair, sans restraints this time. "I'm listening."

"Now, the first thing you need to know is this," began Contessa.

In the observation room, Doctor Mother blanched. "She's telling her everything!"

Alexandria shook her head. "Not ... exactly," she murmured. "Just everything she needs to know."

"But ... some of that is information that we've spent years – and lives – acquiring!"

"And what use is it," replied Alexandria quietly, "if it never gets put to use?"

"This is Contessa," noted Eidolon. "If she considers it necessary, who are we to argue?"

Alexandria nodded abruptly. "It's time we left, anyway. It seems you have matters well in hand here." She gave Doctor Mother a curt nod. "Let me know if anything crops up that requires my attention."

"Certainly," replied Doctor Mother, her attention only half on the Triumvirate capes. She barely noticed as the doorway opened that transported them back to whence they had come. Her attention was on what Contessa was telling Hope. She could only pray that her colleague's power was not playing her false on this occasion. Eventually, she gave up and went away, shaking her head. The recorders would catch everything, anyway.

She did not know then, nor would she learn until it was too late, that the recorders were temporarily inactive. Much later, she would suspect, but never actually prove, that the temporary malfunction was caused by Contessa 'accidentally' keying in the wrong settings on the machine while Doctor Mother was in the room with Hope. But by that time, events would be well advanced along the path Contessa had plotted.
"... and that's all you need to know, for the time being," concluded Contessa.

Hope blinked. "And it's that simple?" she asked. "I can ... wow. I can just do that?"

"That is correct," confirmed Contessa. "Now, as to what you tell others ..."

"I remember what the other lady told me," Hope said promptly. "Not to tell anyone anything."

Contessa smiled gently. "But you and I both know that you will violate such orders if following them hurts people. So this is what you do. You tell people of things that you know – but you don't tell them about this place, and about us. Now Weld saw me, and so did Flechette and Parian. But none of them know me. And nor do they know of this place. So I'd take it as a favour if you didn't tell them my name, or about this place, all right?"

Hope nodded. "I can do that," she agreed. She looked around. "So, how do I get out of here? Do you need to blindfold me?"

Contessa smiled. "We're a little past that, here," she said. "Where do you want to go?"

"Uh, the park, if there's still people needing help there," said Hope.

"Very commendable," said Contessa. She took a couple of steps away from Hope, raising her voice slightly. "Doorway, please. One thousand feet above the park."

And the portal appeared, shimmering in midair like an impossibly solid mirage.

"Wow," said Hope. "That's cool. Can I do that too?"

"If we believe you have a need for it," agreed Contessa with a smile. "Now, go."

"Going. And thank you," Hope called back over her shoulder as she launched herself through the portal. It closed behind her.

*Step three, complete.*

Far above the park, a light appeared, descending.

To the ears of those below came the sound of crystal chimes.
In which Hope saves a life and sets a plan in motion

Amy Dallon was tired, hungry, thirsty and lost.

She knew Brockton Bay quite well; she had lived there most of her life, and had seen quite a bit of it from above, with the help of Glory Girl – mentally, she shied away from that thought – but late at night, streets without lighting became confusing labyrinths.

On this night, she had had the idea of camping down at the distribution centre in Parian's territory; there would be safety in numbers, and something to eat. And she was so very, very tired of hiding. Even pretending to be a part of society, for just a little while, was tempting.

But as she had neared the area, there was the sound of a strange aircraft, and then shouts, and screams, and fighting, and then explosions. So she turned and hurried away.

But in her haste, she had made a wrong turning, and gone down an unfamiliar street, and now she wasn't quite sure where she was. The dark made a mockery of familiar landmarks, and she was guided more by a vague glow in the sky than anything else as she moved forward.

And then she turned a corner and saw, up ahead, a large fire, starting to burn low. Around them, in a rough circle, were arranged derelict cars, stacked one on another. She also smelt burned meat, and saw what she thought was a cooler of beer lying on its side.

Someone's been partying, she thought. Vague twinges of unease were pricking at her hindbrain, but she was too tired and hungry and cold to pay much attention. I wonder if they have any leftovers?

She ventured closer. The night was chilly, and the fires gave off a comforting warmth. It was fortunate for her that she approached by the one open path into the circle, and stayed out of the dark areas, where tripwires and mantraps lay waiting.

When she looked closer, she saw a second bonfire, but this had been built much more carelessly than the other, the wood spread out over a wider area, and thus had burned out some little time ago. Near it, in the dying light of the other fire, she spotted a cooler, along with an upturned trestle table that had held a large roasted pig, which was currently resting on the ground beside the table. Her mouth watered, and she dug out her pocket knife, and spent several minutes hacking off a good-sized piece of pork. It tasted heavenly.

Pulling the lid off the cooler, she found several bottles of beer floating in a slush of half-melted ice. Ignoring the beer, she scooped out several handfuls of the water, ignoring the way her teeth ached or how it ran down her front, just enjoying the taste of the water.

Straightening up from the cooler, she looked around with fresh eyes, taking a few steps to look past the other fire.

And that was when she saw the first body.

"But where did you go? And who was it that took you there?" Weld asked. Hope paused to mend a broken leg with a brief flare of silver-blue light and a crystalline chime, then turned to him.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I promised not to tell anyone her name. But it was all a big misunderstanding. We talked for a while, and then they let me go."
Weld went to ask another question, but Hope cut across him. "I'm sorry," she said gently, "but I promised them that I wouldn't tell any more unless I really have to." She saw Miss Militia moving fast in her direction, and her expression brightened. "Oh, good," she said. "She's here too."

As Miss Militia got up to them, she and Hope spoke at the same time. "I need to talk to you, right now." Then they blinked and stared at each other for a moment.

"You first," said Hope politely. "Mine can wait."

Miss Militia nodded. "You need to come back to Protectorate headquarters immediately," she said. "Triumph is dead, but Clockblocker's keeping him stable for you."

Hope's eyes opened wide in shock. "You were attacked?" she exclaimed.

Miss Militia nodded grimly. "Legend saved my life, but Triumph died and Battery is badly hurt. We need you there, right now." She paused. "They got into the base via teleportation portals, just in the same way you were abducted."

Hope blinked. "I ... didn't know about that. They just spoke to me about some things." She looked around. "I'd rather be in private before we talked about it. Important stuff."

"That's fine," said Miss Militia. "I have a craft standing by. We need to get you back to base. Clockblocker can only do his thing for so long."

Nodding in agreement, Hope followed her to the Protectorate aircraft and climbed in, settling herself into a seat and arranging her wings around her. Miss Militia sat opposite her; the hatch closed, and the aircraft lifted off.

"Comfortable?" asked Miss Militia.

"Sure," said Hope readily. "I'd rather fly, but if we have to get there fast, this is probably better."

"Good." Abruptly, a large-bore gun was in Miss Militia's hand, pointing at Hope's head. "This is loaded with high-velocity armour-piercing rounds. It will take your head off if you answer incorrectly.″ Her voice was grim. "I need to know that you are who you say you are. The girl who was bullied, the one you told Weld about; what's her name?"

Hope blinked. "Uh, Taylor Hebert," she said after a moment of thought. "She works for Skitter."

Miss Militia held her aim for a long, tense moment, then lowered the gun. "Sorry about that," she said. "Master/Stranger protocols, you know."

Hope nodded. "That's fine," she said. "I can understand your worry."

Miss Militia holstered a much smaller pistol, and then looked at her. "What was the information you had for me?"

"Oh, yes," said Hope. "It's about the Slaughterhouse Nine."

"I know they attacked Hookwolf and the Chosen, just tonight," Miss Militia observed. "Was that what you wanted to tell me?"

Hope blinked. "Uh, no," she said. "I didn't know that. How bad is it?"

Miss Militia shook her head. "As far as we know, the Nine left no survivors. We've been prioritising the Merchant attack; there are people there we can help." She tilted her head. "If it's not about the
Chosen, then what's it about?"

"I have a fair idea of where and when we can get the Nine, once and for all. But we're going to need some help."

"You just gained my complete and total attention," replied Miss Militia. "What sort of help will you be needing?"

"Well, it's like this ..." began Hope.

The majority of the fight – it had been more like a massacre – had taken place at the far end of the open area. Amy picked her way through the wreckage of smashed cars and past broken bodies to where the detritus of both had been spread far and wide. Here and there she found great footprints pressed into the dust and crushed concrete, prints that she did not recognise at first.

In the midst of the carnage, she found a body wearing a costume that she recognised; Rune, atop a fallen car, with a horrendous wound in her back. Stormtiger lay nearby, his slashed throat open to the sky. This must be Fenrir's Chosen, she realised, looking around again and picking out landmarks. But who did this?

The answer came to her a moment later. She rounded the second fire and encountered what she initially thought was a mound of stone or other detritus. But as she neared it, she saw that it was composed of human flesh; heads, arms, legs, torsos. All fused together into an abomination, a travesty of life.

Atop it was a metal mask which she recognised as belonging to Hookwolf. Piercing the mask was a wooden pole, and crowning the pole was the head of a woman, who Amy thought she recognised as Shatterbird. She had heard something about this, but had not known it to be true up till this moment.

The Slaughterhouse Nine, she thought numbly. Fenrir's Chosen killed Shatterbird and put her head on a pole, so they took offense.

Up until that point, she had thought that the mound of flesh was dead, that the illusion of life was merely something granted by the flickering firelight. But as she stepped closer, she saw eyes swivel in their sockets, mouths open to call silently to her, and the whole mound twitched raggedly. As if in a dream, she reached out and touched it.

And she turned and bent over, and vomited convulsively, bringing up the water and the pork and the last meal she'd had before that. Hands on her knees, she heaved until all that came out was bile. And yet the mental image was there, the bodies fused together, nervous systems intertwining, multiple hearts pumping blood to more than one body at a time, minds slowly but surely sliding toward madness.

It was more than she could take.

The Protectorate craft touched down, and Hope moved along with Miss Militia, down to the prison level. She had been there once before, as an inmate, but things were different now; as she approached with Miss Militia, PRT guards snapped to attention, bringing their weapons to port arms.

The cell door was open; Hope entered at Miss Militia's gesture. Triumph lay face-down, unmoving. Clockblocker sat beside him, staring at the body, at one hand that was suspended unmoving a few inches off the ground. He was wearing just T-shirt and shorts, and his face was lined with concentration and just a little fatigue.
As Hope entered, noting the large hole that had been blasted between this cell and the neighbouring one, he looked up.

"Oh, thank god you're here," he said, sagging with relief. "I've lost about a minute since I started freezing him. I don't know how much longer I could have kept him going."

Hope nodded, going to her knees beside him and putting an arm around his shoulders in a half-hug. "You've done well," she said. "How will I know when he's unfrozen?"

"His hand," said Clockblocker. "I've been holding it off the ground before freezing him."

"Okay," said Hope. "I don't even know if it will work like this, but I'll give it a try."

"He should be coming out of it any moment now," said Clockblocker. Hope nodded, and watched the hand. A moment later, it fell to the ground.

Hope picked up Triumph's hand and lifted it to her face. Pressing her lips to the inner surface of his forearm, she closed her eyes and concentrated. Her wings lifted and arched over herself and Triumph's body. Her glow intensified, and her wings sang a gradually building song of ever-increasing complexity.

The song reached a sharp crescendo, and then slowly faded, along with her glow. Her wings furled neatly, and she bowed her head, eyes closed, breathing hard.

"Did it work?" asked Clockblocker and Miss Militia, almost simultaneously.

For an answer, Hope turned Triumph's wrist upward. Clearly imprinted in the underside of his forearm was a silver mark, showing exactly where Hope had pressed her lips.

And then Triumph gasped, and began to breathe once more.

"I'm still not sure what use this is," said Miss Militia; they were in the transport once more. Triumph and Battery had been given the benefit of Hope's healing capabilities, and were expected to make a full recovery. But now the transport was taking them on, to the site of the massacre of Fenrir's Chosen.

"I'm not sure either," replied Hope. "But I was told to go there, so I'm going there. It's part of the thing with Slaughterhouse Nine, I think." Contessa had been insistent that she go back to see the Chosen, but would not explain why. So Hope had shrugged and agreed. "I'm sure I'll find out when I get there," she had told herself.

"Who told you to go there?" asked Miss Militia.

"I'm sorry," said Hope. "I can't tell you that."

Miss Militia rolled her eyes. "That gets old, very fast. You do know that, right?"

Hope shrugged awkwardly in the relatively close confines. "Sorry," she repeated, "but I did make a promise."

"I guess we'll find out when we get there," grumbled Miss Militia. Hope grinned.

The sound of the PRT transport was familiar enough that Amy recognised it immediately. She looked around wildly, then ran for the nearest half-collapsed building. "I don't know if they're about to
send the PRT after me, but I don’t want to find out.

For the last hour or so, she had paced back and forth between the edge of the firelight and the horrible mound of living flesh that dominated the scene of the massacre. It was a monument, she knew. A testament. It was Jack Slash saying to the world, This is what happens when you mess with the Slaughterhouse Nine.

Time and again, she had approached the fused mass of human bodies with the intent to do ... what? Pull them apart? End their pain? She wasn’t sure. But each time, her nerve had failed; she recalled the betrayal on the faces of her foster family each time she had refused to heal Flashbang of his brain injury. And the even greater betrayal, the disgust, on Victoria’s face after what she had done to her. Even when she had offered to reverse it, the mistrust, the cutting words, had seared her to the bone.

She couldn’t do it. Not that. Not any more. As proven by what she had done to Glory Girl, she was truly the child of Marquis. She had no right to even consider herself a hero anymore. I can’t be trusted. I can’t be touched. I can’t use my powers. Not any more.

The transport flared and came in for a landing in the space between two derelict cars. Miss Militia stepped out first, assault rifle out and tracking across the devastation. Following her were two PRT soldiers, one with another assault rifle, one with a tank of containment foam. Hope alighted last, looking around with some concentration.

She had no idea what she was looking for; she presumed she would know it when she saw it. Contessa’s advice had been obscure in the extreme, but the basics were clear enough.

They had spotted the monument from the air, and she reluctantly moved over to look at it. Miss Militia and the PRT soldiers had already scouted the area around it, and were now observing the surrounding darkness, torches probing the shadows.

"They're alive," she said, in a sickly tone of voice. "Bonesaw did this and left them alive." Slowly, not wanting to do it but knowing she must, she stepped up and placed her hand on the mass of flesh. She could feel every interconnection, every heartbeat, every nervous impulse. Closing her eyes, she felt hot tears force their way out from beneath the lids. "I can't help them," she whispered. "There's nothing I can do."

Then her head came up. She let her senses spread out, feeling for other life signs, other survivors. And she felt them.

Turning, she moved into the darkness, the glow from her skin lighting her way.

"Where are you going?" called Miss Militia.

"There's someone out here," Hope called back. "A survivor, maybe."

Amy saw her coming, and backed off. She didn’t want to be found. She ducked off to the side, behind a half-ruined wall. Hope came on, directly toward her hiding place. Oh, right, she can detect living minds.

"Come on out," called Hope. "My name is Hope. I'm here to help you. I came and saw Hookwolf once before, remember?"

She could not see the person, but she could detect the spark of mind, behind that wall. She moved
closer. "Don't be afraid," she said. "I won't hurt you."

No, thought Amy. But I'm afraid of hurting you.

Hope stepped closer. "I do know you're there," she said gently. "You may as well come out."

The girl rose reluctantly from behind the wall. Hope moved closer, letting her inner light provide illumination. Behind her, she heard sharp commands, and knew that Miss Militia and the PRT soldiers were backing her up.

"My name is Hope," she began again.

"I know who you are," said the girl dully. "We've met."

Hope frowned. The voice, the posture ... "You seem familiar, but ..."

Miss Militia stepped forward and shone a torch at her. "Panacea?" she said. "Is that you?"

Amy nodded. "Please, call me Amy," she said in a toneless voice. "I'm not Panacea any more."

Miss Militia and Hope shared a glance. "What happened?" asked Hope.

"I don't want to talk about it," muttered Amy. She looked hopefully at Miss Militia and Hope. "Do you have anything to eat? I'm starving."

"That," said Miss Militia, "we can do."

Hope offered Amy a hand to climb over the rubble back toward the transport, and Amy flinched back. "Don't touch me!" she blurted.

"Okay, I won't touch you," agreed Hope. "Take my wing instead." She extended her secondary right wing, so that Amy could grasp the crystalline feathers.

By the time Miss Militia got Amy settled down back at the transport with a blanket over her shoulders, a canteen full of water and a couple of ration bars to eat, Hope was looking for the other life-sign she had detected.

At first, she thought the person might be around the other side of a large collapsed building. But she quickly realised that the life-spark was **within** the huge mound of rubble.

"We have a buried survivor," she called over to the other four. "Under here."

Miss Militia frowned. "It will take hours, if not days, to bring in rescue equipment."

"Well, I'm not waiting," retorted Hope. And so she set to work.
Search and rescue, Miss Militia concluded, was far easier when one of the people concerned could not only pinpoint the location of the victim, but was strong enough to lift half a ton at a time. Using her wings to sweep incidental bricks and concrete chunks from her path, Hope dug down with surprising speed. Larger chunks were moved more carefully, lest the remaining rubble shift and crush the survivor, thus invalidating the entire exercise.

For her part, Miss Militia moved what she could, keeping Hope's way clear, along with one of the PRT soldiers. The other she left to guard Amy and the transport.

Eventually, Hope got down to where a beam was propping up a large section of wall. "They're just behind there," she said. "But the wall is too heavy for me to lift, and if I shift the beam, the wall will crush them." She frowned. "Maybe I can make a small hole. If I can reach through and give them whatever healing they need, they might be able to assist from that side."

"It's a plan," agreed Miss Militia. She assisted Hope in sliding out bricks from under the beam, one at a time, until a small cavity was formed. Hope got down, and reached into the gap beyond. She strained and wriggled, until Miss Militia thought she was trying to crawl into the cavity herself.

"Got it," she grunted. Closing her eyes, she concentrated. The faintest silver-blue glow could be seen shining from between the bricks, and her wings chimed for what seemed to be quite a long time.

"Well, I hope that did the trick," she commented, pulling her arm out. "Hello?" she called into the hole. "Can you hear me?"

A muffled voice answered her; Miss Militia could not make out the words.

"Okay," said Hope, "we're going to get you out. Is there anything you can do from your end?"

The muffled voice sounded again. Hope blinked and looked confused.

"What did they say?" asked Miss Militia.

"Um ... stand back?" ventured Hope.

"What do you mean, stand back?" asked Miss Militia.

And then the wall began to rise from the beam holding it up, and the rubble under their feet began to shift sideways.

"I think," said Hope, climbing to her feet and moving back with some alacrity," that it means we should stand back."

Miss Militia followed suit. "Way back," she agreed, watching the massive beam shift and move aside.

Shouldering broken brickwork aside like an ancient monster rising from the antediluvian deeps, a humanoid form emerged from the rubble, sending clouds of dust billowing everywhere. By the time they could see properly again, the figure was thirty feet tall.

The figure stepped forward, shrinking as it did so. Miss Militia recognised it as Menja, one of
Hookwolf's Chosen. But even as the dust settled, both Miss Militia and Hope realised what was wrong with the way she was standing.

"Your arm," said Hope. There was nothing more to be said; her left arm was missing from just below the shoulder. Whatever shape Menja had been in before Hope gave her the shot of healing energy, the stump of her arm had healed over smoothly.

Menja was just six feet tall when she stopped before them. "Thank you," she said to Hope, with a formal nod. "I am forever in your debt." Another nod, this one to Miss Militia. "And also yours." She indicated the missing arm with a gesture from her right arm. "I was fighting Crawler. He had my arm in his jaws. The building collapsed. A beam fell across my arm, and between that and Crawler, my arm was severed. I think I passed out, and reduced to normal size at the same time."

She rubbed the stump reflexively with her right hand and looked at Hope. "I suspect the pressure of the beam on my arm kept me from bleeding to death. Your healing must have sealed off the wound." Then she turned her gaze to Miss Militia. "Do you happen to have food and water?"

"Well," said Miss Militia, "I can definitely help you with that." She frowned. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"My arm?" inquired Menja.

"No," replied Miss Militia. She gestured to the scene of devastation behind them. "Hookwolf. The Chosen. Basically ... everyone else."

Menja frowned. "I had feared so, even during the battle," she admitted. "The Slaughterhouse Nine are fearsome opponents at the best of times. Did we slay any of them?"

"I don't think so," Hope put in. "We didn't find any bodies. But just so you know, Mannequin's dead."

Menja turned toward her. "How did that happen?" she asked with some interest.

Hope shrugged. "Merchants raided Parian's territory. In the aftermath, Mannequin came after me. Skitter, Parian and Vista helped me take him down." She paused. "Skitter got the kill."

Menja nodded thoughtfully. "A worthy deed, all the same," she said. She nodded toward the bandage that still adorned Hope's head, covering her right eye. "A battle wound?"

Hope nodded. "I think he was trying to go for a brain shot. I ducked, but not fast enough."

Menja's brows rose. "And yet you won out. Hookwolf was right to name you warrior."

"I couldn't do anything less," Hope replied. She turned and stared toward the huge mound of human flesh that still bore Hookwolf's mask and Shatterbird's head atop it. "I just wish I could do something for those poor people."

Menja blinked. "That is ... made of people? Our people?"

Hope nodded. "Bonesaw probably did it. They're alive, but they're all fused together, and mixed up. It won't be just a matter of surgically separating them." She shook her head. "I can heal injuries, but something like that's so far beyond me that it's not even on the same planet."

She sighed. "I just hate it, you know? I like to help people. I live to help people. And then people come along, like Jack Slash and the Slaughterhouse Nine, who like to hurt people, and then set it up
so you can't help them, and all you can do is let their victims die, or kill them to make their passage
easier." Her voice was beginning to waver.

Angrily, she scrubbed at her eyes with the back of her hand. "And these people are just going to
damn well die, probably in pain, certainly in fear and anguish, and I'm right here, and I still can't do a
damn thing about it. No-one can." The last few words came out as near-sobs. Whirling, she stamped
off around the side of the transport, kicking broken bricks out of her way.

Miss Militia stepped forward to go after Hope, but Amy spoke up for the first time. "Don't," she said,
"I'll go." She let the blanket fall from her shoulders and stood up.

Miss Militia stared at Amy, who ducked her head; Menja was currently wolfing down a ration bar.

"I can maybe talk to her," muttered Amy. "Just give me some space, okay? Don't go listening."

Miss Militia raised her eyebrows, but nodded in assent, and sat down beside Menja.

"So, tell me what you saw of the battle," she invited.

Hope was sitting on the end of the beam protruding from the rubble when Amy caught up with her.
Her wings were wrapped tightly about her, and her innate glow was barely perceptible. She was
rocking back and forth slowly.

Amy brushed brick dust off the beam several feet away from Hope, and sat down.

"You've never failed much before, huh?" she ventured.

There was a long moment of silence, then a muffled voice answered, "Not really." It sounded like
she was trying not to cry.

"Sucks, doesn't it?"

A mumble, which Amy interpreted as "Not helping."

"Yeah well," replied Amy. "Still better than wanting to do something that feels right, and screwing it
up well and truly, because it wasn't right."

Hope's wings unfurled slightly, and Amy saw her face. It looked the same, perfect and untouched,
aside from the bandage that covered her right eye. She peered at Amy. "Everyone makes mistakes."

Amy heaved a sigh of her own. "There's mistakes and mistakes. I made the other type. The type you
don't come back from." She grimaced. "I hurt people. I betrayed them. I used my power when I
shouldn't have, and I can never, ever make it right."

"I'm confused," said Hope. "You're a healer, right? How can that be used to hurt people?" Her
wings unfurled and her inner light came up again.

Amy took a deep breath. "I'm not just a healer," she admitted in a rush. "I can manipulate biology.
Heal that eye of yours, cure cancer, give you a third arm, anything else I want. But it's too much
power. Too much temptation. I've hurt people, without meaning to."

"Your power went out of control?" asked Hope.

"No, not like that," sighed Amy. "I went out of control. I ... did things, thinking I was doing the right
thing. And it wasn't. And now I can't change it back, because she won't let me near her."
Hope moved closer, sliding one arm around Amy's shoulders. "I'm sure it'll be all right—" she began, but Amy jerked away.

"Don't touch me!" she exclaimed; it was almost a wail of protest. "If you touch me, I could hurt you with my power, and I don't want to do that!"

"Do you intend to use your power on me?" asked Hope directly.

"No, but I can't be trusted," whispered Amy. "I've proven that."

"Well," said Hope quietly, "Trust has to start somewhere, so I'm going to start by trusting you not to hurt me." And she wrapped her arm around Amy's shoulders again. Amy went to pull away; Hope didn't let her. After a moment, Amy stopped struggling; Hope's other arm went around her, and then her wings. Gradually, Hope felt Amy relaxing into the hug, the tension leaching out of her shoulders.

And then, ever so slowly, Amy's arms went around Hope's waist, and she returned the hug.

They sat like that for a long, long moment, then Amy broke the silence. "You have an interesting physiology. You know, I bet I could make you a girl again, without changing anything else."

"Not on your life," replied Hope firmly, but with a smile in her voice. "I like me just the way I am."

"But don't you miss, you know, sex and all that?"

"Not in the slightest," replied Hope. "I ran away from home at fourteen when my father tried to molest me in my bedroom. For me, sex is something that can happen to other people all it likes, because it's not happening to me."

"Ouch, sorry to hear that," said Amy. "I guess having sucky dads is a part of being a superhero, huh?"

Hope turned her head to regard Amy. "Why, what did your dad do?" She tried to recall what she could about Flashbang. "From what I've heard, he's a stand-up guy."

"Flashbang's my foster dad. I was adopted. My real dad's a supervillain," replied Amy steadily. "He's in the Birdcage. His name is Marquis."

Hope blinked. "Wow," she said. "That's something that would take a long time to get over." She paused, peering at Amy. "How long have you known?"

"Three days," responded Amy, with just a touch of bitterness. "You'd think they would have broken it to me before now. But I had to find out for myself. And better yet, it was a supervillain who gave me the heads-up on it."

"So I guess your foster dad let you down a bit too, huh?" said Hope sympathetically.

Amy heaved a deep sigh. "I guess, yeah."

Hope tightened her hug. "Well, if you'll let me be your friend, I won't let you down." Truth and sincerity rang through her voice like a bell.

Amy buried her face in Hope's shoulder and her shoulders shook slightly; Hope felt moisture beginning to soak through her top. She patted Amy on the back gently, letting her get it out of her system.

Eventually, Amy raised her head and looked at Hope. "Thanks," she whispered. "I needed that."
"Hey," said Hope lightly. "What are friends for?" She released Amy from the hug and propped her chin on her hands. "Now," she said. "if there was only a way to sort out my current major problem."

"What?" said Amy warily. "Do you want me to grow your eye back?"

Hope blinked – or winked, as the case may be. "I ... hadn't actually thought about that," she said, then grinned. "And to be honest, I was kinda looking forward to rocking the badass pirate eyepatch look."

Amy giggled. "I think you'd look way cool with an eyepatch." She sobered. "But while I could definitely fix it, I'm not sure if I'm up to it right now." She tilted her head. "But if not that, what?"

Hope stood up. "Come on." Taking Amy's hand – to which Amy barely demurred at all – she led her to the foot of the mound of fused flesh, which still twitched and blinked at them in the dim light of the dying fire.

Hope gestured at Jack Slash's monument. "The Slaughterhouse Nine like to make their mark on places. Do things that leave people remembering them with horror, even years later. Jack Slash tried it with me, and failed. You think you can unravel all this, and screw the Nine over again?"

Amy looked up at the mound of flesh, where so many people were trapped. People that only she could help. People that Hope was asking her to help. Hope, who trusted her, against all logic, to do the right thing.

She sighed. "I want to," she said, and her voice broke. "But I don't trust myself not to ... do more with them than just separate them out. Improve them. Change them. I might go too far."

"I'll keep an eye on what you're doing," Hope assured her. "If I think you're overstepping the mark, I'll let you know, okay?"

Amy leaned against Hope for support, both physical and emotional. She felt Hope's primary right wing curl around her shoulders in a sort-of hug. She came to her decision. "Okay," she agreed. "Let's do this."

It was utterly creepy to watch, but Hope stayed by Amy's side, supporting her with murmurs of encouragement. With one hand on the mass of flesh, she could feel organs shifting around as Amy hunted to match the DNA of individual pieces of the puzzle with other parts of the same people. It was like an insane jigsaw puzzle made up of two dozen different pictures, all living, and all connected to one another.

A little at a time, Amy gradually undid Bonesaw's work, moving organs and body parts around, matching one with the other until complete bodies began to form. Then she began pulling them out of the mass, separating them in a bizarre and grotesque parody of childbirth.

The last two, when Amy got down that far, resembled Siamese twins, until she literally pulled them apart, one hand on the shoulder of each man. The skin joining them tore with a wet ripping sound, before folding back and healing seamlessly behind the tear.

After it was done, Miss Militia and the PRT men helped Menja organise the rescued victims. They were understandably confused, but given time to recuperate, they would get past their experience. Occasionally, they looked over at where Hope sat with Amy, holding a blanket over her shoulders, but did not approach.
Amy was shattered, spent, but whether the exhaustion was physical or mental, Hope wasn't sure. Some of it was physical, but she figured some of it was just the strain that Amy had been under up until now.

"That," she said, "was all kinds of awesome." She smiled at Amy. "Now, you've pretty well earned any sort of getaway you want. Or ... there's one more thing you can help me with. But it's a pretty big damn thing. And dangerous. You can say no if you want."

Amy looked at her. "What thing?"

Hope told her. Amy whistled. "You're not kidding when you say dangerous."

Hope looked at her steadily. "So, is that a yes or a no?" she asked.

Amy considered for a long moment. "That's a yes," she said. She shrugged. "And if I die, I die."

"Well," said Hope, ruffling her hair, "I'll do my best to prevent that."

Panacea rested her forehead against Hope's. "Thanks. For everything. I appreciate it."

"Hey," said Hope lightly. "What are friends for?"
"Are you sure you don't want to come with?" asked Hope, as the transport's engines spooled up. Miss Militia and Amy were already inside, with the PRT soldiers.

"Thank you, but no," replied Menja. She indicated the men and women who had been recovered from the Nine's horrific monument. At that moment, they were salvaging what food and drink remained from the celebration, that had not been destroyed by the subsequent battle. "These are my people. I cannot leave them."

"I understand," said Hope. "I wish you well." She paused. "But can I offer you some advice?"

Menja smiled. "Advise me, o warrior angel," she said, and there was only the slightest tinge of sarcasm in her voice.

Hope raised an eyebrow, but continued anyway. "This is just an idea, but I'd like you to consider it," she said. "I think you should make contact with the Undersiders, and offer to ally with them." She shrugged. "It's just a suggestion, is all."

Menja tilted her head. "Quite an acceptable one," she allowed. "You make a great deal of sense. We are weak, here, and the Undersiders would make strong allies." Her head dipped in a nod of respect that only missed being a bow by a few degrees.

Hope smiled and returned the gesture. "All the sense in the world doesn't matter if no-one listens," she replied. She turned to climb on board the transport, paused in the open hatchway, and waved. "Good luck!" she called, then slid the hatch shut.

As the transport climbed into the sky, which was now lightening to the east, Menja waved back. "And yourself," she said quietly. "Till we fight on the same side once more."

Turning, she strode to where her people were still finding what was to be found. The bodies of two people – Othala and Victor, she believed – were in the midst of one of the fires, burned almost to ash by now. Rune's body was laid out as best as they could manage, as was Stormtiger's. Cricket had been found in the darkness, ugly little needle-marks showing where venom had been injected into her veins.

All they'd found of Hookwolf was his mask, and a mass of metal shards where he'd fought to the very last.

"We will bury them," she declared. She picked out one of the men by eye. "And then you will go to the nearest Undersider distribution point, and offer them alliance in my name, and in the name of Fenrir's Chosen, and in the name of the warrior-angel Hope."

We have been dealt a fearsome blow, she thought. But we live, and we move on. And we learn, and change, and survive.

Jack Slash was sitting at the small motel table, eating bacon and eggs, and drinking coffee. For all the world, apart from a slight whitening around the knuckles as he perused the newspaper, he appeared to be free of cares.
"Well now," he said as he read and sipped his coffee. "Well now. Isn't this interesting." His tone made it a statement, rather than a question.

The Siberian, leaning back in a semi-comfortable armchair, said nothing. Bonesaw, standing behind her and carefully brushing out the tiger-striped woman's hair, looked up curiously. "What's interesting, Jack?"

"Why, poppet," said Jack genially, "the fact that either I'm losing my vaunted touch, or that the hacks who threw together this muckraking rag have little to no idea what they are talking about."

Bonesaw continued brushing industriously. "Why?" she asked. "What are they saying?"

"Well, now we know where Mannequin got to. He's dead," he said casually, holding up the black-bordered insert. It was titled SLAUGHTERHOUSE NINE in big red letters. "I suppose that's not the fault of the paper – but he was killed just after the Merchants attacked Parian. There were apparently some Wards and Undersiders on site or nearby, and they took down the Merchants. And then Mannequin attacked while they were off balance ... which means that Hope must have been there ... and they killed him. Undersiders working alongside Wards ..." He trailed off, sounding pensive. "Heroes working hand-in-hand with villains? What's the world coming to?"

"They do it for Endbringer attacks," Bonesaw pointed out.

"They do indeed, poppet," Jack acknowledged. "Which means that they see us as being at least as great a threat as an Endbringer."

The Siberian smiled; Bonesaw said, "Cool!" but kept brushing.

"But," he said, "the interesting bit is a listing of all the prominent capes who turned up to help in the aftermath. Including Purity."

Bonesaw paused in her industrious brushing, and looked at him. "But didn't you ..."

Jack Slash nodded. "I killed her. No question about it." He pointed at the offending article. "So why is it that they're saying she's still walking around?"

"Can I see?" asked Bonesaw. She leaned over and read down the list of capes who had attended. "You were right. Hope was there. She's on the list."

"Big surprise there," muttered Jack Slash. The newly-arrived cape had made a very distinct name for herself in her selfless dedication toward assisting others in need. It made Jack's back teeth itch, and also was the main reason Mannequin had gone after her.

But Bonesaw had not yet finished. "Look at the picture, here," she said. "Right there." It was a typical unposed scene, with people helping here and there. And in the background, partially obscured by another cape, but still clearly visible, was Purity.

Jack stared at it; he had not noticed it before, but as is the nature of things, he could not take his eyes off it now. "That's not right," he said flatly. "I killed her. Cut throat plus base of neck, and three major organs."

"There's a rumour," ventured Bonesaw, as she went back to her self-appointed task, "that's going around the boards. They say she can bring the dead back to life."

"Okay now, that's just rude," complained Jack Slash. "How am I supposed to keep track of my body count when people keep bringing my kills back to life? It's messing with my statistics." He finished
off the coffee, and shuddered. "Remind me to kill the idiot who made the coffee. That was vile."

"So why did you drink it?" asked Bonesaw.

"Morning coffee? Hello?" asked Jack Slash rhetorically. "If I can't get my cup of morning joe, I turn into a murderous psychopath."

"You are a murderous psychopath," pointed out Bonesaw, working on a tangle.

Jack Slash rolled his eyes and turned the page of the insert. "Not the same thing and you know it, poppet." Then, as he focused on the new page, his eyes narrowed and he read swiftly. "Wait a minute," he murmured. "Waaaiiiit a minute."

"What?" asked Bonesaw.

"They've picked up the story about the Chosen, but ..."

"But what?"

He looked up. "We didn't happen to step through a portal into another universe on the way back here, did we?"

The Siberian shrugged. Bonesaw looked thoughtful. "I didn't see anything like that. Why?"

"Because in this story, Menja is still alive, and I'm sure some of those people in the background of this photo are people you built into our monument." He looked more closely. "It isn't even there anymore. It's gone." He frowned. "Hookwolf and the other Chosen are still dead, but without the monument, it just doesn't have the same impact."

"Let me see that," said Bonesaw promptly, and climbed into his lap. He allowed her to do so, and sat back as she scanned the paper. "That can't be right," she said eventually, with a pout. "I took ages to finish that thing. And Crawler said —"

"Crawler's an idiot," Jack snapped. "He probably ripped Menja's arm off and thought she'd die of the wound. But she was trapped under a collapsed building, missing an arm. She should have bled out, or died from shock. Certainly not walking around with nothing more to show than a missing arm." He paused, the pieces clicking into place. "There's not even a bandage on that stump. Someone healed her."

Bonesaw tapped a section of the article. "She told the reporter that she owed much to Hope and the Protectorate. It doesn't say more than that, but for a member of the Chosen to admit even that much ..."

"Hope again," growled Jack Slash. "That one is really, truly, getting up in my business. How can I have a nice simple game of two-out-of-three if she's going to keep on breaking the rules all the time? It's unconstitutional. Un-American. No wonder Mannequin wanted to mail her back to the Wards in small pieces."

"So what are we going to do?" asked Bonesaw, sliding down from his lap.

"We, poppet, are going on the offensive. I'm thinking Skitter. We hit her distribution point, kill her, and hold all the people there hostage. The message will be, if Hope doesn't give herself up, we kill all the hostages."

"And if she does?"
"Merry Christmas, poppet."

Bonesaw clapped her hands. "Oh, goody!" She paused, her head on one side. "What about the hostages?"

"Oh, if Hope gives herself up, we'll still kill half of them. We'll make her pick the ones to live and the ones to die. And then I'll turn her over to you." A nasty smile settled on his face. "Maybe then people will remember why they shouldn't cross the Slaughterhouse Nine."

"Okay," said Miss Militia. "That went off better than I expected." She looked at Amy. "Would you like a lift anywhere?"

"No," said Amy. "I think I'll stick with Hope for the moment."

"As you wish. Hope? Where to now?"

Hope had been sitting, eyes unfocused, but she snapped back to the real world when she heard her name. "Ah, yes. For my next trick, I'm going to need ... the Wards and the Undersiders, basically. And you, if you're up for it." She spared a hug for Amy, who leaned into it. "And you too, of course." She paused, turning back to Miss Militia. "How are things going back at the park, anyway?"

Miss Militia opened the intercom and consulted with the PRT soldiers who were flying the transport. "Just about cleaned up," she reported. "Mannequin's body is in custody, including all his bits and pieces, just in case. Good work there, by the way."

Hope shrugged. "It was as much Vista and Skitter and Flechette and Parian as it was me," she demurred. "I was just the muscle. On my own ... I really don't know how I would have gone." She reconsidered her words. "Actually, yes, I do. I would have died. I'm good, but Mannequin was fast and deadly, and had tricks I didn't foresee. Vista and Skitter kept him off me, and Flechette kept me from falling on my face, and for that, I owe them my life."

"Like Vista owes you her life? As does Triumph? And Menja?" Miss Militia's tone was gently teasing. "The debt goes both ways, Hope. Those who sow evil deeds, reap evil in return. You sow good deeds."

"I don't mean to make people feel like they owe me," said Hope uncomfortably. "I just want to do the right thing." She paused. "So, is it okay for me to steal the Wards and yourself as well, so we can deal with the Nine?"

"When you say 'deal with the Nine'," said Miss Militia cautiously, "do you mean ..."

"I mean, take them down, and take them down hard. Today." Hope's voice was firm and sharp. "If we don't, they'll keep killing people, then they'll slip out of Brockton Bay and it'll just keep going. And then, in two years' time, Jack Slash will bring about the end of the world."

"Wait, what?" said Amy. "Are you sure?"

Hope nodded. "Unfortunately, yes." She sighed. "And if that's not enough, they're mean and they're nasty, and they hurt people for fun. So they really do need to be stopped." She turned her gaze toward Miss Militia, one eyebrow raised.

"Do you actually have a plan?" asked Miss Militia. "Or are you just looking to throw enough capes at the problem until something sticks? Because let me tell you, that's been tried, and has never gone
"I do actually have a plan," replied Hope equably. She spoke for several moments.

"Whew," said Miss Militia. "I'm not sure where you're getting some of your information, but if it's all on the level, then definitely, I'm in." She paused. "Once we clear this with Director Piggot, of course."

Hope grimaced. "That might not be a good idea. We have a limited window here, and if Director Piggot decided to drag her heels on it, we might not get all our ducks in a row in time. And besides, she'd probably load us down with PRT troops, and we really don't need that."

Miss Militia gave Hope a questioning look. "Are you suggesting that I take part in a clandestine operation, and bring the Wards in on this, without informing my superiors? I was stretching regs just to bring you here, this morning."

"So stretch them some more," Hope said. "I'm sorry, but we really need to keep this in as small a loop as possible. And we're on the clock." She gave Miss Militia a pleading look. "Can't you call it an extended patrol or something? Please, we need to get this moving now."

Miss Militia sighed. "I notice you're not bringing up Triumph's little saw about 'easier to beg forgiveness than permission'." A pause. "You're sure that this will give us our best chance against the Nine."

"The Five now, but yes. I'm certain of it. Between the Wards and the Undersiders, you, me and Amy here, we have what it takes to nail them to the wall." She met Miss Militia's eyes. "Please."

Miss Militia sighed. "I must be crazy. Okay, I'll start making calls." She fixed Hope with a glare. "But don't you ever do that to me again."

"What?" asked Hope innocently.

"Use your damn puppy-dog eyes on me. It's damn near impossible to say no to you when you do that."

"I have no idea what you mean by that," replied Hope demurely, but a grin was tugging at her lips.

Amy giggled.

Miss Militia tried to frown, but couldn't hold it. A smile stretching her mouth under the scarf, she rolled her eyes and made the call. "Weld? Miss Militia. Are you free? Good. I have a little mission for you and the Wards ..."

As she spoke, Amy nudged Hope. "Which reminds me," she said quietly. "How's the new eye coming on?"

"Focusing a lot better now," said Hope. "I can't really tell the difference. I really appreciate it, by the way. It's amazing how much you take your eyes for granted until you lose one."

Amy smiled and leaned her head against Hope's. "It's only fair. You helped me open my eyes, after all."
In which both an attack and an ambush are planned

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tattletale answered the phone cheerfully. "Hi, Hope, how are you?"

Hope refrained from asking how Tattletale had known it was her. Tattletale knew things like that.

"I'm fine. Got a huge favour to ask. You and the other Undersiders. Can I –"

"I'm in."

Hope blinked. "Pardon?"

"It's something big. isn't it? Really big? Something that you can't do without us? Of course I'm in."

"... right," answered Hope. "Uh, I'm getting together people to –"

She didn't even manage to finish the sentence. "You're going after them?" Tattletale broke in. "The Nine? You're really doing it?"

"Uh –" Hope was wondering why she even bothered speaking at all. Tattletale seemed to be doing a good job at filling in both sides of the conversation.

"You want me to contact the others?" asked Tattletale.

"No, actually," said Hope, feeling an obscure sensation of satisfaction. "Could you text me their numbers? I'd like to talk to them myself. Where can we pick you up?"

Tattletale gave the location of the shelter that Hope had first come to, and then rang off. Soon, the first number popped up on the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Skitter. This is Hope."

"Oh, hi, Hope." Skitter's voice warmed considerably from the initial wary greeting. "What's up?"

"I have some bad news, and I have some good news."

There was a moment of silence. "What's the bad news?"

"The Slaughterhouse Nine is on their way to your territory."

More silence. "This had better be some seriously good news."

"I'm putting together a plan to stop them, once and for all. But I need your help."

"What do you need me to do?"

"Tell me where to pick you up. Bring bugs. Lots of bugs. And how much line can your spiders make up at short notice?"
"Bitch."

"Hope. Slaughterhouse Nine are coming to attack Skitter. We can stop them, but I need your help."

There was not even a moment of hesitation. "What do you need from me?"

"Your biggest, nastiest dogs. Pick you up outside your place?"

"They're all nasty when I tell them to be, and yes."

"You've reached Grue."

"Hi, Grue, it's Hope."

"Hi, Hope. What's up? Oh, and congratulations on taking Mannequin out last night. Skitter filled me in. Wish I'd been there."

"It wasn't just me, but listen; things are starting to move along fast. The Nine are making a move on Skitter, this morning. I have a plan to stop them, but I need you and the rest of the Undersiders. Can I count you in?"

"Hell, yes. When and where?"

"As soon as possible. Where can we pick you up?"

"This is Regent. If you owe me money, I'll take it in small bills. If you're an ex-girlfriend, leave a message at the tone. Beep."

Hope chuckled. "Sorry, Regent, no and no. I need your help. Or rather, Skitter needs your help."

"Oh? What's happened to the dork now?"

"It's not what's happened, it's what's going to happen. The Nine are attacking her territory, and soon. I've got a plan, but I need you for it. Are you in?"

"Does this plan involve me being horribly eviscerated?"

"Not yet, but I can work that in."

"Oh, ha ha. Fine, I'll help the dork out. This time."

"Excellent. Where can I pick you up?"

The transport grounded in the park in Parian's territory. It was now full daylight, and from the look of it, all the emergency services had finished their work and left again, along with the volunteer helpers. Parian was still moving among them, followed by what looked like a unicorn ... and, mildly surprising Hope, Flechette was there too.

They both turned to look as the transport's hatch opened, and Hope stepped out. Parian ran up and seized her in a heartfelt hug; Flechette strolled along behind, but her hug was no less sincere for being somewhat more restrained.

"It's so good to see you again!" exclaimed Parian, then peered at Hope's face. "Your eye! It's back!"
You grew it back?"

Hope shook her head. "Not me. Amy did that for me." She paused. "Um, look, I'd love to stay and chat forever, but I need your help, like, right now."

"Anything!" said Parian at once.

"What she said," added Flechette.

"Well," said Hope, "the Nine are making a move on Skitter's territory, and I really need your help in stopping them. Are you good for this?"

"Um, sure," said Parian, though she looked just a little doubtful. She glanced sideways at Flechette.

"Is it okay if I come along too?" said Flechette quickly.

"I was actually asking you as well," Hope clarified. "Miss Militia's got the Wards coming in on this ..." she paused. "Uh, why are you here, alone ...?"

"I'm on patrol," said Flechette defensively. "Extended patrol."

"Just around this area, huh?" said Hope, raising an eyebrow. She was bad at figuring out relationship cues, but gauging from the way Parian and Flechette were standing so close together, and three times now while they were speaking to her, their hands had brushed, briefly clasped, and then pulled apart again ...

They saw her watching them with a slightly skeptical air, then looked at each other, then back at her. "Please don't tell anyone!" they said, almost simultaneously, thus confirming what she'd only suspected to that point.

Hope chuckled. "Not even remotely my problem," she assured them. "But if you can bring along cloth and thread – as much as you can of each – that would be good."

As she headed back toward the transport, she smiled to herself. It was kind of sweet, actually. She hoped they would be happy together.

Having exhausted the possibilities of breakfast and newspaper, Jack Slash pushed back away from the table. Bonesaw had one of her little spider-bots opened up on the bed, organic bits contrasting with machinery as she tinkered with its insides.

"Time to go, poppet," he said, stretching. "You know how it is; places to go, people to see, Skitters to kill, hostages to take."

"Okay," she said obediently, beginning to reassemble the spider-bot. "If we take Skitter alive, could I have her? Maybe mash her up with Hope?"

Jack Slash considered that. "I don't see why not," he mused. "It would be an elegant solution to two irritations." He glanced aside to Hack Job, who stood silently in the corner. "And I'm sure he'd like a girlfriend."

Bonesaw giggled. "I wonder how their kids would turn out."

"If you had anything to do with it," Jack said, tousling her hair fondly, "they would be spectacular."

Crawler had knocked out a connecting wall between two of the rooms so he could stretch out
comfortably in a nest made of broken beds, chairs and anything else he could find to lie on. The door had been similarly widened, but this had been done carefully, so that the damage was not visible from the road.

Cherish had her own room; she had shared it with Mannequin before the latter's ill-fated attack on Hope. She preferred it on her own; even after the time she had spent in the Nine, Mannequin's silent, eyeless gaze still creeped her out.

They emerged from their rooms and moved past the front office, where the desk attendant sat rigid, one of Bonesaw's spiders perched on his head and shoulders like a cyberpunk wig. As they passed by, he got up and lurched, like a puppet with some strings cut, into the back room.

"Where's he going?" Cherish asked Bonesaw curiously. She could feel the waves of emotion coming off the man, almost palpable at this distance.

"He has a gas stove back there," Bonesaw informed her airily. "He's about to have a terrible accident with it."

They passed the motel sign, with its dangling "NO VACANCIES" notice, and turned down a side street. "Skitter's territory isn't too far from here," Jack Slash said cheerfully. "Let's get moving, shall we?"

They were halfway down the side-street when the explosion sounded behind them, the fireball climbing into the sky amid a cloud of roiling black smoke.

Jack Slash cocked an eyebrow at Bonesaw. "A terrible accident indeed, poppet."

She smiled at his approval. "He had some spare gas bottles back there, so I had him knock the tops off first."

"That's my girl."

Hope and Miss Militia stood on the rooftop, along with Amy, Flechette, Parian and the Undersiders. Bitch had four large dogs with her; it had been a bit of a squeeze in the transport, but they'd made it, even if it was standing room only. But they were here, and that was the important bit.

She frowned; she wasn't sure exactly what time it was, but it had to be getting close to the time-window she knew they had. Where are they? she wondered. I can't do this without them.

And then, with a sense of relief that sent a flush of warmth throughout her body, she saw them, stepping across the rooftops with Vista in their midst, moving in a strange flickering, jerky motion. Oh, thank god.

Moments later, the Wards arrived on the same rooftop; Vista, Clockblocker, Weld, and Kid Win.

"Good, you're here," she said briskly. "We haven't got much time, so I'll be brief." She paused, seeing the looks people were giving each other. "What?"

"Seriously? We're working alongside villains again?" Weld's expression was not overly thrilled.

"Why, what happened the last time you fought alongside villains?" asked Hope innocently.

Weld scowled. "I ended up stuck to a pole, and had to get another villain to cut me loose. And I had to endure many bad jokes at my expense." He gave Hope an irritated look. "And meanwhile, Skitter
had that knife that she got off Mannequin, that can cut basically anything. You could have borrowed
that and cut me free."

"I didn't know exactly how it worked, and I didn't want you to get hurt by accident," Hope protested.

"Plus you wanted to foster hero-villain cooperation," pressed Weld.

"Plus that, yes," admitted Hope. She gave him a grin. "You don't miss much."

"I know you," Weld told her. "There's not much to miss." He snorted, looking over at Skitter. "Just
so you know, Mannequin took that knife off Armsmaster. He might just want that back."

Skitter shifted slightly, and folded her arms.

"Tell him to make another one," Hope replied serenely. "Skitter earned this one."

Weld rolled his eyes. "I suppose." He nodded toward her. "I see you got your eye back."

"Yes, yes, I have," said Hope. "Now, can we get down to business? Oh, and did you bring the
earpieces?" Weld silently held out a zip-lock bag full of radio earbugs, and she accepted it.

"Thanks." Pushing one into her ear, she went around the group, handing them out.

Then, pausing, she looked at the two groups, still standing stiffly apart from one another, aside from
Flechette, who was standing suspiciously close to Parian. "Oh, for crying out loud. Skitter, come
over here. Stand there."

"Why?"

"Because I asked you to. Clockblocker, stand next to Skitter. Parian, next to Clockblocker. Flechette,
there. Weld. Tattletale. Kid Win." And so she went around the circle, placing hero next to villain,
and vice versa. When she was finished, she went and stood between Skitter and Amy.

"You're all in this together, so stop thinking us-and-them and start thinking team, okay? You're about
to do the most important thing in your lives, so don't even start thinking that the person you're
standing next to deserves anything less than your absolute one hundred percent best. Got me?"

The murmur she got back was reluctant, so she raised her voice. "Got me?" she snapped again.

This time, the answer was prompt and clear. "Yes, Hope." Except for one voice, which she
suspected came from Clockblocker, saying "Yes, Mom."

"Good," she said. "Now, hold hands."

The chorus of startled what? echoed across the rooftop. Hope sighed. "Hold hands. I need to know
that you're willing to do that much, to trust each other."

"Uh ..." said Vista. "Some of us have touch-based powers." She was standing next to Amy.

"So what?" snapped Hope. "I said trust, and I mean trust." She looked around at them. "I trust each
and every one of you with my life. You should do no less than that with each other." Reaching out,
she took Skitter's hand with her left, and Amy's with her right. "Now hold hands before I decide to
make you do that stupid falling-backwards thing instead."

Hands gripped hands around the circle; Flechette and Parian were first by a very long margin, but
soon, they were all gripping hands. Even Miss Militia, with Grue on one side and Regent on the
other, was holding their hands firmly.
Hope let the circle hold for a long beat, then said, "Okay, this is the deal." Leaning forward slightly, she unfurled her left secondary wing and, without letting go either of Skitter or Amy's hands, sketched a rough rectangle on the rooftop with the crystalline wingtip feather. An arrow was inscribed pointing into it on one side. "This is the distribution point down there."

Her wing indicated a direction. "They'll be coming in from that side." A cross was made on another side of the rectangle. "I want Vista in that high building there, so you have good oversight." Again, her wing indicated the direction.

"I want Weld, Miss Militia and Grue right here on this rooftop; Weld will be command and control, plus one other job. Miss Militia will be fire support. Grue will be backup, with a tank of containment foam. Plus, if things go pear-shaped, cover for extraction of anyone in trouble. Questions so far?"

"Uh, yeah," said Weld. "This is your plan, and Miss Militia's senior to me. Why am I command and control? And what's my other job?"

"Because you can lead, and because Miss Militia and I will both be otherwise occupied," Hope replied. "And your other job is to grab Bonesaw when the time comes. If she has poisons, pathogens or any other bio-nasties, you're the best bet for that. Also, I have it on good authority that she's got a little bug on her that could really screw up the city. So as soon as you have her in hand, get Grue to foam her solid."

"Got it," said Grue. "So I'm backup and assistant Bonesaw wrangler."

"Couldn't do it without you," said Hope lightly. "Now, going on. Kid Win, you brought your flying surfboard, I see."

"Weld said so," he agreed.

Hope nodded. "Can it carry two passengers?"

"Depends. Which two?"

"Skitter and Tattletale."

He looked at both of them, glancing sideways at Tattletale, who was still holding his hand with her trademark vulpine grin. "Sure, that should be no problem. Where are we going?"

"Hunting. Tattletale knows who."

"Oh yeah," said Tattletale, her grin widening. "This'll be fun."

Hope smiled slightly. "I'm sure. Oh, and Skitter, before you go? Could you please give all the line you had made up to Parian?" She nodded to Skitter and let go her hand, but kept hold of Amy's. "You three had better make a start now."

She turned to Parian. "You and Clockblocker will be working together on this one. How big a tent can you make out of the cloth you brought? Big enough to fit everyone down there, right now?"

Parian turned her head to look over the edge of the roof. "Sure, with some to spare."

"Good. That's job number one. Make the tent, tell people that if something happens, get inside it. Job number two is to string all the thread you have across every exit to that area down there. Once the Nine is inside, I don't want them getting out easily."
"You do know, thread is just thread," Parian said nervously. "Anyone can break it."

Hope inclined her head. "Clockblocker?"

"Ha!" said Clockblocker, getting her point. "Not if I freeze it after you hang it there. I love it."

Letting go Parian's hand, he slapped her on the shoulder. "Let's go do some hero stuff - partner."

Even as Parian and Clockblocker stepped out of the now-disintegrating circle, a swarm of insects deposited a neatly-coiled length of spider silk in Parian's hands. As fine as it was, there was quite a bit of it. "Wow," she murmured, running it through her hands. "What I could do with this ..."

"Well, we're about to find out, aren't we?" said Hope with a grin. "Hurry up, we're on the clock. Vista, could you get them down to ground level?"

Parian and Clockblocker stepped off the edge of the roof, just as Kid Win's flying surfboard took off, with Skitter and Tattletale as passengers. It wobbled for a bit, as he adjusted trim, but then turned and headed off in a definite direction, gaining altitude as it did so.

Hope turned to those remaining. "Regent. Pick a rooftop that Vista can see. You're going to be responsible for pulling your sister out of the group."

Regent gave her a blank look. "And when I've done that, what do I do with her?"

Hope gave him a dry look. "Her powers don't affect you. You're bigger and stronger than her. Keep her out of the fight, and we'll come rescue you from her afterward."

"Gee, thanks," he said wryly.

"Don't mention it. Flechette, I want you on this rooftop, backing up Miss Militia, and providing covering fire for the others if they need it. Also, Bonesaw probably has a few of her little spider-bots along; we want them neutralised as fast as possible. Questions?"

Flechette shook her head, checking her arbalest.

"Good," said Hope. "Have I missed anyone out?"

"What am I needed for?" asked Bitch almost harshly.

"I'm gonna need you to get your dogs just as big as you can make them," Hope said, speaking just as directly and bluntly as Bitch had a moment ago. "And then they're going to have a job of work."

"Doing what?" retorted Bitch.

"Taking down Crawler," Hope told her.

Bitch shook her head. "Can't be done, not even with my dogs. They can worry him, they can take chunks out of him, but they can't beat him. He'll kill them."

Hope didn't smile, didn't soothe her. Instead, she stepped in close, getting into Bitch's face. "I trust you to tell your dogs what to do, and when to do it," she said flatly. "You're going to have to trust that I'm not gonna let Crawler kill your dogs."

Bitch nodded, once. "You only had to say so," she said, apparently satisfied.

Hope nodded. "So yeah, pick a low building, get behind it, and start amping up your dogs." She looked around. In a few brief sentences, she clarified elements of the plan, and added a few touches.
"So, everyone knows what they're doing?"

There was a chorus of assent, and Vista stepped away, heading for her eyrie.

Grue strolled up to Hope. "A pretty mixed bunch. How did you get Panacea into this? Why not bring Glory Girl along too, if you needed transport?"

Amy went to speak, then shut her mouth again. Hope smoothly filled in for her. "Amy was free; Glory Girl wasn't. But we'll handle it."

Grue nodded again, apparently satisfied. "And I noticed that you didn't give yourself a job. That's not like you."

"That's because I'll be taking on Jack Slash."

Grue paused. "From what I hear, he's pretty good at getting around people."

She grinned at him. "From what I'm told, so am I." She glanced at Miss Militia and Amy. "Anything I've missed?"

Amy raised a tentative hand. "Bonesaw's got a minion of sorts," she said. "He calls him Hack Job. He's a mashup of Hatchet Face and Oni Lee."

"What's that ... power nullification and teleporting?" asked Hope.

"Basically, yes," agreed Amy.

"Hm, okay," said Hope. "Miss Militia. As soon as Siberian goes down, or even just before, if you can pull it off, you're going to have to take down Hack Job. Can do?"

Miss Militia nodded. "Can do." The weapon in her hand was a very long and elaborate sniper rifle.

"Good," said Hope. "How long do we have?"

Miss Militia consulted her watch. "If the time window you gave me is accurate, then about ten minutes at the earliest, to twenty at the latest."

"Well, that's my cue to get up there," said Hope. She gave Weld, Grue and Miss Militia a sketchy salute as her wings unfurled.

"Wait a second," said Miss Militia. She held out an object toward Hope. "In light of what Mannequin did."

Hope took the SWAT style goggles and fitted them over her eyes. "How do I look?"

Amy burst out laughing. Miss Militia's scarf hid what looked like a broad smile. Even Weld smirked.

"Absolutely perfect," Grue said, the hollowness of his voice inside his helmet not concealing a chuckle as he spoke.

"That's what I thought," said Hope with a grin of her own. "Let's go do this thing." Spreading her wings, she launched herself skyward.

Chapter End Notes
For those interested, the circle Hope formed went like this: Skitter, Clockblocker, Parian, Flechette, Grue, Miss Militia, Regent, Kid Win, Tattletale, Weld, Bitch, Vista, Amy. Hope stood between Skitter and Amy.
In which the fate of the Nine is determined once and for all

Hope loitered in the eye of the sun.

Hovering was more tiring than forward motion, but she didn't want anyone on the ground noticing the tiny bright spark so far overhead. She was about two thousand feet up, most of a kilometre. Low enough to spot the bulk of Crawler with the dots of other people around him, high enough to escape notice in return. She hoped.

"I can see them now," she said over the radio link. "They're about five minutes out. Hunting party, how are we doing?"

Kid Win grimaced as he banked the flying surfboard over yet another street, empty of all people.

"... how are we doing?" came Hope's voice over the radio.

"I don't know," he said out loud. "How are we doing?"

"He's around here somewhere," said Tattletale, looking pensive. "It's the only area that makes sense." She pointed. "Maybe that street over there."

"There's a van on that street," noted Skitter. "Moving this way."

"Sounds promising," said Kid Win. Kicking the surfboard into a climb, he powered it onward. "We might have something," he reported over the radio. "Going to check it out now."

"... to check it out now."

"Good," said Weld. "Let us know as soon as you have something positive." He looked around; Miss Militia was lying almost prone with her rifle at the ready; Grue was crouching down farther back, and Flechette was peering over the edge of the parapet, just as Weld was.

On the next building over, Parian and Clockblocker were deep in discussion, Parian holding several threads that trailed down into the grounds below. They were also keeping low; in fact, they could not see over the edge of the roof at all. Down in the middle of the distribution area was a large tent, standing apparently unsupported.

Up on a taller building, Vista watched everything, and bit her lip.

Down on a side-street, Bitch pushed her power into her dogs. They were already as big as minivans, but Hope had said she wanted them as large as she could get them. So they got bigger. And bigger. And bigger.

Cherish had not been able to order breakfast – that had been the province of Jack Slash and Bonesaw – and she hadn't slept well besides, so she was hungry, tired and resentful. Thus, she was in no mood to keep a good lookout. Besides, if Jack Slash was confident about such things, who was she to gainsay him?

"There we are," said Jack Slash cheerfully. He waved ahead to where the street opened into Skitter's
distribution area. "Are we ready to cause mayhem and ruin everyone's day?"

In answer, Crawler surged forward with a roar. Bonesaw sent her spider-bots scuttling forward as well; they would run around the perimeter of the area, to herd people back into the middle.

"Slaughterhouse Nine is on site," reported Vista tensely. "Kid Win?"

As the Nine entered the area, people looked up and recognised them. They did the sensible thing. They screamed and ran. But as fast as they ran, the scuttling spider-bots beat them to the other side of the distribution area, so they had to retreat once more. So they retreated, as they had been told, to the new tent. As the last one entered, the tent flap unfolded and closed behind them.

Parian handed a length of thread to Clockblocker. He exerted his power.

Crawler barreled at the tent at full speed, intending to knock it down and scatter the people within. He bounced, hard.

All around the area, threads wove themselves back and forth over the exits. Gossamer thin, they were barely visible. But they were there. Parian handed more threads to Clockblocker. Again, he exerted his power.

"... on site. Kid Win?"

Kid Win grunted in reply as he jockeyed the board after the van, which had just accelerated away. "Just a minute." He turned to Skitter. "Can't you get bugs in there?"

"It's sealed tight." There was frustration in her voice. "Can't find a hole anywhere."

Kid Win lined up one of his minor weapons. It spat a shell out that slammed into the roof of the van and then exploded with a tiny spiteful crack. A fist-sized hole opened in the metal. "How about that one?"

A few bugs managed to fly into the hole, but the van was now accelerating madly.

"What did you just do?" came Weld's voice from over the comms. "Siberian just jumped like something bit her."

"Something did," said Kid Win with some satisfaction. "Pour it on," he added to Skitter.

"Can't get the bugs in the hole," she snapped. "He's going too fast."

"Why didn't you say so?" Kid Win lined up another weapon. A blue bolt leaped out and slammed into the van; azure lightning played over the vehicle for a moment, then the engine died. As the van slowed, bugs caught up and poured into the hole in the roof.

Siberian looked around wildly, then ... disappeared.

"That's it!" snapped Weld. "Siberian's gone! Go, go, go!"
“This is Hope. Diving.”

Cherish looked up, opening her awareness and pulling in the impressions all around her. Most were of fear and fleeing, but some ... "Oh shit," she said. "This is an ambush."

Miss Militia rolled up on to one knee. She sighted for just a moment, and then pulled the trigger. Hack Job took the round squarely in the back of the head. Three more shots struck him, ripping through vital organs, before he slumped to the ground. As a continuation of the move, Miss Militia rolled back to a prone position.

"Hope, this is Vista. Pulling you in, now."

"No –" Jack Slash drew a knife, and swung it at where the bright flash had come from. Miss Militia had ducked just in time; a few of her hairs drifted to the rooftop.

Hope went from fifteen hundred feet in the air to fifteen feet in an eyeblink. Forewarned, she levelled out, wings wide spread, three feet off the ground, wind keening through her wingfeathers.

" – shit!" snarled Jack Slash, just before Hope barreled into the small of his back at over fifty miles an hour. Wings pumping hard, arms locked around his torso, she clawed for altitude once more. Vista obliged by compressing space, giving her ten feet for every foot she climbed.

A normal man, struck with that sort of impact, would have suffered a broken spine, fractured ribs, various internal injuries. Jack Slash had been improved upon by Bonesaw, so he suffered none of those problems. However, such an impact could not help but knock the wind out of him. So he didn't start struggling until she had reached almost the altitude she had started at.

The Siberian appeared beside the stopped van. Tearing it open like papier mache, she pulled the man within into her arms.

"Hell no!" yelled Kid Win, loosing more projectiles at Manton. The Siberian didn't even look around, but the nude projection of a woman moved her body into the way of the attack, taking the shots on her back. They exploded uselessly, not even jarring her stance. Moving faster than any normal human, she sprinted off down the street, cradling him as best she could.

"Son of a bitch," ground out Kid Win. "He's going to get away!"

But Manton had already been stung many times by wasps and bees and hornets. Black widow and brown recluse spiders, carried in by other insects, had injected their venom into him. Skitter had sent bugs crowding into his nose and mouth, blocking his air passages, forcing their way into his lungs, tearing one another apart and packing the remains into the air spaces.

The Siberian got perhaps a hundred yards, flickered, and disappeared. William Manton fell to the ground, bounced limply, and skidded to a halt.

Kid Win landed the flying surfboard and they walked over to inspect the body.

"Well?" he said.
"He's dead," Tattletale said somberly.

"Well, darn," said Kid Win.

"What's up?" asked Skitter.

"How are we going to get the body back?"

Cherish concentrated, trying to fix on one, on the keystone of this ambush. If she could turn that person, disrupt the whole thing from the beginning ...

Something shoved her, interrupting her concentration. She staggered.

"Regent, you're up."

Vista compressed space. Regent saw Cherish spring closer to him; he reached out, grabbed her arm, and hauled her bodily on to the rooftop beside him. She sprawled, looked up, confused.

"Jean-Paul?" she stammered. "What - ?"

"Sorry, sis," he said, and jammed the taser end of his sceptre into her ribs. Electricity crackled, and she spasmed before slumping down to lie twitching at his feet.

"Cherish is down," he reported.

"Excellent," replied Weld. Beside him, Miss Militia and Flechette were doing a land-office business, picking off the small spider-bots as they scuttled into view. "Put me on to Bonesaw, please."

Space collapsed, and Weld reached out to pluck Bonesaw from the middle of the open area. She saw him from the corner of her eye and went to duck away, but something tripped her and she went down. He grabbed her arm and yanked her on to the rooftop. Too late, he realised that she was draped about with three of her small spider-bots. Even as she yelped in surprise, all three leaped off her; one went for his face, another for Grue, and a third for Miss Militia.

His right hand was wrapped around Bonesaw's left wrist. His left hand caught the spider-bot by one leg and slammed it to the ground, where he stamped it to ruin. Grue saw the second 'bot coming, and he already had the containment foam sprayer ready. A glob caught the spider-bot, trapping it.

Miss Militia was caught off-guard; Weld's shout warned her, so she rolled on to her back and fended off the spider-bot with her rifle. It tried to get past, to get at her, but before it could manage this, Flechette picked it off with her arbalest.

With his right hand, Weld more or less threw Bonesaw at the glob of foam trapping the spider-bot. She stuck on contact with it, and Grue turned the sprayer on her. It spread over her in white clumps, swelling to cover her from head to toe.

Crawler spun from side to side, as his allies vanished into thin air, or on to rooftops and far away, or were carried into the sky.

"What?" he bellowed, his discordant voice echoing from the buildings. "What the f**k is this? Fight me! FIGHT ME!"
"Bitch," said Weld, "I do believe that's your cue. But don't let them attack quite yet."

There was a whistle, and Bitch's dogs scrambled on to a nearby rooftop. They were enormous, covered in bony plates, dried blood and spikes more than two feet long; the smallest was as big as a medium sized truck. Bitch jumped off on to the rooftop, then whistled again; the dogs leaped down to the ground to face Crawler.

"Hah!" he bellowed. "HAH! FIGHT ME!"

The dogs snarled and roared in return, great loops of saliva drooling from their jaws, but they did not attack.


Flechette's arbalest thudded; the bolt whipped across the intervening distance, passed through armour plating and skull alike, and lodged within Crawler's brain. He roared, rearing up and shaking his massive head. "Won't kill me!" he bellowed triumphantly. "Can't kill me!"

"Panacea," said Weld over the radio link.

Vista collapsed space. Amy slapped both hands on to Crawler's broad rump. And by the time Crawler registered the light impact, the proximity, she was safely separated by a hundred yards or more of space, up on her rooftop.

"What the hell was that?" bellowed Crawler. "Sissy-girl slap-fighting?"

"Bitch," said Weld. "Go."

Bitch whistled a short, sharp note. Kill. The dogs' ears pricked up, and they moved forward in unison, their heavy footfalls shaking the earth.

Amy could not shut down Crawler's regeneration altogether. But it was tied into his biology, so she instead worked on that. When she took her hands away, Crawler's own body was working against the regeneration that served to keep it functioning. As strong as that regeneration was, she could not cancel it out, but the effect of her would reduce it to almost nothing, for just a little while, until his power overrode it once more. Only a few minutes. But that was long enough.

Crawler was no pushover. Even without his regeneration, even with a bolt stuck through his brain, he was still a formidable opponent. But Bitch had trained the dogs well, and they fought smart. Bentley rushed him from the front, feinted, then leaped away, while the other three circled around, snapping at his flanks.

Jaws that a tyrannosaur would have been proud to own closed on armoured flanks, crushing the armour plate and ripping away the flesh beneath. Crawler began to heal the wound, but it was slow, a snail's pace compared to his usual rate of regeneration. The other dogs closed in, snapping and snarling. They tore more chunks from him, ripping pieces off faster than he could regenerate them. A leg went, and an arm.

Cherish stirred, and opened her eyes.

Regent did not seem to be paying attention; his gaze was fixed on the fight between the dogs and Crawler.
She didn't feel up to attacking him, and her head was pounding far too much from the taser jolt to even attempt using her power in any offensive way, so she tried to crawl away, toward the roof edge, where there was a fire escape. Not a chance; her limbs were still twitching too much to even think about moving.

So that's what that stupid little golden stick was all about.

And then she felt herself moving anyway. Foot by painful foot, she crawled to the roof edge, then climbed down the fire escape. At the foot, she had to pause to regain her breath and steady her shaking limbs.

Her mouth opened, and her voice spoke, but it was not of her own volition.

"I'm only doing this because you're family, sis," she heard herself murmur. "Go away; get out of Brockton Bay. If I hear that you stayed around, I'll find you, and I'll walk you into traffic. Do I make myself clear?"

She found herself in control of her own movements again. Shakily, she nodded.

She waited, but there was no more communication, no more control of her limbs. She was on her own. Unsteadily, she moved away, down the alley, away from the destruction of the Nine.

She'd been playing the long game on them, working to bring them under her control. But all that was over now. She'd have to move on, find another gang to shield herself from her family. It would involve moving to another city, but she could do that.

Crawler fought back, of course. His caustic saliva spattered over them, eating into their bony armour, their expanded flesh. But they slashed at him, and tore his flesh away in great chunks. One on one, in a fair fight, he might have held his own. But this was not a fair fight.

They tore him to pieces. Bentley, at the last, took his oversized braincase in massive jaws, and crushed it. Crawler's brain splattered everywhere, including the corona pollentia, the unique structure within the brain that provided the connection to his powers, to his shard.

While Amy's influence would have worn off in a short time, that time came too late for him, as the very source of his healing was destroyed.

Crawler was dead. It was nearly over.

Far above, Hope had her own troubles. Once he recovered from the impact, Jack Slash proved to be more than a handful. She was strong and agile and skilled, certainly, but he fought with a single-minded determination, and he seemed to have more knives about his person than any one human being should be able to carry.

One blade scored a line across her goggles before she slapped it from his hand, then shouted, "For god's sake, will you stop fighting?"

"Never!" he cried, laughter in his voice, as he slid another knife from his sleeve.

In exasperation, she threw him upward, caught him by the ankles on the way down, and shook him as hard as she could.

Once again, a normal man would have suffered severe injury from such a treatment; with Jack Slash,
he was forced to drop the knife as the jolting overcame even his iron determination to retain the weapon. Other knives and various bits and pieces came free as she shook harder, falling toward the ground far below.

Flipping him up once more, she took advantage of his temporarily dazed condition, and held him by one arm while she tore the shirt from his body. Cloth ripped; more concealed blades came to light. She tore those free as well, and dropped them. By the time he recovered his wits, she had his arms firmly pinned behind his back.

"So what are you going to do now, chicky?" he said, still laughing. "I know all about how you're against killing and death. Turn me over to the authorities now, and they'll just shoot me right in the head."

"I think you're just a little mistaken about me," said Hope coolly, regaining her composure. "Sure, I don't like to see people die. But that depends on your definition of 'people'."

"What, capes aren't people to you?" retorted Jack. "Or is it just us poor misunderstood villains?" His tone of voice told her that he knew exactly how stupid that sounded, and that he didn't care.

"I know misunderstood villains," said Hope. "Unfortunately for you, I understand you all too well."


"Okay," said Hope. "I have a question. Suppose you found out that in two years' time, you would bring about the end of the world. What's your reaction?"


Despite herself, Hope was taken somewhat aback. "Really?" she said. "You'd actually do that?"

"Well, duh, chicky," he retorted. "I'm Jack Slash. That's the way to get my name up in lights. Write it across the face of the world in corpses."

Hope shook her head. "I'm sorry for you," she said. "I really am."

"So what are you gonna do about it?" he asked, teeth gleaming in a manic grin. "Snap my neck? Sure, you could do that. Up here? No-one'll know a thing."

"Somehow ... I don't think so," said Hope pensively.

"Oh, come on," urged Jack Slash. "I'm the bad guy! I've killed millions!" He paused. "Well, thousands. I wanna go out with a bang. Not sit in some dinky little jail cell for the rest of my natural. And if I escape," he added brightly, "I'll just kill again. You know it and I know it. So stop it before it ever happens. Kill me right now. I double-dog-dare you!"

"Jack ..." said Hope.

"Yes?" he said cheerfully.

"Shut up."

Hope descended to the rooftop with Jack Slash firmly in hand. He gave them his manic grin, and she could tell he was working on something to say to them. She spoke first.

"Amy, could you come over here please?"
Amy ventured over, looking questioningly at Hope.

"This is Jack Slash. He has several implanted glands, each of which will release a virulent bio-toxin across the city if he dies. Could you please reverse that?"

Jack Slash's head whipped around to stare at Hope. "You can't know that – how can you know that?"

"Jack," smiled Hope, "not all my powers are flashy."

Jack Slash twitched, then struggled violently as Amy laid her hand on his arm. "Get it off!" he screamed. "It burns! It burns!"

Weld took a step forward, but Miss Militia put a hand on his arm.

"Seriously?" asked Hope. "Quoting Gollum?"

"Shut up," he muttered. He subsided, as Amy withdrew her hand.

"All done," she reported. "That some other stuff. The non-organic implants. Want me to fix them too?"

Hope considered. "Can't hurt."

"Actually, it might hurt him."

Silver-blue light flared where Hope's hand touched Jack's skin. "No, it won't."

Jack stared at her, even as Amy laid her hand on his skin once more. Metal plates and rods, and other less identifiable items, moved beneath his skin, then protruded through and dropped to the ground, the skin closing seamlessly behind.

"What the hell are you?" he demanded. "You capture me, you're going to hand me over for execution, and you don't want to cause me undue pain?"

"I don't believe in that sort of thing," said Hope. "It's not who I am."

He shook his head, muttering something under his breath, as Amy took her hand away again. "He's clean," she said.

"Thank you," said Hope. She turned to see Miss Militia approaching. "Miss Militia," she said. "I present to you Jack Slash. He's been disarmed. Thoroughly."

Miss Militia nodded. "So I see." She took up a stance in front of Jack Slash. "Get him on his knees."

Hope's secondary right wing slapped the backs of his knees, and despite his best efforts, Jack Slash was forced to a kneeling position. He tried to rise again; Hope pressed on a nerve point, and he flinched and stayed where he was.

"Jack Slash," Miss Militia went on. "You have been convicted in absentia for many crimes against humanity. In light of that, by the power invested in me as the local commander of the Protectorate, I hereby sentence you to death, to be carried out immediately."

The gun in her hand was a Glock 17. Stepping up alongside Jack Slash, she took hold of his hair. His head was pushed forward until he was looking at the ground. The gun muzzle pointed at the back of his head.
Miss Militia looked sideways at Hope. Hope shrugged, without loosening her grip. "If it's gotta be done, it's gotta be done," she said.

"Wait," said Jack Slash. "You can't just kill me like this! Don't I get any last words?"

"Yes," said Miss Militia, and squeezed the trigger, putting a single round through the centre of his skull.

Hope felt the light, the life, in the kneeling man go out. She let his arms go, and he slumped, then fell sideways. The roof in front of him was painted with his blood and brains.

She turned to Miss Militia. "So what about his last words?"

"Those were his last words," replied Miss Militia, holstering the pistol. "I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of one final fuck-you. And I really was sick and tired of his voice."

Hope nodded. "As much as I hate to admit it, so was I."

At their feet, the corpse of Jack Slash cooled slowly.

And it was almost over.

Kid Win came in for a shaky landing, with Skitter and Tattletale hanging on for dear life, and William Manton's body slung over the back. "You did it!" he breathed, looking at the body lying on the roof. "He's dead. He's really dead."

"Plus we have Bonesaw in custody," said Miss Militia, gesturing to the mass of containment foam, from which faint protests could be heard. "And Regent got Cherish."

"Correction," came Regent's voice over the radio. "Regent had Cherish, but Cherish woke up and got away while Regent was distracted watching the fight."

"Oh, you're kidding me!" snapped Miss Militia.

"Sorry," said Regent. "But look on the bright side. The rest of the Nine are done."

"That's not the point!" snapped Miss Militia.

Skitter came over to where Hope was looking down toward the people who, once released from the tent, were keeping a safe distance from Bitch and her dogs.

"We kicked ass today," she said. "We took down the freaking Slaughterhouse Nine. And it was all your plan."

"Well, not totally my plan," Hope corrected uncomfortably.

"Whatever," said Skitter. "I really hate to ask this of you, but I need to ask a favour."

Hope looked at her. "Sure," she said.

"... don't you want to know what it is, first?" asked Skitter.

Hope shook her head. "I trust you not to ask something that I can't deliver on," she said.
"Oh," said Skitter. "Okay. I'll, uh, talk to you later about it. You staying at Tattletale's?"

Hope nodded. "I'll be going over to Purity's later this week. Her stepson wants to meet me."

"So does everyone else in Brockton Bay," replied Skitter.

"Ain't that the truth," sighed Hope.

Epilogue: Much Later

Cherish slunk through the streets of Brockton Bay. It was done; the news that the Slaughterhouse Nine had been broken, that Jack Slash had been executed, had spread through the streets like wildfire.

It didn't matter; she could change her face, change her name, get out of the city. Go someplace else, start fresh. It was dark now; she could get to the edge of town, hop on a bus –

"Going somewhere, Cherish?"

She spun around. There had been no-one close enough to speak to her; that much she was certain of. But, melting out of the shadows, came a figure ... a familiar figure.

"Shadow Stalker?" she said, disbelievingly.

"The same," replied Sophia Hess, with a mocking smile. "Or not, as the case may be."

She walked closer, while Cherish tried her best to plumb the depths of her emotions. But it was as if they were smoke; she could not get a grip on them.

"I feel you," said Sophia, walking around her. "You're trying to reach me, aren't you?" Her smile widened. "I had a trigger in the transport. After you left me. After you refused me. I'm different now. A real shadow stalker. What you see is what you get."

There was the edge of madness in her voice, but just the edge. "I'm immune to your power, Cherish. Just like I'm immune to your brother. I'm going to find and kill him, too. But I decided I was going to kill the Slaughterhouse Nine first, just because you all decided I wasn't good enough for you."

She chuckled, and the sound echoed ... wrongly. "Crawler was ripped apart by wild dogs. Jack Slash was shot in the back of the head. The Siberian just ... vanished. Mannequin was killed by Skitter and Hope. Burnscar and Bonesaw are in custody. Shatterbird was decapitated by Hookwolf." She shook her head. "Such sad ends to great, poisonous dreams. And now, you're the only one left free and alive. For now, that is."

For the first time in a long time, Cherish felt real terror. "What – what are you going to do?"

At first, it seemed that Sophia had not heard the question. "You know," she mused, "when I first changed, I thought I still had to eat like a normal person. I nearly starved to death, because I cannot hold this form for long. But then I found that I don't need to be solid to feed." Her body began to dissolve into shadow, slowly, slowly. "And I was so very, very hungry."

And then there were just shadows. Coiling, twisting shadows.

Cherish screamed, and tried to run.

A tentacle of shadow coiled itself about her, and she screamed again. The scream went on and on.
At the very last, she reached out to her brother, tried to contact him. She would never know if she got through.

The next morning, her body was discovered, eyes wide, her mouth still open in the rictus of terror.

And *then* it was over.
In which the aftermath is experienced by various people

Hope approached Miss Militia. "Thank you for trusting me. Thank you for everything. Without you and the Wards, this just would not have been possible."

Miss Militia nodded. "It was a good plan. Audacious, but good. And it came off." She frowned. "I'd really like to know where you got your information from. Plus those suggestions on where to place people."

"I'm sorry," said Hope. "Perhaps someday I'll be free to tell you. But for now ..."


Hope shrugged. "I didn't do all that much. Mainly, I got Jack Slash out of the way."

"Which reminds me," said Miss Militia, and pulled out her phone. "It's time to call in the cavalry. This mess needs to be cleaned up. Bonesaw needs to go into custody until we can decide what to do with her. From here on in, we need official oversight."

"I understand," said Hope. "I just wanted to say, thank you." Stepping forward, she gave Miss Militia an impulsive hug; after a startled moment, the older woman returned the hug.

"No," said Miss Militia. "Thank you."

She released Hope, and hit buttons on her phone. "I suspect I'm about to make Director Piggot's day, or ruin it. Or both," she mused as the call went through.

Hope nodded, and took that as a cue to leave her alone.

The phone rang, and Director Piggot picked it up. "Parahuman Response Teams, Director Piggot speaking," she said, before she registered that the caller ID read as Miss Militia. "Hannah, where are you? I've just been informed that neither you nor the Wards are on base, but there have been no patrols approved for the day, except one 'extended patrol' for Flechette, dating from last night."

"We're on an unscheduled outing," came Miss Militia's cheerful voice. "If you could send a pickup team to Skitter's distribution area, there are some items that I suspect you will really, really want to get back to base ASAP."

Piggot's voice took on a tone of deep suspicion. "Why? What have you done?"

"Wouldn't you like to know what they're picking up, first?" asked Miss Militia. She did sound so very irritatingly cheerful.

Director Piggot sighed, feeling aggravated and put upon. She didn't need this sort of thing, this early in the morning. "Capes and their little jokes. "Very well," she asked with exaggerated, grudging patience. "What are they coming to pick up?"

"Two bodies; Jack Slash and William Manton. One live prisoner; Bonesaw. Multiple pieces of biological matter, all from one source; Crawler. Please send a full biohazard cleanup team. Plus lots and lots of bleach."
Piggot found herself leaning forward, gripping the phone with fingers that were aching with the pressure, knuckles suddenly gone white with tension. "Say that again?" she croaked, in a voice she barely recognised as her own. Fumbling fingers found and depressed the 'record' function on her desk phone.

"Director Piggot," came Miss Militia's voice, as crisp as if she were standing in front of Director Piggot's desk at attention, "I wish to report that the Brockton Bay Wards, with the assistance of the Undersiders, Hope, Panacea of New Wave and myself, have engaged the remaining members of the Slaughterhouse Nine, and defeated them in detail. William Manton was killed by Kid Win, Tattletale and Skitter; Hope captured Jack Slash and turned him over to me for summary execution. Bonesaw was captured by Weld and Grue, and is currently awaiting transport. Cherish was neutralised by Regent, but apparently escaped after the battle. Crawler was ... destroyed." No trace of the almost manic glee could now be heard in her voice, just pure satisfaction. "Our forces took no casualties."

Director Piggot took several long breaths. Then several more. "Crawler," she said, grasping at straws. "How was he destroyed?"

"From what I understand," replied Miss Militia formally, "Panacea did something to him that disrupted his regeneration capability. Then Hellhound – Bitch – set her dogs on him. He is currently spread over quite a wide area. Bitch has her dogs watching the pieces, to ensure that none of them get up again." She paused. "As I said, a full biohazard cleanup team. Two trucks at best estimate."

Piggot steadied her racing thoughts. If this is true ... She paused. One more thing. "Miss Militia," she said calmly and clearly. "What flavour of ice cream do you prefer?"

"Strawberry ripple," replied Miss Militia promptly. "But I prefer yoghurt over ice cream." She didn't even bother asking why the question had been asked; both knew the reason.

Director Piggot nodded. That was the right answer. "I will dispatch assistance immediately," she said. "But you and I are going to have a long talk about going off on your own." She paused, a suspicion creeping into her mind. "You mentioned that Hope was involved. What part did she have in planning this unofficial mission of yours?"

"Oh, virtually all of it," replied Miss Militia cheerfully. "It was her idea all along."

I should have known.

"Thank you, Miss Militia," said Director Piggot. "Assistance is on the way. And give everyone there my warmest congratulations for the success of your mission."

She pressed a button to end the call, then directed a call through to the head of Logistics.

Hope again. This is going to be a very long talk indeed.

Vista stepped down on to the rooftop from her eyrie. Hope met her, and enfolded her in a hug. "That was awesome," she said. "You just owned the battlefield, you really did."

Vista returned the hug. "Thanks to your planning, sure," she said. "I couldn't help but get it right." Her voice sounded tired, and when Hope pulled away slightly to study her face, it was pale and drawn. "But right now, I want to sleep for about a week of Sundays."

"You've earned it," said Hope. "You really have. We could not have done that without you." She held her forehead against Vista's. "You're a marvel, you know that?"
Vista hugged her again. "If you hadn't saved me from the Siberian, I wouldn't even have been here," she said. "Is it true she's really dead?"

"Skitter and the others killed William Manton, and they say the Siberian blinked out at the same moment he died, so I'd say that's a yes," said Hope, indicating the bodies laid out on the roof.

"Oh, thank god," breathed Vista. "I don't have to be scared of her any more."

"No, no, you do not," agreed Hope, and kissed her on the forehead. "How about you go find the others, so when it comes time to get everyone home, you don't have to waste time?"

Vista nodded. "That's a good idea." She blinked. "Did you just put a silver mark on my forehead?"

Hope giggled. "No, silly," she said. "That only happens when I bring someone back to life. The rest of the time, it's just an ordinary kiss. That one meant that you're an awesome friend, and I love you very much."

"Oh, okay," said Vista shyly. "I love you too." She grinned. "I'll go get the others then. Don't run off now; I'll want to say goodbye before we go."

Hope nodded. "I promise," she said. She unfurled her wings and shook them out with a crystalline shimmer of sound. "I'll just go see how Bitch is doing."

Bitch was doing just fine. She stood beside one of her dogs – Hope, while she liked dogs quite a bit, could never tell these ones apart when they were bulked out like this – reaching up to scratch him behind the ear while he slowly downsized, shedding acid-scarred bony plates and extraneous flesh.

Hope flared her wings and landed near Bitch, who heard the noise and looked around casually. She gave Hope a nod, then turned back to her dogs.

"How are they going?" asked Hope as she walked up. "They didn't get hurt too badly, did they?"

"No," replied Bitch briefly. "Some acid burns, some bumps, some broken plates, but nothing that got through to actually hurt them." She looked around at Hope. "I shouldn't have questioned you. You knew what you were doing."

From Bitch, this was the equivalent of ten minutes' worth of florid apology from anyone else.

Hope nodded. "Well, you got the job done," she said. "I'm really glad you were on board with this. I don't know any other way we could have taken Crawler down so thoroughly, short of high explosive, even after his regeneration was dealt with. Your dogs did the job perfectly."

Bitch smiled; it seemed to be an unfamiliar expression to her. "Yes," she said. "They did, didn't they?"

Hope smiled back. "I'm going to hug you now, if that's okay," she said.

"Why?" asked Bitch curiously, but did not object.

"Because it's how I like to show affection, you big silly," said Hope warmly, enfolding Bitch in the aforementioned hug. "I really do appreciate everything you did here today. I hope you understand that."

Slowly, Bitch put her arms around Hope as well. "Thank you for trusting me," she said. "Not many people do. Most people are stupid. Most people think I'm stupid."
Hope rubbed her forehead against Bitch's. "You're not stupid," she said with a smile. "I think the way you know dogs so well is just awesome." She let the hug disengage naturally.

Bitch looked at her searchingly. "You are the only person I know who really understands me," she said at length. "And I understand you. You're not all confusing like everyone else. Skitter does her best to understand me, and makes a big effort, but I can tell she's having to try really hard sometimes. And sometimes she has to explain what she means before I get it. You just get it straight away. And I get what you mean straight away. How do you do that?"

Hope shrugged slightly. "I guess it's part of my power," she said. "Like part of your power is to understand dogs so well." She smiled. "Besides, I care about you, just like Skitter does. I think there's more to you than the villain called Bitch. I think that you should also allowed to be Rachel from time to time."

"That's exactly what I mean," said Bitch. "If anyone else had said that, I would be all confused. I wouldn't know if they meant it, or if they were making a joke, or what. But the way you said it, I really get that you mean what you say."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Hope. She looked up at the dogs. "Where do they like to be scratched?"

"Here, here, and up there," said Bitch. "But I can't reach up there without climbing on board, and you'd have to scratch pretty hard."

In answer, Hope unfurled her right primary wing, curled it up and over, and started digging away at the spot Bitch had indicated. Under Bitch's direction, she adjusted the angle of attack, and she soon had the dog grunting with enjoyment as she scratched industriously away.

Vista moved around the area, looking for the rest of the Wards. Weld had stayed near his original post with Miss Militia, chatting amicably with Grue. Clockblocker, Weld told her, had gone down to help Parian retrieve her cloth and threads, and Flechette had gone with them.

Kid Win was apparently putting on a display of aerobatics for the admiring crowd, which was growing by the minute, though still keeping clear of where Bitch and her dogs were guarding the remains of Crawler. Hope was down there, conversing with Hellhound and apparently helping scratch the dogs.

Vista shook her head. Hope was incredibly easy to get along with, but from all she'd heard, Hellhound – or rather, Bitch, as Hope said she liked to be called – was about the hardest person in the world to get along with. And yet, there they were, talking away with Bitch showing every evidence of interest. It was amazing.

The large tent that Parian had assembled to protect the people on site had been disassembled; the cloth lay in neat rolls on the ground. Vista cast about, spotted movement toward one of the entrances to the distribution area, and stepped over there. Prior to her experience with the Siberian, she would have had to make several smaller steps, to get past all the people, but now all she needed was a line of sight for even just a moment, and she could collapse space and make the journey in a single step.

Clockblocker was there, carefully coiling yard after yard of finely-woven thread. He looked up as she approached.

"Hi," she said. "Nearly finished here?"

"Nearly," he said, with the hint of a groan. "They left me to take care of this, while they went to clear up the other threads."
"Flechette and Parian?" asked Vista, a suspicion growing in her mind.

"Yeah," said Clockblocker. "You'd think they'd have given me a job that my powers could help me with."

"Poor baby," said Vista, patently insincerely. "It does you good to do things the hard way."

"That's what Flechette told me," grunted Clockblocker.

"Well, I have to say, you handled your part in the battle just right," Vista told him. "You and Parian saved over two hundred people from being hurt or killed when Crawler hit that tent."

Clockblocker's face was hidden by his helmet, of course, but his body language betrayed a sudden improvement in mood. "We did, didn't we?" he agreed. "I had my doubts when Hope showed us the plan, but it worked out just right." He tilted his head. "I have to say, though, it felt strange to be doing everything from the sidelines, rather than getting in there and mixing it up with them."

"It was how Hope wanted it done," Vista pointed out, "and it worked a treat."

"It did, didn't it?" Clockblocker agreed again. 'We did a good thing today.'

"That we did," Vista nodded. "Sorry, but I should really go and find Flechette so that when we're ready to go, we aren't running around looking for everyone."

"Why not try her earpiece radio?" asked Clockblocker curiously.

"Oh, she handed hers back to Weld," she said with a shrug. "See ya when we're ready to go, okay?"

"Sure you don't want to finish this for me, while I go look for her?" offered Clockblocker hopefully.

Vista grinned and shook her head. "You're doing such a great job, I'd hate to take it away from you."

Before he could answer, she stepped away again.

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Vista approached the entrance at the other end of the open ground, noting that the thread there had already been removed. So where -?

There was a door standing just slightly ajar in the building next to where she was standing. On a hunch, she sidled up to the door and eased it open. Muffled sounds came from within. Opening it further, she stepped inside. The sounds became louder. Walking down a short corridor, ready at any moment to step back outside if the need arose, she peeked around the corner.

Flechette and Parian were there. Vista could not see all the details in the semi-darkness, but it seemed that both their costumes were somewhat ... disarranged, their masks lying discarded on the floor. Flechette had Parian's wrists pinned up against the wall above her head, but Parian did not seem to be objecting in the slightest; she was returning Flechette's kisses with considerable enthusiasm.

Even as Vista watched, her cheeks flooding crimson in embarrassment, the stitches holding Flechette's top together began to part, the garment beginning to slide down and off her torso ...

"Oh god, guys!" Vista yelped. "For god's sake, get a room!"

Both Flechette and Parian whipped their heads around, staring at Vista. Flechette let Parian's wrists go, and gathered up her top before it slid off her altogether, holding it back in place. The stitching did itself up again, so that it fitted snugly once more. Hastily, the two rearranged their costumes for more decorum, before grabbing up their masks.
"We did get a room," Flechette said, her breathing still heavy. "But someone just walked into it."

"Sorry," said Vista, "but we'll be heading off soon, and I really don't think you wanted Miss Militia or Weld catching you in here."

Flechette groaned. "Just five more minutes ..."

Vista shook her head. "Sorry."

Parian looked anxiously at her. "You won't tell anyone, will you? I don't want to get Lily in trouble."

Vista smiled at her. "It's all right. I think it's really sweet and romantic, actually. Just ..." the blush flooded over her cheeks once more. "Lock the door, next time, will you? I really didn't need to see that." She grinned at Flechette. "Besides, I might need someone to take my monitor duty once in a while."

"Blackmailer," snorted Flechette.

"Yup," grinned Vista.

They headed for the door, then Vista turned and looked at them, and burst out into giggles. "Hold still," she said, and reached up to each of their masks. Lifting them away, she swapped them over and handed them to their respective owners. "That would really have looked good, wouldn't it?"

Ruefully, Parian and Flechette fitted their own masks into place. "Thanks," said Flechette grudgingly; Parian followed suit.

"Don't mention it," grinned Vista. "We're teammates, after all."

"Even me?" asked Parian.

"After today," Vista assured her, "totally."

Hope looked up to see two flying figures flash by overhead, loop around, and land on the rooftop near Miss Militia and Weld. "Ah," she said to Bitch. "It looks like the Protectorate are here. I'll just go see what they want."

Bitch looked wary. "That truce only covered things while the Nine were around," she said. "Could be they're here to arrest us."

"Don't be silly," scoffed Hope. "I won't let them."

Spreading her wings, she lifted off toward the rooftop in question, while Bitch stared after her.

She landed on the rooftop just after Alexandria and Legend had touched down.

She knew Alexandria from when she had first arrived in Brockton Bay; Legend was not someone she had met yet, but she thought she knew his face from the files.

"Hi," she said, holding her hand out. "I'm Hope."

Legend took it, shaking it firmly. "Legend," he said, confirming her belief. His smile was wide and genuine, his personality manifesting as warm and friendly. "I understand you're the architect of this impressive victory here today."
"Well, I put the pieces together, yes, but it was everyone else who really made it work," said Hope, feeling slightly uncomfortable at the praise. "Without the Wards, without Miss Militia, without the Undersiders, without Amy, it really would not have come together."

Amy, who had been hanging back, stepped forward next to Hope, who put an arm around her shoulders. "What I'm saying," continued Hope, "is that if you give one of us credit, you give us all credit. This was a team venture, and every single one of us pulled his or her weight. Without exception."

Legend nodded. "Very impressive," he said.

Alexandria stepped forward. "Did you have to kill Doctor Manton?" she asked, a certain level of sharpness in her voice.

"Well, I didn't do the deed myself," Hope began, "but yes, I believe it was entirely necessary. The Siberian –"

"– could have been kept under control by threats against Doctor Manton," Alexandria overrode her words. "How long has he been dead?"

Hope considered. "Not more than ten, twelve minutes?" she guessed.

"Revive him, please," directed Alexandria.

Everyone stared at her, even Legend.

Hope paused. "I'm guessing you've got reasons for asking me to do that. I can't think of a good one, right now. Considering his crimes, and so on."

"I can," replied Alexandria. "His is an invaluable scientific mind. He offers untold insights into the working of the Manton effect. We need him. Kindly revive him, at once. We will place him under sedation, and convey him back to Protectorate headquarters." She took a step forward, her voice hardening. "That's an order, Hope."

Hope blinked. "Miss Militia," she said, without turning her head, "my resignation from the Wards has gone through, has it not?"

Miss Militia, standing fascinated by the ongoing events, caught herself and nodded. "Yes," she said. "I processed the paperwork last night. You are no longer part of the Wards."

Hope took a deep breath. "Right," she said. "I'm sorry, Alexandria, I really am. But ... I'm not in the Wards any more. I'm not in your, uh, chain of command. So when you tell me to revive Doctor Manton, that falls in the, uh," she stumbled.


"Uh, category of a request, rather than an order that I gotta carry out," Hope finished with a grateful side-glance at Legend. She took another deep breath.

"So, um," she concluded, "I'm gonna have to decline your request, seeing as the reasons you gave me do not balance out the fact that the Siberian is a murderous psychopath who will kill again if she gets half a chance." She swallowed, heart hammering in her chest. "Sorry."

Alexandria stared at her; Hope was expecting to see a brow furrowed with anger, lips tight, fists clenched ... but there was nothing. A totally unreadable expression. Somehow, Hope would have
preferred outward signs of anger.

"With all due respect," put in Miss Militia unexpectedly, "as you well know, there has been a kill order on the Siberian, and by extension, Doctor Manton himself, ever since the Siberian has been in the Slaughterhouse Nine. So Hope is well within her rights to refuse to use her power to revive him. In short, if she chooses not to do so, she doesn't have to."

"When the kill order went out on the Siberian, it was not known that Doctor Manton was the controlling intelligence!" snapped Alexandria.

"Once again, with all due respect, that does not matter," retorted Miss Militia. "He's dead. You can't bring him back. Hope won't bring him back. I support her decision all the way down the line." She faced Alexandria's gaze unflinchingly. "So I guess we're just going to have to stagger on without him somehow."

"Miss Militia," said Alexandria, her voice softening somewhat, "William Manton was my friend and my confidante." She brushed her hair back from her face, and Hope saw the artificial eye that nestled in the socket. "Yes, the Siberian did this to me, and I can still forgive him, still believe that there is someone there to be reached, someone who can be reasoned with." She paused, then looked back to Hope. "Hope; you work well with people. In the last week and a half, I have seen you connect with people I would never have imagined could be worked with."

She gestured at the surrounding area. "This, alone, proves your capabilities. I don't know anyone else who could have brought about such a level of cooperation between groups who have clashed so much, in such a short time." A pleading tone came into her voice. "If you revive him, we will work with you toward finding a cure for his insanity. Please, think of the potential saving of lives if the Siberian can be sent against the Endbringers."

Hope blinked. Saving lives. That was one of her hot buttons, to be sure, and Alexandria had just mashed her thumb down hard on it. She had read of the Endbringers, of the tremendous loss of life incurred by them. Of how William Manton's daughter had been killed in an attack.

She glanced at Miss Militia, who looked back at her. "It's your choice, Hope," said the other woman. "Alexandria makes some good points, but in the end, it's up to you."

Hope made her decision.

"I'll do it," she said. "But I'll do it my way." She paused, frowning. "His lungs are full of bug bits. They have to come out now, or he'll die again, and it'll all be for nothing," she said crisply.

"On it," said Skitter, from right beside her; startled, she looked around, to see all of the Wards, and all of the Undersiders, standing shoulder to shoulder, in silent support of her.

"You're okay with me doing this?" she asked, even as bugs bearing bits of other bugs began swarming out of Manton's mouth.

"I have no idea, but if you think it's worth doing, I'm going to trust you," said Skitter. There was a murmur of agreement from the others.

"And even if she breaks out, we can just drown Manton in bugs again," joked Clockblocker. He looked around at the others. "What, too soon?" Weld slapped him lightly upside the helmet. "Yup, too soon."

Hope looked around to Amy. "I'm going to need your help, here."
"Mine?" asked Amy, her voice coming out as a squeak.

"Yes," replied Hope. "Yours." A glance passed between them. "Can you do something with his brain to ... fix things?"

Amy looked startled. "Uh, there are some things I can do, but -"

Hope paused, looking at her. "What's the matter?"

Amy looked down. "I ... I don't know if I can. It's just ... this is why ..."

Hope folded her into a hug. "Oh, sweetie," she said gently. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to push something like that at you, out of the blue."

"What are you talking about?" inquired Alexandria tartly. "Time is running out."

It was as if she had not spoken; Hope totally ignored her. "Amy," she said quietly, "if this is too hard, I'm calling this off right now. No harm, no foul. But I'm not going to let the Siberian into the world again. Not like she was. You've got the best chance I know of to stop that, to make her better. Make her into a hero."

Amy looked up at Hope, her eyes shining with unshed tears. "If I said no, you'd call it off?" she whispered.

"In a heartbeat," confirmed Hope. "You're more important than this."

Amy bit her lip. "Then I'll do it," she said. "If you think it's worth it, I'll do it." She took a breath. "I can't guarantee a total fix - that will require therapy - but I can do something, I'm sure of it."

Hope studied her face for a long moment, then nodded. "All I want is for him to be stabilised," she said. "Nothing fancy. Just plain normal."

"Normal, I can do," Amy assured her.

Hope smiled. "Excellent," she said, then turned to Skitter. "We don't have much time," she said. "How clear are his lungs?"

"As clear as I can make them," reported Skitter. "Webs are gone, bug bits are gone, live bugs exiting now. There's some left, but not enough to impair breathing."

"Right," said Hope, dropping to her knees beside William Manton's body. "Please stand back, everyone."

Lowering her face to his, she pressed her lips to his forehead. Her wings unfurled and came up to cover her body; she concentrated hard. Nothing happened. She realised. I've got to want him to live.

And I really don't. She concentrated harder. Still nothing.

"What's happening?" asked Legend quietly. "I was told there was more of a light show than this."

Miss Militia shushed him; Hope barely noticed.

She changed tack, aware of the passage of time. If he lives, and defeats the Endbringers, thousands, maybe millions, of lives will be saved. He could prevent another Newfoundland, another Kyushu.

Closing her eyes tightly, she willed him to live.
Faintly at first, her wings began to chime. Her glow, unbidden, began to amp up through the scale. The chime grew more and more complex, louder and louder, harmonising and then separating, as each individual wingfeather rang its own distinct note. She concentrated yet harder, pouring life into the body, feeling the power working, knowing just how close the deadline was. There was a sharp discord as one of the feathers cracked in the battle with Mannequin flew apart; she caught the loss of energy, boosted it pushed it harder.

The song grew louder, more beautiful, more complex, beyond the ability of virtually any human musician to follow. And just as she feared that the last of her strength would be consumed, it peaked with a triumphant peal, then died away. Her glow eased off as well, and she lifted her lips from his forehead, to find a perfect silver mark impressed there.

William Manton inhaled, coughed, inhaled again. Hope furled her wings, half-rolled away; Amy was kneeling beside him, her hand on his forehead. His eyelids fluttered open for just a second before drooping closed once more.

"What are you doing?" asked Alexandria sharply.

"What I asked her to do," Hope replied weakly.

Amy concentrated for several seconds, then took her hand away. "He'll sleep for about twelve hours, while his brain processes the changes I just made, then he should wake up, hungry and alert. He should also be relatively easy to work with." She smiled at Alexandria. "Don't worry; his intellect should be intact. Some of his more traumatic memories may be a bit fuzzy, is all."

"I thought you didn't do brains," said Alexandria curiously.

Amy smiled sadly. "I don't, normally. There's too much temptation to go too far." She nodded toward Manton. "But he should have a better chance at living normally, now."

Skitter helped Hope to her feet. "Thanks," she said, breathing deeply. Her strength was starting to return, but that one had been close, so very close. "Another thirty seconds, and it would have been too late."

Alexandria turned to her and nodded soberly. "The vital decisions are always the hard ones." She smiled frostily. "And now I know what our mutual friend said when she told me, Don't worry, she will make the right decision."

Hope blinked. "Our mutual friend? Contessa? "The, uh, noblewoman?"

Alexandria nodded. "The very same. But I wished to make sure that you were worthy of her confidence, so I decided to push you a little, in a somewhat clumsy fashion, to see how you reacted." She chuckled ruefully. "It nearly backfired. But you made the right decision in the end; one I would not have anticipated."

Hope stared. "You were testing me!"

Alexandria nodded. "Just so. And you passed." She smiled, more warmly. "I will pass word through Miss Militia when Doctor Manton can be seen. I look forward to working with you."

Gathering the unconscious - but living - body in her arms, she vaulted skyward, travelling slowly enough that he would not be harmed by the rush of wind.

Legend paused, then walked over to Hope. "I was about to oppose her myself," he said quietly. "But your solution ... it's different. It may even work. If it does ... Manton won't be the same person as he
was when the Siberian killed Hero." He put his hand on her shoulder. "But thank you for making the difficult decision. I don't know if I could have made it."

Hope shrugged. "Saving thousands of lives is a hard argument to beat," she said.

"This is true," acknowledged Legend. He turned to Amy. "And you, Panacea -"

"Just Amy, please," she said quietly. Hope put her arm around her, pulling her close.

"Amy, then," he said. "Thank you for doing something that was obviously very hard for you. I'll let you know how it turns out."

"Thank you," said Amy faintly, her face buried in Hope's shoulder.

Legend smiled. "Well, I'll be going then," he said. With a nod for Miss Militia and a sketchy salute for Hope, he took to the sky in Alexandria's wake.

Engines growled and trucks marked with the PRT logo entered the open area, heading for where Bitch's dogs still guarded Crawler's remains. Bitch whistled, and the dogs lifted their heads, turned, and galloped toward her.

"Well," said Miss Militia, "the cleanup crew is here. I think it's time we gathered the troops and headed our different ways. Some of us have not had much sleep – or any – in the last twenty-four hours."

Hope nodded. "It was really good working with you," she said. She looked at the Wards. "All of you."

Clockblocker nodded. "Same to you," he replied. "And it's nice to have the bug girl and her pals sic'ing the creepy-crawlies on someone else for a change."

"Hey," said Hope. "If we keep this sort of thing up, maybe we can make that a regular condition."

"I'll admit that I had my doubts," put in Weld, "but it's been twice now, and we've accomplished some pretty amazing things."

Hope gave Amy's shoulders a squeeze. "When you're right," she told Weld. "You're right."

Vista appeared, more or less from nowhere, and flung her arms around Hope. "Don't be a stranger," she said, her face muffled in Hope's shoulder. "You make life fun."

Hope ruffled her hair fondly. "Same to you, kiddo," she said. At that moment, she saw Bitch, leaving her still impressively-large dogs a little way away from the group, approaching Amy.

"Thanks for what you did with Crawler," said Bitch gruffly, holding her hand out. "You did the job."

Amy took her hand hesitantly. "Thanks," she said. "So did you." They shook, once, then released the grip, each girl looking much more comfortable once the handshake was over, but also pleased with herself for having done so.

Vista turned to Amy. "Uh ... can I ask you a question?"

Amy turned, staying close to Hope. "Sure."
"When you did ... what you did ... to Doctor Manton ... how sure are you that he won't snap and try to kill us all again, with the Siberian?"

Amy paused, thinking about that. Hope realised that everyone had stopped, listening. Perhaps they had all wanted to ask the question, and no-one had quite dared.

"Brain chemistry," said Amy, "is not a simple thing." She gave Hope a fond look. "It's not necessarily the root cause of many behavioural dysfunctions, but there is a knock-on effect. Severe mental trauma causes brain chemistry to alter, which causes changes in behaviours, which sometimes cause more chemical changes, and so on. Most people, in their daily lives, undergo many neurochemical changes, but these even out over time, return to base state." She paused again.

"Severe trauma can induce changes which never quite return to normal. Problems like this are best addressed with therapy, coupled with careful medication. I didn't have time for that. And to be honest, fiddling with brain chemistry to produce a specific effect is like playing a piano with fifty thousand keys, none of which are labeled. So I used broad strokes. I took a template that I'm quite familiar with, and I readjusted some of his basic registers to be more in line with that template. Basically, less killing, more nice."

Vista blinked. "So ... where did you get this template you used?"

Amy smiled shyly. "Hope."

All eyes turned to Hope. "Me?" she squeaked.

Amy nodded. "Just your broad behavioural patterns. And not as strong as you have them. Just ... emulating you, a little."

"Oh," said Vista. "Oh, my."

Amy nodded. "It was the best solution I could think of."

"Well," said Hope, "we're just going to have to see how that turns out, aren't we?" There was a general chuckle, and a lightening of mood.

Amy nodded; at that moment, Tattletale approached them out of the crowd. "Can I, uh, say something?" she asked tentatively.

Amy eyed her warily. "Go ahead."

"I just want to say that I'm really, really sorry for what I said in the bank, and how I said it," Tattletale said quickly. She grimaced. "I can see how it's screwed up your life, and I wanted to apologise."

Amy blinked. "Oh," she said. "Oh." Then she rallied. "Um, well, you weren't totally to blame for screwing up my life. Bonesaw had a bit to do with it, and anyway, it's turned out for the best. I now have a wonderful new big sister -"

"I think I'm actually younger than you," objected Hope.

"You're my big sister now, so shut up," Amy retorted, elbowing her lightly in the ribs. She returned her attention to Tattletale. "I'm not in the situation I was before, I can be totally honest with my life and my powers, and I'm actually feeling good about myself for once. So yeah," she smiled, "you're forgiven."
Hope chuckled. "Well, now that's settled," she said to Tattletale, "got room for me and my little sister at yours?"

"Anytime," said Tattletale. "Give me a lift?"

"You'll have to share with Amy."

"I'm good with that if she is."

"But mo-om," complained Amy in a high falsetto, "she always hogs the window seat!"

Hope smiled. It was nice to see her friends getting along.
In which there is a press conference and an interview, and people form opinions

Hope had been expecting the chance to get her head down for a solid four hours when they got to the shelter. They’d made good time, even with dropping off Tattletale down the block so that she could make her way into the building incognito.

But the grapevine had spread the message faster than Hope would have believed possible; when she and Amy entered the shelter, she was greeted with cheers, whoops and hugs. Amy came in for her share of congratulation as well, although she still had a tendency to shy away from human contact. Hope assisted in this by unobtrusively taking the lead, and by shielding her with her wings.

Radios were reporting the news soon, and a portable TV started showing it shortly after. A hastily-organised press conference in front of the PRT building showed Director Piggot addressing television and print journalists.

"It gives me great pleasure to confirm that the Slaughterhouse Nine has been defeated in detail this morning; their leader, the infamous Jack Slash, was captured and executed. He is the third member of the Nine to die in the last week in Brockton Bay; as you will recall, Shatterbird was killed in combat with Fenrir’s Chosen, and Mannequin was killed last night by members of the Wards working in cooperation with independent capes.

"Another member of the Nine, Crawler, was killed in the battle, while Bonesaw joins Burnscar in the ranks of those currently in custody."

Someone had obviously been keeping count, because a question was called out about the Siberian and Cherish.

"It has recently been established," Director Piggot said stiffly, "that the Siberian was in fact a projection created by an otherwise normal human being. That person is now in custody, under sedation. The person's identity is being kept secret, for purposes of security."

She paused. "As for Cherish ... her whereabouts are unknown, but her face has been faxed to every bus station and airport within a hundred miles. If she shows up anywhere, we will take appropriate measures."

One of the gentlemen from the print media – Hope could not keep track of the newspaper names – asked the extremely cogent question, "Who exactly was involved in the battle against the Slaughterhouse Nine?"

Miss Militia, who was standing beside Director Piggot, took up the microphone. "I am pleased to say that I was there. Also present were all the current membership of the Brockton Bay Wards, as well as Hope, the hero Panacea from the group New Wave ... and the villain group known as the Undersiders."

A stir ran through the crowd. Hope thought it might be about the idea of heroes and villains working together to solve a problem. But the same astute gentleman from before asked the question, "I was under the impression that Hope was a member of the Wards. But in your statement, you just referred to her as being separate to them. What is Hope's status in all of this?"

Miss Militia took a deep breath. "Due to differences in opinion, Hope chose to leave the Wards yesterday. However, as the subject of this press conference can attest, we are continuing to work
together closely with her, in matters that require outside assistance."

Another reporter. "Hope was one of the 'independent capes' who assisted in taking down Mannequin last night, correct? Who were the others?"

"That is indeed correct," replied Director Piggot. "The other assisting capes were Skitter of the Undersiders, and Parian, a local rogue cape." Unbidden, she continued. "Weld, Vista and Flechette were representing the Wards."

"Skitter is a well-known villain," called out another voice. "Why are you referring to her as an 'independent cape'? Does this mark a shift in the attitude toward our villain capes?"

Director Piggot looked as though she'd just bitten into something sour, so Miss Militia took that question. "Due to their unstinting efforts, and the considerable degree of teamwork and cooperation shown by the villain capes on scene at the defeat of the Slaughterhouse Nine, we are reviewing their status. Amnesty for past crimes is not something that has been taken entirely off the table."

"If they commit more crimes in the meantime, however," put in Director Piggot, "we will be forced to treat them as criminals once more."

There was a pause, then another question was asked. "Who took down Jack Slash?"

Miss Militia fielded that one. "Jack Slash was engaged and defeated by Hope. He was then delivered to me, and I carried out a summary field execution, as called for by the kill order on his head."

This sparked a flurry of questions. Hope turned away from the television, hearing Miss Militia going on. "We are still assembling a full report on everything that happened during the battle. Footage from helmet cams will also be provided to the media when ..."

She sat down on the edge of the bed that had been set aside for her, and put her head on her folded arms. Amy sat on the bed beside her, and put an arm about her shoulders.

"Are you all right?" she asked softly.

"Yes," said Hope. "No. I don't know." She felt tears welling up. "It's too much. People died. I caused a death." The first sob shook her shoulders. "I took Jack Slash prisoner, and he died. I told you what to do with Crawler, and he died." More sobs. "I don't want to hurt people. I don't want to kill people."

Amy's arms were about her, her voice soothing, her embrace warm and comforting. Hope knew that she was tired and overstressed, and that she was going through the aftermath of an adrenaline high, but all she wanted to do was curl up in someone's arms and bawl her eyes out.

"It's all right," Amy whispered. "You did what you had to do. You saved lives today, remember? You saved Menja, and you got me to save the Chosen ..." She paused. "You saved my life, too."

Hope paused, looking up at her, blinking away tears. "How did I do that?"

Amy brushed Hope's hair from her eyes. "I was chosen by Bonesaw for potential membership in the Nine. It's sort of why I left. They test their potential members, more or less to destruction. I don't think I would have survived. You found me, you stopped them." She paused. "You accepted me for who and what I am. No questions, no judgements. I owe you ... everything." She shook her head in wonderment. "Why did you do that for me?"
Hope leaned into Amy's embrace. "I told you. I'm your friend. That's what friends do. Friends support each other. Friends show trust, and love, and they offer advice."

Amy wriggled into a slightly more comfortable position. "So I'm beginning to learn. I saw Vista was quite attached to you, back there."

Hope nodded, her head pressed against Amy's shoulder. "I saved her life from the Siberian. It was really close. She's a nice kid. And a good friend. And she really pulled her weight out there today."

"She did, that's for sure," Amy acknowledged. "I think we all owe her a vote of thanks."

"I think we all owe each other a vote of thanks," Hope corrected her. "If just one of us had flaked out, the whole thing could have come crashing down. But it didn't. We got it just right."

"Thanks to you," Amy told her.

Hope looked at her quizzically. "How do you mean?" she asked.

Amy touched her on the tip of the nose. "Beep." She giggled as Hope went momentarily cross-eyed to follow the tip of her finger. "I mean, you were the glue that held us together. You gathered us all together, and gave us the plan, and not one of us even considered not following it – because it was you presenting it."

Hope frowned. "Someone else could have done that ..."

Amy shook her head. "Who? One of the villains? Skitter? The Undersiders would follow her, and Parian, but I probably wouldn't have. Miss Militia and the Wards would be too wary to trust her as well." Warming to her subject, she went on. "If Miss Militia had presented it, the Undersiders might have suspected a trap. If I'd come up with it, both sides would have looked at me strangely and found reasons not to do it."

She shook her head. "No, dear sister of mine, you were the only one who could have pulled that off. And that hand-holding thing you made us do –" she broke off into giggles. "Did you see their faces?"

Hope shifted uncomfortably. "I didn't do it to embarrass them –"

"But you did," Amy corrected her. "You did it to challenge their ideas of who they could trust and could not trust. You forced them to re-evaluate the people they were working with. Even if you didn't know it, you were playing a head-game with them, and it worked. Standing there, holding hands while you pointed out the plan, I felt like I was part of the whole group, that we could all do it. It brought us all together symbolically, and from then it was only a short step to coming together as a team."

Hope blinked. "Wow," she said, feeling somewhat overwhelmed. "I did that?"

"Sure," said Amy. She tilted her head, regarding Hope quizzically. "You didn't even know what you were doing, did you?"

Hope shook her head. "Not really," she admitted. "It just seemed the right thing to do."

Amy smiled. "Well, all I can say is –" she began, but her opinion went unsaid, for at that moment, Lisa strolled up, with a stack of clothes over one arm.

"Hi, Hope. Hi, Amy," she said cheerfully. "I'm Lisa; I work here."
Hope, who knew quite well that Lisa was also Tattletale, looked up at the older girl. "Hi, Lisa," she said. "What's up?"

"Well," said Lisa, with her vulpine grin spreading across her face, "some people on really big dogs dropped these off." She handed over the stack of clothes; on inspection, they were fitted to Hope's particular specifications. "I would have waited till you got some rest before giving them to you, but I think it might be a good idea if you changed now."

"Why?" asked Amy. "I don't know about Hope, but I haven't slept since yesterday."

"Because there's a news crew out front," Lisa said, her grin widening. "And they really want to speak to the heroes of the hour."

"How did they find out I was here?" asked Hope, already beginning to remove the now somewhat-tattered top she was wearing. Amy gave her a hand as Lisa replied.

"There's only about a hundred and fifty people here with phones," she said cheerfully. "How many of those do you think have tweeted that Hope's here, in this shelter?"

Hope stood up reluctantly, and let Amy put the new top on her, and button it up at the back. "This is nice work," said Amy. "Parian?"

"Parian," confirmed Lisa. "I'm considering asking her to make me some stuff too."

Hope skinned out of the equally-tattered pants, and stepped into the new pair, looking down at them critically. "Good," she said, finding the pockets. "I like nice deep pockets."

"Hope!" said Amy, sounding mildly scandalised. "You don't just strip off in front of everyone! There are children here!"

"Why not?" asked Hope mildly. "I've got nothing for them to see. Except a butt, and everyone knows what a butt looks like." She shrugged. "It doesn't bother me if people can see my body. I'm about exciting as a Barbie doll."

"But—" Amy broke off, looking helplessly at Lisa. Lisa just shrugged and grinned.

"It's her body," she said. "But you might need this." She handed Amy a brush.

"Me?" squeaked Amy. "Why do I need -?" She got it, and shook her head. "No, I'm not going out there."

Hope nodded firmly. "If I have to go out there, sister dear," she said with a grin, "then so do you."

She leaned over and put her arm around Amy's shoulders. "But I will be there, and you don't have to say a word if you don't want to. I promise."

Amy looked startled. "I was only joking about the sister thing," she said. Hope shrugged. "I've never had a sister before. I kinda like the idea." She smiled at Amy. "We can take it easy for a bit, see how you like it."

Amy nodded. "I think that's a good idea. I mean, I think you'd be a great sister, but I was actually joking..." She looked into Hope's eyes uncertainly. "I'm really not sure if I want to go out there," she said quietly.

Hope grinned. "If you don't come out there with me, I'll tell them all it was your idea," she mock-
threatened. She took the brush from Amy's fingers, and began to tease out the tangles from her hair. "Besides, if I let you back out of this, you'll keep finding reasons not to face the world."

"You wouldn't do that!" blurted Amy.

"She really would," Lisa said, her eyes twinkling.

Hope stopped brushing Amy's hair, put both hands on her shoulders, and looked her in the eyes. "Please?" she said quietly. "It would mean a lot to me if you came out there with me."

Almost angrily, Amy snatched the brush away from Hope, and began doing her own hair. "Damn puppy-dog eyes get me every time," she muttered. "Okay, fine, I'm coming out there with you. But you do all the talking. Okay?"

Hope nodded. "That's fine," she said. She gave Amy a hug, careful not to get in the way as she brushed out her hair. "I really appreciate this."

"You owe me big-time for this," grumped Amy as they headed for the exit.

"I know," Hope said lightly. She paused, just inside the doorway, to give Amy a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek. "We'll be fine," she whispered.

Then she took Amy's hand and pushed open the door, to face the news crews outside.

They were greeted with a barrage of flash photography; however, Hope and Amy were both old hands at this, and they neither shielded their eyes nor faltered in their step. Hope stepped up to the semi-circle of journalists, who were standing with microphones and cameras aimed at them.

Questions were shouted, but Hope did not answer; she held her free hand up in a gesture for silence, and rather quickly, it was granted.

"I'm willing to answer all questions as fully as I can," she said clearly. "But before I do that, I'd like to address a particular matter." She gestured at the shelter behind her. "This shelter has generously agreed to put me up for the time being. However, as it is a purely charity measure – all the people inside are homeless and have nowhere to go – I would like to ask each of you to put up a donation before we go any farther."

She looked at the journalists searchingly. "Each of you still has a job and a home, and enough to eat. The people who work here are volunteers. Some of them live here, at the shelter. Surely it is not beyond you to contribute toward helping your fellow man?"

There was a pause, and then cameras and microphones were lowered, as hands went into pockets. Behind her, Lisa led several volunteers out with donation tins. These were passed through the crowd of journalists, and coins and notes were dropped into them. When the last tin was passed back to the front, Hope smiled at the assembled journalists.

"Thank you," she said. "I really do appreciate that – and I'm sure all the people in the shelter do, too." A chuckle ran through the crowd. "Now," she said sweetly, "I'm sure you all have questions. You there, in the front row."

Mark Dallon looked up from the TV; some cameras had continued to roll, capturing Hope's impromptu fundraiser. "I don't believe she just did that," he said, chuckling and shaking his head. "Shook down those journalists for a donation, even before the interview started."
Carol Dallon looked over from where she was working at her laptop. "She really did that?" she asked, then her eyes fixed on the screen. Hope had begun answering questions, stepping toward the man who had asked one, and revealed Amy standing beside her.

"Isn't that Amy?" she asked doubtfully.

Mark looked closer. "Certainly appears to be. What's she doing in a homeless shelter?"

Carol frowned. "You read the note she left behind. She thinks she's betrayed us all."

"And you're saying she hasn't?" Carol turned her head to see Victoria standing behind the sofa, glaring at the television as though it had done her a personal wrong.

Mark sighed. "Vicky, we've been through this before. She had her reasons —"

"She held out on you, dad!" snapped Victoria, her voice rising.

"Inside voice, dear," murmured Carol.

Victoria lowered her voice, but lost none of the intensity. "Dad, she held out on you. Left you brain-damaged for ages, until there was a supervillain in the house. Let us all think she couldn't fix you, and meanwhile she was just keeping her stupid little secret! And then she —" she broke off, balling her fists.

"And then she ...?" Mark asked after a moment.

And then she used her ability on my brain, to make me feel attracted to her, to want her, to need her. But Victoria only muttered, "And then she left a stupid little note and ran away."

Carol rose and crossed to where her daughter was standing. She put her arms around Victoria, but her daughter stood still, muscles tense, not accepting the hug. "I'm sure we all feel a little hurt that she didn't help your father immediately," she said. "But she helped him in time, and no-one was hurt, so it's all good now, isn't it?"

Except that it isn't. Except that every time I see her face I want to go to her. But I can't. I won't.

Victoria ducked her head and muttered, "I can't forgive her for that. Not ever. She betrayed all of us."

"Well," said Mark cheerfully from the sofa, "all I can say is that I'm glad to be able to walk and talk and dress myself again." He paused. "Although I am discovering a new preference for watching pro wrestling, so I guess she didn't heal all the damage ..."

"Mark! Don't even joke about that!" Carol, with a reluctant smile, released Victoria and swatted her husband lightly across the back of the head.

Victoria studied the image of Hope on the TV screen. She seemed intelligent and well-spoken, and she answered the questions readily enough. However, she also stood quite near Amy, who stood silent, even as Hope described the way that Bitch and Amy had taken down Crawler.

And then one of the reporters pointed a microphone at Amy and said, "So, Panacea, how do you feel about all this?"

"I'm not Panacea any more," said Amy. "Please don't call me that. I'm just Amy now."

"Okay, Amy," replied the reporter obligingly, "can you tell us how you feel about all this?"
"I'm still working my way through it," Amy replied. "But I can tell you this much. All of this is due to Hope. If it wasn't for her, none of this would have happened. None of it." She reached out and took Hope's hand. "She saved my life. She saved me."

"Let's not discount your part in things, sweetie," said Hope, putting her arm around Amy's shoulders and giving her a squeeze. She addressed the microphones. "Earlier that morning, Amy saved the lives of two dozen members of Fenrir's Chosen after the Nine left them to die. I could have done nothing to save them." She gestured at her own face. "And she gave me back my eye after Mannequin destroyed it." She ruffled Amy's hair. "You're not so bad yourself, you know."

The interview ended shortly after, and Carol and Mark began discussing it.

*How can she stand to be so close to her?* Victoria asked herself. *Doesn't she know what Amy's like?* A chill struck her. *Maybe Amy's done the same thing to her as she did to me.*

*I have to warn her. I can only hope that I'm not too late.*
In which Hope and Amy have their beauty sleep interrupted by an unexpected visitor

After the news crews left, Hope and Amy re-entered the shelter. Lisa met them with a hug for Hope and a smile for Amy.

"That was brilliant!" she said, and jingled a donation tin. "They really wanted that interview, didn't they?"

Hope shrugged slightly. "It seemed like a good idea at the time," she allowed. Amy stumbled slightly, and Hope caught her. "Look," she said, "we're both really tired, so could we just get some sleep?"

"Oh, sure, sure," said Lisa. "We'll fix curtains around your beds, so you aren't disturbed by movement. And we'll ask everyone to keep it down."

She was as good as her word; heavy blankets strung as curtains muffled the outside noises to a certain extent, and Hope's fatigue did the rest. She may not have fallen asleep the exact instant her head hit the pillow, but the actual interval would have required an extremely precise timepiece to measure.

She woke up once, briefly, to someone shaking her shoulder. She opened her eyes to see Amy's face.

"Whassup?" she murmured.

"Can't sleep," came Amy's voice, sounding lost. "Sleep in your bed?"

"C'mon then," Hope offered, moving over as far as she could. Amy climbed on to the bed and snuggled up; Hope put her arms around her, and then extended a wing over her, as she had done with Vista.

Amy breathed out, relaxing; as far as Hope could tell, she was asleep by the time she finished exhaling. Hope wasn't far behind.

The second time she woke up, it was an indeterminate time later. She was dimly aware of someone shaking her again. She was also aware of Amy, snuggled up warmly beside her, fast asleep.

"No r'm," she mumbled. "Get noth'r bed."

Whoever it was, shook her harder. She opened her eyes, looking around to see Lisa leaning over her. "Hope!" whispered Lisa sharply. "There's someone here to see you. It's Glory Girl!"

Hope half-closed her eyes again. "Tell'r come back later. Tired. Sleep."

Lisa shook her head. She looked worried. "She won't take no for an answer. She says it's vital. If you don't go out there, she'll come in here. She's really agitated."

Hope blinked a few times, processing that. As her brain kicked over, she felt herself waking up, the warm fuzziness of sleep receding. She really wanted to go back to sleep, but it probably wasn't the best idea to keep an agitated Glory Girl waiting too long.

Carefully, she slid her arm out from under Amy's ribs, then pulled the blanket over the soundly
sleeping girl. Her wings proved to be a bit of encumbrance when it came to rolling off the other side of the camp cot, but her right upper and lower wings managed to act as support so she could get to her feet without losing balance altogether. Lisa helped her stand upright, supporting her when she swayed a little.

"Gonna need some –" Lisa handed her a litre bottle of cold water, "$ - cold water. Uh, thanks." Popping the cap off, she drank down half without pausing, then handed back the bottle and skinned out of her clothes. Swapping the bottle for the clothes, she poured the remaining water over her head. It ran down her body in thin rivulets and pooled on the floor at her feet, leaving her body dry. But, in conjunction with the half-litre she had just ingested, it served to go a long way toward waking her up.

She took her clothes back from Lisa, and climbed into them again. "Okay," she said. "I'm almost human again. What did she say she wanted?"

"Just to talk to you," Lisa said. She indicated Amy. "I think it's about her."

Hope blinked. "Okay." I know something's going on there. But Amy hasn't opened up and I haven't pushed. Maybe I should have. She sighed. Time to go and defuse another unexploded bomb, I think.

By the time she got out into the general area, Glory Girl was pacing back and forth, looking more than just 'agitated'. She looked up as Hope approached her. "There you are," she declared.

"Here I am," agreed Hope.

"What took so long? I was beginning to wonder if they were slipping you out the back way."

Hope was too tired to even chuckle at the absurdity of this, though she did manage a weary smile. "Why would they do that?"

Glory Girl shook her head. "I don't know." Mood changing again, she looked closely at Hope. "I need to talk to you. As soon as possible."

Hope made a gesture with both hands that indicated, you are here, I am here. "So talk."

"Not here," hissed Glory Girl. "We need to talk in private. I don't want anyone else hearing what I've got to say."

"Oh," said Hope blankly. "Okay." She looked around for a few moments, as if a private spot was going to manifest itself in the middle of a crowded shelter. Nothing presented itself. Then her brain kicked properly into gear, and she pointed out the door. "Come on. Let's go flying."

It was easier said than done. Glory Girl, as a well-known cape, came in for her share of attention, but this was the first time she'd shown up at this shelter. However, Hope was a familiar sight here, and she had performed a considerable amount of healing assistance when she first turned up the day before. Everyone wanted to talk to her, to thank her, or even just to give her a heartfelt hug.

She smiled, thanked them, and excused herself, eventually ending up outside with Glory Girl.

"Whew!" she said with a little laugh. "My adoring public."

Glory Girl made an impatient noise. "You could have just asked them to stand aside. What I've got to say to you is important."

Hope looked at her, puzzled. "So are they. Everyone's important." She gestured skyward. "Shall
we?"

Glory Girl nodded and shot skyward; Hope unfurled her wings and followed suit.

It was good to get into the air once more, not going anywhere in particular, just flying for the sake of flying. Once she got some altitude under her, Hope stretched her wings properly and pulled some hard loops and figure-eights, revelling in the rush of wind over her crystalline pinions. The rush of cooler air cleared the last cobwebs from her mind and she came to a hover, facing Glory Girl.

"You really like flying, don't you?" inquired the superhero.

"Oh, yeah," Hope affirmed with a nod and a brilliant smile. "It's the best thing ever. Better than hot showers and chocolate ice cream." She pulled another somersault in midair, then returned to a hover. "So, what's the problem?"

Glory Girl regarded her steadily. "Do you love Panacea?"

Hope blinked. What sort of a question is that? "Um, yes?" she ventured. "She's a really nice person, and I care a great deal about her ... wait," she said suddenly. "Do you mean love, as in 'want to care for her and keep her safe' or love, as in 'want to do sex things with'? Because I don't do sex things with anyone. I'm not ... I don't ... that doesn't happen with me."

Glory Girl snorted. She managed to make even that sound ladylike. "That happens with everyone. Trust me on this."

Hope shook her head. "Not with me," she corrected gently. "I don't have the hormones. My body doesn't produce them. I don't feel sexual attraction toward anyone, ever. Just like I don't look sexually attractive to anyone. Thank goodness," she added.

Glory Girl considered that. "That's really bizarre," she said at length. "Even if it's true. But you don't know Panacea –"

"Uh, that's Amy," interrupted Hope. "She doesn't use the other name anymore. She's very firm on the subject."

"Fine, then," snapped Glory Girl, irritated. "Amy. You don't know her, you don't know what she's willing to do to get what she wants."

Hope paused, thinking about Glory Girl's words. A few things were becoming clear now. "I think ... you'd better tell me what she did," she said slowly.

"First," said Glory Girl, "I want you to tell me how you feel about her." Her voice was insistent.

Hope shrugged slightly. "She's a sweet girl. I like her and I want to protect her. I care a great deal for her, and I can see she's been through a lot and she's very fragile, so I'm giving her all the attention and support she needs to work her way through her problems." She paused. "And yes, I love her."

Glory Girl blew out her breath in a long, aggravated sound. "I'm too late," she muttered. "She got to you."

"... got to me?" asked Hope, her head on one side.

"She adjusted your body chemistry, made you fixate on her," Glory Girl explained. "Made you love her."
Hope blinked. "No, I don't think so," she said after a moment's consideration. "I feel this way about everyone in need."

Glory Girl stared at her. "You're kidding."

"Nope." Hope shook her head. "I love people. I love to help them. It's what I do. When someone needs help, I give everything I've got to make it right. And right now, Amy needs that help the most. But I'm not fixated on her; I can help others too. When I was with the Wards, Vista and I became close. We still are."

Glory Girl shook her head. "You can't be serious. No-one can love everyone that unconditionally."

"Sure I can," said Hope. "Everyone deserves a chance." She paused. "What ... happened with you and Amy?"

Glory Girl shook her head angrily. "You probably won't believe me."

Hope moved closer, took Glory Girl's hands in hers. "Try me," she said as softly as she could, and still be heard over the rhythmic chiming of her wings.

Glory Girl's face crumpled. "She – she's had feelings for me. For years. Her own sister. She hated my boyfriend. Was glad that he's dead. And then when I wouldn't ... be with her, she ... did this to me. Changed the way I think. Mind-raped me. Made me want her. Want to be with her." She pulled her hands away from Hope's, clutched at her own forehead. "When I think about her, I want to go to her, be with her. Do what she wants."

"Wow," said Hope. "That's ... wow." She moved closer, put her arms around Glory Girl. The superhero resisted for a moment, then let her enfold her in a hug. "That sound horrible," she said. "Amy's said a little about it. I didn't know what she was talking about. But she said she's really sorry, and she'd change it back if she had a chance." She paused. "Why don't we give her a chance to make it right?"

Glory Girl pulled back away from her. "You can't be serious!" she shouted. "Didn't you hear what I just said? She changes people, manipulates them for her own ends!"

"I heard everything you said," Hope told her gently. "You've got no reason to lie to me. But you might be seeing things your way, instead of the way they actually are."

"What other way to see them is there?" snapped Glory Girl.

"How about from Amy's point of view?" prompted Hope.

"How about from my point of view, or my dad's?" yelled Glory Girl. "Amy was my sister. Okay, she was adopted, but that didn't matter. I loved her – like a sister! Dad treated her like a daughter. And then when Dad was hurt in the Leviathan attack, suffered brain damage, she wouldn't heal him! She's always said she can't heal brains! Even when we asked her to try, she refused, just let him sit there on the couch like a stuffed dummy, like the way she uses her powers is more important than her own goddamn foster father, the man who brought her up!"

She paused, catching her breath, and Hope interjected. "So what happened then?" she asked gently.

"Bonesaw happened then," snapped Glory Girl. "Invaded the house, did something to Dad, so Amy decided then to heal him." Her face twisted with disgust. "It took that to make her change her mind. All the pleading and begging I did, Mom did, nothing. A supervillain comes in, she changes her mind. Like what we want isn't even important to her."
"It might be more important than you think," murmured Hope. "So when did she do ... what she did ... to you?"

"I went after her, after she left a note and ran away," said Glory Girl. "Caught up with her. Tried to convince her to come back, that all was good, that we forgave her for holding out on Dad. But as soon as I hugged her ..."

"... it happened," Hope finished for her. Pieces were dropping into place now. "I think I see what's happened. And I think I can do something about it."

Glory Girl stared at her. "What can you do about it?"

"I can get her to fix it," Hope said. "What she did to you is wrong, on so many levels. But she knows that. And she wants to change it back. Make it right."

"And you believe her when she says that?" sneered Glory Girl.

"I do," said Hope. "You see, I trust her to do the right thing when she says she will."

"What about what she did to me and my family?" snapped Glory Girl bitterly. "Tell me where the 'right thing' was in all of that."

"It wasn't right. But she didn't have much of a choice," replied Hope levelly. "Especially after what you and your family did to her."

Glory Girl looked at her as though she was speaking in tongues. "What the hell did we do to her, to deserve this?" she asked.

"Well, let's see now," said Hope. "How long have you known who her true father was?"

"... a little while now," admitted Glory Girl. "Mom and Dad told me about it."

"And so, after Tattletale gave her the heads-up about that, with you in the room, when exactly did they sit her down and give her the true facts, so that she could work it through for herself?"

Glory Girl blinked. "They didn't," she said. "Because they didn't know how she'd react." She waved her hands. "And they were right! Look how she reacted when she did find out!"

"Yeah," said Hope. "Look how she reacted when she found out you'd been hiding it from her all this time. Couldn't you have trusted her to be sensible about it?"

Glory Girl's silence answered the question.

"So," said Hope, "it appears that the way to ensure her trustworthiness was to treat her as untrustworthy." She raised an eyebrow. "Good going there. Really. I mean it. You couldn't have done a better job of pushing her away if you tried." She raised a finger. "Oh wait, I was wrong. You did do a better job."

"Now wait just a minute —" snapped Glory Girl.

"No," said Hope calmly. "You wait. I haven't finished yet. We haven't covered the mind-screwing yet."

"Yes!" replied Glory Girl. "I keep telling you —"

"Not what she did to you," interrupted Hope. "What you did to her."
"Okay, look at it this way," said Hope. "Amy's about your age, right? But you're a little taller, more athletic, so she basically sees you as her big sister. She always looked up to you, thought you were the best thing since sliced bread. You're assertive, attractive, attentive to her. So even as a sister, she loved you. And then, just about the time she's hitting puberty, you trigger and get your powers." She paused for effect.

"Puberty is maybe the most emotionally vulnerable time in a person's life," she went on. "The body's changing, hormones galloping around the body, the brain is in a state of flux ... and the sex monster is just beginning to loom its ugly head. So this is happening to Amy ... and your powers kick in. One of which is to give everyone around you an intense feeling of awe. And I'm willing to bet she got dosed with it more than once."

Glory Girl mumbled something that may have been an affirmative.

"And so," Hope went on, "you went from being a loving sister to being an object of desire. Your power changes brain chemistry. It's like a drug. And you addicted your sister to it."

Glory Girl looked stricken. "I didn't mean to!" she blurted.

"And nor did she," Hope replied relentlessly.

"Yes she did!" snapped Glory Girl. "She's always been able to control her powers!"

"Okay, let's lay it out," Hope said. "She gets her powers. She can quite literally change someone's mind for them. She doesn't want to do this indiscriminately; she considers it to be way too much power to just be using willy-nilly. So she decides not to use that aspect of her powers. Which is entirely admirable. But causes her problems as people think she just isn't trying hard enough. Even though she's only trying to protect everyone else from the consequences of her powers, used for the wrong reasons."

She gave Glory Girl a look, to see if she was paying attention. "So then your father gets hurt. She can't just heal him outright without admitting she's been lying all this time, and she feels horribly guilty for letting him stay hurt. But then Bonesaw comes in and injures him to the point that he's likely to die. So she has to make her decision; keep up the pretence and let him die, or break her own rules. Damned if you do, damned if you don't. She breaks the rules, heals his brain. He chases off the villains, all is good. Except the cat is now out of the bag, everyone is going to know she can mess with brains, and she's just broken her cardinal rule. And everyone's going to know she's been lying all this time. So she does the only thing she thinks she can do."

"She ran away. Like a coward," said Glory Girl bitterly.

"No," said Hope. "Like someone who didn't believe she had a future there anymore. Everyone would have been why didn't you tell us? and she would have been under pressure to use her abilities in ways she didn't want to, sooner or later." She gave Glory Girl a direct look. "Tell me I'm wrong."

Glory Girl was silent.

Hope nodded once, then went on. "So then, she's run away, and you intercept her. She's already conflicted, she's a mess of emotions, she's still torn up from breaking her rules, even though she knew she had to, and you confront her. And you're still her object of love, of desire, that she knows that she can never have. And of course the temptation is there to make you want her. She wouldn't have been human if she didn't have that temptation. But she knew she shouldn't." She paused. "I bet
she told you not to touch her."

A long moment, then Glory Girl nodded.

"But you did anyway. You grabbed her and hugged her. And there she was, all messed up inside, and the woman she loves more than anyone else in the world, wants to love her back, is right there, holding her. Full-body contact. Right then, right there, she couldn't help it. She did exactly what she knew she could do. She made you into someone who would love her back. And that's why she warned you not to touch her."

Silence, except for Hope's chiming wings. Glory Girl was watching her, mesmerised.

"And she had an immediate reaction of remorse. She offered to fix it, to make it right." Hope's voice was hypnotic. "And you rejected her, didn't you? You rejected everything about her. You rejected her love for you, rejected any chance you may have ever had for a relationship, and you rejected her as a person, just because she had one moment of weakness at a time of incredible stress."

And still, there was not a single note of scorn in her voice. No suggestion of judgement. Just a flat, calm, relentless laying out of the facts.

"So," said Hope. "I know what she did to you. I know what you did to her. There's breach of trust on both sides. There's a serious amount of mind-screwing on both sides. But you're the lucky one. Because what was done to you can be fixed. What was done to her can never be undone."

"How are you going to fix what was done to me?" challenged Glory Girl. "Every moment I'm not concentrating, I'm obsessing over that —"

"It's simple," said Hope. "She'll do it, and she'll do it right. Because I will ask her to."

"You can't seriously think you can trust her - !" burst out Glory Girl.

"But I do," retorted Hope. "She healed my eye. She saved the lives and sanity of twenty-odd members of the Chosen that Bonesaw had fused together into one pile of flesh. And she has done other things – things that I asked her to do – which have worked out perfectly. You see, I gave her love and trust and someone to lean on, which is all she really needed. And that has made all the difference."

Glory Girl was staring at her. "You're serious," she said.

Hope nodded. "She can fix what she did," she affirmed. "She will fix what she did. You can be free of whatever it's doing to you. All you have to do is trust me." She held out her hand.

After a long, long moment, Glory Girl took it.

Glory Girl sat in a chair. Hope stood behind her, hands on her shoulders. Amy, woken up by Lisa and fortified by about three cups of horribly strong coffee, sat in front of her on another chair.

"Are you sure about this?" asked Glory Girl, for about the third time.

Hope sighed. "Amy. You're just going to reverse what you did to her, right? Nothing else? Just change it back to the status quo?"

"I promise," Amy confirmed. "All I want to do is fix things, Vicky," she added, looking her foster sister in the face. "That's all I ever wanted to do."
"Well," said Hope, before Glory Girl could reply, "that's good enough for me. I trust Amy to do the right thing. I'm reading your body to make sure nothing untoward happens. Kindly trust me to know what I'm doing, all right?"

Reluctantly, Glory Girl reached out her hands, and let Amy take hold of them. Amy closed her eyes, concentrating.

Hope, good to her word, monitored what Amy did. It only took a second or so, and Hope very nearly missed the minuscule change in Glory Girl's brain functions.

And then it was over. Amy opened her hands, and reluctantly let Glory Girl's fingers slip from hers.

"Thank you," she whispered. "Thank you for letting me fix things."

Hope couldn't tell if Amy was addressing her or Glory Girl.

Glory Girl, for her part, seemed a little dazed. "Are you all right?" asked Hope, leaning down alongside her head.

"Holy god, what a relief," whispered Glory Girl. "I can't believe how much of a strain I was under." She gave Amy a glare, tempered only fractionally by gratitude. "Thanks for fixing what you did. Don't you ever dare do that again."

She stood up and turned to Hope. "And thank you for showing me just how far I had my head shoved up my ass," she said. "Until you pointed all that out, I just hadn't put it together."

Hope shrugged. "Sometimes you just need someone with an outside perspective. Friends?"

Glory Girl smiled. "Friends." She clasped Hope's hand, then gasped in surprise as Hope gave her an impulsive hug.

"Silly Vicky," said Hope, giving her one last squeeze before releasing her, "I don't just shake hands with my friends."

Glory Girl's mouth quirked. "So I see." She looked from Hope to Amy and back. "I've got to get back now, but I just wanted to say, thanks." She looked directly at Amy. "One of these days, I might even forgive you. But in the meantime, you do what Hope says. She seems to know what she's doing."

Amy nodded and ducked her head. "I already do," she said with a shy smile. "Take care, Vicky."

"You too, Amy." She turned, took two steps out of the door, and then launched herself skyward.

Hope looked at Amy. "You think we can get some more sleep time, or will any more of your relatives be dropping in?"

Amy shrugged. "I hope not. Race you."

It was close; Amy won by a short head. Hope won the wrestling match for the blanket, but then shared it anyway.

Even the coffee failed to keep them awake.
In which Amy gives Menja a hand, and Hope agrees to assist Skitter in a delicate mission

Hope stirred.

The tantalizing odour of tea wafted past her nostrils, and she inhaled appreciatively.

She had actually woken up a couple of times in the last few hours, but Amy was still sleeping soundly, and she hadn't wanted to disturb her. And it was nice to lie in for once.

She smelled the tea again, and opened her eyes. Lisa was sitting beside the camp bed, with a tray on a small table beside her. On the tray were a teapot, two teacups, a small jug that Hope presumed held milk, and a sugar bowl. The third teacup was in Lisa's hand, as she sipped at the steaming beverage.

"Hi," murmured Hope.

"Hi yourself, sleepyhead," replied Lisa, with a twinkle in her eye. "You two look so damn cute like that."

Hope smiled. "Shush, you," she replied, keeping her voice down. "Amy really needs this right now."

Lisa tilted her head, her vulpine smile widening. "Really?" she asked. "So it's just about Amy? You get nothing out of it at all?"

Hope rolled her eyes. "Okay, fine, so I kinda enjoy it too," she admitted. "It's nice to have someone to snuggle up to."

"So I see," agreed Lisa gravely. "Uh, listen, when you two feel like getting up, Skitter's here to see you."

"I don't want to disturb Amy --" began Hope, but she could already feel the girl in her arms begin to stretch and stir, preparatory to waking.

"I'll be out there," Lisa said, rising to her feet. "Enjoy the tea." She exited through the makeshift curtain, just a moment before Amy's eyes fluttered open.

"Morning, sweetie," Hope greeted her with a smile and a hug.

"Is it morning?" asked Amy, returning the hug.

"I have no idea," admitted Hope. "But we have tea."

"Tea," repeated Amy, then her brain engaged. "Yes please. Tea. Tea is good."

They sat on the edge of the camp bed, side by side, shoulders touching, and enjoyed the hot tea. Hope took hers black, with lots of sugar, while Amy stirred hers almost white, with only one cube.

They drank in companionable silence, leaning against one another, enjoying the togetherness.

"Hope ...?" ventured Amy, as they were almost finished.

"Yes, Amy?"

"Did ... Vicky visit, earlier, or was that just a dream?" Amy looked wistful. "I miss Vicky."
Hope shook her head with a smile. "No dream, sweetie. She visited. We talked. I convinced her that she needed to let you fix what you'd done. You fixed it. And then we went back to sleep."

"Oh," said Amy. "Good. I'm glad." She smiled at Hope. "You have a way of making dreams come true."

Hope wasn't quite sure what to make of that, so she decided to make light of it, and giggled. "All in a day's work, I guess." She turned a mock-stern gaze on Amy. "And no more changing people to what you want them to be, unless I specifically okay it, all right?"

"Oh god no," Amy replied fervently. "I've learned my lesson there." She leaned her head on Hope's shoulder. "I have no idea how to thank you for what you've done for me."

Hope finished her tea and put it down. "That part's easy," she said lightly. "Be the best person you can be. Try not to hurt people, and do good whenever you can." She put her fingertip to Amy's nose. "Everyone matters. Everyone."

"... wow," said Amy, blinking. "You really mean that."

Hope nodded. "I remember living in the gutter, not all that long ago," she said seriously. "If I mattered then, then everyone matters, all the time. It's that simple."

Amy tilted her head to one side. "You know, with your charisma, your philosophy, you could really start a movement," she said. "People would follow you if you asked them to." She giggled, self-consciously. "I know I would. You could make a difference. Change the world. Make it a better place."

"Yes," said Hope, perfectly straight-faced. "I could. And that's why I'm not going to." She stood, stretched, and collected the tray. "Come along, o disciple. Let us see what the afternoon brings us."

Amy grinned. "Lead on, o great and glorious leader."

Skitter was waiting, chatting quietly with Menja. Lisa brought over a tray of hot rolls, just as Hope and Amy emerged from the curtained-off area. She swapped the tray with the one Hope was carrying, and bore the teapot off with the air of someone who has successfully pulled off a magic trick.

Hope and Amy each took a roll, and Hope took the tray over to Skitter and Menja. Skitter declined a roll, but Menja accepted one.

The rolls were delicious.

Finishing hers, Menja inclined her head to Hope. "I understand that it was your plan that defeated the Nine, and avenged my comrades and my arm," she said.

Hope nodded. "Well, sort of my plan," she said. "I presented it, but everyone else did most of the work. I just kept Jack Slash busy." She smiled. "If you want to thank the person who took down Crawler, Amy here set him up, and Bitch's dogs put him down."

Menja nodded to Amy. "It was very well done, then," she said.

Amy ducked her head. "Vista was the one who got me close enough," she volunteered. "It was teamwork all the way around."
"Be that as it may," Menja said, looking back to Hope, "I am only just now recognising who and what you really are." She dropped to one knee and bowed her head. "Command me, and I will obey. Lead me, and I will follow."

"Oh god, no, seriously, get up," said Hope hastily, feeling horribly embarrassed. "All I want you to do is run your territory fairly. Work with Skitter and the other Undersiders. Help people out. Do the right thing by them. And one more thing."

Rising to her feet, Menja looked at her closely. "What is that one thing?"

"People get strong when other people help them to get strong. I'm not saying to let people sponge off you. But it's easier to get to your feet and get strong when others are assisting you. Can you do that for me?"

Menja looked as though she were trying to process this; it was apparently a new and rather difficult thought. "I can ... try," she said eventually.

"That's all I ask for," said Hope. "Oh, yeah, and there's something else, too." She turned to Amy. "If I asked you to, could you fix her arm for her?"

Amy looked thoughtful. "I'd have to draw on a bit of muscle and bone mass from the rest of her body, but sure."

Hope turned back to Menja. "Would you allow her to regrow your arm for you?"

Menja looked startled. "My ... arm?" She stared down at her stump, as if seeing it for the first time. Then she looked at Amy. "You can do this? You will do this?"

"Uh, sure," said Amy. "Just ... when you lost the arm, you lost body mass. If I regrow the arm, I'm gonna have to take that mass from other parts of your body. You're going to be just a tiny bit shorter, a tiny bit lighter, than you're used to being."

Menja smiled. "A change in size ... will not be a problem."

Amy nodded. "Your point is taken." She glanced at Hope, who nodded fractionally. "When you're ready?"

Menja sank back to her knees in front of Amy, and offered her truncated arm. "Now is as good a time as any."

It only took a few minutes. Hope watched, fascinated. As was becoming her practice with Amy, she kept one hand in contact with Menja, observing the change from the inside. Muscle and bone migrated from all other points in the body, causing Menja's left arm to expand like a time-delay film of a tree reaching for the sky. There were pauses at the elbow and wrist as the delicate joints were established, and more for the finer bones of the hand and fingers, but it was over faster than she would have believed possible.

By the end of it, Menja was white-faced and sweating; apparently the process, while not actually painful, was not particularly comfortable either. But she bore it stoically, without a twitch or a word of complaint.

Eventually, Amy lifted her hands away from Menja's now-complete left arm. "That should do it," she said. "Complete copy of the right arm, mirror imaged." She smiled, looking just a little tired. "Even down to the chipped fingernail on the ring finger."
Menja flexed the fingers of her brand-new left hand, worked the elbow, and rotated the wrist joint critically.

"It seems to work well," she admitted. "It feels just a little ... strange. New."

"That's because I had to rebuild the nerve connections from scratch," Amy pointed out. "Basic movements will work fine; you're used to moving your left arm, after all. But you're going to have to retrain your combat reflexes for that arm."

Menja nodded, understanding. "That is not going to be a problem," she asserted. She smiled dryly. "It will be much easier with an arm than without." She smiled at Amy, then nodded to Hope, the gesture so deep as to almost be a bow. "I will be going now, with your leave. My people await me."

"Of course," said Hope. "And remember what I said about helping others get strong, okay?"

Menja smiled. "With your example, I can hardly forget," she agreed. Turning, she strode out the door, a new spring in her step.

Hope turned to Skitter, who had been talking quietly with Lisa as they watched Amy rebuild Menja's arm.

"Sorry about that," she apologised. "Everyone seems to want to talk to me these days."

"It's all good," said Skitter. "That was ... very impressive to watch." She tilted her head. "Do you know," she said, "I think she was serious about you leading her." Her tone was speculative. "In fact, if you put any sort of effort into it, you could have quite the following in a very short time."

"Told you so," murmured Amy.

"No, thank you," replied Hope firmly, then ruined the effect by poking her tongue out at Amy. Amy giggled. "I want people to do the right thing because they understand it to be the right thing, and choose to do it, not because someone with a bit of charisma and a good speaking voice lined them up and ordered them to do it."

"Hmm," commented Skitter non-committally. "Well, good luck with that."

Hope sighed. "Yeah. So. What did you want to talk about?"

"Dinah Alcott," said Skitter. "You remember, the precog Coil has working for him?"

"Ah, right, of course," said Hope. "I remember thinking he seemed a bit evasive about the whole thing."

Skitter nodded. "That's right. Well, awhile ago, I made a deal with him. I'd work for him so long as he promised to let her go after the Slaughterhouse Nine crisis was over."

Hope picked up on the tone of her voice. "And you don't think he'll follow through?"

Skitter shook her head. "I don't know. If he decides that he'd rather have her working for him than me ..."

Hope was shocked, but only mildly so. She was starting to learn the ways of this world. "You think he'd kill you to keep Dinah?"

"She is incredibly useful to him," Skitter pointed out.
"Well, if she's being kept against her will," said Hope immediately, "of course I'll help."

"Me too," said Amy, slightly muffled around the roll she was in the process of eating.

Hope looked at her with a frown. "This could be dangerous, you know."

"Hello?" said Amy. "Ex-superhero? I've done danger." She shrugged. "Besides, I've seen you in dangerous situations. The safest place I can be is right beside you."

Skitter turned her head to glance at Lisa, who shrugged. "Couldn't hurt," she said. "Oh, and before you go." She held up a newspaper so that they could all see the front page, and the blazing headlines glaring out from it.

The primary headline read "SLAUGHTERHOUSE ZERO!", in ludicrously large text. The secondary headline read "HOPE SMASHES NINE"; the font for this was merely ridiculously large. At least two-thirds of the front page was taken up just by the headlines.

"Oh," said Amy.

"My," said Skitter.

"God," said Hope.

"I love it," giggled Amy.

"That's awesome," chuckled Skitter.

"Oh, hell no," protested Hope.

Lisa grinned. "I'm framing this."

"Don't you dare," Hope told her.

Lisa's eyes danced. "Can't stop me." Her grin widened. "And wait till you see what they wrote about you. Someone seems to have told them about, well, everything you did in dealing with the Nine."

The mischievous tone of her voice told Hope exactly who she could blame for that.

Hope groaned and put her hand over her eyes.

Lisa seemed to be enjoying herself immensely. "And the cape forums are just going ballistic. I'm talking lunar orbit levels of ballistic. You are seriously the flavour of the month."

Hope took her hand away from her eyes, and gave Lisa a look of irritation. "You are enjoying yourself far too much." She turned to Skitter. "Let's go before she can embarrass me any more than she's already done."

As they walked out, Amy said conversationally, "But you know, she has a point ..."

"Shut up. Please."

"At once, o great and glorious leader."

"Oh god, you're not going to let up, are you?"

Amy looked pleased with herself. "Mmmmnope."
In which Hope and Amy confront Coil, and Hope has a close encounter of the Noelle kind

Two guards stood, guns leveled at Hope and the two girls. Coil's voice boomed over an intercom speaker. "You brought company, Skitter. I thought I could trust you on this."

"You can trust me," snapped Skitter. "Everyone knows Hope, and she's vouched for Amy."

"Hope? Yes, I have heard of Hope. Amy ... is another matter," Coil responded. "They have given their word to not betray my secrets?"

"We have, and I will again, if necessary," Hope said firmly. "I'm just here on Skitter's behalf. Amy's with me. I take responsibility for her."

There was a long pause. "They carry no weapons?"

"Skitter has a knife," responded a guard. "The other two got nothing. Phones are off, batteries are out."

Another pause. The door ahead of them clicked, and then swung gently open. Skitter led the way; Hope and Amy followed, the latter sticking close to Hope. Hope clasped her hand and squeezed reassuringly.

The room was large and basically cavernous, split into two levels. Coil stood surveying them as they entered. Guards stood around the perimeter, guns in hand but not pointed. Most interesting, however, to Hope, were the other people standing across the room. Sundancer, Trickster, Ballistic and a female form that she decided had to be Genesis' latest creation.

Sundancer turned and waved; the others looked toward the newcomers with varying degrees of interest. Hope waved back with a smile.

Interestingly, Skitter did not seem surprised to see the Travelers in Coil's base. What's going on here?

Amy drew closer to Hope, and took her hand.

"You okay, sweetie?" asked Hope, quietly.

Amy nodded, jerkily. "Starting to wish I'd just let you come on your own," she murmured in return. "But if I had, and I knew you were here on your own, I'd want to be here with you ..."

Hope smiled and squeezed her hand reassuringly. "We'll be fine."

"Welcome," said Coil. "I do wish you had called ahead, Skitter, although I believe I know what your business is with me." He paused. "As for Hope and ... Amy, was it?"

"As I said," Hope reiterated, "I'm just here on Skitter's behalf. And Amy's here on my behalf." She half-smiled. "I understand that you may be a little reluctant to conclude the agreement you have with Skitter, so I'm here to make things easier all round."

Coil's expression was unreadable under the full-face mask, but his voice held a frown. He raised his voice slightly. "You're here to intimidate me into compliance?" Across the room, the Travelers obviously heard, and turned to watch the byplay.
Hope shook her head. "You misunderstand me. I'm here to offer peaceful alternatives."

"And ... Amy?"

Amy raised her head defiantly. "I'm here with Hope. Where she goes, I go."

"Indeed," mused Coil. "Well, then. To business. Skitter, I did indeed promise to release Dinah from her service with me once the Slaughterhouse Nine crisis was over."

He left the statement hanging. After a few moments, Skitter prompted him. "I hear a 'but' coming."

"But ..." he said, drawing the word out, "I find myself ... enmeshed in deals. Situations. Problems. And Dinah is proving invaluable in sorting them out." He looked over at Skitter. "Some of which impact on your group, and the Travelers as well."

Hope blinked. The Undersiders and the Travelers are working with Coil? Or for him? It made sense. They were villains, he was a villain. A mastermind, working from the shadows.

"It doesn't matter," said Skitter harshly. "You made a promise. Gave your word."

"We're all adults here," Coil said smoothly. "Deals can be renegotiated. Say ... one year from now, I release Dinah from her service, and in the meantime, you, the Undersiders and Travelers both, get an increased cut in profits."

"No deal," snapped Skitter. Hope could see that she was getting visibly angry, so she stepped forward.

"I have a suggestion," she said quietly. Skitter and Coil looked at her. She looked at them both in turn. "How about you get her out here, and see what she wants?" She raised an eyebrow. "Maybe she actually wants to stay and help. But if she wants to go ..."

Coil frowned. "I don't think she should be disturbed ..."

Hope tilted her head. "Please?" she said softly. "All I want to do is speak to her, ensure she's healthy."

"Hrmnn," muttered Coil. "Very well. But I will want something from you."

"Oh?" asked Hope.

"A favour. A use of your powers. The accomplishment of a certain goal."

Hope paused before speaking. "Nothing illegal, nothing that will hurt anyone."

"Of course not," said Coil promptly. "I have been watching your progress. I know of your principles. I would not ask you to break them. If anything, you will be helping someone."

Hope did not hesitate. "In that case," she said, "I accept."

Amy grabbed her arm; Skitter's head whipped around so fast Hope feared she would give herself whiplash. "What?" they echoed each other.

"One power use," Hope said firmly. "One. I will do my very best to help you achieve you want. Now, please bring Dinah here so that we can speak with her." She found Amy's hand and squeezed it.
"What are you doing?" hissed Amy in her ear.

"What I have to," Hope replied, just as softly. She gave Amy a quick smile. "It'll be all right."

Amy gave her a doubtful look, then subsided.

Dinah was escorted into their presence by a man in a turtleneck sweater, whom Coil quickly dismissed. She took a few hesitant steps forward, and Hope's heart melted.

"Hi, sweetie," she said, stepping forward herself, and dropping to one knee. "My name's Hope." She smiled brilliantly at Dinah. "It's so nice to meet you."

Dinah blinked at Hope, then smiled back uncertainly. "You're the angel girl," she said softly.

*This is who Tattletale was talking about,* realised Hope. *She's the one who knew about me and Jack Slash.*

"I'm the angel girl," she confirmed. "And I've come to ask you if you want to go home to mummy and daddy, or stay here with Mr – with Coil."

"You're here to take me home," said Dinah, taking another few stumbling steps forward. Hope frowned slightly. Dinah seemed ... unfocused, somehow.

"Do you want to go home?" asked Hope, holding her hand out to Dinah.

"Will mummy and daddy have candy?" asked Dinah, taking a step forward, and putting her hand in Hope's. She smiled at Hope. "You're nice."

"I don't see why –" began Hope, and then the sensations hit her. When her hand touched Dinah's, she took a full inventory of the child's biometrics, her state of health, everything.

Dinah was drugged to the gills.

"Amy, come meet Dinah," she said over her shoulder. "Dinah, do you want to meet my friend Amy? She's nice too."

Something in her voice warned Coil. "What are you doing?" he asked warily.

"It's simple," said Hope. "Dinah is drugged. She's not in a fit state to answer any questions. Once she's out from under the influence ..."

"No!" snapped Coil. His guards went to bring their guns up, only to find that silken cords had been wrapped around them, tying them to the rails. They started forward, only to trip over more cords.

The Travelers also started to move forward, but Skitter held her hand up. "Leave it," she warned them. "This is between Hope and Coil." They paused, watching carefully.

"This does not have to get ugly," Hope warned Coil. "But Amy will have a look at Dinah." A swarm of insects poured from Skitter's costume and formed in front of Coil's face, hanging there as a silent warning.

"... fine," snapped Coil, biting off the word. He gestured; the guards, scrambling to their feet, resumed their places, looking more tense but not actually hostile.

Amy reached Dinah, and put her hand on the girl's arm. She nodded grimly. "Drugged," she
Hope nodded. "I can clear the drugs from her system," she said, "but I can't tell how badly she's addicted, or do anything about it."

Amy smiled. "Whereas I can," she agreed. "She's only moderately addicted, but withdrawal would be unpleasant for her."

"Extremely unpleasant," Dinah confirmed. "But the worst is over after six days."

Hope shook her head. "Let's see if we can't improve on that." She turned to Dinah. "Are you good with us doing this, sweetie?" she asked.

Dinah nodded placidly. "I would appreciate it considerably," she assented. Hope blinked. That was impressive phraseology for a girl that age.

But she couldn't think about it now; she concentrated, sending a pulse of silver-blue light into Dinah's skin. It contacted her immune system, sending it into high gear. Every molecule of the drug still circulating in her system was promptly rejected by her body, flushing to her kidneys. Dinah shuddered.

Amy took over then, adjusting the existing body and brain chemistry, removing the influence of the drug, and reinstating the status quo that the drug had disrupted. Within seconds, they performed the work of months, cleaning all trace of the drug from her body, and reversing the progress of the addiction.

Dinah blinked and looked at them both once more. "Thank you, Hope," she said; her voice was stronger, more sure. She hugged Hope strongly. "That was much less unpleasant than it could have been."

"Don't forget Amy," Hope reminded her.

Dinah disengaged from Hope and smiled at Amy, then hugged her too.

Amy hugged her back, tears standing in her eyes. Her gaze met Hope's and understanding passed between them. *Oh yeah, this is what it's all about.*

"Can I go home now?" asked Dinah, looking from one to the other.

Hope gathered her in her arms again. "Oh, sweetie," she said, "of course you can."

"Then I want to go home."

The door closed behind Skitter as she escorted Dinah from the base. Coil watched her go. Hope had wanted Amy to go with them, but she had refused to leave Hope's side.

"You realise," glowered Coil, "that you now have an obligation to to discharge."

Hope nodded; she kept her expression steady, but her thoughts were hard-edged. *He drugged Dinah to keep her compliant. Also, he tries to edge out on his word. I do not like this man.*

"I said I would, and I will," she agreed. "Whatever power use you require of me, provided it's neither illegal nor harmful to others, I will carry out."

Coil nodded, considering. Then he gestured to the Travelers. "If you can assist me in something I
have promised them I would do, then I would consider the matter at an end."

Hope frowned. "You're being extremely vague. Details would be helpful."

Coil let out a sigh. "Details, indeed." He led the way to where the Travelers were standing, up to what Hope realised was a large vault door of some sort. Hope let her senses expand, and felt each of the Travelers – except for Genesis, of course – and beyond the heavy steel, there was another life-spark, another conscious mind.

He tapped in a code, and a screen lit, showing a shadowy form, the picture presumably matching whoever was within the vault. Hope peered more closely. Whoever – or whatever – it was in there, it wasn't human. There was far too much bulk for that.

Clicking an intercom button, Coil spoke. "I have someone I'd like you to meet." He gestured Hope closer to the speaker.

She stepped forward and said, "Hi. I'm pleased to meet you."

And the creature inside the vault spoke, in the voice of a teenage girl.

"Hello, Hope. My name is Noelle."

They sat at a small table. Coil's minions had produced a teapot and Coil himself had poured for Hope and Amy. Hope sipped at the tea; it gave her time to think.

"So, her powers are running away with her body?" she said at last.

"Basically, yes," replied Coil. He kept his voice down; the Travelers were conversing with her again, via the intercom. "She ... consumes things. Dead matter becomes part of her. Live things ... she can create clones of them, send them out. Broken clones. With her current body mass, she gets very hungry unless she is fed regularly, in large quantities." He paused.

"She's responsible for several mass killings. The Travelers brought her to me in the hope that I would find a cure, and in the meantime prevent her from perpetrating more massacres." He massaged what had to be the bridge of his nose with finger and thumb, through the cloth of his mask. "Thus far, I have succeeded in just one of those tasks."

Hope put her head to one side. "And what do you think I can do?"

"I am running out of options, and the Travelers are running out of patience," confessed Coil. "But I have heard a rumour that you can bring the dead back to life." He nodded to Hope. "I have consulted experts in parahuman capabilities – in the blind, of course – and there is a slight but measurable chance that if she is killed and then revived, her powers may undergo a reset of sorts, to a more controllable level."

Hope recoiled. "That's barbaric!" she exclaimed. A couple of the Travelers looked around. She hastily lowered her voice. "That's wrong. Killing her, in the hope that reviving her will make her powers more controllable? I can't put in words how wrong that is."

"I won't be asking you to kill her," Coil assured her. "Just to revive her once she is dead." He paused. "You can revive her, yes?"

Hope nodded. "I feel her life-energy. I can revive her." Her face twisted into a grimace. "But I don't like it. It feels ... bad. Wrong."
"Well, would it make you feel better if I told you that Dinah told me that your arrival would mark the
day that Noelle was made all better?" asked Coil. He leaned forward. "Killing her and reviving her
via your power was the only option I could think of that just might work."

"I have a better idea," said Hope. "I want to go and talk to her. Face to face."

Coil shook his head. "Not an option," he stated flatly. "If she comes into contact with you, you won't
be able to pull free. She will absorb you into her. You will become her latest prisoner – or her latest
meal." And I won't get my power use, he didn't have to say.

Hope stood. "You want me to fix your problem, I'll fix it my way. Open the vault. I want to talk to
her."

Coil shook his head. "You're crazy. It's not going to happen."

Hope nodded firmly. "Oh, yes it is."

Coil closed the vault door behind Hope, shaking his head. "I can't believe I let you talk me into this,"
he muttered, then raised his voice. "Just stay clear of her," he told her over the intercom. "Do not let
her touch you."

Hope nodded. "I understand. Inner door, please."

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" whispered Amy urgently.

"Not really," murmured Hope, "but I'm not about to allow him to murder her. And you should really
have stayed outside."

"Where you go," Amy said stubbornly, "I go."

Before Hope could answer, the inner door slid open.

The chamber beyond was not well-lit, but Hope's inner glow changed that, filling most of it with a
pearlescent silvery-blue light. Amy stayed behind Hope; Hope kept her wings half-open, shielding
Amy from direct view. I should have insisted that she stayed outside ...

The darkness at the far end of the chamber shifted, and Noelle ventured into the light.

Hope gasped; she was huge. A lower body that was surely composed of everything – and everyone
– that she had ever consumed, and an upper body that looked almost normal, almost human.

"Hi, Noelle," she said with a smile. "It's me, Hope. I just thought I'd come in and say hi. Coil wants
me to help him find a cure for you, you know."

"Does he?" asked Noelle curiously. "And do you think you'll succeed?"

"I can only try," replied Hope cheerfully.

"Why did you come in here?" asked Noelle unhappily. "Surely he told you what I do."

"Because I wanted to speak to you face to face," Hope told her firmly. "I can get a much better feel
for someone, that way."

"But I eat people," groaned Noelle. "I might eat you, even if I don't want to."
"Do you want to?" asked Hope, stepping toward her. She gave Amy a hand gesture – *stay by the door*. For a wonder, Amy obeyed.

"No," admitted Noelle.

"Then I trust you not to," Hope told her, quietly but firmly.

She approached Noelle, moving smoothly and easily, not making any sudden motions that might startle the grossly transformed teenage girl. Noelle watched her nervously, multiple arms and legs extending from the lower body twitching occasionally. Hope could see eyes and mouths on the lower body, as well as where they should be on Noelle's head.

Noelle's upper body turned away, convulsively. "Don't look at me," she said suddenly. "I'm ugly. I'm a monster."

Hope smiled. "I've met monsters. You're not a monster. You're just someone who's had a really horrible deal from life. Yes, you've done bad things, but if I can help you now, you will never have to do them again."

Noelle shook her head. "I can't – I won't – when I get hungry, I can't control what I do." The anguish in her voice tore at Hope's heart.

"Are you hungry now?" asked Hope quietly.

"No, but –" *Soon,* Hope understood. She nodded. "I understand," she told Noelle. She moved a little closer. "Can I ask you a question about what you do, without upsetting you?"

Noelle hesitated. "I guess," she ventured at last. "Depends on what it is. If it's too upsetting, I probably won't answer it."

"That's fair," said Hope. She took a deep breath. "When you're pulling something in, do you start absorbing what's in it before or after you've pulled it all the way inside you?"

Noelle blinked. "After," she said, following a moment's thought. "Sometimes it takes a little while."

Hope nodded thoughtfully. "Then, if you don't mind, would you let me try an experiment?"

"What experiment?" asked Noelle warily.

"Extend one of your limbs toward me. Let me touch it with a wingtip. See if it starts pulling me in." She smiled. "If it does, I can shed a feather or two." Her smile turned into a grin. "Don't worry, they're non-toxic. Approved for consumption by the FDA. Just not very nutritious."

Noelle smiled, despite herself, and thought about it for a bit. "... okay," she said finally. She extended an arm that hung from her lower body. Hope unfurled her primary right wing, and extended it to meet Noelle's hand.

Crystalline wingtip met fleshy hand, brushed, held firm contact. Hope broke the contact, re-established it. There was a slight tackiness there, not unlike containment foam, but nothing she could not overcome.

"Take hold of it," she encouraged Noelle. "See if I can pull free." Noelle obligingly took a grip on the wingtip feather, and Hope exerted her strength to pull free. After only a moderate yank, the feather slid from Noelle's grip.
"Well, that's a start," said Hope.

"How are you doing that?" asked Noelle curiously.

"It's a power thing," Hope said. "Not sure how it works. Nothing sticks to me."

"I still would not get too close," Noelle warned her. "If I absorb you all the way into me, I won't need to go through your skin."

Hope nodded seriously. "I understand that." She moved a few steps closer, re-furling the primary wing. "Point your index finger at me."

Noelle obeyed.

Hope was in reaching distance now; she extended her arm forward, pointing at Noelle with her own index finger.

"What are you doing?" Coil's voice crackled over the intercom.

"Testing a hypothesis," Hope replied, her voice quiet and calm, so as not to startle Noelle. "Let's see what happens ... now."

She leaned forward, wings half-unfurled for balance, and placed the tip of her right index finger against the tip of Noelle's finger.

For a long moment, nothing happened. Noelle seemed to be holding her breath. Hope pulled back, feeling the slight tackiness, but broke the contact with no real effort.

"Again," murmured Hope. She placed her fingertip against Noelle's, and this time 'listened' to the flood of sensations sent to her by her biometric senses.

Hope raised her hand palm out and took half a step forward. As if in a daze, Noelle raised her own hand, palm out. Their hands met, palm flat to palm, and then Hope meshed her fingers with Noelle's.

"That's ... wow," marveled Noelle. "I haven't been able to have human contact for so long ..." Her voice trailed off; she did not add the unspoken That is, people I haven't eaten. When she spoke again, it held a touch of worry. "I think I'm starting to feel hungry. You might want to back off." She let go Hope's hand and pulled her arm back.

Hope smiled. "That's fine," she said. "I've learned what I wanted to know." She moved back to where Amy waited in the corner nearest the inner door.

"She's a regenerator," she said in a low voice. "That much I can tell. Plus, there's extensive micro-scarring in and around her brain area. She's probably taken way too many hits there, and she's not thinking too clearly now." She indicated the mass of Noelle's body with a gesture of her hand. "From what I've seen you do, it should be possible to separate out a normal human body from what she is now, and then fix her brain, put it back together the way it was before she took so much trauma." She paused, looking at Amy. "You think you can pull that off?"

Amy frowned. "Seems awful risky to me. What if I get stuck and pulled in?"

Hope smiled. "That's what I'm here for. To pull you out again."

At that moment, Amy looked up to see Noelle's bulk looming toward them.

The intercom spat out an urgent "LOOK OUT!"
Noelle's voice, high-pitched and desperate, called, "I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! I'm hungry!"

A massive tentacle, one that Hope had not seen before, encircled Hope's waist and plucked her away from Amy's desperately clutching hands. She didn't even have time to do more than look extremely startled before it slapped her against the side of Noelle's grossly oversized lower body, and the flesh folded over her.

Just before she disappeared, swallowed by Noelle's bulk, she called out, "Coil! Get Amy to safety!"

And then there was just a single glowing hand protruding from Noelle's bulk, reaching, imploring. And then even that was gone.

"NOOOOOO!" screamed Amy. "HOPE!"
Weld looked up at the knock on the door. "Come in," he called. He put down the book he had been reading, turned off the stereo, and stood up to greet his visitor.

It turned out to be Flechette. She entered, looking more than a little apprehensive, which struck Weld as somewhat puzzling, as she had acquitted herself superbly during that morning's action against the Slaughterhouse Nine.

"Sit down," he invited. "I have coffee on; would you like some?"

She sat, but turned down the offer with a shake of her head. Weld sat also, his curiosity piqued. "What's the matter?" he asked. "Is there a problem?"

"Not a problem, no ... I mean, yes, maybe," said Flechette, managing to clear the issue up not at all. "No, yes and maybe," mused Weld, a smile playing over his lips. "Well, that certainly makes the matter crystal clear."

"Sorry, sorry," said Flechette hastily. "I'm making a total botch of this." She sat up straight with an obvious effort of will, and looked Weld in the eye. "I want to go on a date."

The smile left Weld's face, and he stared at her. "What, really?" he said. "With me?" He frowned. How to let her down gently? "I'm sorry, but I –"

"No, no, no," she interrupted, cheeks flaming red. "With someone else. Someone I've met. Someone not in the Wards. She helped with the Nine, anyway, so there's that amnesty thing they're talking about –"

"Huh. Well, okay then," said Weld cheerfully, then the import of her words caught up with him. "Trouble? What do you mean?" He paused, thinking. "Someone you've met, who's not in the Wards?" Suddenly, her meaning was clear. "You want to go on a date with a villain?"

Flechette shook her head violently. "She's not really a villain," she protested. "And she helped with the Nine, anyway, so there's that amnesty thing they're talking about –"

She. Not really a villain. Helped with the Nine.

There were only four people who fitted that description, and one of those was Weld's immediate superior; he really didn't think Flechette was referring to Miss Militia.

Hope was maybe a possibility, but Weld didn't think she did dates. Especially romantic dates. Which was the vibe he was getting off Flechette.

Amy was actually a real possibility, but although she was obviously on the outs with the rest of New Wave, that would not even make her "not really" a villain.

Which left ...

"Parian," he said in tones of revelation. "You want to go on a date with Parian."

Flechette nodded so vigorously that he was worried that she might do herself an injury. Then she paused, eyeing him warily. "I know she's not really a hero cape, but she stepped up against the Nine ..."
Weld was thinking back. There had been the battle against the Merchants, where Parian and Flechette had been on the rooftop with Vista. And then after Mannequin's defeat, she had volunteered for 'extended patrol' to keep an eye on the area once the PRT had packed up shop. And she had been sticking fairly close to Parian's side before and after the fight against the Nine.

It made sense. It made a lot of sense.

He wondered why he had not seen it before.

He realised that Flechette was still watching him closely, and he realised that he had not given her an answer.

He smiled broadly. "Well, given her current status, I see no particular problem with it."

She sighed in relief and opened her mouth to answer, but he raised a hand to forestall her. "However. I will need to bring this to Miss Militia. Parian may not be a villain as such; she's not wanted for any crimes not connected to protecting the people in the area she has claimed, and she did, as you say, step up against the Nine." He paused, watching her reactions.

"But she also does associate with the Undersiders on a regular basis, and presumably other villains as well." He grimaced as her face fell. "Sorry, but you see how it goes. Security and all that, and if I let this go by without crossing the tees and dotting the ayes, then Director Piggot would be down on my neck like a guillotine. But Miss Militia should be able to give you a direct answer."

He stood. "If you want, we can go and talk to her now."

Flechette stood also. "I might be in the way ..." she ventured, obviously unwilling to face Miss Militia with such a request. It had apparently taken up much of her nerve just to come and see Weld.

"Seriously, no," said Weld. "You come along with. This is serious business, and it's going to get sorted out. I'd much rather you came to me with this sort of thing."

She giggled nervously. "I didn't even want to bring this to you." Her arms were wrapped around her body, hugging herself. "But Parian is ..."

"From the look of it," observed Weld dryly, "you're not going to be satisfied with just one date. I'm thinking 'relationship'."

From the blush that flared anew across her face, Weld knew he'd hit the bullseye. "Well," he said, "we shall see what Miss Militia has to say."

Miss Militia looked up at the knock on her office door. She had folders open in front of her, helmet cam footage playing silently on a tablet as well as on one of the windows on her computer, and other windows containing individual reports. Currently, she was working to correlate all the separate accounts into one seamless report, that would give an overall view of the action against the Nine.

It was hard going. And now someone wanted to talk to her.

She sighed, and rubbed her eyes. It would probably do her good to put it down for a moment.

"Come in," she called.

The door opened, and Weld entered, followed by Flechette. Miss Militia nodded to Weld, and offered a smile to Flechette. She could still recall, all too well, the spider-bot's limbs scrabbling at her
until the arbalest bolt took it in the side and smashed it against the parapet. Right now, she had a lot of time for Flechette.

"Well, hello," she said. "Please, sit down. What seems to be the matter?"

They both sat, Weld taking the reinforced chair that Miss Militia kept in her office for him. He could sit in ordinary chairs, but only once or twice before his metallic bulk reduced them to wreckage.

Weld looked a question at Flechette, and she nodded back to him, so he turned back to Miss Militia and cleared his throat. "Well," he said, trying and failing to suppress a slight smile, "it seems that Flechette here wants to date outside our ranks."

Miss Militia leaned back and smiled tolerantly. "Really?" she asked, amused. "Who is it? Someone from another Wards chapter? Or ... hmm." She searched her memory for capes around Flechette's age who she had been in contact with recently.

One series of possibilities popped up immediately. She sat forward in the chair, looking at Flechette intently. "It's one of the others who was at the fight with the Nine, isn't it?" she asked, and immediately knew she was correct.

"Not one of the Undersiders," Weld clarified. "Not Amy either."

"Ah," said Miss Militia. "Parian."

Weld nodded. "Parian."

They both looked at Flechette, who seemed to be trying to shrink down into the chair.

"I'm really sorry," she muttered. "I don't want to cause problems ..."

Miss Militia shook her head. "This is not a problem," she said briskly. "This is you bringing a matter to my attention that needed to be treated as such."

"After all," agreed Weld, "we wouldn't want you to bottle it up till you did something stupid."

Miss Militia nodded. "Like defect from the Wards to be with her, or something else."

Weld nodded as well. "Precisely."

Flechette raised her head hopefully. "So ... is that a yes or a no?"

Miss Militia thought for a moment. "Let's say ... suppose I put you on detached duty. Officially, you will be the liaison between the Wards and the gangs; given the recent situation, I think we need to be able to work more closely together. I'm sure Hope will be happy to work with you on this."

She smiled. "You can use Parian's territory as your starting point, but I'd like you to touch base with the others on a semi-regular basis. Any concerns they have – especially, any concerns Hope has – you pass on to us, as well as anything that seems to be going on from outside influences." She tilted her head. "I will be trusting you to use your own judgement on this. Do you think you can handle it?"

Flechette was staring at her. Weld had to nudge the younger girl before she responded. "Oh my god, yes," she blurted. "Yes, Miss Militia, thank you, thank you!"

Miss Militia nodded. "You're welcome," she said with a smile. "I'll sort out the paperwork momentarily. Your new duties start effective immediately. Dismissed."
A moment passed, while Flechette absorbed Miss Militia's words. Then she shot to her feet. "Thank you," she said again, breathlessly. She grabbed Weld impulsively and hugged him, then darted around the desk and hugged Miss Militia as well.

"You won't regret this, I promise!" she said in a rush, and darted out the door.

"I do believe," said Weld dryly, "that she's gone to pack a few things."

Miss Militia snorted. "I believe you may be right." She sighed. "It must be Hope's influence."

"What is?" asked Weld.

"All this hugging that's going on around here."

Weld chuckled. "You may well be correct." He sobered slightly. "Director Piggot may not be overly pleased that you've stationed Flechette alongside a rogue cape."

"Director Piggot," Miss Militia noted, "has other concerns at the moment."

Emma Barnes opened the letter, and frowned. It had been her name on the front, but the letter inside, with all the legalese, looked like what her father dealt with at court all the time. Maybe someone had mislabeled it or something.

"Dad?" she said. "I think someone sent me a letter meant for you."

He came over and she handed the letter to him. He skimmed through it, frowning.

"No, honey," he said slowly. "It's meant for you, all right."

"For me?" asked Emma. "What's it about?"

"It's a court summons," he said automatically. "You need to attend a preliminary hearing to see if charges being brought ... against you ..." He paused, and re-read the passage. "Charges of bullying. Criminal charges." His voice rose in disbelief. "If this hearing finds that the charges are valid, then you will be tried on multiple counts of harassment, bullying, unlawful detention and assault. Tried. In court."

Emma's face had paled, but there was the quiver of a smile at the corner of her mouth, as if she believed he was pulling a practical joke on her.

"Does it really say that, Dad?"

He lowered his eyes to hers. "I'm afraid it does, honey."

"But I'm not really in trouble, am I, Dad? Can't you tell them it's all a mistake?"

He shook his head. "Not this time, honey. Not this time."

Director Piggot looked at the faces of the split-screen video conference. Director Costa-Brown looked back at her from one window; other regional directors occupied the other windows. "Well," she said, "legal proceedings are under way for the Hebert bullying case. It's been a long time coming – perhaps too long – but no cape is above the law, and it's about time they learned that."

The face of the Boston regional director frowned. "It's a bad business, this. Wards bullying normals,
or encouraging others to do so. We need to stamp it out."

"And we are doing so," Director Costa-Brown responded. "We've found two other recent cases, and several that go back a couple of years, and we're coming down hard on all the culprits. Wards are getting a review of their actions and possible juvenile hall time, while their unpowered accomplices are going through the normal court system in the same way."

She cleared her throat. "On to the next order of business. Recognising those who assisted in the defeat of the Slaughterhouse Nine." She checked her notes. "Currently, we have proposed a public ceremony to honour everyone who participated, plus a memorial of the event; probably a plaque."

"Not a statue?" asked the Boston director.

"We're not looking at a statue, at the moment," Director Costa-Brown replied. "Unless you had all fourteen people on it, which would be needlessly complicated, any statue would needlessly glorify just one or two people." She paused. "So, a granite stele, with engravings or pictures of each of the capes who stepped up, and their part in the battle. Names, dates, that sort of thing. An inspiring quote."

"'Forever ended the menace of the Slaughterhouse Nine,'" quoted the Dallas director. It had been a fairly common phrase in the TV news covering the aftermath.

"Something like that," agreed Costa-Brown.

"Nothing special for Hope?" suggested the Boston director.

"How do you mean?" asked Director Piggot.

"Well, after all, from what I understand, the whole thing was her idea," the man from Boston went on.

Piggot's lips tightened. "The whole operation took place against orders. Miss Militia brought Weld and the Wards into it, and entirely neglected to inform me until it was all over. They broke so many regulations ..."

"And yet, despite all the broken rules, the ignored regulations, they hit the Nine so hard it will likely never reform," Costa-Brown pointed out. "Maybe something subtle; putting Hope's name at the top of the list, her image at the top of the picture. She deserves at least that much for her contribution."

She leaned forward and seemed to stare directly at Piggot, out of the screen. "Since Hope left the Wards, public opinion regarding us has already shown a downtick. A ceremony like this, with a plaque linking us to the demise of the Nine, and showing that we recognise her actions, can only help us, public relations wise."

Director Piggot ran her hands over her face. She was pushing it as it was; her hemodialysis would not wait much longer. But she had to hold on for just a little while longer.

"From what I understand," she said grudgingly, "Hope has always been working with all sides, trying to foster understanding and cooperation. The defeat of the Nine only highlights how successful she has been."

Director Costa-Brown seemed to consider matters. "Would it be possible, do you think, to sponsor a new cape team, based around Hope? With her personality, I would imagine that volunteers would come thick and fast."
"Let me sound my people out," said Director Piggot. "I'll get back to you on that one." After making the appropriate farewells, she cut the link and got up painfully from the chair.

*Hope, leading a cape team?* she asked herself. *That's a disturbing thought.*

But yet, it kept niggling at her.

Regent strolled slowly down the street in the deepening twilight, whistling a popular tune and occasionally tossing his sceptre up and catching it once more.

Life was going well, especially since the Nine had been well and truly dealt with. He imagined that the others might be less than pleased with him if they knew that he'd deliberately let Cherie go, but screw 'em. She was family, and even if she'd tried to have him killed a time or two, family was still family, blood was still blood.

Besides, he knew she would take him seriously. She wouldn't pull any more crap in Brockton Bay. And what happened somewhere else, to someone else, was not his problem.

And then he felt the sharp stab of emotion. It wasn't something he'd been thinking about; this was fear, and pain, and pleading. It had been so strong that he'd fumbled the catch with the sceptre, and he had to stoop to pick it up.

*What was that?* he asked himself. But he knew the answer.

*Something's happened to Cherie.*
In which Hope and Amy reach a conclusion with Noelle, and Flechette and Parian reach a conclusion of their own

"NOOOOOO!" screamed Amy. "HOPE!"

Part of her was aware of the inner door clicking open behind her. There was a voice babbling to her over the intercom, but what it was saying, she had no idea. She wasn't listening, wasn't paying attention.

Noelle loomed toward her; she had eaten Hope. Consumed her.

The one good thing, the one bright thing, in Amy's life at that moment had been taken away from her. Literally snatched away, from right in front of her.

The light of her life. Gone.

Blood roared in her ears. She swayed, dizzy from the intensity of her emotions.

Noelle was closer still. The massive tentacle reached out for her.

Amy stood, bewildered, in blackness, in a void.

Massive creatures, long, wormlike, writhed sinuously through the blackness.

She could not gauge their scale; were they just a few yards long, a few yards distant? Or were they the size of worlds, and many miles away?

As they writhed against one another, tiny scales, particles, shards, broke away and scattered into the darkness.

She swayed, leaning against the wall. Noelle hadn't come any closer; she, too, seemed disoriented. Her head felt hot; her chest felt like she had inhaled ice water.

She was back in the blackness, in the void. Shards were still scattering. Spraying across the void, like rice thrown at a wedding. Like glass before a shotgun blast. Like –

One struck her between the eyes.

She was aware once more. Liquid fire was running through her veins. She felt it spread, from her head, meeting the cold in her chest, mingling, a burning both hot and cold. It spread to her legs, to her feet, down her arms.

The sensation reached her hands last; her fingertips felt as though they were about to freeze solid, or burst into flame, or both.

She took a deep breath. The vision, the hallucination, whatever it was, was fading from memory. She had no idea what it meant. But she felt ... different. She raised her hands before her eyes and looked at them. Pink palms, ten fingers. Nothing unusual there.
But the burning, crackling, fizzing feeling in her fingertips...

Noelle recovered, and lunged at her.

Amy reached out and grabbed the tentacle.

Contact.

"What's happening in there?" yelled Trickster. "Get the door open, get her out!"

"Oh my god," gasped Sundancer. "Hope! She ate Hope! She's got Amy!"

"The door is open," snapped Coil. "She's not coming out. She's..." He stared at the screen, trying to interpret the image. "She's not doing anything. She's just standing there. So's Noelle." He paused.

"No, wait, she's doing something now."

The instant Noelle came into contact, Amy's power exploded into her. Within the first few microseconds, Amy had her entire body mapped out to the last molecule. It took less than a tenth of a second for her to seize control of every aspect of it, voluntary and autonomous alike. She knew Noelle's body, inside and out. She knew where Hope was inside that gross body; and she knew what she had to do in order to rescue her.

Hope was curled in a fetal position, her wings furled around her body, in a sac within Noelle's body. Allowing just the most basic of autonomous functions to continue unabated – what Noelle needed to survive, nothing more – she caused muscle contractions to move Hope's sac over to where Amy waited. This took only a few moments.

Never breaking contact with Noelle, Amy lifted one hand from the tentacle and moved closer to Noelle's main body; the tentacle obligingly curled to allow her access so. She placed one hand on the main body, then the other. Then she plunged one of her hands through the outer skin, the flesh parting as she did so. The skin of the sac split open, and she took Hope by the wrist. Then she heaved.

She wasn't strong enough, on her own, to pull Hope out of there, of course. But flesh divided, and muscles contracted, and Hope slid from her confinement in a bizarre parody of childbirth.

I seem to be doing that a lot, these days, Amy mused. At any other time, it would be funny. But right now, she had to save Hope.

Hope's lungs were full of the same sticky fluid that had surrounded her in the sac, and now stained the front of Amy's clothes. Amy triggered a cough reflex that began to clear Hope's lungs, until she was able to breathe on her own.

Hope's eyes opened, and she looked up at Amy from where she was seated on the floor, one slender wrist still held in Amy's firm grasp. Her clothes were soaked in the fluid, but she was otherwise unmarked by it.

"Wow," gasped Hope. "Thanks."

"You're okay? You're okay. What should I do now? Kill her?" Amy's thoughts were whirling.

"What?" said Hope. "No! That wasn't her, that was her power. She didn't want to do that." She
climbed carefully to her feet, freeing her wrist from Amy's grasp, and put her arms around Amy from behind. "Can you fix her, instead? Make it so she controls her power, not the other way around?"

Amy leaned into Hope's embrace and felt a wave of peace wash through her, with just a tinge of shame. *If she can forgive Noelle for trying to eat her, then how can I do less?*

She turned her attention back to Noelle. *Hope's alive. Hope's okay. I can handle this. Let me see now ...*

Noelle's upper body – the torso down to the waist, where it merged with the lower, much more massive body section – migrated across the top of the upper body, and then down the side of it, until Amy could reach up and grasp her hand.

Then, she tugged gently. Noelle seemed to *extrude* from within the lower body, waist followed by hips, thighs ... She had worried that she would get this part wrong, get organs wrong, do something that would accidentally kill Noelle. But then she found out something interesting; her power now let her delve into the very DNA of the body she was working with, examine the chromosomes.

It is a common misconception that DNA provides a map, an instruction manual, on building the human body. It's not like that. There is not one section of DNA that means 'leg' and another that means 'eyeball'. The way chromosomes express themselves, as the body develops and grows, is more like a recipe. When chromosomes are activated, cells develop according to where they are and what they need to be.

Amy picked the appropriate cells and told them to develop into Noelle's lower body, as according to the original DNA set. She had massive resources to draw from, so she sped the process up just as fast as she could.

In the end, it took Noelle just a minute and a half to grow her new legs.

Meanwhile, Amy went to Noelle's brain. As Hope had noted, there was microscopic scarring all the way through it, where extensive injuries had been healed. Noelle's brain was still functioning; however, the scars were disrupting brain activity, especially personality and memories. So she removed the scar tissue, and carefully jigsawed Noelle's brain back together. *All connections test out. Full personality reintegration and memory recovery should occur immediately on waking. Excellent.*

She paused for one final detail, then moved on.

Next were the organs present in the torso. These had not been used for too long; the lower body had had much larger organs to perform the same tasks. She revitalised them, ensured that they were in the right places, and were all connected correctly.

"Oh my god," said Trickster, his voice breaking, as he saw the woman he loved reforming out of the gross body of the monster that had consumed her so long ago. "Noelle. Oh my god."

Amy had Noelle step from the slumped mass of what had been her lower body, painlessly separating the last tendrils of connecting flesh, then lifted her hand from the mountain of dead meat, and took Noelle's other hand in hers. After taking just a moment to appreciate Noelle's nakedness, she got down to business. *If I leave things as they are now, she will just go back into the same cycle as*
before. I need to break that cycle.

She had to look deeper, find the root of Noelle's problems. Closing her eyes for a moment, she leaned back into Hope's embrace. Gathering strength from the warmth, the closeness, she kept her eyes closed as she concentrated on the problem.

She looked deeper, and saw something she had never seen before. She could see the structure of Noelle's powers. She could feel it. It was right there, tangible.

And it was broken.

She could 'see' where pieces were missing, where parts had bent, had warped, had connected elsewhere, where they should not be connected. Where things had gone wrong.

This is why her powers were so out of control.

Amy reached out, took hold of the twisted part. Fortunately, the imperfect joints that connected it to the rest of the structure were far weaker than the ones she wanted to leave intact. With a supreme effort, she snapped it, breaking the improper bonds. It took all her strength to bend the structure back into a semblance of what it should originally had been, but she managed it.

Concentrating, she stimulated the broken sections, teasing more of the substance of the power structure forth, rebuilding the original structure, bridging the gaps. When she was finished, she wasn't sure that this was exactly the same as the structure's original form, but she knew it was a great deal better than the way it had been before, with the warping and the short-circuiting. As the bridging sections connected all the way across, she saw the new joints forming, growing in strength by the second. This was a more robust structure, supplying powers that would be more stable.

Eventually, she decided, she had done enough. There was nothing more she could do, and anything else she tried might cause damage. So she withdrew, leaving the new, rebuilt power structure to re-integrate with Noelle's new body.

The last thing that she did before withdrawing altogether was to check on the powers, give them a test run, as it were. The regeneration seemed to be working just fine, but she switched over the skin absorption aspect of her other power to purely voluntary, as opposed to autonomous control, as it had been before. If Noelle was going to absorb something through her skin from here on in, it would be because she chose to.

Amy brought up full consciousness and awareness in Noelle's new body, waited till she had her balance, let her hands go, and stepped back. Hope, still standing behind her, stepped back as well. Amy half-turned, and put her arms around Hope. She leaned close, feeling the warmth of Hope's body. I nearly lost you...

Noelle stared at Amy and Hope, then around at the vault. Lastly, she stared at the mass of cooling flesh that had so recently been a part of her.

She put a hand to her head. "Okay," she said, "either I've just woken up from a really vivid nightmare, or that was all real." She looked searchingly at Hope and Amy. "It was real, wasn't it?"

"It was," Hope replied with a nod. "How do you feel?"

"Weird," said Noelle. "Hungry. I could really go for a cheeseburger right now."

Amy shivered. "That's better than the alternative, I guess."
Before Noelle could answer, the inner door opened, and Trickster burst in. "Noelle!" he gasped. "You're all right!" He paused. "You are all right, aren't you?" He looked imploringly toward Amy. "Isn't she?"

"I think I am," said Noelle doubtfully. "I feel okay." She looked down at her body, then covered herself with her hands. "Aaaand I feel very naked too. Clothes, please."

As Trickster took his shirt off and offered it to Noelle, Hope whispered to Amy, "She seems to be taking this all quite well."

"I know," Amy replied, in the same undertone. "I put in a disconnect. It's not going to hit her all at once. Things will trickle back into her conscious mind, a little bit at a time. Gives her a chance to come to terms what she's done, without going totally off the rails."

Hope gave her a squeeze. "You really are amazing, you know that?" she said fondly.

"Just following your lead," Amy replied, holding Hope more tightly. "I was so terrified when you got eaten."

"You were terrified," Hope replied. "I was astonished. Didn't have time to be scared."

"Next time," murmured Amy, "please don't turn your back on the monster."

"Yes, mother," agreed Hope, rubbing her head against Amy's.

Amy closed her eyes. "I mean it," she whispered. "Don't ever do that to me again."

Hope kissed her gently on the forehead. "I promise," she whispered.

"So ... what's happening with her powers?" asked Trickster. Everyone was out of the vault now, and he was wearing his shirt once more. Noelle had been supplied with clothing, presumably belonging to one of Coil's minions. Amy likewise clad, as she had been liberally doused in the sticky fluid Noelle's monster form had used to store people in.

Hope, on the other hand was naked, as her own clothes had also been covered in the same stuff. No clothes could be found that would fit her, so the top and pants were currently soaking in hot water. However, her unclad condition didn't seem to bother her, and no-one else was commenting. She sipped at her tea as she waited for Amy's answer to Trickster's question. Her other hand rested in Amy's.

Amy took a bite of cake; coffee and tea had been served to all, and cake and biscuits were on offer. "They should work better now," she said. "Not as screwy." She finished the cake, then reached out and laid her hand on Noelle's. "And totally under your control."

Noelle, who had jumped when Amy did that, stared at her. "You fixed ... my powers?"

"It wasn't easy," said Amy uncomfortable at all the stares she was getting. "But ... yeah. They were broken. Wrong. So I fixed them. Sorta."

Trickster blinked. "Could you fix ... anyone's powers? Make them stronger? Or take them away?"

Amy stopped and thought about that. "I don't ... really think so," she said at last. "If they're broken, I can do my best to fix them. But there's a structure involved. Established pathways are extremely
stable, very hard to affect at all," she explained. "Broken power structures are warped and twisted and less stable, weaker. But I doubt I'd be able to make much of an impression on a well-established powerset with a stable structure."

The Travelers looked at each other. They didn't seem overly surprised by the news that Noelle's powers had been 'broken'.

"So ... what happens now if someone touches me, and I want my power to work?" asked Noelle.

"You throw out a clone of yourself," said Amy promptly. "It will have the powers of the person who just touched you. It'll last for maybe an hour before dissipating." She smiled. "And it won't be evil. I promise."

"I don't ... absorb ... people?" asked Noelle carefully.

Amy shook her head. "No," she said definitively. "And nor will you get any bigger. The body problem was part of the short circuit, and I fixed that." She grinned. "Though I think you can actually use the absorption for other things. Sunlight, for instance."

"So ... " said Trickster. "There will be no problem with me kissing my girlfriend?"

Amy shook her head. "I see no reason not to."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," said Noelle. "I might find a problem with it. What if I don't want to be your girlfriend after all this time?"

Trickster stared at her, aghast. "Noelle?" he said faintly.

She kept her stern expression for about five seconds, before bursting into laughter. "Oh god, I can't keep a straight face. Come here, you." Grabbing Trickster by the lapels, she hauled him close and kissed him soundly.

"Well," said Hope, "it looks like we've done our bit here. Time to go."

Trickster, still holding hands with Noelle, hugged Hope one-armed and kissed Amy on the forehead. "Thank you both," he said fervently.

Noelle, not to be outdone, hugged them both as well. "Thank you for giving me my life back," she whispered. "I have a feeling that once I get a chance to sit down and think, I'm gonna go into hysterics. So I'm gonna need alcohol, and lots of it."

Hope nodded sympathetically. "Any time you want to talk, or just a hug, let me know," she said. "I'll be there."

Amy nodded. "She will," she agreed. "She always is."

Hope, once more clad in clothes that were at least clean, if a little damp, shook hands with Coil. "Thank you for your cooperation," she said gravely.

"Thank you for your assistance," he replied, just as gravely. "May I inquire as to your plans from here on?"

"Well," said Hope, "I'm thinking we'll go catch up with Skitter and Dinah. And after that ... I guess I'll be playing it by ear."
"Indeed," said Coil. "I see. Well, I hope you have a pleasant evening."

"And yourself," Hope agreed. Hand in hand with Amy, she walked toward the exit, along with the Travelers.

Coil watched them go. Irritating, he thought. But definitely an improvement on what might have happened. He sighed. Sometimes, the best of all possible worlds is not what it's cracked up to be.

[Author's note: Apologies to everyone who is offended by such things, but the following contains a sex scene that does not contain a single rude word or explicit sex act. You have been warned.]

The bedroom was dim, lit by a single flickering candle. It was neatly arranged, everything in its place. The bed, a large queen-size, was immaculately turned down.

Lily and Sabah stood in the middle of the room, facing each other, within arms' reach, but not touching. Masks had been discarded, weapons piled against the wall. Lily had removed her body armour.

Sabah's voice was tremulous. "You're sure?" she insisted. "You're not going to get in trouble for this?"

Lily smiled. "They assigned me to be a special liaison," she said. "But they know what's going on. I think they'd rather I spend time with you on their dollar than lose me altogether."

"Would you have done that?" asked Sabah. "For me? Leave the Wards?"

Lily shrugged uncomfortably. "I dunno. If they told me I couldn't see you ... maybe. I have friends in the Wards. But ... you're you."

Sabah smiled. "But you don't have to make that choice anymore. You can stay with the Wards and be with me."

Lily smiled in return. "Yes," she said softly. "There is that."

They moved into each other's arms. Sabah blew out the candle.

Moonlight streamed in through the open window. The bed was now thoroughly disarranged. Discarded clothes were strewn on the floor and over the end of the bed. One boot was perched precariously atop the wardrobe.

Both girls lay upon the disordered sheets, sweating slightly and panting softly.

"Wow," gasped Lily. "That was ... wow."

"It was," agreed Sabah. "So worth. The wait."

"Ohgodyes," groaned Lily in a single heartfelt exhalation.

They lay together for a while, enjoying the mutual afterglow. Sabah regained her breath first, and began doing something that made Lily jump and then giggle.

"Stop that," she said, but in a tone of voice that meant Oh god please don't stop.
Sabah listened to the tone rather than the words, and kept doing it. But then, just at the point when Lily was beginning to arch her back and moan softly, she stopped.

"Why did you stop?" gasped Lily. "That was just getting good."

"You asked me to," Sabah replied; her voice was innocent, but there was a devilish twinkle in her eye.

"You are mean, evil and heartless," said Lily. "I'll have you know, I am the official liaison from the Wards, and I demand to be treated with proper respect. So get back to what you were doing, wench."

"Wench, is it?" retorted Sabah, smiling slowly. "Tell me something; as official liaison, what are you supposed to do if I do something ... bad?"

"I suppose I'd have to take ... appropriate measures," replied Lily, her tone suggestive.

"Hmm," replied Sabah, giggling wickedly. "What sort of 'appropriate measures' did you have in mind?"

Lily leaned close and whispered in her ear. Sabah's eyes grew wide.

"In that case," she said eagerly, "how can I resist?" And so, as challenged, she did something very bad indeed. Lily, in return, was forced to take appropriate measures.

And they both had a wonderful time.

"Lily?"

"Mmm?"

"Remind me to thank your boss."

"Already did. For both of us."

"Ah. S'okay then."

"Night, love."

"Night."
Chapter 58

Once outside Coil's base, Hope and Amy paused to say their goodbyes to the Travelers.

Hope looked at Noelle, who was gazing around at the night-time cityscape, and taking deep breaths of the air. "Are you going to be all right?" she asked.

"Oh, yes," said Noelle. "Just being in the open air, out of that vault ... just this is worth it." She took a tight, possessive grip on Trickster's arm. "I can't wait to see where you guys live. I can't wait to just sit down and eat normal food with you guys again, and watch TV. Hot showers. Oh god, hot showers. Sleeping in a normal bed again." She paused, and her voice broke. "Oh, god. The nightmare is over."

Hope smiled at the absolute joy in her voice. And you don't ever have to be a monster again.

"Actually," she said diffidently, "what are you going to be calling yourself?"

"Huh," said Noelle. "I had not thought about that."


"Seriously?" said Genesis. "Echidna? What sort of name is that?"

"Not one I'll ever be using, that's for sure," Noelle declared. She smiled at Hope. "I'll get back to you on that one."

Hope nodded. "Well, good luck," she said, and paused. "Actually ..." she said. "Would you be able to do me a huge favour?"

Noelle smiled. "No favour's too big, trust me on this."

"Would you be able to use your power on me? That is, make a clone with my powers, so that I can get everyone back to the shelter without making more than one trip?"

Noelle looked thoughtful. "I ... suppose," she allowed. She glanced at Amy. "You're sure it's safe?"

"As sure as I can be," said Amy. "I mean, I know your powers are stable right now, but I can't guarantee to know exactly what will happen when you use them."

"Well," said Noelle, taking a deep breath, "I guess I'll have to find out sooner or later." She reached out toward Hope, palm out, fingers spread. Hope copied the gesture, so that their palms met and their fingers interlinked. Noelle closed her eyes for a moment, and took another deep breath, and a third. She gave a nervous chuckle. "This is really hard. To let go and let it happen."

"It's okay," said Hope soothingly. "Take your time."

"Right," said Noelle, and bit her lip. "I just don't want – I really don't want – anything bad to happen again."

Hope stepped up and enfolded her in a hug, using her wings as well as her arms. "It's okay, sweetie," she murmured. "We're here. Nothing's going to go wrong, and even if it does, we can fix it." She kissed Noelle on the cheek, and then let her go, stepping back until they were just holding hands.
Noelle smiled bravely at her, and at Trickster. Then she took a deep breath, and then a second one, then closed her eyes. As she opened her eyes, she blew out her breath in a sharp exhalation, and relaxed her control on her power.

And a glowing form faded into existence.

It wasn't Hope, and it wasn't Noelle.

She wore Noelle's clothes, and Noelle's face ... mostly. Her skin glowed, but instead of the silver-blue pearlescence of Hope's radiance, hers was more of an earthy tone, a healthy skin colour. The gorgeous crystalline wings that arched up over her back were a deep sapphire blue, and their tones were subtly different to those that Hope's wings generated.

But the main difference was ... her. She was stunning. It was beauty beyond the remit of any earthly artist to describe with oil, with pencil, with sculptor's tools. She was the epitome of the lover, the mother, the perfect, unattainable woman. Renaissance artists would have wept tears of blood to see her, sold their very souls for the opportunity to create her likeness, and died unfulfilled as their every effort fell short of perfection.


No-one else said a word; they were just staring. It was as though an angel of light, of love, had touched down to Earth among them. For while Hope was beautiful, in an austerely inhuman way, Noelle's clone of Hope was in no way asexual or androgynous; she was woman, and purely and gorgeously so.

There were those people who tended to gravitate toward Hope, and eventually make it necessary for her to ask them not to form a cult around her. But this generally took months. Noelle's clone of Hope could have formed such a cult in days. Her looks and presence were such that she could cause a multiple traffic pile-up merely by walking down the street.

"Hmm," she said, looking down at her body, and bending a wing around to examine it. "I like this, I really do." Her voice was similar to Hope's, with the same crystalline undertones, but still distinctly Noelle's voice. She smiled at Trickster, and posed. "You like?"

"Guh," said Trickster.

"Francis," said Noelle tartly, "close your mouth and wipe your chin. You're drooling."

Chastened, he did as he was told, wiping his face with his sleeve. "Is this gonna happen every time you clone someone?" he asked, trying hard to keep his eyes averted from the vision of loveliness before him.

"No, just Hope," sighed Noelle. She grabbed him by the arm. "Come on, it's time for us to go." She nodded to the clone. "You are helping Hope get the others home, right?"

The clone nodded. "Right." She paused. "What do I do then? Come back here? Hang around there?"

Noelle considered that. "Whatever you want. Fly around for a bit. Help out at the shelter. Lend a hand." She quirked a smile. "Just try not to cause too much of a disturbance, okay?"

"Got it," said the clone. She turned to Hope and Amy; Hope was watching Amy's face with interest. Amy was staring at the clone with much the same expression as Trickster had held before Noelle had snapped him out of it. Even Sundancer looked fascinated, though not to the degree that Amy was.
"Where are your friends?" the clone asked.

Hope pointed. "Down the street and round the corner. I can feel them."

*Just like I can feel you,* she mused. *You must be an offshoot of Noelle's life-spark.*

"Ah," said the clone. "So *that's* what *that's* about."

As they moved off, Hope heard Sundancer mutter to Genesis, "And here, I thought I was straight ..."

Skitter was watching for them, which didn't surprise Hope; she had noticed the bugs flying around them at regular intervals. But when the Noelle-clone rounded the corner, Skitter stepped back, with every indication of confusion.

"Whoa!" she exclaimed. "Who the heck is this?"

"A clone of Noelle, with my powers," supplied Hope. "Created by Noelle, after Amy helped her out with her powers."

Skitter paused. "It sounds like I missed quite a bit," she conceded.

"That's okay," said Hope. "We can fill you in on the way back." She looked at the three girls. "Okay, Dinah's the smallest, and Skitter's fairly skinny, so you two can ride together. So, who wants to ride with me, and who wants to ride with ... uh ..."

"Call me Noelle," invited the clone. "I still think of me as me, after all." She smiled. "And let me tell you – it's awesome having a whole different set of powers after being stuck like I was for so long."

"Uh, I'll ride with Noelle, if that's okay?" volunteered Amy. She shot a quick, nervous glance at Hope.

Hope smiled at her. "Sure," she said. "I can easily handle Skitter and Dinah." She grinned. "And I get to tell the story about your heroism."

"I'll deny everything," Amy declared, then turned to the clone. "Come on, let's blow this popsicle stand."

The flight back was fairly quick and uneventful. Hope detailed to Skitter and Dinah what had happened once they left Coil's base; she tried to soft-pedal some of the details to spare Dinah's sensibilities, but more often than not, the child spotted this and demanded chapter and verse.

Glancing sideways once or twice, she saw Amy apparently deep in conversation with Noelle's clone. *Oh, they're getting along well,* she told herself. *Good.*

Then she glanced one more time, and saw the clone lower her face and tenderly kiss Amy on the lips. Hastily, she averted her gaze, more from a wish to not embarrass Amy than from any upset of her own. *Well, that could get complicated,* she thought. *I hope Amy doesn't get hurt.*

Following the kiss, Hope fully expected the clone to hang around after they arrived back at the shelter; however, this did not happen. Immediately upon depositing Amy on terra firma, Noelle turned to Hope and said, "Well, I think I'll fly around a bit until this body dissipates."

Hope frowned. "That seems really sad."
The clone tilted her head. "How so?"

"Well, you're only created for an hour of life. Doesn't it bother you?"

The clone smiled and shook her head. "Not really. You see, I have all of my memories, and when this body dissipates, the memories and impressions – in a vague form – will end up back in my real brain. I'll know what I did as a clone, but it won't overlay what I did for real."

Skitter had taken Dinah inside to get her a meal and a bed, while Amy had once more attached herself to Hope's side. Hope glanced at Amy, and said, "Uh, I'm a bit confused here. I, uh, saw you two ..."

"Kissing?" said the clone, with a grin. Amy groaned and hid her face in Hope's shoulder. Brightly, the clone went on. "That was actually Amy's idea. You see, she's got a bit of a crush on you –"

"You weren't supposed to tell her that!" protested Amy, her face flaming scarlet.

"It's okay," Hope soothed her. "I'd pretty well figured it out anyway." She put her arms around Amy. "It doesn't change what I think and feel about you."

The clone raised an eyebrow. "I think I need more friends like you." She smiled. "But anyway, Amy knew you weren't interested in the romantic side of things, but she says she always wanted to know what it would be like to kiss you if you were ..."

"... so you were the next best thing," finished Hope. She gave Noelle an approving nod. "That was very nice of you."

"Oh, I don't mind kissing girls," said Noelle. "I rather enjoy it, in fact. But I prefer boys. One boy. Trickster, to be precise."

Hope nodded. "I'm glad you have him to help you through it," she said. "He really cares for you; I can tell." She tilted her head toward Amy and smiled; there was a twinkle in her eye. "So," she asked teasingly, "was it as good as you hoped it would be?"

Amy leaned her head against Hope's shoulder and sighed. "Better," she breathed. "But I know I can't keep her, so I'm just gonna hang on to you until you get tired of me, or until I can get my head together about being away from you."

"It'll have to be the latter," said Hope, "because you're my friend and I love you dearly, and I always will," she added with an extra squeeze, "and I will never, ever leave a friend in need." She held Amy close and rubbed her head against her friend's forehead. "And that's a promise."

Noelle's clone smiled. "Well, that sounds like there's nothing for me to worry about there. I'll be getting going then."

Hope and Amy waved as the clone took to the air, the gentle glow of her skin slowly diminishing into the darkness. Amy turned to Hope. "You know how I've been fixated on Vicky for so long?"

"Mm-hmm?" said Hope with a smile.

"Not any more," said Amy softly, still looking to where the clone had disappeared. "Not ... any ... more."

[Author's note, for a little explanation: Hope has the GURPS advantage called Transcendent]
Appearance: this is the best possible physical appearance, reserved for angelic entities and the like. As she was Unattractive before her power-up, this basically counts as one of her powers. As per her subconscious wishes when she powered up, she retained her Androgynous appearance, and also became Asexual, and took on the Impressive trait for her appearance; thus, her looks are technically perfect, but do not appeal on a sexual level. In GURPS, Transcendent looks have a +8 to appeal to those who prefer your gender, and +2 to everyone else. Having the Androgynous/Impressive modifiers meant those were averaged out, so her base appearance gave her a +5 to appeal to everyone.

When Noelle's clone got that same power, she had no particular wish to be Androgynous, Asexual or Impressive, and so got the base Transcendent looks, replacing Noelle's natural Attractive appearance. Therefore, when dealing with those characters who preferred the female form, she got a +8 to their reactions, rather than Hope's +5 – on top of the other modifiers that she 'inherited' from Hope. Which is why Trickster was drooling. And even against those girls who may have been just a little bi-curious, she still had a considerable impact.

Just outside the shelter, Hope found herself being confronted by an irate Lisa.

"Skitter just told me what happened," she snapped. "How the hell could you be so stupid?"

"Wait, what?" asked Hope, taken aback. This was a side of Lisa she hadn't seen before.

"You idiot!" snapped Lisa. "If you got killed ..." She stopped, either unwilling or unable to say what she wanted to.

Hope blinked. "... yes?" she ventured.

Any nudged her. "I think she's trying to say she'd miss you," she prompted.

"Yeah, well," said Lisa, looking and sounding just a little abashed. "Quite apart from, you know, the impact on the future of the whole damn human race, I guess I'd ... kinda ... you know ... miss you. Just a bit."


She drew Lisa into her embrace, holding her close, feeling the tension slowly leaving the girl's body.

"I really appreciate the concern, by the way," she said softly. "I just want you to know that in my book, you're one of the good people."

"Shows how much you know," murmured Lisa, from within the embrace.

"Yes," said Hope. "I do know. I know good people by how they treat their friends, and people in need." She relaxed the hug somewhat, and smiled at Lisa. "I'm sorry you had to be surprised by that. It was a bit reckless of me. I'll try to do better next time."

By now, Lisa's arms were around Hope, and she was returning the hug. "This is really nice," she said softly. "No wonder Amy hangs around you so much."

"Well, duh," Amy retorted, evidently having overheard the comment. "Thank you, Captain Perceptive."
Hope kissed Lisa on the cheek, then laid her head on the girl's shoulder. "Well, any time you need more of the same, just say the word. I have plenty, and to spare. I guess things are fairly tough here -"

"Oh god," said Lisa. "I've got so many things to do, and so much to organise, and I can't relax for a single damn moment, and there's no-one's shoulder I can cry on that won't think I'm getting weak. So I have to be strong every damn minute of every damn day. It wears on a girl, it really does." She nuzzled her face into Hope's shoulder. "But you ... you don't judge. You don't have an agenda. You're just you."

She eased out of the hug, but stopped to give Hope a quick peck on the cheek. "I'll want more of those, sometime soon. Thanks. You've just made my day." A pause. "Oh, and by the way, there's a message from Miss Militia. She wants to see you tomorrow morning. Not urgent." A flashing smile, and then she was gone, back into the shelter.

Hope looked at Amy, who looked back at her. "Huh. I wonder what that's about ..."

"Good morning, Hope," said Miss Militia. "Good morning, Amy. I see you got my message."

Hope smiled. "The shelter passed it on to us, thanks."

Miss Militia nodded. "Please sit down. Coffee? Tea?"

"Oh, tea, please," said Hope.

Amy nodded. "Same here, thank you," she said.

Miss Militia raised one eyebrow slightly as she poured. "You two seem particularly chipper this morning. Did something happen?"

Hope chuckled; Amy giggled. "Oh, yes," said Hope. "We visited Flechette and Parian today, before coming to see you."

"And how are they?" asked Miss Militia, pouring her own cup.

Amy muffled her giggles, unsuccessfully, with her hand. Hope grinned. "They are in particularly good form today," she informed Miss Militia.

"Good form?" snorted Amy. "Try 'cat plus canary plus cream'. The both of them. I have never seen two people so indecently pleased with themselves, and with life in general."

"I ... see," said Miss Militia gravely, stirring her tea. "I have to ask ... did you know about it? Did you advise Flechette to see me when she did, or was it all her own idea?"

Amy put her cup down abruptly and tried hard not to laugh out loud. Hope smiled.

"Did I say something funny?" asked Miss Militia.

"Sort of," admitted Hope. "You see ..."

"Did you speak to Miss Militia about us before I went to see her?" asked Flechette. She sat side by side with Parian on a sofa; there was room enough for both of them, but they sat very close together, holding hands. The gesture almost had a touch of defiance about it; yes, we're holding hands, it seemed to say, and what are you going to do about it?
Both Flechette and Parian had taken their masks off to see Hope and Amy, and Hope fancied that there was a new life, a new spark in their faces.

Hope wasn't good with sexual signals, but they may as well have been shouting it from the rooftops; they were together, and that was it. End of story. The hand holding, the sidelong glances, the whispered endearments, the tiny touches and stolen kisses ... it all added up to that one thing. 

"No," said Hope. "I didn't think it was my business." She smiled. "It seems that you managed to get it sorted out all by yourselves though."

"Yes," murmured Flechette, "we did, didn't we?" She and Parian gazed fondly at each other, and shared a quick peck on the lips.

"Well," said Hope, standing up, "we won't keep you any longer. I'm sure there's things you need to be doing."

Amy stood also; something Hope had said seemed to strike her as very funny, and she was trying to hold in her giggles.

"You know," said Flechette, "this is all due to you, Hope." She pulled Parian close to her. "Sabah and me. Together. Here. We have you to thank for this."

Hope tilted her head. "But I just told you that I didn't speak to Miss Militia," she protested. "This was all you."

"Yes, we did this bit," said Flechette. "But earlier. You brought us together to fight the Merchants ..." She paused to gaze again at Parian's face. "That was our first kiss, then," she said softly.

"What, really?" asked Hope, a little surprised. "Wow. First team-up, first kiss. That's kind of romantic, actually."

Parian giggled. "We'd met earlier, and I knew I was attracted to her, and she knew she was attracted to me, but ..."

"But you didn't know she was attracted to you, and vice versa," finished Amy. She looked at Hope. "She's right, you know. You started this."

Hope blinked. "I guess ..." she said slowly.

"And then there was the fight against the Nine," Flechette went on. "We were both there, so that Parian was in the good books, and after I nailed the spider that tried to eat Miss Militia's face ...

"... she was much less likely to say no," finished Hope, comprehension dawning.

"And who caused us both to be there?" asked Flechette challengingly.

"I guess ... me?" said Hope.

"And Hope wins the prize," Flechette declaimed. Standing from the sofa, she dragged Parian forward and enveloped Hope in a hug. A moment later, Parian belatedly added her hug to the quota. Hope did her best to hug them both back; she managed, but only by using her wings.

And then Hope felt a third pair of arms go around her, from behind It was Amy, of course. Hope smiled and leaned her head back to rub against Amy's forehead.

"Hey, why are you in this hug?" asked Parian of Amy with a giggle.
“Because it’s Hope, duh,” replied Amy. “If anyone gets to hug Hope, I get to hug Hope.”

“Fair point,” conceded Flechette. She gave Hope an extra squeeze. “So Hope; thank you. I’m happier than I’ve ever been before, and it’s all due to you.”


Hope felt Amy’s arms tighten around her, and her voice whispered, "Thank you," from near the back of Hope’s neck. She didn’t bother asking what Amy was thanking her for; they had more than enough to thank each other for, covering the last few days.

It took a moment or two to disengage from the hug, and Hope had to wipe her eyes.

“What are you crying about?” asked Parian.

Hope sniffled back more tears. "I just love it when everyone's happy," she said with a wan smile. "I'm so glad for the both of you."

"Me too,” said Amy, but she suspected they didn't hear her; the two girls were in each other's arms again, looking into one another's eyes. "Come on," she murmured to Hope. "Let's get going."

Hope came along with her. "Bye!" she called out as they left.

Amy smirked. "Somehow I don't think they heard you."

"Why not?" frowned Hope.

Amy looked at Hope and blinked when she realised that Hope was serious. "Because they're probably already in bed again. Or on the sofa. Or up against the wall."


Amy nodded. "Really."

"But ... they would have done it once already, last night," said Hope, in the tones of someone working through a difficult logic puzzle. "Why would they need to do it again?"

Amy laughed out loud. "From the bags under their eyes," she confided to Hope, "they didn't do it just once last night. And I'd lay odds they didn't just sleep in this morning."

Hope shook her head. "Sex is weird," she observed. "I'm glad I'm not equipped for it."

Amy sighed. "Sometimes it doesn't help, even if you are," she admitted.

After listening to a somewhat edited version of their visit to Flechette and Parian, Miss Militia nodded. "So she thought you advised me. And I thought you advised her. " She smiled. "It is rather amusing, when seen in a certain light."

Hope nodded. "Oh, and I want to say that it was really nice of you to let Flechette go and be with Parian like that." Amy nodded in agreement.

"I'm sorry," said Miss Militia, her voice deadpan, "but I have no idea what you are talking about. I did nothing of the sort. Flechette has been assigned as a long-term liaison to the gangs of Brockton Bay. How she carries this out is up to her, but I certainly did not send her out to form a physical
relationship with anyone." One eyebrow raised. "That's my story, and I'm sticking to it."

Hope giggled. "I'm sorry," she said, sounding not at all sorry. "How could I have been so silly?"

Miss Militia gave what sounded suspiciously like a snort of laughter, then finished her cup and put it down. "As for why I asked you to be here; at the end of the week, the powers that be will be holding a ceremony to honour those who took part in the destruction of the Nine. They want to put up an obelisk with a series of commemorative plaques, with our names and what we did in the fight. Pictures too, apparently." She took a deep breath. "They want to use the actual location of the battle, in Skitter's territory. They want to place the stone itself on the spot where you grabbed Jack Slash."

Hope shook her head. "I don't recall where that was, exactly. I was traveling too fast, and Vista was shuffling space and distance like playing cards."

"It's okay," Miss Militia assured her. "Clockblocker had a helmet cam going. He caught quite a lot of the action." She sighed. "They also want a complete account of the entire battle. I'm correlating written reports with cam footage, but of course human memory is fallible, and not everything got picked up by the camera." She did not mention what she and Hope knew, that her own memory was picture-perfect – but she had been busy as well.

"Well," said Hope, "I can certainly speak to Skitter about using the area, and placing the obelisk." She smiled. "Her name's going to be up on it, after all." She paused, thinking. "How's the amnesty thing going? I'd really like it if this thing with the Nine has a long-term benefit other than just 'we beat the Nine; okay, back to normal'."

She leaned forward in her chair. "Look, I know the villain groups around Brockton Bay are all guilty of criminal activity. But I don't know that they had much of a choice. Some of the 'heroes' I have met are less than ... accepting of people like that. But if they had a chance to wipe the slate clean, show what they can do with a new start in life, integrate with the forces of law and order, without any sort of prejudice, who knows what good they can do?"

Miss Militia blinked. "It's true that some of our heroes were not always model citizens. But ... that's not my call. A lot of it depends on the Undersiders keeping their collective noses clean over the next few weeks. But I do know that the truce will extend at least up until the ceremony is done."

Hope smiled. "That's wonderful. I'll definitely speak to Skitter." She sat up. "Also, talking about the Nine. Has Doctor Manton woken up yet?"

Miss Militia nodded. "He's lucid, but he's still a bit debilitated. He's also a little bemused by the idea that he was dead for a while."

Hope nodded. "It affects people that way." She paused. "Is he ... able to be seen? Or still dangerous?"

Amy shook her head. "If he's still dangerous, then there were some problems with his brain that I never saw."

Miss Militia nodded toward Amy. "No, he's ... placid. Accepting. Polite and friendly."

"Oh, good," said Hope. "I was hoping I could speak to him and Bonesaw."

Miss Militia raised an eyebrow. "Really?" she asked. "What about?"

"Just –" Hope raised her hands, paused a moment, and dropped them again. "I want to hear what they have to say," she said after a long moment. "I want to hear their side of things. And maybe, just
maybe, once they hear my side of things, they might ... come good. Like Burnscar did." She smiled hopefully. "I really think Jack Slash had some sort of unhealthy hold over them, and now that he's gone, we might be able to help them get better."

"Well," said Miss Militia slowly, "that's not an entirely unwarranted suggestion." A smile quirked the corner of her mouth. "Although Director Piggot is likely to have kittens at the idea."

Hope considered. "I don't want her thinking I'm sneaking behind her back," she decided. "I might go and talk to her."

Miss Militia nodded. "That would probably be a good idea."
Chapter 59

Chapter Notes

This post contains the first of the real sexual themes in this story. It also got me banned for a month from Spacebattles.

The previous night:

Hope and Amy had done their rounds, greeting people and ensuring that everyone was healthy, mending any minor cuts and bruises and sprains that may have occurred during the day. The heating in the shelter had finally been repaired, so all that the bed required was a light sheet. Hope stood beside the bed and stripped off, folding her clothes neatly and putting them on the packing crate that served as a nightstand.

"You're going to sleep like that?" asked Amy, a little doubtfully.

"Sure," said Hope. "I'm not going to need them for warmth. It'll only cause wear and tear if I sleep in them anyway; I'll just put them on again tomorrow." She smiled at Amy. "And when I'm snuggling with someone, skin on skin feels nicer than clothes."

Amy blinked and considered that. She glanced around at the blankets still hung up to form a makeshift curtain around their sleeping space.

"No-one's gonna walk in," Hope assured her. "They know we're in here. People are learning to respect privacy, even when it's just a hanging blanket." She smiled. "I'm really pleased with the way this shelter is running. People are just nice to each other."

And you have no idea how much of that is your own influence, do you? Amy didn't articulate the question. She just smiled back at Hope and, feeling a flush of daring, stripped off her own clothes and folded them neatly on her own side of the bed.

They climbed into bed together, pulling the sheet over themselves and snuggling in warmly.

"Mmm," murmured Amy. "This is nicer."

"Told you," Hope replied, holding her close. "It doesn't have to be about sex. Being naked together is just plain nice, even when you're just snuggling."

Amy could not argue. Their embrace was definitely sensual, but in no way sexual. Hope had no erogenous zones, no body parts that caused embarrassment when accidentally nudged up against someone else. For Hope's part, she did not mind one way or another when Amy's breasts pressed against her, or when she slid her thigh between Hope's legs. As far as Amy could tell, Hope saw it as all body contact, plain and simple, and all equally pleasing.

And Amy had to admit that, although she had rarely shared her bed with anyone before meeting Hope, it was nice to be able to snuggle up without having the extra worry of a hand accidentally going there or touching that. Any way she wanted to cuddle was just fine with Hope. And if they traded the odd kiss or caress during that time, that was just showing affection, nothing more. Amy found herself appreciating that deeply.
They were relaxing into that warm state that preceded sleep when a thought that had been niggling at Amy finally roused her to speak.

"Hope?" she ventured.

"Yes, sweetie?" murmured Hope.

"What you said earlier, how you didn't mind me kissing Noelle's clone ... did you really not mind it?"

Amy pressed her face into Hope's shoulder. "I didn't want to hurt your feelings, really I didn't."

Hope raised herself slightly. In her drowsy state, her inner glow was damped down to a dim night-light level; enough to see by, but not enough to keep Amy from sleep.

"Has it really been bothering you?" she murmured. "That you kissed her?"

Amy held Hope tighter. "Mm-hmm."

"Oh, sweetie," said Hope softly. She slid her arm from under Amy's body, and sat up above her. "I love you; you do know that, don't you?"

"Yes," whispered Amy. "And I love you too."

"I know," Hope murmured. "And would you mind if I brought someone else into my bed, because they need for me to hold them?"

"I ... guess not?" Amy replied, a little doubtfully.

Hope smiled and leaned down to kiss Amy on the forehead. "I love you. I will always love you. And as long as you need me, I will be here for you. And if anyone else needs me, I'll be there for them too. But I will never stop being there for you as well."

She sat up again, her expression tender. "For me, loving you is all about making you happy. If you're happy, then I'm happy. And if you decided you'd be happier with someone else, if you wanted to kiss them, or sleep with them, or spend your nights with them and your days with me, or even marry them and move away, then I'll know that you're happier with them than you would be with me, and I'll be happy for you." To punctuate this, she leaned down and kissed Amy on the tip of the nose.

"And any time you wanted to come back, any time you wanted to kiss me, hug me, climb into bed and snuggle with me," she went on, caressing Amy's cheek and brushing back an errant strand of hair from her eyes, "you'd be welcome. Any time. Because I love you, and I just want you to be happy."

And she leaned down and kissed Amy on the lips. It was a warm, soft pressure, loving but not erotic. Just a declaration of unconditional love, of trust, of togetherness. Amy returned it, wrapping her arms around Hope and pulling her close.

It was not the same as the kiss she had shared with the clone. That had been a romantic kiss, with all the sexual overtones. That one had left her tingling all over, wanting to do more, go farther. This one ... didn't. Instead, it soothed her soul, gave her an inner peace. It did not demand anything from her; instead it gave ... everything.

Hope kissed Amy, and Amy kissed her back, and in that endless moment, the wounds in Amy's soul, so deep that she barely even recognised the pain any more, began to heal.

The kiss ended. Hope held Amy close. She felt Amy's shoulders shaking, felt hot tears running over
her skin. Recognising them for what they were, she merely held Amy close and caressed her softly, murmuring endearments until the girl fell asleep in her arms.

She lay awake a long time in the soft light of her own body, watching Amy as she slept, before she finally dozed off herself.

Hope and Amy got up quite early, and Hope flew them over to visit Flechette and Parian. On their return to the shelter, they found that breakfast had not yet been served, so they went back to their enclosed area for rest and quiet conversation. Hope skinned out of her clothes once more, and Amy stripped down to her underwear. They climbed into bed and lay in one another's arms as they spoke softly, the sheet covering them and the blankets muffling the sounds from the shelter around them.

"So sex is really that great, is it?" murmured Hope drowsily.

Amy smiled, her face up next to Hope's. It was oddly arousing to talk to Hope about this subject, about which Hope knew next to nothing. It was tempting to go just a little farther and show her. Her lips were right there ... it would be so easy to just give her a full-on lip-lock, to show her what it was like.

"It's like nothing on earth," she replied just as sleepily. "You have no idea."

"Got an idea from my dad," Hope mumbled. "Not sure I wanna know any more." Her eyes closed, and she drifted off for a while.

She awoke from a light doze to find Amy sitting up, smiling down at her. "Hi, sweetie," she murmured with a smile.

"Hi, yourself," replied Amy, returning the smile. She leaned down and kissed Hope on the forehead, the touch of her lips soft and tender and loving.

"Mmm," smiled Hope. "That's nice."

"I know," murmured Amy. She kissed Hope on the tip of the nose. Hope giggled.

And then Amy kissed Hope on the lips. Hope began to return the kiss, but Amy had other ideas. Go ahead, her libido urged her. Show her what it's like. She'll love it. And so, when she kissed Hope, it was firm and forceful and demanding. Hope felt Amy's tongue pressing at her lips, sliding between them into her mouth. And then a wash of sensation, a hot flush, swept throughout Hope's body. Searing ecstasy boiled though her body from scalp to toes and back again. She arched her back, crying out against the press of Amy's lips, as the sheer, blinding pleasure racked her body.

When it finally receded, she pulled back and stared at Amy with wide eyes.

"What was that?" she asked, breathless.

"That was what it feels like to have sex," Amy said with a shy smile. "I thought you should know what it's like. Why people enjoy it so much." Her expression changed as she saw the shocked expression on Hope's face.

"You ... made .. me feel that?" asked Hope, still catching her breath. "Like you made Glory Girl fall in love with you?"

"I ... I'm sorry," whispered Amy; tears ran from her eyes as she became aware of the enormity of her
action, the level of her betrayal of Hope's trust. "Oh god, I'm sorry." Blindly grabbing her jeans from where she had put them, she began pulling them on over her legs, babbling the words. "I'll go away now, let you be. I'll leave the shelter. You don't need to worry about me. You'll never have to see me again." Oh god, run away, why did I do that, get away, I've hurt Hope, I'm a monster, I just want to die ...

"Oh, shut up and get back here," said Hope pragmatically, reaching up and grabbing her arm. Blinded by her tears and hobbled by the jeans, Amy tripped and fell back on to the bed, on top of Hope. Hope wrapped her arms around her, and then her wings, to hold her still. As Amy struggled, sobbing, Hope kissed her gently, repeatedly, on her cheeks, her eyelids, her nose and her mouth. She only stopped kissing her when Amy stopped struggling and began to weep silently against Hope's chest.

Hope stroked her hair and spoke softly, reassuringly to her. "It's all right," she said gently. "It's all right. You don't have to go anywhere. You can stay right here with me. It's all right."

Slowly, her words penetrated to Amy's mind, and she raised her head to look tearfully at Hope's face. Hope smiled at her, and kissed the tip of her nose.

"How can it be all right?" Amy asked in a broken voice. "What I did -"

"Is done," said Hope softly but firmly. "I love you. This means that silly little things like that are forgiven, not held over your head forever and a day." She rubbed her nose against Amy's, still holding her close. "Just please, don't do that again without giving me some warning. I don't want to get confused between lust and love."

Ever so gently, she placed a kiss on Amy's lips. This was the same as the one they had shared the previous night; full of love and tenderness. Amy hesitated, and then returned it in kind. She felt tears burning in her eyes; she did not deserve someone like Hope. Someone who loved her, who forgave her, who would not reject her. No matter how hard her unconscious mind told her that she didn't deserve forgiveness.

Hope opened her wings from around Amy but kept her arms around her, holding her close. "I know you have urges," she whispered gently. "I know you have a crush on me. And I know you get confused and frustrated, because I don't do sex, but you feel attracted to me all the same, right?"

Amy nodded, not trusting herself to speak, lest she betray exactly how strong those feelings got at times. She blushed violently. "I'm sorry," she finally said, in a very small voice, still fighting back tears. "I'm such an idiot."

"Which means," said Hope briskly, ignoring her words, "that we're going to have to find a solution for you. We can't have you being all distracted by the sex thing. We need to get your head back in the game." She considered for a moment. "If Noelle were willing, we could visit the Travelers and ask her to create another clone of me for you."

"... no," said Amy reluctantly. "That would basically be using her for sex, and she's already in love with Trickster." She shook her head. "I know she said we could go to her for anything, but I want to save that for something important." She quirked a wry smile. "And besides, it wouldn't be you. It would be her. I'm not in love with your powers. I'm in love with you." It was the first time she had admitted it out loud, and saying so shocked her slightly.

"I know, I know," said Hope, giving her a sympathetic look. "But ..." She paused, thinking. "Maybe the answer's closer to home. I'm sure there's a nice boy or girl somewhere around in the shelter here who would not object to letting you take them to bed and do the sex thing with them." She smiled
Amy shook her head. "That could cause drama later on. If I did it with a single person, they might decide that they had a claim on me after that. And if I spread myself around, that would look bad on me, and that would reflect back on you." A sigh. "And once again, whoever it was would not be you." She grimaced. "It looks like I'm just gonna have to keep on keeping on."

Hope took a deep breath. "Not ... necessarily," she murmured. Amy looked up questioningly. Hope smiled at her. "I may not be equipped to have sex, or even get pleasure from sexual touching," she went on, "but I can certainly do things that give you pleasure, if you'll show me how. And it would make me very happy to do so, especially if it makes you feel better afterward." She deliberately placed her hand on Amy's bra-clad breast, and squeezed gently, suggestively. "Just ... no more of that thing you did, please."

Startled, Amy stared at her. "What – you – are you certain?" she stammered. This seemed to be following right in the tracks of her most lurid fantasies about Hope, and she could not help but wonder where the catch was.

"Of course I'm certain, you idiot," Hope replied fondly. "This will change nothing between us. I will still love you as dearly as I already do. You obviously want me, need me to do this for you, so here I am, offering." She leaned forward slightly, her expression one of polite interest. "Yes or no?"

Amy continued to stare, her mind in turmoil. On the one hand, she wanted this, oh god she most definitely wanted it. On the other hand ... this was Hope. The idea of her offering what she was offering ... have I influenced her with my powers without knowing it? Am I doing again what I did to Victoria?

Frantically, Amy tried to think back, to determine whether she had exerted her power, consciously or unconsciously, on Hope to make her do this. She could not be sure ... she didn't think she had ...

"Sweetie?" Hope's voice was patient. Amy was still staring at her, mouth half-open in shock. Hope sighed to herself. Any minute now, she's going to talk herself right out of it, and we'll be back on this merry-go-round again. Time to take action.

Leaning forward, she closed Amy's mouth with a firm kiss. This time, it was her tongue that intruded through, to delicately flick at Amy's tongue. Amy's eyes opened wide. After a long moment, she returned the kiss, with interest. She kicked the jeans off. The underwear followed shortly thereafter.

"I said, don't do that again!"

"Sorry, sorry, sorry." Amy's voice was apologetic.

Hope considered. "Well, okay, fine, you can do it one more time."

"mnnngkay."

Later, dressed, they sat at a table and ate the breakfast served to them.

"You've never done that before?" asked Amy in an undertone.

Hope shook her head. "Nope." She smiled at Amy. "It was interesting. Answered a lot of questions I had wondered about." Placing a fingertip on Amy's nose, she shook her head in playful rebuke. "But seriously, as I told you, I'm happy just from making you happy. I don't get sexually frustrated. I don't
need to feel the sensations."

Amy's eyes twinkled. "But they are nice, aren't they?"

Hope sighed, her eyes going unfocused. "That they are." She recovered herself and shook her finger firmly at Amy. "But no more. Sooner or later, we're going to be going our separate ways, for one reason or another, and I don't want to be dependent on you to give them to me. Understand?"

Amy nodded, then paused. "I could ... make it so ... you could do that without me."

Hope shook her head firmly. "That raises a lot of other problems. No, it's best that I chalk them up as a wonderful experience, but one that I don't need to repeat."

Amy shook her head in turn. "Wow. You've got a lot more self-control than me."

Hope grinned. "Nope. My body just doesn't have needs, that way. It was nice, oh god in Heaven it was nice, but so's chocolate ice cream, and so are hot showers. And if I can do without them, I can do without, well, that. And as for flying -- that sort of thing comes a distant second to flying any day." She smiled at Amy. "But if you promise not to do it again without warning me first, I can still ... help you out, when you need it." She giggled. "You look so funny when, you know, it happens. But I know you're enjoying it, so I like helping you get there."

Amy breathed deeply. "Oh god yes, I enjoy it," she murmured. "For someone who knew nothing about sex before this morning, you sure picked it up fast."

Hope shrugged. "I can feel what's happening to your body when I touch it. Pleasure's just another thing that happens. I can learn what works, and what doesn't. And practise makes perfect."

Amy blushed hotly. "Would you ... uhh ... would you let me, uh, help you practice some more?" she stammered. Lowering her head, she looked up at Hope shyly. "If you don't mind, that is," she added almost inaudibly.

Hope considered it. "Okay," she said thoughtfully. "We've got about an hour till we have to go see Miss Militia. We can ... practise some more, if you want." She smiled at Amy as she rose from the table. "But we're going to have to establish ground rules. I know you enjoy it, and it's fun for me too, but we can't go dashing off every time we have a moment of privacy. So if I say no, it means no. Okay?"

"Okay," agreed Amy promptly. She moved off first toward the curtained enclosure. Hope followed more sedately, greeting residents of the shelter, smiling and chatting to them as she went.

When she reached the 'bedroom', Amy was waiting for her, looking as though she was about to explode from repressed tension. Hope smiled at her and turned to pull the makeshift curtain closed. She felt Amy's arms close around her body from behind, caressing softly. Lips pressed to the back of her neck in a gentle kiss.

"Mmmm," she murmured, leaning back into the embrace. She turned within Amy's arms and held her close, their lips less than an inch apart. "One more thing," she breathed. "Don't do that thing to me, at least for this time, okay? It makes it very hard for me to concentrate on what I'm doing."

"Are you sure?" murmured Amy teasingly, reaching around Hope to unbutton her top. Hope shrugged out of it, letting it fall to the floor; she undid the buttons of Amy's shirt as Amy hooked her thumbs into the waistband of Hope's pants. With the buttons undone, as her pants slid off her hips and down her legs to the floor, Hope ran her hands around Amy's body under the shirt, caressing her bare skin, making Amy breathe harder.
Amy paused to exchange a lingering kiss with her lover as Hope stepped out of the pants; Hope returned the kiss as she had learned to do, sliding her tongue into Amy's mouth. She then assisted Amy with removing her jeans. "Well," she murmured against Amy's lips as the kiss ended, "maybe just one more."

*We both know she's going to push the boundaries on that,* Hope thought with an internal grin, *but she does so enjoy doing it to me, and we both enjoy me pretending to be severe with her after. And it does feel so very nice.*

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Hope was not particularly body-shy; sexually speaking, she had nothing to look at. But while merely she enjoyed the feeling of skin on skin as a tactile experience, Amy seemed to find the sensation of Hope's body moving against hers to be highly arousing, under the right circumstances. So when Amy proposed to strip her naked, the clothes came off.

Nor was she an expert with women's underwear, especially with bra straps, as she had never needed to wear one. However, she was a quick study.

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Hope loved Amy in an absolutely pure sense; she wanted to shelter her from harm, and wanted to make her happy. More specifically, she was doing her best to heal Amy's damaged psyche; the girl had voluntarily exiled herself from the only family she knew, then been rejected by the woman she loved and desired. Hope was working to give her stability, love, respect and friendship, and by doing so, help her toward accepting who and what she was, and moving beyond previous mistakes.

In the process, Amy had, perhaps inevitably, fallen in love with Hope; not with the perfect sexless body on the outside, but with the mind within. Therein lay two problems. The first was that Glory Girl had harshly rejected her in every way possible, when she was in a very vulnerable position. That had scarred Amy deeply. And the second was that Hope was not naturally a sexual being; she had no instincts in the matter.

The last thing that Hope wanted to do was to reject Amy as her foster sister had rejected her. She loved Amy deeply, and had no particular aversion to becoming her sexual partner – albeit on her own terms – if it helped heal those wounds. However, she had started this affair without much of an idea of how to do such things. Fortunately, Amy had taught her several things in the process of their last encounter, and she had picked up a few more on her own.

If Amy was to ever regain her centre, her self-confidence, she had to heal. Hope could only assist her in this; she had to take the lessons she had learned, and apply them as well as she could. The rest, the healing, the catharsis, was up to Amy herself.

"I said just *one* more!"

"Sorry."

"It's *nnnnngk ohgod ohgod* behave! Am I going to have to spank you again?"

"Oh, yes please!"

"Or not."

"Awwww..."
Hope's wings chimed rhythmically as they flew toward Protectorate headquarters. Amy was cradled in Hope's arms, a secret smile on her face. Hope leaned down, kissed her on the cheek, and said suspiciously, "What are you smiling about?"

The smile widened into a grin. "About you, this morning, wondering how Flechette and Parian could be wanting to have sex more than once."

Hope released a crystalline peal of laughter, warm and musical. "Oh god, was I naive." She giggled. "Well, question asked and answered, I guess."

Amy nodded. "Thank you for doing that for me, by the way. It was exactly what I needed."

Hope smiled and rubbed her head against Amy's. "You're welcome. Time?"

Amy wriggled around and showed her the watch on her wrist. Hope pursed her lips. "Well, we're going to make it, but only just. I hope you're satisfied."

Amy made a purring sound deep in her throat. "Mmm, yes."

Hope pretended a severe tone. "You were a very bad girl today. I told you not to do that thing to me, and you did it anyway. You need to be punished."

"Oooo ..."

"So tonight, we just snuggle. None of the other thing. You're just going to have to do without for the time being."

Amy smiled. Snuggling with Hope was very nice too. She could definitely settle for snuggling.

Hope smiled also. Amy was already more relaxed, self-confident, happier. She was beginning to heal.

You know, she thought, ever since my father, I always thought of sex as a thing to be avoided. A mental chuckle. Not that I ever had much chance of having any, once I got my powers. But ... with Amy, it's different. She's having sex, and enjoying the hell out of it. I'm just having fun, helping her to have sex, and enjoying that. And I know how she's feeling, and enjoying it, and she's doing that pleasure-thing for me, and that's really nice.

Hmm ... I guess this is the closest I'll ever come to having sex. And Amy's the only person who can do it for me. And I guess I'm the only one she wants to do it with at the moment ... huh.

It never occurred to Hope that what she was doing with Amy, as unprecedented as it was in her life, was also helping her in a very real way. Deep within her, repressed pain was starting to ease, scars were beginning to heal. She loved everyone, but she had not felt – had not dared to feel – true love for another human being, not since her mother had left, all those years before. Amy, with her need and her pain, had gotten under her skin, into her heart, and the unconditional love that Amy was returning to Hope was doing more for her than she would ever realise.

But all she knew – all she needed to know – was that what she was doing was helping Amy. And that was enough.
"Let me see if I have this straight," said Director Piggot, in a less than happy tone of voice. "You want to speak to Bonesaw and Doctor William Manton, on the basis that you may be able to reach them?"

"Well, yes," said Hope brightly. "I figured that as I had made some progress with Burnscar – how is she doing, by the way? – I might try with them as well."

Piggot sighed. "She's ... actually doing quite well, to be honest." She gave Hope a grudging nod. "Your talk with her had ... ongoing benefits. She's cooperative, if not actually polite, and ..." She paused. In the silence, Amy's phone beeped to indicate a text message. Amy dug out her phone and read it.

"And ...?" prompted Hope with an expression of polite interest.

"... and she has been asking to see you again," finished the Director with a scowl. "Apparently she thinks you're the only cape around here really worth talking to."

"That doesn't have to be the case," Hope replied with a twinkle of her eye. "All you have to do is just make a little effort." Amy tapped her on the arm. "Oh?"

"It's for you," said Amy with a frown. "I don't know that number."

Hope took the phone. "Excuse me, Madam Director," she said politely. She looked at the message.

TO HOPE: SHAKE HANDS WITH THE DIRECTOR. C.

She blinked, and checked the number. It wasn't one she knew either. But she thought she knew who the message was from. Handing the phone back to Amy, she turned back to Director Piggot. "Sorry," she said. "I'm having a strange day."

Piggot snorted. "Try walking a mile in my shoes," she commented. After a moment, she paused, considering. "But you know; it's not altogether a bad idea to see how Bonesaw and Manton react to you. You are very ... persuasive, when you want to be. And I've never seen even the slightest hint that you have used that ability for anything but good. And then there's Triumph."

"Oh, how's he doing?" asked Hope quickly.

Piggot gave her an expression which was almost a smile. "He's well. He sends his regards. And his power ... do any of your abilities affect other parahumans' powers?"

Hope blinked. What a strange question. Is she asking if I'm a Trump? "No, not that I have ever noticed, Madam Director. Why do you ask?"

Director Piggot smiled inwardly in satisfaction. She has that tell; whenever she blinks before answering a question, it means she was taken off guard by it. And there it is. She's telling the truth.

"Because his powers have ... improved. Slightly more effective, more under his control, more powerful."

"Oh," said Hope uncertainly. "Usually, people end up ... less, when I bring them back."

"Oh, he ruined his vocal cords with that last use of his power," said the Director. "He's going to
sound like sandpaper and gravel for the rest of his life. And we think his system was strained from overclocking his power like he did. But his powers are working better than they ever have before. Can you explain that?"

Hope paused. "When Vista and I had that encounter with the Siberian, Vista's powers improved in capability as a result. Could that be the case?"

Director Piggot shook her head. "That was when she overcame the Manton effect. This is different."

"Then ... no, I can't, Madam Director," confessed Hope. "I have no idea how that happened." She grimaced. "It's not something I'd want to experiment with."

"No, I can't imagine you would," murmured the Director. *Although some might,* she did not add. "Though that might also explain ..." She trailed off. Hope looked at her questioningly. "Never mind," she said. "But when you meet Doctor Manton, I'd like you to note for yourself anything out of the ordinary."

"Oh, okay," said Hope. "Wait, does this mean –" Her face lit up with a brilliant smile.

Director Piggot could not help but respond; her own smile was brief and grudging, but it was there. "Yes," she said. "I'm cutting orders now to allow you access to all three ex-Nine members. To be honest," she added, "you're the reason they are in custody, and you have had a very positive effect on Burnscar already, so it would appear to be a good idea to continue the experiment."

"Thank you, Madam Director," said Hope happily. "I will do my best not to disappoint you." Remembering the text message, she leaned forward and offered her hand across the desk. "I appreciate this, I really do."

Piggot looked somewhat startled, but took Hope's hand and shook it. "Just don't go hugging me," she said warningly. "I don't hug."

But Hope's eyes had opened wide. "Director Piggot," she said softly. "I didn't *know.*"

The Director frowned. "What, that I don't hug? It's not something to make a song and dance about."

Hope shook her head. "No, not that. You. Your health. I didn't realise it was in such a poor state."

"What do you mean?" snapped Director Piggot. "What are you talking about?"

"If you recall, Madam Director," said Hope, "one of my abilities is to directly observe the state of someone's health when I come into contact with them."

Piggot's eyes glinted dangerously. "And you just intruded into my privacy, just because you felt like it?"

Hope shook her head. "No, Madam Director. When I shook hands with you, the power activated. It does that unless I'm actively suppressing it. And I saw ... your kidneys, and your leg muscles." She frowned. "That's an old injury, isn't it?"

Director Piggot subsided with a sigh. "Yes, Hope. It's an old injury. Unfortunately, it's fully healed. And I have read your file; in fact, I wrote most of it. Your healing ability will do me no good whatsoever."

Hope glanced at Amy; Amy nodded. "But mine might just be able to help," she said.
Piggot frowned at her. "Amy Dallon, right? Previously known as Panacea?"

Amy nodded. "Yes, that's me. But I'm not using that surname either. I'm here to find out about my real name."

The Director rubbed her chin. "I think I recall the case. The Dallons took you in. Your father was ..."

"Marquis," supplied Amy. "But all I have is that name. I know he's in the Birdcage, but I don't know his real name." She shrugged. "To be honest, I don't need to. He's a criminal, he's in jail." A deep breath. "But I want to know what my real name is. I don't even know if it's Amy, or if that's a name my foster parents picked."

Hope put her arms around Amy and held her close; Amy rested her head on Hope's shoulder.

"We were going to ask for access to Marquis' file after talking to the three prisoners," Hope explained.

"I can give you that name right now, if you want," said the Director. "It will only take a moment."

"Talking about taking a moment," said Hope. "Amy was serious when she said she could fix your health problems. Do you want her to do that for you?"

"Just give me a minute, okay?" said Director Piggot in a distracted voice, as she worked at the keyboard. "Ah, here we are. Marquis ... family ... daughter. Ah." She looked up at Amy. "The name we have on file for you is Amelia Claire Lavere."

"Amelia Claire Lavere," repeated Amy softly. "That's my name."

"That's your name, sweetie," confirmed Hope, giving her a kiss on the cheek. She smiled at Director Piggot. "Thank you for that."

"It was no trouble, really," Piggot said dismissively. "Now, I'll get someone in to escort you to the prisoner level —"

"Madam Director," said Hope sweetly but firmly, "you did not answer the question."

"What question was that?" asked the Director, looking slightly hunted.

"Amy says that she can fix your health problems. Would you like her to do so?"

Director Piggot looked as though she really did not want to have to answer that question. "... is it safe?" she asked at last.

Hope nodded. "I've seen her work. She's very precise." Amy found her hand and squeezed it.

"Also," said the Director, "I understand that after years of claiming that she could not heal brain injuries, or do anything else with brains, she is suddenly able to do so." She fixed Amy with a hard stare. "Explain yourself."

"I – I –" stammered Amy, suddenly becoming flustered. She looked on the verge of tears.

"Because she didn't want people asking her to," Hope said, pulling Amy's face to her shoulder, and holding the girl close. One wing curved around protectively between Amy and the Director. Amy put her arms around Hope, holding her tightly. "The ability to alter someone's brain – literally change someone's mind – is powerful. Scary and powerful. She didn't want to have to deal with that when she first got her powers, so she said she couldn't. And the longer you stick to something like that, the
harder it is to go back on it." She stroked Amy's hair as the girl clung to her.

Director Piggot frowned. "It makes sense. Very well. What assurance do I have that Amy will not alter my brain, for instance, to make me more amenable to you and your long term goals?"

"Because I don't want to," said Amy unexpectedly, turning her head to face the Director. Her eyes were bright with unshed tears. "Like Hope said, it's too much power. Too easy to misuse. Too easy to go wrong. Even if you think it's a good idea, it might not be."

"You altered Doctor Manton's mind," Piggot pointed out.

"Hope asked me to, and she spotted me while I did it," Amy replied.

"Spotted ...?" queried the Director.

"Watched what she was doing," Hope clarified. She smiled. "It's much easier to make sure that no changes to the brain are made." Her wing quietly re-furled itself.

"I suppose," mused Director Piggot. "So, you say you can fix my health problems. Are there any preparations we need to make?"

Hope shook her head. "You give me one of your hands, and Amy the other. I'll watch what she does. It's always very interesting."

"And you'll make no changes without my specific permission?" Piggot pressed.

"None whatsoever," Hope confirmed. She disengaged from Amy, and took Director Piggot's left hand with her right, and Amy's right with her left. Amy took Piggot's right hand with her left hand, and the circle was complete.

A silver-blue pulse of light flared from Hope's hand to Director Piggot's. The Director jumped, startled. "What was that?" she asked, although she knew that none of Hope's abilities of that type were harmful.

Hope smiled apologetically. "Sorry; I do that as a matter of course. It was a pain blocker. Sometimes this sort of thing can be uncomfortable; you won't feel a thing."

"Oh," said the Director. "I see what you mean. My feet don't even hurt anymore."

Hope nodded, with a smile. "Exactly." She turned to Amy, who had a look of concentration on her face. "See what I mean?" she asked.

"Oh, yes," said Amy. "See there and there in her leg muscles? That's scar tissue. It's going to have to go." She frowned, all professional now. "Also ..." She leaned in and murmured to Hope.

Hope nodded. "Good idea."

"What are you two whispering about?" snapped Director Piggot.

"Amy made a suggestion," Hope replied. "I agreed." She nodded to Amy.

"Okay then," said Amy briskly. "I propose to regrow your kidneys, fix your leg muscles, improve your overall muscle tone just a little, and give you a slight boost to your metabolism. The first two will be permanent; the other two will wear off in about a week, unless you choose to start exercising."
"And it's that easy?" asked Director Piggot.

"Basically, yes," said Hope. "So, does Amy have your permission to fix your kidneys?"

"Uh, yes, certainly," said the Director, wondering if she were in the middle of a strange dream.

"Okay," said Hope. "And your leg muscles? Can Amy repair them, bring them up to scratch?"

Director Piggot nodded. "Certainly."

"The muscle tone-up?" asked Hope.

"I suppose so," replied Piggot.

"And the metabolism boost?" finished Hope.

Director Piggot nodded. "Yes, yes," she said impatiently. "When will you be finished? I have appointments."

Amy raised her head. "It's done," she said.

"What, already?" asked the Director. "Are you sure you did anything? I didn't feel a thing."

Hope smiled gently. "She was done before you said 'yes' the second time," she explained. "She is really very good at this. And the pain blocker is a good one."

Amy nodded and let go Piggot's hand; Hope did likewise, and gathered Amy into a hug, rubbing her hand gently in circles on Amy's back. "You now have," she said to the Director, "two brand new kidneys in full working order. Your leg muscles are free of all scar tissue. You will feel a bit stronger and more energetic than you have for a while, but unless you take up exercise, that will wear off in a week or so." She smiled. "It's up to you now."

Director Piggot nodded sharply. "I understand." She paused. "You won't be offended if I get myself checked out before taking what you have said on faith, will you?"

Hope raised an eyebrow. "Suit yourself," she said cheerfully. "But you'll feel silly."

"I'll take that chance," replied Director Piggot coolly. "In the meantime ..."

She pressed a button on her desk phone, and in short order, a PRT guard entered the room.

"This is Hope and that is Amy," she said briefly. "I'm sure you can determine which is which. They have authorisation to visit Burnscar, Bonesaw and Doctor Manton. Please show them every courtesy."

The guard nodded. "Yes, ma'am," he replied. Turning to Hope and Amy, he added. "Pleased to meet you. If you will accompany me ..."

They followed him from the room.

Once the door closed, Director Piggot stood up from the desk and walked experimentally around the room. She rose up on her toes, then dropped to a crouch. Kicking off her pumps, she dropped on to her hands and cranked out half a dozen push-ups before growing fatigue in her arms forced her to stop. Standing up again, she walked around the room slowly, kicking out each leg in turn, revelling in the flexibility, the looseness of her joints, the lack of pain in her leg muscles.
I can run, she thought. I can use a treadmill. I can jog.

Returning to her chair, she picked up the phone.

"I'd like to order a medical examination as soon as possible," she said. There was a pause. "Myself. And I'd like the results kept confidential." Another pause. "No, no particular concerns. I'd just like to have something cleared up." She smiled, an expression which would have astonished most of her subordinates. "Three o'clock? Excellent. Thank you."

The guard led Hope and Amy down to the detention level. Hope had been here before, not so long ago; she recognised the corridor with the "No Naked Flames" signs posted.

Burnscar was in slightly more comfortable circumstances now; her heavy manacles had been replaced by a pair of full-length gloves that strapped across her back; she could move her arms and use utensils, but she could not remove the gloves.

She was sitting at a table, watching a show on a pad when Hope and Amy were cycled through the airlock. When she saw who it was, she stood up immediately, a smile spreading over her face. "Hope!"

"Hi, Mimi," said Hope with an answering smile. She gathered the girl into a hug and kissed her on the cheek. "You're looking good. Are you doing all right here?"

Mimi hugged her back fiercely. "I've missed you. I'm doing okay. No long walks on the beach, but I can live without that." She held Hope at arms' length and stared searchingly into her face. "Did you get my message to Elle? And is it really true you killed Jack Slash? Is it true the Nine are gone for good?"

Hope nodded. "I told her your message. She seemed pleased to get it. And I didn't kill him, but I was there when it happened. And yes, the Nine have been defeated."

Mimi seemed to sag slightly with relief. "So he's really dead. Not just ... body missing, assumed to be dead?"

Hope grimaced. "He's as dead as a bullet in the back of the head will make a man. Miss Militia did the honours."

Mimi hugged her again. "Oh god, thank you for telling me that. No-one tells me anything concrete. All I get are snippets and rumours."

Hope held her tightly and patted her on the back. "It's all right," she murmured. "I'm told that everyone here's very pleased with you."

Mimi smiled wryly and wiped a tear away. "That's nice, I suppose. But I know that sooner or later they're gonna come and get me and I'll get a lethal injection or whatever they want to do to put an end to me." She put her head on Hope's shoulder. "When they do that ... can you be here for me? Please?"

Hope held her tightly. "Oh, honey ... of course I will. But they're not going to do that now, surely?"

"I'm a mentally unstable cape," said Mimi practically. "Any information I could have given them on the Nine is now irrelevant. Any fire anywhere near me is a weapon and an escape medium, and given the chance, I can generate fire myself. And the more I use fire, the more I want to use it. I go out of control. If I was them, I'd be planning to kill me, too."
"What if you weren't mentally unstable?" asked Amy, then looked surprised at herself.

"Huh?" said Mimi. "What do you mean?"

"She means," said Hope softly, "that if you really wanted to change, she could help you. But it's your choice." She looked over at Amy, one eyebrow raised. Are you sure about this?

Amy nodded, fractionally. Sure I'm sure.

"I ... you could do that?" asked Mimi uncertainly. "I've been through therapy before ... medications ... I don't think I want to do that again."

"It'd take about one minute flat," said Amy. "I'd need to have a good look at your mental structure, but whatever's triggering you, I could probably dial it back to controllable levels." She shot Hope an anxious look. "That's all right, isn't it?"

Hope nodded. "So long as Mimi says yes, and so long as the PRT says yes."

"Wait," said Mimi. "Who are you again?"

"I'm Amelia Claire Lavere," said Amy proudly. "They used to call me Panacea."

Mimi blinked. "I've heard of you," she said. "I didn't think you could fix brains."

"Long story," sighed Amy. "I don't do it to just anyone. Only for those people who really need help. And only when Hope says it's okay." She nodded toward Mimi, and touched her own face. "And I could get rid of those scars too, while we were at it."

Mimi looked startled. "Oh," she said.

Hope nodded consideringly. "If we did this, it would let you show a new face to the world. A new start. If you were okay with it."

Mimi sighed. "I'm gonna have to think about this, okay?" she said. "It's not something I can just jump into."

Hope nodded. "I understand," she agreed. "I'll be talking to the Director about it, too." She ruffled Mimi's hair. "Don't go doing anything silly in the meantime, okay?"

Mimi smiled and rubbed the side of her face against Hope's. "I'll be a model prisoner," she agreed. On impulse, she kissed Hope on the cheek. "Thanks for coming. Even if ... even if they won't let you do this, even if they do kill me, thank you anyway, for being here. For showing up. For helping."

Hope nodded, feeling tears in her eyes. "That's all right, Mimi. You be good now." She gave Mimi one last squeeze, then she and Amy entered the airlock.

Once they cycled back through, Hope turned to the PRT guards stationed at the cell. "You got all that, did you?"

The guards nodded. "Full video and sound," one confirmed.

"Please convey the recording to the Director as soon as it can be done," Hope said. "If we can fix her, then there will be no need to kill her. And I'd much rather we get the chance to do that before she's executed. Do that for me, please?"
The guard nodded. "I'll make sure it has a priority heading," he said.

"Thank you very much," replied Hope, with a brilliant smile. "I really do appreciate it."

"You're welcome," replied the guard, unbending enough to return her smile. "You have a nice day now."

"And you too," replied Hope, as their escort led them off again.

Now, let's hope our visits to Bonesaw and Doctor Manton go as smoothly ...
Chapter 61

The escort paused outside of the cell, where two guards stood watch. "Visitors for Bonesaw," he announced. "Hope and Amy."

The guard manning the security station nodded. "We've received the authorisation." He looked at Amy and Hope. "Both of you are going in?"

Amy looked dubious. "I don't know," she murmured to Hope. "She scares me."

Hope put her arms around Amy, and kissed her softly on the forehead. "It's all right," she whispered. "You don't have to if you don't want to." She paused. "But, if you don't, you'll never stop seeing her as scary."

Amy leaned her head against Hope's and sighed. "You're going to talk me into this, aren't you?" she grumbled softly. "And I'm going to end up thinking it's all my idea."

Hope grinned. "Nope. It's my idea. But you should face those things you are uncomfortable with. If you don't, you'll never get past them." She rubbed her forehead against Amy's. "I learned that from a very dear friend of mine."

Amy bit her gently on the tip of the nose. "You suck." Straightening her shoulders, she took a deep breath. "Let's do this," she declared.

Keeping their thoughts to themselves, the guards let them into the airlock.

Inside the cell, Bonesaw was ... less than Hope had expected. Straitjacketed, blank stare, rocking back and forth, humming atonally to herself. Even Amy was shocked.

Hope turned and pressed the intercom button to the outside. "What's going on here? Why is she like this?"

"I'm sorry, uh, Hope," came a voice from the outside, "but tests showed that she's brimming over with biotoxins and plague vectors. We can't just kill her, because that will release an airborne virus that could wipe out the city. So we have her jacketed and sedated so she can't self-terminate." A pause. "We're preparing a level five biotoxin zone to perform the surgery in, but that takes time."

"You have got to be kidding," said Hope flatly. "She's not sedated, she's *catatonic.*"

"That wasn't us," protested the guard. "She was like this when she woke up. And we already used enough sedative to knock out an elephant. We don't dare try anything else, or lower the dosage."

Hope clicked the intercom off and turned to Amy. "I don't believe this," she said. "Look at her; she's got to be twelve at most. Younger than Vista. How can they treat a child like this?"

"Uhh ... that child has murdered hundreds of people," ventured Amy. "Helped to murder thousands. And she terrorised me and my step-dad."

Hope nodded. "I know, I know. But this smacks of vindictiveness. We should be better than this." She took a deep breath. "I want to *talk* to Bonesaw. See what makes her tick. See if she's willing to change."
Amy looked at her dubiously. "I suppose," she said. "How are we going to do this? Another Manton job?" But even as she said it, her expression indicated how much she disliked the idea.

Hope shook her head. "That's only a last resort," she stated. "For now, let's just do what we did with Jack Slash."

Amy nodded. "I can do that. But not with this straitjacket in the way."

"So we take it off her."

It took a bit of doing. But with Amy holding Bonesaw's shoulders, Hope got the buckles undone, and they pulled the jacket off her, to find an extremely crumpled t-shirt underneath. Bonesaw looked at them dully, then started humming again, holding her arms around herself in a parody of the straitjacket.

Hope nodded to Amy, and they clasped hands, then each took hold of Bonesaw's hands. They gasped in mutual shock; Bonesaw's system was crawling with virulent plagues. Even a cut that released a single drop of blood would infect an immense area. Worse yet, she had implanted into herself so many devices both defensive and offensive that Hope wondered at her paranoia; fingertip firing darts, extending arm bones delivering flesh eating acids, and so much more.

She stood up and went to the intercom. "Uh, we're going to need a biohazard disposal container." She paused. "A big one."

There was a slight delay, and then a large plastic container with a secure sealing lid was passed into the airlock. Hope retrieved it, and went back to Amy and Bonesaw.

Amy went straight to work, neutralising the virii and other diseases that swarmed through Bonesaw's system. Several extraneous glands and organs that manufactured more plague were shut down and absorbed back into the body. After that, she began removing the massive modifications to the spinal cord, throat area, skull and skeleton. Weapons and defenses alike were also rejected by the body, to be replaced by ordinary flesh and bone. Hope was impressed; Amy was getting very good at this. As each item emerged from Bonesaw's flesh, Amy dropped it into the biohazard disposal container. By the time she was finished, there was quite a significant amount of material in there. Bonesaw looked noticeably thinner as a result.

Finally, Amy did a sweep of Bonesaw's system and purged all of the sedative from her body, including near-lethal levels secreted in some of her organs.

Riley felt the fog beginning to clear from her mind. The dream was coming to an end; rather, the nightmare.

... say goodbye ...

... goodbye, mommy ...

... be a good girl ...

She saw her mother's face as she died. It was an image that she carried with her as she awoke properly, which was strange, as she could never remember what her mother looked like normally. But she knew that the bad man Mr Jack had killed her ...

And then she awoke, and all of her memories came flooding in on her. And she recalled everything
that she had been doing in the years since her mother told her, with her dying breath, to be a good
girl.

And she knew that she had been doing anything but be a good girl.

Hope watched Bonesaw’s eyes coming alive again. The humming stopped. She focused, for the first
time since they had entered the cell.

"Hi," said Hope softly. "I'm Hope. How are you feeling, Bonesaw?"

Bonesaw looked at her, tried to form words, then finally spoke. "Hi, Hope." Her voice sounded
weary. "I'm tired, and hungry, and thirsty."

Hope smiled. "We can get you something to eat. What would you like?"

Bonesaw looked hopeful. "Pizza?"

Hope rose, and went to the intercom. "Excuse me; could I please have a pizza delivered here?"

There was silence, then one of the guards replied. "I'm sorry, could you please repeat that?"

"Pizza," repeated Hope patiently. She looked over her shoulder. "Toppings?"

"Supreme, with double everything," Bonesaw declared, with more animation than she had shown a
moment ago.

"Supreme, with double toppings," Hope relayed.

Another pause. "Where are we going to get a pizza from at short notice?"

Hope raised an eyebrow, although she didn't know if he could see her. "What would your Director
say if you asked her that?"

"She'd say, use your initiative." There was a pause. "Oh."

Hope smiled. "Thank you. And some cold water, if you have some."

There was relief in his voice. "That we can do."

"Thank you very much," replied Hope. She went back to where Amy still faced Bonesaw. Neither
had spoken to each other.

Hope settled down on the floor next to Amy, taking her hand and giving it a gentle squeeze. Amy
squeezed back, but never took her eyes off Bonesaw.

"So, Bonesaw –" Hope cut herself off. "I'm sorry, what's your real name? It feels silly to call you
Bonesaw."

"I'm Riley," whispered the girl. "My name is Riley."

Hope smiled. "Well, Riley, I'm pleased to meet you. My real name's Hope too. It makes it easier to
keep track. And I think you've met Amy."

Riley nodded. "Panacea, right?"

Amy shook her head. "Not Panacea any more, thanks to you." Her voice was just a little curt.
Riley nodded and managed a wry smile. "And I won't be Bonesaw much longer, thanks to you, so I think we're fair."

"What do you mean?" asked Hope.

"You took all the stuff I had inside of me out," replied Riley, pointing at the biohazard container, with all of the items that had been extruded from her body sealed inside of it. "That means you fixed the diseases I had inside of me. So now they can execute me." She gave a helpless little shrug, and Hope's heart melted.

"Oh, sweetie," said Hope softly. She let go Amy's hand and reached up to gather Riley in her arms. Riley accepted the embrace, settling on Hope's lap as Hope's arms went around her. The tension gradually eased out of her, and she closed her eyes as she snuggled up to Hope.

Hope rubbed her cheek on the top of Riley's head. "Can you answer something for me, Riley?" Her voice was soft and restful.

"Sure." Riley's voice was drowsy.

"Why did you do ... all that you did?"

There was a long pause. "Because Mr Jack told me it was a good idea."

"That's Jack Slash?"

There was the faintest hint of tears in Riley's voice now. "Yes. He showed me why nothing mattered."

Hope rocked her gently from side to side, her arms holding her securely, her voice soothing and gentle.

"How did he do that, sweetie?"

The hint of tears was stronger now. "He killed my family. I saved them. He killed them again. Every time I saved them, he killed them again. Until I realised that I was being stupid, that there was no sense in trying to save anyone. Jack showed me that there's no good or bad, just doing fun things." Her voice broke. "Mommy told me to be a good girl."

"Oh, sweetie ..." Hope rocked her a little longer. Amy could see that there were tears starting in her eyes now as well.

"You do know that Jack Slash is dead, right?" This was Amy, interjecting.

Riley looked up at her, tears running down her cheeks. "Really and truly?"

Hope nodded, smiling at Amy. "Really and truly. I held him down and Miss Militia shot him in the head."

Riley took a long breath, then let it out. She didn't speak. But just a little more tension seemed to ease out of her body.

"So do you think Jack Slash was right, after all?" Hope asked her softly.

"I don't know what to think," Riley admitted. "I don't want to think he was right, because I don't want him to be right. And I don't want to think that he was wrong, because that means that I've done so much —"
She broke off, sobbing. Hope held her, murmuring gently, rubbing her back in slow circles. Amy watched, intrigued.

She was still crying when the pizza arrived, along with a jug of cold water and some plastic cups. Hope held her, while Amy collected the refreshments.

As Amy put the pizza and the jug down on the floor, Riley's sobs trailed off. She looked at Amy.

"I'm really sorry for what I did to you," she said. "It felt right at the time, but it was wrong, I know that now."

"I, um," said Amy awkwardly. "It's, um, okay. I guess. I'm in a good place now, so I guess. I, um. It could be worse. A lot worse." She stopped talking. Hope reached out and took her hand. Amy squeezed her hand back.

"I've done bad things," said Riley soberly. "Lots of bad things. I've hurt people." She opened the pizza box and took out a slice, staring at it. "You know this, and you got me pizza. How can you be so nice to me?"

Amy shook her head. "Don't look at me. I ask myself that same question every day."

Hope smiled at her over Riley's head. "It's easy," she said. "I love you. I love everyone. Everyone deserves a second chance." She nodded to Amy. "Pour me a drink, please?"

Riley took a bite of pizza as Amy poured the cup of water. "Mmmm, pizza," she mumbled. She took another bite, and another, pizza sauce staining her lips as she demolished the slice. Hope accepted the cup from Amy and took a drink; it was refreshing and cold. Riley ate a second slice, and then poured herself some water and gulped it down greedily.

Riley paused, halfway through her third slice. "Can I ask you a question?" she said to Hope, leaning back against her comfortably.

Hope rested her chin on top of Riley's head. "Sure thing, kiddo," she said fondly.

"Did you give Jack Slash a second chance too?"

Hope nodded soberly. "I tried," she said quietly. "He told me he'd rather kill the world."

Riley sighed sadly. "Sounds like him." She paused. "And then Miss Militia shot him in the head? And he really truly died?"

Hope nodded, her cheek rubbing against the side of Riley's head. "Yes. He died. I checked."

Riley's hands had begun to shake uncontrollably. "Good. I'm glad. He was a monster. He made me into a monster. He made me like it."

She dropped the slice back into the box, leaned over and abruptly threw up. Part of it was the pizza; the rest consisted of whatever food she'd eaten in the last few days. Some went on the floor, some on to Hope, where it slid off, and some on to Hope's clothing. She kept heaving, straining, until there was nothing but bile coming out.

Hope did not move, did not recoil. She held Riley's hair out of the way until she was finished throwing up, then cradled her gently. Riley asked for a cup of water to rinse her mouth out, and then Hope had to hold it for her. The spasms had become fits of racking, tearing sobs that came up from
the depths of Riley's soul.

"Just hold me," she whimpered between sobs. "Oh god, please hold me."

And Hope held her, while the sobs ran down into nothing, and Riley relaxed into an exhausted sleep, still cradled in her arms. Amy got up and moved the pizza box, and went to the airlock. It failed to cycle.

"Guys?" she called out. "We've got a spill to clean up in here."

"Sorry," the reply came back. "She's the most notorious bio-Tinker in the world. God only knows what she just threw up on you. You're staying put till we get a full decontam team in there."

Amy sighed. "Oh, for crying out loud," she muttered, then raised her voice again. "Contact the Director. Tell her it's Amelia Claire Lavere. Tell her I said I gave Bonesaw a class-A clean-up before she ever threw up. Trust me, guys, the worst thing on that floor is the *e coli* that used to be in her gut." She glanced over in Hope's direction. "Eww, and whatever you were feeding her before we got here. That stuff's *gross.*"

There was a long pause. "We'll relay your message to the Director. Stand by."

Minutes passed; Amy went and sat next to Hope for a while. Then the airlock clicked.

"You're clear to come out," the same guard told her. "Sorry about the delay."

Muttering to herself, Amy climbed to her feet, and made use of the airlock. She came back with a bucket of hot water and cleaning cloths.

Carefully, meticulously, Amy cleaned up the splatters of vomit from the floor, then sponged off Hope's clothes where they had been splashed. Then she dabbed at the spots that had landed on Riley's clothes.

Hope leaned up and gave her a peck on the lips. "Thank you for being here," she said softly. "I don't know how you do it, I really don't," Amy replied. "For what did to me and my dad, for what she's done to other people, I'd let her suffer. You ... don't." She smiled fondly down at Hope. "You make me want to be a better person. I can only try to meet your example. I don't always succeed."

"Well, I love you anyway," Hope told her with a cheeky grin. "You're a wonderful person in your own right, you know. You don't have to work at being me. Just be you."

"I've been trying to be me for some time now," Amy commented as she took the bucket and cloths into the airlock. "Somehow I can't seem to make it work."

When she returned, she sat down beside Hope and put her arm around her shoulders. Hope leaned into her with a smile. Riley was sleeping soundly in Hope's lap, curled up in her arms.

"So," said Amy after a while, "as cute as this particular mass murderer is while she's asleep, are we going to cradle her while she gets her eight hours, or do we not have other things to do?"

Hope giggled and rubbed her head against Amy's. "You're right, of course," she said. "Help me get up. I think my legs have gone to sleep."

So with Amy's help, and her own wings for support, Hope climbed painfully to her feet. Her legs had indeed gone to sleep. The pins and needles of returning circulation made her wish she knew
Carefully so as to not wake Riley up, she placed the sleeping child on the thin mattress which was all the cell offered for such amenities. Riley mumbled a sleepy protest, but then curled up and seemed to drop back into deeper slumber after Hope kissed her on the cheek. Picking up the straitjacket and the biohazard bin, they passed out through the airlock for the last time.

"Don't worry about prepping that surgery, guys," Hope said briskly. "Amy took care of it. It's done. She's no longer a biohazard."

"Unless you count projectile vomiting," put in Amy dryly.

"Amy!" Hope tried to sound shocked, but the giggle ruined it. "That's mean."

"Well, given that the Director signed you off on that," said the guard, handing off the straitjacket to his colleague, but accepting the bin very carefully, "I'll take your word for it."

Hope smiled. "Thank you." She looked toward the escort. "I believe it's Doctor Manton next, yes?"

Doctor William Manton was housed in what could almost have been a hospital room; there was a bed, and chairs, and a machine beside the bed. No cords were attached to him at the moment, but a nurse was fussing over the placement of his pillows.

Two guards were standing outside his door, and another guard down the end of the hall kept a close watch on a series of CCTV screens. Beside his hand was a very large red button.

The PRT guard escorting them stopped outside the door, and exchanged pleasantries with the guards on duty there.

"Two visitors to see you, Doctor Manton," one of them reported via the intercom. Manton looked up; he obviously could not see through the window from his side, but he raised a hand and waved an assent. The door clicked and hissed open, allowing Hope and Amy to enter.

Closer to, William Manton looked a little older and greyer than the last that Hope had seen him. Of course, he had been dead for part of that time, so her memory may have been playing tricks with her. She looked for, and found, the silvery mark of her lips, up near his hairline.

"Hello, Hope," he said in a pleasant baritone. "I'm pleased to meet you. I understand that I owe my presence – both here, and in the land of the living – to you."

Hope blinked, somewhat taken aback. He was actually charming; downright friendly, in fact. He also seemed to be fully aware of what was going on. For some reason, she had expected some level of confusion, a lack of full comprehension. He didn't even seem to be sedated.

"I – I'm glad you're taking it so well," she replied with a smile.

"Of course I'm taking it well," he replied with a return smile. "I'm not quite the man I once was, but now that my head is clear, I can do good in the world for once. Balance out some of the evil that I have done." He looked beyond Hope, toward where Amy stood near the door, as if ready to bolt. "And this would be the lovely Panacea, yes?" he asked.

Amy nodded sharply. "I don't use that name any more," she replied. "But yes, that was me."

"Ah, I'm sorry," Manton replied. "What I am trying to say is, I understand that you are the one who
Amy's head jerked up, and she looked hunted. Hope took a step back, and put her arms around the girl. "Yes?" managed Amy.

Manton nodded. "I appreciate it, I really do. You have done me a great favour." He smiled. "Two great favours. One, I know what is important in life now. That is, helping people rather than harming them. And two, you have reunited me with my daughter as she truly was."

Hope and Amy looked at him, puzzled. He gestured toward the nurse. Hope looked at her properly for the first time, letting her senses spread out. A cold jolt of fear ran through her. There was no life-spark where the nurse stood. Her hair, tied back in a sensible pony-tail, was snow-white. And her eyes ... were the eyes of the Siberian.
Chapter 62

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Hope froze. Amy clutched at her arm, fingernails trying very hard to dig into her skin.

_The Siberian is right there, not two yards away_, thought Hope distantly. _Why are we not dead yet?_ She could feel her heart hammering in her chest. She could feel Amy's heartbeat, thudding away next to hers.

The 'nurse' stepped forward, holding out her hand. "I'm pleased to meet you, Hope," she said in a warm contralto.

Hope blinked. This did not sound like the opening to any murderous attack she had ever heard of. As her whirling senses tried to make head or tail of the situation, she began to pick up details that had previously escaped her.

Apart from the white hair and the eyes, the 'nurse' looked entirely normal; her skin featured a normal flesh tone, lacking any stripes, on her face and hands, at any rate. And she was speaking; the file Hope had read on the Siberian had specifically mentioned that she had never been heard to speak.

_Als_ _o, the guards would not have been so relaxed if she was overtly dangerous_, she realised belatedly. _Still, I could have done without that shock._

Gingerly, Hope extended her hand and shook the Siberian's hand. Her grip felt warm and strong, but not a bone-crusher. "Um, likewise?" she ventured. "You, uh, look different from the last time I, uh, saw you."

The 'nurse' gave her a wry smile. "I'm sorry;" she said. "I know what happened then, but I don't remember it as if it happened to me. Who I am now has changed from who I was then." Her smiled widened. "As you can see, I prefer to wear clothes now, and I'm the right age as well."

"Hope, Amy," said Manton, "I'd like to introduce you to my daughter. She –"

"- isn't really his daughter," interjected the 'nurse' with a smile. "He's just projecting on to me everything he recalls about her, so of course he sees me as such. But I'm not, really."

"I ... see," said Hope. Her arm went back around Amy. "And this change ... is the result of ...?"

"Some much-needed brain surgery, from what I understand," commented Doctor Manton. He smiled at Amy, who was still almost frozen in place. "Her previous manifestation brought out certain unpleasant aspects of my personality at the time that I triggered. Those aspects have been greatly altered." He considered. "I suppose I am a different man; however, from what I recall of my previous life, who I was then is no great loss."

He grimaced. "I think he ... I ... could not choose whether to manifest her as my daughter or my wife, and as for the rest of it ..." His voice trailed off, then he began again. "You see, my daughter loved skiing when she was young; she was quite good for her age group. We used to call her 'snow tiger' as a kind of nickname. I suppose that when I triggered, the manifested form took the tiger motif and ran with it."

"Which is what I call myself," said the 'nurse'. "I don't want to be called the Siberian any more, and
"I'm not going to call myself by his daughter's name, because I'm really not her, so I'm Snow Tiger now."

"Wow," said Hope, still stunned at how well Amy's ad hoc brain alteration had turned out. *I suppose it would have been just plain embarrassing if he had manifested someone looking like me.*

"Okay," said Amy, from within the circle of Hope's arms. "You're all friendly and that, and your ... Snow Tiger actually looks like a real girl, Gepetto. But no matter how nice you are, no-one gets trusted immediately around here – not even Hope. So what's this ... open prison sh*tick thing? Please tell me there's more to security than two guys outside."

Manton nodded gravely. "Your concern is understandable." He pointed toward the foot of the bed. "Around my left ankle is quite a substantial electronic cuff. Within it are reservoirs of a powerful sedative; if I do anything my jailors don't like, or if Snow Tiger even attempts to pass the boundaries of this room, I will be in dreamland in a very few seconds."

He tapped his belly. "And around my waist is a belt containing a shaped charge, designed to blow me into two very messy halves if Snow Tiger attacks anyone, or makes an escape attempt with me. They have three guards watching me around the clock; one on site, and two in undisclosed remote locations."

Hope frowned. "How do you know all this?" she asked. "Some of that I imagine you could have figured out, but other parts would not strike me as being particularly obvious."

Doctor Manton shrugged. "They told me, of course. Of course, I don't know if all of those details are correct, but it would be definitely convincing enough to give me pause if I were considering escape."

"And there are probably other safeguards in place that they didn't tell you about," replied Hope, with a nod.

"And there is that too," he acknowledged. "Which I understand and accept. I ... have done too much, hurt too many people, to be even given the slightest hint of the benefit of the doubt."

Amy tilted her head. "Okay, I understand that you're nicer now, and not about to flip out and kill us all. But ... clothes? And talking? How does that figure? What I did ... I didn't ..."

Manton shrugged. "And there you have me," he admitted. "Perhaps she could always have worn clothes, but I wanted her to be naked to the world. Which," he added wryly, "says nothing good about who I used to be. And as for speaking ... she could always speak. It's just that ... I didn't do it very often."

"Wait a minute," said Hope. "Previously ... the Siberian ... were you controlling her? And are you controlling Snow Tiger, now?"

Manton nodded. "I was, yes. She was basically a puppet under my control. Tiger here ... not so much. I can control when she manifests, but what she wears, and how she acts, has more to do with how I remember my daughter than with my conscious wishes."

"So why the hospital bed?" asked Amy. "Or is it just a way of keeping you in one place? Sedation?"

Manton shook his head. "Not really," he admitted. "I have ... spinal problems. My legs ... I can walk, but with great difficulty. Snow Tiger has to help me move around. Mostly I use a wheelchair. But if I sit up for extended periods of time, it causes excruciating agony."

He nodded to Amy. "But yes, that was a good guess. I am on a mild sedative, and an antidepressant.
Mainly so that when I start remembering what I used to be like, what I used to do, I don't attempt suicide. Again."

Snow Tiger sat in the chair beside his bed, and took his hand in hers. "The first time he tried was the first time I manifested, and stopped him in time," she explained. "The guards were most surprised. But I won't let him," she added fiercely. "We can help people. We can do good in the world."

Amy was looking from Hope to Snow Tiger and back; she could see echoes of one in the other. But she said nothing.

"We could ... maybe fix your spine?" ventured Hope. Amy stirred, in the circle of her arms, but still did not speak.

Manton shook his head. "I appreciate the offer, but no thank you," he said softly. "Snow Tiger, and my jailors, won't let me punish myself in the only appropriate way I can think of, no matter how much I ask them to let me do so," he turned his head to smile fondly at his faux daughter, "so I choose to accept the pain as some level of penance for my deeds."

Amy frowned. "So ... where do you go from here?"

"That ..." said Manton quietly, "... is classified. Sorry. But Alexandria came in and had quite a long chat with me. I am being kept alive and in good health just so long as I assist the PRT with certain goals. Once those are complete, if they are ever complete, I will be taken off the medications, and allowed to seek my own end." Or, he didn't have to say, they will do it for me.

Hope nodded. "Well ... okay." She paused. "I expected ... when I came in here ... that you would need help from me. But ... you don't." Another pause. "I'm glad."

Manton nodded. "I appreciate the sentiment," he told her. "And the visit. And I am pleased to be able to thank you in person for doing what you have done. And you too, Amy," he added. "If it were not for you two, I would not be able to speak with my daughter now."

"I keep telling you," said Snow Tiger fondly, "I'm not really your daughter."

"You are to me," he replied with a smile. "If you were truly a construct of my mind and nothing else, would you be arguing with me right now?"

Hope tilted her head to Amy, and nodded at the door. Amy nodded back, and reached back to press the button beside the door handle. The handle clicked, and the door opened slightly.

"Well," said Hope, "goodbye, and good luck with whatever you do."

Snow Tiger waved, and Manton managed an absent, "Bye", before they fell back to their amicable bickering. Hope and Amy eased out the door and closed it behind them. Hope took several deep breaths. Amy was shivering violently.

"That was ... is there a word for really creepy and really sweet, at the same time?" asked Hope, holding Amy tightly.

"If there isn't, there should be," Amy replied, returning the embrace. "I can't believe you shook hands with her ..."

"I didn't have much of a choice," Hope pointed out. "She was being polite. I couldn't very well refuse."
Amy nodded reluctantly. "Can we get out of here now? I want to go someplace else. Anyplace else."

"We can definitely do that," agreed Hope. She kissed Amy tenderly on the forehead. "Let's go get ice cream."

"Ice cream is good," agreed Amy.

The PRT cafeteria had ice cream in several flavours. Hope ordered a bowl of chocolate ice cream, and Amy settled down with a vanilla strawberry swirl sundae. Some little time passed, as they worked on their respective treats.

Passing PRT staff stared at them, but no-one accosted them.

"You know what I love about you, Hope?" said Amy at last, stirring the melting remnants of her sundae together with the spoon.

Hope looked up, giggled, and reached across to maneuver a glob of cream from Amy's cheek into her mouth. Amy opened her mouth to accept it, and sucked on Hope's fingertip for a moment. "Mmm," she said softly.

"Um, no, what?" asked Hope, reclaiming her hand with a smile.

"I love that you don't ... push me," said Amy. She took hold of Hope's hand and held it in both of hers, her sundae forgotten. "You don't try to force me into your expectations. You don't hold expectations over my head and make me try to guess what they are. You don't hold back approval because I'll never be what you want. And you do things that I want, that really don't matter to you one way or the other, just to make me happy."

Hope put down her spoon and took hold of Amy's hands. "Sweetie," she said softly, "I love you. I don't hold any expectation of you, except to do what you think you need to do. To me, loving you means that I support you and make you happy. All I want of you, is for you to be yourself, and not some mixmash of what other people expect you to be. Because to try to meet everyone's expectations only means that you will meet no-one's expectations, and you will end up exhausted and hurt and not even meeting your own expectations." She smiled. "And you're wrong when you say that those things we do don't matter to me. They matter very much, when they make you happy."

Amy rose, ignoring the remains of her sundae. "Can we ... go?" she asked. "Back to the shelter? Because I really, really want to snuggle." She met Hope's eyes. "Not the other thing. Just to snuggle."

Hope nodded. "We can do that," she agreed. "I kinda want to snuggle too. There's some things that only a good cuddle can help with."

They lay, comfortably entwined, under a light sheet, on the camp bed. Their heads were side by side on the same pillow, mere inches apart. Hope kissed Amy gently on the tip of the nose. "I love you," she whispered.

"Mmmm," Amy replied. "I just wish I could love you as much as you deserve."

"How do you mean?" asked Hope.

Amy pulled back slightly so as to look her directly in the face. "I know that you like to go out and help people, all the time. But here you are, spending time with me, holding me, comforting my silly
fears, instead of going out and healing people in hospitals or something. I know that you should be out there, but because I need you, you're here with me." Tears welled in her eyes. "God knows I feel guilty enough about that already, but I can't help feeling grateful that you are here with me, instead of out there."

Hope pulled her into a tight embrace. "Oh, sweetie," she said softly, "I know there are people out there who need help. There will always be people who need help. If I help someone on one side of town, someone on the other side of town might be dying, and I can't help that."

She rested her forehead against Amy's. "But if I go out there and push myself, every hour of every day, then I will just burn myself out. Everyone needs a rest. Everyone needs to unwind. Everyone needs to de-stress, have fun, do something silly." She kissed Amy very tenderly on the lips; Amy shivered. "And if they are very lucky, have some fun snuggle time with someone they love very much."

Amy was shivering more violently now, her body shuddering spasmodically. Hope held her tightly. "Sweetie? What's the matter?"

Amy held her tightly. Her voice was thick, choked with tears. "You have ... no idea ... how long ... I've waited ... to hear ... that from ... someone ... anyone."

Tears were beginning to spill from her eyes. Hope held her, murmured softly, encouragingly. Amy went on. "I've tried ... so hard ... to be ... the best ... to deserve praise. But everyone ... expected more ... and more ... from me ... no matter ... how hard ... I tried."

"I know, sweetie, I know," murmured Hope, stroking her hair. She kissed away Amy's tears. "You've been under such a strain. But you're not any more. You don't have to live up to unreasonable expectations any more. You don't have to do what you don't want to do. All you have to do is be yourself."

"But I don't know how to be myself!" wailed Amy. "I've never been myself! I've only ever been what other people expected me to be!"

"Well," said Hope softly, "I think it's about time you started learning who Amelia Claire Lavere really is." She smiled. "I've met her a few times, when you weren't paying attention, and I quite like her."

"But I -" began Amy.

"Hush," said Hope softly. With an abrupt motion of one of her wings, she flicked the sheet off them both; Amy gasped at the sudden touch of cool air on her naked body. Hope pushed her on to her back and straddled her; taking control of Amy's wrists, she pinned them up over her head. Her wings, with a gentle crystalline murmur, unfurled to cover them in a glittering tent. In the shelter of her wings, Hope smiled down at Amy. Amy wriggled, enjoying the feeling of being deliciously helpless to Hope's whims.

Hope leaned down, brushing her lips across Amy's, featherlight, teasing. Amy whimpered. "Please ..."

Hope raised an eyebrow. "Please what?" She leaned down again while Amy whispered in her ear. Both eyebrows rose this time. "What, really?"

Amy nodded. Hope considered. "Okay," she said with a grin. "We can do that."
"Well, doctor, what's the prognosis?"

The medic paused. "Director Piggot, I'm not sure how to say this ..."

She felt a chill pass through her. *Something went wrong.* But she did not let it touch her voice. "Tell me," she snapped, her voice edged with steel.

The medic shook his head. "I simply do not know how to explain this. Your kidneys have regenerated entirely; they are now fully functional. Blood scans show toxins at acceptable levels. Your legs are also in good shape. The best possible shape, in fact, for a person of your age and level of physical fitness." He gave her a wondering stare. "In fact, you're looking healthier than I have seen you in some time." A pause. "What happened?"

She pursed her lips. "Hope is what happened. Hope, and her friend Amy. Previously known as Panacea. But you do not repeat that to anyone, do you understand?"

He nodded. "You do realise that this is going to have to go into your medical file."

"Do what you have to, doctor," said Director Piggot. "Just don't advertise the fact."

He nodded. "As you say, ma'am."

"Good." She paused. "So I am cleared to exercise, and lose weight?"

The doctor nodded, looking mildly surprised. "I had already presumed you were, but certainly. Don't overstrain yourself, but your legs can definitely take a normal exercise regime now."

He was surprised at the smile she returned to him. "Thank you, doctor."

Amy flopped back on to the bed, gasping for breath and staring blindly at the ceiling. She was coated in sweat from head to toe; her hair straggled in sodden strands across her face and the pillow. Hope snuggled up to her, holding her close, enjoying the second-hand feeling of her satiation.

"Ohmygod," Amy panted. "Ohmygod. Ohmygod." She turned her head to stare at Hope's serene face. The only hint that Hope had been exerting herself was the fragrance of jasmine in the air. "Where the hell. Did that come from?"

"What?" said Hope innocently. She nuzzled Amy's face, kissing her on the cheek.

"That thing that you did. Just before. You know."

"Oh, that?" said Hope. "That was just a variation on something else you showed me. Did you like it?"

"Guh," groaned Amy. "Ohmygodyes." She mustered a smile. "You're amazing, you know that?"

Hope kissed her lovingly on the forehead, then embraced her closely again. "How do you mean, sweetie?"

"I mean that I would never have initiated that, not this time, not as tense as I was feeling, but you did, and it was amazing. And oh my god, it was just what I needed. And you don't even get that much out of it."

"And that," said Hope softly, "is where you're wrong." She stroked Amy's cheek, brushing hair back
from her eyes. "I get the fun of cuddling with you. I get the enjoyment of making you happy." She giggled. "Especially when you make all those funny noises. And –"

"I do *not* make funny noises!" Amy tried to muster some indignation, but she was feeling too warm, too comfortable, and too loved to actually manage it.

Hope giggled and kissed her on the tip of the nose. "If you say so, sweetie." Her eyes sparkled with amusement. "And like I was saying, I get the satisfaction of seeing you become just a little bit happier, a little bit more relaxed each day."

Amy stretched like a cat, then relaxed into the snuggle once more. "I *do* feel better," she admitted. "Less like the other shoe's going to drop at any moment, and take me back to the way my life was before. More like ... I can look forward to the future, and see something nice happening there."

"You *are* going to have to reconcile with your family eventually," Hope said gently. "If only to get it out of the back of your mind."

Amy nodded. "But I don't have to do it today, right?"

Hope nuzzled her cheek, and kissed her gently on the lips. "No, sweetie. Not today."

Amy kissed her back, and closed her eyes with a sigh. "That's good. Today was a bit stressful, but right now, I got no stress at all. And I like it that way." Her voice began to drift a little. "I'm gonna get a little rest, if that's okay?"

Hope kissed her softly on the forehead. "That's okay, sweetie. I might go for a walk. That all right with you?"

"Mmmm, okay," murmured Amy. "Just put the sheet over me before you go, please. I don't think I can move, right now."

Hope climbed out of bed, picked up the sheet, and carefully draped it over Amy. For good measure, she pulled out the blanket and put that on her as well. Amy made a soft sound of comfort as she snuggled into the warmth. Hope leaned down and kissed her softly on the cheek.

Amy was asleep before Hope finished getting dressed.

Joe yawned. He was off-duty, and should really get some sack time. But he'd been slacking on his fitness training lately, and the PRT did have standards they liked their people to keep up. So, he got his sweats on, and headed down to the gym. There was usually no-one there at this time of night, and he could have his pick of the equipment.

Only, there was someone there.

He heard the treadmill rumbling over the sound of the air-conditioning as soon as he entered the large, spacious room. He could also hear the puffing of someone really pushing themselves to the limit.

Curious, he walked farther into the gym. There was someone dressed in sweats on one of the treadmills, all right ... a woman. Not someone he had seen down here before. She was a bit beyond heavy-set, but the way she was pounding the pavement on that treadmill, she was looking to lose some of that.

*Who the hell is that?*
And then she caught the movement from the corner of her eye, and turned her head.

"Who's there?"

The face, and the voice, were familiar to him. They both belonged to a person he had never expected to see in the gym, especially not giving a treadmill this sort of punishment.

"D-Director Piggot, ma'am!" he blurted, coming to attention, before remembering that he was off duty and out of uniform.

"Trooper Caldwell, isn't it?" she replied, not faltering in her steady stride. "A bit late to be going to the gym."

_You're here, aren't you?_ But he didn't voice the comment.

"Sorry, ma'am," he said. "I can go, if you like."

She shook her head, sweat flying off it in droplets. "Never mind. Stay. Use the equipment." She hit a button on the treadmill and it slowed to a steady walk. "Actually, now that you're here, you can spot me on the weights."

"Weights, ma'am?" His brain was struggling to keep up.

She gave him a sharp glance. "Your file says you're quick on the uptake, Trooper Caldwell. Do try to keep up. Weights. I intend to lift some. I am asking you to spot me on them. Is there a problem with this?"

He blinked. "Uh, no, ma'am!"

"Good," she said coolly. Another sharp glance. "This goes no farther than you and me. Do you understand?"

He nodded vigorously. "Yes, ma'am!" _After all, who'd believe me?_

"Good boy."

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Chapter End Notes

Yes, I made up that bit about Manton's daughter. It sounded as good as anything else. Also, I understand some readers like more drama. Be patient; some is coming up quite shortly.
In which there is a less than amusing misunderstanding, and men with guns

Hope carefully closed the curtain behind her, and moved through the shelter. Some people greeted her; she moved over, sat, and chatted with them for a while. Children were invariably fascinated with her wings, and she unfurled them to let the little ones play with the crystalline 'feathers' that edged them.

She liked children, liked their uncomplicated worldview. She tried to keep her own outlook as simple as possible, but sometimes that was ... difficult. And children weren't as standoffish about hugs as some adults were. Hugs were always nice. And children deserved the chance to be children for as long as possible, especially when bad things were happening around them.

*I need to visit the Wards again sometime,* she told herself. *See how Vista is getting along.*

But for now ... she wanted to get out, stretch her wings.

Leaving the shelter, she unfurled her wings with a dramatic crystalline chime. They snapped all the way open, and she beat them down hard, lifting her into the evening sky. She revelled in the feeling as she flexed her pinions harder and harder, forcing them to work to the limit of their capability, carrying her aloft on chimes of crystal.

She loved to fly. It was the root cause of all her happiness. She loved to be in the air, free, boundless, able to twist and turn and go where she liked. Flying while carrying people was nice, but solo was far preferable. She could do things that would make incautious passengers lose their lunch, or even break bones if she was not careful. So she tended to save this sort of flying for when she was alone.

She powered forward, flipped a wing, and spun into a tight loop. Her spine popped, one vertebra after another, as she flexed her own body as well as her wings. Stunt after stunt followed, as she enjoyed herself thoroughly. The pleasure she felt was mental, physical and emotional. Her wings rang crystalline paeans of joy. Diving, she rocketed down between the buildings and along, pulling sharp turns around corners, then up into the air once more. She felt fulfilled, validated, complete.

*This must be what Amy feels like when she has sex,* she thought with a grin. *I wish she could feel what I do when I fly.*

In the darkness below, hostile eyes watched her every move. One man raised a rifle, but another pushed it down again.

"You heard what the boss said," the second man said quietly. "Leave it."

She landed back at the shelter, panting slightly from her exertions, but happy, and glowing in more ways than one. There was a smattering of applause from those people who had been sitting outside to enjoy the evening air, and had seen that portion of her aerial display that had taken place close enough for them to see. Hope smiled and gave them a bow, wings spreading out behind her. "Thank you, thank you," she said with a giggle. "I'm glad you enjoyed the show."

She was just considering going back to climb in with Amy and get some rest, when she saw Lisa approaching her.

"Hey, you," she greeted the girl. She smiled widely; she could not help it. After a good flight, she felt like she could just hug the world.
"Hey, you," Lisa replied, returning the smile. "You're in good spirits."

Hope nodded, her eyes bright. "Need that hug?"

"Oh, yes please," Lisa agreed, and Hope hugged her. Lisa leaned into her shoulder, her arms around Hope; tension slowly drained out of her muscles. "Mmmm," she murmured softly. "This is really nice."

Yes, I know, thought Hope with an inward sigh of her own. A good hug just could not be beaten. But she didn't say anything; she just concentrated on enjoying the hug.

When Lisa finally let go, Hope kissed her on the cheek. "Feel better?" she asked with a grin.

"Oh, definitely," Lisa agreed. She paused, frowning. "Listen, there's something I need to talk to you about."

"Sure," said Hope promptly. "What is it?"

"Um, we'll take this to my room, I think," said Lisa. "Privacy issues."

"Okay," said Hope. "Sure." She followed Lisa to her room – the staff members had rooms rather than simple blanket enclosures – and watched while Lisa closed the door behind them and locked it.

"Okay, now,' Lisa said, "this is going to sound really strange if I'm wrong, but I don't think I am." She looked Hope directly in the eye. "Are you and Amy having sex?"

Hope blinked. "I, uh ..." she began, then she started again. "Um, that is, yes and no."

"I knew it," muttered Lisa. She turned her gaze to Hope. "Do you care that other people find out? Because in these close quarters, they are going to guess at some point. And some people are going to be happy, some people are going to be squicked – especially when they find out how you're doing it – and some people are going to accuse Amy of using you." She paused. "Especially once they find out what Amy can do with her powers ... she's using them to make you feel pleasure, isn't she?"

"Not this last time," Hope said. "The other two times, yes. But it's no big deal. She does it, I enjoy it, I spank her for doing it, she enjoys that ..."

"Whoa, whoa, too much information," said Lisa hurriedly, holding up her hands in a warding gesture.

"Sorry, sorry," said Hope apologetically. "I don't know about sex. I don't know what's okay to talk about, and what's not. All I know is what she's shown me how to do."

Lisa's face took on a bemused expression. "Wow," she said. "I guess ... wow." She looked keenly at Hope. "You must really care for her to do this."

"I love her, and she needs to be held and loved," Hope said simply. "She has so much pain bottled up inside her. All I can do is be there for her, and help her open up, and let it drain a little at a time. And some of it's about sex, so ..."

"So you're doing that for her," Lisa finished. "I've seen the results so far. Her body language is ... loosening up. Becoming less tense." She chuckled. "When I saw her this morning, I thought to myself, 'there goes someone who's just had some seriously awesome sex', and then I thought, 'wait, what?' Because there hadn't been anyone in your enclosure except you two." She raised an eyebrow. "There was only the two of you, right?"
Hope nodded. "I wouldn't actually mind if she wanted to have sex with someone else," she said, sitting down on the edge of Lisa's bed. Her voice was quieter, more solemn that it had been.

Lisa went to her bedside table and poured water into a couple of plastic cups from a bottle. She sat beside Hope and handed her a cup. "Really?" she asked. She put an arm around Hope's shoulders; Hope leaned into the embrace as she sipped from the cup.

"Really," said Hope. "I'd guess I'm only an average to good lover. All I know is what Amy has taught me, and what I'm working out from guesswork and figuring out what she enjoys. I mean, so far she's having a really good time, and I love cuddling with her and making her feel nice, but I really don't have any instincts for what I'm doing. I don't know what I've been doing right, how I've managed to make it so good for her. I'm worried that I'll start missing cues, and it will all go flop for her." Suddenly, she turned toward Lisa. "Hey, you're really good at instincts," she said. "Would you like to have sex with Amy? I bet you'd make a great lover for her."

Lisa had been drinking from the cup at the time; she inhaled at the wrong moment, and sprayed water all over the wall of her room. Hope held her and patted her on the back as she coughed and choked, and finally regained control of her respiratory system.

"Congratulations," she wheezed at last. "You can join a very short list of people who have managed to totally and utterly blindside me."

"I'm sorry," said Hope contritely. "I didn't mean to do that." She looked anxiously at Lisa. "But ... would you like to? I mean, you don't have a boyfriend, or a girlfriend, right?"

Lisa shook her head. "No, sweetie, I don't have either one of those. I haven't had one for ... years. Not since I triggered."

"Oh, that's sad," said Hope, putting her arms around Lisa and giving her a hug. "Why's that?"

"Because ..." Lisa paused. "How do I put this in terms you'll understand?" She frowned. "Okay, think of it like this. I've met a guy, he seems nice. But as soon as I start associating with him, I'm picking up on all his signals. It's like he's waving signs, and I can't avoid reading them. And they're all about what he thinks and what he feels about things. And guys think about sex all the time. Not just about sex with their girlfriends, but they also look at the chick behind the checkout counter, and the woman walking her dog down the street, and the jogger who just bounced past ..."

She drew a deep breath. "If I'm with someone, they have no secrets. None. I can see everything. And most of it's stuff I don't want to know about. I really don't." She smiled at Hope and kissed her on the cheek. "It's why I like spending time with you," she said. "You're ... pure. You don't have any agendas, no dirty secrets. Right now, you're radiating liking for me, and wanting to help Amy. You're worried that you've offended me by asking if I wanted to sleep with Amy ..."

"Wow, that's awesome," said Hope with a grin. "You can read me like a book, huh?"

"One with really large print, and not many pages," Lisa confirmed. "Although I gotta admit, you gave me a false negative with the sex thing, with Amy. I saw her, I thought 'great sex, gotta be great sex', and she's smiling at you and those little touches that they think are so subtle, and all the other signals. And then I look at you, and you're treating her exactly the same as normal; sweet, loving, but totally platonic. No change. It really made me wonder, and that's why I had to ask, to make sure."

"Well, yeah," said Hope. "For me it's basically fun naked cuddles. But from what Amy tells me, for her it's mind-blowing sex." She paused. "I am getting better at picking out what she likes and doesn't like, from her body's pleasure-signals. But it's still largely guesswork. And I really think that she
would have a much better time with someone who actually has a sex drive, and knows how to make a woman feel good in bed." She shrugged, a little downcast. "And you're obviously not interested, so ..."

"Well, to be honest, I doubt she'd be interested in letting me climb into bed with her," Lisa said with a vulpine grin. "If you hadn't been following, she doesn't actually like me. We have a history, remember?"

Hope frowned. "But ... you apologised, and she forgave you," she said, puzzlement in her voice.

"Yes," said Lisa patiently, "and she mostly meant it too. But there's still just a little resentment there. Perfectly natural. It's actually come down a great deal over the last day or so." She grinned again. "Must be the great sex she's getting." A pause. "But no. I can see that you don't hold grudges. You're a very special person, like that. Most of us ... do. And we can't let them go, no matter what."

Hope hunched into herself. "Sorry I bothered you with it, then," she mumbled. "I thought I could help her. I thought I could surprise her with a lover who wouldn't blab it everywhere, and who could give her what I can't."

"Oh, honey," said Lisa softly, holding her close. "You tried. And it's a very sweet idea. I don't know anyone else who would to that for someone they loved."

Hope leaned into the embrace. "It was still a stupid idea," she said, her voice muffled against Lisa's shoulder. "I feel like such an idiot." Her tears were beginning to well, staining Lisa's top.

Hope was not a very reserved person. When it was time to be happy, she was very happy indeed. But when she felt that she'd failed someone, the needle swung the other way, quite sharply. And so, as Lisa held her, she clung to the older girl and cried.

Stealthily, clad dark as the night itself, the band of armed men crept closer to the shelter. They had climbed out of the vehicles more than a mile away, and were working their way along back alleys and side-streets that were miraculously clear of foot traffic at this time. Now and again they would pause, as their radio headsets gave them warning, and then they would move on.

Amy stretched and let out a contented sigh, then reached out for Hope. She was not there.

Oh wait, Amy recalled. She said was going for a walk.

She nearly stayed in bed, nearly chose to wait for Hope to return. Because I know she'll come back to me, every time. A deep, secret smile at that knowledge. Because she loves me.

But eventually nature's processes took their toll, and she found herself getting up anyway. Wearily, she climbed into her clothes – naked is fun, but getting dressed again is a chore – and wandered out to find the ladies' bathroom. On the way, she looked vaguely around for Hope, didn't spot her.

She finished in the bathroom, washed her hands, strolled outside to see if Hope was there. She wasn't, but some other residents of the shelter were. They greeted her respectfully, cognisant of her capabilities as a healer. "Have you seen Hope around?" she asked.

"Oh, she was up there," declared one older man. "flyin' around like a dream an' a angel."

"Sure was nice," said another. "But she came down a little while ago, went inside."
“Someone came talk to her,” said the first man. "Lisa, I think. They went off talkin'. Mighty nice person, that Hope. Mighty nice."

Amy nodded. "Yes, I know," she agreed with a smile. But her thoughts were darker. Lisa's talking to Hope? she asked herself. What's she want her for?

Well, I'm going to find out.

She headed across the shelter to the door to Lisa's room. It was shut, but as she tried to turn the handle, she found that it was locked. Inside, she could hear strange noises.

From inside, the noises stopped, and Lisa's voice called out, "Busy!"

Why's Lisa got the door locked? "Hope!" she called out. "Are you in there?"

Lisa heard the door handle rattle. "Busy!" she called. Hope's sobs died away toward sniffles.

Then they both heard Amy's voice. Hope tried to answer, but she was still having trouble finding her voice.

"Yes, she's in here!" Lisa called out. "Can you give us a minute?"

What can Lisa and Hope be doing in there that they need to lock the door for? wondered Amy. Her mind immediately leaped to an unpleasant conclusion, which she tried to reject.

And then the door lock clicked, and Lisa looked out around the door. "What's up?" she asked.

Amy tried to look past Lisa into the bedroom. She couldn't see Hope.

But she could smell the faint scent of jasmine in the air. That was Hope's version of sweat, and she only put it out after she'd been exercising heavily. Amy had begun to conflate it with sex, as she had only smelt it after Hope had spent a strenuous session with her, and she could smell it now.

What she didn't realise was that Hope was still exuding the fragrance following her bout of high-end aerobatics, and that it had nothing to do with sex.

So of course, she came to the worst possible conclusion.

Lisa's conned Hope into having sex with her.

That conniving bitch.

And then, the emotional backlash. All of her insecurities stampeded to the fore.

I thought Hope loved me more than that.

How could I have been so stupid?

She stared at Lisa. "How could you?" she cried, then turned and ran.

Lisa blinked. "Oh, shit."

Hope came to the door behind her. "What just happened?" she asked curiously.

Lisa sighed. "Amy just came to the conclusion that we've been having sex, and ran out of here."
"So ... what should I do?" asked Hope.

"Do?" said Lisa. "Go after her, you dope. Tell her the truth. She wouldn't believe me if all the angels in heaven came down and sang my innocence in chorus, but she'll believe you." She stopped talking. Hope was still looking at her, waiting for her to say something more. Lisa gave her a shove. "Go!"

Hope went.

Amy was a couple of dozen yards outside the front door of the shelter when Hope emerged. She immediately ducked behind a couple of guys who were standing and smoking, chatting quietly.

"Amy!" called Hope. "Amy!"

Amy closed her ears to the anguish in Hope's voice. She cheated on me, she told herself. And with that conniving cow Lisa. Tattletale. That's twice that bitch has ruined my life now.

Turning, she stumbled blindly off into the darkness. There was certainly nothing left for her at the shelter now.

I can't believe I really thought she loved me.

Hope swept long, wide circles, staring at the ground below. Even fully extended, her senses could only pick out life-sparks if she flew really low, and then she couldn't see as far as she wanted. But she swooped low, again and again, scanning for a lone life-spark.

Oh god, Amy, please come back.

Now and again, she found one, but invariably it was a man or a woman, the wrong shape or the wrong age to be Amy, huddling in an alleyway or inside a rude shelter.

And so she flew on.

Again, the rifle was raised.

"No!" snapped a low voice. A hand slapped the barrel down.

"When am I gonna get a shot like that again?"

"Order is, don't engage."

The rifle stayed down. The winged, glowing figure, passed by. The men moved on.

She nearly picked up on Amy's location three times, but each time, Amy saw or heard her coming, and ran just that little farther, to be out of her range. By now Amy was panting hard, trying to keep her breathing quiet enough to hear the chiming sound of Hope's wings.

She heard Hope land on a rooftop not so far away. "Amy!" she called, her voice full of heartbreak. "Come back! Please!"

Amy's own heart tugged at her, but she clenched her teeth, remembering what she'd thought she'd seen. Hope. In Lisa's bedroom. Doing my thing with her.
Her gorge rose, and she nearly threw up. But she swallowed hard, controlling her reaction. *Can't waste food. Going to be hungry.*

She was going more carefully now, picking her way, as she heard Hope flying away to quarter another area. *Well, I hope she's happy with Lisa, that's all I can say.*

*Maybe I should have stayed. Done something to Lisa. It's not like she doesn't deserve it.*

She paused in a deep patch of shadow, closed her eyes, feeling hot tears pricking her lids.*No. I might hate her, but Hope wouldn't do it, and I won't do it. And Hope might have betrayed me, but I'm not going to betray her.*

Her moment of stillness was all that saved her. When she opened her eyes, she saw the men with the guns.
In which Amy is in peril, and Hope searches for her

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Timeline A

6:15 PM

Coil stood before the six men. They were the best of those that he employed; well-trained, personally loyal to him, able to take direction.

"This is a scouting mission. You six will be pathfinders," he said, enunciating the words clearly. "You will not see those that you are guiding in; you will never meet them. But it is imperative that you do your job well; the success of the mission depends on you."

On the screen next to him, he flashed up three faces; Tattletale, Hope, and Amy. "If you see any of these people, you will report their location and direction of movement. Do not approach them, and do not make suspicious movements. Tattletale, specifically, will be aware of such things, so as soon as you see her, observe without being observed, and withdraw if necessary."

The screen flashed to a map of the area around the shelter in Tattletale's territory. He indicated a spot. "The truck will drop you off here. You will make your way toward the shelter, here, through these back streets. Report on the movements of any people in the area, and try to locate a path clear of witnesses. Are there any questions?"

One of the men stepped forward. "Uh, yes, sir. It seems to me that even if we locate clear paths, it's not guaranteed that the path will stay clear while your uh, other people, move through it, if we've moved on by the time they come through. Sir."

Coil waited, but the man had apparently finished. "Davidson, isn't it? That did not seem to be a question. In fact, it sounded more like a statement to me."

Davidson looked uncomfortable. "Uh, yes, sir. Just an observation, sir."

"Well, well," said Coil. "It appears to be an observation that escaped me up till now. What about you, Michaels? Did you spot the flaw, as Davidson did?"

From the tone of his voice, Michaels knew what his response must be. "Why, no, sir. This is the first I've seen of it also, sir."

Coiled turned back to Davidson, who was now visibly sweating. "Thank you for your incisive comments, Davidson. I will take them into account. Were there any other questions?"

There were none. Coil nodded to Michaels, who gathered the men together, and moved them off. Michaels fell into step alongside Davidson, and appeared to be speaking to him in a low tone. Coil nodded fractionally; he doubted he would have any more trouble out of Davidson.

Timeline B

6:15 PM
Coil watched as, on the screen, Michaels stood before the assembled men in the warehouse. He owned it by proxy, and it was occasionally useful for situations like this. Of the seventeen men arrayed before Michaels, five were Coil's own, as was Michaels.

The other twelve were mercenaries brought in from Los Angeles and Miami; while Coil's men would form the core group and relay orders, the mercenaries would take the brunt of any retaliation. Deniability, deniability, deniability.

"This is a hostile extraction," Michaels said, speaking slowly and carefully. He held an electronic pad in his hand; the words of his script scrolled up it, although he only had to refer to it from time to time. "You will be guided in to a shelter for the homeless. There is one person there whom you must take prisoner, and convey back to this location. That person must not be harmed under any circumstances." With an inconspicuous motion from his thumb, he halted the scrolling words and looked up at the men. "Her life is more important than yours. Remember that."

Tapping the pad, he brought up a picture on the screen at his elbow; on Coil's second screen, he could see that it showed Tattletale, both masked and unmasked. "Her name is Lisa; once you finish this job, you will forget that you ever saw that face or heard that name." His voice brooked no argument.

"Kinda cute," commented one of the mercenaries, a rough-looking man from Miami. His name was Reynolds; he chewed toothpicks interminably, but was reputedly very tough in a brawl, and was an excellent shot. Unfortunately, he seemed to have a high opinion of himself, and a correspondingly low opinion of the small-town operation he'd been hired to participate in.

"You do not lay a hand on her, over and above what's necessary to get her back here," Michaels told him; that wasn't in the script, but it was exactly what Coil would have said. He made a mental note to give the man a bonus.

"Whatever, man, whatever," said Reynolds, holding up his hands in mock surrender and giving him a cocky grin. Michaels gave him a level gaze for several seconds, then went on.

"There are two other capes also resident in the same building," he said. "You will avoid engaging them under any circumstances." He tapped the pad again; two faces replaced Tattletale's. On the left was Hope, and on the right, Amy Dallon.

"This one is known as Hope, and that one is called Amy Dallon, previously known as Panacea. Hope is a relatively new parahuman, but she exhibits Brute, Mover, Striker, Breaker and Thinker capabilities. She's best known for her Striker abilities, which are based around healing powers. She does not have ranged aggressive capabilities. Panacea is also a healer of some note, and has recently exhibited other capabilities, not well documented at the moment."

He raised his voice slightly for emphasis. "Once again, you do not engage either of these capes. If engaged by them, you break off and retreat. If innocents are under threat, Hope may stand down; all our data indicate that she will do that rather than see them come to harm."

"She doesn't look so tough," observed Reynolds. "Armour-piercing round in the right place takes down most Brutes, pretty as you please. Her friend's a cutie, though."

"You're not listening," Michaels said firmly. "It's not a question of whether or not you can take them down. It's about not engaging them. Period."

Coil silently agreed with him. He didn't know whether the mysterious prohibition regarding Hope was still in effect, or if it had been lifted after the defeat of the Nine. Lacking Dinah, he didn't have a
good way of finding out. *I'd rather not find out the hard way. This is why I need Tattletale under my control.*

*I wouldn't even need to do it this way if I could just grab her, but every time I've tried to set up a meeting to grab her, she's picked up on it.*

*Of course, if she wasn't sharp enough to pick up on something like that, she wouldn't be so valuable to me.*

And as for Amy ... the girl had seemed quite close to Hope, and Coil presumed the attachment was mutual. *If Amy dies, and Hope finds out that I am ultimately responsible, then that will put her head to head with me. Either way that turns out, I lose. Better not take the chance.*

"So, what, we back off and run away from a couple little girls?" asked Reynolds scornfully. "Or whatever this Hope really is."

"If you'd rather walk away from the job," said Michaels quietly, "the door's over there. But once you walk out, you're never coming back."

"Nah man, I'm fine," Reynolds said, after a brief pause to show that he wasn't cowed by Michaels. Michaels, on the other hand, flicked a quick glance up at the camera behind the men. One eyebrow raised fractionally. *Do we really need this jerkass?*

Coil sighed, and tapped his radio mic button twice, to send a pair of clicks to Michaels' radio earpiece. *Affirmative.*

Though he had his own doubts. Reynolds was going to be trouble.

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**Timeline A**

6:43 PM

The six men had split up shortly after leaving the truck, to cover as much area as possible. Michaels had had a word with Davidson, leaving him in absolutely no doubt that any more stupid-ass comments like that would have him scrubbing the floor of Coil's base with his toothbrush. Every square foot.

They ranged through the streets, pausing at intersections, or when they saw movement, to radio back reports.

"*Corner of Purcell and Frigate, clear all directions ..."*

"*Corner of Frigate and Holloway, clear ... wait, no. Group of three people moving down Holloway toward Frigate. Will advise when clear.*"

"*All clear on Jamison and Frigate.*"

"*Eyes on group of five at intersection of Franks and Dalton.*"

As Coil got the reports, he manipulated an electronic map of the area, showing where his scouts were, and where people were moving. It wasn't perfect ...
6:43 PM

... but it reduced the chance of witnesses considerably.

"Purcell and Frigate, currently clear," he said into the radio. "Franks and Dalton has five people on site. People moving down Holloway toward Frigate. Move down Purcell and cross over Frigate."

"Roger," came Michaels' voice. "Purcell and Frigate, clear."

"All units, maintain position. Inform me if status changes."

The group of eighteen men moved silently down Purcell Street, crossed over Frigate Street. There was no-one to be seen.

"This is creepy," commented one of Reynolds' men. "It's like this is a damn ghost town. How's he finding his way around all the people?"

Davidson leaned close. "I'll tell you how," he said confidentially.

"Yeah?" asked Reynolds. "How?"

"Drones. UAVs," Davidson told him. "Never see 'em, never hear 'em, but they can loiter up there all damn night, man." He didn't know this for certain, but he'd approached Michaels privately, as he was curious about the matter. Michaels had consulted with Coil, and then let Davidson in on the 'secret'.

"Damn," Reynolds said, impressed. This was some outfit, if they had unmanned aerial vehicles to play with.

"Quiet back there," snapped Michaels. He held up a fist. "Hold it. Hope's in the air. Everyone down in the shadows."

They stepped over on to the sidewalk, and concealed themselves in the deeper shadows next to the building. In the next minute, just as predicted, the slender winged figure of Hope appeared over the rooftops on the far side of the street. She was totally visible in the dark, lit up with an inner glow. From the way she flew, she was utterly carefree, pulling loops and barrel rolls; even from where they were, the men could hear the crystalline chiming of her wings.

Reynolds brought his rifle up, lining it on the target. Clay pigeon, he thought. Easy shot. And then there was a hand on the barrel, pushing it down.

"You heard what the boss said," Davidson told him. "Leave it."

Reynolds jerked his rifle away, but she had climbed high into the sky and was soaring away by now, a much more difficult shot. Damn it, he thought. I had a perfect shot. I would have nailed Hope, clean as you like. One shot, one kill.
Timeline A

7:17 PM

Amy was about to step out of the alleyway on to the street – Hope was coming back soon, and she didn't want to be caught in the open – when she spotted the man moving down the middle of the road.

Something about the way he moved, the way he looked around, made her wary. She pulled back into the shadows, watched him go by.

Davidson never even saw her. He proceeded to the next intersection, and pronounced it clear.

Amy took a deep breath, and went to step into the street –

"Amy, oh god, I'm glad I found you!"

She turned, just as Hope dropped into the alleyway, flaring her wings to stop herself, the tips scraping against brickwork.

"Leave me alone, Hope," she said dully. "You can't tell me what to do any more. You're sleeping with Lisa now."

The ache in her chest that these words produced was almost more than she could bear, but she said them.

"Oh, sweetie, is that what you thought?" asked Hope, a look of utter joy on her face as she saw that Amy was unhurt. She stepped forward and embraced Amy thoroughly. "Lisa and I weren't doing that. We were talking. Well ... I was crying, and she was comforting me."

Amy had thought that her heart had frozen into a solid lump in her chest. But Hope's words applied a furnace heat to the middle of her chest; in an instant, she felt warmth spreading to all her limbs, and to her face. She returned the embrace, feeling the love and affection soaking in from Hope's touch. "Really?" she asked. "It wasn't ... the other thing?"

"Oh, god no," chuckled Hope. "I was actually asking her if she wanted to make love with you. Because, you know, I'm not really that good at it. And I thought you might like to be ... with someone ... who knows how ..."

She ran down, because Amy was staring at her.

"Was that why the door was locked?" asked Amy. "You got her to lock it so you could ask her that?"

Hope shook her head. "No, no. That was about her asking if we were doing what we were doing," she admitted. "She's figured it out, and warned me that other people might not react well once they figure it out too." She dropped her eyes. "I don't want to get you in trouble, sweetie."

Amy held her close, and rubbed her forehead against Hope's. "I don't care what they think about you and me," she said fiercely. "I love you, and that's all that matters."

"And I love you too," said Hope fondly.
"And that's stupid, about not being good at helping me make love," Amy went on hotly. "I'll take you over anyone who thinks they know how to do it. And anyway," she giggled, "I actually like snuggling better sometimes. It gives me time to appreciate you just plain being there with me."

"Aww, sweetie, thank you," said Hope, her heart melting all over again. "I was so worried; that makes me feel so much better."

She kissed Amy; a kiss full of love and tenderness and total commitment. Amy returned it in full. They were holding each other quite closely by the time it finished.

"Let's get you back to the shelter," said Hope softly, nuzzling Amy's cheek. "It's getting cold out."

"Mmmm," agreed Amy. "Let's do some more snuggles. I like snuggles."

"Snuggles are good," agreed Hope.

As Hope lifted into the sky, carrying Amy in her arms, Amy said, "So you really asked Lisa if she wanted to make love to me?" She giggled. "How did she react?"

"About how you'd expect," replied Hope with a grin. "She was drinking a cup of water at the time, and ..."

Amy's laughter faded into the night.

Chapter End Notes

This story arc will continue into the next chapter.
In which the chase goes on, and things get worse

Chapter Notes

This story arc continues on from the last chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Timeline B

7:17 PM

Hope was coming back soon, and Amy didn't want to get caught in the open. She darted across the street.

She made it just in time; Hope's glide-path, low and slow, took her right over the alleyway that Amy had been hiding in. She didn't pause. If Amy had been there, she would have seen her, would have been able to drop right down into the alley.

Amy thought for a moment she was caught anyway; Hope glided the length of the alley, but when she reached the street, she threw out a lazy wing and turned right. Flapping twice, she gained some altitude and started down the street.

"Control," said Michaels quietly, "we have Hope approaching our position. Does not appear to have sighted us. Orders?"

Coil was confused. There was no indication of Hope in that area.

Timeline A

"All units, any sign of Hope?"

"Affirmative, base. Just overflew me, heading back toward the shelter. Seems to be carrying someone in her arms."

Coil sighed. That's no use to me now.

Timeline B

"Do not engage. Repeat, do not engage."

"Roger," came Michaels' voice. "No engagement, affirmative."

Hope came flying past just above the buildings on the other side of the street; she was flying low and slow, and appeared to be looking for something or someone.
Reynolds raised his rifle. *Sweet, sweet shot.* She was in his sights. All it would take would be one trigger pull ...

"No!" snapped Michaels' voice, as he slapped the barrel down again.

Reynolds looked up at him as though he was crazy. "Where am I gonna get a shot like that again?"

"Order is," explained Michaels with exaggerated patience, "do not engage." *What's this guy got to do to get the message?* But his hand stayed steady on the barrel of Reynolds' rifle. It stayed down.

The winged, glowing figure passed by. Michaels lifted his hand from Reynolds' gun and moved to the front once more. The men moved on. But now Michaels had another problem to worry about.

*Reynolds is going to be trouble. I can feel it.*

7:23 PM

Amy moved up the street, keeping to the shadows. When she heard Hope cry out, she nearly answered, but she clenched her teeth, remembering. She fought her nausea, and then heard the chime of Hope's wings as she lifted off again.

The dark patch of shadow within the alleyway sheltered her as she fought with her own dark desire to hurt Lisa. Her eyes closed, and the hot tears leaked through the lids.

When she opened them again, she saw the men with the guns. They were passing by her position, clad in dark clothes, intent faces, carrying rifles.

*I know PRT,* she told herself. *That isn't PRT. They're going somewhere, and they're going to do something bad when they get there.*

In a horrifying flash of insight, she realised the truth.

*They're going to the shelter.*

What they would do there, she had no idea, but she knew beyond all rationality that their destination lay there.

*What do I do?*

She was no Alexandria, no Glory Girl, no Hope. She could not even consider attacking these men and have any chance of winning.

*I have to go back. I have to warn them.*

The searing hatred she had felt toward Lisa just a moment ago didn't matter. She didn't deserve what these men obviously intended. Nor did Hope. Nor did the other people in the shelter.

Waiting as long as she dared, she peered around the corner of the alley into the street. *If I wait too long, they'll get too close to the shelter. I have to go now.*

Taking a deep breath, she darted across the street. It was just bad luck that one of the men looked around at just the wrong moment.

"Hey!"
"Someone saw us!"

"There she goes!"

Rifles were coming up.

"Sir, the men have been spotted. Witness is making a run for it."

Coil had a bare instant to make a decision. His previous timeline was proving no use now; too many factors had changed. He collapsed that one and opened a new one.

Timeline C

7:25 PM

"Capture only. No shooting."

Michaels shouted, "Don't shoot! Capture only! Run her down!"

Timeline B

7:25 PM

"Shoot to kill."

"Take the shot!" yelled Michaels.

Reynolds grinned as he levelled his rifle. He lived for shots like this. Open sights, poor light, rapidly moving target, short window of opportunity. Piece of cake. He fired.

The M-4 carbine spat three rounds; the shots echoed off the surrounding buildings.

Amy was hit by all three rounds, high up under her right shoulderblade. They punched diagonally across her chest, destroying her lungs and heart, and smashed two ribs on the way out of her body. She was dying before she hit the ground, dead in just seconds after that. Blood pooled under her body.

"Go check," Michaels ordered Davidson.

Davidson nodded, and trotted up the street to where the supine figure lay, eyes staring sightlessly at the night sky. He reached down to feel for a pulse. There was nothing. Damn pity, he thought. Cute girl. Then he paused. Wait a minute. Pulling out a penlight, he shone it at her face. Oh crap.

Michaels saw him use the torch, then give the high sign. "Hold here," he said quietly, then headed over to where Davidson waited by the cooling body. "What's up?" he asked quietly.

For an answer, Davidson shone the light on her face again.

"Oh Christ almighty," muttered Michaels. He keyed his radio.

"Sir, witness was killed. We've ID'd her as Amy Dallon."
Coil froze. "Repeat that, please."

"Witness was killed. Positive ID as – oh shiii – it's Hope -"

The voice broke off. Coil heard thuds and crackles, and distant shots. He closed his eyes. Amy, dead. Hope, aware.

*This situation is rapidly becoming untenable,* thought Coil. *I need someone like Dinah, or Tattletale making these calls for me.* The irony was not lost on him.

Hope had heard the shots, and returned fast. She saw, and recognised, Amy's body on the ground. Her first swooping run took Michaels off his feet. After that, the others began shooting. It didn't do them a whole lot of good. She killed Michaels, Reynolds, and thirteen others before the accumulated wounds brought her down.

Watched by Davidson and the two other men who had not even fired a shot, so terrified were they, she staggered to Amy's corpse and fell alongside it. With the last of her fading strength, she applied the kiss of life to Amy. When the light from this act faded, so did her own light, forever.

Amy wept, and tried to revive Hope in her turn, but the very last spark of life had gone out of her, in bringing Amy back. There was nothing left.

Coil collapsed that universe, and opened another one.

**Timeline C**

7:37 PM

"Witness is Amy Dallon. Capture and hold. Keep her incommunicado until the mission is complete, and then release unharmed."

Michaels blinked. "Roger that, sir. I'll pass that on."

The men spread out, running down alleyways, calling out when they saw her. Amy dodged and weaved, trying to hide inside buildings, but all too often they were locked. She was young, and fit, and not loaded down with gear as they were, but there were so many of them.

And then she doubled back, into a niche barely large enough for her. Breath rasping in her lungs, she did her best to remain quiet until they passed by.

"We've lost her, sir. She went left or right, but there's far too many places for eighteen men to search, and still keep an eye out."

Coil sighed. "Search only to the left."

"But sir –"

"Do as I say."

"Yes, sir."

**Timeline D**
7:37 PM

"Search only to the right."

"But sir –"

"Do as I say."

"Yes, sir."

Timeline C

7:41 PM

They were moving away from her hiding place. She was home free; all she had to do was wait a few more moments, and she could make a run for it.

Timeline D

Amy bit back a sob. They were searching toward her hiding place. How did they always know which way she was going to go?

One of the men got too close; he loomed at the entrance to the niche. "Well, hello," he said with a nasty grin. With one large hand, he grabbed her by the arm. Turning, he opened his mouth to shout. She didn't hesitate. He wore long sleeves and gloves, presumably to hide his skin, but his face was uncovered. Amy reached forward and grabbed his face; he convulsed and then collapsed.

If the niche had been larger, she might have gotten away with it. Unfortunately, there was no room in there for the both of them, and another man saw him fall.

"Hey, what the hell?" he called out.

She had no choice; she burst from the niche and bolted down the street.

Michaels saw a rifle go up. Reynolds, again. "No!" he shouted. "No shooting!"

"HOPE!" screamed Amy. "HOPE! HELP ME! HOPE! PLEASE!"

"She went right, sir. Just came out of a little niche."

In the background, Coil heard the screams of the girl, calling for help.

Why can things never go smoothly?

Timeline C

"Turn your men around. She's in a niche to the right."

Michaels made hand signals; the men turned and headed back the other way.
Amy nearly missed their return; she bolted from the niche, mere yards away from the oncoming men. Michaels saw a rifle go up. Reynolds, again. "No!" he shouted. "No shooting!"

"HOPE!" screamed Amy. "HOPE! HELP ME! HOPE! PLEASE! HOOOOOPE!"

Reynolds fired.

Coil heard the shots over Michaels' link, and cursed.

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Timeline D

One of the men brought Amy down with a flying tackle, winding her. She twisted, slapping his face; he fell limp. But he was still pinning her to the ground; as she struggled to get free, Davidson and Michaels arrived.

"Hold it," snapped Michaels. "Davidson, get her up. Watch your sleeves, don't let her touch your face." As Davidson cautiously hauled her to her feet, she tried to catch her breath, but she was too dazed to do anything much. Michaels anxiously eyeballed her. She didn't seem hurt. He breathed a sigh of relief, and keyed his mic.

"We have her in custody. She is unhurt. Repeat, unhurt."

"Excellent."

"Okay," said Davidson, "now what do we do with her?"

"We could use her as leverage," mused Michaels. "Orders are, we don't hurt her in any way, but they won't know that at the shelter. Straight swap, her for Tattletale."

"Won't work," Amy interjected.

"Shut it!" snapped Reynolds. He made to backhand her; Michaels caught his arm.

"You stupid moron," snarled Michaels. "One, we're under orders to not hurt her. Two, she can do shit to you if you touch her skin." He shook his head. "I'm half inclined to give her the chance. Somebody check on Thomas." He glanced to make sure Davidson's gloves were still in place. They were.

Then he turned to Amy. "And why not?"

Amy was terrified, but she refused to show it. "Because she'll see straight through you. It's what she does."

Michaels saw her point. "God damn it."

And at that moment, Hope swooped into view. She had heard Amy's voice, but had taken a little while to figure out where it had come from. She saw Amy, and she saw the men holding her, and she saw the guns.

"AMY!" she screamed.

Rifles came up; Michaels yelled, "No shooting!"
Hope paused; she saw the obvious threat to Amy. Davidson carefully held Amy's arms behind her. Amy had caught her breath, but there were too many guns near her to try anything.

"Now, she ain't hurt," Michaels told Hope, who hovered a couple dozen feet away, ten feet off the ground. "But her staying that way depends on you behaving for us."

Leverage, he thought. Maybe send her to grab Tattletale?

Hope ignored him. "Amy?" she asked tremulously. "Are you all right?"

"Hope?" said Amy, looking up at her. "You came?"

"Of course I came, silly," Hope said. "I love you." She dropped lower, landing softly on the ground and furling her wings. She carefully kept her hands in plain view.

"Oh, Hope," whispered Amy, closing her eyes. When she opened them, they were full of tears. "What about Lisa?"

"Hey!" snapped Reynolds. "Enough with this chit-chat. How about we do something about this one, and get along with it?" He leveled his rifle at Hope.

Hope ignored him, as she had Michaels. "What about Lisa?" she replied. "She's just a friend, that's all." She smiled, and addressed Michaels. "Thank you for finding Amy. I'll just take her off your hands and go home now, thanks."

"Like hell you will!" snapped Reynolds. "Move one foot closer, and I shoot. I'm loaded with armour-piercing, dollface. It'll put a hole right through you."

"Reynolds!" barked Michaels. "Put your goddamn gun up. You have your orders!"

"Screw your goddamn orders!" retorted Reynolds. "You're all piss-scared of this one goddamn cape. I'll show you how we do things in Miami!"

Chapter End Notes

This story arc concludes in the next chapter.
In which the chase is concluded, various results play out, and karma is awarded

Chapter Notes

This story arc continues from last chapter.

Timeline C

Davidson knelt over Amy's sprawled body; she was conscious, but wrenched with pain from a ragged bullet wound in her abdomen. Blood pooled on the asphalt; the field dressing Davidson was applying was quickly stained red as well. Hope landed ten feet away, her face tight with anxiety. Amy's head lifted, turned toward her. Her lips formed Hope's name.

Hope's breath caught in her throat. "Oh, sweetie," she breathed. She looked at Michaels. "Please," she begged, "let me heal her."

Before he could even speak, she was moving forward.

"Get back!" snapped Reynolds. His finger was on the trigger; when she took one more step, her eyes on Amy, he fired. Michaels tried to stop him, but wasn't fast enough. Three rounds smashed into Hope's chest; she stumbled and fell forwards. Blood began to spread in a rapidly-growing pool beneath her body.

"HOPE!" screamed Amy; she swung up and around, slapping Davidson on the face. He froze, and Amy began dragging herself toward where Hope lay, one arm outstretched toward Amy.

Michaels went to grab Reynolds, but one of the Miami mercenaries intercepted him, holding him back. A scuffle broke out.

Amy's wound would not let her travel far, but she reached out, and her hand clasped Hope's. She could see Hope's eyes, already glazing over, but then her fingers responded, curling around Amy's. The faintest spark of silver-blue light passed between them, and suddenly the agonising pain in Amy's stomach faded to nothing. She could concentrate again.

She could feel all of Hope's injuries. She could feel the fading life.

Oh god, Hope, please don't die. She exerted her power.

Hope ... healed. The bullets popped back out of the closing wounds, and the damaged organs regained their former capability. Hope's eyes cleared ... just as Reynolds lowered his gun and fired again, obviously intending to finish the job on both of them.

Hope's wings swung forward, but from the awkward position, she could not strike as hard as she wanted. The impacts merely knocked Reynolds off his feet, but the wings also sent most of the bullets careening into the night sky. Most, but not all. One hit Hope; she grunted and took the impact. Two hit Amy.
Without even looking, through her contact with Amy, Hope knew that the wounds were bad; one more in the stomach, one in the chest. Amy wasn't dead yet, but nor would she last long.

Reynolds scrambled back to his feet, cursing foully. He went to aim the rifle, to fire again.

He never got the chance. Hope came off the ground like an avenging angel. Her primary right wing caught Reynolds across the chest, lifting him off the ground and throwing him through the air. The impact shattered his breastbone and all the ribs on his right hand side.

The men were bunched together, scuffling among themselves, off-balance as she tore into them. Hope was enraged beyond reason, and her wings were ready-made clubs of heavy crystal. In less than eight seconds, they were all down.

She stumbled back to Amy, coughing up red sprays of blood. *Lung hit*, she thought dully. *I'll live.* *Just gotta last long enough to help Amy. Long enough.*

She laid her hand on Amy's arm, and gasped. She was almost gone.

*Heal her ... gotta heal her.*

She tried. She tried so hard. But every time she exerted herself, she came over in a coughing fit, spraying more red across the asphalt. Blackness was crawling in around the edges of her vision as she felt Amy die, felt the life go out of her body.

No longer strong enough to hold herself up, she lay across Amy's body, her lips on the girl's cheek. She drew on her will, her love for Amy. She concentrated.

*Live. Please live.*

The glow began, the crystalline song sounded in her ears. She did her best to keep it going, threw her all into maintaining it.

But her body was in a weakened and drained state, exacerbated by the failed attempts at healing Amy. No matter how deep she reached, no matter how hard she tried, she could not hold it. She passed out.

Fifteen minutes later, she came to, her body's self-repair mechanisms having healed the most grievous of her wounds. She was alive. She would survive. But beneath her, still and cold, lay the corpse of Amy Dallon.

Her screams of anguish and loss echoed across the city.

________________________________________

Timeline D

________________________________________

Michaels attempted to grab Reynolds, but one of the Miami mercenaries intercepted him. Their struggle distracted Davidson just long enough for Amy to elbow him in the stomach and wrench her arm free of his grip.

Just as Reynolds squeezed the trigger, Amy reached out and grabbed his wrist, where the sleeve did not reach the glove. Reynolds convulsed and the gun barrel jumped skyward, shots barking out randomly into the night air. Then he collapsed to the ground, a puppet with its strings cut.

Davidson was still staring at Reynolds when he felt a tap on the shoulder. He looked up to see Hope
standing right there, not three feet away. "I would like my friend back now," she said softly. "Please."

The pitch and spin she put on that word gave Davidson serious doubts about the wisdom of refusing her request – if request it was. He also recalled the extremely stringent orders he had been given regarding Hope and Amy. The way he saw it, there was only one thing to do. He let Amy go, and stepped back.

"Thank you," said Hope, with what looked like quite a genuine smile. "And thank you for not hurting her." She embraced Amy, her arms going protectively around the girl. Both primary wings unfurled, curving out to shield them both from anything that might happen.

Behind Davidson, the scuffle had been resolved; the man who had jumped Michaels was unconscious and bloody on the ground, and the remainder of the Miami contingent had been subdued and disarmed. They were kneeling in a row, their hands clasped behind their heads, when Reynolds began to stir.

When he came around, he was face-down on the ground, with Michaels' gun pressed firmly against the back of his neck. Davidson was just securing his hands behind his back with heavy zip-ties. The men from Los Angeles were standing off, wanting no part of any of the situation.

"What the hell is this?" snapped Reynolds, his face pressed hard into the asphalt.

"This," Michaels said grimly to Reynolds, "is how we do things in Brockton Bay." He looked up to see that Hope already had Amy. Walking over, he said to Hope, "Go ahead. Take her home. I figure the mission's blown now anyway." He indicated Reynolds with a backward jerk of his chin. "I'm just gonna take this piece of shit and walk away, if that's okay with you?"

Hope nodded. "Thank you," she said to him. As he moved away, she held Amy close. "You're all right?" she murmured. "Really all right?"

"Really all right," agreed Amy, snuggling into Hope's arms. "Really, really all right."

Michaels gave Hope one last nod, then hauled Reynolds to his feet by his collar. "Walk," he ordered, prodding the mercenary in the spine with his gun to add emphasis. Reynolds walked. The rest of his men walked or were carried.

Amy and Hope watched them go.

Hope's knees were trembling, but she held out until they were out of sight; only then did she subside to the ground. Amy was right there with her; they clung together silently, for a long moment. Each could feel the other's trembling.

"Oh god, I thought I was going to lose you," whispered Hope. She buried her face in Amy's shoulder, inhaling her scent. "I thought you were going to die. All those guns ..." She began to cry softly, her tears leaking on to Amy's jacket. "Please don't ever do that again."

"Don't you ever do that again, either," Amy retorted, holding Hope tightly. Tears were spilling down her cheeks too. "You nearly got shot."

"I didn't think he would really pull the trigger," Hope admitted. "But you stopped him." She rubbed her forehead against Amy's. "Thank you for that."

"I'm just glad you were still looking for me," Amy said, her voice unsteady. "When I needed you, really needed you, you were there."
"Of course I came out looking, silly," Hope replied, kissing her on the forehead. "I love you. I will never stop loving you. I would have kept looking for you all night and all day. All year. All my life."

Amy felt the warmth in her chest expanding until it threatened to choke her. She couldn't form words any more. So she and Hope just held each other, and wept cleansing tears.

When the initial wave of emotion had passed, they separated slightly and looked at each other.

"So what was that all about? What did they want?" asked Hope, smiling a little wanly. She kissed Amy on the tip of the nose. This elicited a shaky giggle from the other girl, so she did it again.

"Lisa, I think," said Amy. She took Hope's face between her hands and kissed her gently but firmly on the lips. Hope closed her eyes, enjoying the closeness and the contact. "At least, that's the impression I got."

Hope opened her eyes and smiled again. "Well, they aren't any more." She gathered Amy back into her arms and gave her a hug that made her gasp for breath. "Thanks to you, sweetie. Lisa's going to have to know about this, of course, in case they try again."

Amy squeaked in protest, and Hope relaxed the hug somewhat; Amy squeezed her back. "Thank you for looking for me. Thank you for coming back for me."

Hope rubbed her cheek against Amy's. "Of course, sweetie. That's what I do for people I love. I never give up on them." She looked directly into Amy's eyes. "Not ever."

Amy felt warmth flooding through her again; the rush of emotion brought sudden tears to her eyes. She hid her face in Hope's shoulder. "So Lisa – it really wasn't –"

Hope shook her head, chuckling. She told Amy about the conversation she had had with Lisa, and how silly she felt about propositioning Lisa in Amy's stead.

"Well, that's stupid, about you not being good at making me feel good," Amy said firmly when she'd finished. "I'll take you over anyone who thinks they know how to do it. And anyway," she giggled, "I actually like snuggling better sometimes. It gives me time to appreciate you just plain being there with me."

"Aww, sweetie, thank you," said Hope, her heart melting all over again. "I was so worried; that makes me feel so much better."

She climbed to her feet and helped Amy up. They held hands, squeezing tightly. Hope looked up at the sky and took a deep breath. "It's a beautiful night, isn't it?" she said softly.

Amy looked up as well, snuggling under Hope's arm; she felt a wing curl around her as well. "It is, sweetie," she agreed. "It really is." They held each other for a long moment of perfect understanding.

Then Hope turned to Amy. "Let's get you back to the shelter," she said softly, nuzzling Amy's cheek. "It's getting cold out."

"Mmmm," agreed Amy. "Let's do some more snuggles. I like snuggles."

"Snuggles are good," agreed Hope; crystalline chimes rang out as she spread her wings and lifted off, with Amy in her arms.

"Oh," said Amy. "One other thing. While they were holding me? I turned every microbe that touched my skin into a particularly virulent version of the common cold, and let it go again. So if you
see anyone sneezing uncontrollably over the next few days …"

Hope laughed all the way back to the shelter.

Timeline C

8:17 PM

"Hurry," urged Coil. "Get everything packed up. We don't have much time –"

The inner door to his base exploded inward. His head whipped around. There hadn't even been an alarm.

Hope was first in through the door. Bullets, fired by his men, ricocheted from her flashing wings. She was followed by a billowing cloud of blackness, and a spreading swarm of insects.

_Ah, of course. She brought the Undersiders._

And then Coil realised his mistake, as a sun-bright ball of light and heat melted in through the wall. And then a second one, beside the first one.

Great cracks appeared in another part of the base; rubble fell from the ceiling.

Other figures emerged from the cloud of blackness. Space began distorting oddly. Bursts of light shot across the intervening space, stunning his men. Gouts of sticky slime pinned more of them to the wall or engulfed them in suffocating blobs.

Hope had not just brought the Undersiders. She had brought _everyone._

His men never stood a chance. Some tried to run; they only lasted marginally longer than those who stood their ground. Coil made it three steps, then inexplicably tripped. He pulled his gun; a painful gash appeared on his hand, and the gun dropped from limp fingers.

And then Hope was right there, holding him by the front of his costume. He saw her fist pull back …

He collapsed that universe.

Timeline D

8:17 PM

"You came highly recommended," said Coil quietly. He sat in his chair, watching Reynolds. Michaels and Davidson flanked the mercenary, just behind his field of vision, keeping him nervous and off balance. The rest of the Miami contingent stood off to the side, obviously ill at ease.

"On checking matters farther, I find out that you're a loose cannon, whose reputation was built on taking down one Brute, with a lucky shot. I'm going to have to speak with my contact about the people he recommends." He steepled his fingers before him. "Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

"Yeah!" blustered Reynolds. "I want my money! I turned up, I put in my time, and then your guys pulled us out of there! With a gun in my back! What sorta deal's this, anyway?" He rubbed his
wrist, recently freed from the zip-ties.

Coil sat patiently, watching him. "What were your orders concerning the parahumans Hope and Amy Dallon?" he asked quietly.

Reynolds paused. "Not to engage," he said sullenly.

"And what did you do?"

Reynolds opened his mouth, then shut it again. Coil glanced at Michaels. "Well?"

Michaels nodded. "He threatened both of them at different times. He did his best to shoot Hope after his man grabbed me."

"She was in the way!" burst out Reynolds. "What the hell else was I supposed to do?"

There was a sharp report. Reynolds stared first at the smoking gun in Coil's hand, and then at the round hole in his own chest. And then he fell over backward. His heels drummed briefly on the floor.

Coil's voice was quiet, but very distinct. "Follow. Orders."

He looked over at the remainder of the Miami mercenaries. "You will be paid off. You will leave Brockton Bay tonight. You will never speak of what happened here tonight. And you will never return to Brockton Bay. If you disobey these orders in any significant particular, I will have you killed. Is all that understood?"

It was.

After the last of them left, Coil stood and put his hand on Michaels' shoulder. "I understand that you did your best. Bad luck happens. None of this is on you."

Michaels nodded. "Thank you, sir." He sneezed, and looked surprised. "Sorry, sir. Must have picked something up."

Coil glanced down at Reynolds' corpse. "I'm afraid I've made a bit of a mess. Get someone to clean it up, then you may as well get some rest. I know I will." Coil headed toward the exit. "It's been a very long day."

He didn't start sneezing till he got back to his quarters.

Later that Night

"Hope?"

"Mmmm?"

"I'm really sorry for thinking what I thought. I should have known better."

Hope giggled sleepily "Yes, you should have, but that's what we live and learn for."

She nuzzled Amy's cheek and kissed her softly. Amy murmured drowsily and snuggled more closely to her. "Hope?"

"Mmmm?"
"Let's not do that again. Ever." She didn't have to say what 'that' was.

Hope agreed wholeheartedly. "Let's not."

Amy sighed contentedly. "I love you, Hope."

"I love you too. Night, sweetie."

"Night."
"Hello?" The voice was hoarse and raspy. In fact, it sounded suspiciously as though the man had a cold.

"Hi, I'd like to speak to Coil, please. Tell him it's Tattletale, and it's urgent."

"I'm sorry, Coil is unavailable at the moment. Can I take a message?"

"Actually, yes," she said brightly. "Tell him that I know. Just that. 'Tattletale knows.'"

"Is that it?"

"Yes, that's it. He'll know what I mean. Byeee."

Lisa hung up, grinning maliciously. Suck on that, Coil.

Coil was not actually at his base. He was at home, in bed. He had tried to gut it out at first, but he had discovered very quickly that a full-face mask is not a good accessory for someone suffering from sneezing and coughing fits. So he had gone home and left his most able-bodied men – the cold virus had been every bit as virulent as Amy had intended, and had gone through the base like wildfire – on station to handle day-to-day business.

His sinuses pounded, his joints ached and his chest muscles felt as though they were slowly shredding every time he sneezed. In fact, his entire body was a shifting landscape of pain.

This day could not get any worse.

And then the phone rang, and Tattletale's message was delivered. The pounding agony in his skull immediately redoubled.

I was wrong.

Amy and Hope woke bright and early, and ducked into the showers before anyone else could claim them. As Amy scrubbed herself down, she watched Hope just turning around under the hot water, the spray tinkling off her wings.

"You don't get dirty," she observed with a faintly puzzled air. "Why do you even bother to take showers?"

"Because hot showers are possibly the greatest invention of mankind," Hope replied with a grin. She turned off the water, re-furled her wings, and began to dress. "That and chocolate ice cream."

Amy rinsed the soap off, turned off the water, and began to dry herself. "You really like them that much?"

"Try going eight years without either one," replied Hope soberly. "Even living on the streets for two years ... hot water is an unimaginable luxury." She paused, tilting her head in thought. "Huh. Well, I'll be."

"You'll be what?" asked Amy, climbing into her clothes as Hope handed them to her.
"Normally if I sleep too long in one place, I start getting nightmares," Hope said. She smiled at Amy. "But since I started cuddling with you ... not a one."

Amy playfully snapped her towel at Hope, who blocked it easily with a wing. The crystalline feathers rang softly with the impact. "You're probably just imagining things. And that's not fair."

Hope leaned in and kissed her softly. "Life's not fair, sweetie. But some things are nice anyway."

Amy hugged her close and smiled. "I'll go with that."

When they emerged from the shower block, they were surprised to see Lisa, in her role as shelter attendant, talking to a woman wearing a yellow silk formal dress. Alongside her stood a man in black and white formal wear.

"That's different," said Hope to Amy, indicating the pair with the flick of a wingtip. "Do you suppose they're on their way to a function, and stopped to ask for directions?"

"I don't know of any functions going on around here," Amy replied with a frown.

At that moment, Lisa turned and spotted them, and beckoned them over. Hope and Amy shared a glance, then approached the trio.

"Morning, Lisa," said Hope, giving her a hug. "What's up?"

"Morning, Hope," replied Lisa, returning the hug and giving her a kiss on the cheek. "These people would like to speak with you." She moved off, talking to people, but Hope could not but detect the interest in her eyes as she looked back at the newcomers.

Hope looked at the pair. "Hi," she said. "How can I help you?"

The woman spoke softly. "We are here on behalf of our employer. He wishes to meet with you, at midday today."

Hope blinked. "Really? Who is he, and why does he want to meet with me?"

The woman glanced at Amy, who rolled her eyes. "Okay, fine, Secret Squirrel stuff. I'll be brushing my hair." She shook her finger at Hope. "Don't go anywhere without me, okay?"

"Hey," said Hope. "Last night, that was you, not me."

"Don't change the subject, sweetie," said Amy, giving Hope a quick hug before disappearing into their shared sleeping space.

Hope watched her go with a helpless smile, then turned back to the woman. "Now," she said. "You were saying?"

"Our employer is known as Accord," the woman in yellow said quietly. "We are members of the Ambassadors."

Hope frowned. "That's ... Boston, right?"

The woman nodded. "Correct. My name is Citrine; this is Othello. We have been sent to politely request your attendance at a meeting with Accord."

Hope lifted an eyebrow. "What if I said I didn't want to go?"
Citrine paled slightly. "That would be... bad. Accord does not like his plans to be interrupted. He reacts... poorly."

"Oh," said Hope. "Well then. I suppose I'll be coming along." She paused. "Midday doesn't give us much time to get back, does it?"

Citrine smiled. "He sent us in his private jet."

"I haven't had breakfast yet," Hope pointed out. In truth, she didn't really need it, but Amy did.

"You can eat on the jet. We have a fully stocked buffet cart."

"Okay, then," Hope said with a nod. "The Ambassadors travel in style."

"We do," agreed Othello. "Do you need to take anything along?"

Hope nodded. "Just one." She held up one finger in a wait-here gesture, and went over to the sleeping enclosure, ducking between the hanging blankets. Amy sat on the bed, brushing her hair and singing softly to herself. Hope thought she recognised *Top of the World*, by the Carpenters.

"Hi, sweetie," said Hope, sitting down beside her and hugging her. Amy immediately broke off the brushing to hug her back. Hope nuzzled her neck, enjoying her just-showered scent.

"So what did they want?" Amy asked, rubbing her cheek against Hope's.

"Me, to travel to Boston, on a private jet," Hope replied with a grin. "Wanna be my plus one?"

"Just try to leave me behind," declared Amy.

"So wait," said Amy, peering out the window. "We're going to Boston, to meet Accord? Why?"

"I have no idea," said Hope, leaning back in the upholstered seat. "But I have to say, when he travels in style, he really travels in style."

"Only Hope is meeting with Accord," Citrine admonished Amy gently. She and Othello had donned masks shortly after getting back on the plane. Hers was yellow, trimmed with precious stones, while his was half black and half white. "You should not even be coming along. He will not be pleased."

"Amy is my friend," said Hope firmly. "If she wants to come along, she comes along."

Amy slid into the same seat as Hope and snuggled with her. "S'right," she giggled. "This is awesome. A private jet. This is all kinds of awesome."

Citrine sighed.

They rode in a limousine to Accord's base of operations. It appeared to be a normal office building, but Hope supposed there were more subtle defenses than first met the eye.

"You must be neat, tidy and correct in appearance at all times," said Citrine. "Be sure to address him formally at all times. He hates untidiness or informality."

Hope nodded seriously. She straightened her clothing slightly, and ran her hand over her hair, smoothing it down. It fell immediately into place. Citrine stared. "What hair conditioner do you use?"
"I don't," said Hope.

"Skin preparation?"

"I don't."

"You mean ... this look is natural for you?"

Hope shrugged, eliciting a slight tinkle from her wings. "I don't know that you'd call it 'natural', given that it's a power effect. But yes, I look like this with zero effort. Perfect skin, perfect hair, I don't get dirty, I don't sweat, nothing sticks to me." She smiled at Citrine, who looked positively jealous. "Now, ask me how easy it is for me to walk down the street without being recognised."

Citrine pursed her lips. "You ... have a point," she admitted. She checked a tiny gold watch on her wrist. "Two minutes to midday. You need to be precisely on time. Go. There is a clock outside his door."

Hope left, and Citrine let herself relax slightly.

Amy frowned. "He's that stringent?"

Citrine shook her head. "Oh, honey. You have no idea."

At precisely twelve by the clock, Hope knocked on the door to Accord's office.

"Enter," she heard from within, so she opened the door. Stepping into his office, she closed the door behind her and moved over to stand before his desk. Careful to keep her wings tightly, perfectly furled behind her, she clasped her hands in front of her. She was not wearing a skirt, so she could not curtsy, but she bent one knee slightly, and dipped her head in a slight bow.

The man behind the desk wore a white suit, and a mask made of silver and wood. The metal meshed over itself in layers so finely crafted that when he spoke, the mask moved in imitation of the face beneath it.

"I am Accord. You are Hope. You are punctual. That is good."

His voice was dry, uninflected. From his words, from his bearing, she drew a sense of what the man was like. This went deeper than mere body language; it drew on the very forces that drove his life. As with Hookwolf, and with Bitch, she felt her posture shifting, her speech patterns changing, to accommodate his way of thinking, of seeing the world.

It was always a fascinating procedure. But she did not let it distract her as she spoke.

"I am pleased to meet you, sir. However, I confess myself curious as to why you wanted to meet with me." She felt her posture straightening half an inch she hadn't known she could manage; her hand-clasp changed into something more formal.

He nodded fractionally, perhaps pleased at her response.

"A fair question. Please, have a seat." He waved at a chair before his desk.

She sat, feet flat on the floor, wings arranged neatly on either side of the chair back. Her hands folded themselves in her lap.

"You have only recently arrived in Brockton Bay," he went on. "And yet, in the short time you have
been there, you have managed to disrupt matters to an extent far beyond that which one person should be capable." He paused, inviting comment.

"I'm sorry, sir," Hope responded. "I didn't mean to cause disruption."

"Be that as it may," replied Accord, "I have been required to restructure several of my plans in that region since your arrival. It is quite unacceptable. Your actions are unpredictable."

"Sir," said Hope, "I was totally unaware of any of your plans for Brockton Bay; any disruption was entirely unintentional."

"I understand that," agreed Accord. "And in fact, I believe that you played a major role in the defeat of the Slaughterhouse Nine; their actions had disrupted more than one of my plans in the past. However, your continued existence and activities threaten to destabilise my future plans, and I will not have that." The threat was subtle but implicit.

"Yes, sir," agreed Hope. "However, I have a solution, if you are interested."

He looked up. "I am listening."

"My aims are simple, sir. I want to help people, and do the right thing. I do not act from the profit motive, nor from romantic impulses. If you wish to predict my actions, sir, use that as a baseline."

He frowned; or at least, the mask performed a frowning action. "Those are your motives? 'To help people and do the right thing?' That's it?"

Hope nodded. "Yes, sir, that is the entirety of the matter."

"Well then," mused Accord. "That should simplify matters considerably." He paused, then apparently came to a decision. "Tell me, how far does your personal altruism extend?"

Hope blinked. "I'm not sure that I get your meaning, sir."

He opened a desk drawer and took out a slim bound document. "Read this, and let me know your opinion of the contents."

Hope stood, accepted the document from him, and sat down again. "May I inquire, sir, as to the contents of this document?"

"You may not," Accord replied. "I would prefer you to arrive at the conclusion yourself."

"Yes, sir," replied Hope, and began to read.

Accord watched her read. Her movements were precise and measured. She gave each page her total attention, eyes flicking to graphs and other illustrations at precisely the correct moments. Her lips did not move while she read, a habit he found irritating in the extreme.

He found himself appreciating her appearance. This was not the attraction of a man for a woman, something he found distasteful at best. It was the appreciation of perfection, of idealised beauty. She could have been a statue of glowing alabaster, adorned with wings of purest crystal. Even those wings, as she stood, moved and sat down, had not hampered her. They had only emitted the faintest whisper of muted crystalline song, pleasant to the ear but not distracting.

She was ... perfection. Her movements, her appearance, were the epitome of what he strove for. She needed no elaborate costume, no adornments. If she were working for me ...
But no. She had already disclaimed the profit motive. Such as she did not work for mere money. And she had briefly been a member of the Wards. He could not see her accepting a place in an overtly criminal organisation.

And with such natural grace and poise. We could work so well together, achieve so much. Regretfully, he decided that such was not to be. A great pity.

It took her ten minutes to get through the document. When she finished, she looked up at Accord. "Sir, I request the time to read it through a second time. I wish to ensure that the impression I got the first time is the accurate one."

He nodded slightly. "Please, take your time."

The second read-through took five more minutes. Then she closed the document and looked up at Accord. "Sir, this is astounding. I am presuming that it is your work, that it is accurate, and that it is the short form of a full plan that covers all the aspects referred to in passing." The tone of her voice made this a statement, not a question.

Accord nodded. "Each of your presumptions is entirely correct."

Hope frowned. "Then I have just one question, sir." She paused; he waved for her to continue. "Why is this document not being made use of around the world, right now?"

Accord paused for so long that Hope thought for a moment that he was not going to answer. "Ignorance," he said, with a note of anger in his voice. "Greed. Politics."

"Sir," said Hope formally, "this document is ... nothing short of world-changing. Have you shown it to many people?"

Accord nodded. "And each and every one of them puts it away and forgets it. Because I am a villain. Because it would take too much money to implement. Because they cannot be bothered."

Hope nodded. "Yes, sir, and because they themselves are not suffering from the problems that it solves. Whereas I have." She lifted her head. "Sir, may I take copies of this precis and the full plan with me when I leave? This plan is not just good; it is great."

Accord shook his head. "I will supply you with what you ask, but I have been attempting to convince the leaders of today's world to take up the plan for quite literally years. Not one of them has accepted it on its own merits."

Hope almost smiled, but her formal manner would not let her do so. "I understand that, sir. However, I can be persuasive if I wish to be, or so I am told." She tapped the document. "This is something about which I truly intend to be persuasive."

Accord nodded. "I do see your point. For some reason, I find myself quite willing to believe you. Perhaps you will succeed where I have failed." He tilted his head slightly. "You are not put off by the fact that a villain originated the plan?"

"Sir," said Hope firmly, "I choose to judge people by their current actions, not by their past mistakes. And your document is a thing in and of itself; it does not warrant judgement except on its own merits."

"Very well, Hope," said Accord. "Thank you for agreeing to meet me. I will take your assessment of your own character into account when formulating my plans. You will be supplied with copies of the
Hope recognised this as a dismissal; she rose from the chair. "Thank you for being so courteous in your invitation, sir. And thank you for showing me the plan."

Bowing once more, in a slightly more precise manner than which she had entered with, she exited the office and closed the door behind her. As she did so, upon leaving his presence, she felt the formal reflexes drain from her body.

Accord sat watching the door after it closed behind her. *She is serious about supporting my plan, about implementing it,* he told himself. *Of all the results I expected when I arranged this meeting, this was not one of them. Perhaps we can work together after all, in a fashion.*

The thought pleased him. He pressed a button on his phone. "Send in Citrine."

Amy came to meet her, and they embraced, holding each other tightly.

"So tell me what happened!" she urged Hope.

"Oh, this and that," said Hope as they walked to the front office desk. "Talked about stuff. Why he shouldn't have me assassinated. How to solve all the world's major social problems in less than a quarter of a century. Nothing important."

Amy stared. "You're kidding." She looked at Hope's face; she was smiling, but not in the manner of a joke. "You're not kidding."

Hope shook her head. "Not in the slightest, sweetie. Not in the slightest."

The plane ride back was relatively quiet. Amy snuggled up to Hope, reading through the document she had brought with her on to the aircraft. Hope put her arm around Amy, holding her close.

"I spoke with Accord after you left his office," Citrine said, partway through the flight. "He seemed most impressed by you." She tilted her head. "Did he offer you a job?"

Hope shook her head. "It didn't come up. We discussed my disruption of his plans, and I suggested a solution. Then he showed me this document. I'm extremely impressed, and I told him so. He seemed ... surprised."

Citrine nodded. "Understandably so. He's been trying to get someone – anyone – in the wider community to pay attention to it, for years now." She smiled. "I'm glad he didn't hire you."

"Why is that?" asked Hope.

"Because I'm his second in command," Citrine said frankly. "And that state of affairs would have ended the second you entered his employ." *You would, quite literally, be perfect for the job,* she didn't say.

"Oh," said Hope. "I'm glad it didn't come to that," she said. There didn't seem much more to add.

"So am I," agreed Citrine with a genuine smile. "So am I."

Hope had to ask the question. "Citrine ... I have trouble getting my head around something. Accord is a villain. And yet he comes up with something like this, which offers him no profit. How do those
two facts go together?"

Citrine sighed. "I don't know the full story. However, I do know that he was not a villain when he came up with the first draft of that document."

"Really?" asked Hope.

Citrine nodded. "Really. He came up with that plan in just a short time. Days, even. Possibly less than that. But his employers would not look at it, would not accept it. From what I understand, he tried to prove that it was financially viable ..." She trailed off.

"... by stealing the money," Hope finished. "I see."

"Wow, she thought. So his bosses were too short-sighted to see it through, when it could have been well on the way by now. That's so sad."

She paused. "Who was his employer? Who did he work for?"

Citrine gave her a dry smile. "The Parahuman Response Teams."

Citrine did not get off the plane in Brockton Bay. "Goodbye," she said. "And good luck with your work here in Brockton Bay."

She would have shaken hands, but Hope would have none of that; she stepped up and hugged her firmly, and then Othello as well. "Good luck to the both of you," she replied. "It was very nice to meet you both."

"Uh ... likewise," said Othello, slightly taken aback. "You take care now."

They stood side by side at the edge of the airfield, hand in hand, watching the plane taxi down the runway. "Well," said Amy. "That was interesting. Where are we going now?"

Hope grinned. "Citrine said the copies of the plan would be delivered to the shelter. It's going to take a few more hours to get here, even by express delivery. So I figure we should make productive use of our time. I'm thinking the hospital." She rubbed her nose against Amy's. "Wanna see how many wards we can clear out before Lisa calls to complain about the crates on her doorstep?"

Amy grinned; Hope's enthusiasm was infectious. "Sounds like fun. Let's do it." She giggled as Hope swept her up in her arms. They shared a kiss before Hope took off.

They managed to clear three wards before Lisa rang.
In which Hope and Amy go to hospital, Hope talks to Lisa and Skitter about saving the world, and Amy gets unexpected hugs

As Panacea, Amy had always seen her role as a healer to be a duty, one she could not avoid. In the end, the duty became onerous; life, at times, seemed to be nothing much more than an endless parade of injured and sick, to be healed only so that she could go on to the next one. There was no end to them, and she was expected to just. Keep. Healing. Them.

She could not stop, would not let herself stop, lest she be seen as being derelict in her duty.

And then there came the incident with Bonesaw, where she was forced to heal her foster father or see him die before her eyes. And following that, when she fell prey to an instant of fatal temptation, and forever lost the regard that Glory Girl held for her. Her healing power, the power to reshape biology itself, changed in one day from being a troublesome gift to a burden that could never be shed.

But then, she met Hope.

She had been a little doubtful at first, a little unsure of just how sincere Hope was in the feelings that she showed toward Amy. But as time went on, and Amy spent more and more time in Hope's company, she had come to the realisation that Hope was nothing but genuine, that the love and respect and regard that she offered Amy were true gifts from her generous soul. And Amy had begun to return that regard, to trust her with her life ... and her love.

Amy's heart was battered and bruised; she was not sure who to trust. But Hope was the one person who trusted her utterly, who afforded her the respect and love and human contact she craved, who hugged and kissed her playfully when she had felt that no other person would ever trust her touch again. Hope was the one person who never pulled away from her, to leave her adrift and alone, even when Amy pulled away from her.

And Hope was a healer also. She knew the burden Amy carried, that there were always more people sick and injured to be healed and mended, that while she healed one person, others, elsewhere, were dying. And in her cheerful way, she did not let it affect her mood. She enjoyed healing people, helping people. It was something she felt she had to do, but unlike Amy, the urging came from within, not without. And sometimes, she knew, one had to step back, relax, let the batteries recharge.

That was what they had been doing, those last few days. Amy understood that now. In between the monumental events of the last few days, Hope had been deliberately taking it easy. She had needed to relax a little, perhaps. Amy had needed it much, much more. And so, they relaxed. They enjoyed life. They learned new things about themselves and about each other. Events intruded, of course, but once those things were over and done, they had gone back to enjoying one another's company.

And Amy was, at last, learning to relax. Learning, indeed, that it was all right to relax.

As Hope touched down in front of the hospital, Amy looked up at the building in slight trepidation. Things were different now – she was different now – but the hospital was still the same looming, monolithic institution of death and despair that she could never, ever overcome. There were always more sick, always more injured, it never ended ...

"Well, come on," urged Hope, tugging at her hand. "Let's go. This'll be fun."
Fun? Amy had never called it that, had never considered calling it that. But she loved Hope, trusted her, and so allowed herself to be dragged along.

And when they got to the wards, she discovered that it could indeed be fun.

Hope made a game of it; she laughed and chatted with the children, who reached out with wide eyes to touch her wings and her glowing skin, even as she healed their ailments. And she introduced Amy as "my really good friend Amelia Claire, who's come along to help me out today". It seemed that none of the children were savvy enough to connect 'Amelia Claire' with Amy Dallon, also known as Panacea.

So Amy went along with Hope, hand in hand. She made the effort to chat to the children, and it became easier and easier the longer she worked at it. She held their hands while Hope healed them, and sometimes, when it was clear that Hope's power was not going to suffice, she gave just a little helping hand. And sometimes, just sometimes, she gave Hope herself just a slight rejuvenating boost to restore her flagging energy levels.

For it seemed that for all of Hope's boundless enthusiasm for healing and helping others, too much healing did tire her out, where it did not with Amy. And yet Hope was always willing to do one more healing, one more mending, even if it wore her out altogether. And as subtle as Amy tried to make her assistance, more often than not, Hope would turn and give her a smile, or rest her head against Amy's briefly, in a silent thank-you gesture.

They worked their way through one ward after another, entering with smiles and cheer, leaving the former patients climbing out of bed and looking for their clothes. Hope was the more radiant, the more beautiful, the more prominent of the two, and so she came in for the lion's share of gratitude and hugs. But Amy also found herself being thanked and hugged, and she realised somewhat to her surprise that she was truly enjoying herself. And then she happened to glance at Hope, who was giving her a sly glance that said, *See? It can be fun.*

And so she relaxed, and let the past fade away, and laughed, and had fun.

They had cleared out three wards and were working on a fourth when Amy's phone rang. She waited till Hope finished healing the current patient – an old lady with a broken hip – and then answered it.

"Hello?" she said.

"Hope's responsible for this, isn't she?" said Lisa, sounding amused and irritated at the same time.

"Oh, hi, Lisa," said Amy with a grin. She was feeling just too good about herself right now, to do anything but. "Thank you, I'm doing well. Hope says hi," she added as Hope grinned and waved extravagantly to get her attention. "And how are you? It's a lovely day out, yes, I agree."

"I have crates," said Lisa. "Crates have been delivered here. Please ask Hope to come and do something about them." She paused. "And give her a hug and a kiss for me." She hung up.

"Oh, I will," said Amy to the dead phone, and put it away. She turned to Hope, who was watching her expectantly. "That was Lisa," she said with a smile. "Something about crates being delivered."

Hope giggled. "Was she upset with me?"

Amy smiled in return, and wiggled her hand back and forth. "Only a little bit," she replied. "Oh, and
she said to give you this." She grabbed Hope in a hug, and planted a kiss on her cheek. Then she squeezed her just a little tighter, and kissed her softly on the tip of the nose. "And that one was from me," she said softly. "For opening my eyes yet again."

Hope smiled at her, and hugged her back. "You're welcome, sweetie," she said, rubbing her forehead against Amy's. "And thank you. You could have done much less." She looked around. "How many more do we have in this ward?" she asked a nearby nurse.

"And what about the rest of the hospital?" added Amy.

"Well," said the nurse, checking a clipboard. "You've cleared out the Intensive Care unit, the oncology ward, and the palliative care cases. And there are ... seventeen patients remaining in this ward." She looked up. "Most everyone else is only minor injuries or other non life-threatening conditions."

Hope nodded. "Well, we're required somewhere else, so we'll just finish up here, and get going," she said briskly. She grinned at the nurse. "Maybe they'll let you go home early."

The nurse shook her head in wonderment. "You've done so much already ... we were stretched so thin after Leviathan. This is only going to bring our workload down to merely stressful levels again, I'm afraid." She looked down the wards at the newly-healed patients and the empty beds. "I have no idea how to tell you how much I – we – appreciate what you've done here."

Hope let go Amy and gave the nurse a heartfelt hug. "Well, I appreciate the fact that you work so hard at what you do," she said. "After all, you and your colleagues are the ones who keep them alive until we can get to them." She turned to Amy. "Shall we reduce her workload some more?" she asked with a grin.

"Let's do this," Amy agreed. For the first time ever, she was really starting to enjoy what she did best.

They landed outside the shelter just a little later. Two crates stood outside the building, with a smaller box on top. And, for a surprise, Skitter had also chosen to visit. She stood with her arms folded, conversing with Lisa; they both turned as Hope and Amy landed nearby.

"Skitter!" said Hope happily. "It's great to see you!" Skitter nodded, and was apparently going to be satisfied with shaking hands, but Hope went to hug her instead. Skitter fended her off; Hope paused, a little hurt.

"Wait a minute," said Skitter. "I have bugs in my costume. Don't want them crushed." And bugs were indeed swarming out from under her costume, in volumes that suggested that she was even skinnier than the lines of the costume suggested. The swarm formed over her head, and she nodded at Hope. "Okay, now you can hug me."

Hope did so, enthusiastically. "It's really good to see you," she reiterated. "How have you been?"

Slowly, she felt Skitter's arms go around her in return, and Skitter's body began to relax by degrees. "It's good to see you too, Hope," Skitter replied. "I've been ... good. It's been quiet. Mostly." She let go of the hug, a little reluctantly, and stepped back from Hope.

"That's excellent," said Hope, with a wide smile. "I'm so glad to hear it." She hugged Skitter again. "It looks like things are starting to come good around here, too."

"Didn't you know, Hope?" asked Amy, rolling her eyes theatrically. "Around here, when things start
to come good, it's just getting ready to hit you between the eyes again."

Hope let go of Skitter and took Amy's hand. "What, everything?" she asked, squeezing gently.

Against her own will, Amy's mouth curled into a smile. "Well, not everything," she admitted, squeezing Hope's hand back.

Hope smiled back, then her expression turned serious as she looked at Skitter. "Well, if anything does go wrong, I'll help where I can, of course," she said. "I'm about to call up to make an appointment to see Director Piggot. While I'm there, I'll sound her out on the PRT attitude toward the Undersiders and the others." She paused. "Oh, wait; there was something else I wanted to talk to you about."

"Yes?" said Skitter.

Hope took a moment to think about what she was going to say. "The Director says that the PRT wants to put up a monument to the fight against the Nine, in the area that it happened. And hold a ceremony to honour everyone who stepped up. And she says that the truce will hold for everyone until then. After that, they're talking about a general amnesty for the Travelers and the Undersiders, for their service to the city."

She looked at Skitter. "Is it actually okay for them to put up the monument, and hold the ceremony there? They're talking about the twentieth."

It was Skitter's turn to pause. "I ... guess," she said eventually. "Especially if they're serious about the amnesty."

"I think they are," said Hope.

Skitter shrugged slightly. "Sure. It's worth a try, I guess. It'll be interesting to see how long it holds." She tilted her head slightly. "So what are you going to see her about?"

Hope indicated the crates behind her. "That. It's a blueprint for saving the world."

There was a short pause. Then Skitter said flatly, "You're kidding."

"No," said Lisa. "She's really not. She went to see Accord today." She looked at Hope quizically. "I hear he's really hard to get along with."

Hope shrugged slightly. "Maybe for some people. You just have to approach him in the right way. I actually got along with him quite well."

Lisa shook her head, with her trademark vulpine grin. "You have the best Thinker power."

"I don't know," said Hope. "Yours is pretty cool too. Sometimes I wish I could just fill in the gaps like you can."

"No, no, you don't," Lisa corrected her. "You just think you do. Having all the gaps filled in, all the time, even when you'd be much happier for them to be not filled in, can be a real pain sometimes."

Hope shrugged again. "I'll take your word for it." She turned to Amy. "Borrow your phone?" she asked. Amy handed it over; as she did so, Hope handed the document Accord had given her over to Lisa. "Have a read," she invited. "It's the short form of the plan."

The phone call was brief; Director Piggot's office was happy to make an appointment for Hope at
any time, by order of the Director herself. By the time she'd finished the call and had handed the phone back, Lisa had finished skimming the document and was going through it more carefully.

"This ... this is amazing," she said, looking up. "I can see the ramifications. This could really work." She tapped the document. "This could really save the world."

"Does it have something in there for Endbringers?" asked Skitter.

"No," admitted Hope, "but there are other plans in the works for them." She turned to Amy. "Wanna come with me to see the Director?"

"Do you even have to ask?" Amy retorted, stepping into the circle of Hope's arms. "I want to see how she's doing with that treatment we gave her."

"Treatment?" asked Skitter; the bugs were flowing back into her costume now, disappearing from sight like a magic trick.

"Yeah," said Hope. "She had bad legs and her kidneys were wrecked. Some sort of old injury. Amy fixed it all up."

"Huh," said Skitter. "That was nice of you."

Hope grinned at her. "It's what I do."

"So I see," said Lisa, handing the document back without needing to be asked. "What are you going to do with these crates?" she asked.

"I'll sort something out when we get back from seeing the Director," Hope promised. She scooped Amy into her arms; Amy put her arms around Hope's neck and snuggled close.

About to take off, Hope paused, remembering. "Uh, Skitter," she said, "one more thing. Can you contact Taylor Hebert for me?"

Skitter looked a little taken aback, and Lisa smothered a cough. "Why do you ask that?" said Skitter, a little belatedly.

"Because I want to know if she's been getting in touch with her dad, like I asked her to," said Hope. "And because they're going ahead with the court case against the girls who were bullying her. I think if she turned up and testified ..."

Skitter turned to Lisa. "There's a court case?"

Lisa shrugged. "First I've heard of it."

Skitter turned back to Hope. "Uh, yeah, thanks," she said awkwardly. "I'll be sure to tell, uh, Taylor about this. And yeah, she's been talking to her dad. I made sure of it."

"Good, thanks," said Hope. "I really appreciate that." She gave them both a brilliant smile, and launched herself skyward in a succession of crystalline chimes.

"Amy," she said, once they had reached cruising altitude, "did it seem to you that Skitter acted a little strangely when I mentioned Taylor Hebert?"

"I dunno," Amy replied. "Skitter just gives me the creeps. All those bugs."

"Hey, it's her power," Hope pointed out reasonably enough. "It would be unfair to tell someone
whose whole thing is controlling bugs to not keep bugs around."

"Yeah, I know that," sighed Amy. "But she still gives me the creeps."

Lisa and Skitter stood side by side, watching Hope and Amy disappear into the distance.

"Do you think she guessed?" asked Skitter.

Lisa shook her head. "Nope," she declared. "Hope is a wonderful, wonderful person, but she's woefully inadequate when it comes to subterfuge."

Skitter nodded. "She is a kind of anti-Stranger, isn't she?" She gestured to the crates. "You think she can pull off this saving-the-world thing?"

Lisa shrugged. "If anyone can ..." she said, letting her voice trail off.

Skitter made a non-committal noise. "We'll have to wait and see, I guess." She paused. "Is it just me, or is there something going on between Hope and Amy? They seem very ... close."

Lisa's eyes glinted with amusement. "Oh, you have no idea. Come on, I'll show you where you can get changed, and we can sit and eat while I tell you all about what's been going on around here."

"Go on in," said Director Piggot's secretary with a smile. "She's expecting you."

"Thank you," said Hope with an answering smile. She opened the door and entered, Amy following closely behind.

Director Piggot was not alone; sitting opposite her was a tall woman with an Asian cast to her features. The woman looked around; Hope thought she looked familiar. "Oh!" said Hope, stopping so suddenly that Amy nearly bumped into her. "Sorry, I didn't know you were busy."

Director Piggot looked over at Hope and gestured her into the room. "Come on in, Hope. You too, Amy." She tilted her head at Hope. "You've met Doctor Yamada before?"

The woman rose, holding out her hand to Hope. "Doctor Jessica Yamada. I recall you; they had me do a psychological assessment of you a few weeks ago."

Hope shook it, and then eschewed the handshake for a quick hug; Dr Yamada let out a surprised and pleased "Oh!" as she did so.

"I remember you now, Doctor," Hope said warmly. She let go to hold her by the shoulders. "I was still a little confused then; I didn't realise that I was being examined. I just remember thinking that you were a very nice lady."

Dr Yamada smiled back at her. "Well, you certainly seem to have borne out my assessment of you, and more besides. Director Piggot was just telling me of what you and Amy here have done for her."

Amy snuggled up beside Hope; Dr Yamada looked keenly at the both of them. "I have also heard a little of the problems with your family, Amy. I have no doubt that your association with Hope is doing you a great deal of good, but sooner or later you will have to face them as well."

Amy ducked her head slightly. "Yeah," she sighed. "Hope keeps telling me that, too." Hope put her arm around the girl and squeezed slightly.
"Well, then," Dr Yamada said with a smile, "you might want to listen to her about that." She looked at Hope. "I have also been talking with Mimi, Riley and William. To be honest, I expected a much rougher time with each of them. Director Piggot says that Mimi opened up and became cooperative after your first visit, and Riley has become far less uncooperative after you visited yesterday."

She paused for thought. "I would say that although they are not cured, or even mostly cured, a good deal of the groundwork has been laid down. This will make my work much easier." She glanced at Amy. "And Director Piggot has informed me that you performed mental surgery upon Doctor Manton?"

Amy nodded, jerkily. "It was the only way," she said. "Siberian was too much of a threat, otherwise." She closed her eyes. "Don't ever want to have to do that again." Hope embraced her with both arms and held her close.

"Indeed," noted Dr Yamada. "Well, I have to say, he seems well-balanced and focused. Apart from his suicidal tendencies, stemming from remorse over his previous actions, of course." She gave Amy a measured nod, which the girl did not see. "Time will tell, of course, but I think you did really well there."

"It's not something we'll be repeating in a hurry," Hope noted. "The power to change the way someone thinks is really, really scary. It's why Amy refused to even acknowledge that she could do it for so long."

Amy's face was buried in Hope's shoulder. "Not gonna do it unless Hope says it's okay," she said, her voice muffled. Hope rubbed her back gently, her hand moving in slow circles.

Dr Yamada watched them both, her eyebrows raising just slightly. "I see," she said softly. "I see, indeed." She walked over to the pair. "Amy," she said quietly, "may I hug you?"

Amy looked around, slightly startled. "You want to hug me? No-one wants to hug me except Hope."

Dr Yamada opened her arms slightly. "If Hope can trust you enough to hold you in her arms, then I can trust you too," she pointed out.

Amy looked uncertain. Hope loosened her grasp, and gave her an encouraging smile. "Go on," she urged Amy.

Reluctantly, Amy let go of Hope and approached Dr Yamada. Slowly, gingerly, they embraced one another, settling eventually into a warm and comfortable hug. Hope watched, a smile on her face. After a long moment, they disengaged; Dr Yamada smiled and said, "There, that wasn't so bad, was it?"

"No," said Amy reluctantly. "It was nice. Thank you."

"I think you should come and see me," said Dr Yamada. "Both of you. Just to visit, and to talk." She smiled again. "And to hug."

"I think ... I'd like that," Amy admitted, then glanced at Hope.

"Oh, I'd definitely like that," Hope agreed. "We'll do that, Doctor. It's a really good idea."

Dr Yamada nodded, and picked up her handbag. "Excellent. Here's my card; ring me any time to make an appointment." She reached into the bag and took out a card, offering it to Amy, who took it. Then she nodded to each of them in turn. "Goodbye, Emily," she said to the Director. "I'm good to come in tomorrow?"
"You are," confirmed Director Piggot. "See you then."

After the door had closed behind Dr Yamada, Piggot rose and walked around her desk. Already, she was moving more easily than Hope had seen her doing before. Abruptly, she embraced Hope, who froze, startled.

"Director," she said, uncertainly, "I thought you didn't hug?"

"I don't," said Director Piggot. "I'm not hugging you now." She continued to hug Hope, who, after a moment began to hug her back. "I just want to thank you for ... what you did yesterday."

Hope smiled. "Well, Amy could do with being thanked too. Considering that she did all the hard work."

"A very good point." Piggot disengaged from Hope, and hugged Amy, who tentatively hugged her back. Then she pulled back from Amy and smiled at her. "Do you know what I did last night?"

Hope blinked, unsure if she was being set up for a dirty joke. "No, what?"

"I went to the gym, and exercised," declared the Director. "For four hours straight." She went back around her desk, and sat down. "My legs hurt, I ache all over, I slept for ten solid hours last night, but I've never felt so good in my life." She leaned forward, elbows on the desk. "So, what did you want to see me about?"

Hope put Accord's document down on the desk. "Read this," she said, "and tell me what you think of it."

As the sun began to dip below the horizon, shadows began to gather. In some places, more shadows gathered than in others.

Flanked by his minions, Regent strolled down the street, tossing his sceptre gently from hand to hand.

The shadows continued to gather. Watching him. Waiting.

And in the heart of them lurked ... malice.
In which Hope speaks with Director Piggot about the plan, and Regent faces a horrible death

Director Piggot finished reading the document for the second time, placed it carefully on the desk, then looked up at Hope. For a long moment she didn't speak.

"Is this genuine?" she asked at last. "Not some elaborate prank?"

Hope nodded. "It's genuine," she assured the Director. "I'll tell you who did it, but you've got to promise not to be mad at me for talking to them."

Director Piggot was silent for another long moment. Then she sagged slightly. "It's Accord's work, isn't it?" she asked quietly.

Hope blinked. "You – I – how did you know?" she blurted.

Piggot smiled thinly. "Credit me with some intelligence," she said with satisfaction. "You didn't come up with this – you admitted as much. And I know only one other cape in the region who could plan something this intricate, this complete." She tapped the document with one manicured nail. "I presume there is more to the plan; actual details, numbers, locations, and so on?"

Hope nodded. "I asked him to give me several copies. They are taking up two large crates at the moment."

Director Piggot nodded. "I will need to look over the actual plan. But before I do, kindly salve my curiosity. Why would he create such a plan, that will take so long to bring to completion? One that affords him no profit that I can see? And why would he give it to you?"

Hope took a deep breath. "He gave it to me because I actually think it's worth pushing," she said. "We spoke on the matter, and he obviously believes that I will do my best to bring it about. As for why he put it together, all I know is what I've been told. But then ..." She paused. "Actually, thinking about it ... I believe it's the reason he became a villain."

It was Piggot's turn to be taken aback. "Come again?"

Hope leaned forward. "Accord lives to make plans. Every time he sees a problem, he creates a plan to solve it. He can't not do it. His second in command told me as much. Anyway, back when he was working for PRT, he apparently took a day or two to solve world hunger. Created a plan. His boss said it wasn't workable, that it would cost too much. He embezzled cash from somewhere to prove that it was workable. Got caught. The rest you know."

Director Piggot didn't speak for a long moment. "So ... his entire criminal career ... has been because we would not implement his plan to solve world hunger? That's always been his overall game plan, to make it happen?"

Hope nodded. "Exactly."

The Director shook her head slowly. "If we had known then ... world hunger, gone."

Hope nodded seriously. "But it's more than that, now. His plan has grown, over the years. Now it covers pollution, energy, population pressure ... everything. Even landmines in Africa and other places." Her face was alight with more than her inner glow. "Accord can make the plans, and he can update them. But he has trouble with people. They don't listen to him." She smiled, brilliantly. "But I
can talk to people. I like to talk to people. They listen to me."

Ironically, Piggot wasn't listening at that moment. She was instead flipping pages, looking for a reference. She found it. "This aspect of the plan is intended to solve the worldwide crime problem. He's a criminal. Isn't that sort of self-defeating?"

Hope shook her head, her smile widening. "That's the beauty of it. Once this plan is implemented, he'll have no need to be a criminal any more. He won't want to be. He lives for order. I felt that, when I spoke with him. And once the world is in order, he can turn his powers to planning ever greater things. Things that benefit humankind."

Director Piggot shook her head. "This is big. I can't handle this all on my own. What's my part in this? What do you need from me?"

Hope grinned. "Well, I figure you have some political clout, being the regional Director of the PRT ..."

Piggot snorted. "Not that much. There's no way I could take this to the President, or anyone close to him."

Hope shook her head. "You don't need to. I'm taking this one step at a time. All I want, all I need, is for you to help me talk to someone further up the line, a little closer to the top."

The Director thought about that. "Director Costa-Brown," she said after a moment. "She'll listen, and you've certainly got some credit with her. And she knows names, knows where skeletons are buried. She should be able to help. I'll speak to her, set up an appointment for you."

Hope smiled. "I really do appreciate this."

Piggot shrugged, massively. "Next to what you and Amy did for me? It's nothing." She fixed Hope with a warning look. "I have just one piece of advice. Let no-one know that Accord is the author of the plan."

"What?" exclaimed Hope. "Why not? That won't be fair on him!"

"Because," said the Director patiently, "people will use the fact that he's a villain to undermine the validity of the plan."

"Really?" asked Hope, looking like a kicked puppy. "Why would they do that?"

"Because people are greedy, gullible idiots who will overturn something good to snatch a small profit even if it denies a long-term benefit," explained Piggot in a careful tone. "So you don't give them the chance. You present the plan as your own. Call it the Hope Plan, or the Hope Initiative."

"No," said Hope, setting her jaw. "We'll call it the Hope Accord." She didn't have the sort of jaw that was designed to be thrust out stubbornly. With some people, this expression made them look implacable and unyielding. With Hope, it made her look utterly adorable, like a tiny, fluffy kitten facing off against a bulldog and refusing to back down.

Director Piggot didn't let herself smile, though her lips twitched. "I like that. It's a good name."

Regent strolled down the sidewalk, accompanied by his minions. He flipped up the sceptre, caught it again.
Life was good. The Nine were gone, and he was still basking in the glory attendant to having been there. He had stepped up, he'd participated in their defeat, and people knew it. Cherie's death had put a bit of a damper on that, but not much of one. They had never really been close; he had let her go more from a vague sense of filial duty than anything else. Her death concerned him more than a little, but in truth it was the manner of her demise that gave him the most pause. Who had killed her, and how, and why? It was something to think about; Cherie had not been without her defenses.

He looked around; lights were coming on, here and there. Power was being gradually restored to parts of his territory; of course, he had ensured that his base got electricity and running water as soon as it was available. *With rank cometh privileges.* But it was nice to see the area beginning to come to life again. Businesses would reopen, people would be able to live in their own homes again, life would start going back to normal. And with returning prosperity would come increasing profits, from the tributes they afforded him, the warlord of his territory.

He flipped the sceptre up again. But just as he caught it, he heard the voice emanating from the alleyway that he was just passing.

"Regent! Hey, Regent! Remember me?"

He paused, peering down the alleyway, cautious in case this was some sort of half-assed ambush. The voice was a girl's; it sounded vaguely familiar. He should know this one.

His minions ranged around him protectively. "Who's there?" he called down the alley. "Show yourself!" His grip tightened on the sceptre. Around him, hands reached for guns.

There was a human shape, clad in shadows. She stepped forward, the darkness seeming to part as she moved into the light. Regent frankly stared.

"Shadow Stalker? What the hell are you doing here?"

She smiled; at least two guns were pointed directly at her face by now, but she didn't seem to care. "I'm here for you, sweetheart," she purred. "I'm here to take you to see your sister."

He took a step back. The menace in her voice was unmistakable. Nor did she strike him as being particularly stable, although she seemed to be holding it together well enough. All four minions now had guns pointed at her by now.

He paused, taking a closer look at her. She was still wearing the prison sweats, but now they hung on her frame a little. Her face was more gaunt, the shadows under her cheekbones more pronounced. But the look in her eyes ... he took another involuntary step back.

"I think," he said, and cleared his throat. "I think I'll pass."

She smiled wider, showing her teeth. "You're much braver than your sister. She screamed, and begged, and tried to run," she said, her voice pooling thick and sweet and deadly, like poisoned syrup. "She didn't get far." She licked her lips, a disturbingly sensuous gesture. "She was delicious."

His imagination whitened out; he didn't even want to think about what that meant. With a jolt, he forced his powers into action, reaching out. Nothing happened; she continued her slow, menacing advance.

"I can feel it, you know," she said, and giggled. The giggle was perhaps the worst bit; the sound echoed in his ears, and the echo sounded wrong. A cold sweat broke out all over his body. "I can feel you trying to affect me, trying to control my body. But I'm different now. I'm better. You can't affect me ... but I can affect you."
And then she broke apart into writhing shadows that filled the alleyway. Two of his minions opened fire, blasting steady shots into the darkness. The other two grabbed Regent by the arms and hustled him away, down the sidewalk. They didn't speak; they didn't need to.

Behind him, there was a scream. He looked over his shoulder, even as he was hustled along. An inky-black tentacle, looking as though it was composed of darkness itself, had whipped out of the alley, grabbed one of his men by the ankle, and was dragging him back into the darkness. He scrabbled at the concrete of the sidewalk, clawed at the corner of the alleyway itself ... and was gone. The scream rose to an agonized pitch – and then stopped.

The other minion emptied the rest of his magazine into the alleyway in a fever pitch of rapid fire, then bolted. Regent was now running, flanked on either side. People saw them coming, saw the grim faces and the guns, and hastily got out of the way.

He didn't know where the third minion had gone to; all he knew was that there were two with him when the car screeched to the kerb, rocking on its suspension. The driver was one of his, of course; Regent was controlling his every move.

The car was a convertible, with the top down. Regent liked to be seen by his adoring masses. Also, it made for quick entry or exit, if such became necessary.

The car was just a few paces away; Regent broke into a sprint. Behind him, a surprised grunt, then a yell of shock and pain. He tumbled headfirst into the back seat before looking back. One of his two remaining minions had been snared by a dark tentacle that snaked from a storm drain. He was being dragged back into the drain; it didn't look as though he would fit. The yell rose to a scream, and Regent saw the man convulsing and thrashing. Words came through the scream.

"Kill me! KILL ME!"

Regent grabbed the gun off his last remaining minion, took careful aim, and put a bullet through the man's head. And then the driver, under Regent's direction, gunned it, peeling out in a cloud of burned rubber that nearly pitched Regent over the trunk and on to the road. His minion grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and hauled him back to safety.

Regent flopped back on to the seat, handed the gun back to his minion – he could never keep their names straight, so he just thought of them all as 'minion' – and wiped his brow. "Christ almighty."

"Yes, sir," said his minion respectfully.

He fumbled his phone from his pocket and started dialing. The others should know about this.

And then there was a manhole cover flying at the windshield. Through his control of the driver, the car's nose dipped as the brakes locked on, and the wheel twisted frantically. He himself barely had time to brace himself; the minion had been standing up in the car, looking back the way they had come.

Given no warning, no chance to react, the minion was catapulted forward over the front seat and the windshield and on to the road. The manhole cover whipped past him and shattered its way through the glass; it slammed into the driver, nearly decapitating him, and sent the car spinning out of control. Regent grabbed frantically for a handhold, any handhold.

The car swerved violently, mounted the kerb, and rammed headfirst into a street light pole. Regent was not thrown from the vehicle; instead, he bounced around the cushioned back seat area like an ungainly pinball. When he finally regained his addled wits, he found himself crammed into the foot-
well, with his legs up on the seat.

Frantically, he scrambled upright, searching for a weapon, any weapon. A tentacle came sliding over the top of the door, questing, seeking. He scrabbled back, away from it. Another came oozing over the top of the opposite door.

"You are going to die," he heard a whisper, almost inside his own head. "I'm going to eat you. Slowly. Agonizingly. And every instant that –"

His reaching hand found the sceptre. He thumbed the activation switch and rammed it at the nearest tentacle. The sceptre penetrated, as if it were not really there, and there was a pop of electrical discharge. The tentacles both recoiled violently, disappearing from view, and he heard a distant scream of rage and pain. Well, at least that still works.

Flinging the door open, he scrambled out of the car and found that his left ankle ached horribly; he must have twisted it in the crash. Can't be helped. He hobbled off down the road at his best speed. Amazingly, the phone was still clutched in his hand. As he went, he typed in a frantic text.

Waving the sceptre frantically from side to side, he lurched away from the stricken car. The driver was dead; that much he knew. His minion was either dead or thoroughly unconscious. Which meant it was up to him to stay alive, stay away from whatever Shadow Stalker had become, until –

Shadows, sinuous and deadly, slid out of the nearby open manhole. He shrank back, holding the sceptre out in front of him protectively. A questing tentacle got too close; he jammed the sceptre into it. Another pop of discharge; the tentacles all recoiled violently back into the manhole. He could almost taste the scream of pain and rage that she let out.

But it wouldn't hold her for long; he knew that. So he ignored his sore ankle, and ran for it.

Blood pounded in his ears; he wasn't much of a runner, but he didn't carry much in the way of excess weight, and he was reasonably fit. But his twisted ankle didn't help. He kept running anyway, doing his best to ignore the shards of agony that lanced up his leg with every jolting stride.

And then his foot landed badly, and his ankle twisted under him, and he fell. He screamed as he felt something part in the ankle joint; he wasn't going to be running again in a hurry. In fact, he wasn't sure if he was going to be standing again in a hurry.

The fall had jolted the wind out of him, and the sceptre had skidded from his hand, several yards farther on down the street. He started dragging himself toward it, two arms and one good leg. There was still a phone in his right hand; he realised this when it rang.

Still crawling, dragging himself toward the sceptre, he hit the button to answer the call, then put it on speaker.

Aisha's voice crackled out of the phone. "Hey, dweeb. Where you at?" He could hear the steady thrum of an engine in the background.

Regent could have wept, but he kept it under control. Besides, she'd rag him forever and a day if he broke down over the phone.

"About halfway down Conroy," he managed, gasping as he pulled himself a bit closer to the sceptre. "For god's sake, hurry. Did you bring them?"

"Yeah, yeah," she replied, sounding amused. "But why did you want –"
The rest of her reply was lost as he screamed and dropped the phone.

The reason he dropped the phone was that a tentacle, dark as night, had snaked out of a nearby storm drain and wrapped solidly around his ankle. His bad ankle. The scream was wrenched from his lungs as it lifted him up bodily to hang upside down, his head just above the street. Even as he was lifted, he lunged forward to grab the sceptre; his fingers just barely brushed it before it was forever out of reach. The phone slipped from his fingers and skidded away.

He hung there, swinging slightly, as more tentacles oozed from the drain. Agony lanced through his leg, but he could not swear all of it was due to the injury; some of it was a terrible, numbing, aching cold.

The voice was back, whispering in his head. "You can't run. You can't escape. You can die. And you will die. You will die so slowly. You will beg for death. And I. Will. Laugh."

More tentacles wrapped around his body, and he felt the terrible cold, the ache of it, the numbing sensation that somehow blocked out everything except the pain. And he screamed.

The sensation lessened, until it was just on the periphery of his mind, like the dull almost-ache of a tooth that's starting to go bad. "Oh, don't be such a baby," she whispered in his mind. "I've only just started to hurt you. We have plenty more to go yet."

As if to prove her point, the tentacles bore down again, and he knew only agony. He felt them dragging the life energy from his very cells, like ice-cold fish-hooks snagging on every particle of his being. His vision blurred, he could not move. Everything was pain. Pain was everything.

And then, there was light. Bright, burning, crackling light. Light so bright that it hurt his eyes even behind clenched lids. But if it hurt him ... 

He heard the scream with both his ears and his mind. The tentacles released him, or perhaps they just dissolved away, as mist will sublime away under strong sunlight. He fell heavily to the street, covering his eyes with his arms, protecting them from the actinic glare.

"Hey, dweeb, get the hell up," came Aisha's cheerful voice. Her hands under his arms prompted him into motion, and he struggled to his feet. "Watch the flare," she warned him, and he moved his foot; his vision was starting to clear, and he realised that he'd nearly just stepped on a burning road flare. Another one was crackling and popping several yards away. Aisha grinned and pulled the tab on a third one, sending it skidding underarm into the storm drain. Light and smoke poured out of the drain, and he thought he heard another scream, distant and in horrible pain.

He tried to move, but his ankle nearly gave way again. She supported him, and helped him toward her motorbike. His entire body ached as though he'd been beaten, and his joints creaked like those of an old man.

"What the hell was that thing, anyway?" she asked as she got him seated on the back of the bike.

"Dunno," he rasped. "But it used to be Shadow Stalker." His voice was rough from screaming. He grabbed her arm. "Thank you. Thank you for coming. And for bringing the road flares."

She grinned at him. "Hey, you told me to. I had no idea what you wanted them for, but then I thought, hey, what the hell."

He held her by the shoulders. "You saved my life."

She was about to reply, but then she kissed him, hard. They held the kiss for long moments before
she broke away.

"Wow," he breathed. "Was that you, or was that me?"

"Dunno. Don't care," she said, and kissed him again.

Minutes later, they were powering away from the scene, with Regent on the back of Aisha's bike. He had his arms around her slim form, and the thoughts crashing around his head were anything but calm.

*What the hell has Shadow Stalker become?*

*Aisha likes me. She really *likes* me. For me.*

*Grue is gonna kill me for kissing his little sister.*

*I don't care. It was worth it.*

*What am I gonna do about Shadow Stalker?*

*Dammit, I knew I should have killed her when I had the chance.*

"Hey," she called over her shoulder, breaking into his thoughts. "You're looking pretty rocky. Want me to take you to a doctor or something?"

"Not a doctor," he replied, and coughed weakly. He was feeling pretty crap.

"Healer, then," Aisha decided. "How about Hope? She's over in Lisa's territory."

Regent considered. Hope was ... he could not figure Hope out. She was totally straightforward, totally upfront, but her motivations were a mystery to him. She *helped* people, people who she'd never met, people who could never pay her back in any meaningful way. People responded to her, but she never capitalised on this, never tried to get any sort of advantage from it. It was almost like she was nice for the sake of being nice. Which made no sense at all.

But it made her an ideal choice for healing him. He knew he could trust her. Which was really weird, because he didn't trust anyone, except the Undersiders.

"Sure," he said. "Let's go there."
In which Hope gets an apology, and Regent gets some healing

Director Piggot stood up and walked around from behind her desk. "I'll look forward to seeing the complete plan," she said to Hope. "It's not often that one gets to view the blueprint for saving the world."

Hope smiled. "If it gets done, it will be thanks to your help," she said, and hugged the Director.

Piggot accepted the hug, then shook hands firmly with Amy. "You have both changed my life; I could do no less in return."

Hope shrugged. "You needed help. We helped. It's not a big deal." She paused. "Oh, and not to change the subject, but I've seen Skitter, and she says it's okay to use the area for the monument and the ceremony."

The Director nodded. "Good, good. I'll set that in motion, then." She paused, looking at Hope, and sighed. "And I believe ... I have an apology to make."

Hope blinked. "An apology, Madam Director?"

Director Piggot shook her head slightly. "Call me Emily. You have earned that, at least. Yes, an apology." She took a deep breath. "You see, when you first arrived here, I mistrusted you deeply."

She looked from Hope to Amy and back. "You have to understand, I had never met a cape before who had your range of powers, and yet was so ... centred. So positive. So nice."

She shrugged. "In my experience of capes, that doesn't happen. Powers of that magnitude just do not occur without serious mental problems. So ... I believed, at least at first, that you were hiding something. That there was a monster, waiting to emerge. And then, as time went on, and you kept on acting like you do, I went from mistrust to dislike. Because I could not understand you. And I have had bad experiences with capes."

"To be honest, there are very few capes that I do like." She grimaced. "But then ... events happened. And gradually, I was shown that not only do you act like that, but you are like that. My job requires me to continually evaluate data, and all the data I was getting showed me one thing. And it wasn't the thing that I originally believed. So it took me a while to come around. Even after you helped take down the Merchants and the Nine, I was reluctant to believe it. Miss Militia's report showed me just how you'd acted during both incidents ... but I did nothing."

Taking a deep breath, she forged on. "But then ... events happened. And gradually, I was shown that not only do you act like that, but you are like that. My job requires me to continually evaluate data, and all the data I was getting showed me one thing. And it wasn't the thing that I originally believed. So it took me a while to come around. Even after you helped take down the Merchants and the Nine, I was reluctant to believe it. Miss Militia's report showed me just how you'd acted during both incidents ... but I did nothing."

She grimaced. "Because we cling to our illusions." A pause. "And of course, you're a healer, one who can reliably bring dead people back to life. Which is a very rare talent, and particularly valuable during Endbringer attacks. So I was conflicted; I wanted the Wards to have access to your powers, while not trusting you as a person. And when you left, I was angry that your powers were no longer readily available, while being relieved that you were not my problem any more."

Another deep breath. "But then you shook hands with me. And you found out about my health problems. And you had Amy fix them. She shook her head. "For the first time in ten years, I can move without pain, and I'm not stuck doing four hours of hemodialysis every night. You've given me my life back. And you have not asked for a single thing in return." She smiled. "So I can't ignore it any more. You're different, Hope. You're genuine. You're a good person and I want to apologise to you, unreservedly, for the way I have treated you in the last few weeks."
Hope blinked. "Madam Director ... Emily ... I had no idea. I thought it was something I'd done, but I couldn't imagine what. I just thought, if I followed the rules, and did what I was told ..." Her voice trailed off.

Director Piggot chuckled wryly. "But you don't actually do that, do you? You ignore the rules if they are stopping you from helping people." She stopped for a moment, thinking about that. "I suppose ... it was one of the reasons I was so conflicted. The PRT only works if people follow orders. And we can issue orders to the Protectorate and the Wards, and reasonably expect to see them obeyed."

She fixed Hope with a steady gaze. "But here you were, ostensibly within the chain of command, never once being anything but polite and respectful, but just simply ignoring orders when it suited you. Reaching out to villains, upsetting the order of things ... but never once seeming to realise the magnitude of the effect you were having, or the ripples you were leaving behind." She shook her head slowly. "Poor Weld. I thought he was just being incompetent, but he never really had a chance of pulling you into line, did he?"

"Weld was nice to me," Hope declared. "He has a hard job to do, and I suppose I made it harder, but he always tried his best. And I think he understands the way I think, and why I do things the way I do, which is why I got away with so much."

Director Piggot nodded. "I understand that now. Before the Nine, he was slated to appear at a disciplinary hearing, regarding his handling of you as a subordinate. That's not going to happen now."

Hope smiled. "Thank you. I really appreciate that."

Another nod from Piggot, sharp, all business again. "No sense in disciplining a subordinate for something that's really not his fault." She shook hands again with Amy, and with Hope, re-establishing the formal distance. "Thank you again for bringing this matter to my attention. Director Costa-Brown will hear about it just as soon as I can contact her."

"Thank you, Madam Director," said Hope gratefully.

Director Piggot's eyes glinted with amusement. "You can still call me Emily, you know. I did mean that."

Hope nodded. "In that case, thank you, Emily," she said, as she and Amy exited the office.

"You're welcome," replied Director Piggot to the closing door.

Alone in her office, she sat for a while, marshaling her thoughts. Then she picked up her phone and hit speed-dial.

"Ah, Director Costa-Brown," she said. "I'm glad I caught you. There's a matter that's come to my attention, that I believe you need to look into." She paused, listening. "Why yes, it does involve Hope. How did you guess?"

"You were very quiet in there," observed Hope as they winged away from the PRT building.

"Wasn't much for me to say," replied Amy, snuggling into her arms. Night had come down properly while they were in Director Piggot's office, and lights were gleaming all over the city. Power had not been returned to all areas, but it was starting to look promising.

"What do you think of Doctor Yamada?" asked Hope, letting herself glide for a short while, the
wind keening through her wingfeathers.

Amy shrugged slightly. "She seemed nice," she allowed, glancing away and sounding disinterested.

"Sweetie," said Hope firmly. Amy looked around at her, a little surprised by the tone. Hope rubbed her forehead against Amy's, then kissed her gently on the lips. She smiled at Amy's slightly startled expression. "Do I have your attention?"

"Um, yes," replied Amy promptly; her tone was anything but disinterested now.

"Good," replied Hope with a smile. "I really do think you should go to see Doctor Yamada ... but I will be coming with you. I'm not going to make you see her on your own. Not unless you want to. You get that, sweetie?"

Amy nodded, her eyes welling with tears. "Uh huh. Th-thank you, Hope. I know I need help but ..."

"But it's so hard to ask for it, I know," soothed Hope. "I'm not just going there for you, sweetie. I'm going there for me, too." She leaned down and kissed Amy softly on the forehead. "Because I know I need help too. But I'll be right there with you, all the way."

And they flew on, in a comfortable silence that was broken only by the chiming of her wings.

There was a motorbike parked outside the shelter when Hope and Amy came in for a landing. A dark-skinned girl in a skin-tight costume was just helping Regent off the back seat of the bike. Regent was not looking good; he was grey in the face, and his ankle would not support him. Just coming out of the shelter were two others; one was Lisa, and Hope recognised the other as Taylor Hebert.

"What happened to him?" asked Hope. She didn't stop to ask who the dark-skinned girl was; Regent looked as though he were in some pain.

"Shadow Stalker happened to him," the girl explained tersely. She looked over at Lisa. "She's our mystery killer. She's upgraded somehow. Shadow tentacles, but she can't stand bright light."

Hope and Amy reached Regent and eased him to the ground. Holding hands, they each grasped one of his, and consulted on what they saw there.

"Fractured ankle, torn Achilles tendon," noted Amy.

"I got that," said Hope, and silver-blue light flared. Regent gasped as his ankle shifted back into alignment, and the tendon repaired itself.

"As for the rest of it ... wow," said Amy. "I've never seen anything like this before. Not in someone your age, anyway."

"Wow is right," Hope agreed. "It's like ... you just got old, all of a sudden. There's cellular breakdown starting to happen all over the place."

Amy nodded, then addressed Regent. "Whatever Shadow Stalker did to you, it aged you by about thirty years. Once your body has a chance to catch up with this, you'll be starting to show age lines, grey hairs, arthritis, and so on."

Hope frowned. "I can't fix that," she said worriedly. "I don't know how."

Amy squeezed her hand. "I ... I guess I can," she said uncertainly. "Should I?"
Hope met her eyes, and nodded decisively. "Yes," she said. "We should."

Amy nodded. "Okay then. Let's do this." A squeeze of Hope's hand. "Ready?"

Hope squeezed back. "Ready."

To Regent, it was like a bucket of ice-cold water being poured through every single cell of his body, all at once. Far from being as agonizing as Shadow Stalker's attack had been, this was ... refreshing. Shocking, but refreshing. He felt his body waking up, his system quickening; even his heart was beating more strongly.

"Holy crap," he said. Even his eyesight had been starting to go, he realised, as the world snapped back into clear focus. "That was ... awesome. Can you do that with anyone? Even the just normally aged?"

Amy let go his hand and shrugged. "I could, I guess," she said, "but the big problem is, once I started, where could I stop? Where do I draw the line, between the old man that I rejuvenate, and the old woman that I don't?" Hope folded Amy into her arms; Amy buried her face in Hope's shoulder. "I can't make those sorts of decisions," she said, her voice muffled. "It's not fair."

"Yeah, I guess," replied Regent. "But thanks, I really appreciate it."

"You're welcome," said Hope with a smile. She looked at the girl standing nearby, watching the byplay with a slightly anxious air. "He should be all right now." She paused, frowning, looking at her properly for the first time. She was wearing a skintight costume, with two cute little horns attached to the mask over the forehead. "I'm sorry, I don't think we've met."

The girl snickered as she helped Regent to his feet. "Actually, we have. A few times. You just don't remember it."

Hope frowned. "I think I would remember meeting someone like you."

"Someone like who?" asked Amy.

"What?" asked Hope.

"You said something about 'meeting someone like you'," explained Amy. "But I'm not sure what you're talking about."

"I did?" asked Hope. She looked around; Regent had gotten to his feet, looking somewhat better than he had before. There was a motorbike nearby; surely Regent had not ridden that in on his own, in the shape he was in? "I think I'm missing something here."

"You are," said Lisa sharply. "Imp, stop it."

_Imp?_ wondered Hope silently. Suddenly, there was a girl standing there next to Regent; or had she been there all the time? She wore a skintight costume, with two cute little horns attached to the mask over the forehead.

"You're no fun," said the girl – Imp? – sulkily.

"They just healed Regent," Lisa pointed out. "It's rude to play tricks on them after that."

"Okay, fine, I'll be nice," Imp sighed. She stuck out her hand. "Hello, Hope, I'm Imp," she said in a sing-song tone, like a child repeating something by rote. "We've met several times, but you don't
remember, because I can make you forget my existence." She stuck out her tongue at Lisa, then grinned a cheeky grin. "I can pull off the best pranks."

Automatically, Hope shook her hand. "So ... you're one of the Undersiders?" she asked. Abruptly, a memory clicked into focus. "You were in the house where I went to meet you all. I remember someone saying your name, but I didn't know what it meant at the time."

Imp's grin widened. "I was sitting beside you on the sofa the whole time."

Hope blinked. "Wow. You're good."

"And I was on the island for the meeting, too. And at the fight with the Slaughterhouse Nine."

Hope blinked. "You were there?"

"Hell yes, I was there," Imp confirmed. "Or did you think that Regent got hold of Cherish, and Weld got hold of Bonesaw so easily, just by sheer luck?" She looked insufferably pleased with herself. "A little shove at the right time can work wonders."

Hope glanced to Lisa for confirmation, and got an answering nod. "Wow," she said again. "You're really good."

"See?" said Imp to Lisa. "See? Hope thinks I'm good."

Lisa rolled her eyes. "I never said you weren't, honey. Just that you tend to rely on your powers a bit too much. You know they don't work on machines."

Imp pouted. "Which is totally unfair, by the way," she grumped.

Hope frowned. Should Lisa be just dropping information about Imp's weaknesses for Amy and me to hear?

She glanced at Lisa, who divined her concern, and gave her a nod. Ah, okay. Lisa knows she can trust us.

She nodded back, and turned her attention to Regent. "Feeling better?" she asked him.

"Oh, definitely," he agreed. "You and Amy do good work. Want a job? I pay well."

Hope shook her head with a smile. "I don't do this for money," she informed him. "I do it because it needs to be done."

Regent nodded, although he acquired a faint line between his eyebrows, as he attempted to assimilate that world-view and failed to do so. "Well, okay then. Amy? Interested in a job? I pay top dollar."

Amy shook her head, still snuggling close to Hope. "I'm with Hope. Where she goes, I go."

Regent chuckled. "For a moment there, it sounded like you were with with Hope, not just, you know, 'with' her." His chuckle died away, as he looked at the pair of them. Amy put her arm around Hope's waist, pulling her a little closer, and looked steadily back at him.

His jaw dropped. "What, really?" he asked, looking somewhat startled. "But how do you ..."

Hope gazed back at him, one perfect silver eyebrow raised slightly. "What we do," she said softly, "is between Amy and myself, and no-one else."
Imp stared, fascinated. "You have got to tell me how you manage that," she said with considerable interest. "I mean, do you ... does she ..." Hope wasn't quite sure who she was addressing. But her right primary wing unfurled and curled around to place a protective barrier between Amy and Imp.

"Enough, you two," snapped Lisa. "This is a private thing between the two of them, and we don't need you two prying. Or spreading rumours. Understood?"

"But –" began Regent.

"I was only –" started Imp.

"Besides," said Lisa with a grin, "I'm wondering how Grue will feel about the two of you."

Imp and Regent snapped their heads around to stare at her. Hope raised an amused eyebrow; Amy caught her eye and quirked a half-smile. They settled back to watch the show.

"You wouldn't – " began Regent.

"Don't you dare –" Imp said at the same time.

They both glared at Lisa, who grinned, and flicked a meaningful glance toward Hope and Amy.

Imp got it first. "Okay, fine," she sighed. She elbowed Regent in the ribs. "We'll leave 'em alone," she added. "Right, dweeb?"

Regent nodded resignedly. "Right, fine." He put his arm around Imp's shoulders; she put hers around his waist. "Grue is going to kill me when he finds out, isn't he?"

"Maybe, maybe not," said Lisa judiciously. "I'll talk to him." Regent actually brightened a little at that. Imp just looked sulky.

"Uh ..." said Hope hesitantly. "I must be missing something here. Why would Grue be angry that Imp and Regent are a couple?"

Lisa grinned her vulpine grin. "Because she's his little sister," she explained.

"Oh," said Hope. She looked at the pair of them. "Oh, dear."

"Exactly," grinned Lisa.
Imp and Regent left a little later, on Imp's motorbike. As the sound of the engine faded into the night, Hope turned to Taylor, who had taken little part in the proceedings to that point. "I've been meaning to get hold of you," she said. "Has Skitter told you about the court case?"

"A bit, yeah," Taylor acknowledged. "Who's going on trial?"

"Emma Barnes, and maybe the other one as well. Madison Clements, I think her name was?"

Taylor nodded jerkily. "That's her. So they're really going on trial for ... what they did?"

Hope nodded. "Sure. There's apparently a whole lot of evidence, mainly emails and phone texts between those two and Sophia Hess, about how much they were working at making your life miserable." She shrugged. "You might not even need to turn up. They might have all they need to make a solid case."

Taylor shook her head. "You don't know those people. Emma's father is a lawyer. When Dad and I tried to take it to the school, after I hit Emma in the shopping mall, Mr Barnes threatened to keep us coming back to court till we couldn't afford it any more. He knows all the tricks."

Hope nodded sympathetically. She let go of Amy, and hugged Taylor. The girl seemed a little reluctant, but accepted the hug. "I don't think he knows enough tricks this time," she said quietly. "I told Weld about it, and he looked up all the information. So he told Miss Militia, and she told Director Piggot, and she must have taken it straight to the top."

"Director Piggot," muttered Taylor. It was almost a snort of derision. "Don't discount her so fast," murmured Hope. "She may surprise you. She's had a bit of a life change recently."

She took a deep breath, gave Taylor one last squeeze, then stepped back to take Amy's hand again. "Anyway, this is all part of a program to ensure that Wards aren't bullying kids, or encouraging bullying by others, in the schools they're attending. They've found some other cases, so the PRT is hitting them as hard as they can. And the non-cape perpetrators are being prosecuted by standard law enforcement."

Taylor looked at her, puzzled. "But ... PRT doesn't really have jurisdiction over civilians. How are they justifying prosecuting Emma and Madison?"

Hope grinned. "They prosecute the henchmen of villains, right? That's a precedent, right there. They want to send a clear message – even if you're not the cape, even if you're just doing what the cape tells you to do, you're still responsible."

Lisa nodded. "That makes a certain kind of sense. I like it."

Taylor frowned. "But what if Mr Barnes pulls some lawyer trick, and has all the evidence thrown out of court on some technicality? Then it's a no-show."

Hope smiled. "Then be there. Testify. The PRT wants this to happen. If you're there, speaking up, they won't ignore you. And all the lawyer tricks Emma's father can pull won't matter. Because he'll be up against the PRT's legal teams." She took Taylor's hand with her free hand, squeezed it. "Amy
and I will be there to back you up, all the way." She turned to Amy, squeezed her hand in turn. "Won't we, sweetie?"

Amy squeezed her hand back. "Sure," she agreed. "It might even be fun."

Lisa tilted her head in thought. "Something just occurred to me," she mused.

Taylor turned her head. "What's up?" she asked.

"This trial's going to get a lot of publicity."

"Yes," said Hope. "That's the idea." What's she leading up to? she wondered.

"And there were originally three girls bullying you," Lisa continued, speaking to Taylor.


"Shadow Stalker," supplied Amy, to show she was keeping up.

"As you say," Lisa agreed. "Shadow Stalker." She smiled. "And she's back, after some kind of twisted revenge, right? Regent was the one who took her body over, controlled her, that's gotta be fairly humiliating. Now, she's had a try at him, but failed because of Imp, and maybe even got hurt. So she's likely to try for another target, instead of going after him again."

Taylor frowned. "You're talking about me. Shadow Stalker will be coming after me."

Lisa inclined her head. "Or Hope." She smiled her most vulpine smile. "And if you attend the trial, with Hope as moral support, there's two of her most hated enemies right there in a public place. As well as her former allies. Who, if I read her correctly, are now to be despised because they were weak enough to be caught and punished."

Hope felt the light-bulb click on over her head. "So she's likely –"

"- to hit the trial, if we're there!" finished Taylor, almost in the same breath.

"Doesn't that mean we should stay away, if us going means she will be drawn there?" asked Amy, frowning. "It's not exactly the best forum for a battle. And if what Regent says is accurate, we can hardly hurt her."

Lisa's smile widened. "Not ... unless we prepare the field of battle beforehand." She glanced at Hope, caught her eye, raised an eyebrow.

Hope paused. "Oh," she said. "I see. I think I see." She grinned back at Lisa. "Let me see what I can do."

"What are you two conspiring about?" asked Taylor suspiciously.

"An idea," said Hope cheerfully. "I'm going to need to talk to some people, but if all goes well ... we're going to court."

Taylor left shortly afterward, backpack slung over her shoulder. Hope had given her another hug before she left; the girl had seemed both tentative about human contact, and achingly grateful to have some.

"Will she be okay, getting back to Skitter's territory alone?" she asked, as the darkness swallowed the
"Oh, I figure she can take care of herself," Lisa replied with a grin. "Taylor can be pretty tough when she needs to be. And besides, we have petty crime just about stamped out in this area. Plus, I slipped some road flares into her pack."

She waited till Taylor was definitely out of earshot, then leaned forward conspiratorially. "And there's one other thing I wanted to talk about while she wasn't here," she said with a grin. "See, her birthday's on the nineteenth, and I wanted to throw a surprise party for her."

"Oh, wow," said Hope. "How old will she be?"

"Sixteen," replied Lisa with a grin.

Hope blinked. "She's younger than me? Wow. I thought she was older for sure. She's really self-assured for fifteen."

"She's had to learn to be," Lisa told her. "She had a pretty hard run of it, for a while there."

Hope frowned. "I met her dad," she said uncertainly. "He seemed like a nice guy."

"Oh, he's the best," Lisa agreed. "Loves her dearly. But there were times when even he wasn't able to help her."

"The bullying," Hope said.

"That, and other things," Lisa agreed.

"Other things?" asked Hope.

"Not important right now," Lisa told her. "But I will tell you about them later."

Hope frowned. "Did other ... bad things, happen to her? Was she molested? Raped? Did she fall pregnant, have a baby, or an abortion?"

No, Hope recalled, Taylor's body had shown no gross evidence of any of those things having happened.

"Oh, no, no, nothing like that," Lisa said hurriedly. "Not bad things, as such. Just ... different things. I will tell you about them later, I promise," she added. "Just not right now. It's not the time."

Hope took a deep breath. "Okay," she said, taking Amy by one hand and Lisa by the other, and leading them into the shelter. "So, tell me more about this party you're planning."

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Hope rose early the next morning, before sunrise. She and Amy had sat up deep into the previous night, working out party details, and giggling over the silly pictures Lisa was photoshopping together for the invites. But Hope didn't sleep much, and so she was wide awake at five in the morning, with the urge to get up and do something she hadn't had time to do since before she arrived in Brockton Bay.

And she wanted to share the enjoyment of it, and so she woke Amy.

Amy did not enjoy being awoken at such a ghastly hour, as she colourfully put it, but coaxing and prodding (and a steaming cup of coffee from the kitchens) got her awake and into her clothes.
"So where are we going?" she asked, still half-asleep, as she and Hope left the shelter. She was wearing her jacket, at Hope's insistence; a crisp early-morning breeze made her shiver and pull it around herself.

"You'll see," smiled Hope, wrapping her arms around Amy and rubbing noses with her. Then she scooped the girl up in her arms, crouched slightly, and launched herself skyward, with a diminishing series of chimes from her wings.

Upward she flew, in a long angled arc. The crisp air at ground level gave way to a certain briskness, and then downright chilly air. Amy clung to her, jacket firmly zipped all the way up, and shivered occasionally, but didn't complain.

When Hope finally figured that she was high enough, she was hovering far above Captain's Hill, with all of Brockton Bay spread out before them. The sleeping city was still in shadow, far below. Amy was huddled into her, curled up for warmth. Her eyes were closed, and she was possibly more than half asleep now.

Hope waited a beat, then smiled. "Okay, sweetie," she said. "You can look now."

Amy blinked, then opened her eyes fully and looked up at Hope. "What?" she asked. "What are we looking at?"

Hope nodded toward the horizon. "Look," she said softly, her voice barely audible over the rhythmic chiming of her wings. "Look over there."

Amy looked, just as the first limb of the sun burst over the horizon.

It illuminated them first, as the highest point above Brockton Bay. The sunrise was brilliant, lighting up the clouds gathered out over the ocean in shades of red and orange and purple. As the sun climbed higher, it first touched the summit of Captain's Hill and then eventually, the tops of the taller buildings in Brockton Bay.

They watched the full glory of the sunrise, from first light, to the sun-rays chasing the last of the early-morning mist from the dockyards. Far below, sea birds flew across the brilliant scene.

Hope turned her face to Amy's, and they shared a kiss, long and gentle and tender and loving. Amy put her arms around Hope's neck and held her close even after the kiss ended. "Good morning, sweetie," Hope said in her ear.

"Good morning to you too," Amy responded. "That was wonderful. Thank you for getting me out of bed. It's been a long time since I got the chance to watch a sunrise, especially not from however far up we are."

"Don't look at me," giggled Hope. "I don't have a built-in altimeter. But I do like watching sunrises and sunsets from this high up. They're kind of awesome." She grinned. "Wanna see how fast we can get back to the shelter?"

"Wait," said Amy. "What do you meeeEEEEEE –"

Her voice rose to a shriek as Hope turned and dived.

It had taken Hope a little over twenty minutes to reach the appropriate altitude from which to watch the sunrise. It took her five minutes to get back down, and it took her that long because she was being careful with her passenger.
By the time they landed outside the shelter, Amy looked more than a little disheveled from the rush of wind. Her hair was a tangled mass, her cheeks were flushed, and she had that certain brightness in the eye which betrays people who have undergone a new and exhilarating experience and enjoyed it thoroughly.

The staff were only now starting to rise, as were the earliest of the shelter residents; most of them were still asleep. Hope and Amy went back to their sleeping enclosure and collapsed on to the bed, fully clothed, unable to dredge up the motivation to take anything off.

They lay in one another's arms, on top of the sheet, kissing occasionally, softly and gently.

"You are so mean," whispered Amy.

"Why is that?" asked Hope with a giggle, as she kissed Amy on the tip of the nose.

"You got me all worked up with that dive coming back here, and I've got no-one to take it out on. I'd like nothing more than to hold you down, tear your clothes off, and ravish you, but you've got nothing to ravish." She sighed. "Once we get past the 'tear your clothes off' bit, there's nothing more to do, really."

"Well," said Hope uncertainly, "I can undress you and ..."

Amy shook her head. "That's the problem. I'm feeling aggressive. I don't want it done to me, I want to be doing it. And you've got nothing to do it to." She eyed Hope speculatively. "Unless you'd like me to make some ... changes ... to your physiology ...?" Her voice trailed off suggestively.

"No!" said Hope, then she moderated her voice. "No," she said more softly. "I'm really sorry. I wish I dared let you make me into a real girl, even just for a day, even for an hour, but I can't make myself want to. I'm too terrified of not being me any more." Tears were running down her face; she rolled away from Amy to the very edge of the bed, wings wrapped around herself in a tight cocoon of misery. "I'm sorry for being so selfish."

Minutes passed. Amy moved around a little on the bed, but Hope didn't notice, wrapped as she was in her own little world of self-recrimination. But then Hope felt Amy's hand tugging gently at the wings which enclosed her. She had the strength, easily had the strength, to prevent Amy from moving the wing aside, but she let her move it anyway. Gradually, her wing uncurled from around her; under Amy's gentle coaxing, it furled into place on her back.

Each wing in turn, Amy uncurled from around her, and helped her furl, before taking her shoulders and rolling her back toward the middle of the bed. That's when she realised that Amy was bare as the day she was born, and smiling at her.

"Get those silly clothes off," Amy said softly, "and come snuggle with me. I understand naked snuggles are better than any other type."

Hope blinked at her. "You don't want me to ... I mean, I can do the other ..."

Amy shook her head. "No, sweetie, I don't." She began to unbutton Hope's top. "Right now, I just want to snuggle with you. Because if snuggles are good enough for you, they're good enough for me."

So Hope let Amy take her clothes off. And they climbed under the sheets and snuggled, without a stitch on, and without a care in the world.
Because right then, and right there, snuggles were indeed just what they both needed.

Much later, after breakfast, Hope levered open one of the crates, and dug into the contents. They had been stacked with Accord's trademark efficiency and sense of order, with carefully colour-coded and labeled binders. Hope borrowed a large carry-bag and stacked the binders in it, along with one of the overview documents.

Closing the crate once more, she grinned at Amy. "Ready to roll, partner?" she asked.

"Always," responded Amy, chuckling as she leafed through the contents of a bag that Lisa had given her.

"What's that?" asked Hope.

"The invitations for the party," Amy giggled. "Check this one out."

"Wow," said Hope. "I don't think Bitch would kiss anyone on the cheek. Punch, yes. Kiss, no."

"That's why they're so funny," Amy told her. She carefully closed the bag, and let Hope scoop her up in her arms. Hope's grip was a little awkward, given the large carry-bag she was also holding, but she managed. Amy wriggled a little to get herself settled, then put her arms around Hope's neck. "Ready when you are, sweetie," she whispered.

Hope spread her wings and brought them down, launching them skyward. The crystalline chime didn't quite drown out Amy's whoop of enjoyment.

"What was that about?" asked Hope, once they were at altitude. "The 'woo-hoo', I mean."

Amy shrugged. "I dunno," she said with a smile. "I guess I really enjoyed this morning's flight, and it showed me just how much fun flying can be."

Hope smiled down at her. "Well, I'm glad," she said, kissing Amy on the cheek. "And thank you for the snuggle. It was really, really nice."

"It was, wasn't it?" agreed Amy. "And I'm sorry about upsetting you earlier. I was really only joking, what I was saying. I know you really don't want to be made back into a girl, and I would never pressure you into doing something you don't want to do." She caressed Hope's cheek with her hand. "You are a truly beautiful person, inside and out, and I love you just as you are."

Hope turned her face into the caress, kissing the palm of Amy's hand. "Thank you, Amy," she said, feeling tears welling briefly in her eyes, before they were whipped away by the wind. "I love you too." She looked down at Amy. "But I know you. You were very relaxed in the snuggle. You were anything but relaxed, earlier. How did you -?"

Amy looked briefly embarrassed. "Oh, I, uh, took care of the problem."

It took Hope a few seconds to grasp her meaning. "Oh!" she said. "Oh, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have brought it up."

Amy giggled. "That's all right. After all, we've done much the same, together."

"Seriously," said Hope. "I could have -"

Amy shook her head. "As mind-blowing as that can be, I can't be dependent on you for everything,
can I? There's got to be *some* things I can do for myself." Her giggles became more intense. Hope followed suit.

Their giggles turned to laughter. Amy snuggled up into Hope's arms. Hope rested her chin on top of Amy's head. They flew on.

Their first stop was the PRT building, where Hope handed off the carrier bag to a PRT guard.

"Please get this to Director Piggot, just as soon as possible," she said politely.

"Understood," the guard replied. "She left word that you would be dropping this off. I'll get it straight to her."

"Thank you," she replied with a smile.

"No," said the guard quietly. "Thank you." And then, unexpectedly, he saluted her.

"Oh," she said. "Okay. Uh ... see you later." She had no idea how to salute, and wasn't even sure if he expected her to. So she just left, with Amy at her side.

"Wow," she said, once she was outside. "That was different."

"I guess he heard what we did for the Director," Amy commented.

"What you did," Hope corrected. "I just spectated."

"What we did," insisted Amy. "You picked up on her problems, and spotted for me while I did it. If you hadn't been there ... I don't think I would have dared." She embraced Hope tightly. "I don't trust myself with my powers, but I trust you with them. Because you can watch me and make sure I don't go too far."

"You know, sweetie, we're gonna have to work on that self-trust thing someday," Hope said softly, brushing hair out of Amy's eyes.

"Yeah, maybe," said Amy, holding her forehead against Hope's. "But not today. I'm just enjoying being with you."

Hope smiled. "And I always enjoy being with you," she replied. "But we're going to Protectorate headquarters next. So you're gonna have to share me with Vista. She likes her hugs too."

Amy grinned and kissed the tip of Hope's nose. "That's fine. She can hug you while you're there. I'll hug you the rest of the time."

"Sounds like a fair division of labour," agreed Hope. Taking Amy in her arms, she lifted off from in front of the PRT headquarters.

"So, you really enjoy flying now?"

"Yup."

"Wanna go for a barrel roll?"

"*Hell* no."
Their reception at the Protectorate building was extremely cordial. Miss Militia appeared and greeted them warmly.

"How have you been?" asked Hope, hugging her carefully and trying to avoid the basket-hilted sabre that rode on her hip.

Miss Militia heaved an exaggerated sigh. "It's been really slow," she pretended to complain. "Someone took out the Merchants and the Slaughterhouse Nine. The gangs have been behaving themselves. Even Coil's men haven't been doing anything over the last few days." She threw up her hands. "I don't know what the world's coming to."

Hope blinked. "Uh, you were there when we took down the Nine," she said. "I watched you shoot Jack Slash." Her voice dropped away, and she looked down, wrapping her arms around herself. Amy embraced her, holding her close, comforting her.

Miss Militia nodded. "I know," she said. "I was making a joke. It was funnier to pretend that I didn't know what had happened to them." She looked closely at Hope. "Are you okay?"

Hope nodded, leaning against Amy. "I'm still not really comfortable with what we had to do there," she said quietly.

Miss Militia nodded again. "I understand. But it had to be done."

Hope took a deep breath. "I know, I know," she admitted. "I'm just glad that it's over and done." She paused. "However, there is a new problem out there, and it nearly got Regent last night."

Miss Militia went from relaxed to alert in a single heartbeat. "I'm listening."

Hope explained about Shadow Stalker's new lease on life, and how she had nearly killed Regent. "We think she's killed others," she concluded.

"Yes," agreed Miss Militia. "Weld filled me in on the murders Skitter told him about." She paused. "Cherish too, huh?"

Hope nodded. "However, I'm working on a plan of sorts. Can I go talk to the Wards?"

"Sure," agreed Miss Militia. "I think they'll be glad to see you."

'Glad' was not quite the word for it, at least for Vista. She hit Hope with a flying embrace that only differed from being a flying tackle in that Hope saw her coming and braced for impact. Hope grinned and hugged her back.

"It's good to see you too, kiddo," she said, ruffling Vista's hair. "How have you been?"

"Missed you," said Vista, still clinging to her. "No other girls around here. No-one to sit and watch silly movies with."

"And eat popcorn and ice cream," agreed Hope. "Tell you what, sometime when we have the time, Amy and I will come over and we'll have a TV night with you. Suits?"

Vista nodded eagerly. "And Flechette, too," she said.

Hope nodded, considering the idea. "I like it. She can bring Parian along. That'll make it a real girls' night in."

"I like Parian," declared Vista. "She makes the coolest animals."
"She really does," agreed Hope. "Now, are you going to let go so I can go and talk to some of the others, or do I have to tickle you?"

"Hah!" said Vista. "Idle threats! You wouldn't – eek!"

She let go hurriedly, and grabbed Hope's hand, while Amy took the other. "You're mean," she said accusingly. "Tickling a helpless girl like that."

"She really is," sighed Amy. "I've tried to beat it out of her, and all she does is laugh in my face and challenge me to do my worst." Vista began giggling.

"No, no, you must have misheard me," Hope corrected her, trying not to laugh herself. "I said, do your best. Your best," she repeated. "You keep doing your worst. No wonder you keep failing." Vista giggled harder.

"Best, worst, what's the difference?" asked Amy ingenuously.

"Dunno," replied Hope. "Ask a German butcher what his best wurst is like." She stooped and picked up the helplessly giggling Vista from the floor and carried her along.

In the common area, she found a chair to deposit Vista in, and went in search of Kid Win. At the same time, Amy went looking for Clockblocker.

"Yeah, I can do it," said Kid Win. "Self contained units, independent power supply, sure. You don't need a tinker for this. All off the shelf tech."

"Yeah," said Hope. "But this next bit isn't. I need really special activation switches." She explained for a few minutes. "Can you do it?"

Kid Win considered briefly. "Sure," he said. "I'll just need to do a bit of research, see what the tolerances need to be."

Hope nodded. "As for the venue, I don't know where it will be. But once that's set, will you be okay to do the installation?"

"Sure," he said. "This is all above board and legitimate?"

"Miss Militia knows I'm talking to you about it. She doesn't know what the full plan is, yet. So once you get the units up and running, be sure to let her know what you're doing."

He nodded. "Sure thing." A grin. "Not the weirdest thing I've ever made, but it's in the running."

Amy handed the paper bag to Clockblocker. "Wait till we've gone, then hand these out," she instructed him.

"What are they?" he asked.

She grinned. "You'll find out," she assured him.

"Will I like it?"

Amy chuckled. "Oh, I think I can guarantee it."
- Side story: a surprise party -

Chapter Notes

For those who were wondering about the invites mentioned at the end of Chapter 71, they are a reference to a side-story written by Ehn, on the Spacebattles forum. This side-story is not necessarily 100% canon, but it's close enough that I'm including it here. Here's the first part of the side-story.

PRT headquarters, 17th June 2011

Emily Piggot had been in an exceptionally good mood lately. She knew it could not last. So when Weld asked for a meeting over a 'peculiar problem' she just sighed and sent him a message to get in her office as soon as possible. "Figures," she grumbled, "as usual, it gets worse."

"Madam director", the metal boy entered with a confused expression on his face and a manila folder under one arm, and dragged over the reinforced chair set aside for him.

Well, this peculiar indeed - she thought - he is rarely fazed.

"Uhm..." Weld fidgeted a bit and then just slid the folder over her desk "it seems we, that is, the wards and Miss Militia, have been invited to a party"

"What? Why are you taking this up with me and not the PR department?" she asked while taking out what appeared to be one of said invitations.

The top read 'Slaughterhouse ZERO victory party' and just under that, in smaller font, 'come dressed as a cape'. It was a very cheap print, and sported - Emily nearly crumpled it at this point - a clearly photoshopped photo of Weld being kissed on the cheek by Hellhound.

Emily put the flier down and pinched her nose "Let me guess, there are different photos right?".

"Yes, we... we all received one with one of us on it. Clockblocker carrying Skitter bridal style, Vista riding Hellhound's dogs, and so on".

She nearly smiled at the amount of fidgeting Weld was now doing, and nearly spit her coffee at his next line "And, umh, yourself and Miss Militia with Grue..."

"What?! Damn it to hell, he could be my son! Who is printing this crap?" she slammed her hand on the flier and Weld, for an answer, indicated the bottom of it. Written in marker was the line 'come and have fun for a night big boy, your wards need to unwind - TT'.

Tattletale, of course, she probably choose the fake photos to irk them the most. Damn her hide.

"We all got personal messages like this, and I'm frankly worried about a couple of them"

"What do you mean?" she snapped her head up from the stupid flier. If Tattletale has a hand in this, she is surely planning something.
"Well, Missy was a bit pissed at first. They used a very old photo of her, when she was around ten, but after a while she started insisting we should definitely go, and Clockblocker immediately agreed with her."

Yes, definitely something brewing, but what? "What did their invites said?"

"Nothing much... 'come as you are' for Dennis and 'glide in in style' for Missy. I'm not sure what took those two... except that one is 13, and the other might as well be, so they get excited easily."

"There's no way you can go to a party organised by villains. Even with how things are going, and even with Flechette's liaison status, that would be a PR nightmare."

Someone took that same moment to knock at the office's door. Emily did not have time to snarl a refusal before... someone entered.

"What, who..." in a second she connected the pieces and groaned "Clockblocker, what is the meaning of that?"

The white clad figure snapped to mock attention "I'm not Clockblocker Ma'am director, as you can see from my costume"

Indeed, he was wearing a white 'generic' form fitting costume from the Protectorate's stores, clock faces inexpertly drawn on it with permanent marker.

"I'm just Dennis, and I have this awesome Clockblocker costume because the chicks dig him a lot, since he's so manly and funny"

Damn it, I never fully realised how annoying his grin is with that full face mask he usually wears. It's a pity the generic masks leave the mouth exposed. Still it would be easier to gag the young fool this way... where's duct tape when you need it?

"No, I'm still not allowing this. Weld is impossible to disguise anyway, as is Miss Militia and her energy. I don't care if the generic costumes are armoured, it does not stand up to a high calibre."

Dennis' face fell a bit, but he tried to rally as best as he could. "But Kid Win's will be, he is making a mock up of his actual armour, but with real steel... And Weld and Miss Militia can 'casually drop in' on their patrol right?"

Emily shook her head. "No, I'm sorry but that's not nearly enough firepower if things go really south, remember that."

Another knocking, this time way more urgent sounding interrupted her. What is now? Damn Tattletale and her shenanigans. "Come in!"

She nearly reached for her gun when an unmasked Vista entered her office... dressed in one of the old costumes used by Shadow Stalker, with a lot of added padding it seemed.

Again, Emily put her face in her hands "You're going as Shadow Stalker?" just one glance at Vista's face showed her how excited the kid was.

Platform shoes too. This kid wants to grow up too fast... eh, we all did at that age, and then we wish we could go back being young.

And now I'm having serious trouble denying them again, it would be too much like taking the candy away from a child. Vista stillisa child, no matter the brave front she usually puts on, or how much...
she hates to be the youngest.

"Oooh" - Vista nearly squealed - "so we can go?"

"Look, ahem, 'Shadow Stalker'..." she checked her terminal to make sure the 'unmasked heroes around' alert was on - it was - and not to look at the young child making puppy eyes at her. Before she could resume, said puppy-eyeing child continued.

"Dragon got the most awesome costume!"

Dragon? What? Why did I not... checking her email indeed revealed one from the tinker. She opened the attached image, and did her best not to gape.

It was a papier-mâché armoured suit. No, an actual armoured suit covered in inexpertly-looking made papier-mâché, to give the impression it was fake. The email was a simple offering for help and tactical support.

"Very well - she half grumbled - you can go if you first make a good plan that includes extraction, both for yourself and the civilians. And you're all on a buddy system! You'll stick with at least one of your teammates for the whole night, am I clear? Dismissed."

Those kids will be my death. Well, they do deserve to have a party now and then... still I do not like that it was Tattletale's idea.

At least Vista is being more mature than Dennis about this, what a surprise... not.

"Duh, of course it works. We can make it look like we got matching costumes, and the public does not know that Sophia was sent to the Birdcage..." the voices of the wards faded in the distance while Emily massaged her temples.

She started to compose messages to Dragon and Miss Militia, then with a smirk picked up her phone.

"Williams? I need Kathrine, Lily and Zoe from the special squad in my office. And a camo uniform for the four of us. Yes, the four of us. Williams, I was doing spec ops when you were still in third grade, shut up and do as I say!"

It is a public party after all right? Four Miss Militias would not be amiss, even if they have real laser guns. They look ike toys anyway. And it has been too much time since I was on the field, I miss it.

[We now return you to your regular programming.]

Part 72

Hope and Amy were on the way out when Miss Militia approached them.

"How did it go?" she asked.

Amy merely grinned, while Hope nodded seriously. "Kid Win seems to think he can pull off what I need," she said. "I've told him to let you know once he's got it all sorted out."

"So, may I know any details of this plan?" asked Miss Militia meaningfully.

Hope grinned. "Sure," she said, and filled in the few details she had already worked out. "I'm going
to have to make sure that she can be there, of course, out of costume," she added. "But that shouldn't be a problem."

Miss Militia nodded. "Interesting. I'll find out where the venue is, so that Kid Win can sort things out on his end without complications."

"That would be awesome, thanks," said Hope gratefully. She gave Miss Militia a quick hug. "I guess we'll be going then."

"Actually," said Miss Militia, "before you go, there is something else you could probably help us with, if you have the time?"

"Um, sure," said Hope. "What is it?"

"Well, as you're aware, Armsmaster lost his arm fighting Leviathan," explained Miss Militia. She looked at Amy. "Could you perhaps assist in growing it back? I would greatly appreciate it."

Amy glanced at Hope, who nodded emphatically. "Sure," she said. Amy nodded also. As I recall, thought Hope, he's a fairly nice guy.

The last time Hope had met Armsmaster – Colin, as he had introduced himself to her – he had been under the influence of strong drugs. Now, he was clear-headed, and the warm and friendly facade was no longer in evidence. This Armsmaster was not the nice guy she recalled.

As she watched, he moved his left arm, rotating the wrist carefully. Then he flexed, observing how the bicep bulged.

"It's not as strong as my right," he observed critically. "Feels a little strange. Heavier than it should be. The new eye's not focusing properly." Closing his eyes, he tried to touch the tip of his index finger to his nose; he missed by several inches. "Poor coordination, too."

Hope could feel Amy beginning to tremble slightly beside her; whether this was due to anger, fear or unhappiness, she wasn't sure, but she didn't hesitate in her response. Squeezing Amy's hand gently, she cleared her throat.

"Colin," she said quietly, "the eye will sort itself out. I know this; she's done it for me too. But it's a brand new arm. If you'd eaten a bigger meal, and not been so impatient to get started, she would have had more biomass to build muscle with."

"So you say," he retorted. "She could have pulled in muscle from elsewhere."

"She did," Hope informed him. "She just stopped short before noticeably reducing your other muscles." She took a deep breath. "But the fact remains that you have a left arm again. The nerves are there; it's your job to learn how to use it properly. And it feels heavy because you've been walking around for several weeks without a left arm. You're not used to having one."

He looked over at her, his expression unreadable. "Dragon says she could fit me out with a prosthetic that's better than the original. Maybe I should have taken her up on the offer." He flexed the new arm again. "It's going to take me months to bring this one up to scratch."

Hope put her arm around Amy, and held her close. "And I think you're being ungrateful," she said clearly. "Amy didn't have to regrow your arm for you. This was a favour for Miss Militia."

He blinked, and his expression cleared slightly. "I'm ... uh, sorry," he said almost grudgingly. "I think
I was a little rude there. Dragon's told me to watch out for things like that." Hope watched as he constructed a smile on his face; it was less natural than the one he'd given her while under the influence of drugs, but at least he was trying. "Thank you. I appreciate your help."

Hope nodded. Better."Well, that's all we can do for you for the moment," she said. "Take care." She steered Amy out of the room; fortunately, Amy waited until the door hissed shut behind them before exploding.

"I can't believe him!" she exclaimed. "I regrew his arm, and he was acting like he wanted to take it back and have it exchanged for a better one!"

"I know," said Hope quietly. She kissed Amy on the forehead.

"And 'poor coordination', my ass! He's using that arm for the very first time! Of course it's going to be off until he learns how! That supercilious, overbearing, arrogant –"

"I know," said Hope again. She took Amy in her arms and held her tightly. "Some people are just like that. This happens. Maybe when he gets used to his new arm, he'll realise just what you've done for him."

Amy was about to reply, when the door hissed open again and Armsmster emerged, pulling a T-shirt down over his – admittedly impressive – torso. He gave them each a cursory nod and walked straight past them; Amy let him get half a dozen paces before her control cracked.

"Hey!" she snapped. "How about some respect and appreciation? Or doesn't that count anymore, around here?"

He stopped, and turned slowly. "I've already thanked you," he said bluntly. "As for respect ... I don't see how you deserve it."

Hope stared. "What, seriously?" she asked.

He nodded. "Yes, seriously," he said flatly. "Hope, you were with the Wards. Panacea, you were with New Wave. Each of you chose to abandon your team, walk away from them. You choose to live in the territory of a known supervillain, and you've been seen associating with them regularly. That makes you unreliable at best, and villains at worst."

"But ... we do good things," said Amy. "We help people."

"Not as part of an organised team action," Armsmster snapped. "Teamwork is vital!"

"We took down the Nine as a team," Hope reminded him.

"Half of which were villains or rogues," Armsmster shot back. "Which supports my original point." He jabbed a finger at them. "Teaming up with villains is a bad habit to get into. Sooner or later they'll stab you in the back."

"But the Endbringer truce –" began Hope.

" – is just a way to keep the villains in line till we're ready to deal with them again," snapped Armsmster. "You can't depend on them to be reliable or to watch your back, not really."

Amy raised an eyebrow. "Skitter ... might disagree," she murmured. "I heard what you did, there."

Hope wasn't sure what Amy was referring to, but it produced a curiously disproportionate response.
Armsmaster moved forward a couple of steps, his expression threatening. "Shut your goddamn mouth," he grated.

*This is getting out of control,* thought Hope. She stepped forward a pace herself, her wings unfurling and spreading so as to place a shield between Amy and Armsmaster.

"Hey!" protested Amy; Hope ignored her.

"Colin," she said quietly, "please step away. She didn't mean any harm. This does not need to go any farther."

His anger cooled slightly, but he still directed a furious glare at Amy. "You've got no idea what you're talking about," he snapped.

"Maybe she does, maybe she doesn't," replied Hope levelly, "but this stops. Now." *Please stop. I don't want to hurt you.*

He met her stare; she returned it, not about to back down. There was deadlock for a moment, then Miss Militia's voice rang out. "Armsmaster! Stand down!"

Hope exhaled a silent sigh of relief as Armsmaster stepped back a few paces and relaxed somewhat. Miss Militia had just turned the corner, and Hope didn't know how much she'd heard, but it was obvious she'd heard enough.

"Armsmaster, you need to return to your quarters, now," Miss Militia stated, her voice flat and hard. He didn't even try to meet her stare; he just turned on his heel and re-entered the room he'd just emerged from. As soon as the door hissed shut behind him, Miss Militia pressed her palm against the locking plate. A chime sounded, indicating that the door was now locked.

Then she turned to Amy and Hope. Hope's wings had furled once more, and she was standing next to Amy, wondering what was going to happen next. Her hand found Amy's, and squeezed tight.

"I'm not sure what's going on here," said Miss Militia, "but rest assured, I will be viewing security footage. And if I find that either one of you was responsible for that little scene, I will be speaking to you about it. Are we clear on that?"

Hope nodded, not trusting herself to speak. Miss Militia's anger may not be directed specifically at her, but she liked and respected the older cape a great deal. The thought of losing any of the respect that Miss Militia might hold for her was painful.

Amy nodded also. "It – it might be my fault, a little bit," she admitted in a small voice. "He made me angry, so I said a few things that maybe I shouldn't have."

Miss Militia frowned. "Well, we'll see," she allowed. She glanced toward his door. "I know he has a temper, but that was not something I'm used to seeing from him." She nodded at Hope and Amy. "But I did see he has both arms again, so you're free to go, if you want."

Even Hope could read that as, *Please go, before you set Armsmaster off again.*

They exited the building; Hope could see Amy was still upset about something, so she went to put her arms around her. Amy didn't stop her, but didn't relax either.

"Sweetie," said Hope, "what's up? Are you all right?"

"Yeah, sure, I'm fine," said Amy, her voice a little unsteady. "I'm just a weak and helpless girl, who
needs protection from anyone who might threaten her." The look she turned to Hope showed pain more than anything else. "I thought you knew me, trusted me to be able to take care of myself. I mean, I know he's three times my size, but – hey!" She yelped and broke off as Hope picked her up under the arms and spun her in a circle, then put her down and kissed her soundly.

"Wow," she said, her previous mood forgotten. "What was that about?"

Hope giggled. "You thought I was protecting you from Colin?" she said with a grin.

"Well, yes," admitted Amy. She paused. "Weren't you?"

Hope shook her head. "No, sweetie, I was protecting him from you. I know what you can do, first hand, and I didn't want you getting in trouble for protecting yourself." She put her arms around Amy and held her close. Amy returned the embrace, and they held each other for a few moments.

"I'm sorry," said Amy softly. "What you meant. I didn't realise."

Hope smiled, holding her forehead against Amy's. "It's all good, sweetie. Really." She paused. "Actually, what was that comment about Skitter in aid of? It really set him off."

"I can't really talk about it," said Amy, "but during the last Endbringer attack, he, uh, kind of went off the reservation a bit. Broke the rules. Skitter was involved. I was there for the aftermath; it was a bad business. But it's all confidential stuff."

Hope blinked. "Okay," she said after a moment. "So he's actually not allowed to leave. Wow. I didn't realise until just now."

Amy nodded. "And it seems that he doesn't like being reminded of that."

Hope ruffled her hair. "Well, would you?"

"I guess not."

A long pause. "So ... what do you want to do now?"

Amy considered. "Can we get ice cream? That left a bad taste in my mouth."

Hope nodded. "Me too. I think there's a kiosk on the Boardwalk. Wanna go see?"

"Excellent idea."

They sat at a table on the Boardwalk, enjoying the late-morning sun. Hope had a bowl of chocolate ice cream in front of her, while Amy was making inroads on a concoction of nuts, fruit, cream, and heaven knew what else was in there. She presumed there was ice cream under there somewhere.

She glanced sideways at Amy, and smiled. Amy was so serious most of the time, as she worked to shed the ingrained habits of self-enforced duty. But right now, she was so thoroughly enjoying the confection she was eating, that the teenage girl underneath was able to peek through.

"There you are," murmured Hope.

Amy looked up, saw Hope gazing at her. "What?" she asked, her voice muffled by a spoonful of cream and fruit. "Have I got something on my face?"

Hope leaned in and kissed her very gently on the lips. "No, sweetie," she said softly. "I was just
watching you enjoy your ice cream, and it made me happy."

Amy smiled back at her, a little uncertainly. "I always enjoy eating ice cream," she pointed out. "Why is this time any different?"

Hope smiled. "Because I'm not watching Amy Dallon enjoy ice cream. I'm watching Amelia Claire Lavere enjoy ice cream."

Amy blinked. "What's the difference?" she asked again.

"You're more relaxed, more happy. You're absolutely invested in enjoying that, whatever it is you're eating. You're not even thinking about being Amy Dallon, or Panacea. You're being you. And I like it."

"It's a super double-choc fudge sundae with nut sprinkles and fruit salad," Amy said automatically. She tilted her head. "I'm a different person? Really?"

Hope smiled and nodded earnestly. "Take another spoonful. Taste it. And then ask yourself, are you happy – really happy – being who you are, and where you are, right now?"

Doubtfully, Amy took the spoonful, and let it melt into her mouth. She closed her eyes and savoured the flavours. And she smiled.

When she opened them again and looked at Hope, there were tears in her eyes. "I am," she said softly, with a look of growing surprise on her face. "I really am." She put down her spoon and took Hope in her arms, holding her closely. "Thank you, Hope," she whispered. "Thank you so much."

Hope returned the embrace. "You're welcome, sweetie," she replied, nuzzling her cheek against Amy's. "You're so very welcome."

Amy pulled back and looked her in the eye. "You know something?" she said. "Yesterday was the first time in forever that I actually had fun healing people in the hospital." She held out a spoonful of her sundae for Hope to taste. "Can we go do that again?"

"Yay!" exclaimed Amy.

Hope giggled at her enthusiasm. "But first, we have ice cream to finish." She held out a spoonful of chocolate ice cream for Amy to try.

Amy nodded. "We do indeed." She opened her mouth, accepting the chocolate ice cream. "Mmm, that's nice too."

Neither dessert lasted long after that.

As Hope came in for a landing at the hospital, they saw much more activity around the building than they had expected. Inside the lobby, staff were bustling to and fro, and the place seemed busier than ever.

Hope looked at Amy. "What's going on?" she said.

Amy shrugged. "Search me. I thought we'd cleared the place out more than this."
They made their way to the front desk, and got the attention of a harried receptionist. "Excuse me, but what's going on here?" Hope asked politely.

The receptionist rolled her eyes. "About three other hospitals in the area heard that we had empty bed space, so they sent their overflow here. Without asking us, or each other. We've had ambulances arriving half the night and all morning." She gave them a pleading look. "Can you do *something*, please? Much more of this, and we'll be overrun."

Hope raised an eyebrow. "So, the hospital's full up again?" she asked.

The receptionist nodded. "That's about the size of it," she agreed.

Hope and Amy met one another's eyes. Both nodded at the same time.

"Challenge –" began Amy, and cracked her knuckles.

Hope unfurled her wings, shook them out with a ringing chime which turned heads right across the lobby, and re-furled them more tightly. " – accepted," she finished.

Amy's hand found Hope's and squeezed tightly. Hope squeezed back.

They both spoke at the same time. "Let's *do* this."
- side story: a surprise party -

Chapter Notes

This is the second of Ehn's interludes regarding the upcoming party. I had no part in writing them, but I thought they were cute enough to be included.

Skitter's secret base, 17th June 2011

"Come on honey it will be fun. And your children are really excited about it. Some of them wants to go dressed as you, see?"

Tattletale held up a cardboard mask, depicting Skitter's, coloured in with more enthusiasm than skill.

"They're all painting the masks I brought"

"That's a bad idea on multiple levels Tattletale... and they're not my kids, you make it sound like I was her mom... And you're doing this on purpose, do you?" Skitter groaned at the smirk on her friend's face.

Lisa put a finger on her cheek and made a show of thinking things over "Why, you clothe them, feed them, make them go to school, keep them safe... could it be that for the average ten year old there's not that much difference?

Oooh, I bet they're really excited to get dressed up as mommy the superhero."

Skitter warmed up for a retort, but suddenly stopped. "You're trying to change the subject. What are you scheming this time?"

Tattletale got up from her chair and hugged her friend "Aw, come on, you make it sound like little old me is a villainous mastermind scheming eeeebil things."

That finally made Taylor chuckle. She mussed up Lisa's hair and returned the hug.

"I cannot believe you can say that with a straight face, and stop with the puppy dog eyes already, you're scaring me. I'll go, I'll go."

The two girls kept hugging for a bit, Taylor stoking Lisa's hair absently. "It's good, you know? I... I never really had someone hug me a lot besides my mo-" her breath hitched and she fought down a sob, Lisa doing her best to soothe her.

"Come on sweetie, we're all getting a fresh start now. We're getting amnesty, and you can be a hero you mom will be proud of."

"And the day after tomorrow: party!" she threw up her hands, grabbed Taylor by the waist and twirled with her on the spot. That got a small laugh too. Skitter took her mask off, and dried her tears.

"Jerk, stop using your power to make me feel better... and enough with the wounded innocence expression too."
For half an hour the two girls just sat there hugging, Lisa occasionally coming up with some inanity that made Taylor smile, then giggle.

"I'm going to suck at being a hero, you know? Miss black swarm of insects is not really a friendly image"

"Nah, that's easy: butterfly screen."

"Uh?"

"You always know where civilians are right? Just put up a screen of butterflies between them and the actual swarms and suddenly you're fairy princess Skitter. Besides which villain is going to live with his rep intact when you kick his ass with butterflies?"

"That... could work. Wait, did you actually plan for my hero image?"

Her usual vulpine grin was all the answer she needed. She was thinking about indulging in a bit more human contact, realising just now how starved of it she was, when she suddenly sat up and reached for her mask.

"Oh no, no one messes with our girl time, - Lisa's expression hardened instantly as she stood up - I'm going out there with you and I'm destroying them, whoever they are."

"Don't worry TT - Taylor's good mood apparently remained - that's just what I needed, I have enough butterflies in my range to practice things with."

[We now return you to your regular programming.]

Part 73

The phone rang; Emily Piggot reached over and picked it up, never pausing from paging through a report on her desktop computer.

"Piggot speaking."

"Director Piggot, this is Miss Militia. I have Clockblocker in my office, requesting leave to pay a personal visit to Hope. I'm thinking of having him meet up with Flechette first, to see how she is going with her liaison duties." There was a note of apology in her voice. "Normally I would send this through channels, but this is kind of short notice."

"Understood," replied the Director. "I see no problem with this. Backdate the paperwork and send it as normal." She paused. "Kindly give him a message to pass on for me."

"Certainly, Director. What is the message?"

"This message goes to Hope, to be passed on to the Hebert girl. The District Attorney's office is anxious to talk to her about testifying at the Barnes trial. Do you have that?"

"Yes, Director. Message to Hope; the DA wants to talk to Taylor Hebert about testifying at the trial of Emma Barnes. Is there anything else?"

"No, that will be fine. Did you have anything else to speak to me about?"
"Not exactly, Director, but have you seen the news this afternoon?"

Piggot frowned. "No, I have not. Is there a problem of some sort?"

She could tell already from the tone of Miss Militia's voice that there was not. "No, Director. It just appears that Hope has made the headlines once more, well and truly."

The Director nodded. "I'll check it out. Thank you for the heads-up."

She hung up a few moments later, then opened a new window and clicked up a news channel.

Miss Militia had not been exaggerating. A photo of Hope and Amy being hugged by people outside... that would be the Brockton Bay General Hospital.

The headline read "Angels of Mercy". She skimmed the text, then shook her head, in mingled amazement and disbelief. They cleared the entire hospital. Every single patient.

She shook her head again. With any other cape, that would be a publicity stunt. With Hope... it's just what she does. Especially now that she has Amy as a force multiplier.

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Hope's wingbeats were slow, her breathing ragged. She didn't look tired, exactly, but Amy could tell the depth of her weariness from the physical contact. This close, she could also smell the scent of jasmine."

"Sweetie, you want another boost?" she asked.

Hope shook her head with a weary smile. "No, I'm good," she said. "We're not far away. Besides, you're just as tired as I am, and you know it." She leaned over and kissed Amy on the forehead. "But damn, we did good work today."

"We did," agreed Amy. "I was really glad that you were there. We make a good team."

"We make a great team," Hope corrected her. She grinned. "With your looks and my powers... no, wait, your brawn and my brain?"

Amy laughed tiredly. She really was worn out, mainly from bolstering Hope's energy levels. But it was worth it; between the two of them, stopping only a couple of times for a breather and a bite to eat, they had done what they'd set out to do. Together. It gave her a warm feeling that filled her very being.

She reached up and pulled Hope's face down to her own, and kissed her several times. Hope never faltered in her steady wingbeats, but she responded to the kisses, and smiled once Amy disengaged from her.

"Mmmm," she said. "That was nice. What was that for?"

"I was just thinking, how much I love you, and how you've changed my life," Amy said, snuggling into her arms. "I can't imagine what my life would be like right now if you hadn't found me. Seriously, I was in a really bad place."

"I love you too," Hope replied. "I'm just glad that we found each other. You've done so much good since I met you, not least being fixing my eye. And don't forget saving me from Noelle."

Amy held her tighter, and shivered. "Don't remind me about Noelle. That was so scary."
Hope leaned down and kissed her gently. "It's all right, sweetie. You were there, and you did what you had to." She rubbed her cheek on the top of Amy's head. "Being with you has changed my life too. It's given my preconceptions a shake-up, changed the way I see things. And that's a good thing. Does that make sense?"

Amy smiled up at her. "It does, actually. Knowing you the way I do now, it really does."

Hope smiled back, and they shared a gentle peck of the lips. "I'm glad."

Wrapped in a comfortable silence, broken only by the chiming of Hope's wingfeathers, they flew on.

Hope stumbled a little on landing, but caught herself in time. She let Amy down to her feet, and they turned toward the shelter. And stopped, surprised, as people poured out to meet them. Applause filled the air, with congratulatory voices. People patted them on the back, or hugged them, as they clung to one another to stay upright.

"Okay, everyone, back off," called out Lisa, as she moved forward into the crowd. With the other shelter staff, she cleared a way in to where Hope and Amy were surrounded by their well-wishers.

"What's going on?" asked Hope, swaying a little. Amy was clinging to her, her face pressed in to her shoulder, as the crowd ebbed and flowed around her. One wing was curled protectively around the girl.

Lisa quirked a smile. "They've been watching the news. You're apparently the top of the hour. And a lot of these people had friends or relatives in hospital." She shook her head. "But damn. A whole hospital?"

Hope grinned wearily. "It was a kind of 'challenge accepted' sort of thing. And once we were most of the way through, we sort of looked at each other, shrugged, and decided to see it all the way through to the end."

Lisa nodded. "Yeah, I can see that. Well, it hasn't done your reputation any harm at all." She led the pair into the shelter. "Would you like something to eat?"

"Maybe later," said Hope. "Amy's about asleep on her feet, and I'm not far behind." She smiled at Lisa and gave her a quick one-armed hug and a kiss on the cheek, then scooped Amy into her arms and carried her into the sleeping enclosure.

Lisa watched them go, arms folded, a fond smile on her face. I love you too, Hope.

Clockblocker looked around with interest. "You've got yourself set up fairly nicely here, Lily. I was imagining some sort of ragged lean-to, cooking rat-on-a-stick over a fire made of burning math textooks or Encyclopedia Britannica."

Flechette slugged him playfully on the shoulder. "You idiot," she said with a grin. "Things are actually a lot better than that, even for the people who lost everything after the Endbringer attack. We even have electricity on for a few hours a day, now."

The room was spacious and well-appointed, with battery lanterns spilling a soft glow on the walls. Comfortable-looking furniture sat around the walls, and rugs covered the floor.

Parian entered from the kitchen, bearing a plate of cookies and a tea set, from which an enticing aroma filled the room. Vista immediately moved to help her, taking the plate of cookies, snapping
one for herself as she set it on the coffee table.

They all sat; Sabah and Dennis had been introduced to each other, and so they were able to unmask in order to eat and drink.

"So, what's it like being a warlord?" asked Missy, her eyes bright with curiosity. She sipped at her tea and nibbled on her cookie.

Sabah smiled. "I'm not really much of one," she admitted. "With the Merchants and the Chosen gone, and everyone else respecting the borders, I'm spending more time helping people out than being a warlord." She sipped at her tea. "I was never a villain, and I'm not as tough and respected as Skitter or Grue. I suppose that's why the Merchants chose to attack me instead of someone else." She took Lily's hand. "And since Lily moved in, there's been no trouble at all."

"Well, maybe one or two spots of trouble," Lily allowed with a grin. "But nothing I couldn't handle, and nothing that's gonna happen again." She shrugged and took a bite from her cookie. "People are learning to leave Dolltown alone."

Dennis grinned. His red hair was disarrayed from the helmet which sat on the sofa beside him. "Reported crimes are way down, which makes it a lot easier for reclamation and rebuilding. Given the way the city's pulled itself together, Mayor Christner is talking about a full-scale revamp of the city, funded by Washington." He nodded at Lily. "You must be doing a good job as liaison; everyone's behaving themselves."

Lily took another sip of tea. "Well, I'm putting in the face time, but I can't say it's all my doing. They're polite enough and I can see things are going ahead, but it feels like even if I wasn't there, they'd still be doing the right thing." She paused, then added hastily, "You don't need to tell Miss Militia all of that. I like my job." She squeezed Sabah's hand. Sabah smiled and squeezed back.

Missy giggled. "That's okay. But I do miss you. There's no-one there to talk girl talk with, any more."

"That might change soon, actually," said Dennis. Everyone looked at him. He paused, realising that he may have spoken out of turn, then shrugged. "It'll be common knowledge soon anyway. The Director is talking with her boss about the possibility of extending the amnesty from the Undersiders and the Travelers to all the gangs. I, uh, overheard her talking to Weld about it."

"Dennis!" exclaimed Lily, sounding shocked. "I'm ashamed of you. Listening in on other peoples' conversations. For shame." She paused. "Did you hear any more?"

He grinned. "Yeah. She was saying, that if they kept their noses clean, there might be a chance that some of them could be getting provisional Wards status. They were discussing the names of people who they would offer this to. I didn't hear many, but Skitter was one name that did come up."

"Skitter?" repeated Sabah. "She's kind of nice, but she doesn't give an inch. And even though she's on my side, those bugs are kind of creepy."

"But she does the best Darth Vader impressions," grinned Missy.

"Skitter as a Ward?" pondered Lily. "That would be ... different. She'd probably have to change her costume, and maybe even her name. Too many people know her as the scary bug girl supervillain."

"I could make her a new costume," Sabah said cheerfully. "I've seen how she wears the one she's got now, and if she gave me the spider silk for it, I could make one that does what she wants, and look heroic into the bargain."
"So who else came up in the discussion?" asked Missy.

"Sundancer was another one, you know, from the Travelers?" said Dennis. He paused. "Actually, that's something you can help us with. Is it true the Travelers have another member now? We've been hearing rumours, but nothing solid."

Lily nodded. "Her name's Omake. I'm not really sure where she popped up from; I get the impression she's from out of town or something, and has recently rejoined them, but you can tell she knows them from way back. She's got a thing going with Trickster, from what I can see. Apart from that, not much."

"Oh-mah-keh?" said Dennis, drawing out the word. "What's that, some Native American phrase?"

Lily grinned. "Nope. I didn't know either, so I asked. It's a Japanese anime term for a short side-story that has non-canon elements."

"Oh, okay," he said. "I'll remember that, thanks. Any idea of her powers?"

"I think she's a power copier, actually," said Lily. "I haven't seen her in action yet, but she's a nice person. She strikes me as one of those people who enjoys life to the absolute maximum."

"Okay, so Trump, gotcha," said Dennis. "It's always nice to know about a new cape in town."

Lily nodded. "So, what's the gossip from home base?" she asked. "Anything new and interesting?"

Missy grinned. "You'll never guess. I saw Director Piggot smiling yesterday."

"You're kidding," said Lily flatly.

"Nope," said Dennis. "I didn't see that, but I heard something from one of the PRT guards." He leaned forward and lowered his voice. "Our Director's been going down to the gym of a night, and exercising. Seriously."

"What's so strange about that?" asked Sabah. "People can smile, and exercise. It's not unusual."

Dennis laughed, Missy giggled, and even Lily smiled wryly.

"Yeah, no," said Dennis. "Not Miss Piggy. Doesn't happen."

"Master/Stranger protocols?" asked Lily with a frown.

"She's been checked out," Dennis replied. "She's clear. It's just that ... she's in a good mood, and she's exercising. It's like Bizarro World." He shook his head. "She keeps that up, I'm gonna have to change her nickname."

"Yeah," agreed Missy with a grin. "Or one of these days, she's gonna catch you at it, and POW! She'll karate chop you right across the room."

There was general laughter at that, and the conversation shifted to more general topics.

"Flechette's looking really happy," Vista commented as they stepped across vast distances, courtesy of her space-bending powers.

"You're not wrong," Clockblocker replied. "Mind you, if I had someone as cute as Parian cuddling up to me, I'd be – ow!" He rubbed his arm where she'd just punched him.
"Behave," she told him severely. "Or I'll make you walk home, and it'll take ten times as long."

"Okay, okay, I'll behave," he grumped, rubbing his arm. "That hurt."

"It was supposed to. Parian is really nice, and she deserves your respect. She helped out against the Merchants and Mannequin, and you worked well with her against the Nine."

"Yeah, I did," he conceded. "I gotta say, she knows her stuff. But I didn't know she was with Flechette then. Or was she?"

"Sort of," admitted Vista. "But that would be telling, so I'm not going to say anything else."

He nodded in acknowledgement. "Okay, fine. I'm glad that Flechette and Parian are together, and they make a cute couple. Satisfied?"

She nodded. "Sure. Let's go."

And they headed off over the rooftops again.

---

Hope became dimly aware that someone was shaking her shoulder. She opened one eye and turned her head to see Lisa bending over her.

"Wh's'p?" she murmured. Amy, curled up in her arms, made a noise in her sleep, and shifted slightly.

"It's Vista and Clockblocker, here to see you," whispered Lisa.

"What? Oh," she said as her brain processed the information. "Tell them I'll be right out."

Lisa nodded, and left as silently as she had arrived. Hope looked at Amy's face, peaceful in repose, on the pillow next to her own. It would be so easy to stay in bed, to snuggle down in the warmth and comfort of Amy's arms ...

... but no, she'd said she would come out, and so she had no real choice.

With a sigh of regret, even as her brain began to wake up some more, she set about extricating herself from Amy's embrace. She was about half done, when Amy stirred again and murmured, "Mmmph?"

Hope leaned over and kissed her softly on the cheek. "It's okay, sweetie," she murmured. "I've just got some visitors. Go back to sleep."

Amy stirred some more, and looked up at her, eyes heavy with sleep. "Visitors?" she mumbled.

Hope nodded. "Vista and Clockblocker. Lisa said they want to see me about something." She kissed Amy again, on the forehead. "Go back to sleep, sweetie. I'll be right back in."

Amy shook her head drowsily. "I'm coming with." She reached up and cupped Hope's face in one hand. "Or I'm going to drag you back into bed and force you to snuggle with me some more."

Hope smiled helplessly. The threat actually sounded quite attractive. "Okay, sweetie," she murmured. Sometimes Amy was just too cute for words.

She swung her legs over the side of the bed and reached for where she'd left her clothes. On the other side of the bed, Amy sat up, rubbing her eyes.
Hope was just stepping into her pants when she heard an excited voice approaching rapidly.

"–me on Hope, up you get!"

In the next moment, the blanket curtain was pulled aside, and Vista entered, laughter on her lips. Hope paused, glanced at her, then finished pulling her pants up. On the other side of the bed, Amy had grabbed the sheet to cover herself, and turned toward the interruption.

Vista stared from Hope, now calmly reaching for her top, to Amy; she turned white, and then blushed a deep scarlet. With a muffled "Eeep!" she yanked the curtain closed and disappeared from view, as fast as she'd arrived.

"That was Vista, wasn't it?" said Amy, reaching for her underwear. Hope had to admire her sang-froid.

"Afraid so," sighed Hope.

"Maybe you should talk to her –" Amy yawned capaciously, stretching, and letting the sheet fall to the bed once more, "– about barging into someone else's sleeping area."

Hope giggled. "I think she's just learned that lesson." She shrugged. "Back in the Wards, we just wandered into each others' rooms at will. She always knocked on Flechette's door, because there was the chance she might be undressed. But with me it didn't matter."

Amy stood, pulling on her panties, then slipped into the bra. "Well, now it does," she said with a smile. "Do me up?" she asked, turning her back to Hope. "I always have trouble with this one."

Hope obligingly snapped the clasp on the bra, then buttoned her own top.

"I'll be out in a minute," Amy told her, voice slightly muffled by the t-shirt she was pulling over her head. "Go on ahead."

Hope waited till Amy's head emerged from the shirt, and gave her a hug and a kiss. "You're wonderful," she said softly, touching her gently on the tip of the nose with her fingertip. "Never forget that."

Amy hugged her in return, then gave her a slap on the backside. "Get out there before I drag you back into bed," she growled. Hope giggled and made her escape.

Clockblocker and Vista had been conversing with Lisa for a few moments following Lisa's return, when Vista became bored and wandered away a few steps. You know, she told herself, I bet she's just gone back to sleep.

Grinning, she slipped into the shelter. She knew where Hope's sleeping area was, so she darted in that direction. "Come on Hope, up you get!" she said as she yanked back the blanket curtain. As she took in the scene before her, the laughter died on her lips.

On one side of the bed stood Hope, in the process of stepping into a pair of pants; she wore nothing else at the moment. This was not something Vista was unused to; Hope was not at all body-shy. In fact, for a majority of the battle when the Undersiders had attacked the base, she had been similarly naked.

However, on the far side of the bed sat someone Vista belatedly recognised as Amy, previously known as Panacea. At the intrusion, Amy had grabbed a sheet to hold it to her front, but Vista could
clearly see that apart from the sheet, she had nothing covering her at all.

Vista had met Panacea before; they were acquaintances, but not close friends. Definitely not someone with whom it was cool to barge in on while they were in the altogether. Especially not when they had obviously just been naked, in bed, with someone else who was also wearing nothing whatsoever.

In the first instant, she had a very firm realisation of the magnitude of her faux pas, as the blood drained from her face. In the next, she realised that she was staring at Amy's uncovered back, and she blushed heavily. "Eeep!" she managed in a startled squeak before jumping backward, pulling the curtain closed, and beating a hasty retreat back to the entrance of the shelter.

In her agitation, she misjudged, and ended up ten yards farther out from the shelter, still blushing furiously, and staring back toward the main doors.

"What the hell?" muttered Clockblocker.

Lisa rolled her eyes. "Looks like she walked in on Hope and Amy getting dressed," she sighed. "You go see if she needs therapy, I'll go get some coffee for Amy."

Clockblocker chuckled and strolled over to where Vista still stood. "You okay there?" he asked her. "Get an eyeful, did we?"

"Hope and Amy," she said. "Both naked." She said it in the tone of someone who desperately wanted to forget what they'd just seen.

"Okay," he said. "Hope and Amy. Not wearing clothes. What's the big deal?"

"One bed. They were naked in it. Sleeping together. Naked."

Clockblocker frowned behind his faceplate. "So they don't wear pajamas. It's not a big deal." And then her meaning clicked. "Oh! Right. I see." He began to chuckle helplessly.

"What's so funny?" snapped Vista, stung.

"Vista," explained Clockblocker patiently, "Hope is asexual. She's not ... interested. Or able. It's not that she doesn't feel like it, it's that she's unable to feel like it. Or do anything about it, for that matter." He shrugged. "So she and Amy share a bed. And they don't wear pajamas. Maybe they cuddle, maybe they don't. It's no biggie."

Vista hesitated. She recalled that one night, after the Siberian, when she had crept into Hope's bed, and been held and comforted for the rest of the night. They had worn pajamas that night, certainly, but she had indeed been cuddled by Hope, and it had given her a lot of comfort and security. If Amy needed that sort of comfort, then she needed it.

It made sense to her. "I suppose," she said ruefully. "I've just made a huge idiot out of myself, haven't I?"

He chuckled again. "That's up to Hope and Amy. Oh, here comes Hope now." He waved. "Hey, Hope. Vista says you and Amy are sleeping together, nekkid. I say that doesn't mean there's anything between you two. Am I right, or am I right?"

Hope strolled up, holding a cup of tea, courtesy no doubt of Lisa. "Clockblocker, you are entirely
correct. Amy and I do sleep together without clothes on, and you are correct in saying that when we do, there is nothing whatsoever between us."

Clockblocker nodded, and turned to Vista. "See?" he said. "I was right." And then something in the way she'd said it made him pause. *Wait a minute*, he thought. *Did she just say what I thought she said?*

Hope grinned at him, and took Vista's hand. "Come on, kiddo, let's go apologise to Amy. Not that she's too embarrassed; she was still half-asleep when you came in."

They walked back to the shelter, leaving Clockblocker in their wake, staring after them. "Oh," said Hope over her shoulder, "and please don't use the word 'nekkid' in my hearing ever again. It's a silly, silly word."

They sat around one of the tables in the dining area. Amy clutched a steaming cup of coffee as if it were a lifeline, and Hope sat alongside her. Vista had stammered an apology, which Amy had graciously accepted, after letting her stew for about thirty seconds or so. Now, Vista sat silent, determined to say nothing that might embarrass her again, while the others talked.

"So the District Attorney wants to talk to Taylor Hebert?" said Hope. "Well ... Lisa, could you get in touch with Skitter, see if she can pass the message on?"

Lisa nodded. "I'm sure she will be able to," she agreed. She pulled out her phone and started tapping out a text.

Hope looked over at Clockblocker. "Was there anything else?"

Clockblocker got up, walked around to Hope's side of the table, and gestured for her to get up. Hesitantly, she did; Clockblocker hugged her as hard as he could.

"Wow!" she chuckled, hugging him back. "I didn't expect this; what's the occasion?"

"My father," he said, a break in his voice. He looked at Amy. "Please, may I hug you?"

Amy got up, and he hugged her as well. "He had leukemia," he explained. "You healed him once before, but it recurred. He was in hospital. You healed him again. Mom called me. Thank you, oh god thank you."

Amy smiled as he released her. "Leukemia. I think I recall that one."

Hope nodded. "Older man, red hair, thinning."

"Not thinning," said Clockblocker. "It was the chemo. It was killing him, making his hair fall out."

Amy nodded. "Yes, I remember him. He had a genetic predisposition toward cancer; that's why he had a relapse."

Clockblocker paused, frozen. "You mean – it'll happen again?"

Amy smiled and shook her head. "I said 'had'. Doesn't have it anymore."

Clockblocker's voice was hesitant. "You ... you gave him gene therapy?"

Amy shrugged. "Call it what you will. I turned off that marker. He might get cancer again someday – anyone can get cancer – but it won't be from that." She looked critically at him. "He might have
passed it on to you. I can check, if you want."

He looked from her to Hope and back. Hope nodded encouragingly. Finally, he said, "What do I have to do?"

"We need bare skin," said Hope. "Your hand will do."

He pulled off his glove, and held out his hand. Hope took hold of his thumb and index finger, while Amy held his other three fingers. Without even looking, they clasped each others' free hands in a firm grip.

After a long moment, Amy shook her head. "Can't see it," she said. "You're clear." She looked at him. "Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

He shook his head. "Only child." His hand free once more, he began pulling on his glove. "Thanks for that. I really appreciate it. And my dad ... I mean, I really appreciate it."

Hope put her arm around Amy's shoulders. "That's fine," she said. "When I was in the Wards, you were nice to me. I appreciate that, too."

Vista cleared her throat. "Uh, not to break this up, but it's getting dark out. We should be getting back."

Lisa nodded. "She's right." She smiled at the two Ward capes. "Drop by any time. Always happy to see our heroes on the job." Hope could not quite tell if there was a sardonic note to her comment.

Amy turned to Vista. "And really, it's all right," she said. "These things happen. You do something silly, you fix it, you move on." She looked fondly at Hope. "A very dear friend taught me that."

Hope grinned and kissed her on the cheek, then hugged Vista. "Don't let it bother you, kiddo," she advised. "I'm not going to." Her grin widened. "Just, next time, knock, okay?"

Vista smiled and hugged her back. "Okay," she said. "Thanks, I'll remember that."

They stood outside the shelter, watching as Clockblocker and Vista disappeared into the deepening night. Hope turned to Lisa. "We," she announced, "are going back to bed. If anyone short of an Endbringer wants to see us, tell him to come back later."

"And if an Endbringer wants to see you ...?" prompted Lisa with a vulpine grin.

Hope and Amy spoke as one. "Tell him to come back much later."

As they climbed into bed, Hope giggled.

Amy, already settling into her embrace, murmured drowsily, "What's so funny?"

"Did you see the look on Vista's face?"

They were still giggling when they fell asleep.
Colin paused at the entrance to the gym.

"You said there'd be no-one else here," he said to the guard who was escorting him.

The guard shrugged. "Usually isn't, this time of night. So, you want to exercise, or you want to go back to where you came from?"

Colin gritted his teeth. "Exercise." He'd much rather be doing it alone; the last thing he wanted was a bunch of PRT guards commenting behind his back while he worked up a sweat. But the need to build up his arm, to keep the rest of his body in fighting trim, outweighed his need for privacy.

And there was only one person and maybe they could just ignore each other.

The guard nodded. "Exercise it is, sir." He indicated the doorway. "I'll be standing right here, sir. If you need anything, come see me first. Go out of sight for more than ten seconds and I will presume you are attempting to escape, and will take appropriate measures. Do you understand?" He spoke in a monotone, as if he'd said those exact words a thousand times before, and perhaps he had.

Colin nodded. "Yes, I understand," he responded. *You idiot. I understood it the first three times you said it.*

He moved into the gym, looking over the equipment, trying to ignore the other occupant, who was panting on a treadmill. As he got closer, he found it harder to ignore the person, because unless he missed his guess, it was Director Piggot herself.

She was overweight, of course. He knew that already. But she was down here, gamely plodding away on that treadmill. Making an effort. He had to admire that, in a distant way. But it was none of his concern.

He was just heading for the weight racks, when – "You! Armsmaster! What are you doing here?"

He stopped and turned; the treadmill was rolling to a stop. Director Piggot leaned on the rail, obviously out of breath, but still authoritative.

"The exercise facilities at the Protectorate headquarters are inadequate for my needs," he explained. "So I requested permission to come here. Miss Militia granted it." He nodded toward the doorway. "I have a minder." A gesture at his ankle. "And a tracking bracelet. So no matter what it looks like, this is not an escape attempt. Now," he said as he turned away from her, "I came here to exercise. So if you don't mind ..."

Not much caring if she minded or not, he walked to a weight bench, selected a hand weight, and started his reps. Behind him, he heard the tones of a mobile phone in use, then quiet conversation. *Checking on me, eh, Director? Well, good luck. Miss Militia may have given me permission just to get me out of her hair for a while, but it's still valid.*

After a while, she put the phone away, and started up the treadmill again. The rumble of it intruded on his concentration, but he pushed it away as he steadily worked on strengthening his left arm.

But after a while, he had to admit that it was no use. He had trained himself to notice everything around him; all that he had was his technology and wits, to face off against monsters that could
ignore bullets and throw cars. And no matter how much he tried, he could not turn off that heightened awareness. And the more he was aware of it, the more it annoyed him.

With a sigh, he put down the weight – his biceps were starting to burn nicely anyway, and could probably do with a breather – and got up.

Director Piggot was still on the treadmill, but she was starting to flag.

"You're doing it wrong," he said bluntly.

Slowly, she turned toward him. The treadmill rolled to a stop. "I beg your pardon?" she said glacially.

"You're doing it wrong," he repeated. "What you're trying to do, you're going about it all wrong."

"I am exercising," she snapped. "I am losing weight. I am building muscle. I am getting fit."

"Sure you are," he agreed. "Throw enough exercise at the flabbiest body, and all that will happen. But there's a right way to do it, and there's a wrong way. And you're going about it the wrong way."

For a moment, he thought she was going to throw a punch, or call the guard over and have him thrown out. But then the blaze of anger died from her eyes, to be replaced by a steely glint.

"Keep talking," she gritted.

"You're pushing yourself to exhaustion," he pointed out. "Which, in your current state, doesn't take long. You need to get to a certain heart rate and stay there for as long as possible. Also, what you're doing is a good fitness maintenance regime, which is probably what you used back in the day –" he refrained, with unusual tact, from saying back when you were my age, " – but what you need is a weight loss regime suited to your body, plus a muscle building workout for each part of your body that needs it."

He indicated the treadmill. "That'll be useful once you've got the weight off and can maintain a steady pace. Or you could try the ellipticals. But the way you're doing it? You're just punishing your body for not much return."

He turned away. "But don't take my word for it. See a good fitness coach."

He had taken three steps when she called out, "Wait."

He stopped, and turned back, frowning. He wanted to get back to his reps.

"You obviously know what you're talking about," she said, reluctant respect showing in her eyes. "I'll make you a deal. You coach me in this, and I'll ensure you have unlimited access to these facilities. Open pass. What do you say?"

He paused for a long moment, eyeing her. She had a ways to go, he could tell. But he could speed that up, just as he intended to bring his left arm back up to scratch just as fast as possible. And maybe, after she was fit enough, if he did a good enough job, he could keep coming here, using the equipment.

Really, it was a no-brainer.

He shrugged. "You've got a deal, Madam Director."

"Good," she said briskly. "Now, show me where I'm going wrong."
"Okay," he said. "First off ..."

To: miss_militia [email address expunged]
From: e_piggot [email address expunged]

Miss Militia:

I am hereby authorising ongoing permission for Colin Wallis, aka Armsmaster, to attend PRT HQ exercise facilities as needed, until further notice.

Regards,
Emily Piggot
Regional Director (Brockton Bay)
Parahuman Response Teams

"Morning, sleepyheads."

"Morning, Lisa." Hope gave her a hug and a kiss on the cheek. Lisa returned it, leaning into the embrace and closing her eyes for a moment.

Amy followed Hope, her expression sleepy but satisfied. She didn't hug Lisa, but they shared a kiss on the cheek.

Lisa placed breakfast before them, and sat down opposite. "Congratulations. Parahumans Online just hit a new high for posts about you two." She smiled. "I saw a couple of trolls try to post inflammatory messages about you. Never saw anyone get nailed to the wall so hard and so fast."

Hope spooned cereal, trying to hide her embarrassment. "I wish people wouldn't get themselves so worked up over what I do," she said quietly. "If everyone just got on with doing the right thing, it would be a nicer world."

Lisa reached over and ruffled her hair playfully. "And if wishes were horses, we'd all ride unicorns," she replied with her vulpine grin. "On a more serious note, there's three messages for you. One, Miss Militia says that Burnscar has said okay to the procedure. And two, Director Piggot says that Director Costa-Brown has agreed to an appointment, as of ten o'clock tomorrow morning. And three, the Director also asked me to pass on the information that the preliminary hearing for the Barnes trial will take place this afternoon."

Hope sat bolt upright. "The trial?" she exclaimed. "So soon?"

Lisa shook her head. "No, not the trial itself," she explained. "Just a hearing to determine whether the trial should actually take place or not." Her vulpine grin was more in evidence than ever. "I strongly suspect that it will."

Hope glanced at her suspiciously. What are you up to? she wondered. But she knew there was no percentage in asking the question. If Lisa wanted her to know, she'd tell her.

"So ... " said Lisa. "Procedure on Burnscar, huh? More brain surgery?"

Amy looked anxious; Hope sighed, and took her hand. "We'll see how it goes," she temporised.
Lisa nodded understandingly. "That's all you can really do, isn't it?" she agreed.

Mimi looked nervous. So did Amy. In fact, the only person in the cell who looked calm and collected was Hope herself. At least, she hoped she looked calm and collected.

"Okay," she said cheerfully. "Amy, would you like to explain to me and Mimi, what it is you're going to be doing?" As she said this, she put her arm around Amy's shoulders and squeezed reassuringly.

Amy shot her a grateful look, and cleared her throat, but Mimi put up a hand. "Don't explain first, please. Just tell me one thing." She took a deep breath. "Will I still be me afterward?" She seemed on the verge of tears.

Amy mustered a smile for Mimi. "You'll still be you. I'll just be adjusting some of those parts of you that you don't like. Okay?"

Mimi nodded. "Okay," she whispered. She looked from one to the other. "Will I need to be ... unconscious ... for this?"

Hope glanced at Amy. "Well, you don't have to be, if you don't want to be," she said. "Right?"

Amy shrugged. "I've never had to worry about it, before."

Mimi huddled into herself. "Could you ... please ... put me out? And if ... and if it doesn't work ... just not wake me up?" She lifted tear-filled eyes to them. "Please?"

Hope felt her heart fill with pity. "Oh, sweetie," she murmured, taking Mimi in her arms. "Sweetie. We're not going to kill you. We're going to heal you."

She stroked Mimi's hair as the girl wept against her, broken, jagged sobs. "If you ... if you ... have to," Mimi managed. "Do it ... please ... so I ... don't know."

Hope met Amy's eyes over the supervillain's head. Silently she asked the question, are you sure you can do this? Amy nodded in reply. Yes.

She kissed Mimi on the forehead. "Okay, sweetie, we'll put you out," she agreed. "But you will wake up again. I promise."

Mimi gripped her hand. "Only if I'm healed," she begged. "Only then. Promise me."

Hope squeezed back. "I promise," she whispered. I promise you will live, and be healed.

She helped Mimi lie back on the floor of the cell, still holding her hand, then shifted her grip to the girl's shoulder, so that she could observe the procedure. She took Amy's hand in hers, and ensured that her smile was the last thing that Mimi saw before Amy's hand on her brow plunged her into a deep and dreamless sleep.

"Okay," she said in a low voice, despite the fact that Mimi would not be woken by normal conversation, "let's do this."

Amy clutched her hand tightly and took a deep breath, then closed her eyes.

First, she thought, the powers.
It was as she had thought. The powers themselves were stable and well-established; she would not be able to alter them as she had with Noelle. But the control links to her psyche were badly established; she had problems with self-control and quite a few subconscious issues, and many of these were able to activate her powers when triggered.

So she carefully went through, shifting control linkages to Mimi’s conscious mind; they would only activate at her directed will, not in response to stress or anger, now. There was the chain-reaction effect where the use of fire triggered more use of fire; she short-circuited that, putting in a negative-feedback link, where a stronger use of her power required more mental effort, not less.

And now ... the mind.

Hope’s hand was warm in hers, her loving presence so close by and supportive. *I could not do this without her, I really couldn’t.*

With a mental effort, she plunged into Mimi’s mind. The structure opened out before her. She reached for Hope’s mind, reminded herself of what she’d done with William Manton, and memorised the appropriate areas. Then she went back to Mimi’s mind.

*Wow,* she thought. *She’s really messed up.* The contrast with Hope was amazing. For a second, she quailed, lost confidence. *Can I really do this? Where do I start?*

As if sensing her distress – she probably had, Amy realised – Hope squeezed her hand reassuringly. Confidence returned.

*Focus,* she told herself. *Just one step at a time.* And then it became clear.

*Ah, of course.* She began adjusting brain chemistry, carefully, making sure not to make sweeping alterations. *Aggression levels down, but not too far ... ease off on that deep-seated hostility and self-loathing ... self-control up a notch ... that should do it for now.*

She opened her eyes and took a deep, shuddering breath. Hope's anxious eyes stared into hers.

"Is it done?" whispered Hope.

Amy nodded wearily. It had taken just a few seconds in real time, but it had wrenched her mentally and emotionally. She took her hand off Mimi's brow, and took Hope in her arms. "Hold me," she said softly. "Just hold me, please."

Hope held her until the shuddering was under control, murmuring softly and patting her gently on the back. Amy clung to her, not quite on the verge of tears.

"Was it bad?" Hope asked, pulling back slightly and kissing her on the cheek.

Amy nodded. "It's never fun," she said. "I'm always scared I'll lose control, follow an impulse, and do something stupid that I'll never be able to fix."

Hope nodded gravely. "But you haven't yet," she said cheerfully, and kissed Amy on the tip of the nose. "Shall we wake the patient up?"

Amy nodded shakily. Hope put her hand on Mimi's shoulder again, then leaned over so that she was smiling down at her when Amy brushed her hand over the girl's brow once more. Mimi's eyelids fluttered, then flickered open.
"You said you were going to put me under," Mimi said fretfully. "I don't want to be awake for this. Please."

Hope's smile widened to a grin, and she took hold of Mimi's hand to help her into a sitting position. "It's done."

Mimi blinked. "Really?" Her gloved hand went to her forehead. "I don't feel any different."

Amy shook her head. "If you did, you'd know I had screwed up. Feeling different, feeling weird, that's a sign that something's wrong."

Mimi shook her head. Nothing seemed to rattle in there. "Uh, so, how do we know if it worked?"

Hope smiled. "Only one way I know of to be sure." She nodded to Amy. "Would you like to leave the cell?"

Amy looked dubious, but shook her head. "I did the work, I need to have faith in it."

"Okay," said Hope. She went to the intercom and pressed the button. "Gentlemen. Commencing test. Ready?"

Over the intercom came a tinny voice. "Ready."

Hope nodded, and returned to where Mimi sat. Standing behind her, she began undoing the catches on the heavy flameproof gloves that Mimi wore. These were fastened behind her back so that she could not reach them.

"Wait!" said Mimi. "What are you doing?"

"What does it look like?" asked Hope. "Taking your gloves off." She nodded to the door. "The guards have been briefed. If your flame gets out of control, they will flood the cell with argon, then containment foam." She leaned down and gave Mimi a kiss on the cheek. "It's up to you not to let it go out of control."

The last catch came free, and Hope helped her pull the gloves off. Mimi stood up, staring at her bare arms, at the gloves dangling from Hope's hand.

"I don't – I can't –" she whispered.

Hope nodded. "You can," she disagreed. "You will." Handing the gloves to Amy, she took Mimi's hands in hers, holding Mimi's palms open and facing up. "You won't burn me," she said softly. "You know that. Just a little. To prove that you can control it, instead of it controlling you."

Mimi bit her lip, and then a tiny spectre of flame appeared over her right palm. It was joined by one on her left palm, tiny dancing figures. One appeared to have wings. She bit back a sob as the figures grew larger, leaping from one hand to the other, passing in midair. They twirled in midair, holding each other. The figures were now recognisably Hope and Amy.

When they were a foot tall, Mimi stopped their growth, then shrunk them. They diminished to almost nothing, then winked out. She looked at Hope, her eyes full of tears. "I can ... control it," she whispered. "It's no effort, no strain. I just ... want it to stop, and it stops."

Hope smiled. "You can do a little more, if you want," she said encouragingly.

Mimi blinked back the tears. "I'm good ... for now," she whispered. She held out her arms. "Can I
have ... the gloves back, now?" she asked. "Just in case?"

Hope nodded, and helped her fit the gloves back on to her arms. Carefully, she did the fastenings up again firmly, ensuring that the restraints were comfortable across Mimi's back.

When she had finished, Mimi hugged her tightly. "Thank you for talking," she whispered. "Thank you for listening."

Then she hugged Amy, who returned the embrace. Mimi gave her a kiss on the cheek, then paused, and said softly, "Did you mean it about the scars?"

Amy nodded. "I can do that now, if you want."

Mimi nodded. "I think ... yes."

So Hope stood by, one hand in Amy's and the other on Mimi's shoulder, while Amy smoothed her thumb over Mimi's cheeks, one side at a time. Where her thumb passed by, only unmarked skin remained. Hope could see how she was doing it, but it was impressive to watch all the same.

"Showoff," she muttered.

Amy stuck her tongue out at her.

Mimi giggled.

After they had made their goodbyes and passed out through the airlock, Hope stopped to chat with the guards outside Burnscar's cell.

"Took a hell of a risk there, taking the gloves off her," observed one of the guards.

"Not really," Hope replied. "I'm the one who captured her. She knows her fire can't hurt me, not really. And more to the point," she added, squeezing Amy's hand, "I trust Amy's work."

As they left the guard post, hand in hand, Amy said softly, "So, where do we go from here?"

Hope hesitated. "Well, there was that Doctor Yamada. I was thinking we could call her up, make an appointment."

Amy grimaced. "Must we?"

Hope nodded firmly. "We really must." She pulled Amy into an embrace; Amy relaxed into it. "You know it, and I know it."

Amy nodded reluctantly, head on Hope's shoulder. "I suppose."

"Tell you what," Hope said. "Each time we go to see Doctor Yamada, we go get ice cream after."

Amy brightened. "Ice cream sounds good."

Hope grinned, and kissed her on the tip of the nose. "It does. Works for you?"

Amy smiled reluctantly, and returned the kiss. "Works for me."

They walked on.
"All rise."

The people in the courtroom all rose. The magistrate sat down, made himself comfortable.

"Be seated."

They all sat.

Emma Barnes glanced around surreptitiously. This did not fit what she thought she knew of how trials went. There was no jury, no witnesses. Barely any members of the public. Madison was sitting there with her parents; she gave Emma a wan look. Her parents gave Emma a look of ... hostility? What's that about? Do they think I'm responsible for this, for getting Madison in trouble?

"This hearing is to determine whether there is a case to be answered, in the matter of People versus Emma Barnes and Madison Clements."

She wasn't sure who was speaking; events were going too fast for her. Too long she had been used to getting away with everything, having things her own way. She wasn't used to being in trouble. It had always been too easy to make it someone else's problem.

But now it was her problem. Who had done this? Taylor? Couldn't be; she tried, at the school, and Dad fixed it up. So who? Sophia?

It was a tenet of her internal faith that no matter what happened, it was never her fault.

So who do I blame this on?

Her father was prodding her. Someone had asked her a question. The magistrate. She jerked bolt upright and blurted, "Uh, not guilty, Your Honour."

A titter of laughter ran around the courtroom. The magistrate smiled dryly and said, "Miss Barnes, this hearing is not intended to establish guilt or innocence. It is intended to determine whether a trial should take place at all." He held up a mobile phone. "Is this your phone?"

She peered at it. It looked like hers. The pink case, the stickers, looked the same. But she couldn't be sure ... "May I examine it, Your Honour?"

She nodded; the bailiff stepped forward, took it from the magistrate's hand and passed it to Emma. She looked it over, then thumbed it on. Her personal background came up, and she entered the security code, covering it with her hand as she did so. The icons popped up, and she flicked through a few screens until she was sure.

"Yes, Your Honour, it is my phone," she agreed, handing it back to the bailiff. She didn't know why they had it ... oh, wait. Daddy had asked for it yesterday, and she had been so worried about the trial that she hadn't asked for it back.

The bailiff handed it on to another man – the prosecutor? She could only guess. "So then, these texts are yours?" he asked. He plugged the phone into a screen that lit up, showing texts scrolling down the screen. Texts which she recognised. Texts which should not be on that phone.

"But – I deleted those!" she blurted.

This time, there was no titter. The magistrate's glance at her was much less paternal and much more magisterial. "Thank you for that information, Miss Barnes. I do believe that there is enough evidence to go on with a trial." He paused, checking something. "Trial will take place at ten AM on
Wednesday the twenty-second of June." A bang of the gavel. "This hearing is concluded."

At the bailiff's command, everyone rose. They waited until the magistrate had left the courtroom, and then started milling around, preparing to leave.

Emma's father made straight for the prosecutor. Emma tried to catch Madison's eye – *it'll be all right. Daddy will fix it* – but her parents hustled her out, with one backward glare. As if it was *her* fault.

It *couldn't* be her fault. It was *never* her fault.

She trailed over to where her father was speaking in urgent low tones to the man she guessed was the prosecutor.

As she got there, she heard the man say, "Seriously, Alan! You can't win here. The PRT is behind this. Your daughter's getting tried as a *henchman*. We know the Hess girl egged her on, but she did enough on her own to warrant a trial. The Clements girl too."

"Where the hell did those texts come from?" snarled her father.

The man grinned. "Didn't you hear me? The *PRT*. They've got the Protectorate to call on. And some pretty heavy-hitter tinkers. Trust me, however you thought you deleted those texts, they've got fifteen different ways of retrieving them." A chuckle. "You're not getting those thrown out of court."

"I could claim tainted evidence," Alan Barnes began. "Planted text messages –"

"No, no, you could not," returned the other man. "We got another phone in the mail, just the other day. Apparently belongs to Hess. Texts on it match up *perfectly* to the ones we retrieved. To the second, even."

He registered Emma standing there, and his face closed up. "Sorry, Alan," he said. "I can't speak any more, not in front of the young lady." He nodded to Emma. "Sorry, kid," he said, as he closed his briefcase. "Just doing my job."

And then they were walking out of the courtroom. Emma was in a daze. She never noticed the half-dozen flies that followed her out; nor would she have paid any attention if she had seen them.

After all, flies were just flies, weren't they?
The phone didn't even get the chance to ring once before Tattletale answered it.

"Hi, Taylor."

"Seriously, Lisa, it's still creepy when you do that."

"Why do you think I still do it?"

"Figures. Listen, the hearing just finished. The trial is set for the twenty-second."

"Excellent. When are you going in to talk to the District Attorney?"

"I'm ... not sure I want to."

"Taylor, listen to me. I don't care what evidence they've got against those girls; you standing up there and describing what they did to you is worth ten times that much. Trust me on this."

"But I tried once, and Mr Barnes threatened to bankrupt my dad!" Her voice was almost a wail.

"That," said Lisa with heavy patience, "was when there was just you and your dad, against the school, who were anxious not to upset Mr Barnes, and were well aware that if Emma got in trouble, so would Sophia, and they didn't want their star Ward being in trouble, and maybe moving to another school."

She paused. Taylor didn't respond, so she forged on. "Now, it's the PRT doing its best to clean up its image, by making an example of Emma and Madison. If Sophia wasn't already listed as a criminal at large, she'd be getting hammered twice as hard again."

"That's something else I'm worried about. Shadow Stalker's going to kill again. I just know it."

"Imp nearly killed her. Maybe she'll die on her own. But yeah, she probably will kill again. We can't help that. But we will get her."

"How? That mysterious plan you were talking about with Hope?"

She could hear Lisa's vulpine grin down the line. "Something like that. Something that requires you to be on site."

"Okay, fine. I'll be there. But I'm going to need better clothes."

"Why not get some from home?"

"Because Dad might be there."

"And the problem with that is ...?"

Taylor groaned. "Okay, fine. I admit it. It wouldn't kill me to see my dad again."

"Actually, just a suggestion? Move back in, at least until the trial is done."

"What? Why?"
"Maybe it will improve your image in the eyes of the court. That way Mr Barnes can't paint you as a homeless runaway. You know, a vagrant. Untrustworthy."

"Huh. You might be right."

"You know I'm right. So, about the victory party. Who are you coming as?"

"Seriously, Lisa, a party as well? I'm not in the mood."

"You know your kids are talking about going as you. Oh, and that reminds me. Hope has been asking me about Bryce. If you bring him over to the shelter, Amy says she can regrow his fingers for him."

"Oh. Okay, yeah, I can do that. But I don't really want to go to any party."

"I'll use my puppy-dog eyes on you again." Her voice was playful and teasing.

"That won't work a second time."

"I'll get Hope to use her puppy-dog eyes. I hear Director Piggot hugged her the other day."

"That's a disturbing image, right there. Okay, fine. I'll go to the party. As you."

If this was supposed to give Lisa pause, it failed. She chuckled. "And I'll go as Hope. Lots of white body makeup and sparkles. And big fake wings."

"Won't she be offended?"

"Who, Hope? God, no, Hope doesn't do offended. She'll probably laugh herself silly, and help me put it together."

"She probably would too." Taylor paused. "Actually, I just had an idea."

"Say on, o great and wise Taylor."

"Make the party into a fund-raiser. Ten dollar door charge, five if you're in costume. It encourages costumes, and what's left at the end of the night, we put toward your shelter."

Lisa paused. "That's actually a really great idea. And here's another one. Bring your dad."

"Really? I don't know if he's really a party person, since Mom ..."

"Taylor." Lisa's voice was firm. "Bring. Your dad. To the party."

"You realise, he'll probably come in costume."

Lisa chuckled. "All the better. I can see him as Coil."

Taylor shuddered. "Yeah, no. I had a nightmare about that. Let's not go there."

"You have very strange nightmares. But you'll make sure he comes to the party?"

"Yes, okay, I'll bring him to the party. Okay? Happy now?"

"Definitely. Catch you later."

"Later, Lisa."
Taylor hung up, and stared pensively at the phone. *Now, what's Lisa up to?*

Lisa hung up; her usual cheery aspect was replaced by a thoughtful expression. *Now, have I forgotten anything?*

"Hello, Riley."

Riley looked up. "Hello, Doctor Yamada!" She jumped to her feet and ran to hug the older woman.

Jessica Yamada smiled and hugged her back. "How are you feeling today, Riley?"

Riley sat down in her chair, facing Dr Yamada. "I'm feeling better today. I didn't cry once, and I thought of a new way to vivisect a human being without killing him."

Yamada's smile never wavered. "You know, crying can be very healthy."

Riley nodded vigorously. "Oh, I know. Crying helps get rid of stress hormones, and makes you feel better. I think I'll be crying a bit more tomorrow, but today I just feel good."

The therapist's smile turned rueful. "I'm sorry, Riley. You probably know more about how the human body works than I ever will. I apologise for being condescending to you."

Riley giggled. "That's fine, Doctor Yamada." She looked at the doctor as she balanced glasses on her nose, preparatory to taking notes. "Are your eyes all right, doctor?"

Jessica sighed. "Just a little long-sightedness. As you would know, one of the penalties for getting older."

"You know," said Riley seriously, "I could fix those for you. Make it so you have perfect twenty-twenty vision, or even better, if you wanted. Given the right equipment, I could give you low-light vision as well." She paused. "But that would mess with your colour vision, because I'd have to replace a lot of your cones with rods. So maybe you wouldn't like that."

Dr Yamada chuckled. "No thank you, Riley. I appreciate the offer, but I'll stick to the original issue for the time being." She made a note. "So tell me, why do you want to vivisect human beings?"

"Oh, I don't *want* to," Riley explained. "I just know how. I mean, standard surgical procedure only admits to a certain number of ways to open up a person without killing them, but I know more ways than that, because I know how to keep people alive while I'm doing it." She smiled angelically. "But I figured out a new way this morning. It might even have implications for surgical techniques. I'd have to read up on the material, to see if someone's already figured it out."

"I'll see about getting you the latest medical digests, if you want," offered Dr Yamada.

"Ooh yes, please," replied Riley. "And have you passed on my request for internet access?"

Yamada nodded. "Unfortunately, they turned it down. Apparently the standing rule is, no technology for Tinkers."

"But I'm not an *electronics* Tinker, I'm a *bio-*Tinker," explained Riley, as if she were the adult and Jessica were the child.

Jessica nodded. "I know that, and you know that, but the rules don't know that." She smiled and shook a finger. "And before you try to wheedle me, I value my medical license far too much to try to
smuggle something in to you. And you know it."

"Awww." But Riley knew that she was right, and would not budge on the subject. It was one of the reasons she liked the doctor so much. Jessica Yamada was a nice person, with strict boundaries. Riley liked boundaries. They let her know where she stood with people.

"So, Riley," said the doctor. "What would you like to talk to me about today?"

"Well," began Riley. "I had a bit of a dream last night. Well, it wasn't really a dream, more of a memory of something that happened when I was with the Slaughterhouse Nine. Can I talk about that?"

"Of course you can," said Dr Yamada, making a line on her pad. "I'm all ears."

Riley nearly giggled, imagining grafting ears all over Jessica Yamada's face and hands. That would look so silly. Then she took hold of her imagination and gave it a stern shake. Dr Yamada was a friend. She would never do that to a friend.

"Well," she began. "There was this this little midwestern town ..."

Jessica Yamada listened, and made notes, as the blonde-haired child before her reeled off a tale of terror and bloodshed that would make any veteran horror-movie director run screaming into the night.

Every now and again, she interrupted the narrative, drawing out some detail, and asking Riley about her own actions, and the motivations she had been acting on.

Riley was slowly, ever so slowly, shaking off the influence of Jack Slash. It would take more than one, or two, or even ten more sessions, but each time, a little more of the child within was emerging. Each session, she could see a little more of Riley, a little less of the Bonesaw persona.

It would be a long, hard slog. But it would be worth it, to reclaim the soul of a lost child from the pit of horror that had long engulfed her.

Bryce wiggled the newly-regrown fingers on his right hand. "Feels weird," he complained.

Amy rolled her eyes. "They always say that."

Sierra, a redhead with dreadlocks – which was not the weirdest thing that Hope had seen all day, although it came close – slapped him lightly upside the head. "Behave," she snapped. "You lost those fingers through your own stupid fault, and now you're getting a second chance. You will be polite, and you will be grateful."

Hope looked enquiringly at Lisa. "How did he lose them, exactly?" she murmured. "I remember fixing his hand as best I could, but Taylor wasn't exactly up-front about how it happened."

"Sierra thought he was kidnapped by the Merchants," Lisa supplied in a similar undertone, as Bryce, his tone much abated, apologised to Amy and thanked her as politely as his apparently perpetually sullen attitude allowed.

"But he wasn't?" Hope guessed. It seemed to be where she was leading.

"No," agreed Lisa. "He joined them of his own free will, got injured at the party, and we got him out just in time."
Hope grimaced. "That's nasty," she said. "He hasn't been any trouble since?"

"Not since he realised what the Merchants were like," replied Lisa. "And since Skidmark and the rest ended up in custody, they've just fallen apart, so even if he wanted to go back, there's no-one to go back to."

"I hear Skitter's been moving into that territory," Hope said. "Cleaning up a bit."

"We do our best," replied Lisa with a vulpine grin.

"Actually, I've just had an idea," said Hope. "I'll talk to Amy about it, but she's getting pretty good at fixing long-term injuries. If you could spread the word around, anyone with an amputation or other similar injury could come here, and Amy and I could fix it for them."

Lisa raised an eyebrow. "What, like a pilgrimage to the healing waters?" Then she saw the look on Hope's face and chuckled. "Sorry, couldn't resist." She sobered for a moment. "Just make sure that you don't push too much on Amy, too soon. It will be too much like what she went through before she met you."

Hope nodded seriously. "I'll do my best."

Amy rejoined Hope, and they went to talk to Skitter, who had brought Sierra and Bryce over.

"It's good to see you again," said Hope. "Keeping well?"


Hope stepped forward. "Hug for a friend?" she asked. "Or are you still carrying way too many bugs?"

Skitter did not reply, but bugs of all description began to pour out of her costume, forming into a swarm above her head, or running down her legs, across the floor, and up the wall. When they stopped emerging, she stepped forward and accepted the hug.

Hope held her for a long moment, feeling Skitter's arms go around her, and gradual relaxation of taut muscles. "So, are you coming to the victory party?" she asked, still holding Skitter close.

"Not sure," said Skitter. "Might, might not. See how I go."

Hope pulled back slightly and planted a kiss on the forehead of Skitter's mask, above and between the blank yellow eyes. "I'd really like to see you there."

"I'll see what I can do," Skitter replied.

Hope pulled her in for another squeeze before letting her go. "I'd really appreciate it."

Skitter nodded, and gathered in Sierra and Bryce as her bugs swarmed back into her costume. "Let's go," she said. "We have a bit of a walk, and we want to get back before it gets dark."

"Bye, Amy," said Sierra, and gave the girl another hug. "Nice meeting you. Good seeing you again, Hope."

They stood watching until the two girls and the boy disappeared around a corner. Then Lisa turned to Hope. "Actually," she said. "I know someone you can help right now, if you want."
The bus rolled into Brockton Bay just on sunset. There weren’t many passengers; while the exodus from the city had trickled almost to a standstill, there were not yet many people making the return journey yet.

Still, no-one took much note of the eight people who clustered into a tight group after they had retrieved their luggage. Most of them were rugged-looking, and workers were somewhat in demand in the city right now. There was lots of rebuilding to do.

Of course, working to rebuild Brockton Bay was not on their agenda; they were after quicker money than that.

"You know the drill," said the leader. "Hit the bars, find out where the easy marks are. We want something quick and easy, in and out."

The six larger men nodded and dispersed. The leader turned toward the last of the group. "I would've waited a bit longer, but it looks like things are settling down a bit. And I want to get my cut before it's all tightened up again. With a proper war chest, I can start in to taking control here."

"So what about the local capes?" asked the other man.

There was a harsh laugh. "The most prominent cape in town right now is that new one, the one they call Hope. I refuse to be scared of someone who belongs on top of someone's Christmas tree."

"So, you figure easy pickings?" asked Eligos.

"Sure," said Valefor. His long blond hair whipped in the freshening breeze as he spoke. "Easy pickings."

It was coming on to dusk when the truck dropped Taylor off at the sidewalk. As it rumbled off down the road, she dusted herself off, adjusted the pack on her back, and moved determinedly up the path to the front door.

There were lights on inside; electricity had been reconnected to this neighbourhood, then. Her knock resounded on the door.

"Coming!" she heard from within, and then her father opened the door.

He stood, stock still, for a moment, then stepped forward. "Taylor?" His face was a picture of surprise, joy, and confusion. "I thought ... after our last argument ... you were never coming back."

"Never's a big word, Dad," she said, stepping forward to meet him. "I'm just back for a little while. Just until the trial is done."

They met in the doorway, in a fierce hug. He held her as a drowning man clutches a lifeline. She could feel the tears prickling her eyelids. *He never stopped loving me. Not ever.*

She could feel her own arms gripping him as well, and she was surprised at the strength of emotion that she felt. *He was always my rock. My strong point.*

Long moments passed before they parted, and he closed the door with a sheepish smile. "I'm just cooking dinner. You want some?"

Saliva filled her mouth as she smelt the enticing odours coming from the kitchen. "Oh, yes please."
Hope and Amy had been flying over Travelers territory for some little while, as the darkness deepened, before they were joined by a large winged flying creature. It was fanged, and clawed, and scaled, and looked somewhat like a cartoon dragon. As they flew on, it looked them over carefully.

"Genesis?" called Hope. "We'd like to see you, if that's okay."

There was no answer forthcoming, but the dragon banked away and dived toward the rooftops below. Hope looked at Amy, and shrugged. "Looks like follow the leader."

The dragon led them to a fairly well-appointed base, one which was clearly set out for a wheelchair-bound person; it was all ground floor, ramps led up and down steps, and there were no shelves over a certain height. The door unlocked electronically at their approach, and they entered.

The girl called Genesis rolled her wheelchair forward to greet them. "Hope," she said with a smile. "I've heard a lot about what you've been doing. It's good to meet you in person." She looked at Amy quizically. "You were at Coil's base too, right? You fixed Noelle?"

A nod. "My friends call me Amy."

Genesis nodded. "Call me Jess," she said. "Any friend of Trickster and Noelle is a friend of mine."

Hope smiled. "How is she going, anyway?"

Jess grinned. "Loving it. Every minute of the day." She paused. "She's calling herself Omake now."

Hope nodded. "Yes, I was talking to Flechette and Parian the other day. It's a good name."

Jess nodded. "So. Question. Much as I like visitors ... why are you here?"

Hope took a deep breath. "As corny as this sounds ... how would you like to be able to walk again?"

Jess looked at each of them searchingly. "Really? You're just offering? No strings attached?" A pause. "Can you even do that?" She caught herself, grinning wryly. "Of course you can. I saw what you did with Noelle."

Hope smiled. "Yes, we can." She glanced sideways at Amy, who nodded. "Yes, we will. No strings attached. Just ... keep doing what you're doing. Keep being a good person."

Jess blinked, suddenly finding it hard to speak. "Okay. What – what do I do?" The immediacy of the event was upon her.

Hope held out her hand. "Just give us your hands."

The 'operation' – Jess' mind insisted in calling it that, although it was over and done in less time it took her to describe it – was almost painless. A mild twinge, at the site of the old injury, and then strange new sensations filling her legs.

"That's ... it?" she asked doubtfully.

Hope nodded. "That's it," she said cheerfully. "Now we work on the physical therapy."

Jess groaned. "That takes weeks or months."

Amy grinned. "We'll see about that. Your muscles were a bit atrophied, so I've rebuilt them using mass from your back and arms. You were also suffering from decalcification, but I fixed that too. I'd
advise you to drink a little more milk in future."

Jess looked dubious. Hope giggled. "Trust me," she said, "it's far easier than rebuilding the legs from scratch."

"I'll ... take your word for it," agreed Jess. "So, what do I do now?"

"Take your shoes off," instructed Amy. "You might need visual aids here."

So Jess took her shoes off. "Wiggle your toes," Amy directed.

At first, they didn't want to do it. But in less than thirty seconds, she had hit on the right nerve impulses, and all ten pink toes were wiggling nicely, as she leaned forward, watching them avidly.

"Wow," she breathed. "I can wiggle my toes."

"As the man said, you ain't seen nothin' yet," Amy told her. "Left foot. Work the ankle. Move your foot around."

This took a little more work, and her toes kept wiggling instead of her ankle moving, but she managed to work it out, flexing her ankle most satisfactorily. After that, the right ankle was a cinch.

"What do I do now?" she breathed, looking up at them, face shining.

"Knees," instructed Amy. "Straighten each one as far as you can. It won't be easy, but see what you can manage."

Each knee worked. Amy had been right; they would not straighten all the way out, but she managed a very respectable angle with each knee in turn.

As her left foot returned to the footrest, she looked up once more. "What now?" she asked, tears already running down her face. Dread seized her by the back of the neck. They were going to tell her to stand up, as she had dreamed of doing virtually every night since it happened, and she was going to fail.

"Now," said Amy quietly, "you are going to stand up." She held out her hand. "And we're going to help you."

As in a dream, she took their hands. She could do nothing else.

She waited for instructions, but realised that they were letting her take her own time, find her own way. It steadied her somewhat, to realise that she was in control now.

It was wonderful. It was terrifying. It made her stomach clench and her throat tighten. Holding their hands tightly, she used her newly-responsive thigh muscles to move herself forward on the wheelchair seat, then lifted her feet off the footrests to rest on the floor.

And then ... she stood up.

She swayed, and nearly fell, but Amy and Hope, holding her hands, steadied her. Then she caught her balance, childhood reflexes gradually returning to the surface. The floor pressed hard against her bare soles; she fancied she could feel every scratch, every piece of grit, every hair on the polished wooden boards beneath her feet.

"My feet hurt," she said inanely.
Amy smiled. "That's because you haven't had this much weight on them since you were injured. They'll get used to it."

She could feel the pain spreading; ankles, knees, hips. "It's hurting," she said. "My joints are hurting."

Hope frowned, and a silver-blue pulse of light flared into Jess' hand. Immediately, the pain faded to a mere whisper.

"I'll desensitise the nerve endings a little," suggested Amy. "Just until you get used to it."

"Please," said Jess. Again she felt the strange sensation ... it was more of a non-sensation, this time. And when it was over, she felt more comfortable standing upright.

Greatly daring, she lifted one foot, then put it down again hurriedly as she nearly overbalanced. Then she tried it again, and managed to maintain balance this time, putting the foot down six inches in front of the other. She repeated the process, shuffling forward, then lifting her feet higher and higher off the floor.

"Oh my god," she whispered. "I'm standing."

"And walking," agreed Hope.

"Unaided," added Amy.

Jess looked up, and realised that as she had been staring at her feet, Hope and Amy had let go of her hands. Her arms were spread out and waving like a tightrope walker in a strong breeze, but she was still walking. On her own.

"I think," observed Amy, "that the physical therapy aspect has been covered."

Jess nearly crushed Amy's ribs with the hug.

When they left, a few minutes later, Jess was using her chair as a walker until she properly got the hang of standing upright once more. She was moving with much more confidence, and couldn't stop smiling, even as she kept on bursting into tears, staring down at her bare feet and wiggling her toes.

Hope paused in the doorway. "So," she said with a smile. "How do you feel?"

Jess looked over at her, and grinned through the tears that were still running down her face. "Tall."

Taylor sat opposite her father and enjoyed the meal. Even as she ate, and spoke with him, her bugs spread out all around the house – and inside as well – in a way that was instinctive to her by now.

"So, Dad," she said. "The District Attorney has been trying to get in touch with me about testifying at the trial. Do you think I should? With Mr Barnes' threats, and all?"

He frowned, giving her question due thought. "I think you should," he decided. "Bullies like that should be faced down whenever possible, and with the PRT backing you, we can face him down. And we can't let Emma and – what's her name? Madison? – get away with bullying you for so long."

She nodded, giving him a grateful smile. "So you'll go with me?"
"Oh honey, of course I will," he said immediately. "Of course I will."

She smiled, blinking back tears. "Thanks, Dad," she whispered.

"Well, you know, I'm your dad," he said. "It's kind of my job to support you in everything you do." He paused. "Just by the way ... why are you back? Did you have an argument with your friends?"

She shook her head. "The exact opposite, actually. You remember Lisa? She told me I should come back home for a bit, at least until the trial is over. Even with the PRT covering all the bases, it's likely to be stressful for both of us."

Danny Hebert nodded. "She's a smart girl, Lisa." He paused again. "Uhhh, and after the trial? Any chance you'll stay on?"

She smiled. "Not full time, but I may decide to sleep over once a week or something. If, you know, my schedule allows."

"Anytime, honey," he replied. "You know you're welcome any time of night or day."

She nodded, trying to swallow the lump in her throat. "I know that, Dad. And thanks."

They sat for a few moments, just smiling at each other, then he pulled out a handkerchief and blew his nose. "Well, then," he said, forcing heartiness into his tone. "Who wants dessert?"

"Me!"

---

"I see you're back for more punishment, Director."

"Believe me, Armスマスター, I've been through ten years of hell. This, what you're putting me through now, is nothing."

Armスマスター almost smiled. "Was that a challenge, Director?"

Emily Piggot did smile. To be more precise, she showed her teeth. "If you want to take it as one."

She paused. "And this is ridiculous. While we're in the gym, I'm Emily and you're Colin. Me calling you Armスマスター, you calling me Director ... that stops at the door. Understood?"

He nodded, curtly, once. "Understood. But don't think I'll be making it any easier for you – Emily."

Her glare was full of challenge. "I wouldn't expect you to – Colin."

"Good. You remember the exercises I started you on yesterday?"

Her voice was curt. "I think I can manage that."

"Excellent. Start on those. I'll let you know when you can take a breather."

She was just about to commence when he held up a hand to stop her. "Just one question to satisfy my curiosity, Dir – Emily."

She paused. "What?"

"What's started you on this exercise kick? From what I understand, you've been flying a desk for ten years, and you haven't exercised once in all that time."
She nodded acknowledgement to his comment. "That was because I took an injury in the field, which damaged my leg muscles and destroyed my kidneys. I was unable to exercise for ten years."

"Okay," he said. "That makes a certain amount of sense." He paused. "So ... how is it that you can exercise now?"

"How is it that you can lift weights with your left arm now?" she retorted rhetorically, turning away to start her prescribed exercise regime.

"Understood," he replied. *Hope and Amy. Those two do get around.*
In which Amy has an idea, Hope meets with Director Costa-Brown, and Taylor is unsure about reality

Hope glided over a sleeping Brockton Bay, with Amy cradled in her arms.

"We did a good thing, didn't we?" she murmured.

Amy nodded. "We did. I'm so used to healing someone and just moving straight on that I forget sometimes what the aftermath is like, for the person just healed." She leaned up to kiss Hope on the cheek. "Thank you, sweetie, for reminding me of that."

Hope smiled down at her. "It's my pleasure," she said softly, then beat her wings half a dozen times to maintain altitude.

Amy had a pensive look on her face. "That idea you had, of healing people with crippling injuries or conditions ... do you think they should all come to the shelter, or should we just travel around the city and go to them?"

Hope frowned. "Well, the first way is inconvenient to them, because they'd have to first come to the shelter, then line up, and if they are requiring constant care, that could be a danger to them. So ... I suppose we travel around the city. Like a relay race." Or like a join-the-dots puzzle, she added mentally.

Amy nodded. "The bonus being, of course, is that each of them we heal, we only have to do it once." She stretched in Hope's arms, then snuggled back into her grasp. "And it is so worth it to see their faces, after." She paused. "Wait a minute. What was that you just said?"

Hope blinked. "That we're going to have to travel around the city. Like in a relay race?"


"Well, sweetie, I'm glad you did," said Hope, "because I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Okay," said Amy. "How's this for an idea ..."

The shadow, coiling and writhing as it went, oozed through the sewers. It was hurt, and dreadfully so; the terrible light of the road flares had stabbed it to the very core of its being. But it was recovering, healing. There was life down here, not as satisfying nor as filling as larger creatures, but life all the same. And each small spark fed it, healed it just a little more.

Rats squealed, tumbled over one another, to escape the encroaching shadow. Some managed to get away, scampering down side-channels, scrambling up through manholes, diving into water.

Most did not.

Leaving tiny, twisted corpses behind it, the shadow oozed on down the sewers.

I'm not dead yet ...

Taylor yawned and stretched, and then looked around with some confusion. This isn't my bed. This
isn't my base.

And then memory clicked into place, and she recalled where she was, and why. Ahh. Staying with Dad until the trial is over.

The early morning sun was streaming in through the window as she threw the covers off and climbed out of bed. She trailed off to the bathroom and did the necessary things; just as she got back to the bedroom, her phone buzzed with a text message.

CALL ME. LISA.

Typical Tattletale, she thought with a grin. Texts me at exactly the right time. But makes sure it's innocuous in case Dad sees it.

The bugs in the surrounding area gave her a picture of local movements; a few dogs, a cat, no people as yet. Her father was up, moving around in the kitchen downstairs.

She dressed in sweats and running shoes and headed downstairs. Her father was just starting to put together breakfast as she entered the living room.

"Going out, honey?" he asked her.

"Going running," she replied. "I'll be back for breakfast."

He came over to her as she stood by the door. "It's good to have you back, Taylor," he said, and kissed her on the forehead. "Stay safe."

"I have pepper spray and a knife, Dad," she told him. "I know how to take care of myself, these days. And things aren't as bad as they used to be."

He nodded, still concerned. "Well, I've learned my lesson," he said with a wry smile. "I'm not going to try to tell you what not to do."

She gave him a grateful smile. "Thanks, Dad," she said. "I'll be back soon."

She found herself settling into the old running pace as she started off, finding the going easy, breathing steadily. Plugging the earpiece into the phone, she clipped it on to her ear and hit the speed dial for Lisa.

"Hi, Taylor."

"Lisa. What's up?"

"It's Hope and Amy. They came in last night with ideas for something they could do to help you out. Amy wants to show you. I told them that you were unavailable last night, but you might be able to show this morning."

Taylor nodded, even though Lisa couldn't see her. But then, she might even guess that I just nodded.

"Okay," she said. "I'll try to make it in this morning."

"Excellent. Just so you know, however, Hope has a ten o'clock appointment to see Director Costa-Brown of the PRT. A transport is picking her up at nine from the PRT building."

Taylor tried to recall what time it had been when she came through the living room. A little after seven? "I'll see what I can do." She paused. "What's Hope seeing the head of the PRT about?"
"It's the plan she got from Accord," Lisa replied. "She's pushing it up the chain."

"She really thinks that thing can work, huh?"

"Well, I've looked through it, and I haven't found any loopholes yet," said Lisa. "And if anyone's got the traction to push it through to completion ..."

"Yeah, I know," said Taylor. "If anyone can pull that one off, it'll be Hope." And maybe not even her, she thought pessimistically. But I'm not going to bet against her. Not after what she pulled on the Nine.

Her legs were starting to feel the strain as she started up a hill. Her breathing was harsher now as well, making it harder to talk. "I'll see you at the shelter," she said. "Bye."

"Bye, Taylor," Lisa responded, and the phone went dead.

It was half past seven by the wall clock when she re-entered the house. The tantalizing smells of bacon and eggs were wafting through the living room, and she sniffed appreciatively. "I'll be right down," she said, and ran upstairs to take a quick shower.

Bathed and changed, she found she was quite enjoying the old ritual of sitting down to a cooked breakfast with her father. Her bugs were still reporting on the goings-on around the house and farther out; there was more movement going on, but it was all the day to day life of suburbia. No men with guns, no capes tearing up buildings ... it was all so mundane.

And just for a moment, she found herself missing her old life. But only for a moment.

"So, when did you want to go in to talk to the district attorney's office, Taylor?" her father asked, after the last of the toast had been disposed of.

"Oh! Uh, today, sometime, I guess," she answered, caught somewhat off-guard. "I, uh, need to go do something first. I'll be done by nine."

He nodded. "I'll call them, make an appointment. In the meantime, do you need a lift?"

She hesitated. On the one hand, getting a lift would reduce her travel time considerably. On the other ... secret identity, secret identity ...

"Taylor?" He was still looking expectantly toward her.

She sighed inwardly. "A lift would be great, Dad," she said with a smile. "Just to that shelter over in midtown. I have to talk to Lisa about something."

"Great," he said, a smile spreading over his face. "I can do that." He paused. "Are you still working for ..."

"I'm working in the area controlled by Skitter, yes," she said, hoping her voice didn't change when she said the name. "I never actually see her personally." Unless I look in a mirror, she added mentally.

"Right, right," he said. "So ... I'll be okay waiting for you?"

"That'll be fine, Dad. I shouldn't be too long." I hope, she told herself. Lisa sounded positively gleeful over the phone.
His old truck still worked just fine; it rattled and banged over the potholes and ruts, but wasn't fazed by the poor state of some of the roads.

"We should be starting work on some of these, next week," he said. "Raising the grade, resurfacing. It'll be better than new by the time we finish." There was undeniable pride in his voice. She could understand. Helping to rebuild a city ... there's something special in that.

"Oh, that reminds me too, Dad," she said. "There's going to be a big celebration on the day after tomorrow. They're calling it the Slaughterhouse Zero Victory Party. It's a costume party, for charity. Ten dollar cover charge, plus an extra five if you aren't dressed as a cape." She smiled at him. "Lisa said I should invite you."

"Really?" he said, somewhat startled. "I'm ... not really much of a party person ..."

"Dad, please?" she said, hating herself for injecting that little-girl tone into her voice. "For me?"

Normally she wouldn't go to these lengths, but Lisa had been insistent on her bringing him along, and she trusted Lisa's instincts.

He sighed, and relented, as she'd known he would. "I'd be happy to, honey." He gave her a mock glare. "Two days isn't much time to prepare a costume, you know."

She grinned. "Carry half a surfboard with wires coming out the end, and tell everyone you're Kid Win after an equipment failure."

He laughed out loud at that one. "That's an idea." Turning the corner, he slowed to a halt. "That's the shelter over there, isn't it? I'll just wait in the truck."

"Thanks, Dad," she said, and gave him a swift kiss on the cheek. Grabbing her backpack, she jumped out of the truck and ran toward the shelter.

With her bugs, she quickly located Hope and Amy, talking to Lisa. Ensuring that she wasn't spotted by either of the first two, she entered the shelter by another way, going straight to Lisa's room and closing the door behind her.

Moving as quickly as she could, she changed into her costume, leaving her clothes and pack on Lisa's bed. Then she checked that no-one was watching, ducked out of Lisa's room and made her way toward where Hope and Amy were waiting.

She had noticed it before, but people responded much differently to her as Skitter than they did to her as Taylor. Dressed in the costume, she caused heads to turn, and people to back away from the insects that she gathered to her.

"Skitter, good to see you," said Lisa cheerfully, turning to face her. Hope also turned, smiling a greeting, although Amy seemed a little startled. Hope immediately moved in to hug her, which Taylor still was not really used to, but she was rapidly coming to appreciate. Even as Skitter, human contact was still human contact. And Hope was just plain nice to hug.

"So, what did you want to see me about?" she asked, injecting just a hint of insect-buzz into her voice.

Amy grinned. It transformed her face. "You're gonna love this," she said. "Hope gave me the idea coming home last night, and it took a bit of fiddling this morning, but check this out."

She opened her closed right hand, and Taylor found herself looking at a dozen medium-sized insects.
They were of a type she wasn't familiar with, and as she watched, Amy apparently released some sort of control over them, because they immediately fell under her sway.

Under her direction, all twelve of them took wing and flew to Skitter's upturned palm, where she looked closely at them. They didn't have pincers, stingers or other obvious attack mechanisms. She looked up at Amy. "What are they?"

"I call them relay bugs," she answered, grinning broadly. Hope wrapped her arms around Amy from behind, and gave her a squeeze; Amy leaned back against her comfortably.

Behind her mask, Skitter frowned. "What's a relay bug?" she asked.

"It relays the effect of your power," explained Amy. "Wherever they are, it's like you're there. Expanding your area of effect."

Skitter paused, taking that in. "That's very impressive," she said. "What do I need to know about them?"

Amy shrugged. "The original one was a cockroach that ran over my foot this morning; I repurposed it a bit. They'll eat anything, they're fairly rugged, but they can fly reasonably well, and the carapace has a sort of chameleon effect built in." She gestured at the dozen bugs on Skitter's hand, and Skitter noticed that they'd gone from a pale fleshy colour to the dark grey of her glove. "They're not toxic to anything, though they'll taste pretty bad." She paused. "They're fairly long-lived for insects, but they have no breeding instinct. You will have to direct them to breed."

So they don't spread and go wild if they're out of my control, Skitter understood. I like it.

"Well," she said, causing the 'relay bugs' to join the other insects orbiting her, "that'll be very useful. Thanks." She turned to go. "I have to be somewhere, but I really appreciate it. I'll be sure to put them to good use."

"I'll walk you out," said Lisa. She gave Hope a meaningful look. "You might want to think about heading over to the PRT building."

Hope nodded. "Okay, good idea. Anything you need to grab, Amy?"

Amy shook her head. "I'm good. See you later, Skitter. Let me know how the bugs turn out."

"I will," Skitter assured her.

Lisa walked with Skitter straight to her own room, and chatted to her as she changed out of her costume.

"They've actually got a couple other ideas," she said cheerfully. "These ones will need you to help them with, but I like how excited they get with the idea of helping you out."

"Well, let's just see how the relay bugs go, first," said Taylor. "I'll be interested to see how well they work."

"Me too," agreed Lisa.

Back in the truck, Taylor smiled at her father. "Sorry I took so long. I couldn't find her at first."

"That's fine," he said comfortably. "The appointment's not for an hour and a half, so why don't we
find something to do in the meantime?" He smiled at her. "I hear they've got a good ice-cream kiosk on the Boardwalk."

"I like that idea," she agreed.

As Danny started the truck, a relay bug climbed out of her backpack and flew out of the window to a nearby tree. No-one noticed as its carapace turned a light brown to match the bark.

She kept track of everything around the shelter as the truck drove away. When they were nearing the limit of her range, she sent another relay bug out. And then another one, and another.

By the time they got to the Boardwalk, she had relay bugs covering vast swathes of the city, even though she would normally have been well out of range of the insects in those areas.

Amy certainly knows her stuff, she admitted to herself. I can't wait to see the other ideas she and Hope came up with.

They strolled the Boardwalk, eating ice-creams, conversing lightly on some subjects and leaving others alone, by mutual silent agreement. She truly enjoyed the interaction with her father; she didn't have to think every moment of how to impress him or keep him scared of her. He was her Dad. He loved her anyway.

And in the meantime, she was straightening out the kinks in the line of relay bugs, until she had her base under close surveillance, and most of her territory besides. Everything seemed to be under control; Sierra was doing some sweeping, but otherwise the base was empty.

There were people gathered here and there in her territory, apparently passing the time of day; she gathered heavy swarms and simply flew them past overhead; the people looked up and fell silent until the swarms were gone.

*Flying the flag.* It was very effective, even by remote control.

"Well, honey," said her father, tapping his watch. "It's just about time. Shall we go?"

She nodded. She was a little reluctant to do this, but she had told Lisa that she would. And Lisa would know if she hadn't.

*So here we go.*

"Here we go," muttered Hope under her breath, as the door opened to admit her to the office of Roberta Costa-Brown, National Director of the Parahuman Response Teams.

She entered, Amy at her side. Someone had been on the ball; there were two chairs awaiting them, in front of the Director's desk.

Behind the desk sat Director Costa-Brown herself; she rose, but did not offer to shake hands. "Good morning, Hope," she said in greeting. "Miss Lavere. Please, take a seat."

*She really has done her homework,* Hope noted as she sat down. Nor did she miss Amy's slight smile as she recognised the same thing.

"Good morning, Madam Director," Hope said, closely echoed by Amy. She smiled. "It's really good to meet you. And I appreciate your taking the time to see me."
"Having perused the plan that Director Piggot sent through to me," the Director said, "I was quite intrigued. It strikes me that I have seen, or heard of, something similar, once upon a time." She raised an eyebrow. "Are you the author of this rather impressive document?"

Hope tried not to swallow nervously. She knows. Does everyone know Accord's work?

"No, Madam Director," she responded. "I was given the basics of the plan by someone else. I was also advised not to make the real author's identity publicly known, in case it reflected badly on the plan."

Director Costa-Brown smiled fractionally. "And so you hid it in plain sight. I applaud you." She tapped the cover of the folder which lay before her. "Hope. Accord." There was no doubt, from the emphasis in her voice, that she knew exactly what she was referring to.

Hope nodded, her throat dry. "Yes, Madam Director." Is she going to kill it now, because she knows?

The Director surprised her. "I have read through the plan," she said next. "And I can find no flaws in it."

Hope was astonished. She read the whole thing? She herself had only managed to skim most of the binders, to get an idea of the contents. "Yes, Madam Director?" she managed.

"And so," said Director Costa-Brown, apparently enjoying herself, "I will supply you with an introduction to ... where were you wanting to take this to?"

Hope cleared her throat nervously. "I was thinking ... the United Nations. To address the General Assembly on the matter."

She had managed, at last, to get a reaction out of the Director. Both eyebrows rose sharply. "You are nothing if not ambitious," she observed. Hope could not tell if she thought that to be a good thing or a bad thing.

"If a thing's worth doing, Madam Director,' ventured Hope, "it's worth putting your all into it. Otherwise, why even start?"

Again, that fractional smile came and went. "Very well," said the Director. "I will see about getting you an appointment to see the Governor of New York. He has the requisite connections to get you in to see the Secretary-General, whereas I do not."

Hope took a deep breath, and realised that she had been holding the last one for far too long. "Thank you, Madam Director," she said rapidly. "Thank you."

"Ah," said the Director. "Before we end this meeting, I would give you two pieces of advice."

Hope was immediately attentive. "Yes, Madam Director?"

Director Costa-Brown treated Hope to a steady gaze. "Advice number one. Have your Hope Accord translated into electronic media. Ensure that it can be followed, and understood, by the most lackadaisical and unenthusiastic of readers. In short, make it idiot-proof."

She leaned forward slightly. "You, with your gifts, could sell this to anyone short of a congenital idiot or a psychopathic maniac, and I would not be so sure of either of those. But ensuring that they keep following it after you have moved on, that requires extremely simple and easy instructions."
Again, she tapped the folder. "Accord does understand the concept of 'simple and easy'; however, papers in binders are far too time-consuming to look through in today's world." She paused. "There are many tinkers you could call upon to get this done at a moment's notice. Were I you, I would avail yourself of the services of one of these."

Hope nodded. "I understand, Madam Director. And the second advice?"

Here Director Costa-Brown's smile sharpened noticeably. "This is the hard one, my dear. You are going to have to learn the material. All of it."

Hope looked dismayed; had her complexion allowed it, she would have turned pale. Paler. "There's a ... lot of it," she managed.

Director Costa-Brown nodded in agreement. "Indeed there is. But while presenting it, you need to know it like the back of your hand. You need to be able to act, in fact, as though you don't need the actual written-down plan. You need to give the impression that it's all contained in your head, and you're just using the written form as notes to jog your memory."

Hope didn't look any happier. "I ... really don't know if I can memorise all that," she said, trying hard not to let the dismay into her voice.

The Director raised one eyebrow fractionally. "You don't need to have every single fact, figure or formula memorised perfectly," she said, although she gave the impression that she, herself, could do so — and probably had done so. "But you do need to know where to find any one of them, and what it means, and how it relates to everything else. Do you understand me? You need to be able to grasp, in your own mind, how the plan fits together. How it works."

Hope blinked. "I suppose ... I can do that," she allowed.

Director Costa-Brown's eyes hardened. "Do you 'suppose' or do you know?" she snapped. "Because if you cannot learn to present this plan competently, I am not going to allow you to waste the time of the Governor of New York, thus putting me in a bad light for arranging the introduction. So is that a yes, or a no? Can you do it, or not?"

Hope was tongue-tied; she wanted to say yes, but could not get the word out. Then her power came to her rescue; she felt her spine straightening and her mouth opening, quite without her own volition. "Yes, ma'am!" she said briskly.

The Director's smile had just the faintest touch of warmth in it. "Good," she said. "I will speak to him and arrange the appointment. Director Piggot will inform you in due time. In the meantime ..." She paused. "I understand that you only need a few hours worth of sleep a night. I would advise you to put the rest of that time to good use." She tapped the folder with one fingernail, meaningfully.

Hope nodded. "Yes, Madam Director, I certainly will," she agreed.

"Very well. Good day to you; it has been a pleasure meeting you."

The dismissal was plain; again, Director Costa-Brown rose as they stood, but once more she did not offer to shake hands.

Alexandria watched the door close behind them, and smiled to herself. Well, I've done my part, she mused. If they can pull it off, it will be a neat trick.
badly that she had to cling to Amy for support. Amy held her close, arms around her.

"Oh my god," murmured Hope, leaning on Amy and pressing her face into her shoulder. "I feel like I just got skinned alive and put back together. That woman could give Director Piggot lessons in hardass."

Amy kissed her gently on the cheek, mindful of spectators. "You did fine, sweetie. You said your piece, and I think you might have impressed her just a little bit."

Hope looked at Amy accusingly. "You were cool as a cucumber all the way through. How come?"

Amy smiled. "I've been associating with hardass capes since I could walk," she said. "If I can weather Vicky in a bad mood, I can stand a glare from the head of the PRT."

She fell silent, and Hope took her hand. "You okay?" she inquired softly.

"Yeah," said Amy, but the catch in her voice said otherwise. "Can we ... can we get home now please?"

_Dammit_, thought Hope. _She was doing so well, too. All it took was a reference to her sister ..._

"Sure thing, sweetie," she said soothingly. "Sure thing."

Amy was very quiet in the transport, all the way back to Brockton Bay.

"Mr Hebert, Miss Hebert, come on in. It's a pleasure to meet you."

The office of the Brockton Bay District Attorney was almost luxurious, featuring a large desk, several comfortable-looking chairs, a discreet liquor cabinet, and a wide leather-upholstered sofa.

The DA, a man in his early fifties who was starting to show some middle-age spread, came out from behind his desk as they entered. He shook their hands, being careful not to squeeze Taylor's too much, and then invited them to be seated; they took the sofa.

His assistant, a younger man who oozed competence, served coffee and then sat off to the side with a notepad. From that moment, he seemed to almost fade into the background; it was a useful talent.

The DA took a cup and then seated himself in one of the chairs facing them. For a few moments, he chatted with Danny about the progress of the ongoing reclamation work; he actually seemed to have taken the time to find out about his visitors. Privately, Taylor suspected the assistant to have done the footwork, presenting the facts to his boss. _It's how I would have done it._ She also noted how he made the effort to include Taylor in the conversation; while she understood the ploy for what it was, she also appreciated the intent behind it.

While the casual chatter – undoubtedly meant to put them both at ease – went on, Taylor checked on her bugs. She had managed to keep the relay bugs in range, and thus she was able to cover far more of the city than ever before. Out of curiosity, she pressed her senses outward, trying to see if there really was a limit to how many bugs she could sense and control at once.

She couldn't find one. Every bug, every insect, spider, worm and crustacean, within her range was at her beck and call. _And wait till I breed more relay bugs. I'll be able to cover the whole city at once._ The thought gave her pause. _That's incredible._

"So, Taylor," said the District Attorney, breaking into her train of thought, "what are your thoughts
She took a deep breath, and tried to order her mind. "I – I'm not sure what to think," she said honestly. "I went through so much, for so long, and all I wanted was for it to stop, for them to leave me alone. I would have been happy for them to just leave me alone," she repeated, feeling treacherous tears in the corners of her eyes.

She wiped them away and looked up at him. "You probably know that I – we – took this to the school, and they just – just didn't want to know. Mr Barnes, he threatened to –" She stopped, unable to go on.

The DA nodded. "I can guess what he threatened. I know Alan Barnes quite well, and I'm familiar with his style. He's a divorce lawyer, and he knows all the tricks, and he's got the morals of ... let's just say, I don't actually like the man. However, up until very recently, he's managed to keep the heat off his daughter and her friends; he even had a hand in making sure that Shadow Stalker got probation for her earlier misdemeanours, instead of going straight to juvenile hall."

He paused. "But things are different now. The PRT is involved, and they are directly aware of what's been going on. It's not being swept under the rug any more. When it comes down to it, this is a crime by a super-powered cape, and you're the victim. Miss Barnes and Miss Clements were willing perpetrators in the crimes instigated by Shadow Stalker, and they will be treated as such. Alan Barnes is playing in the big leagues now, and his shyster tricks will no longer be tolerated."

Taylor blinked, her head starting to spin. What this man was talking about ...

"Is this even real? It seemed to be the culmination of all her wishes and daydreams. Emma and Madison would finally be punished, and made to stop. True, it was a little late; she had not even seen either girl for some time, but ... this feels too good to be true."

Her bugs went into high alert, probing the surroundings for anything which might indicate an illusion or a trick of some sort. Who would do something like this? Who could do something like this? But no matter how much she looked and probed the area, it remained stubbornly real. The assistant, busy taking notes, was not armed, did not have a costume under his clothes. The DA himself was relaxed, showing no signs of deception.

Taylor had the six blocks surrounding the DA's office under what was perhaps the most comprehensive surveillance known to mankind, and she could not find a single iota of evidence, short of her own instincts, that anything was wrong. This doesn't happen to me, she told herself. Things don't go my way.

"Miss Hebert? Taylor?" The District Attorney said; with a jolt, Taylor realised that she had spaced out, so completely was she concentrating on searching for any evidence that this meeting was in any way a setup.

"Oh, sorry," she apologised. I'll play along for now. See how far they're willing to go with it. "It's just ... a lot to take in. I'm finding it hard to believe that ..." Her voice caught, and she felt her father take her hand. She squeezed back, glad that he was there.

The DA nodded sympathetically. "I understand," he said; she thought cynically, I bet you really don't. But I'm your star witness, and you desperately want me on side. But he was still talking. "What I need to know," he said, leaning forward slightly, "is whether you are willing to testify at the trial, tell people what happened to you."

"I thought ... I thought you had evidence," she said slowly.
He smiled; the lines around his eyes crinkled. "Oh, we have evidence. Hospital records. Texts between all three girls. We've seized their phones and retrieved deleted text messages. Your father has already supplied us with the list of printouts you made of the messages they sent to you, and we have verified a great many of those also." His smile became very satisfied. "It makes our lives so much easier when the PRT lends us a tinker for the purposes of retrieving such evidence from electronic media."

Taking a sip from his coffee, he went on. "But all the evidence in the world just sits there. It doesn't stand up and speak to you. It doesn't look the jury in the eye and say, 'This happened to me. It could happen to you.' You can ignore evidence. You can't ignore a human being."

"What ... would I have to testify about?" asked Taylor, though she knew the answer already.

The DA verified her fears. "Everything," he said bluntly. "Barnes will try to shake your case, he will try to undermine what you are saying, he will attack your character." He paused. "I understand you moved out of home. Where are you living now?"

For the first time, Taylor smiled. "Back at home," she said. "I moved back in last night."

That provoked a nod of approval. "He won't be able to make much of that, then." He coughed delicately. "Now, this will come up, so I have to ask you. Do you have a sexual history that he will be able to hold over you?"

Taylor blushed slightly, but shook her head. "No, I do not." A pang of regret. Not even with Brian, much as I might want to.

The DA nodded again. "So would you be willing to undergo an STD screen and a pregnancy test, so that if such an accusation arose, we would be able to squelch it?"

Taylor hesitated fractionally; her father squeezed her hand. "Of course," she said firmly. It might be a little embarrassing to have it done, but much better than letting Mr Barnes throw accusations.

"Well, that's that settled, then," said the DA with obvious relief. "Now, as to how the trial will go, we'll lead with the following questions ..."

"So, what's this then?"

"They're calling it a Slaughterhouse Zero celebration party. Charity thing. Come as your favourite cape. Day after tomorrow."

Valefor nodded. "I like it. See what else you can find out about it."

Eligos nodded. "Will do."

Valefor watched him go. Slaughterhouse Zero, huh? I'll give them Slaughterhouse Zero.
In which Hope and Amy undergo a personal crisis, Taylor finds her secret identity irksome, and Director Piggot presents Armsmaster with an unpalatable truth

The transport let Hope and Amy off outside the PRT building; Director Piggot was there to meet them. She greeted them with a solid handshake apiece, mindful of the guards in view. Hope noted that she had already started to lose weight and gain muscle; not much, so far, but she had only been at it for a few days.

"Did it go well?" asked Director Piggot.

Hope smiled. "I think so. She gave me some very good advice, and told me she'd be arranging a meeting with the Governor of New York."

"Excellent. I'm glad to hear it." She nodded to them both. "Well, I have paperwork to catch up with, but I will watch the progress of the Hope Accord with interest. Good luck to the two of you; I will be happy to see you at any time. For you two, my door is always open."

"Thank you, Madam Director – " began Hope.

"What did I tell you, the last time we spoke?" interrupted the Director; there was a slightly amused glint in her eye.

"Oh, sorry. Thank you, Emily," Hope corrected herself. "I hope the only time we need to see you will be a social call." Amy nodded in agreement, with a wan smile.

"Indeed," agreed Director Piggot. She touched her hand to her brow in what was almost a salute, and turned away. Hope and Amy watched her go, then Hope gathered Amy in her arms and they took off.

Another universe, another attempt to wrest control of the city back into his hands.

Another confrontation with Hope.

Again, it did not go well.

Coil growled in his throat, and collapsed that universe.

Hope winged over Brockton Bay; the early afternoon sun was pleasant on her back, but Amy was being more quiet than normal. "Director Piggot – Emily – was looking better than the last time we saw her, wasn't she?" she ventured.

Amy roused herself. "Yes, she was," she agreed abruptly. "Can we land, please?"

"What?" said Hope. "We're only five minutes away from the shelter."

"Land, now, please," insisted Amy. "Please. There's something I want to talk to you about, and I don't want people listening, and I can't argue with you when you're holding me in your arms. You'll probably kiss me or something, and that's just far too distracting."

"Okay ..." said Hope. "If you want to land, we'll land." She spiraled down to a conveniently flat
rooftop, and set Amy on her feet. "What's the matter, sweetie?" she asked, going to brush some of Amy's hair away from her eyes.

Amy pushed her hand away. "We're the matter," she said. "Us. We're not really a couple, are we? You don't really love me, do you?"

Hope stared at her, baffled. "Of course I love you, sweetie," she said. "I always have. I tell you a dozen times a day."

Amy rolled her eyes angrily. "Yeah, but you love everyone like that. Which is the same as loving nobody. You don't love any one person more than anyone else. So you love me exactly as much as you love Director Piggot or Armsmaster —"

"Maybe a little more than I love Armsmaster —" murmured Hope.

"- or Mimi, or Riley!" finished Amy, not taking any notice of the interruption. She rounded on Hope. "On the flight back, I was thinking about my family. My real father gave me up, and Mark was always depressed, so he never worried much about me, and Carol just took care of me because she had to, and Vicky always loved me as a sister and nothing else." She paused, gulping for breath, on the verge of tears.

"... and?" prompted Hope. She desperately wanted to take Amy in her arms, but Amy had said she didn't want that, so she held off.

"And everyone's love is conditional!" shouted Amy. "I understand that, now! I will love you so long as you stick to these boundaries!" She pointed an accusatory finger at Hope. "And I figured out your boundaries, too. You love everyone, not just me, so why are you staying with me?"

She didn't give Hope the chance to reply. "I'll tell you why! Because you're keeping the dangerous cape happy, that's why! It's why you're doing things with me that you never did with anyone else! 'Watch out for Amy Dallon, if she's unhappy, she could spread diseases, kill us all.' 'Whoops,' you say, 'I'll love her and kiss her and make her happy so she doesn't!'" Her finger, pointing at Hope, was shaking. "That's it, isn't it? ISN'T IT?"

Hope was shaking her head helplessly. "That's not it, sweetie." She took a deep breath, tears running down her face. "It's a very little tiny bit of it," she admitted, "but that's not all of it, not by a long shot."

"Then what is it?" insisted Amy. "Tell me! I want to know! I know it's not because you're attracted to me, god no, you don't get attracted to anyone! So why are you with me, if it's not just to make sure I don't flip out and give everyone anthrax or something?" She gave Hope a hard stare. "Because if it is just that, then you're the coldest, most calculating bitch I've ever met, to make me fall in love with you like this."

The venom in Amy's words had Hope on her knees, her arms wrapped around her own body, crying softly. "I don't know how to explain this," she said between gasps for breath, "but it's not like that. It's not like that at all." She paused, taking a deep breath. "Can I – can I borrow your phone?"

Amy stared at her. "Why? So you can report in, tell them you've failed? That I've realised what's going on?"

Hope shook her head helplessly. "No, sweetie. So we can talk to someone who can explain it, better than I can."

Amy set her jaw, continuing to stare at Hope.
Hope looked up at her, tears still running down her face. "Please?" she whispered. "Trust me, just this once?"

Amy took a deep breath, let it out, and brought out her phone. "This once," she muttered. "Because I can't resist those goddamn puppy-dog eyes of yours."

Hope accepted the phone, then dug into a pocket for a card. She dialed the number, blinking away tears as she did so.

The phone on the other end rang and rang. Hope was beginning to think it would ring out, and then it was picked up. "Hello?"

"Hello, Doctor Yamada?" The voice on the other end of the phone was unmistakable; only one person in Brockton Bay had that sweet, crystalline voice. But Jessica Yamada frowned; it sounded as though she had been crying.

"Hello, Hope. What's the matter?"

"Can – can we see you, please?" asked Hope. Her tone was pleading, desperate. "Amy and I – we've had an argument. Amy's upset. We need to see you. Please."

Amy. Amy Dallon. Panacea. Doctor Yamada had read her file. She knew exactly what Panacea was capable of, if she put her mind to it. And she was angry and upset?

"I'll see you right away. You know where my office is?"

"I – yes. It's on your card."

"Good. I'm there now. I'll see you when you get here."

Doctor Yamada put down her phone and paged her secretary. "Hold all appointments until further notice. I have a priority case coming in. Once they get here, hold all calls. I want zero interruptions. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Doctor Yamada," came the reply.

She cut the connection, and leaned back in her chair. She had to relax, be confident and assured when they got here. Deep breaths. Relax.

A line from Henry V came to her.

Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more.

Amy stared at her. "We're going to see Doctor Yamada now?"

Hope nodded, looking at her imploringly. "She can make it clear. People like that are trained to look in from the outside, to see what we don't see. She can tell you what I really feel for you." She took Amy in her arms; Amy didn't respond, her body stiff and unyielding against Hope's. "Please."

Amy growled, deep in her throat. "Okay, fine. But don't expect me to like it."

Hope smiled tremulously, and kissed her on the cheek. "That's all I ask. Thank you, sweetie."

As they took flight, Amy muttered again, "Damn puppy-dog eyes ..."
Doctor Yamada watched the pair enter her office. Hope had a worried expression on her face, and the reason for it was made immediately clear. Amy followed her in; unlike the last time Jessica had seen them, there was a barrier between them, no less real for its lack of physical existence. Before, there had been hugs and kisses. Now, there was no physical contact, no easy byplay. It was also abundantly clear that Amy did not want to be here, but she made no move to leave.

"It's good to see you both," said Doctor Yamada, rounding her desk and offering Hope a hug; Hope clung to her momentarily, then sat on the sofa. Amy did not accept Yamada's offer of a hug; she merely shook hands. She took the far end of the sofa from Hope.

"Just so you know," said Amy curtly, "I'm only here to give Hope a fair hearing." She nodded to Doctor Yamada. "I've heard good things about your work; I know I can trust you to tell the truth."

Jessica raised one eyebrow. "Of course I'll be telling you the truth, Amy. Now, all that remains is for you to tell me what the argument was about, and how you expect me to assist you in resolving it."

"It's about our relationship," ventured Hope tremulously. "What we have. Amy thinks it's all pretend, that there's nothing there, but –" She broke off, hugging herself. She looked to be in actual, physical pain.

Amy seemed to be in almost as much pain, though more emotional than physical. "Doctor, I'm in love with her, but I can't help but feel that she's only going through the motions of loving me so that I don't flip out and flood the city with god knows what biotoxins." She stared at Doctor Yamada with haunted eyes. "I want to know the truth."

"Well then," said the doctor, settling back into her chair and getting comfortable. "I suppose you'd better tell me everything about the two of you. From the beginning."

To Taylor's mild surprise, the meeting with the District Attorney concluded with what seemed to be agreement all the way around.

"Actually, Danny," said the DA on the way out of the office, "have you thought about bringing a lawsuit against the school, or at least those teachers that allowed the bullying to go on? Once this trial goes through, you will have plenty of material to hang on them."

Danny glanced at Taylor, who shook her head. If that happened, I would be in and out of court for months, she told herself. My work as Skitter would be severely hampered. "I just want this to be over," she said out loud.

Her father nodded his head, agreeing with her. "We're not after compensation," he said. "And any lawsuit would drag us through the limelight. Besides, Taylor has to go to school somewhere after they reopen."

School, she thought. Ugh.

I became Skitter to get away from the bullying at school. Even if they're gone, I still have to face everyone else who was there, who didn't help me, and will now pretend that nothing whatsoever happened. Or they'll hate me for testifying at the trial, and it will start all over again.

No, I don't think I'll be going back to school.

But she said nothing out loud.
Jessica Yamada leaned forward in her chair, placing her elbows on the desk and her hands flat in front of her. Amy and Hope had been in her office for more than an hour now, enough time for her to tease out of them how they had met, and virtually every aspect of their shared relationship ever since. Tellingly, the contradictions between the two accounts had been rare, and quickly cleared up. Even at odds, they were polite and respectful toward each other.

It was, she had to admit, one for the books. More importantly, it was one she had to deal with immediately, if the whole city was not to be endangered.

Fortunately, she believed, she had the end of the thread in hand, the clew, as it were. Now, to give it a tug and see where it led ...

"Amy," she began. "When you first met Hope, even before she knew who you were, did she treat you with kindness and consideration?"

Amy nodded. She had calmed down somewhat, but she was still keeping to the opposite end of the sofa from Hope. "She did," she admitted. "But she does that with everyone. Which is kind of my point."

Doctor Yamada nodded. "Hope," she went on. "We've already established that you love Amy. But do you like her?"

Hope was no longer holding herself against pain, but she was still looking anxious, and darting occasional glances at Amy. At Doctor Yamada's question, she looked surprised. "Of course I do," she replied promptly. "She's funny and nice and fun to cuddle with. She's a truly wonderful human being."

Amy looked around at her, eyes opening wider, her expression softening.

But Doctor Yamada was not yet finished. "But when you met her, you didn't know that. You couldn't know that. Why is it that you chose to stay with her, to keep her with you, in those first few hours?"

"Because she needed me to," said Hope. "She was lonely, and hurting, and desperately needed someone to love her and hold her and comfort her. And that was me. There was no-one else."

Doctor Yamada tilted her head to one side. "So ... you took pity on her?"

Hope shook her head, consideringly. "Not pity. Pity involves looking down on someone. I could see she needed help. It was up to me to help her, and to encourage her to help herself."

Jessica Yamada looked at Amy. "And has she helped you?" she asked gravely.

Amy nodded reluctantly. "She has," she admitted.

"And has she given you encouragement?"

Again, Amy nodded. "Yes. She has." She gave Hope a half-smile. "I hadn't realised exactly how much, up until now."

"And has she ever made you do anything, with your powers or otherwise, that you didn't want to do?"

Amy shook her head. "No," she admitted. "It's always been my choice." She looked at Hope wonderingly. "Even when you thought it was really important – you checked with me first."
"It's like I told you, sweetie," said Hope softly. "You are more important. You're always more important."

Doctor Yamada cleared her throat. "Something that I'm curious about," she said. "There are other people in this city who surely need help, as much as Amy did, or more so. Why are you not keeping them close by, helping them as well?"

Hope looked at her, then at Amy, before answering. Amy looked back at her, obviously also wanting to hear the answer to the question.

"I do help them," Hope replied. "But... there's only so much help I can give. And I'm not the only person out there who can help others. So... I help people where I can, and then I leave others to help them the rest of the way. But Amy..." she turned and gave Amy a loving smile, "Amy's problems are kind of unique. I don't know if anyone else could really help her with them. And I don't want to leave her alone, without help. So I'm doing my best."

"And one more thing," said Doctor Yamada carefully. She was treading dangerous ground now, so she chose her words with caution. "Amy; you had concerns that Hope's attentiveness had much to do with the danger you pose as a powerful cape, correct?"

Amy looked up at that. "I did, yes," she said warily.

Doctor Yamada nodded. "Hope, do you think she's dangerous?"

Hope met Amy's eyes squarely, and said, "We're all dangerous. I'm dangerous. Weld is dangerous. Miss Militia is terribly dangerous. And of course you're dangerous, sweetie," she added softly to Amy. "I'd be an idiot to think otherwise. But are you a danger? I do not believe so."

Amy's eyes were filling with tears; she reached out to take Hope's hand. Hope took it, lacing their fingers together.

"And why do you think that she's not a danger?" asked Doctor Yamada neutrally.

Hope never looked away from Amy's face. She answered Doctor Yamada's question, but addressed Amy as she did so. "Because I trust you. I trust you with all my heart. With my life." She drew Amy to her; the girl did not resist. "If I did not trust you, would I sleep in the same bed? Would I expose myself to your power as much as I do, if I did not truly love you?"

She embraced Amy and kissed her three times; once on the forehead, once on the tip of the nose, and once, softly and gently, on the lips.

Then she tilted her head, smiling at the girl in her arms. "Have I ever abused your trust? Or given you any reason to believe that I don't trust you, wholly and absolutely?"

"No," whispered Amy. "You never have. Oh my god, I've been such an idiot." The tears were now running down her face.

"It's okay, sweetie," Hope told her with a teary smile of her own. "It's like you told Vista. You do something silly, you realise it, you fix it, you move on. It's fixed. We can move on from this."

"Actually," said Doctor Yamada, "We're not finished here yet. There is more to your relationship than either of you seems to realise."

They both turned to look at her in surprise. She looked back at them, one eyebrow raised. "It is something that needs to be aired," she said, and paused. "But perhaps you have enough to go on
with for the moment."

She ventured a smile, shared equally between them. "Come back tomorrow? Say, ten o'clock? I
usually don't work on weekends, but this is important. And I'd rather go through it with you than
have it come up in the future, where I might not be there to walk you through it."

"Okay," said Amy. She put her arms around Hope, and gave her a hug. "You've definitely made me
feel better about us."

Hope leaned into the hug, holding her close. "Me too," she said. She smiled at Doctor Yamada.
"Thank you, Doctor. Thank you for saying what I didn't know how to say."

Jessica Yamada smiled. "It is kind of my job," she pointed out. "Thank you for sharing, and letting
me help you." She stood up and came around from behind the desk. Hope got up and embraced her;
Amy was not far behind.

"I didn't know how it would help," Amy admitted. "But it did. You've helped me see where my
thinking was going wrong, and to help me put it right."

"I'm glad," said Doctor Yamada. "It's a pure pleasure to see people walking out of my office smiling.
To know that we've made actual, real progress." Hope hugged her again, her face alight with more
than the glow of her skin, and took Amy's hand as they walked out the door.

As it closed behind them, Jessica leaned against the desk and breathed deeply several times.

Well, she thought. I've been in strained situations before, but that was fairly unique. A faint smile
creased her face. I wonder if I should start a side-business as a parahuman relationships counsellor?

After a moment, she thought better of the idea. I think I'll stick to the supervillains. It's safer.

Once Taylor and Danny were back in the truck, he looked at her and said, "You're awfully quiet
there, kiddo. Something bothering you?"

She shook her head. "Not really, Dad. It's just ... it was going on for so long, and then I tell just the
right person, and ... now, this is happening."

"Huh," he said, turning the ignition key; the truck rattled to life. "Who did you tell?"

"Hope," she said. "She gave me a lift, and we were talking, and I mentioned the bullying, and it was
amazing. She actually cared. I can only imagine that she told someone in the Protectorate or the
PRT."

"Well, kiddo," he said, as he put the truck into gear. "I'm glad you told her. I'll have to thank her
when I see her next."

"Well," said Taylor with a grin, "There is the Slaughterhouse Zero victory party. You can thank her
then."

"Dress up as a cape, huh?" he commented. "Who do you think you'll go as?"

"Hmm," said Taylor, as if considering. "I was thinking maybe Tattletale, of the Undersiders."

"A villain?" he asked, his eyebrows raising.

"A villain who helped take down the Si- the Slaughterhouse Nine," Taylor pointed out, hastily
amending her words at the last moment; she wasn't supposed to know the still-classified events around the death and capture of William Manton.

"The PRT is apparently talking about an amnesty for the Undersiders," she went on, "so she probably won't be seen as a villain for much longer."

"Hah," he said. "I know who I'll go as, then."

"Who?"

"The darkness guy. Grue. I've got an old motorcycle helmet somewhere, I'll paint it black and put a skull on the front. Dark jeans, my black sweater, and voila!"

"Dad –" She stopped short.

"What?"

You know Grue is black. But she couldn't say it. How am I supposed to know that?

"It, uh, it sounds cool. But I like my Kid Win idea better."

"You're just jealous," he said teasingly. "I'll be a cooler villain than you."

If you only knew, Dad. If you only knew.

This time, as Hope took Amy in her arms, there was no stiffness, no reserve. Amy put her arms around Hope's neck and held her close. They were in the air before she spoke.

"Hope," she said, "how do you put up with me?" There were tears in her voice.

"What do you mean, sweetie?" asked Hope. "I love you. How could I not put up with you?"

Amy's voice broke. "I just ... I just keep doing stupid things, accusing you of not loving me. I know you love me, I know you'll never hurt me, but – things just crowd into my brain, and I can't think straight. It's like – it's like there's a monster in the back of my head that doesn't want me to be happy, so every time I start to feel really happy, it finds a reason to make me push you away."

Hope went to a hover. She looked into Amy's eyes and kissed her gently, lovingly. "Sweetie," she said softly. "You have been through so much, had to endure so much pain and suffering, your mind is still sorting out all the trauma. And this can make you act against your nature. Some part of your mind thinks you don't deserve happiness, so it makes you try to push it away. But you will never, ever push me away. So long as you need me, I will be here. Always." She kissed Amy again.

Amy clung to Hope. "Have I told you how much I love you?" she whispered, face hard against Hope's shoulder.

"Not recently," grinned Hope. "But I can guess."

"How do you ever put up with me and my moods?"

"One kiss at a time." And Hope kissed her again. Then she brightened. "Oh, hey."

Amy looked up, eyes still a little dreamy from the last kiss. "What?"

Hope grinned. "I just remembered a promise I made you."
"Promise?"

Hope nodded. "After therapist, ice cream."

"Ice cream," echoed Amy. "I like ice cream."

"Ice cream it is."

So they had ice cream. And it was good.

"I'm a lot more optimistic about going back to Doctor Yamada, in future," admitted Amy over her chocolate sundae. "To talk about my family and stuff. If I was so wrong about you ..."

"We can only find out," said Hope, squeezing her hand. "But one thing's for sure."

"What's that?"

"I'll be there, with you, if you want me to be."

Amy stared at her. "If I want you to be? Of course I want you to be there."

Hope grinned. "Just checking."

"Smartass." But Amy's tone was fond.

"I love you too."

"So you're okay to get home from here?" Danny asked. He was letting Taylor off near the shelter again.

"Sure," she said. She glanced at the sun; still mid-afternoon. Just have to make sure I'm home before dark. "I'll be fine."

"Whoa," he said. "Check it out."

Her bugs told her what he was referring to, even before she heard the gentle chiming sound, high up but coming closer. Hurriedly, she leaned into the truck, busying herself with her backpack as Hope swept almost directly overhead, with Amy in her arms. I don't need her seeing me just before she runs into Skitter again.

More chimes sounded as Hope flared her wings, sunlight sparkling off the crystalline wingfeathers. Her father sucked in his breath. "That's beautiful." Even as he spoke, Hope and her passenger dropped out of sight beside the shelter.

"She's all of that," Taylor agreed.

"Who was that with her?" her father asked. "Would it be impolite if I went in there now with you, and thanked her for helping us out?"

"Uh, that's Amy. She's kind of her partner." Lisa told me how much more than 'partners' they are, but that's none of my business. "And ... I suppose not?" Dammit, Dad, you're not supposed to be getting in the way like this.

"Well, then, kiddo, let's do this," he said briskly, climbing out of the truck and slamming the door.
She couldn't think of a good reason to slip away, so she went along with him. But she left bugs guarding the truck; she didn't think anyone would try to steal it or vandalise it, but there was no sense in taking chances.

Amy was flushed and laughing as Hope came in for a landing outside the shelter. Hope had pulled some gentle aerobatics on the way back; not enough to alarm Amy, but definitely enough to get the blood racing. In conjunction with the ice cream, this had succeeded in lifting Amy out of her funk. Hand in hand, they entered the shelter in high spirits.

Lisa came to meet them. "How --" she began, but her voice trailed off into a startled squeak as Hope swept her into a hug, swinging her in a circle. Hope finished off with a resounding kiss on the cheek before letting Lisa go.

"Wow," said Lisa, eyes bright and face slightly flushed. "Not that I'm objecting, but ... what was that all about?"

"It went really well," Hope told her. "I'm seeing the Governor of New York, once Director Costa-Brown can set up the meeting."

Lisa smiled. 'That's excellent," she said. "But there's more. I can tell."

Amy giggled. "Hope's just happy because the day could be a lot worse, and it isn't." She stepped up to Hope and put her arms firmly around her. "But I love her dearly, and I know that she loves me too, and all is right with the world."

Lisa, observing them both, crooked an eyebrow in what may have been comprehension, but said nothing. Her vulpine smile spoke volumes, however.

At that moment, an outside voice broke in on the group. "Lisa! How are you?"

Lisa looked up. "Taylor! And you brought your dad!" Her smile was quite genuine. "How are you, Mr Hebert?"

His return smile was a little guarded; he recalled the circumstances under which they had last met. "I'm well, Lisa. I understand I have you to thank for Taylor moving back in for the time being?"

Lisa nodded. "I think it's a good idea under the circumstances, don't you?"

"Oh, indeed," he agreed. His gaze shifted, drawn to Hope, who was still holding Amy. "Hope, how have you been?"

Hope smiled, and released Amy to shake his hand. "Oh, who am I kidding," she said, and hugged him instead.

"Whoof!" he said, surprised at the strength in her arms. "What was that for?"

"You're Taylor's dad," she pointed out. "She loves you very much, and she's my friend, so you're my friend too."

"You have a good point," he agreed gravely, and returned the hug. "And I want to thank you for passing on the information about the bullying. We've just come from talking to the District Attorney. He's very optimistic about the trial."

"Well, I only told Weld," she said. "He must have passed it up the line. But it should have been done
ages ago, while the bullying was still going on." She tried to look determined, but only succeeded in looking adorably cute. "I don't like it when people are mean to each other."

He nodded, trying to keep his face straight. "That's a very admirable point of view. I wish more people shared it."

She nodded. "Oh, don't I know it." Then she brightened. "Are you coming to the victory party?"

He sighed and nodded. "Taylor twisted my arm."

She grinned. "It should be lots of fun. I don't know who I'll be going as, yet. Maybe Miss Militia."

"Well, I'll see you there," he said. "And thanks again for helping Taylor out. There should be more people like you around." He looked at the girl standing next to Hope; T-shirt, jeans, frizzy brown hair, pretty face. "And you're Amy, right?"

"That's right," she said. "Amelia Claire Lavere." She seemed to take a particular pride in quoting the name.

"Danny Hebert. I'm pleased to meet you." She didn't seem to be quite the hugging-strangers type, so he offered his hand. She shook it gravely. "So you're Hope's partner, huh?"

"That's right," she said with a smile. "Mainly we heal people, but right now Hope's also working on saving the world."

He blinked; it sounded like the lead-in to a joke, but there was no indication of such in her voice. "Uh, okay," he said, a little dubiously. "Well, good luck with that."

Amy nodded. "Thanks. We'll probably need it." Beside her, Hope put her arm around Amy's shoulders; Amy leaned into her comfortably.

"Well," he said, "I really should be going. It was nice meeting you both."

They both smiled. "It was nice meeting you too, Mr Hebert," said Hope.

"Have a good day," said Amy at the same time.

"You too," he said. He turned to where Taylor was chatting with Lisa. "I've got to go now, kiddo," he said. "You'll be fine to get home?"

She nodded. "I'm good," she replied. She gave him a quick hug. "Later, Dad. Thanks for being there, today."

He smiled. "It was the least I could do," he said. "I've got a good feeling about this trial." He nodded to Lisa. "Have a good day."

They stood at the entrance to the shelter, watching him walk away. "Now see," Hope said to Taylor, "you've got a nice dad. Why can't mine have been like that?"

Taylor blinked. "Your father wasn't nice?"

"Long story," said Hope. "But short answer: no." She enfolded Taylor in a hug, and the topic was done. "It's good to see you again."

Taylor hugged her back. "Likewise." She could see Amy off to the side, watching them with amused
tolerance. Despite what she knew of their relationship, there was no apparent jealousy or insecurity. Amy obviously knew that Hope liked to hug people, and saw no problem in it.

And she really did enjoy being hugged by Hope. There was no implicit promise, no strings attached, nothing other than the hug. She could feel herself relaxing, enjoying it. *I could really do with more of these.*

Eventually, of course, the hug had to come to an end, but not before Taylor had made a quiet resolution to return for more, possibly before the trial date. They had a wonderfully relaxing effect on her.

And in the meantime, her father had made it back to the truck unhindered, and driven away. She had enough relay bugs in the area to get to the point where she could see him turn into her street, and pull up in the driveway outside the house.

Which reminded her.

"Oh, Amy," she said, before she recalled that she was out of costume. *Dammit!*

"Yeah?" said Amy.

"Skitter said to say she's really impressed with the relay bugs," she temporised hastily. "If you've got any more ideas for tricky bugs, she'd be very interested."

"Oh, we have, we have," said Amy. "There's the web-spider, the cure bug, and the big bug. But we really have to speak to her about all of those before we can go ahead on them."

Taylor nodded, itching to be able to put her costume on and get the full details. *But it would look too suspicious.*

*Later, then. Argh. I hate waiting.*

*Ah well. She sighed. Might as well check in.*

"Rats?"

"Yeah," said Sierra. *"Rats. Looks like they swarmed out of the sewers for some reason. They're getting into peoples' houses."*

Taylor sighed. "Okay, I'll be over there as soon as I can."

She hung up and glanced at Lisa. Lisa nodded. "Gotta go?"

"Yeah," said Taylor. "Skitter needs me," she added for the benefit of everyone else.

*I can change on the way over, and then I get to clean out an infestation of rats. Joy.*

"Emily."

"Colin."

"Good day?"

"I've had worse. You?"
"Same old, same old. Ready to go?"

"Always."

She set to exercising, and he had to admit, she was coming along fast. Still big, still bulky, but she was taking his exercise regimes and pounding the hell out of them.

His own muscle-building exercises were also bearing fruit; it would be a while before the left was the match of the right, but he was getting there.

It was during a breather period that she surprised him with the question.

"Colin, why did you do it?"

She didn't have to elaborate what 'it' was.

"Because it was my best chance of taking down Leviathan."

"But you set up people to be killed. Heroes and villains both. And you deliberately tried to get Skitter killed. And you failed to take down Leviathan."

"I'm sorry about the heroes. But villains ... they're expendable. As soon as the Endbringer Truce is over, they're back to committing crimes. You can't trust them."

Piggot was silent for a long moment. "Colin ... you broke the Endbringer Truce. How do you think that looks to the villains?" She paused. "And what about Skitter?"

"What about Skitter?" he replied. "She was an annoyance, a problem. As an Undersider, she was too good at what she did. I figured that as a casualty of war, she'd never be missed."

"You do realise," she said very deliberately, "that when they found you, Skitter was holding pressure on your injury. She could have left you to die. She didn't. That girl is the only reason you're alive today." She paused, then twisted the knife. "The girl you tried to have killed, the one you outed to her own team as a mole, saved your life. Explain that to me in terms of heroes and villains."

Without giving him a chance to answer, she went back to her exercises. Which was just as well, because he had no answers for her.
In which Taylor and Danny are saved from a close encounter with death, but Taylor does not escape unscathed

The truck dropped Taylor a little down the road from her father's house, just on dusk. She hitched her backpack up on her shoulder and walked the remaining fifty yards or so, cutting across the dying lawn to knock on the front door.

Danny opened the door at once; she got the impression that he'd been waiting for her to arrive.

"Hi, Taylor," he said with a smile. "It's good to see you."

She returned the smile and gave him a quick hug. "Good to see you too, Dad." Then she noticed the smell of paint fumes. "What have you been painting? It smells awful."

"Sorry, sorry," he said. "I was painting that helmet in the garage, and I accidentally left the adjoining door open. It was a lot worse earlier, but the house is airing out nicely."

"Well, I'm just glad you didn't paint it right here in the living room," she commented dryly.

"Credit your old man with some sense," he said with a grin. "But the helmet looks good. I even painted a white skull on the visor."

My dad is going to be dressing up as the guy I've got a crush on, she thought. How much weirder can my life get?

Out loud she said, "You realise that visors are supposed to be see-through for a reason."

"Ah, that's fine," he said. "I'll have a good look at it tomorrow, and scrape away what I don't need." He gave her a quick smile. "So, how was your afternoon?"

"Oh, not too bad," she said. "Fairly busy." She recalled the houses infested by the rats, the people staring at her, and the cockroaches marching out of the houses, bearing the corpses of the rats on their backs. "Did a bit of cleaning up."

Flasy, she thought, but not the best PR. When they saw the dead rats, they didn't see the end of their problem, they saw me being scary.

"Well, so long as you're gainfully employed," he said with a smile. "I've just put some ravioli on. There's not much on TV as yet, but you're welcome to watch that while you're waiting."

"Actually," she said, "I might go upstairs and take a shower. Call me when it's ready."

"Will do, kiddo," he agreed.

The shower was heavenly after the long day; afterward, she changed into loose sweats and lay down on her bed. She preferred being Skitter, she really did, but once in a while it was nice not having so many people depending on her.

Her father was downstairs, humming as he chopped some sort of vegetables in the kitchen. Around the neighbourhood, dogs made their rounds, and cats skulked through the undergrowth. Hardly any people were out and about after dark, unless they really had to be; Brockton Bay had become that sort of city.
She drifted for a while, more aware of the bugs than her own immediate surroundings. And then, she noticed the fleas dying.

More specifically, the fleas were on rats, which were running frantically. Underground. In the sewers, she realised. They were running towards her house. And the fleas – and presumably the rats they were clinging to – were dying, in waves, over a front that covered the width of the sewer pipe.

The rats were scrambling over one another to get away from whatever was killing them, but it was just ... rolling over them.

_This must be what drove the rats from the sewers earlier_, she realised. _Whatever it is, they're terrified of it, and for good reason. It's killing everything it touches._

And then she realised what it must be, realised she'd always known subconsciously, but didn't want to admit it.

_It's Shadow Stalker. Coming here._

_She doesn't know I'm here. She's coming after Dad._

The thought chilled her to the bone. She rolled off the bed, snatched up the pack, and darted out the door. "Dad!" she shouted. "Dad! We have to get out of here, now!"

The roiling death in the sewer line was two blocks away.

She made it down the stairs in just seconds, the pack swinging heavy in her hand.

"Dad!" she shouted again.

He emerged from the kitchen, a wooden spoon in his hand. "What's the matter, kiddo?" he asked. "What are you shouting about?"

"We have to get out of here, right now," she urged him. "Trust me on this; we're both in terrible danger."

"What?" he said. "How?"

"Too long to explain," she said, grabbing him by the free hand. "We have to get out of here. Where are the truck keys?"

_One block away._

Inside her pack, bugs crawled over her phone. Busy legs typed a text and sent it to Lisa.

_SS HERE NOW. SEND HELP._

Amy and Hope shared the one armchair, watching TV with their arms around one another. Hope was dozing, enjoying the close contact and the warmth, until Amy wriggled around and murmured, "Let's go to bed."

"Mmm," replied Hope drowsily. "I like that idea."

Amy got up first, then gave Hope a hand to get up as well. Hand in hand, they were just heading toward their sleeping enclosure, when Lisa burst out of her room.
"Hope!" she gasped. "Taylor's in trouble! Shadow Stalker's going after her and her dad!"

All drowsiness fell away from Hope. "What?" she said. "Where?"

"You don't have a phone," said Lisa, apparently at random.

Hope blinked. "No, I broke it in the fight against Mannequin and the Merchants."

"Right. Amy, lend Hope your phone, please. I'm going to need to give her directions."

"Hell, no!" snapped Amy. "I'm going with her!"

Hope looked at Amy. "Sweetie, I can only carry two people," she said gently. "Taylor and her dad. I won't be able to bring you."

Amy looked lost and forlorn. "But ... I want to come with you," she whispered.

Hope hugged her hard, then kissed her firmly on the lips. "I'll be back," she assured Amy. "Can I please borrow your phone?"

As if in a dream, Amy handed her phone to Hope. "Please take care," she said softly.

Hope caressed the side of her face, brushing hair out of her eyes with her thumb. "Always," she assured Amy.

And then she ran for the entrance, her wings unfurling as she went. Chimes sounded as her pinions beat rapidly at the air.

Amy stood there, her hand to her cheek where Hope had caressed her. Lisa put a hand on her shoulder. "She'll be okay," she assured Amy. "She's good at this sort of thing."

Amy turned to her, eyes full of tears. "But she's going to do it without me," she whispered. "I'm not going to be there to save her if something goes wrong."

Lisa put her arms around Amy and held her close. "Ah, she's tough," she said soothingly. "She can handle it."

Silently, she added, I hope.

"On the table," he said automatically, letting her drag him along. "What is it? Some sort of supervillain attack?"

"You could say that, yes," agreed Taylor. "Come on." She saw the keys, let go his hand, snatched them up. With her other hand, she hitched the pack on to her shoulder. "Let's go."

He gestured toward the kitchen. "Shouldn't I at least turn the stove off?"

"No time, Dad," she said in frustration. "Let's go."

"I'm going, I'm going," he capitulated, moving to the door. Opening it. Stopping in his tracks.

Outside, on the doorstep, stood Sophia Hess.

Too late.
Sophia had one hand raised as if to knock. After a moment, with a bright little smile, she lowered it and said, "Knock knock, anybody home?"

She was skinnier than Taylor recalled her, wearing prison garb with SPECIAL written down the arm. Her features were sharper, cheekbones more prominent. And there was a light in her eyes which did not bode well for her sanity.

Taylor stepped around her father, pushed him back a step. "Sophia," she said with all the conviction she could muster, "please leave my Dad alone. He's got nothing to do with what happened."

"Nothing?" repeated Sophia. She stepped forward, into the doorway; Taylor stepped back, and so did Danny. Outside, in the darkness, Taylor felt her bugs encountering roiling darkness, tentacles that roved here and there, and dying as they did so.

"Nothing," she affirmed.

Sophia shook her head. "I don't think so, Taylor," she said. "He was the one who went to the school with you, and got me suspended. Taken off sports." She smiled again; it was a bright little smile, but there was something broken behind it.

"Miss Hess," said Danny firmly. "You are not welcome in this house. I think you'd better leave."

Both Taylor and Sophia were taken aback for a moment. Taylor was astonished; she loved her father dearly, but that was quite the bravest thing she'd ever seen him do.

Sophia giggled; the sound echoed in Taylor's head ... wrongly. "Big talk," she said, "for a man armed with a wooden spoon."

"Listen," said Taylor, "if this is about the trial, I can refuse to testify."

Sophia paused. "Testify? Trial?" she said. "What are you talking about?"

She doesn't know, Taylor realised. She didn't know until I just told her.

"Emma and Madison," she clarified. "They're going on trial for what they did. What you told them to do. They're being tried as henchmen."

"Emma and Madison?" repeated Sophia. "On trial, for that?" She laughed out loud. Again, the sound was unpleasantly twisted. "That's stupid."

Taylor shrugged. "That's the PRT for you."

She knew exactly what was in the pack; her costume, a few odds and ends ... and several road flares. Lisa, if I get out of this, I am going to kiss you.

She didn't even have to rummage for them; due to her bugs, she had them located exactly. All she had to do was reach ... very ... carefully ... into ... her ... bag.

"Well," said Sophia, taking another step forward, "I guess they're going to have to hold the trial without you."

"Wait!" said Taylor, inching her hand farther into her bag. "Who else are you targeting?"

"What's it to you?" frowned Sophia.

"Just ... curious," said Taylor. "You may as well tell me. After all, I'm not getting out of this alive,
Sophia giggled unsettlingly again. "Very true. Well, Hope is on my list. And Regent. And maybe the rest of his Undersider buddies, I hadn't decided yet." She paused. "Skitter, definitely Skitter."

"Well, you know," said Taylor, "Hope's going to be at the trial, but only if I'm there."

She almost had the thing. *Just a few seconds longer...*

"What, really?" asked Sophia.

Taylor nodded. "She's offering me moral support."

Sophia snorted inelegantly. "No such thing. You have to stand or fall on your own. Anything else is weakness."

"Well, then," snapped Taylor, "call me weak!" She yanked the road flare from the pack and ripped the tab off. It sparked to life, billowing acrid smoke but emitting a star-bright light, too intense to look upon. Taylor had closed her eyes and looked away. Danny was partly shielded by Taylor's body, although he still caught some of the glare.

Sophia was caught totally unawares; she screamed, black shadow-stuff smoking off of her flesh as she fell backward out the doorway. Taylor hurled the road flare after her, then slammed the door and leaned on it.

Danny was rubbing his eyes. "Christ, what was that?" He sniffed. "Did you just light a road flare?"

Taylor was already pulling two more out of the pack. "Here," she said, handing him one. "We're going to have to make a run for it."

"What?" he said. "Why?"

A window shattered, at the back of the house.

"Because she's not going to give up that easily," Taylor said grimly.

He took a deep breath, and coughed a little as he inhaled some of the smoke still hanging in the air. "Okay, kiddo," he said. "You've been right so far. I'll trust you on this. But after this, we're going to have a talk, okay?"

Taylor nodded. "So long as we get out of this," she agreed.

She could feel where Sophia was; her physical body had dissolved once more into shadow, and she was keeping away from the front door, where the road flare was burning on the path. The shadowy tentacles were almost literally surrounding the house, and two had just smashed in a rear window.

They couldn't hope to hold out in the house for much longer; road flares only lasted so long, and Sophia had all night.

"We're going to have to make a run for it," she repeated. "Out the door, light the flares, into the truck. We stop for nothing." She handed him the truck keys. He went to take them, noticed the wooden spoon he was still holding, and distractedly stuck it in his pocket.

She opened the door, peering out. The road flare lay on the path, still burning brightly. At the edge of the radiance that it cast, she could see roiling shadows.
"Go!" she snapped, and launched herself out the door. With her free hand, she pulled the tab, holding the flare away from her, and it burst into fizzing, crackling life. Behind her, Danny did the same; the shadows fell away as light flooded the area.

They pelted down the steps, leaping over the already-burning flare, and made for the truck. By the time Danny had the doors open and they were climbing in, Sophia had realised their plan and was boiling around the now-abandoned house to try to intercept them. However, the road flares kept her at bay.

Taylor hurriedly wound the window down and held the road flare out in the open air before slamming the door; on his side, Danny stuck the keys in the ignition before doing the same.

"I can't hold the flare and drive at the same time," he said suddenly.

"Toss it in the truck bed," Taylor told him.

"Right," he said, and threw it backward; it landed in the wide tray, and rolled to a stop.

Danny twisted the key; the vehicle roared to life. Showing none of his usual caution, he slammed the truck into reverse and backed rapidly down the driveway, even as shadows flowed around the truck to try to cut off its retreat.

The heavy truck paused, but then pushed through the obstruction, bumped on to the roadway. The engine roared as Danny slammed it into first and accelerated away.

"Which way?" he shouted to Taylor over the revving of the engine.

"Just go straight ahead for now!" she replied. She fished for her phone, got it, and typed in a text one-handed.

OUT OF HOUSE. WHERE TO?

The reply came back swiftly. HEAD WEST. HOPE ON WAY.

"Head west!" shouted Taylor.

Danny downshifted and skidded the truck around a corner, nearly mounting the kerb as he did so. Taylor was about to make a joking comment about his wild driving, but her bugs picked up shadows boiling out of a storm drain ahead. "High beam!" she screamed.

Danny hit high beam; the shadows caught in the beams melted out of the way; he swerved to avoid the worst of it. This time the truck did mount the kerb, and someone's mailbox went flying. Danny wrestled the truck back on to the road, shouting, "Sorry!" over his shoulder as he did so.

Taylor shook her head. *Dad, sometimes you're just too polite.*

Hope flew hard and fast, arrowing through the air just as quickly as she was able. The chiming of her wings was rapid, urgent, a call to battle. Lisa had texted her the exact location of Taylor's house, and she was heading in that direction.

And then the phone beeped with an incoming text. She pulled up a bit, so that she would not encounter an inconvenient power line while she read the text.

TAYLOR & DAD HEADING WEST. HAVE ROAD FLARES.
West. Road flares. Right. She angled a wing, banking slightly, and shot away on her new course.

And then, up ahead, Taylor saw ... darkness. Where the street lights ended. They haven't connected electricity to that area yet. The street lights had been hampering Sophia's capabilities, sapping her strength. But once they entered that area ...

Shadow Stalker's got nothing stopping her.

She fished in her pack, grabbing another couple of road flares. They stuck; she yanked harder, and they came free.

"We've got help incoming," she informed her father. "But we may have to abandon the truck. Get ready."

He nodded grimly. The blackness came closer.

And from overhead came the sound of crystal chimes.

Hope arrowed down the road, wings blurring with the speed she was trying to coax from them. She had spotted the truck swerving down the road, with the sun-bright road flare rolling from side to side in the truck bed, and the other being held out the window.

She also saw the blackness roiling ahead, retreating slightly from the truck's headlight beams, but not giving way.

Backwinging hard, she landed in the truck bed, avoiding the madly rolling flare. Leaning over on the passenger side, she shouted, "Taylor!"

Taylor opened the door and leaned out, throwing her road flare away; Hope grabbed her and hoisted her from the vehicle like a baby. Hanging on to her pack with one hand, Taylor clung to Hope with the other. Hope moved to the other side. "Danny!" she yelled.

Danny's door opened, but a tentacle lashed out of nowhere and slammed it shut again. Hope reached down, grabbed his arm where it protruded out the window. "Hang on!" she shouted to both of them.

She spread her wings and beat them, once. This lifted her and Taylor clear of the truck bed, and pulled Danny out through the truck window like a cork from a bottle. He cried out with pain, but came free. Below them, the truck speared into the shadow-tentacles, its high-beams boring a hole through the intangible shadow-stuff. Bereft of a foot on the accelerator, it slowed rapidly until it ran up on to the kerb and stalled.

Hope continued to beat her wings rapidly until they were far above the ground, out of danger.

"You both okay?" she said.

"I think ... you dislocated my shoulder," said Danny, gritting his teeth. "But ... I might just ... forgive you."

Hope giggled in the release of tension. "Thanks. I'll fix it when we land."

They landed on an abandoned sports oval. Taylor ignited another road flare just to be sure, while Hope ran her hands over Danny's left shoulder. "That pain blocker I gave you will be wearing off soon, so I'll make this quick," she told him. Gripping his shoulder with one hand and his upper arm...
with the other, she twisted and pushed. There was a *click*, and the shoulder went back into place. Another silvery-blue pulse, and she healed the damage that had been done by the dislocation.

"There," she said. "That should deal with it."

"Thanks," he said, working the shoulder. "That feels great."

Taylor hugged Hope, holding her close. "Thanks," she whispered. "Thanks for coming to save us."

Hope hugged her back. "It's fine," she said with a grin. "It's kind of what I do."

"Uh, Taylor," said Danny. "Not to interrupt this, but about that talk we said we'd have?"

"Ah, yeah," said Taylor, improvising rapidly. "Skitter contacted me, told me –"

"Taylor," said Danny tiredly. "No more lies. Please."

He was looking at something in his right hand. "This fell out of your pack, in the truck. I grabbed it, thought you might need it. I didn't know what it was."

He held it up to the light of the road flare. "But I think I do now. Care to explain this?"

It was the mask from Skitter's costume.
Hope blinked. *Taylor is Skitter? Holy crap.* Her worldview seemed to distort for a moment, as she fitted that fact into place. It was like she was staring at a Magic Eye picture, letting her eyes drift to superimpose two near-identical parts of the pattern, and all of a sudden, a whole new picture had leaped out at her. *Of course. How could I not have seen it?*

"Dad," said Taylor, the road flare falling from her hand and charring the grass at her feet, "it's ..."

Her voice trailed off. *It's not what it looks like.* But she knew that it was exactly what it looked like.


Taylor glanced at Hope, who was looking back at her. Not with accusation, not with condemnation, but with ... understanding? Acceptance? Taylor thought she caught an almost imperceptible nod. *Tell him.*

She straightened her back. "Yes, it's true," she said. "I'm Skitter. I've been Skitter from the beginning." She looked her father in the eye. "I never, ever wanted to hurt you, Dad." She turned away, holding her right arm with her left hand. "If you don't want me near you any more, I'll understand."

His arms came around her from behind, in a hug that squeezed the air out of her. "What sort of a father would I be then?" he asked her as he held her. He gave her a little bit of a shake. "I love you, Taylor. Don't ever think otherwise. Just ... don't lie to me any more, okay?"

She turned in the circle of his arms and put her own arms around him. "I promise, Dad," she whispered, tears leaking from her eyes and staining his shirt. "I promise, I promise, I promise."

When he finally released her from the hug, Hope caught her up, squeezing her so tightly that she squeaked in protest. "This is awesome!" Hope enthused, letting off the pressure so that Taylor could inhale again.

"What is?" asked Taylor suspiciously.

Hope spun her around and gave her a smacking kiss on the cheek. "Two of my very best friends are the same person. And I never suspected." She let Taylor go and ran a hand through her friend's hair, long and curly and still slightly damp from the shower. "Though really, I should have figured something was up ..."

Taylor stared, feeling her mouth curling into a smile in response to Hope's enthusiasm. "You aren't surprised? Disappointed in me?"

"Oh, I'm surprised all right," agreed Hope. "Surprised the hell out of me. But once I saw it, I thought, 'Oh, right. That makes sense.'" She grinned at Taylor. "So I guess that Taylor and Skitter can't both come to the victory party together now, huh?"

Taylor giggled. "I guess not."
"And that's me all disappointed," grinned Hope, looking anything but. She turned to Danny. "And I want to thank you, too, Mr Hebert."

"Call me Danny," he said. "Mr Hebert's what people call me when they haven't saved my life recently." He tilted his head. "What for? And wait, you didn't know about this?"

"For being so understanding about Taylor's little secret," she said. "Some people might have taken it a bit hard." She grinned. "And no, I had no idea. I'm really bad at figuring out secrets."

He nodded understandingly. "I am a bit disappointed, yes," he said. "But mainly because she didn't confide in me." He reached out and ruffled his daughter's hair. "I've kept secrets before. I can keep this secret. Just ... no more lies, okay?"

Taylor smiled, putting her arms around her father again. "No more secrets, Dad," she agreed. "No more lies."

"And I'm going to want to know all about my daughter the supervillain," he added, mock-seriously. "It seems there's quite a bit about your life that I've been missing out on."

She hugged him more closely. "When we get the chance, Dad," she said, "we'll talk all you like."

Though her thoughts were shadowed. Some of what I've done ... I'm sure he won't like at all. I'll cross that bridge when I come to it.

"That's all I ask, honey," he said. "That's all I ask."

Shadow Stalker lurked in the sewers once more. Her thoughts were a roiling mass of anger.

She got away! How did she get away?

**Hope** did it. That interfering bitch.

But what did Taylor say about a trial? She and **Hope** will be there.

I'll get them then. Where they can't escape.

The twisting, writhing shadows coiled away down the sewer pipe. Rats squealed and tumbled over each other to get away from her. Some succeeded. Most did not.

Soon ...
eventuated, Taylor was to bang on the roof of the truck, Danny would stop and get out, and Hope would airlift them both to safety.

But nothing untoward happened. They arrived back at the house safely. Hope went in with them while they grabbed overnight bags of clothes.

"I'm still not sure about this," said Danny doubtfully. "She's gone; we could just stay."

Hope shook her head firmly. "She could return at any time. It's not worth the risk. She won't know you're at the shelter, so she can't follow you there."

Taylor nodded. "It's for the best, Dad. I'd rather have you at my base, but that would take far too many explanations, especially with the trial coming up."

Danny nodded. "You make a lot of sense," he agreed reluctantly.

Lisa's phone played a jaunty little tune to let her know that she had received a text message. She checked it, then turned to Amy. "It's from Hope," she said. Amy jumped up, her face alight. Lisa handed the phone to her.

ALL IS GOOD. NO-ONE HURT. BRINGING T & D BACK TO SHELTER FOR SAFETY. TELL AMY BACK SOON, BIG HUGS & KISSES. PS: WE KNOW.

Amy read it through twice, her smile widening as she read through the 'hugs and kisses' bit. She looked at Lisa questioningly. "What's the 'we know' bit about?"

Lisa grinned her vulpine grin as she took the phone back. "That's up to Taylor to tell you about, if she chooses. Which I suspect she will."

Hope glided in, backwinging at the last moment to land them safely and smoothly outside the shelter. Taylor, especially, was glad to have her feet back on solid ground; she had been carrying both bags, as well as her backpack, in order to balance out the weight difference, and they were not especially light.

As Hope entered the shelter, she found herself being embraced fiercely by a half-laughing, half-crying Amy, who was intent on plastering her face with kisses. Hope, giggling, returned the embrace and the kisses, when and where she could.

"I'm back, sweetie," she said as Amy calmed down. "I told you I would be."

Amy nodded, her eyes filled with tears. "I was so worried," she whispered. She held Hope close and put her head on her shoulder. "I'm just glad you're back."

"I'm glad I'm back, too," smiled Hope, kissing Amy on the cheek. She grinned teasingly. "I might go away more often if I'm going to get a reception like that when I get back."

Amy stuck her tongue out at her. Hope giggled and kissed her on the tip of the nose.

Lisa smiled as she helped Taylor make up the beds for her and Danny. "I'm glad you're okay," she said. "I was worried there for – mmmph?"

Even as Lisa spoke, Taylor grabbed her, pulled her close, and kissed her. It was fairly unscientific, and got her partly on the cheek and partly on the lips, but it got the point across.
"Seriously?" demanded Lisa, once Taylor had let her go. "What the hell?"

"Road flares," said Taylor. "All those road flares you shoved in my pack. When Shadow Stalker was coming after us, they were the only thing that made her back off. I swore to myself that when I saw you next, I would give you a big kiss. You saved our lives. Both of us."

"Right," said Lisa, with a slightly hysterical chuckle. "Next time, I'll settle for a hug, okay? I'm not used to being kissed out of the blue, especially not by girls, and most especially not by you."

"Yeah, well, it was a spur of the moment thing, okay?" said Taylor. "I said I'd do it, so I did it. Now, if it was Brian ..."

"Now, if it was Brian, you wouldn't have stopped at just one kiss, would you?" chuckled Lisa, uncannily echoing her thoughts.

Taylor threw a pillow at her.

"Okay," said Lisa, "there's a matter that needs to be dealt with."

"Oh?" said Hope. She and Amy were sharing a large armchair of dubious ancestry, while Lisa, Taylor and Danny were each sitting in a more normal chair. Each of these seats had been dragged outside the shelter so that they could enjoy the night air and enjoy a certain amount of privacy for their conversation.

"Yes," said Lisa. "There's a certain fact that four of us here know, but which Amy does not."

"Oh. Oh, yeah," said Hope. Danny and Taylor said nothing, but looked at Amy.

Amy looked back at them, then at Lisa. Finally, she looked at Hope. "What is she talking about?" she asked.

Hope kissed her gently, then addressed the group. "I think she can be trusted with it," she said.

Taylor frowned. "I think we should discuss it. Lisa?"

Hope cleared her throat. "If we're going to talk over Amy's head, then I'm going to take her for a walk while you guys talk it over. But I'm in favour of it." They got up from the chair and moved off; Lisa watched them go.

"I suppose it *was* sort of rude to start the discussion with her right there," observed Danny.

Taylor nodded. "I guess." She paused. "But it does need talking over. Lisa, what do you think?"

"I've gotten to know Amy pretty well," said Lisa. "I like her. I think she's good people." She nodded across at Taylor's father. "Mr Hebert?"

"I'm going to abstain from this one," Danny said. "I like Amy and think she's a sweet girl, but I don't know her well enough to make an informed judgement. Plus, I'm not a cape, so that sort of disqualifies me to say anything on the matter."

"That's fair," said Lisa. "Taylor? Is that a firm 'no'?"

Taylor frowned again. "The first time we met, we made a bad impression on each other. She's changed a lot since, but has she changed enough that she would respect it?"
"That's the question, isn't it?" said Lisa. "But I think you're asking the wrong question."

"And what's the right question?" asked Danny.

"Whether she was ever the sort of person who would out someone else's secret identity."

Hope walked, hand in hand with Amy.

"What are they talking about?" asked Amy. "What's so important?"

Hope squeezed her hand. "If I told you what it was, it would let you know what they're deciding whether or not to tell you," she said. She took Amy in her arms. "I love you. You know that. I personally think that you can be trusted with the information, but it's not mine to give out. Okay?"

Amy put her arms around Hope, held her close. "I trust you, sweetie. I love you, and I trust you, and I will never, not ever, doubt you." She kissed Hope, softly and gently, on the lips. Hope drew her even closer, so that their cheeks rubbed together as they rocked gently back and forth.

They were still standing close together, talking quietly, when Danny came to find them. "Ah, there you are," he said. "Come on back; they've come to a decision." As they followed him back to the gathering, he gave Amy a reassuring smile and nod.

Once they were back in their armchair, arms and legs sorted out to their satisfaction, Hope looked around at the group.

"So, what's the verdict?" she asked.

Taylor nodded, jerkily. "Yes," she said. "I think it's a good idea." She looked at Amy. "Sorry for all this runaround, but it's kind of important. But we have decided to let you in on the secret."

"Which is ...?" prompted Amy.

Hope laughed out loud, and Lisa and Danny both stifled snickers. Taylor looked embarrassed. "That I'm ... um ... Skitter."


"Just a bit earlier," Hope admitted. "Danny and I found out at the same time. I thought it was unfair on you not to know. Thus, this meeting." She leaned closer to Amy and breathed, "You'd already figured it out, hadn't you?"

Amy grinned ever so slightly, and replied just as quietly. "I had an idea, yeah."

Hope muffled a giggle, and Lisa shot them both a suspicious look.

"Oh," said Amy, out loud. "Um, well ... thanks for trusting me."

"Well, it makes things a lot easier when I'm trying to drop in to talk to you as Skitter, and my loving Dad is on site as well," replied Taylor, drawing a chuckle from all present.

"I thought you were acting just a little strange, this afternoon," Hope said. "Especially when Amy was telling you about the new bugs we've worked out."
"Right," added Amy with a giggle. "So, 'Skitter' really likes the relay bugs, does she?"

"Skitter does," Taylor confirmed with a nod. "They let me cover so much more area."

"What's a relay bug?" asked Danny curiously.

Taylor briefly explained what one was, and why they were so invaluable to her. Then she turned to Amy. "Now. Before I die of curiosity. What other bugs did you have in mind?"

"Well," said Amy, "I had three concepts in mind, and I've just thought of two more. For the first one, I'm going to need a spider."

"Any particular type of spider?" asked Taylor.

"What's the type that spins the strongest webbing?"

"That would be a Darwin's bark spider," said Taylor. "I don't have one of those handy. But I do have a few black widows."

"I'll have two, thanks," said Amy.

"Hold out your hand," said Taylor.

Amy did so; within moments, two dragonflies whirred out of the darkness, each carrying a spider under it. The spiders were neatly deposited on the palm of Amy's hand, and the dragonflies zipped away again. Each spider bore the black carapace and the red hourglass marking on the back, and each one sat placidly on Amy's hand.

Danny's eyes opened wide, and he stared at Taylor. She gave a helpless little shrug. "This is what I do."

"His eyebrows rose. "So I see."

"All right," said Amy. "This is just a theoretical idea of mine, but it should work." She closed her hand, apparently crushing the two spiders together. When she opened her hand again, one spider sat there. Its abdomen was much larger in proportion than the black widows' had been, and its carapace was a dull grey with a red cross on the back. The abdomen seemed to be pulsing slightly.

"Well, that's the best I can do," she said, handing the spider over to Taylor.

"So ... what is it?" asked Taylor.

"It's designed to spin the strongest web that's possible for a spider to spin," explained Amy. "It's also designed to spin it fast, and spin a lot of it. It'll have to eat a lot to cover that, of course. But it's not very venomous, aggressive or territorial. It'll eat bugs all right – except your relay bugs. They have very similar pheromones; they'll basically ignore each other. And it's like the relay bugs in that you will have to tell them to breed. However, they'll spin web all day long."

Taylor had the spider in her palm, teasing out strands of web. She tried it between her fingertips, testing tensile strength and elasticity. Then she grinned. "I'll take them."

Amy nodded. "Thought you would. That one's pregnant. She'll lay her eggs in a day or three."

"Nice," said Taylor. "So what other ideas do you have?" The modified spider ran up her arm and into her hair; only Taylor knew where it went after that.

Hope took up the conversation. "I was wishing we had ways of spreading the cures to diseases – easily cured or treated, with today's medical technology – without having to go to each individual
patient and inoculate them, when Amy came up with this doozy."

Amy grinned. "Consider this. Bugs based on mosquitoes, but a bit larger. They generate, in their bloodstream, the cure for a particular disease. They pick up molecular scent-cues that someone's got that disease, home in, sting them, and inject the cure."

Danny looked taken aback. "Bugs that cure disease instead of spreading it? Is that even possible?"

Amy nodded. "Easily. But I'd be far more comfortable with someone like Taylor in the driver's seat, to make sure nothing went wrong." She paused. "Alternatively, I could make a bug that can generate a relatively safe paralytic or knockout drug, perhaps a ketamine variant. But again, I'd be uncomfortable about these bugs just wandering anywhere."

Taylor was nodding. "If you can make the bugs, I can keep an eye on them. What else? You mentioned a 'big bug'. This has me curious."

Hope grinned. "I don't even know if this would work, but Amy seems to think she can manage it. Imagine a flying bug so big you could ride it."

That stopped the conversation dead. Everyone was imagining it.

"That would be either really, really scary, or really, really awesome," said Danny at last.

"I think it would be both, at the same time," said Lisa. "What sort of bug did you have in mind?"

"Not sure," said Amy. "Taylor?"

Taylor blinked. "Um. Hmm. It would need to be as sturdy as possible. Maybe start with a Hercules beetle. They're about the strongest flying bugs around."

"Hercules beetle, right," said Amy. She paused. "What do those look like?"

Taylor grinned. "I'll get one to you, in the next few days. How are you going to make it grow big? Spinach?"

Amy laughed out loud. "Actually, it couldn't hurt. No, what I'll need is biomass. Lots of biomass. Other bugs would be best, so I have all the stuff that goes into making up a bug anyway."

Taylor nodded. "I think I can actually manage that," she said with mock solemnity. She paused. "And there was a fifth one that you mentioned?"

Amy nodded. "For this trick," she said, "I will need a firefly, plus three or four other bugs."

Moments later, a firefly landed in her hand, along with two moths and a large beetle of some sort. She cupped her hands together for a few moments, then opened them again. What was revealed was a large bug that resembled the firefly, but was the size of a large moth.

"Interesting," said Taylor. "What does it do?"

"I'm calling it a flash bug," said Amy. "Cover your eyes before you activate it." She already had her hand shading her eyes. Hope took her cue and did the same.

Taylor waited till everyone had covered their eyes, then had the bug fly to her hand, and caused it to activate its bioluminescence.

The resulting flash of light dazzled them, even though they were covering their eyes. Stark shadows
stretched in all directions. However, it only lasted a few seconds before it faded out.

"Christ almighty," said Danny, blinking and rubbing his eyes. "What was that?"

"Something that will give Shadow Stalker a severe headache," said Taylor, with a grin that showed her teeth.

"That's what it's meant to do, yes," agreed Amy. "It can only do about one flash an hour, and each flash reduces its overall lifespan, but each of those flashes is about fifteen million candlepower."

"I can definitely live with that," agreed Taylor. "I'll get together with you on breeding more of them." She looked at Hope and Amy with genuine respect. "You two have obviously been thinking about this a lot. Thanks. I really appreciate it."

Amy hugged Hope closer. "It's kind of like art. You visualise something new, something that's never existed before, and you make it." She smiled at Hope. "And it really helps to have someone there to encourage you and make you feel better about yourself." Hope kissed her tenderly on the cheek.

"Well," said Taylor, "I really do appreciate your efforts. Anything else you come up with, I want to know about."

Danny stretched and yawned. "For my part, as much as I enjoy watching you young people playing tricks with your cape powers, I have had a long and exhausting day, and I need to get my eight hours in." He rose; Taylor rose as well, to give him a hug. Hope and Amy scrambled out of their chair so that Hope could hug him also. "Good night, all," he said. "Believe me, tonight has been a real education."

The meeting broke up shortly after that. Each person carried their chair inside; Hope had to rouse Amy from a contented doze, and then carried her and the chair inside, Amy riding in style. Hope made sure to give Taylor and Lisa a good-night hug before they each went off to bed.

Hope and Amy were eating breakfast the next morning, when Lisa came in bearing two packages. "These came special delivery," she said. "This one's for Hope, from Boston." It dropped on to the table before Hope, with a solid thud, almost causing her cereal to slop over. "Been getting more fan-mail from Accord?" she asked with an arched eyebrow.

Hope stared at the package. "I haven't been in contact with him since," she said. "I have no idea what that is."

"Well," said Lisa, "only one way to find out." She checked the address on the other parcel. "Okay, this one's for Skitter, care of Hope." She shot Hope a slightly exasperated look. "So what's this one?"

Hope shrugged. "Um, no idea?" She blinked. "Oh, wait. Kid Win was working on that idea for me. This must be something she can practise with."

Lisa nodded. "Ah, excellent. I'll get it to her right away."

As she moved off, Hope opened the parcel from Boston. It contained a stack of a dozen bound folders. On top was a single sheet of foolscap, bearing an immaculately scripted handwritten note.

_Hope,_
Accord has been following your progress with interest. He approves of the name you have given to his plan. Enclosed are one dozen copies of a similar plan, designed for Brockton Bay and its immediate environs. It will take much less time to implement than the Hope Accord, and will serve as a proof of concept.

Best wishes,

Citrine

Amy picked up the first folder. It was titled simply: Brockton Bay: Crime and Public Safety. She paged through it. "Wow," she said. "It's all here. Just ... how to make the city right again."

Hope picked up a second copy, and began to look through it. It was immediately obvious that Accord was the author; there was the same simple, clear and unambiguous language, the straightforward descriptions, thoroughly annotated.

On further investigation, she found slight differences. The basic wording was the same in each one, but each folder had different sections highlighted and expanded upon. On checking the title pages, she found why.

One copy for me, plus a couple of spares, she realised. One each for the mayor, the chief of police, Miss Militia, Director Piggot, Skitter, and the leaders of each of the other groups in Brockton Bay. Wow. He really trusts me on this.

Each of the individualised copies had a brief introduction, pointing out to the intended recipient where his or her main area of responsibility would lie.

All I have to do is sell them on this.

She smiled. Challenge accepted.

Doctor Yamada cleared her throat. Hope and Amy sat side by side on her sofa, right alongside each other, as opposed to the wide separation with which they had begun the previous day's session. Their body language said everything that she needed to know; they were once more a couple.

"Thank you for coming back today," she said with a smile. "I understand that this is not something you asked me for, but I believe that you may wish to know it, as it covers important aspects of your relationship."

Hope smiled at her. "I'm ready to hear it," she said. "Amy?"

Amy smiled. "Definitely. But just wait a second, please?" She was currently snuggled up against Hope. Standing up, she climbed on to Hope's lap, sitting crosswise over her legs and leaning comfortably up against her, her head on Hope's shoulder. She felt Hope's arms go around her, and snuggled comfortably into the embrace.

"Okay," she said. "Now I'm ready to hear the rest of it."

Doctor Yamada's eyes twinkled. "Perhaps you misunderstood me," she said. "I'm not going to tell you about yourselves. You're going to tell me."

Hope blinked. "I ... don't get it," she said.
Yamada smiled. "I can see there are things about your relationship which you don't really understand yet. Nor do I; but between us, we may work them out." She smiled at Hope. "Let's start with you."

"Okay," said Hope readily.

"Are you attracted to Amy, physically or sexually?"

Hope shook her head firmly. "I'm not wired that way." This was a question she'd been through before. But she wasn't ready for the next one.

"Are you attracted to Amy \textit{in any other way}?"

Hope paused. "How ... do you mean?" she asked slowly.

"It's a simple question," replied Jessica. "What attracts you about Amy? Is it intellectual? Emotional? Look into her eyes, right now, and open yourself to your feelings."

Hope looked into Amy's eyes. They gazed at each other for a long moment. Then, as in a dream, she leaned in, and kissed Amy. The kiss lasted long enough for Doctor Yamada to discreetly clear her throat. Hope pulled away, looking a little embarrassed.

"Wow," she said. "I am attracted to her." She rephrased it, talking directly to Amy. "I really am attracted to you."

"So ... what's the basis of this attraction?" asked Yamada gently, then her tone changed to a sudden, rapid-fire delivery. "Top of your mind, right now, first answer!"

Hope jumped. So did Amy. Hope answered automatically. "She needs me." She paused, looking at Amy in wonderment. "I'm attracted to you because ... you need me to be with you."

Amy looked back at her. "So ... because I need you to be with me ... you feel a need to be with me?"

Hope nodded slowly, with dawning comprehension. "So that's why I feel about you the way I do." She smiled. "I like it." Amy nuzzled with her a moment, and they shared another kiss. It appeared that Amy liked it too.

"So wait a minute," said Amy. "Does this mean, the moment I don't need you to help me through the day, you won't be attracted to me any more?"

Hope squeezed her lovingly. "Not at all, sweetie. I still love you, and I will always like you. And just because you stop being so very dependent on me, doesn't mean you won't still need me." She kissed Amy lovingly on the tip of the nose. "When you need your space, I will be able to let you have your space."

"Unlike every overprotective boyfriend ever," agreed Amy.

Hope grinned. "Or girlfriend."

"Or girlfriend," agreed Amy. She placed a gentle kiss on Hope's cheek. "You know," she said, "I think I can live with that."

Hope smiled and rubbed her head against Amy's. "I live to please."

"That is exactly what you do," agreed Doctor Yamada. "However, there is more."

"More?" asked Hope, echoed by Amy half a second later.
"Indeed," replied the doctor. "Let's go back a ways. Back to the night you met Noelle."

Amy shivered. "That was scary." Hope squeezed her comfortingly, and kissed her on the forehead. Amy snuggled gratefully into her embrace.

Doctor Yamada nodded. "But in the aftermath, what one significant thing happened?"

"Well," said Amy, "there was the clone, and the flight home, and ..."

"And ...?" asked Jessica.

Amy coloured. "I - I had a crush on Hope at that point. I was never going to be with Vicky, and Hope was always there, being nice to me, and she cuddled me when I felt lonely or sad, so ... yeah, when Noelle made the clone, and it looked just a bit like Hope ..."

"And that clone was beautiful," Hope assured Doctor Yamada. "Really beautiful. More beautiful than me."

"I'll take your word for it," Jessica replied dryly. "So, Amy, what did you do next, and why?"

Amy's blush deepened. "I ... I didn't think Hope was interested in kissing me in that way, and there was the clone, and I was talking to her about how wonderful Hope was, and I just asked her if it would be okay to kiss her just once, just to feel what it would be like to kiss Hope, if she ever was interested in ... me."

"And ... it was nice?" asked Doctor Yamada.

"Oh ... yes," breathed Amy. "It was ... wonderful."

Jessica nodded. "I want you to take a moment to think," she directed. "I want you to think back. How did that affect your feelings toward Hope?"

Amy thought for a long moment. She opened her mouth to speak, then paused. She went to speak a second time, then paused again. A look of surprise crept over her face. "I - I thought I'd started getting feelings about the clone, about Noelle," she said at last. "But ... it was Hope, all the time. It was all about Hope." She looked at Hope, with the same sort of wonderment that Hope had shown her, earlier. "That was the moment I fell truly in love with you."

She and Hope nuzzled for a moment, then turned to the doctor expectantly.

Doctor Yamada nodded. "That's very good. You're doing well." She smiled. "Now, Hope, this is where you come into it. When you went to bed that night, why did you take off all your clothes, and encourage Amy to do the same?"

Hope blinked. "It just ... seemed like the thing to do?"

"Had you ever done that before? Snuggled naked with anyone? Had you ever even considered it?"

Hope paused. "... no," she said at last. "I ... never did." She shook her head. "Never even wanted to."

Jessica Yamada pursued the point. "So, in this case, why did you?" She smiled. "Take your time."

The moment when the penny dropped was almost audible. Hope stared at Doctor Yamada. "Because Amy needed me to?"
Yamada made keep-going motions with her hands. "Needed you to ..."

Hope swallowed, looked at Amy, who was staring back at her. "Needed me to ... be naked with her ... because ..."

Jessica Yamada tilted her head. "Because ...?"

"Because she was attracted to me, and wanted to make love with me?" Hope blinked. "That's it, isn't it?"

Amy stared at her. "I ... I never asked ... I never thought ..." Her eyes filled with tears.

Hope caressed her face, kissed her, soothed her. "It's all right, sweetie," she murmured.

"So," said Doctor Yamada. "We have Amy, desperately in love with Hope, attracted to her but not knowing it yet. We have Hope, recognising the signs, also without knowing it, encouraging Amy to sleep naked with her." Her eyes glinted with amusement. "But nothing happened until the next morning."

"No," agreed Hope. "The next morning, we visited Flechette and Parian."

Amy giggled. "Those two! They'd just gotten together, and unlike us -"

"-definitely unlike us," added Hope with a giggle of her own.

"- they were enjoying each other immensely. It was a good thing we got out when we did; it might have been embarrassing otherwise."

Hope laughed out loud. "Remember the question I asked?"

Amy went into a fit of giggles. "Why would anyone want to have sex more than once a day?"

Jessica Yamada coughed to cover her own amusement. "So, you were having a pretty frank discussion of sex and sexuality on the way back, then?"

Amy nodded. "We were. We hadn't talked much about sex before. I knew Hope couldn't do it, and didn't want to, but I didn't know much past that."

"And how did talking about sex with Hope, this time, make you feel?"

Amy paused, thinking. Then she blushed. "Interested. Very interested." She paused. "I wanted to kiss her. Show her that sex can be nice."

"But you didn't," said Doctor Yamada. "Despite your ... needs."

Amy shook her head. "I didn't dare. Not then."

"We went to bed when we got back," supplied Hope. "I decided to take a nap."

"You took your clothes off again?" asked Doctor Yamada.

Hope nodded. "Amy got down to her underwear. It was almost as nice."

Amy smiled. "Hope is so cute when she sleeps. She doesn't need as much sleep as me, but when I do catch her sleeping, I just love to watch her."
"So she slept, and when she woke up ..."

Amy nodded. "That's when I kissed her, for real. She was so cute, I couldn't resist. And ... I did that other thing. I wanted her to know what sex felt like. I wanted it so badly. I guess ..." she paused. "I guess, even then I sort of knew that I wanted her to want to make love to me. So ... I pushed matters. Just a bit."

"'That other thing' being a trigger of her pleasure centres?" prompted Doctor Yamada.

Amy nodded. "As soon as I did it, I realised what I'd done. I was horrified. I was going to go away, leave Hope alone. I hadn't done anything permanent, like with Vicky, but I had violated her trust. So I went to run away."

Doctor Yamada looked expectantly at Hope. "What did you do?"

"I stopped her," said Hope simply. "I forgave her. I realised that she loved me, that she needed me to be her lover."

"Realised then?" asked Jessica pointedly.

Hope paused, and thought about it. "No. I only thought I realised it then, but ... no, I didn't, did I? I'd known it since the night before."

Doctor Yamada raised a finger. "Now, up till this point, you had been strongly against any concept of sex. Your very powers reinforced this. But almost immediately Amy did this to you ... what did you do?"

Hope blinked. "I didn't even think about not wanting sex. Amy needed me ... needed me to do this with her." She spoke out loud as she thought through it. "I had brought her to this point. I had offered myself to her, encouraged her to be naked with me. She had ... responded. But it was up to me to make the next move."

She leaned in to Amy and kissed her very tenderly, then looked up at Jessica Yamada. "So I made it," she said softly.

Doctor Yamada tilted her head. "So ... what does this tell you? There was seduction ... but who seduced whom?"

A long moment ensued. Silence reigned.

Amy broke it first. "No way!" she exclaimed. She stared at Hope incredulously. "You seduced me?"

Hope began laughing helplessly, rocking back and forth on the sofa. Amy joined in a moment later. Jessica Yamada watched them both, trying hard not to smile too broadly.

When they got control of themselves, Amy wiped her streaming eyes and kissed Hope lovingly. "Thank you, sweetie," she said softly. "From the bottom of my heart, thank you."

Hope was just shaking her head, staring at Doctor Yamada. "I had no idea that I was even capable of doing something like that."

"Few people are aware of what they are capable of doing," agreed Doctor Yamada. "Trust me, most people? Their motivations are a lot less pure than yours."

Amy chuckled briefly. "I bet." She paused. "So ... can you tell me something? I enjoy what we do
together. I mean, it's awesome. But Hope doesn't feel sexual pleasure, so ... she keeps telling me that she enjoys it anyway." She faced Doctor Yamada directly. "You seem to know what's going on with us. You tell me."

Jessica shook her head. "That's not my job. My job is to ask the right questions." She smiled at Hope. "When you're out and about, and you help a kitten down from a tree, or a random stranger across the street, how does it make you feel?"

"It feels nice," Hope said promptly. "It feels right."

"What, the warm fuzzy feeling that anyone gets from an act of kindness?"

Hope shook her head. "No, I actually get a nice feeling." She took a deep breath. "I can't hate people. If I do, I actually feel physical pain. And when someone I really care about rejects my love, it hurts too."

Amy looked at her, shocked. "You mean ... yesterday ..."

Hope nodded, holding her close. "Yeah," she said softly. "That's the way I'm wired, sweetie. I can't get away from it." She smiled. "But there's the other side of the scale."

"Which is?" prompted Doctor Yamada.

"When I'm with someone and I do something nice for them, it feels good to me. Actually feels good. And the nicer the thing I do, the more I like and care for that person, the nicer it feels."

"So, when you're in bed with Amy, and you do something that makes her toes curl, and she lets you know exactly how much she enjoyed that ... how does that make you feel?"

Hope grinned. "A million times as nice." She rubbed noses with Amy. "And when we're in bed, doing what we do, I know exactly how good it feels to you, because I can read your nerve impulses."

Amy stared at her, wide-eyed. "So when you make me feel ... like you did that time ... oh my god."

Hope nodded, grinning. "It's like I keep telling you, sweetie," she said, and kissed Amy on the tip of the nose. "Making you feel happy makes me feel happy."

"Exactly," said Doctor Yamada. "And to be honest? Normally, I would discourage such an intimate relationship. But in your case ... right now, Hope, you are the best possible partner Amy could have." She smiled. "This is not to say that neither one of you needs further therapy – you both could probably do with a little more, especially Amy – but for the time being, what you have with each other will do you both the world of good."

Hope held Amy close, so close that she could feel her heartbeat. Amy snuggled into her embrace. Neither one spoke. They didn't need to.

Jessica Yamada watched them both, a soft smile on her lips. She had a small inkling of how Hope felt when helping people; she felt it herself, now. Her questions, the answers they had raised, had served to bring two people closer together than they had been before. If ever she doubted herself in her profession, she only had to look back on moments like this.

After therapy, it was time for ice cream.
Hope was feeling so good, she had a double helping of chocolate ice cream. Amy was tucking into a sundae that had to be twice as extravagant as her normal fare. Hope stole some of it, but that was fair; Amy stole a spoonful of her own dessert. They giggled at the minor thefts, and duelled with their long-handled spoons.

"So, sweetie," said Hope mischievously, "how do you feel?"

Amy looked at her, eyes bright. "About what?"

Hope giggled. "About being seduced by someone who knew nothing about sex."

Amy shook her head. "I'm still getting my head around that. But it's a good feeling. Like I know so much more about us, and it makes me feel more secure."

Hope grinned. "Yup." She blatantly plucked the second cherry off the sundae and popped it into her mouth. Amy gasped in feigned indignation and stole a large spoonful of chocolate ice cream.

"And what's more," continued Amy, once she had swallowed the purloined ice cream. "I feel like I love you more than ever, even if you did take my cherry." She paused as what she had just said dawned on her, and burst out laughing.

Hope blinked, puzzled; she knew there was a joke involved there somewhere, but she didn't think the theft of a piece of fruit was that funny. That is, until a red-faced Amy choked back her laughter just long enough to fill her in on the joke.

Then she laughed so hard that she fell right off the chair.

She was still giggling, fifteen minutes later, when they took off to fly back to the shelter.

Chapter End Notes

Accord's new document is referenced in Worm: Imago 21.4
Purity paged through the document, reading paragraphs almost at random, but paying particular attention to the sections that had been highlighted and expanded for her attention.

"This is ... a very interesting document," she noted.

Hope nodded. "It is," she agreed. "I've got a copy for each of the leaders of the community here in Brockton Bay." She saw the reaction to her words, and went on unhurriedly, "That was not an empty compliment, Kayden. If this is to work, if it is all to come together, then you and the Pure have your part to play."

She stopped speaking. Virtually anyone else would have followed up with something along the lines of Are you interested? or perhaps a veiled threat such as If you don't comply, you will get left behind.

Hope knew quite well that Purity was aware of the implied question; she knew equally well that the woman had not missed the absence of any such attempted coercion. Her face bearing only an expression of mild interest, she awaited Kayden's decision.

"Who else have you spoken to about this?" asked Kayden.

"You're the first," Hope said truthfully.

"There's a lot you're not saying," mused Kayden. "Everyone with any sort of prominence in Brockton Bay knows of you, and these days I only hear good things about you. I'm thinking that you came to me first, before anyone else, so that you could find out where I stood on the matter." She bent a meaningful glance toward the sofa, where Amy sat with Theo, playing with Aster. Amy's face showed her enjoyment as she tickled the infant; Aster gurgled happily. "And you have said not a word about the visit paid to us by Jack Slash, once upon a time." Her hand unconsciously brushed her forehead, just about where a silver mark lurked near her hairline; it was in the shape of a kiss.

"Nothing needs to be said," replied Hope sincerely. "It happened; it's over. You're alive; the children are alive. I just did what I needed to do. There's no debt involved." She smiled. "Aster is a wonderful child. I'm just happy just to see her healthy and growing well." She tilted her head. "Is she walking yet?"

Kayden smiled, all mother now. "A little, mainly leaning on things. Her balance is still a little wobbly."

Hope returned the smile. "It's always so cute."

Kayden nodded. "And imagined debt or no, she and Theo are alive and not orphaned today, solely because of you." She gave Hope a measured nod. "I told you once before, the Pure will cooperate with your plans. This remains true." She hefted the bound document. "We will play our part."

They stood on a rooftop, looking down at a large house. Amy's face was creased with tension. "I don't really want to go in there, Hope," she said in a bare whisper.

"It's okay," said Hope. "You don't have to. I can go in by myself."

Amy caught her arm. "I really don't want you going in there alone either," she insisted. "Vicky --"
Hope took Amy in her arms and kissed her gently on the cheek. "Sweetie," she murmured, "I really
do have to go in there. Vicky was looking much better when we saw her last, and I'm sure the
Dallons will be happy to see you."

Amy's face showed that she was dubious in the extreme.

"Tell you what," Hope said. "You come in with me, but if you start feeling like you just have to get
out, I'll come with you. Okay?"

Amy nodded doubtfully. "If you're sure," she said.

"Sure I'm sure," Hope told her cheerfully. She squeezed Amy gently. "Didn't you ever want to bring
someone nice home to meet your parents?"

Amy's startled laugh frightened pigeons. "This is not how I ever imagined it," she said with a giggle.

Hope leaned her forehead against Amy's. "Sweetie, you do realise, you're going to have to face your
family sooner or later."

Amy nodded, swallowing. "I just didn't think it would be so soon."

Hope kissed her on the tip of the nose, eliciting a nervous giggle. "No-one ever does."

Amy squeezed her tightly. "Okay, let's get this over with before I lose my nerve altogether."

Hope scooped her into her arms. "I thought you'd never ask."

An attractive blonde woman opened the door. She stared blankly at Amy for a few seconds. "Amelia
darling," she said, "where have you been? Some of us have been worried sick."

"Aunt Sarah," said Amy, gripping Hope's hand tightly. "May we – may we come in?"

"Who is it, Sarah?" called Mark Dallon's voice from somewhere back in the house.

"It's Amelia," the lady named Sarah called over her shoulder. "She's come back, she's safe." She
sounded pleased and relieved. Then she turned back and looked at Amy's companion. "And you
must be Hope." A warm smile settled on her face. "Please, come in, come in."

Hope smiled in return. "Thank you very much, Mrs Pelham." She had made the connection from
'Aunt Sarah' to Sarah Pelham, otherwise known as Lady Photon; Amy's aunt.

"My dear, you do not call me 'Mrs Pelham' after your accomplishments. Please, call me Sarah." She
turned and moved back into the house; Hope closed the door, and she and Amy followed.

They entered the living room; Mark was just descending the stairs. "Amy girl!" he called out,
pleasure evident on his face. "And you brought your friend!"

Amy pulled Hope over to meet Mark. "Dad ... Mark ... this is Hope. She ... she saved me from a
really bad place." She squeezed Hope's hand hard. "I'm ... I'm with her now."

"Well," said Mark, "any friend of Amy's is a friend of mine." He hugged Amy warmly; after a
moment, she returned the hug. Then he looked at Hope questioningly.

Hope smiled. "I hug too," she said with a grin.
He gave her a hug, which she returned with interest. "Thank you for keeping her safe," he said softly.

"Thank you for raising such a wonderful daughter," she replied.

Releasing her, he stood back, his hands on her shoulders. "So ... you're with her now, huh?" he said.

Hope nodded, taking Amy's hand again. "In every way that's important," she confirmed.

Footsteps clattered on the stairs and Victoria Dallon came into view. "Did I hear Amy's name?" she demanded, just before she spotted Amy and Hope.

"Oh my god," she said. "You're back."

Amy nodded, gripping Hope's hand tightly. "Hi, Vicky," she said, in a very small voice.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded, then took another step down. "Why are you back? What's going on?" She spotted the fact that Amy and Hope were holding hands. "Seriously, what's going on here?"

"Well," said Mark, "it appears that Amy has brought her new ..." He looked at Hope, obviously rejecting the words girlfriend and boyfriend as soon as they came up. "... uh, other half, to meet us."

"I told you!" shouted Victoria. "I warned you! I said this would happen!"

"Inside voice, dear," said Lady Photon cheerfully.

"No," said Hope clearly, "it has not happened and it will not happen." She folded Amy, now trembling violently, into an embrace. "Amy is in love with me. I love her, and I like her, and I know that she needs me, and so I do everything in my power to make her happy."

"But how do you know she won't -" Vicky began, then broke off.

"Because I trust her," said Hope firmly. "I trust her - all of her - for what she is, what she can do. And in the time I have known her, she has worked miracles." She smiled fondly down at the girl in her arms. "We've started seeing a therapist. It's going well."

More footsteps sounded on the stairs, behind Victoria. A cold voice cut across the room.

"What is she doing here?"

Amy swallowed. "Hi, Mom."

There was silence, then, from all concerned. It was finally broken by Sarah Pelham.

"Well, come on, isn't someone going to invite Amelia and Hope to sit down?"

They sat side by side on the sofa, as Sarah served cookies and tea. Mark sat in an armchair, close enough that he could reach out and take Amy's hand. Victoria sat on the sofa beside her mother on the other side, Carol Dallon's forbidding presence overlaying Victoria's faintly resentful one. Sarah poured the tea, then seated herself opposite Mark.

"So are you sure you're all right, Amy?" Mark asked. "I heard you were at the Slaughterhouse Nine
Amy nodded, jerkily. "Hope planned it all. My only job was to shut down Crawler."

"How did you do that?" asked Sarah, showing considerable interest.

"Turned off his regeneration for as long as I could. It was long enough."

Amy went to take a sip of tea; her hand was shaking, until Hope gently steadied it. She gave Hope a grateful look.

"But – wasn't that dangerous?" asked Mark intently.

Hope nodded. "But I had Vista push her in and pull her away, so she spent minimum time in his vicinity. And he had something else on his mind." She grinned. "One of Flechette's arbalest bolts, to be precise."

Victoria nearly choked on her tea.

"That wouldn't have lasted long," remarked Sarah. "Crawler's system is – was – very adaptive. What did you do then?"

"I saw what happened then," said Victoria, sounding a little sick. "The news censored it, but I saw a Youtube clip. Hellhound set her dogs on him."

Sarah's eyes widened slightly. "That sounds ... thorough," she commented.

Hope nodded. "That was the plan," she agreed. "I can't say I'm very comfortable in myself for having planned how to kill someone like that ... but he wasn't someone who would listen to reason, and he wouldn't easily be locked up."

Mark nodded understandingly. "Well, it seems that you both came through it all right," he said. "And going up against the Nine, that was never a guarantee." He looked keenly at her. "I understand that you dealt with Jack Slash?"

"Yeah," said Hope briefly. "Took him, disarmed him, got Amy to disarm him some more, then Miss Militia ..." She turned her head away. "... did what was necessary."

There was more silence at that, then Victoria said reluctantly, "Well, I'm glad you're okay, Amy."

Amy nodded fractionally, and managed, "Thanks, Vicky. I'm glad you're okay, too. And ... I'm sorry."

Victoria shrugged. "Well, it's done and you fixed it. Not saying I'm forgiving or forgetting, but it's done, and I'm not mad at you, not really, not anymore."

Carol looked from Victoria to Amy and back again, but neither girl seemed willing to expand on what they'd just alluded to.

A longer silence fell; Hope sipped tea, while Amy slowly relaxed, although her hand stole into Hope's and gripped it tightly.

"Well," said Sarah cheerfully, breaking the spell. "I know I'm just the houseguest here, but someone's got to say it." Carol looked at her frostily, but Sarah seemed to ignore the gaze and went on blithely. "Hope, I for one am thoroughly glad that you have taken Amelia under your wing, both figuratively and literally."
At this, Mark turned a snort of laughter into a cough; Sarah loftily ignored him and continued. "- but I'm sure that this visit is more than just a social call."

Hope nodded. "Actually," she said, "It is." She put her teacup down and reached into her shoulder-bag. "I've got something I think you should see."

"Wait," choked Mark. "Are you distributing religious tracts?"

Hope blinked, then laughed out loud. "No," she said with a giggle. "No, I'm not." She hauled out the appropriate document and dropped it on to the coffee table with a thump. Getting her giggles under control, she cleared her throat. "This is a plan to fix the problems that Brockton Bay is currently facing. Basically, to get it back on its feet."

Carol stared at the folder, then reached over and picked it up, weighing it in her hands. "And you're showing us this why, exactly?" Her tone was not overtly hostile, but it was a little south of neutral.

"Because this is your copy," said Hope cheerfully. "The bulk of New Wave is here, in this room. You have a part in this plan."

Mark frowned. "We disbanded New Wave."

Hope nodded. "I know, but you're mostly still around, right? Part of the plan needs your involvement. It's all laid out in there. You'll be cooperating with other groups; each group will have a copy of the plan to make sure everyone's on the same page." She grinned. "Literally."

Carol was turning the pages, skimming the text with a professional eye. "This appears to be very detailed, very comprehensive," she admitted. "Backup plans. Alternatives. Fallbacks."

"May I see?" asked Sarah, stretching out a hand. Reluctantly, Carol handed it over.

Sarah started paging through. "Wow," she said. "This is thorough."

Hope smiled. "I'm glad you think so. We need everyone on board for this to work."

Mark tilted his head. "Who else will be involved?"

Sarah had turned back to the contents page. "It looks like ... everyone. The PRT, the Protectorate, the Wards, the police, the mayor's office ..." She paused. "Even the gangs?" She looked up questioningly at Hope.

Hope nodded seriously. "They are a major power in Brockton Bay. If they are not integrated with this effort, then it just won't work."

"Can you trust them?" asked Victoria. "They're villains."

"And they're my friends," said Hope firmly. "They trust me; I trust them. If I ask them to do this ..."

"Ask?" repeated Mark dubiously. "Just ... ask?"

"Ask," confirmed Hope. "Just like I'm asking you, now."

Sarah and Mark looked at each other. There was a pause, then Mark grinned. "When you put it like that ..." he began.

"... how can we say no?" finished Sarah. She gave Hope a firm nod. "We'll do it," she told her. "I'll get in touch with the rest of my family today."
"Excellent," said Hope. "The plan includes coordination instructions. I haven't gotten around to everyone yet, so give it till tomorrow, okay?"

Sarah nodded. "Understood," she agreed. "And thank you for giving us this opportunity to help the city again."

"Now just wait a minute!" snapped Carol. Everyone turned to look at her.

"Yes?" said Hope.

"You can't just waltz in here, throw a plan at us, and expect us to follow it! We don't know anything about you!"

Sarah cleared her throat. "I've heard enough about her. And she's taking care of Amelia." She smiled at Hope. "I'll have a good hard look at that plan, tonight. But I'm fairly confident in saying that New Wave will back it."

Carol glared at her. "And what if some of New Wave doesn't want to back it?"

"Mom ..." said Victoria quietly. Carol ignored her.

"In which case," said Lady Photon levelly, "we will work around you. It's your choice."

Carol subsided into furious silence.

By unspoken agreement, they rose. Sarah and Mark followed Hope and Amy to the door, while Victoria held back slightly. Carol didn't even bother coming to the door.

"Good luck, Amy girl," said Mark, ruffling her hair and kissing her on the forehead.

"Take care," Sarah added, putting her hand on Amy's shoulder.

Amy felt her eyes filling with tears. Then she felt a slight nudge from Hope. "Go on," she heard her voice say softly. "Hug them, you big silly."

With that encouragement, she flung her arms around her father, and then her aunt. Mark hugged her back immediately; Sarah was also commendably quick on the uptake. Hope watched with a smile on her face.

Amy disengaged from her aunt, and returned to the refuge of Hope's arms. Mark cleared his throat. "Thank you for bringing her around," he said.

Sarah smiled at Hope. "Thank you for taking care of my niece," she added.

"It's my pleasure," Hope responded. "We'll be in touch."

She gathered Amy into her arms, and unfurled her wings, leaping skyward as she brought them down in a complex crystalline chime.

Mark and Sarah watched them disappear over the rooftops.

"Well," observed Mark. "At least we know she's safe and happy."

Sarah nodded. "That takes a great weight off my mind. Hope seems very attentive to her."
"She does," said Mark. "I think Amy's very lucky there."

They both turned to Victoria. Mark frowned. "There was something you said to Amy, earlier. Was that something we need to worry about?"

Victoria shook her head. "No," she said. "It's over and done and dealt with. Strictly between me and Amy."

Sarah nodded. "Well, so long as you're sure," she said. She turned to Mark, and lowered her voice. "I think I'll take that document with me when I go, just in case."

"It might be a good idea," agreed Mark.

And life went on in the Dallon household.

Once aloft, Hope smiled down at Amy. "How do you feel?" she asked.

Amy took a while to consider that. "Much better, for having done that," she said at last. "Thank you. Thank you for being there with me."

Hope kissed her tenderly. "Sweetie," she said, "where else would I be?"

"Well, of course I'll give you a hand with it," said Faultline cheerfully. "I'd never hear the end of it from Gregor if I didn't." She thumbed through the document. "This is pretty good stuff," she said. "Where did you get it from?"

Hope decided to stick with the truth. "Accord," she admitted.

Faultline burst out laughing. "Really?" she said. "That's amazing. All these hero groups, the mayor's office – do they know that?"

Hope shook her head, a grin creeping across her lips. "You're the first one to ask. Some will guess, of course."

Faultline laughed harder. "Oh, this is too precious. Using a villain's plan to fix the city, right under the heroes' noses? You bet I'm in."

As soon as Hope entered Trickster's base, she found herself being hugged by Noelle – Omake, she reminded herself. Trickster himself doffed his hat, then removed his own mask. "For friends like you," he said grandly, "there are no masks." His face was pleasant but unremarkable.

Hope smiled and hugged Noelle, then made way for Amy to do the same. "It's good to see you both!" enthused Noelle. She wore a costume in red and black, in keeping with the rest of the Travelers. It had a hood that framed the face, with a mask fixed into it; she pulled both these off now, letting them dangle down her back.

"It's good to see you, too," Hope said. "How have you been?"

Noelle spread her arms and spun in a circle. "I've been wonderful!" she said happily. "I've been down on the Boardwalk, and up Captain's Hill, and over to visit Ballistic and Sundancer and Genesis ..."

Trickster leaned in to Amy. "She had four hot showers that first night," he informed her in a stage
Noelle turned on him and slapped him lightly on the shoulder. "Only two," she contradicted him. "Because hot showers are so heavenly."

Hope nodded. "Oh, yes," she said. "I hear you, trust me. Hot showers – one of the things that makes life worth living." She held up her hand, and Noelle gave her a high-five, then giggled.

"Oh, and we heard what you did for Genesis, too," added Trickster. He gave Amy an appraising glance. "That was really good work. She's almost as happy as Noelle."

Noelle hugged Amy again, tightly. Amy hugged her back, face flushing with pleasure from the praise. "We're both thinking of getting Sundancer to teach us how to dance," said Noelle. "Because we can."

Hope giggled. "That sounds excellent," she said. "But this isn't just a social call."

"Oh?" said Trickster, reverting to serious mode, even as Amy and Noelle hugged each other again.

"Yeah, no," said Hope. She reached into the shoulderbag and handed him the thick document. "This is for you. It's a plan to fix the city's problems, and I'd like you and the Travelers to help me out with it, if you can."

Trickster took it, looking at it doubtfully. "Seems an awfully big plan for just us to carry out."

Hope shook her head with a smile. "Not just you. Every major player in the city will be doing their part." She raised an eyebrow. "And it can't hurt to give the PRT another reason to extend the truce, and maybe grant amnesty, right?"

Trickster nodded. "You raise a very cogent point." He began to page through the document. "This is Accord's work, isn't it?"

Hope nodded. "Will that be a problem?"

He shook his head. "So long as I don't have to deal with him directly. We nearly lost Sundancer the last time that happened."

Hope nodded. "No, it's all good. I get along with him quite well."

Trickster stared at her. "Wow. I mean, you're all kinds of charming, but that takes a special level of diplomatic to do."

Hope grinned. "It's a gift."

He nodded. "I can believe it." He hefted the document. "Well, I'd better get to work, looking this over and getting in touch with the others." He leaned in and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "And that's from Jess. She made me promise to give you a kiss the next time I saw you."

Hope smiled. "Tell her she's welcome, and that Amy and I will be around to see her just as soon as we're able." She looked over to where Amy and Noelle were chatting animatedly. "Presuming I can prise my girlfriend away from your girlfriend sometime this century."

Trickster grinned. "Presuming that, of course," he agreed.

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Hope smiled down at Amy. "You and Noelle were getting along well there," she observed.
Amy nodded. "Oh, she's so happy. She's been doing everything she said, and more. Hot showers, new clothes, shoe shopping, everything." She leaned in, despite the fact that they were several hundred feet in the air, "and she says the sex is fantastic!"

That sent Hope into a fit of giggles. "I hope you told her," she managed, "that we didn't do it just so she could get some."

This caused Amy to start giggling herself. "Something like that," she said. "But she's a really nice kisser."

"Oh, really?" said Hope, amused.

Amy nodded. "But between her and you – I'd pick you."

"That's nice, sweetie," said Hope, "but you know I don't get jealous. You can kiss her all you like, so long as you both enjoy it."

Amy giggled. "You might not get jealous," she said, "but Trickster might."

Hope grinned. "You might just have a point there."

Coil looked dispassionately at the document in his hand, and then at Hope.

So slender, so frail, he thought. So dangerous.

"So tell me exactly why I should follow this plan of yours," he invited.

"Because it's not just my plan," Hope replied steadily. "I'm passing it on to all the other influential powers in the city. The Undersiders and the Travelers have already received their copies, and have agreed to follow it. It will get the city back on its feet. That's a good thing, isn't it?"

"It is," he conceded. But I wanted to do it my way.

"It's a good plan," she urged him. "It'll work." She smiled. "And everyone who takes part - hero or villain - will be recognised as having done so."

Behind his mask, he gritted his teeth. She hadn't mentioned the corollary; probably hadn't even considered it. And everyone who doesn't, will be marked out because of it.

"Go," he said, making a dismissive gesture. "I will consider it."

But he already knew what decision he would make.

I was outmaneuvered before she even walked into the room. And she doesn't even know that she did it. She's not even gloating. I can't even hate her for that.

"Hope?"

"Yes, sweetie?"

"Did Coil seem a little ... grumpy ... to you?"

"Truthfully? He always seems a little grumpy."
"Hm. Very true."

An aide ushered them into the mayor's office. Mayor Christner rose from behind his desk, hand outstretched. "Hope," he greeted her. "So pleased to meet you. Heard a lot of good things about you." They shook; he applied just enough pressure to make it a firm handshake without crushing her fingers together.

She smiled inwardly; she could take all the pressure he could apply and give it all back with interest, but he didn't need to know that.

"It's a pleasure to meet you also, Mr Mayor," said Hope politely.


Hope shook her head. "Some cold water, if you have it?" ventured Amy.

"Of course, of course," said Mayor Christner, fetching a bottle of chilled water from a small bar fridge. He took a chair opposite them and sat down, a large man, fit for his age. "How can I help you?"

"Well, you see, Roy," said Hope, reaching into her shoulderbag, "it's about saving the city. Getting it back on its feet."

Mayor Christner nodded. "I'm working on that," he said. "With the city calming down the way it is, and I hear you're more than a little responsible for that," he added jovially, "Washington's receptive to the idea of funding some rebuilding and reclamation." He watched as she pulled the document from the bag. "What's that?"

"This," said Hope, handing it to him, "is the way to get that done."

Christner took it from her, opened it, flicked through. He looked up from the pages at her. "This is ... a plan to get the city working again?"

She nodded. "Complete in all details."

He frowned. "Does this have anything to do with this Hope Accord you're trying to push through?"

Hope nodded. "Yes, sir. It's based on the same principles, but it's specifically factored for Brockton Bay, and it will take far less time."

Christner frowned. "Does it factor in the villain gangs? They could be quite a stumbling block."

Hope smiled. "It does. They have their own parts to play, their own copies of this plan."

He stared at her, looking slightly stunned. "They're in on this?"

She nodded. "I've been speaking to them. They're in agreement with me on this. Brockton Bay needs to get back on its feet." She shrugged, slightly. "You can't argue with the profit motive."

He nodded seriously in return. "I have to agree with you there." He frowned again. "I might meet with some obstacles. Red tape. People in local government with their own agendas."

Hope nodded. "I understand. But you might want to ask them this: if the PRT, the Protectorate, the police force, New Wave, and all the villain gangs running Brockton Bay are willing to work together to rebuild the city – how will they look if they choose to oppose it?"
He blinked. "Wait – all of them have their own copies of this plan?"

Hope nodded. "So if anyone tries to play fast and loose, it will be very easy to tell who's doing it."

Mayor Christner took a deep breath. "Well," he said, "that should rattle a few cages." He smiled grimly. "I'll have to look this over, but if it's as comprehensive as it looks, we will implement it. No matter who tries to get in the way." His gaze softened. "I owe you this. For Rory."

"Rory?" asked Hope, puzzled.

"My son," he said. "You saved his life."

Hope still looked puzzled.

"Ah," he said. "You might know him better as Triumph."

Director Piggot leafed through the document. "This looks quite reasonable," she said. "Much less ambitious than the Hope Accord." She raised an eyebrow. "Same author?"

Hope nodded. "He's been keeping tabs on the progress of that one, and decided to send this one over this morning. Apparently he thinks that I'm capable enough to handle them both at the same time."

Piggot nodded. "Well, I see no problem with implementing this one. I'm presuming the others have already gotten their copies of the plan?"

Hope nodded. "Just about. I've just got to see the chief of police and Miss Militia, and then I'm done."

"Well," said the Director, "I can pass a copy on to the chief of police. We're on good speaking terms. As for Miss Militia, I'm fairly sure she'll go along with it." She rose from her desk, and hugged Hope and then Amy without a trace of self-consciousness. "Good luck, the two of you."

"Wow," said Hope. "You're really doing well." She took the second document from her bag, and put it on the desk.

"You think so?" asked Director Piggot, with a smile that was almost shy.

Amy nodded. "Oh, yes," she said. "You've lost weight, your muscle mass is improving, and so is your cardiovascular health. Keep it up."

"Oh, get out of here, you two," Piggot told them roughly, but she could not stop the smile from breaking out across her face. "Go bother someone else."

Giggling, they went.

"Hope!" said Miss Militia cheerfully, standing from behind her desk to give her a hug. Amy got one as well, before Miss Militia sat on the corner of her desk to survey them both.

"It's good to see you both," she said. "Director Piggot just rang to say you're on the way over. It appears you have something to show me?"

Hope nodded, fishing the last copy of the document from the bag. "This one's yours. It's an integrated plan to basically fix the city."
Miss Militia took it and leafed through a few pages. "Accord?" she asked simply.

Hope nodded. "But I talked it over with Mayor Christner, and we're calling it the Christner Initiative. He's going to unveil it on Monday, at the victory ceremony."

"Which I think is totally unfair," said Amy fiercely. "Hope's been flying all over town, talking to everyone, getting them all to agree to follow the plan, and he gets the credit?"

Hope gathered her into an embrace. "I told you, sweetie," she said softly, "I don't care about the credit. I only put my name on the big plan because that's the best way to get it to go through."

Miss Militia nodded sympathetically. "Politics," she agreed. She tapped the document. "If Director Piggot says it's sound, then I'll go along with it." She smiled at Amy. "Never mind," she said. "Trust me, the people who matter?They'll know who deserves the credit."

Amy mumbled something along the lines of, "I still think it's unfair," and snuggled into Hope's embrace. Hope kissed her tenderly on the forehead and looked across at Miss Militia.

"Actually, there's something else you could do for me," she said.

Miss Militia looked alert. "Yes?" she asked.

"Director Costa-Brown gave me a piece of advice, specifically, to get the Hope Accord put on to digital media, all cross-referenced, hyperlinked, basically idiot-proof. What's the fastest way I could get that done?"

Miss Militia considered. "A Tinker would probably be best." She raised a finger. "Leave it with me. I'll make some calls."

Hope smiled. "Thanks. I really appreciate it."

Miss Militia shook her head. "It is absolutely not a problem."

"Dragon speaking. Hello, Miss Militia."

Miss Militia paused. "Hello, Dragon. I have a favour to ask of you."

"You know I'm always happy to help out the Protectorate," Dragon replied.

"This is true. Have you heard of the Hope Accord?"

"Yes," replied Dragon, not much to Miss Militia's surprise. "I have been supplied with a copy. A very sound plan. It has been meticulously laid out. In fact, I cannot see any significant way I can improve upon it, if that was what you were intending to ask."

Miss Militia chuckled. "No, that's not the reason. Hope has asked me if I knew who could get it translated into digital media as fast as possible, with hyperlinks wherever necessary. Essentially, she wants it to be easily accessible by any idiot with a computer."

Dragon did not even hesitate. "That is eminently possible." She paused. "Will she be needing foreign-language versions, as well?"

"It ... might be a good idea, if she's going to be presenting it to the United Nations," allowed Miss Militia. "Will this be much of a problem?"
Dragon chuckled. "I cannot see much of one," she said. "I will let you know when I have finished."

"Thank you," said Miss Militia. The call ended, and she sat back in her chair.

Well, Hope, I've done my bit, she thought. It's up to you now.

Her gaze strayed to the grey-bound document on her desk. Well, not all of it. We each have our part to play, in the ... Christner Initiative. Her lip curled. Politics.

Hope and Amy landed back at the shelter. Hope's wings were tired; she might not have been flying all over the city, as Amy had intimated, but she had certainly covered a large area of it.

Lisa greeted them on the way in. "Hi, you two," she said. "How did it go?"

"They all agreed to go with it," said Hope. "Even the mayor." She chuckled tiredly. "It's now the Christner Initiative, just so you know." She put her arms around Lisa and hugged her close.

"Wow," said Lisa. "Everyone? In one day?" She returned the hug, enjoying the closeness, the warmth of the embrace.

Amy put her arm around Hope's shoulders as they disengaged. "You should have seen her," she said. "She just charmed them all."

"I'll just bet," agreed Lisa.

Hope was looking around. "Where's Taylor and Danny?"

"Oh, Danny got a lift home to collect his truck, and he was going to drive Taylor around, have a father-daughter day. They said to say thank-you for the extra flash-bugs you made up this morning," said Lisa. "I suspect that if Shadow Stalker tries again, she's going to get a horrible surprise."

"That's the general idea," said Amy, with a grim smile.

"I just wish people could all get along," said Hope, just a little plaintively.

"Don't we all," agreed Lisa.

Amy grabbed Hope by the hand and started pulling her toward the sleeping enclosure. "Okay, enough chatter," she said. "Come along."

"Amy?" said Hope with a tired giggle. "What's going on?"

"What's going on," said Amy firmly, "is that you're going to get a back and wing massage, right now. You've overstrained yourself, and you're going to have horrible cramps unless I get there first. So come on."

"I've never had a back and wing massage before," said Hope, allowing herself to be towed along.

"Well, I've never given one before either," said Amy. "So this will be a new experience for the both of us."

Lisa watched them go with a smile.

They're so cute together.
"Oh god, don't stop!"

"Are you sure?" Amy's voice was teasing as she shifted position, straddling Hope's hips, but her hands kept working.

Face down on the bed, Hope wriggled ecstatically. "I'm sure, I'm sure, I'm sure! Oh god, that feels so awesome!"

Amy grinned, and dug her thumbs in hard. Something popped, and Hope groaned in pure unadulterated pleasure.

"Oh god, I felt that right down to my toes! Don't stop, please don't stop!"

Amy smiled lazily and leaned down close to Hope's ear.

"Sweetie," she murmured, "I don't ever intend to stop."

She dug her thumbs in again, at the base of the complicated joint structure of Hope's secondary left wing. Hope let out a long, shuddering groan, and her toes curled.

Amy almost giggled as she kept working, kept probing. *I knew Hope would enjoy this,* she told herself. *But I didn't know she'd enjoy it this much.*

*We're gonna have to do this more often.*

*A lot more often.*
Taylor blinked her way into wakefulness, and groped for her glasses. Her bedside table was the wrong height ... again.

Where am I?

Oh, wait. In the shelter.

Not in the base, because of the trial ... not at home, because of Shadow Stalker.

She fitted the glasses over her face, then sat up in bed.

On the other side of the curtained-off enclosure, her father slept on a bed identical to hers, snoring softly.

She was aware, of course, of the movements and locations of all bugs in her range, and so she became aware, and puzzled, at the fact there seemed to be a dozen of them trapped in a takeaway box on the bedside table.

What – oh. Flash bugs. Amy must have made them last night or this morning.

She smiled. I now have twelve more flash bugs.

She recalled the actinic flash of light that these things produced; had seen it just last night, vividly recalled the strange sensation of clearly seeing the bones in her hand outlined in the flash, and still being dazzled by the leakage of light itself.

That's what I call an extremely specific weapon of mass destruction.

Opening the box, she let them out; they fluttered on to her hands. They didn't all look the same; Amy must have used any bugs she could catch. But they were all around the same size, and had the oversized abdomen and bioluminescent bulge. She had no doubt at all that they were just as powerful as the one that Amy had first created for her.

Twelve more. Amy, I could just ki-hug you.

She blushed slightly as she amended her thought; she didn't need to embarrass herself again. Though if I'm reading the signals right, Amy might prefer girls. She grinned. She might enjoy it. A deeper blush. But I wouldn't be meaning it that way, dammit. I'll just hug her. That's safest.

Grabbing her overnight bag, she went to the bathrooms to brush her teeth. While she was there, she took a shower – at least they've got hot water here – and got dressed in fresh clothes. Running a brush through her curls, she met Lisa on the way back. The other girl was moving about her morning
duties with purpose, but changed course when she saw Taylor.

"Morning, Lisa," she said in greeting. "Hope and Amy around?"

"Up, had breakfast, and gone, sorry," Lisa told her. "They had an appointment somewhere. Oh, and Hope gave me three things to give to you. This is the first one." She opened her arms and hugged Taylor; after a surprised moment, Taylor responded, enjoying the feeling of closeness, of warmth.

Lisa pecked her on the cheek as they let go of each other. "Damn, but I'm getting used to those things," Lisa grumbled half-heartedly. She grinned her vulpine grin. "And that's how a friend gives a thank-you kiss."

"I'll be sure to remember that," Taylor grinned. "Thanks; I'm starting to get used to being hugged too. I think Hope's spoiling us both."

"And that," replied Lisa, "is no bad thing. I think we both need to learn to be a touch more civilised, and Hope's nothing but."

"You know," said Taylor, "you just might be right." She paused. "What's the second thing?"

"One moment," said Lisa. "I've got them in my room." She moved off. "Second and third thing are actually things, not hugs. But I can add a fourth and fifth thing to the list if you want more hugs."

"Maybe later," replied Taylor, amused. She followed Lisa to her room, and was rewarded by a flat box the size of a large hardcover novel, and a bound folder bearing the title Brockton Bay: Crime and Public Safety. It was fairly hefty, maybe comprising between a hundred fifty and two hundred pages.

"Okay," she said, a little nonplussed, "what are these in aid of?"

Lisa grinned. "Well, this one," she said, indicating the bound document, "is a plan devised by Accord to get Brockton Bay back on its feet; public order, crime, pollution, disease, the lot. Sort of like the Hope Accord, but local. This the copy intended for the Undersiders."

Taylor frowned. She wasn't quite sure what the Hope Accord was, but she let it go. In any case, Lisa was still talking. "And this one, unless I totally miss my guess, is a test control panel for you to practise on."

"Control panel for what?" asked Taylor, feeling as though she were groping her way through a fog.

"How would I know?" grinned Lisa. "Do I look clairvoyant? Go wake your dad; I'll go and find some breakfast for you."

Taylor went, shaking her head.

Sitting over breakfast, with her father beside her, Taylor paged through the thick document. Several times, she had to remind herself to take a bite of the admittedly delicious sausages and eggs.

"This is seriously impressive," she said to her father. "He's taken everyone into account, all of us still active in Brockton Bay. We've each got areas of responsibility, resources outlined, cash flow required, companies we can call on ... it's all here. Simple as one-two-three."

She turned a page. "And for the aftermath ... he's recommending that the Protectorate and the Wards offer some of us places."
"Surely some of the Undersiders and the others aren't cut out to be heroes?" Danny commented; it was his first coherent response of the day.

Taylor nodded. "He has appendices outlining the best ideas in each case." She shook her head. "He's really done his homework on this."

"So you'll take it up?" he asked.

Taylor nodded. "Oh, certainly. Lisa said Hope was going to be going around, handing on copies to each of the major powers in the city. PRT, Protectorate, and all the gang leaders."

"Isn't that a bit ... dangerous?" asked Danny. "I mean, I know she's competent, but some of those people are very scary."

Taylor smiled. "You weren't at the meeting I attended. She was with the Wards then. She went around greeting everyone. Oh, except the Merchants, and no-one liked the Merchants," She shook her head. "I couldn't believe it. She'd been here two weeks, and she'd managed to make common ground with eighty percent of the criminal element of the city. Even Hookwolf was being nice to her."

Danny blinked. "Oh."

Taylor grinned. "'Oh' is right." She finished her breakfast, closed the document, and got up from the table. "Let's go; I'll tell you more later."

While Danny collected the overnight bags, Taylor stuffed the document and the mysterious box into her backpack, on top of her costume. Her collection of bugs went under her hair or into the pack.

Then she made the phone call.

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"Hello?"

"Skitter here. I need transport, two people."

"Pickup and destination?"

"Tattletale's base, to an address to be given."

"Fifteen minutes."

"Thank you."

Coil's man hung up, and Taylor closed her phone.

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Danny came out with the bags, and Taylor went over to him.

"Dad," she said. "We're going to be getting a lift back to the house. A truck's going to show up in fifteen minutes. The driver won't be there for small talk. We say as little as possible. And we don't give our exact address. Okay?"

Danny nodded. "Villain connections, huh?"

Lisa appeared from the direction of the kitchens, her face flushed with heat. "What, you're going already?"

Taylor nodded. "We're heading back home. Got a lift."

Danny spoke up unexpectedly. "Maybe we should make a father-daughter day of it. Drive around, see the sights." He paused. "Maybe catch up a bit." His meaning was clear.

Lisa grinned. "Sounds like a plan. Have fun." She hugged Danny. "It's been nice having you here, Mr H. Come again, any time."

Caught unawares, he dropped the bags and hugged her back awkwardly. "It's been nice getting to know you too, Lisa. Take care." He paused. "You know, something just occurred to me. Last night, you said you knew Taylor's secret. I know when Hope and I learned it ... but how did you know it?"

Lisa chuckled, leaned in, and whispered three words into his ear. He blinked and stared at her. "What, really?"

She nodded. "Yes, really."

"Huh," he said. "I would never have guessed."

Bending, he picked up the bags. Giving Lisa another somewhat surprised glance, he nodded to Taylor. "Let's go; the truck will be here soon."

As they walked outside, Taylor turned to her father. "What did she say?"

He shook his head. "Because I'm Tattletale." He looked at her questioningly. "Is she really, or was that some obscure joke?"

Wearily, Taylor shook her head. "Nope, Dad. No joke. That's exactly who she is."

He shook his head in disbelief. "I'm beginning to think I woke up in the Twilight Zone."

Taylor chuckled wryly. "Welcome to my world, Dad. Welcome to my world."

The truck dropped them off almost on their corner, then ground on down the street. Taylor hefted her backpack, while Danny took the two bags.

The house had not been disturbed since the previous night, with only the burned-out road flare in the middle of the path to show that anything untoward had happened at all. The congealed ravioli still sat on the stove; Danny had taken the time to turn it off while grabbing clothes, but nothing else.

On investigation, it seemed that the rear porch window had been smashed. Danny swept up the glass and nailed some plywood over it while Taylor dumped the ravioli and took the bags upstairs. The flash bugs she took out and installed at spots around the outside of the house, in the shade. They promptly went into a somnolent state.

She also took the pregnant web-spider and installed it in a small box in her bedroom, so that when the eggs were laid, she could keep track of them.

"Ready to go, kiddo?" he called out from downstairs.

"On my way, Dad," she replied, grabbing her backpack before running downstairs.
The old truck was none the worse for its night-time adventures, save for the scorch-marks on the metal tray bed from the second road flare. Danny got it moving out on the road, heading generally toward the Boardwalk.

"Okay, Taylor," he said. "We're about as private as we're likely to be. Now's the time you can tell me about ... things."

So Taylor told him. From the very first moment when she realised that she wasn't insane, that she was actually viewing the world through the senses of the bugs around her –

"When was that?"

"In hospital, after the ... you know, the locker thing."

Danny said nothing for a long moment, but she saw his knuckles whiten on the wheel. For all the pain and terror Taylor had gone through, her father had gone through almost as much pain and anguish and frustration, trying to find out who had done this to his daughter, who could be brought to account.

There had been a payout by the school, more an inducement to shut up and take the money than any sort of admission of guilt, either singularly or collective. It had mostly gone on Taylor's hospital bills; Danny had not had enough savings to pursue any serious lawsuit, so nothing else had happened. No-one was punished. Life had gone on.

He took a deep breath. "Was there any connection, do you think, between that and ... your powers?"

She nodded. "Yes ... uh, apparently it takes a very traumatic experience to trigger powers in someone."

"Ah." She saw him nod. "Makes sense, I guess."

She talked more, about practising with her powers, hiding them from everyone. Conceiving the idea of becoming a superhero. Keeping a coded journal of her thoughts on the matter. Designing a costume. Having black widow spiders weave it out of their webs –

"Wait, what?" he said, surprised. "Your costume is made of ... spider silk?"

She nodded. "It's stronger and tougher than Kevlar. Normal industries can't really harvest it easily, because spiders are delicate, and black widows will eat each other if I'm not there to control them. But I can get them to spin their webs and weave it. It's slow ..." She paused. "But maybe Amy's web-spiders will make it quicker." A smile. "I'm looking forward to seeing how they go."

"You were talking about your costume," he prompted.

The costume had been painted in greys and blacks, before she realised that it looked too edgy, too villainous. "Plus," she said, "full face masks always look creepier. But I wanted the creepy look. The mandibles. I wanted them to not take note of the fact that I was a teenage girl."

"I suppose," he said reluctantly, "that if you're going to go out as a costumed vigilante, it makes sense to be bulletproof."

"Let's go with knife-proof," she corrected him. "I haven't been shot yet, and I really don't want to try."

He nodded. "I can accept that." He looked up. "There's a Wendy's just down there; want to grab a
Taylor nodded. "Good idea. It's been too long since I've had some good old-fashioned fried cholesterol."

He chuckled, and pulled the truck into the parking lot.

By unspoken mutual agreement, they stayed off the subject of Skitter while eating. Taylor got out the document again, and began to leaf through it.

"Dad," she said suddenly. "Have a look at this."

"What?" he asked.

She tapped the page. "Plans to get the old ferry up and running again."

He sat up straight, and leaned over to look at the page; she turned the document so that he could see where she was indicating. "Well, I'll be damned," he said. He scanned the details. "I've been pushing for that for years now. They've always told me that there's just not enough need for it, or not enough money, or whatever. And this plan's got it all laid out with diagrams, even."

When he leaned back to start eating again, he smiled at her. "When I see Hope again, I might just give her a big hug and kiss."

Taylor chuckled. "You do that, Dad. From what I know of her, she won't mind a bit."

Back in the truck, Danny said, "So, where were we?"

"Well," said Taylor, "there was the time we robbed the bank. That was the first time we went up against the Wards." She paused. "That was the first time I met Amy, too."

He looked at her, interested. "What happened?"

"She used a black widow spider to turn my power against me, and hit me on the head with a fire extinguisher."

Danny winced. "Ouch."

Taylor shrugged. "I got over it. Lisa got me out of that one. We won, and we got away, and no-one got hurt more than they could handle." She frowned. "We found out later that the bank job was a distraction for something else." She saw him about to ask the question, and she added, "Uh, I can't tell you about that."

I am not telling him about Coil or Dinah. That's something that's not safe for him to know.

He frowned. "So, how do you beat superheroes with bugs? It seems a little one-sided to me."

She raised an eyebrow. "With one bug, sure. With a thousand bugs, crawling into your costume, all over your face, up your nose, into your eyes, down your throat ..."

He shuddered. "Okay, okay," he said. "I get it." He paused. "Was that your first fight?"

She shook her head. "No. My first fight was the very first time I went out as Skitter. I didn't even have a name then. I was actually trying to be a hero. You've heard of the ABB?"
"The, uh, Azn Bad Boys, right? They're the ones that got taken down ..." His voice trailed off. "... by the Undersiders?" He stared at her. "You were in that?"

Taylor nodded. "But my first fight was a bit earlier. I'd been tracking them, and I came up on them just about the time I heard their leader talking about killing kids." She paused. "You know, Lung?"

He blinked. "Yes, Taylor, I have heard of Lung. I don't know anyone who hasn't." Again, he stared at her. "You fought Lung?"

She nodded. "Yes, and it was very nearly my last outing. I did a lot of damage to him, but he nearly got me. I'm just glad my costume is fire-resistant." She gave him a half-grin. "Remember the morning you asked me if I'd set fire to my hair?"

He paused, thinking back. "Vaguely." Another pause. "That was the morning after that? Wow. I would never have guessed." He paused again, thoughtfully. "And those friends of yours, you started hanging with, around then ...?"

"They're the Undersiders, Dad," Taylor explained. "You know Lisa's Tattletale. Maybe I'll introduce you to the rest of them sometime."

He nodded, thoughtfully. "They took you in, helped you where I couldn't. I'd like to meet them, sometime." He turned to her. "So, what happened with Lung? You say he nearly got you. How did you get away?"

"The Undersiders showed up and hammered on him. Then Armsmaster arrived and finished the job." She grimaced. "You know how I said my costume was kinda edgy looking?"

He nodded. "It is edgy looking."

"Yeah. Well, they thought I was a villain, which is why they came to my rescue. And then Armsmaster thought I might be one too." She considered. "He was kind of friendly after I explained matters, but he turned out to be a bit of a dick."

"Taylor!" Danny was half-laughing, half-shocked. "This is Armsmaster you're talking about. He's a hero!"

Taylor shook her head. "No, Dad. He's really not. He might wear the costume, but he's really not."

Danny was shaking his head, still chuckling. "I can't believe this. I'm getting the lowdown on the cape gossip in the city from my own daughter. Who happens to be the notorious supervillain Skitter."

Taylor nodded. "Well, Lung had a bit of a grudge against me after the first fight, so when I went up against him again ..."

"Wait, hold on," he said. "Why did he have a grudge against you? He nearly beat you, didn't he?"

She nodded. "But I did it by attacking his most sensitive spots with black widow and brown recluse spiders, not to mention every type of stinging insect I could muster." She paused for effect. "His most sensitive bits, Dad."

"Oh," he said, getting it. "Oh. Ewwww." He stared at her. "That's ... really hardcore. That's ... brutal."

She nodded, conceding the point. "Fighting someone like Lung, you don't take half measures. Of course, it didn't help that the tranquiliser that Armsmaster used on him caused a bad reaction, and made his crotch rot off ..."
"Christ almighty," he said softly. "Christ almighty." He was shaking his head slowly. "When I said I wanted to know everything ... I didn't know that 'everything' meant this sort of thing."

"I told you, Dad," said Taylor quietly, putting her hand on his arm. "No more secrets. No more lies."

He nodded slowly, and covered her hand with his for a moment. "Is that the worst you've done?"

She paused, considering. "Well, I don't know what you would count as 'worst', but ..."

"Whoa, whoa," he said hastily. "I think I've hit my limit for the day. Can we have a time-out on this, and come back to it later?"

She grinned. "Sure thing, Dad. What do you want to do now?"

"I don't know," he said after a moment. "Maybe just ... spend the day with my daughter?" He pulled the truck to a stop, and she saw that they were near the Boardwalk.

"Sounds good to me, Dad."

Some little time later, they were leaning on the rail overlooking the ocean, when he turned to her and said, "You're kind of quiet. What are you thinking?"

"Oh, nothing," she said. "I'm just running sweeps through my territory."

"What, really?" he said. "From here? While you're talking to me?"

"Oh, yeah," she said. "It's no real effort. I can multitask, easily." She grinned. "Amy's relay bugs are kind of awesome. I've got a string of them between here and my territory. I've also got more leading to the house, so I know if anyone's messing around there."

He shook his head. "So here I am, thinking we're having a normal day out, and you're still doing supervillain stuff."

She shook her head. "Cape stuff. There's a difference. I'm not hurting anyone. Making sure no-one's sneaking in where they shouldn't. Dealing with infestations."

"I ... don't want to know, do I?" he asked.

She considered. "Probably not." She raised her head. "Ooh. Mommy spider just started laying her eggs. She's gonna be hungry. Some bugs should do her nicely."

He shook his head. "How much of your attention are you spending on me? I'm your father, Taylor. I'm trying to connect here, to be a part of your life again." His voice had a note of pleading in it. "Can you just do the cape version of putting down the remote and turning off the TV, just for a little while?"

She looked at him, and saw the hurt in his eyes. And she realised how it must have looked to him.

*I'm always using my power. Even when I'm with my own Dad, I can't help it.*

A surge of anger. *Like hell I can't.*

So she stopped doing the sweeps. Stopped controlling all but a tiny number of the insects in her extended footprint. Turned to her father.
"You're right, Dad," she said. "I'm sorry." And she hugged him.

After a long moment, she felt his arms go around her body, and she relaxed into the embrace in a way that would have been impossible for her just a little while ago. Not so long ago, I was far too tense. This kind of hug would have been awkward then. Not any more.

Thank you, Hope. Thank you, Lisa.

They held each other for a long time.

"So where did you want to go now, kiddo?" asked Danny. After the initial awkwardness, Taylor had been able to finally unwind and spend some quality time with her father. But time was now getting on, and the sun was starting to dip low in the west.

"I'm thinking, the shelter," said Taylor. "I need to tell Hope that I'm definitely supporting the plan."

Danny nodded vehemently. "Oh, for sure," he agreed.

Taylor paused. "Actually," she said thoughtfully, "I'd like to get everyone together and fill them in on the plan, all at once. Tomorrow and Monday are likely to be hectic, so tonight's probably the best bet."

"'Everyone' being ...?" asked Danny.

"The Undersiders," supplied Taylor. "Grue, Bitch, Regent, Imp. Lisa already knows; I think she borrowed one of the spares."

Danny began to chuckle helplessly, shaking his head.

"What's funny?" she asked.

"I recall, not so long ago, telling you that I would make a cooler villain than you." He shook his head again, wryly. "Do I feel like a prize idiot."

Taylor giggled. "It's okay, Dad. You weren't to know."

"Yeah, maybe," he agreed. "So where are you meeting everyone? Do you need a lift?"

She smiled at him. "What do you say to meeting at home?"

He stopped to think about that. "Are they going to show up in costume?"

"Only if they want to hide their identities. I'll tell them that you already know Lisa and me, so it's their choice."

He nodded. "Okay," he said, hoping he would not regret this. "I'll, uh, pick up some snacks on the way home then."

She grinned. "Get some doggy treats too." Her grin widened at his stare. "Trust me on this."

"Taylor!" Lisa grabbed her and spun her around in a hug. "You're looking good. The day went well, did it?"

Taylor smiled self-consciously, but returned the hug. "It did, yeah. We cleared the air on a lot of
"things." She looked around. "Hope and Amy back yet? I want to thank Amy for the bugs."

Lisa nodded. "Yeah, they're back. But ... I wouldn't bother them right now." She seemed to be intensely amused about something.

Taylor frowned. "Don't tell me ..."

Lisa shook her head. "Nope. Amy's just giving Hope a back and wing massage." She could not help a smirk. "But it's amazing how much it sounds like they're having sex in there."

"I ... think we'll leave them alone for the moment, then," suggested Danny.

"It might be a good idea, yes," agreed Lisa. She gave Danny a hug. "And how have you been, Mr H?"

"I've been good, Lisa," he replied, returning the hug. "Today has been ... educational."

She obviously picked up on the tone of his voice, because her eyes cut sideways to Taylor. "Told him about Lung, huh?"

"Only about the first time," Taylor said defensively.

Lisa rolled her eyes. "Mr H," she said seriously. "When she tells you about the second fight with Lung, make sure you're sitting down. Your little girl is seriously hardcore."

Danny let go of Lisa and put his arm around Taylor. "I'm starting to get that impression," he agreed, an amused tone in his voice.

Taylor shook her head, reddening. "You guys are enjoying this way too much," she complained.

Lisa grinned her vulpine grin. "Oh, yeah," she agreed. She raised her head. "Oh, here they are."

Hope and Amy emerged from the curtained enclosure; Hope was moving slowly, with a dreamy look on her face. Amy, beside her, gave off an air of considerable smugness. Both looked somewhat rumpled.

Hope wandered up to Taylor and gave her a heartfelt hug. "Hi, Taylor," she said.

"Hi, Hope," replied Taylor, returning the hug. She grinned. "You look like you're enjoying life."

Hope's face was glowing, in more ways than one. "I feel awesome. Back and wing massages ... oh my god." She let her head fall back. "I never knew anything could feel that good." Taylor shared a glance with Amy, and raised an eyebrow; Amy's air of smugness, if anything, increased.

Taylor chuckled. "Well, I'm glad. Oh, and Dad wants to say hi."

She let Hope go, and went to Amy. "Thank you for the extra bugs," she said quietly. "They'll really help out." She impulsively hugged her. Amy seemed a little surprised, but returned the hug.

"You're entirely welcome," she replied with a smile. "Have you had a chance to look over the plan?"

Taylor nodded. "Me and Dad both. We're definitely in. I'll brief the rest of the Undersiders, tonight."

Amy smiled. "That's excellent."

As they separated, Taylor looked over to where Hope was hugging Danny. She had her head laid
against his chest, eyes closed, and seemed to be really enjoying the embrace. Taylor turned back to Amy. "Back and wing massage, huh?"

Amy nodded, her grin threatening to split her face. "I finally found a way I can make her feel half as good as she makes me feel, without using my powers on her." She giggled. "And she says I make funny noises."

Taylor shook her head. "Seriously, too much information." But she was grinning. "She looks utterly shattered."

Amy's look of smugness increased.

Lisa joined them. "So ... yes on the plan?" It was more of a statement than a question.

Taylor nodded. "Sure. I'm thinking I'll brief in the Undersiders on it tonight? Dad's place?"

Lisa tilted her head. "Sounds good. Want me along?"

Taylor grabbed her head, rubbing their foreheads together. "You know I do. And bring a spare costume. I want to make sure I can fit into it."

"What for – oh!" said Amy. "The party. I wasn't even sure I wanted to go."

Taylor eyed her sternly. "You are coming, Amy. Seriously. Or I'll set my bugs on you."

"Worse," said Lisa. "I'll tell Hope. She'll just use her puppy-dog eyes on you, and ..."

"Okay, fine, fine," laughed Amy. "I'll go." She paused. "I don't know who as, though. And it's tomorrow night."

"You can always just go as yourself," pointed out Taylor. "You don't have to go in costume."

Amy nodded. "Good point. I'll think about it."

Hope and Danny rejoined them; Hope put her arms around Amy from the back and rested her chin on Amy's shoulder, while Danny stood alongside Taylor. Amy put her hands over Hope's hands, holding them in place.

"Well, kiddo," he said. "Ready to roll?"

"Sure," said Taylor. "See you guys later, then?"

Lisa nodded. "Count on it." She looked at Hope and Amy. "Want to come over too?"

Amy turned to look at Hope, who promptly stole a kiss off her. She pulled Hope's arms tighter around her body, and leaned back into the embrace. "Want to go, sweetie?" she murmured.

Hope nodded. "Yes, please. It's been ages since I've seen everyone else."

Amy looked at Lisa. "Then we'll come. Thanks."

Taylor looked at her father. "Uh, that's all right, isn't it, Dad?"

Danny nodded. "Of course, kiddo." A wry smile crossed his face. "I'm actually looking forward to meeting your friends properly, now that I know who they actually are."
Taylor met Lisa's eyes, and they both grinned at the same time. Taylor could tell Lisa was thinking the same thing as she was. *This could be very interesting.*
In which Hope and Amy attend a get-together at the Hebert household with the rest of the Undersiders

Hope glided over the city, Amy cradled comfortably in her arms. "Warm enough there, sweetie?" she asked.

"I'm fine," Amy responded; she was, after all, bundled up in jacket and jeans against the late evening chill. "You're wearing a lot less than I am."

"Anything thick would get in the way of my wings," Hope pointed out, "and anyway, the cold doesn't affect me as much." She flapped her wings a few times, flexing the pinions, reveling in how they felt. "I didn't realise how stiff my wing muscles were becoming," she added.

"You've been doing a lot of flying with unbalanced loads, sweetie," Amy pointed out. "With your physiology and your powers, you aren't likely to do yourself any kind of permanent damage, but muscle strains and cramps can build up, little by little."

"Well, right now," said Hope, "my back and my wings feel great, thanks to you. I feel like I could fly to the moon and back."

Amy snuggled happily into her cradling arms. "I'm glad, sweetie," she said.

Wings beating slowly and steadily, they flew on through the lowering dusk.

Taylor knew when Hope and Amy were inbound; her bugs picked them up about two blocks out. She hadn't yet detected the other Undersiders, but then, she wasn't expecting to see them yet.

She trotted down the stairs from her bedroom, where she had been gazing at the multitude of tiny spider eggs in the small box with the mother web-spider. There was a web built over the opening to the box, and Taylor had guided several insects into it, so that she had plenty to eat. She had tested some of the webs with her finger; they felt significantly stronger than normal.

Danny was in the garage, working on his costume. He had underestimated the effort that would be required to clear a viewspace through the visor, if he was going to see anything with the helmet on and the visor down. The white skull he had carefully painted on the clear visor made it almost impossible to see through.

Taylor leaned in through the door from the living room. "Hope and Amy will be here in a minute, Dad," she said, and disappeared again.

"Uh huh," he said, distracted. He'd tried paint thinner, but that just smeared the paint, leaving a translucent film that still made it hard to see details more than a foot away.

*Maybe if I scraped it off?* He'd have to find a razor and try that approach.

Taylor got out the snacks, laying out the biscuits and bags of peanuts and chips on the table. A couple of bottles of soda were cooling in the freezer. *It's almost like a party,* she thought. She grinned. *We need more parties. Like the one tomorrow night. I hope that one turns out okay.*
Valefor surveyed his men. Eligos wore a dress shirt and brandished a rubber knife; his real edged weapon was intangible, unseen, until he chose to call it up. Valefor wore a corset covered by a large apron with many pockets, in which various implements of butchery and surgery lurked. His long blond hair was tied back in girlish pigtails.

The six other men wore classic 'thug' outfits with watch caps and black sweaters; the word HENCHMAN was stencilled in four inch high letters across the back of each. Each man wore a black domino mask. Their guns had been carefully painted in bright colours, and orange caps lightly glued over the muzzles, to make them look as much like toys as possible.

Eligos nodded. "I like it. We're going to knock 'em dead."

Valefor silently agreed. Perhaps literally. His smile was predatory.

"Okay, guys," he said out loud, "get the costumes off. They all look good. This party's gonna be a blast."

Hope landed in the back yard, gliding in and landing as silently as she could, so as not to draw attention from any neighbours. Even as they moved toward the back door, it opened, and Taylor beckoned them in.

"Is anyone else here yet?" asked Hope as she followed Amy into the house; even as she spoke, however, she spread her senses out and knew that there were only two other people in the building; Taylor and, presumably, her father. She gave Taylor a quick hug, which Taylor returned.

"No, you're the first," Taylor said. "I'm expecting the others a little later, once it gets full dark." She grinned suddenly. "Dad's in the garage; come and see his costume."

Tentacles of shadow flowed out of a storm drain and solidified into the form of Sophia Hess. She stood down the road a little, and across the street, from the Hebert house. Lights were on inside; she could see them from where she stood.

Taylor's smart, she thought. But I'm smarter. I'll wait till they're all asleep, then I'll flip the breaker, so they won't have any light to look for those damn road flares. One, two, the whiny little bitch and her dad, dead.

Her body disassociated and she flowed back into the storm drain. I can get into the basement easily enough. I'll wait there. And if either one of them is stupid enough to come down into the basement while I'm waiting ...

She did not finish the thought, but a cold amusement rolled off of her.

Danny looked up as Taylor led Hope and Amy into the garage. "Good to see you could make it," he said with a grin.

Hope smiled and gave him a quick hug from behind. "I'm always glad to see my friends," she told him. "Ooh, you're going as Grue? That's awesome."

Amy leaned in and looked critically at the helmet. "Um, aren't you supposed to be able to see out through the visor?" she asked after a moment.

"Thank you, Amy," said Danny with forced patience, "I had actually realised that, yes. But thank
you for pointing it out anyway."

Taylor caught the eyes of the other two, and indicated the door leading into the house with a tilt of her head. "Come on," she said, "let's leave Dad to finish working in peace."

Hope gave Danny a kiss on the cheek. "I'm sure you'll get it sorted out," she said encouragingly. Taking Amy by the hand, she followed Taylor back into the living room.

Danny absently rubbed the spot on his cheek, then rummaged through the clutter on his work bench until he found a box knife. Extracting the blade, he began carefully scraping away at the film of paint on the visor.

"But all I said was –" began Amy.

Taylor grinned; Hope hugged Amy, and silenced her with a quick kiss. "It's okay, sweetie," she said, rubbing noses with Amy. "He's not mad at you; he just wants to work it out for himself."

"Oh, okay," said Amy. "I feel a bit silly now."

Hope held her forehead against Amy's, looking into her eyes. "When we realise we've done something silly, what do we do next?"

Amy smiled reluctantly. "We fix it, and we move on."

"Exactly," said Hope. "Now, let's give Taylor a hand with the snacks. The others will probably be here soon."

They made their way across the back yard, shrouded in darkness. Grue was out of costume, as was Lisa. Regent wore street clothes, but had his mask on. Imp was fully costumed. Rachel hadn't even bothered with the mask she sometimes wore. Bentley and Angelina were with her, trotting at her heels without the need for leashes, and she was carrying Bastard, because his legs were still too short to go for a good long run.

"Why are you trusting Taylor's father?" Regent had asked.

"Because I've met him, he's seen my face, he knows my name, and he's an all right guy," Grue had answered.

"Yeah, well, you wouldn't be so quick to trust him if you'd met my father," Regent had retorted.

"Your father's a supervillain," Lisa had cut in. "Danny Hebert's just a nice guy who wants the best for Skitter, for Taylor. She's told him a bit about what she's done, and why. He's a bit weirded out, more than he lets her see, but he's getting his head around it." She had paused for emphasis. "But he's not about to betray her, or her friends. He's made that decision."

"You can mask up, or not," Grue had said to Regent. "He's already heard your name, and Rachel's. It's your choice."

Rachel hadn't even bothered voicing an opinion. Her face was already known. It wasn't an issue. And if Hebert's dad was going to have a problem about a known supervillain being in his house, that was his lookout. She had her dogs with her. That was all she needed.

Darkness boiled into the basement, up out of the drain-hole. There were very few insects left in the
sewers from the previous night's action, and no rats at all. No bugs were dying en masse, so Taylor
got no warning, no heads-up about the malevolent presence lurking beneath the house. Hope didn't
have her senses extended, so she got no indication either.

There was a knock on the back door; Taylor looked up from pouring peanuts into a bowl. "It's
them," she announced, then she raised her voice. "Dad!" she called. "They're here!"

Danny put down the blade and entered the house from the garage, wiping his hands on his shirt.
Hope went to the back door and opened it. "Hi, guys," she said cheerfully. "Come on in."

The shroud of darkness that had cloaked the back yard dissipated, and people entered the house,
passing by Hope. The first one through the door had to be Grue; he was the only one tall and wide
enough to fit what she had seen of the darkness-clad supervillain. He was a good-looking dark-
skinned youth of about eighteen or so, dressed in a black jacket and dark jeans. He gave Hope a
polite nod as he entered.

Lisa, the next one to enter, was similarly clad in street clothes; she grinned and gave Hope a quick
hug and a kiss on the cheek, both of which Hope returned.

Hope noted Regent's street clothes; no doubt he had only put on the mask once he got to the house.
He gave Hope a condescending nod as he walked into the house.

Rachel was the last. "I brought dogs," she said. It was more of a challenge than anything else. At her
feet were two large dogs; she had been carrying a puppy as well, but now she clipped a lead to his
collar and put him on the ground.

In the living room, Danny greeted Brian. "I remember you," he said. "You and Lisa brought Taylor
home that day. Was that after one of your fights?"

Brian nodded. "That was the day we took down Lung."

"I'd be interested in hearing about that," said Danny.

"No ... no you wouldn't," said Lisa, strolling in from the back door. "Not right now. Trust me on
this." She gave him a vulpine grin, kissed Taylor on the cheek, then parked herself on the sofa next
to Amy.

Regent entered the living room, taking up station in the corner of the room, as Hope called from the
back door. "Danny, is it okay if Rachel brings her dogs into the house?"

Danny came to look over her shoulder. "Are they housetrained?" he asked.

Rachel nodded once, sharply. As if any of my dogs wouldn't be.

"Then they can come in," he said agreeably. "Nice to meet you. I'm Danny Hebert."

"I know who you are," she said, brushing past him. A click of her fingers, and Bentley and Angelina
followed her in. The puppy's claws scrabbled on the linoleum.

Danny looked at Hope, a little taken aback, and just a little angry at the rudeness.

Hope leaned in close to him, and spoke quietly. "Danny, Rachel is very, very good with dogs, but
she doesn't do the social thing with people. She doesn't mean to be rude; it's just the way she is."
When they got into the small living room, it was beginning to look remarkably cramped. With Hope and Amy and Danny, and five of the Undersiders, there wasn't much room to move without bumping into someone.

"Wait a minute," said Danny, frowning. "Didn't you say there were six of you all told?"

Brian sighed. "Imp," he said in long-suffering tones, "must you do that?"

Danny blinked. There was a girl in a tight-fitting costume standing right there, where a second ago, he could have sworn ...

"What the hell?" he blurted.

The girl giggled. "Hi, Danny," she said impudently. "I'm Imp." She had dark skin, and her mask bore a pair of cute little horns. Then she stuck out her tongue at Brian. "And yes, I must. So nyah."

"I ... see," said Danny. "I guess you turn invisible or something."

"Or something," she agreed. "Ooh, peanuts." Grabbing a bowl, she began crunching happily.

Danny turned to Rachel. "That's a cute pup you have there," he said, trying to generate some level of contact. "What's his name?"

Rachel didn't even look up from where she was pressing the pup's rear to the floor. "Bastard," she said bluntly.

"Ah," he said. "Right." And I think I'll leave that one well alone then, he decided.

Taylor fetched a couple of bottles of soda from the fridge and poured for everyone, then picked up the document from the table. "Okay, everyone," she said. "This is a plan to fix the city. Everyone's got a part to play, even us." She paused.

Hope cleared her throat and held up her hand; Taylor nodded to her. "Especially you," Hope corrected. "The gangs have their part to play, and the Undersiders are about the most prominent gang in Brockton Bay right now."

"So what's in it for us?" asked Regent, lounging in the corner.


"Well," said Brian, "that sounds like a good enough reason for me."

"What about me and my dogs?" said Rachel. "You just gonna push me out?"

Taylor shook her head. "No. As a matter of fact, you've been factored into the plan."

Rachel looked up at that. "How the hell have I been factored into any damn plan?"

"There's a huge number of stray dogs in the city right now," Taylor replied. "The plan includes a purpose-built canine shelter and training centre to be set aside for you to run. Subsidised by the city. You run it your way. No outside interference."

Rachel frowned. "That sounds like something for nothing. I don't ever get something for nothing."

Rachel thought about it for a moment. "I dunno," she said at last. "I don't like the idea of sending dogs out into places they might get hurt."

Hope stepped up to her; even Danny saw her body language shift. "Listen to me, Rachel," she said bluntly. "Those dogs are going to be trained to do that anyway. Someone else trains them, probably screws it up, those dogs get hurt. You train them, you do it right, those dogs do their jobs exactly right, they don't get hurt." She leaned in. "They're going to be trained anyway. Would you rather someone else did it, or would you rather you did it right?"

Rachel nodded. "Okay," she said. "I get it now. I can do that. I can train dogs."

Hope smiled without showing her teeth. "Thank you, Rachel," she said. "I'm going to hug you again now."

Rachel made no protest, and Hope enfolded her in a hug. After a moment, Rachel's arms crept out and around Hope's body.

After Hope let her go and stepped back, Rachel looked at her curiously. "Why do you keep doing that?" she demanded.

Hope smiled again. "Because I like to," she said. "And because it feels nice to be hugged." She moved to sit next to Amy on the sofa, and put her arm around the girl's waist; Amy snuggled into her. "So, Taylor, you were saying?"

"Basically," said Taylor, "this plan is designed to get Brockton Bay back up and running again, as fast as possible. Also, for those of us inclined to do so, it is strongly suggested that the PRT offer some of us places in the Wards. I'm a strong contender there, as is Grue, and maybe Tattletale. Regent could have a place if he wanted, while Rachel has the offer of the canine shelter."

"What about me?" put in Imp. She had almost finished the peanuts, and had already refilled her soda twice.

"What about you?" replied Taylor. "You haven't even made the public eye yet. Downside of using your powers all the time like you do."

"Aww," pouted Imp. She grabbed Regent's arm. "We'll go on the run, dangerous outlaws, like whatsername, Bonnie and Claude."

"Clyde," corrected Brian. "And no, you won't. You're still a minor. Once I get custody of you ..."

"That's right," Imp said, "let everyone know I'm your little sister."

"I still don't know who you are," interjected Danny mildly, "so it doesn't really matter, does it?"

"Do we need to worry about getting the offer straight away?" asked Brian.

Hope shook her head. "The plan recommends extending the amnesty, and only making the offer once the city has been rebuilt far enough that your presence is no longer required in your various areas." She smiled. "Amy and I have spoken with Miss Militia and Director Piggot, and they are both very interested in pushing through with it."

Taylor frowned. "Coil?" she asked.
Hope nodded. "I've given him his copy. He seemed a little unsure, but I think he'll go with it. There's options in there for if any one of the major players opts out of the plan, including him. But it's easier if he works to the plan."

"So wait," said Brian. "If we decided to buck the plan, it could still go through?"

Hope nodded. "It would take a lot longer, but yes, it could still work. Unless you deliberately went all-out to sabotage it." She looked around at the group. "You aren't going to do that, are you?"

Taylor shook her head firmly. "No, we are not." She looked at each member of the Undersiders in turn. "Are we, guys?"

"Of course not," said Brian.

"Definitely not," said Lisa.

"Guess not," agreed Regent.

"No," put in Rachel.

Taylor looked at Imp. "Well?"

Imp looked sulky. "Okay, fine, I won't screw up your precious plan," she said. "You're no fun."

"So we're agreed?" said Taylor. "We back the plan?"

There was a general round of agreement, concluded with a curt nod from Rachel and a reluctant one from Imp. Hope stood up from the sofa and hugged Brian, as he was closest.

"Whoa!" he said. "What's with the hugs?"

Lisa chuckled. "She's all about the hugs," she said. "Can't live without 'em."

"Hugs are nice!" protested Hope.

"They are," conceded Brian. "Just not used to getting them."

"Well, deal with it," Hope retorted. "Because it's just gonna keep happening."

"You realise, this constitutes assault," Brian pretended to complain.

"Assault and huggery?" Taylor riposted.

"It'd be better than assault and bug-" Imp began.

Lisa cut her off. "Don't even go there," she warned. Imp pouted again, while everyone else laughed.

Shadow Stalker's interest was piqued by the laughter. Was there a party or something going on upstairs? Condensing herself into human form, she crept up the stairs one at a time until she reached the basement door. Ignoring the large moth perched on the door frame, she pressed her ear against the door. She could hear voices, but not what they were talking about. All she could make out was the occasional word.

"So, Taylor," said Brian. "Would you accept an offer from the Wards?"
Taylor considered this. "Actually, if my territory was all quiet, and my people were all housed and being taken care of, then yeah, probably," she agreed.

"So what would you go for as a hero name? Too many people know Skitter as a villain."

Shadow Stalker stiffened. Did I just hear someone say Skitter?

"I don't know," said Taylor. "Maybe Weaver, or Spinner -"

"Sounds like someone who spins around all the time," interjected Regent.

"Insectosaurus Maximus," offered Imp.

"Ew, no," Taylor objected.

"I like Weaver, actually," said Danny, unexpectedly. "It's a good, strong name."

Lisa nodded. "Danny's right."

"Okay, Weaver it is," Taylor agreed with a chuckle. "Brian, your turn."

"But I never said I'd join the Wards," objected Brian. "Besides, I'm eighteen. They'd put me straight into the Protectorate."

"Let's say they give you a bit of time in the Wards to find your feet," said Lisa. "Quit dodging. What would you take as your hero name?"

"Uh, I dunno," said Brian. "Blackout, maybe?"

"Way to racially profile us, big brother," retorted Imp.

"I was referring to my darkness, you little pest," retorted Brian. "Besides, I don't hear you coming out with a better idea."


"Tenebrae," said Taylor unexpectedly.

"Wait, what?" said Regent. "What the hell does that mean?"

Danny smiled. "It's Latin for 'darkness'," he explained. "Nice one. I like it."


"I like Tattletale," objected Lisa.

"Tough," said Brian. "Now you have to pick a hero name."

"Um ... Oracle? Cassandra? Sybil? Gypsy?" Lisa shrugged. "Take your pick."

"Two of those are girls' names already," objected Regent.

"Why Gypsy?" Imp wanted to know.

"Fortune-tellers, stupid," Regent told her.
"Don't call me stupid, dweeb," she retorted.

Shadow Stalker retreated to the bottom of the stairs. *I think the Undersiders are up there. And Taylor's got something to do with them. I can get them all at once. If they're in league with the Undersiders, it means that they're criminals, and I'm justified in doing this.*

*Not that I need an excuse.*

Opening the fuse box, she flipped the breaker.

Then, dissolving into shadow, she roiled up the stairs.

The lights went out.

"What the hell, Grue?" shouted Regent.

"That's not me!" shouted Grue in return. And indeed, Hope's glow was now the only source of light in the living room; if Grue's power had been active, even that would have been snuffed out.

Taylor was already sending bugs moving. *If that's the circuit breaker ...*

Her bugs hit the basement ... and died.

"It's Shadow Stalker!" she yelled.

The moth on the door frame woke up. Taylor went to trigger its bioluminescent flash. But before she could, a tentacle brushed the door frame, and the 'moth', absorbing its life energy in that same instant.

As it died, the flash bug gave up all its stored bioluminescence in one tremendous flash of light.

Everyone spun around at the soundless psychic scream that reverberated through their heads. The dogs started barking; even Bastard started yipping frantically. Brilliant light flared out from all around the basement door; it looked exactly like a bad special effect from a second-rate horror movie.

Then the light cut out, as did the psychic scream. But the scream did not end abruptly; it dwindled, as of someone retreating rapidly. Everyone was on their feet, without even realising it.

"Everyone else heard that, right?" said Danny, shakily.

Lisa nodded. "That was Shadow Stalker, all right." She turned to Amy and hugged her, hard.

Amy blinked. "Wait, what?" she said.

"Your flash bug," said Lisa, "just saved all our lives, most probably."

"Is she ... dead?" asked Regent tensely. "And what the hell's a flash bug, anyway?"

"Think of a firefly, times about a million," explained Lisa. "Amy made them up for Taylor. And no, she's not, although that would really have hurt her, a lot." She paused. "In fact, I'm surprised she survived it."

Everyone turned toward Amy. She quailed a little under their concerted gaze. Hope put her arms around her, and held her close.
"You did that?" asked Brian. "That was awesome!"

Lisa nodded. "He's right, you know."

Even Imp was nodding in agreement. "As much as I hate to agree with my big bro, that's actually kinda badass. You nuked her ass."

Amy began to smile. "I did, didn't I?" she said.

Hope kissed her on the forehead. "You certainly did, sweetie," she agreed.

Rachel looked up from where she was calming her dogs down. "Would she have killed the dogs too?"

Lisa nodded. "Probably, yes."

Rachel rose and walked over to Amy. "Then thank you. For saving my dogs."

Stiffly, awkwardly, she hugged Amy, then quickly let her go.

"Christ," remarked Regent from the corner, "if this keeps up, we're going to have to call for Master/Stranger protocols on Rachel."

As one, Lisa, Brian and Taylor turned toward him. "Shut up, Regent."

Taylor retrieved a road flare from her pack, just in case, and cautiously opened the basement door. From the top step, she retrieved the corpse of the flash bug. Moving farther into the basement, she flipped the circuit breaker back on. The lights came back up.

"So you built in a suicide switch?" she said, bringing the bug back to the table.

Amy nodded. "Basically, if something killed it, it would let go everything at once."

Everyone crowded around to look at the tiny creature that had given its all to save them. The rear of the abdomen looked blackened and shriveled, from the intensity of the flash.

"Well," observed Danny, "it sure as hell worked." He looked troubled. "That was the only one though, wasn't it?"

Taylor shook her head. "Nope. Amy made some up for me this morning. I have a dozen more."

Danny nodded. He put his hand on Amy's shoulder. "Thank you, Amy. I really mean it. From the bottom of my heart."

Amy nodded; her throat was too choked up with emotion to speak. All she could do was smile. Hope enfolded her in an embrace, and held her close. Amy hugged her back. "You did good, sweetie," whispered Hope. Amy held her tighter.

Taylor looked around at everyone. "Just so you know, she's not in the sewer system within three blocks of here, but above ground is a tougher prospect to search."

There was a long silence. Danny looked from face to face. "So I guess ..." he began.

"That the party's over?" finished Lisa. "Hell no. If we went and hid under the covers every time someone tried to kill us, we'd never come out."
"We laugh in the face of danger!" supplied Regent.

"No, no, that's me," Imp replied. "I laugh in the face of danger. You run and hide from danger."

"Enough," said Taylor, and although she did not raise her voice, everyone stopped and turned toward her. Danny blinked; she speaks, and they listen, he thought. I really don't know my little girl any more.

Taylor turned toward him. "Dad, I know you're freaked out. So are we all. But what we should be doing is making a sweep of the area, to ensure she won't come back. We'll carry road flares. I've got flash bugs all over the house."

He nodded, dumbly. Hope spoke up. "Amy and I will stay here and keep an eye on the place. If she tries flipping the breaker off again, we'll just toss a road flare down the steps." A shrug. "Shadow Stalker already proved she can see me coming ten miles away, anyway." She met Taylor's eyes. I'll make sure your dad comes to no harm. Taylor nodded in gratitude.

"Uh, Taylor," said Amy, "if you leave some bugs where I can get to them, I can make more flash bugs while we're waiting."

"Good idea," said Taylor. She dashed upstairs to her bedroom, emerged moments later in her full Skitter costume. Bugs had begun to congregate on the table; insects of every description. And every single one simply sat there, immobile. "Is that enough?" she asked.

"It's a start," replied Amy, with a grin.

Lisa had sequestered the bathroom to change as well. In the back yard, under cover of Grue's darkness, Rachel was enlarging her dogs. Danny watched the process with a certain level of horrified fascination.

"Let's do this thing," said Skitter. She hugged her father, hard. "I'll be back soon, Dad. Promise."

"Just take care, okay, sweetie?" Danny said, as he let her go.

"Always."

They mounted the dogs, three apiece. No-one looked back. The dogs bounded over the back fence and disappeared.

"Let's get back inside, Danny," said Hope. "No sense in standing out here and making a big target."

Danny nodded, allowing Hope to guide him back inside. Amy shut the door, locking it behind them.

All three sat at the table, Hope and Danny on either side of Amy. Lisa had left each of them a couple of road flares, and Danny had fetched a powerful torch from the garage. Hope had her arm around Amy; they both watched in fascination as Amy carefully gathered the bugs together, then performed her miracle of genetic alchemy to produce more flash bugs.

"Is it like this every time, with them?" he asked after a while. "Just ... going off into the unknown, not knowing who or what they're facing, or whether they'll get back safely?"

Hope shook her head. "I have no idea, Danny," she said softly. "And I'm not sure I want to know." She fell silent, and they watched Amy create one new flash bug after another.
The other Undersiders dropped Taylor off about an hour later. She was hot and sweaty despite the chill night air, and drank down several glasses of water.

"We got several sniffs of her, but never close enough to get a solid lock," she reported. "Lisa's fairly certain she won't be back tonight." She turned to Hope, and hugged her tightly. "Thanks for staying, and looking after my dad," she said.

Hope hugged her back, just as hard. "It's the least I could do," she told Taylor. "Are you sure she won't be back?"

Taylor shrugged. "The guys can be back tomorrow morning and we'll do another check of the neighbourhood, make sure she isn't lurking somewhere near under cover. In the meantime, we have Amy's flash bugs." She eyed the new flash bugs sitting on the table, a round dozen all told, and hugged Amy, just as tightly as she had hugged Hope a moment before. "Wow, you really came through there, Amy," she said softly. "Thank you. For me and my dad, thank you."

Amy was a little taken aback, but returned the hug. "Just never threaten me with another black widow spider ever again, okay?" she said with a wan chuckle.

Taylor laughed a little shakily. "Deal."

She let them out the back door, and watched until Hope's glow faded into the night sky.

Lisa entered the shelter to see Hope and Amy waiting for her. Wordlessly, Hope embraced her, holding her tight. Lisa didn't need to be told what this was about; she just held Hope, feeling the tiny shudders of emotion in her, gradually dissipating. Amy was looking reasonably calm; Hope had obviously been comforting her, and now needed some comforting of her own.

Lisa held Hope at arms' length. "You gonna be okay?"

Hope nodded. "I'm good. I've got Amy to snuggle with." She eyed Lisa. "Are you going to be all right yourself?" She raised an eyebrow. "You could climb in with us if you wanted."

Lisa choked off a laugh. "That sounds interesting, but not right now. I borrowed a flash bug. But I doubt we'll have any more problems tonight."

Hope nodded. "Okay. Good night." She gave Lisa a smile, took Amy by the hand, and they disappeared into their sleeping enclosure.

Lisa watched them go, then headed off to her own room. The last thing she did before falling asleep was to carefully place two road flares and the somnolent flash-bug on her bedside table.
In which the Undersiders return for more socialisation, Danny gets to know them, and costume preparations are made for the party

Lisa was serving breakfast the next morning when she saw Hope and Amy emerge from the shower area. They were looking far too bright and chirpy for such a time in the morning. Amy's hair was damp; Hope's was, of course, completely dry. Lisa put the tray down just in time for Hope to give her a hug and a kiss on the cheek. Hope smelled very faintly of jasmine.

"Good morning," Hope said, cheerfully. "Did you sleep okay?"

"So-so," admitted Lisa. "I woke up a few times, thought I heard noises, nothing to be alarmed at. You?"

Amy put her arm around Hope's waist. "We slept okay," she said. "Could have been worse." She leaned in against Hope. "A lot worse."

Lisa read between the lines, and her mouth twitched. She shook her head, chuckling to herself. "You two ..." she said. "Go on, sit down, I'll get you something."

By the time she got back with their tray of breakfast, Amy had taken her towel and robe back into the sleeping enclosure, and she and Hope had found a place to sit. People made way for them, showing them both considerable respect; in their time at the shelter, they had helped many people with complaints and injuries, both minor and major.

Hope never presumed on this respect; she always asked politely for a space to sit down, and thanked those people who made way.

"So, heading back over to Taylor's place after breakfast?" asked Lisa as she served them.

Hope nodded. "Want a lift?"

Lisa considered for a moment. "Sure. I'll just let the others know where I'm going."

By the time they landed outside Taylor's house, the sun was well up in the sky. "The others should be here by now," Lisa said. "In fact, I think I just saw Bentley in the back yard."

Taylor opened the door on the first knock. "Come on in," she said with a smile. "I've been expecting you."

As they entered, she kept talking. "The others are already here. In fact, they've been here for hours. We've already done another sweep for Shadow Stalker. There's no trace of her in the area at all."

Lisa nodded. "There's an outside chance that the flash bug last night wounded her to the point that she won't recover. But I don't think so. Right now, I think she's too weak to try to attack a human; she's more likely to feed on smaller creatures, like rats, build her strength up."

"With luck," said Taylor, "that will keep her out of action for a few days."

"Well, the trial's only three days away," observed Hope. "With what Kid Win's setting up, it's our best chance to catch her."
In the living room, Imp was lounging on the sofa. Regent was sitting on the floor in front of her, leaning back with his head on her knees. Brian was sitting at the dinner table, in earnest conversation with Danny. He looked over as they entered.

"Good to see you," he said. "Rachel's in the back yard, with the dogs. You didn't have any problems with Shadow Stalker after you left last night?"

Lisa shook her head. "I think she's gone to ground. That flash bug would really have done a number on her."

In the murmur of general agreement, she turned to Danny. "Hey, Mr H," she said. "So long as we're staying to hang out awhile, why don't you show Brian your costume?" She turned to Taylor. "And speaking of costumes, I brought my spare along ..."

Brian and Danny stood over the work bench, looking at the helmet.

"I painted the skull on the visor," explained Danny, "but I'm having trouble making it so I can actually see through it, too." He looked at Brian. "How did you manage it?"

"With great difficulty," admitted Brian. "You have to take a lot of care to make sure the eye sockets are big enough to see out of, and at the right height." He eyed the scrape marks left by the razor. "You realise that those will also obscure your vision?"

Danny sighed in defeat. "I know, I know," he said. "So how do I make this work?"

"Just keep the visor flipped up," Brian said. "People will see what it's supposed to be. That's good enough."

"I guess," said Danny. "I just wish I'd thought ahead a bit."

Brian nodded sympathetically. "So what made you pick me as a cape to copy?"

Danny chuckled. "Taylor, actually. She said she was going as Tattletale. So I said as a joke that I'd go as you, and then it stopped being a joke."

"Speaking of Taylor," Brian said seriously, "you really have an extraordinary daughter there. She's saved our lives on more than one occasion. Even last night, she was the one who chose to place a flash-bug in the basement. She's smart, dedicated, never gives up ..." He trailed off, as Danny looked at him intently. "What?"

"Brian," said Danny quietly. "Are you ... and Taylor ... involved?"

Brian paused. He took stock of the situation; he was younger, fitter, stronger, and had been trained in boxing and other self-defense skills. Danny was taller, but skinnier and did not have the weight of muscle that Brian had. But Brian got the uncomfortable impression that Danny Hebert was not a man to trifle with, not when it came to Taylor's well-being.

"Not intimately," he replied truthfully. "We're friends. We're good friends. I have a lot of admiration for her." He grinned sheepishly. "She's got a bit of a crush on me, I think. But ..." He shook his head. "She's a bit young for me. Reminds me too much of my sister. Besides, romance in the ranks would mess with both our heads."

Danny nodded. "I understand," he said. "Taylor's told me about you. She really likes you. So I will say this exactly once." His tone did not change; nor did his expression. "I do not have an objection
with your becoming involved with her. But if you _ever_ hurt her, then I don't care about your powers, and I don't care how far you run. I will find you. And I will make you pay." He gave Brian a measured nod. "Just so we're on the same page."

Brian blinked. "Yes, sir," he said. "I do understand." *Not that there would be much left of me after Taylor got through with me, but he loves her, and I have to respect that.*

As if the confrontation had never happened, Danny turned back to the helmet. "So," he said. "Visor up, hey?"

Brian nodded, glad of the change of subject. "Yeah," he said. "Looks like the only way."

In Taylor's bedroom, Lisa helped Taylor climb into her spare costume.

"It feels weird," Taylor complained.

"That's because you're used to your personally fitted outfit," Lisa told her. "Hold still, I'm doing the zipper up."

"Don't people see your underwear through this?" asked Taylor, looking down at herself in the purple costume. "I mean, it's not exactly tight on me, but on you ..."

"There is such a thing as sheer underwear, Taylor," Lisa pointed out. "Victoria's Secret. It is your friend." She grinned her vulpine grin and held out the mask. Taylor removed her glasses and fitted it on to her face.

"Voila!" said Lisa. "And we have a new Tattletale in town. Come on out, and we'll show everyone."

"Wait, wait, what?" said Taylor. "In this? It feels like I'm wearing nothing!"

"That's because you're used to wearing your own costume," explained Lisa patiently, opening the bedroom door. "That's got a bit more weight to it. Armour panels and all." She grinned. "This one shows off your figure."

"But what if I don't want to – eep!"

Despite Taylor's protests, she found herself being dragged out of the room and to the top of the stairs.

"Hey, guys!" Lisa called. "Check it out!"

Hope and Amy looked up from where they were sitting on the sofa together; Brian and Danny came in from the garage. Imp and Regent, who had strolled out to watch Bitch training her dogs, wandered back in to see what the noise was about. Only Rachel ignored the commotion; she had better things to do.

"Huh," said Brian. "Nice."

"It's a bit loose here and there," Regent commented. "Might want to take it in a bit."

"Yeah," agreed Imp. "Especially _here_ and _here_." She cupped her hands in the vicinity of her own not-very-substantial bosom.

"Oh, shush, you two," scolded Hope. "I think you look just too cute for words. Right, Amy?"

Amy grinned. "Well, no-one will mistake you for the real Tattletale," she said truthfully, "but you

Danny cleared his throat. "Can I just say that as an old-fashioned fuddy-duddy, I disapprove of the whole skintight costume idea for a teenage girl, and leave it at that?" Taylor's face fell. He hastily went on. "But if you're going to be wearing a costume, that one looks very nice on you. At least it covers all of you."

"Well," she said, "at least you're honest. Thanks, Dad." She smiled at him and turned to Lisa. "Come on," she said. "I've worn it, they've seen it. Can I go change back now?"

Lisa grinned. "Okay. But there was an alternate costume idea I was working on; the Tattletale bikini..."

"No!" said Taylor, very firmly, on the way back into the room.

"Shame," Regent remarked. "She might look nice in a –oof!" He glared at Imp, who had elbowed him in the ribs.

"Watch it, dweeb," she cautioned him. "The only crass, sexist comments you're allowed to make are about me."

"So when do I get to see you in a bikini?" he countered instantly.

She elbowed him in the ribs again. "And only when I feel like it," she added loftily.

"Hey," said Brian to Hope. "What are you going as?"

Hope shrugged. "I've asked Miss Militia if I can go as her; she said yes. Loaned me a scarf and a sash." She grinned. "It's not like people won't know who I really am."

"That's very true," agreed Brian with a chuckle. "You're very distinctive."

"Any more distinctive, and they'd have to give you a Stranger designation," agreed Regent.

Imp knocked on his skull with her knuckles; he jerked and said, "Ow! What was that for?"

"Stranger designation's for people who are hard to spot or locate, dweeb," she informed him. "You know, like me. Hope's anything but."

"You didn't let me finish," he complained. "I was gonna say, a Stranger designation with a negative value."

Imp looked at Hope critically. "With those wings, and that glow? Negative twelve, for sure. You wouldn't be able to hide that even under a burqua."

Hope chuckled, shaking her head. "Guys, please," she begged. "No more power designations. I get a headache trying to keep track of the ones I do have."

Imp frowned. "Oh? What do you have?"

Hope sighed. "Um, let's see." She began to count them off on her fingers. "Brute, Mover, Breaker, Striker, Thinker, and Master."
"Master?" repeated Regent. "You, uh, control people?"

Hope shook her head. "No. It's kind of silly, actually. I'm rated as Master with a zero rating. I don't actually have any powers that compel people to do anything – and I wouldn't use them if I had any," she added hastily, "but I get along with people really well most of the time, and sometimes they do what I ask, if I ask really nicely."

Lisa coughed a few times, sounding suspiciously as though she was trying hard not to laugh.

Brian was less circumspect. "You," he said bluntly, "could charm the birds down from the trees, if you so wished."

Hope nodded. "I know," she said, with a strange note of resignation. "But sometimes ... I wish people would do what I ask because they want to, because they know it's the right thing to do, not just because it's me asking them."

She looked around the room. Lisa understood; she understood everything. But Danny was also looking at her with comprehension. Taylor, also, seemed to get what she was talking about. Brian was nodding slowly.

Regent shook his head. "Sorry," he said. "I don't follow."

"Yeah," said Imp. "If you can tell people what to do, and they do it, and they don't argue, where's the problem?"

Unexpectedly, Rachel spoke up. "People aren't dogs."

Everyone turned to look at her; she glared back angrily, and shut her mouth.

"Well, of course people aren't --" began Regent.

"No, wait," said Lisa. "I get what she's talking about. Rachel has her dogs trained so that when she gives them an order, they follow it because it's her giving the order. But people shouldn't be like that. People should think about what they're being told, whether it's right or not. They should choose, and decide the right course of action, not just do something because they were told to do it." She looked toward Rachel. "Is that it?"

Rachel nodded once, curtly. "Yeah, I guess." She went back to grooming Bentley.

"That's a good philosophy," said Brian. "Wish it actually worked in the real world."

"Well," said Hope. "I can only keep trying." With the aim of changing the subject, she turned to Taylor. "Did you get that parcel Kid Win sent you?"

"Oh, yeah, I did," said Taylor. "I've been so busy, I forgot about it." She went and fetched her pack, and retrieved the box. Pulling out her knife, she slit the tape and opened the box, to find a flat metal case with a bulbous glass panel on one side.

"Cool," said Imp. "What is it?"

"A control panel, you said," Taylor said to Lisa. "Right?"

Lisa nodded. "Right. Built for you to control."

"Me?" Taylor examined it. There seemed to be no visible controls. However, there were four small holes penetrating the interior. "Huh. Let's see."
Bugs crawled into each of the four holes. The glass panel began to glow, softly at first and then brighter; a bank of LEDs became visible behind the frosted panel. At the same time, the light behind the panel began to move and swivel.

Taylor paused; she stopped all the bugs, and then moved one back and forth. The light dimmed, then brightened. Another one. The light tilted left and then right. A third one. The light swiveled around its axis. And the fourth bug, she found, tightened and opened the focus of the light.

She held up the box so that the glass face pointed at the far wall. Then she ran the light intensity up to max, pulled the beam in to its tightest focus, and used the other two bugs to direct the beam in cautious circles and squares. It took a little concentration, but she soon got the hang of the controls.

"Okay," said Regent. "That is definitely cool."

"Sure, sure," said Imp. "But what's it for?"

Lisa grinned. "It's a trap."

"A trap?" asked Danny. "How do you mean?"

Hope smiled grimly. "Let's just say, when you go to the trial ... bring sunglasses."

The gathering began to break up around midday. Hope gave Danny and Taylor a parting hug, then took off, carrying Lisa and Amy back to the shelter.

Brian shook hands with Danny, and he left with Regent and Rachel; Imp was with them, he knew, but flickering in and out of perception, skipping along the edges of awareness.

Taylor closed the door and went back into the living room. Her father was seated on the sofa, his expression pensive.

"Taylor, can we talk awhile?" he said.

She nodded. "Sure, Dad. What about?" But she knew. She sat beside him on the sofa.

"I've met your friends before, some of them. I didn't know who they were then, what they had done." A wry smile crossed his face. "I didn't know what you'd done, even while you were living under my roof."

"Dad --" she began.

He raised an admonitory finger. "Shh. Let me finish. I met them. Knowing who they were, this time. And they're ... human. For notorious supervillains, disturbingly so. Lisa cares deeply for you, I can tell. Regent ... Alec, I think you said his name was?"

Numbly, she nodded.

"He's just ... a teenager with an ego problem. No different than a hundred others I have known. Rachel ... she has her social problems, but she's amazing with those dogs. Brian is a nice boy." He met her gaze. "He likes you, you know, but not in that way. Not yet. But I like him. He's direct. Says what he means." He paused. "His sister ... she's deliberately crass. I think she does it to get attention."

He paused. "What I'm saying is ... even knowing that they're capes, knowing that they're
supervillains ... did not change my perspective of them. They're people. Just like you and me."

Taylor watched her father. He was working through something, she knew.

"But," he continued, after a moment or so of silence, "I watch on the news. I read things online. I read between the lines. I listen to them talking about things they've done, what they've had to do, sometimes just to keep from being killed. I'm not stupid; I can join the dots. I have a fair idea what they've done. What you've done. What the Undersiders have done."

Slowly, he shook his head. "What I want to know is ... with all you've been through ... how can you just ... relax and have fun, after what's happened to you, what you've had to do, just to survive?" He stared at her. "How can you not hate me for not being able to protect you from a world like that? How can you even smile?"

Taylor moved closer to him, and put her arms around him. "Dad," she said softly, "we relax and have fun so we can get over what's happened to us, not in spite of it." She leaned against him and closed her eyes. "If we couldn't laugh once in a while, if we couldn't have that moment of human contact, I think we'd all start screaming. And I don't think we'd be able to stop."

She felt his arm go around her shoulders.

They held each other for a long time.

"Don't tickle!"

"If you didn't stop wriggling around, I wouldn't be tickling you!"

"But it tickles!"

Lisa tried hard not to move as Hope applied the white-face makeup to her head and shoulders. She had tried, as an experiment, to dab some on to Hope's skin, but it just didn't stick. So even as Hope spread a thin, even layer over Lisa's skin, her hands stayed unmarked, the same as ever.

Amy was working on Lisa's arms; her hands were liberally daubed in the white makeup, and she had a single white spot on the tip of her nose.

"Okay," decided Hope. "That's that done."

"Excellent," said Lisa, examining her hands and arms. "Didn't miss any spots."

"I'll put the glitter on while it's still sticky," Amy said, and she began sprinkling handfuls of shiny glitter over Lisa's face and shoulders. Lisa shut her eyes and sputtered glitter from her lips.

"Watch it!"

Amy giggled. "Sorry."

They fitted the wings next; Lisa had a sort of harness, with the wings attached to straps. They tended to bump into things whenever she turned around, but with the glitter and the white makeup, it was clear who she was supposed to be. Hope helped her get it straight, then arranged the wings carefully so that they held a graceful curve instead of sticking out straight behind her.

In the meantime, Amy was working on her own face in the mirror; she had wiped the makeup from her face and hands, and was carefully dabbing away at her cheek with a brush. When she was satisfied with it, she applied glitter thickly to the resulting mark.
Hope and Lisa examined her handiwork.

"Is that supposed to be ... a kiss?" asked Hope.

Amy nodded. "One of your kisses of life," she confirmed. "Because you saved me."

"And I've never regretted it for an instant," Hope replied softly, taking Amy's hands in hers. "Not a single one."

"You two are about to put me into a diabetic coma," said Lisa, startling a giggle out of Amy. "The party's starting in an hour or so; Hope, you haven't gotten ready yet."

"Oh, right," said Hope. Rummaging around in the small bag she'd brought into Lisa's room, she pulled out a pair of military camouflage pants, and an olive-drab version of her normal top. Skinning out of her clothes, she put these on.

"What, no boots?" asked Amy jokingly.

Hope grinned and indicated her feet. "Look at those, and tell me where in the world I could get army boots to fit me."

Amy nodded. "Fair point." She could not help but grin at the disparate image the military camouflage made on Hope.

Next, Hope got out a scarf patterned with the Stars and Stripes, and positioned it around her neck, and a similarly emblazoned sash that went around her waist. Then she pulled out a bright yellow and green water-pistol, and struck a ludicrously menacing pose.

Amy began to giggle.

Hope held up a finger, and pulled out the last item; the SWAT goggles that she had worn the day they had defeated the Slaughterhouse Nine, and perched these on top of her head, aviator style. Then she resumed her pose.

Amy broke up altogether. She fell back on to the bed, laughing helplessly.

Lisa could not help but grin. "Well," she said, "it certainly makes a statement."

"And what statement is that?" asked Hope, tucking the pistol into her sash.

"Something along the lines of 'I should not be allowed to dress myself,'" answered Lisa with a grin. Hope stuck her tongue out at her, while Amy continued to giggle spasmodically on the bed.

"Well," said Lisa. "Let's get going. We've got a party to go to."
In which preparations for the party are almost complete

"Come on, let's get going already," urged Missy. She was dressed in one of Shadow Stalker's old costumes, padded a little at the front, and carrying a toy crossbow.

"Yeah," agreed Dennis. "Like Shadow Squirt says, let's get going." His costume was a parody of his actual Clockblocker outfit, with clock-faces drawn with marker pen over a white morph suit; more enthusiasm than artistry had gone into the work, but they were recognisable as what they were supposed to be. Abruptly, he found himself fifty yards away from the PRT transport. "Hey!"

"Well, don't call me Shadow Squirt," retorted Missy, letting space snap back to normal.

Weld rolled his eyes. "Seriously, I think I preferred it when Hope was here. She might have played up with the rest of you, but she kept it low-key, and she knew when to stop."

"I miss Hope," said Missy. "She'll be at the party, right?"

Chris nodded. His costume looked amazingly as if someone had attempted to create a papier-mache version of of the Kid Win armour; it was only when one looked closely that it was possible to see the real armour underneath. "I'd be astonished if she isn't," he observed. "It is sort of in her honour, as well as ours and the Undersiders'."

Missy was looking at Weld critically. "So you're going like that?"

Weld looked self-conscious. "I couldn't think of anything else, okay?" He looked down at himself, where the designs of Hero's armour had been daubed on to his metal skin with latex paint. "And it's not like any costume's gonna hide who I really am."

"Okay," interrupted another voice. "It seems that you're all ready to go."

Miss Militia came striding up, wearing her regular costume. Marching in step with her, surprisingly enough, were Triumph, Battery, Assault and Armsmaster.

Dennis was the first to find his voice. "Wow," he said. "You're all coming?"

Hannah nodded. "Triumph is on probation, he has agreed to certain restrictions in order to be allowed to come along. Armsmaster is wearing a cut-down version of his usual armour, no offensive capabilities, and he's still wearing a tracker. Director Piggot recommended that he be allowed to attend, due to his ongoing good behaviour."

Battery spoke up. "I need to get out, and I'd like to thank Hope for saving my life, and Triumph's."

"And I'm not letting her out of my sight," Assault added. "Also, I wanted to thank Hope as well."

Missy spoke up. "But ... you're not dressed as someone else. You're dressed as yourselves."

"Clockblocker and Kid Win are dressed as themselves," pointed out Weld.

"No, we're not," said Dennis. "We're pretending to be people pretending to be us. There's a difference."

Missy giggled suddenly. "I wonder how many other capes will be pretending not to be themselves."
"I suspect," observed Miss Militia, "that it will be more than a few."

Alec looked at himself in the mirror. *I've still got it,* he thought. One of his older, less elaborate costumes, a different shaped mask, his hair combed a different way ... and voila. *Regent but not Regent,* he observed silently. He flipped up the gold-painted sceptre and caught it again. *Well, time to go.*

He headed for the door; outside, a car engine started. One of his regular chauffeurs was on duty. *Can't wait to see who Imp's coming as.*

"Come on, we'll be late!"

Brian sighed. "We will *not* be late," he said patiently. "The party will last longer than five minutes." He eyed Aisha. "And I'm not even sure if I want to know where you got a Glory Girl costume from. Or why the skirt's so short."

"Found it," retorted his sister impudently. She fluffed out the skirt. "And I like it that way."

He sighed again. "You realise, Amy might not be too thrilled about you dressing like her sister. Especially like that."

Aisha shrugged. "Tough. If she can't take a joke, she shouldn't be hanging with us. And anyway," she added, with a surprising amount of insight, "I don't think she gives a damn about who she used to be anymore."

Brian frowned. "You may actually be right," he mused.

"Woo hoo!" crowed Aisha. "I'm right, you're wrong!"

Brian sighed. "Broken clock, twice a day," he reminded her. "And anyway, what *is* this thing you have going on with Regent?"

She didn't even bother to look defensive. "Who says there has to be a thing?" she said defiantly. "Maybe it's just that he likes my style and I like his."

"Maybe I'm not too thrilled about the idea of him with you. He's got a background of using his power to make people do things, against their will."

"Maybe it's none of your business, big brother. Maybe I think it might be kinda kinky. Maybe he –"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," he protested, holding his hands up. "Way too much information."

She grinned ... it had to be admitted, impishly. "You asked, big brother." Her grin widened. "Next time, don't ask a question you don't wanna hear the answer to."

Brian subsided, irritated, but fully aware that she had scored on him.

"So anyway," she went on brightly, "what's with your costume?"

"Legend is a Protectorate cape," he said, trying not to sound defensive. "What's wrong with that?"

"You do realise, he's gay," she said slyly. "Are you trying to tell us all something?"

"So he's gay; who cares?" retorted Brian. "I don't, and I'm not. It's just a costume. Seriously, grow
"You're no fun," she grumped, and stuck her tongue out at him.

The dog licked Rachel's face. She didn't quite smile, but she scratched it behind the ears before she resumed brushing its coat out.

Rachel liked brushing down her dogs. She did it methodically, carefully. They enjoyed the attention, she could tell. Their health was very important to her; she couldn't ensure that they were all healthy and happy without hands-on attention.

She had asked off-handedly if any of her minions wanted to attend the victory party, and only Cassie and Biter had stayed. Good riddance.

She really could not understand why anyone would actually want to go to a party. Too many people. Too much noise. Waste of time.

She kept brushing, the repetitive action soothing her thoughts. The dog wriggled under her attentions, and she quieted it with a murmured command.

She knew where she was with dogs. It was where she belonged, what she enjoyed.

It was who she was.

"I'm Skitter!"

"No, I'm Skitter!"

"You're both big poo-poo heads! *I'm* Skitter!"

Sierra sighed. It had seemed like a relatively harmless idea to let the children choose their costume ideas for the party. But, one and all, they had chosen to go as Skitter. Tattletale had helped her make up the masks out of cardboard, and they had gleefully coloured them in, with much more enthusiasm than accuracy. She was actually quite taken by the one rainbow-coloured Skitter mask.

However, now that the hour of the party was drawing near, the kids were getting more and more high-strung, and they were beginning to bounce off the walls. Worse, with the proliferation of Skitter masks abounding, they were beginning to argue among themselves as to exactly who was the real Skitter.

And then, thankfully, a swarm of insects coalesced in the middle of the living room, into Skitter's trademark not-quite-human shape.

"No," it buzz/hummed. "*I'm* Skitter."

The children all squealed in delighted terror and fled to hide behind Sierra. She smiled at the swarm apparition, half expecting Taylor to step out of it. "Thanks," she said. "They were starting to get a little rowdy."

Taylor grinned to herself as she sat in the passenger seat of her father's truck. The helmet sat between the two of them; its visor had an irritating habit of sliding down at the slightest bump, and driving blind was not his forte. Taylor was wearing the Tattletale costume, with a lightweight spider-silk
body-stocking under it, just to help fill it out a little. Like Danny, she'd left the mask off for the time being.

Danny glanced sideways at her. "Something funny, kiddo?"

She let her grin grow wider. "Just helping my minions keep the kids in order."

"Minions?" he asked. "Kids?"

"Yeah," she said. "Some girls from my territory. They pass on orders from me, and I let them live in my base, take care of it for me. And there's a few orphans, so I'm taking care of them too." She chuckled. "So they're all going to this party as me, as Skitter. You'll like them; they're great."

He shook his head slightly. "Every time I find out something new, I have to rethink everything," he said. "You have minions, and you've got kids you're taking care of." He smiled fondly at her. "I look forward to meeting them."

She smiled back. "Thanks, Dad. This really means a lot to me."

Director Piggot climbed into the PRT transport, accompanied by three other female PRT operatives. Each was wearing military camouflage, accented by scarves and sashes as per Miss Militia's costume. She carried a tinker-made laser rifle, as did they.

"I really don't like this," insisted the PRT man who climbed on board with her. "It leaves you far too open. What if a villain attacks while you're there?"

Piggot shook her head. "Williams," she said tiredly, "half the villains in the city will be attending the party. It's their chance to strut their stuff, and wear silly costumes in public without being ridiculed."

"I do not know why I should wear a costume to the party," said Gregor stolidly.

"Because it's fun," insisted Newter. "You dress up like someone else, and pretend to be them for a night."

"But I am me," responded Gregor. "I cannot be someone else. Who would I be?"

"You could go as Weld," suggested Newter brightly.

"My flesh is translucent," Gregor pointed out. "Weld is made of metal. I would not be able to pretend very well."

"Okay, fine," grumped Newter. "Go as yourself. But you will go to the party?"

"Yes," replied Gregor. "Shamrock wants to go, and so we will go."

Newter tilted his head sideways. "So... you always intended to go? You just didn't want to go in costume?"

"That is correct," Gregor confirmed.

"Aw man," complained Newter. "And here I had all these great arguments ready to use in case you didn't want to go."

"Do not worry," Gregor assured him. "I am sure that you will find some opportunity to use them in
the future."

Newter brightened. "Yeah," he said. "There is that."

Faultline leaned in through the door. "If you boys have finished putting on your makeup, Shamrock and I are ready to go," she announced. She was wearing a white hooded robe with a red cross on the front and back, and a scarf over her face.

"Okay, boss lady," replied Newter with a grin. Moving adroitly, he slithered past her and out the door. "Nice Panacea outfit."

She nodded. "It's amazing what you can conceal under a robe, if necessary."

When Gregor emerged, he found that Shamrock was wearing a Glory Girl costume. Unlike Faultline's robe, this costume was skin-tight, and Shamrock showed it off to its very best advantage.

"You look very nice in that," he informed her as she took his arm.

"Why, thank you," she smiled, and squeezed his hand.

"Nice going with the theme," grinned Newter. "Of course, Panacea isn't using that name or costume any more, but hey, what can you do?"

"Will Labyrinth be all right?" Gregor asked next, ignoring Newter.

"Emily's staying with her," Faultline replied. "She didn't feel much like going to the party anyway. The last I saw, they were settling in with popcorn and a bunch of comedy shows."

"Maybe I should stay as well," offered Gregor. "I feel as though I am abandoning them."

"No, no, you don't," said Shamrock, quite firmly. "There is a party, and we are both going to it."

"You tell him," chuckled Newter as they climbed into the car. The suspension sank heavily as Gregor levered his bulk in. "I wonder who else will be there."

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"You'd better believe I'll be going," Jess said emphatically. She was much steadier on her feet than she'd been even two days ago. Now, when she moved, she hardly ever stumbled, taking positive joy and glee in being able to lift her feet just so and put them down where she wanted them to be.

*Four days ago, she was confined to a wheelchair, thought Marissa. This is what a miracle looks like, three days later.*

She smiled and gave Jess a hug. "I'm glad," she said. "Noelle wants to go too, so of course Francis will be coming."

"Grumbling all the way?" responded Jess with a grin.

"You know it," agreed Marissa. She spun Jess in a circle. "This is gonna be fun."

"Hey, watch it, twinkle-toes," Jess objected, but not too strenuously, "some of us are still getting used to being vertical again."

Marissa grinned. "So get used to it," she told her friend. "If there's any justice, there's going to be dancing tonight at the party. And I want to see you out there on the floor."
Jess looked uncertain. "I ... I don't really know how. To dance, that is."

"Oh, that's easy," said Marissa cheerfully. "This is how you do it." She stepped up close to Jess. "You put your hand here, and here. He should put his hand here, and here. And then you move real close to him, look him straight in the eye, and say, "Oh, you're so big and strong. Could you teach lil' ol' me how to dance?"" At the same time, she gazed at Jess with soulful eyes, and stuck out her lower lip in a hopeful pout.

Jess was laughing so hard that she broke away from Marissa and plopped down into a chair. "Oh my god," she gasped, "you look like a lovesick poodle. Does that really work?"

"Got me 'dancing lessons' with some really good looking boys," confirmed Marissa with a smirk.

"And meanwhile, you've been doing ballet since forever," grinned Jess. "Did they ever twig?"

Marissa raised an eyebrow. "You do know about boys and their egos, right?"

Jess nodded, still grinning. "Ah. Right."

Marissa sighed. "I hope they do have a dance floor. It's been forever since I've had a chance to just get out there and have fun."

"Okay, that's great, love. Now, if you could set up the dance floor over there, thanks?"

The event organiser shook his head and wiped his brow in the westering sunlight as Menja plucked the first of the dance-floor foundation boards from the back of his truck. "I dunno how I would've gotten it done so quick without her," he confided to Hope and Amy, as they stood nearby, watching. "She's a marvel. Most of my regular guys left town after Leviathan hit, and aren't back yet. How'd you get her to help?"

Hope shrugged slightly; her wingfeathers tinkled gently. "I asked nicely."

He shook his head again. "And I'm damn glad you did. We'd be ten times as long doing this without this kind of assistance."

With the last of the dance-floor sections slotted into place, Menja reduced herself to normal human height and moved over to where Hope waited with Amy.

"Thank you, Menja," Hope told her. "It could not have been done so quickly without you."

Menja nodded. "That's true," she acknowledged without false modesty. "Will you be needing me for anything else?"

Hope shook her head. "Unless you want to change your mind and stay for the party?"

It was Menja's turn to shake her head. "No. My people need me. We are rebuilding." She paused. "I have heard of an initiative to rebuild the city, to make it safer and better for all concerned. Is this true?"

Hope smiled. "Mayor Christner is announcing it at the ceremony tomorrow." She waved her hand at the monument stone, still swathed in tarpaulins, ready for the unveiling at the ceremony. "We have copies of the plan at the shelter if you want to have a look. We're all pitching in on this one."

Menja frowned. "You are saying Mayor Christner formulated this plan, and everyone is following it?"
Hope smiled slightly and shook her head. "No. It is Accord's plan. Mayor Christner's name is on it to ensure that the city government stays behind it all the way."

Menja looked most enlightened. "Ah. I hear that Accord is very good at formulating plans." She frowned. "Does the Mayor know where the plan came from?"

Hope lifted an eyebrow. "He did not ask. One suspects that he knows that he would not like the answer, so he is doing his best not to find out." A shrug. "Politicians."

Menja smiled dryly. "You realise that you would make a superb politician, o warrior angel. You merely have to ask, and many would follow you."

"No," said Amy unexpectedly. "She would make a terrible politician. She can't lie worth a damn."

This startled a chuckle from Menja. "You have a distinct point there." She inclined her head to Amy, and a slightly deeper bow to Hope. "Enjoy the party. I will be by the shelter sometime to look at your plan."

Growing once more to thirty feet tall, she strode off, each step covering yards of ground at a time. In moments, she was out of sight.

"Okay," said Parian, "time to get the tent up."

She and Flechette had been standing nearby, keeping a low profile. Menja may be friendly to Hope and allied to the Undersiders, but she was still the last remnant of a vicious white-supremacist group. Lily was Japanese-American, and Sabah was Middle Eastern in appearance; neither would have come close to meeting the old Chosen's 'pure' white-bread Caucasian standards. She had seen them, but she had steadfastly ignored them the whole time she was there.

Hope and Amy came over to join them. Hope looked troubled. "I'm sorry for that," she said. "I really wish people could be more nice to each other."

Lily shrugged. "It happens," she said. "I barely notice, anymore."

Hope hugged her; Lily hugged her back. "It's nice to see you again," said Hope. "How have you two been going?"

Lily watched the large tent almost literally inflating under the impulse of Parian's power. It 'walked' itself forward, placing itself directly over the area set up for the dance floor and food tables.

"We've been going great," she said. "Parian was really worried about the Nine, but with them out of the way, and the Merchants as well, things are really looking up."

Hope grinned. "I like the costume."

"Well, yeah. It was her idea," admitted Lily. She felt weird; for the party, she and Sabah had chosen to simply swap costumes. Sabah had made the appropriate alterations for size and fit, but did not carry the arbalest or the bolts that Lily normally wore with her costume. "I'm not used to wearing a dress."

"But you wear it well," Amy said encouragingly. "It looks good on you."

Lily grinned behind her mask. "Mine looks better on her."

Amy looked over to where Parian was walking back and forth, working out the best placement of
the tent with the event coordinator. The costume really did show off her body to its best advantage.

"Hmm, yeah," she said appreciatively. "I do see your point."


For an answer, Hope put her arms around Amy from behind, holding her close. Amy smiled and leaned back into the embrace.

"Well, damn," said Lily after a moment. "I'd heard rumours, but ... damn." She paused. "I know it's none of my business, but how do you ..." She trailed off.

"Yes," said Amy, "it is none of your business, and the answer is 'spectacularly'." Hope giggled.

"Okay," said Lily. "I think I'll just leave that one alone, right there."

Amy grinned. "Might be a good idea."

"I'm still not sure that this is such a good idea."

Director Piggot sighed. "Williams," she said patiently, "you have made it abundantly clear that you do not believe this to be a good idea. However, you have yet to come up with a cogent reason for not liking it. So until you do, kindly keep your opinions to yourself." She looked out the viewport. "Besides, we're here."

The PRT craft grounded a moment later, followed shortly by the one from the Protectorate HQ. As Piggot and her picked escort climbed from the transport, she heard a high-pitched whine from the west. Moments later, a Dragon craft came in for a fast, well-piloted landing. It opened, to reveal a young woman wearing an evening gown. She was tall, slender, brunette, and pretty rather than gorgeous. A simple silver domino mask adorned her face.

The Protectorate, Wards and PRT members stared at the newcomer.

"... Dragon?" said Armssmaster at last.

The brunette nodded, stepping forward daintily. "The same," she agreed. "It's nice to meet you at last, Colin." She smiled at Director Piggot. "And you also, Emily."

"Likewise," replied Piggot. "I presume I can trust you to keep an eye on Armssmaster for the evening? He is still technically under house arrest, after all, but this party is a special occasion."

Dragon smiled. "I won't let him out of my sight," she agreed. Taking his arm in hers, she led him off toward the tent.

"Damn," said one of the PRT agents in Director Piggot's escort. "Now that's what I call a dramatic entrance."

You're not wrong, thought Director Piggot, but she did not say so out loud.

"Okay," she said, raising her voice. "Everyone, pair up. Buddy system. You do not lose sight of your buddy. You do not go off on your own. If you have to attend a call of nature, your buddy comes along." She indicated the row of porta-potties off to the side of the tent. "If your buddy has to go, you go with."

She turned to Williams. "You have a bad feeling about this? Good. Keep an eye out all round with
the transport's sensors. Keep it hot, ready for immediate dustoff. Anything hinky goes off, I want to know, yesterday."

Williams nodded and saluted. "Yes, ma'am!" he replied, looking much happier than he had been a moment ago.

People were already starting to arrive; some were in civilian clothes, while other bore recognisable costumes. Director Piggot counted a couple of Miss Militias, an Alexandria, and a Glory Girl or two. There also seemed to be a Tattletale and a bunch of little kids running around with Skitter masks on.

She shook her head. *This is going to be some party.*
Hope and Amy joined Lily and Sabah at the wide entrance to the tent. Lights mounted on scaffolds, powered by heavy-duty generators, illuminated the interior brightly. More lights were dotted around the outside of the tent.

"It's looking really good," Hope told Lily. She eyed the tent. "Though this looks kind of familiar ..."

Sabah nodded. "It's the same one I used on the day," she confirmed with a pleased tone in her voice.

From within, music could be heard playing over the speakers; currently, it was easy listening, but Hope knew that the CD stacker had a large selection to pick from.

"Nice," said Amy. "But aren't you concerned about not having enough room?"

Sabah shook her head. "Not once Vista gets here, I'm not," she confided.

Hope nodded. "Ah, good thinking," she agreed.

A tidal surge of small children ran past them, all wearing Skitter masks of one description or another. Hope recognised the red-haired girl who was trying to keep them under control.

"Hi, Sierra!" said Amy. "How's Bryce's hand?"

"Oh, it's fine," said Sierra, brushing a dreadlock out of her face. "Hi, Amy, Hope. It's good to see you. He's still the same morose, grumpy teenager as always, but now he can give me the finger with both hands at the same time."

Hope chuckled. "Got time for a hug?" she asked.

"I've always got time for a hug," agreed Sierra, and allowed Hope to enfold her in her arms. She returned the embrace, her head resting on Hope's shoulder for a moment.

And then Hope became aware that all the mini-Skitters had returned and were watching her hug Sierra.

"Who's that?"

"That's an angel!"

"No, silly! That's Hope!"

"She's all glowy and shiny!"

"She's pretty!"

Sierra disengaged from the hug and crouched down next to the children, bringing her eye line level with theirs. Hope also crouched; her wings were forced to partially unfurl, so that they did not dig into the ground.

"Yes," said Sierra. "This is Hope. She's a really nice lady."

Hope smiled at the children. "I'm really pleased to meet you all," she said, and they ooohed at the
sound of her voice.

"If any of you gets lost and can't find me or Skitter or anyone else," went on Sierra, "you find Hope, okay? She'll take care of you."

Hope nodded. "I will, I promise," she said. She reached up and tugged on Amy's hand; Amy crouched beside her, looking bemused. "This is my really good friend Amelia. She'll help you too, if you need help." She gave them all a brilliant smile. "Any questions?"

"Do those wings really work?"

"How do you make your skin glow like that?"

"Do you like Fruity Pops? I like Fruity Pops."

Amy leaned over and whispered in her ear, "Don't you know, you should never give kids a straight line like that?"

Hope was about to reply ruefully that yes, she knew that now, when one determined young boy stepped forward and said, "Are you really good friends like Parian an' Flechette are really good friends?"

Amy's eyes met Hope's, and they both smiled helplessly. "Yes, yes we are," confirmed Hope.

"You're not going to be doing kissy stuff with her, are you?" His voice held wariness.

"Eww! Kissy stuff!" Several of the children made amazingly realistic choking noises.

Hope stood up from the crouch, drawing Amy with her. "No, we're not going to do kissy stuff," she said with a giggle. She squeezed Amy's hand and sent her a sidelong glance that said, Maybe later, though.

Amy squeezed back. No maybe about it.

"Are you kids done harassing Hope and Amy?" asked Taylor. She was wearing the Tattletale outfit, but had left the mask off in favour of her glasses. Beside her was Danny, wearing dark clothing and the Grue helmet. The skull-painted visor was lifted so that he could see what was going on.

"Taylor!" shouted the children and mobbed her, jostling around her and pointing at their Skitter masks. She crouched down and hugged them, congratulating them on their masks. Danny stood by, watching in bemusement.

One of the children noticed him. "Who are you?"

"This is my daddy," said Taylor. "His name's Danny."

All the children stared up at Danny. One of them leaned in close to Taylor. "Is he a good daddy?" she asked in a stage whisper.

Taylor nodded and hugged her. "The best," she assured her. "I love him very much."

"Daddy Danny!" shouted another child. That set them all off, and in just a few seconds, they were all chanting 'Daddy Danny' in unison, albeit with a few chiming in with 'Danny Daddy' after the main group.

Danny looked as though he didn't know whether to laugh, die of embarrassment, or run screaming
"Enough, enough," laughed Taylor, standing up. "Leave my poor daddy alone, okay?" She put her arm around his waist and he draped one arm over her shoulders. "But yeah, Dad," she said, apparently continuing a conversation, "these are the kids I take care of. And that's Sierra, who helps me with them."

"I'm pleased to meet you, Sierra," said Danny politely, holding out his hand.

"Nice to meet you too, Mr Hebert," Sierra said, a little shyly, shaking his hand.

"Seriously," he said, "call me Danny. You look like you've got a job of work taking care of these kids for Taylor, so you've earned it."

Taylor stepped out from underneath Danny's arm and took two of the children by their hands. "Now," she said, "I know where we can get some Fruity Pops, so who wants one?"

"Fruity Pops!" It was more or less unanimous.

"Okay, let's go get some Fruity Pops," she said with a grin. She smiled at Hope and Amy. "I'll talk to you later. Enjoy the party."

She led them away, with Sierra helping to round up the stragglers. Just as they disappeared into the tent, one lone voice asked, "Doesn't Daddy Danny want a Fruity Pop too?"

Hope giggled. "Wow," she said. "That was interesting."

Danny nodded; his visor slipped closed. He opened it again. "Raising one girl was exhausting enough. That was like an avalanche of kid."

Hope gave him a hug, which he gratefully returned. "Oof," he said with a grin, as she squeezed a little too hard. "Nice to see you too." As she stood off away from him, he surveyed her costume. "So, Miss Militia, huh?"

Hope grinned, the scarf around her neck not hiding her expression. "I admire her a lot," she said. "She loaned me the costume. Parian made up the shirt."

"And the goggles?" he asked, managing to keep a straight face; Amy giggled.

Hope sighed, but could not hide the grin. "I know, I know. I look silly wearing them," she said. "But I was wearing them on the day, so it's kind of appropriate." She took them off and handed them to Danny, pointing out a deep score across one lens. "Jack Slash did that."

He ran his thumbnail along the groove, and whistled softly. "Christ almighty," he said. "Good thing you were wearing them."

Hope nodded. "Miss Militia gave them to me. I've been thankful ever since."

He nodded; the helmet visor slipped closed, and again he pushed it up. "Well," he said, handing back the goggles. "I was going to go see if my daughter needs rescuing from the howling hordes of little Skitterlings. You're welcome to come along if you want."

"We'll be along in a while," agreed Hope. "I thought we might see who else is turning up."

"Well," he said, "I'll see you around."
Lisa, backed up by a couple of her men, was in charge of the large plastic donation bin at the entrance. She accepted Danny's money and greeted him as he passed through, followed by several other people. And then a familiar face arrived at the entrance.

"Welcome to the Slaughterhouse Zero victory party - why, Director Piggot of the PRT," she amended with a grin. "How nice to see you here. I see you got our invitation."

Piggot looked with interest at the teenage girl dressed like Hope, with aluminium foil covered wings, whiteface makeup all over her face, shoulders and arms, and glitter on top of that.

"Indeed," she said. "Party of four, more to come." She raised an eyebrow as she paid for entry. "You sent the invitations?"


All four PRT personnel stared at her. "Tattletale," murmured the Director. "Really."

"Really," agreed Lisa. "You had wheat germ for breakfast, you've recently started an intensive exercise program – which, I can tell you now, is really starting to show dividends – you were irritated at the invitations but could not resist coming, and those are real laser rifles." She raised an eyebrow. "Would you like me to tell you your ATM pin codes?"

Piggot blinked. "No ..." she managed. "I think we're good for now." She leaned close. "But this conversation is not over," she added.

Lisa nodded. "No," she agreed. "It's really not."

The PRT people moved into the tent, and Lisa greeted the next people to enter. "Welcome to the Slaughterhouse Zero victory party. That will be fifteen dollars apiece, thank you, and any further donations are always welcome."

The four-winged flying beast circled the area once, then came in for a six-point landing. Four people rode astride it, each dressed in the red-and-black of the Travelers.

Trickster was the first to slide to the ground, replacing his top hat as he did so. He turned to assist Omake to the ground; she giggled and accepted his offer. Sundancer slid down next, and she and Omake lifted Genesis down. As they did so, the flying creature slowly dissolved into nothingness and she blinked into wakefulness.

Jess took a couple of moments to get her balance again. "Wow," she said. "It's disorienting actually carrying myself on those things. I'll have to get used to that."

"Maybe you'll make them more comfortable in future too," grinned Sundancer, rubbing her butt.

Omake nodded. "Definitely more comfort, please," she agreed.

"Okay, okay, I get it," Genesis grinned. She surreptitiously rubbed her own backside as she spoke. "I'm too used to sitting down on something that comes pre-padded, I guess."

"Not any more," noted Trickster. He offered a short bow, indicating the tent. "Shall we?"

Omake took his arm, her face lighting up with pleasure beneath the mask. "I am so looking forward to this."
Hope and Amy saw the Protectorate and Wards capes organising themselves, and headed in that
direction. On the way, they encountered Armsmaster with a slim brunette on his arm, heading for the
tent.

Hope had never actually seen him in his armour, but she recognised him from file pictures. But the
woman was a stranger to her and Amy both.

"Hi," said Hope. "Armsmaster, right?"


Amy bridled, and was about to say something cutting, but Hope squeezed her hand. "How have you
been going?" she asked, noting the lack of hostility in his voice.

"I've been ... going well," he said after a moment. "I've recently been ... pulled up on a few matters.
My behaviour has not been ... exemplary, and this has been made clear to me." He took a deep
breath. "In view of that, I would like to offer my unreserved apology to both of you, for my harsh
words, last time we met." Another deep breath. "They were undeserved and unwarranted."

The words came out stiff and almost rehearsed, but Hope took them at face value. "Thank you,
Armsmaster," she said quietly. "Everyone does something silly once in a while." She turned to the
woman on Armsmaster's arm, who had been watching the proceedings with polite interest. "I don't
believe I know you."

The woman smiled widely. "We've met before, but you didn't see my face then." She leaned in and
kissed Hope on the cheek. "I'm Dragon. Remember me now?"

"Oh," said Hope. "Okay. Wow. So you turned up in person?"

Dragon nodded. "I did. I believe the occasion warrants it, don't you?" She smiled at Amy. "And you
must be Amelia Claire. We've worked together when you were Panacea, but I don't think we've had
a chance to talk before."

Amy nodded. "No, we haven't. But it's very nice to meet you."

"Thank you." Dragon smiled again, and they moved off.

Amy looked back to see them go. "They seem very close. She must be something special, if she can
take Armsmaster in a mood."

Hope nodded. "Very special indeed." She was thinking hard; the kiss on the cheek had confirmed
what her life-sense had told her. *If I'm not much mistaken, that's a biomechanical construct, not a
human being at all.*

*Which leaves one question: does she know that I know, or was this an accident?*

With what she had heard of Dragon, she very much suspected the former.

The open-topped convertible crunched into the roughly laid out parking lot, and pulled to a stop.
Alec climbed out, offering Aisha his hand. She grinned and accepted; Brian climbed out the other
side.

"Thanks for the lift," he said, stretching mightily.

"Eh, it's okay," said Regent. "I had the room, and I was gonna give Imp a lift anyway. So you were
welcome to come along if you didn't cause too many problems."

"Yeah, sure," said Brian. "I'll believe you." He was going to say more, but then he saw several people heading for the tent. "Hey, it's the Travelers," he said. "Let's go say hi."

He waved, and after a moment, Trickster waved back. The two groups converged.

"Okay, Regent I know," said Trickster, "and I'm guessing that's Imp. So ..." he pointed at Brian, "... Grue?"

As an answer, Brian let darkness swirl around his hand for a moment before letting it fade. "I notice you're in your normal costumes," he observed. "Couldn't think of anything new?"

Trickster shrugged. "Can't improve on perfection."

Omake gave him a gentle punch to the shoulder. "Behave." She smiled at the Undersiders. "I haven't met you guys. I'm Omake."

"Ohh yeah, I heard about you," Brian said. "Hope and Amy helped you out, didn't they?"

She nodded vigorously. "Hope's wonderful, and Amy's just a treasure. And a few nights ago, they went to Genesis' place, and ..." She gestured to the fourth member of the party.

Imp looked her over. "So what was wrong with you?" she asked bluntly.

"I was in a wheelchair from the age of nine," replied Genesis, just as bluntly. "Now I'm not."

"Well," said Brian, "I'm really, really pleased to hear that. I'm glad for the both of you." He looked keenly at Genesis. "If you're interested, I've done boxing and mixed martial arts. It helps with coordination and balance. Just putting that out there."

Genesis looked interested. "I ... that sounds like a good idea, actually," she said. "I'm doing better every day, but once in a while, I still manage to trip over my own feet." Her smile was brilliant. "But the best part about that is that I can get up again."

"Well," said Brian, "once things quieten down, and we don't have any crises going on --" there was a snort from Imp, "- I'd be glad to tutor you. I'm already giving Skitter lessons." He glanced at Trickster. "You too, if you want."

Trickster shook his head with a chuckle. "No, I'm good. Thanks for the offer, though."

"So what do you do?" Regent asked Omake.

"It's a touch based power," she replied, a little shyly. "If I come into contact with someone, and I want it to happen, I create a clone of myself with their powers."

"Huh," said Imp. "Cute. Sort of a 'high five for victory' thing."

Omake chuckled. "Something like that."

"So what happens to the person you've touched?" asked Regent. "Do they lose their powers?"

Sundancer shook her head. "No. When she tried it out on me, I felt perfectly normal, and I kept my powers."
"Cool," said Imp. "So you could create like an army of Alexandrias."

Omake shook her head. "No, it doesn't work that way. If I create a second one, the first one fades away."

Regent nodded. "But you can create a clone of Alexandria."

"No," said Trickster. "She can create a clone of herself, with Alexandria's powers."

"So if you touched me," said Regent, "the clone would be a girl, but with my powers."

Omake nodded. "Basically, yes."

"Ooh, ooh, ooh, do it to me," said Imp. "I wanna see this."

"Okay," said Omake readily, and held out her hand, palm out. Imp high-fived her.

"Well, come on," Imp said impatiently. "Do it already."

"Do what?" said Omake.

"Do what what?" said Imp.

Brian was beginning to grin. Regent chuckled. Sundancer leaned against Genesis and giggled.

Imp glared around at them. "What's funny? Why are you laughing?"

She whirled at a tap on her shoulder. "Who did that?"

"Who did what?" asked Brian innocently.

"What are you talking about?" snapped Imp. "Something's going on here."

Genesis and Sundancer were leaning against each other, giggling helplessly. Brian began to laugh. Trickster's face was unreadable behind his mask, but he was audibly chuckling.

And then the red and black figure appeared beside Imp and goosed her.

"Hey!" she yelped, leaping in the air. She glared at the clone of Omake. "Where did you come from?"

"I've been here all the time," grinned the clone. She high-fived Omake, and vanished.

"Oh god ... that was ... the funniest ... thing ever," gasped Brian. "So how does it feel?"

Imp glared at him. "Shut up."

Omake looked at her innocently. "I can make another clone with your powers, if you want."

Imp switched her glare. "No."

Sundancer and Genesis were beginning to recover, wiping their eyes. Trickster nodded toward the tent. "This is fun and all, but you know, there's a party just over there."

Brian nodded. "Your point is valid. Let's go to the party. Ladies?" He offered Genesis his arm, and after a moment of surprise, she took it. Not to be outdone, Sundancer grabbed his other arm.
"Can you teach me mixed martial arts, too?" she asked.

"You don't need balance training," Genesis informed her as they moved off.

"Can if I want to," Sundancer said cheerfully, and stuck her tongue out at Genesis. They both giggled.

"I just wish I'd had a camera," said Regent to Imp.

"Shut up, Dweeb."

Vista was the first one to reach Hope. She ran three steps, shortened the distance, and launched herself into a flying tackle. As she did so, the hood fell back to reveal a bright pink Hello Kitty hairband underneath.

Hope braced herself for the impact, and spun Vista around, chuckling.

"Hi, kiddo," she said cheerfully. "Good to see you too. But I have to ask; what's with the costume? And the hairband?"

"You know how you have evil twins?" asked Vista. "Well, I'm Shadow Stalker's good twin. The one who doesn't do nasty stuff." She held up the toy crossbow. "See, it's pink too."

Amy grinned. "I think you'd need a few more accessories to make the costume brighter before people took that seriously."

"Really?" asked Vista. "Like what?"

"Hey," said Clockblocker, "isn't that Faultline's Crew?"

Weld nodded. "Looks like," he agreed, watching the four people climb out of the car. "At least, you can't mistake Gregor and Newter, and the other two must be ... um. Faultline must be the one in the Panacea costume, but I'm not sure about the other one. I think she's called Shamrock?"

"Why don't we go say hi?" said Kid Win. "It might be interesting, meeting them in a social situation."

"I guess," said Weld. "But don't do or say anything stupid."

"Hey," said Clockblocker. "This is me."

"Yeah," said Weld. "That's why I said it." He turned to the others. "We'll meet you inside," he said.

"Certainly," said Miss Militia. "Don't be too long."

Miss Militia was the next one on the scene. She took in Hope's costume, nodded, and said gravely, "Miss Militia."

Hope grinned, and replied in the same tone, "Miss Militia." She looked past Hannah at the rest of the group, and said, "Wow, you really brought a few along, didn't you?"

Miss Militia nodded again. "A few of them wanted to see you, and the rest just wanted to come to the party." She looked over at where Amy had taken Vista's mask and was painting something on to
Hope smiled. "Thanks."

"Oh, and that reminds me," said Miss Militia. "Director Piggot said to tell you that the Governor has set aside Monday the twenty-seventh for the meeting with you. Two thirty in the afternoon." She handed over a USB memory stick. "And here's the digital copy of the Hope Accord, before I forget."

"Ooh, thanks," said Hope. She gave Miss Militia a hug, which the older woman gravely accepted and returned. "That's excellent, thank you so much."

Miss Militia nodded. "Well, good luck." She looked at Vista, who was now wearing her mask again. Amy had painted a smiley face on the black impact plastic in whiteface makeup, and then sprinkled it with glitter before it dried.

Hope giggled. "That's a huge improvement," she said.

"It's definitely different," agreed Miss Militia. Vista hugged Hope one more time, then they headed off toward the party.

Newter wriggled out of the car window without even bothering to open the door. Faultline buzzed the window closed, then got out; Gregor got out of the back seat, and then handed Shamrock out of the front.

"Why can't I ever go shotgun?" complained Newter facetiously.

"We've been over this," Faultline said. "In the back seat, if you accidentally drug the person next to you, there's no major problem. In the front seat, if you accidentally drug the driver, there is a problem."


The other three members of the Crew looked up to see the Wards approaching. "Hey," said Newter. "Friendly meeting, neutral ground, right?"

"Relax," Weld assured him. "The truce is still in effect. We're just here to attend the party."

"Excellent," replied Faultline. "You're Weld, the new leader of the Wards, right?"

"That's right," replied Weld. "And you're Faultline?" At her nod, he went on. "So, by process of elimination, this must be Shamrock."

"I got a question," said Newter. "Your skin, is it metal, or does it just look like it?"

"It's metal," Weld assured him. "My whole body's made of it."

"So you don't absorb chemicals through the skin?"

Weld shook his head. "Just metal. Iron and steel, mostly. Why?"

Newter grinned. "Just curious."

"Hope is going to be here, yes?" Gregor asked of Kid Win.
"Sure," he said, "I think she's over near the tent somewhere. Dressed like Miss Militia. Why?"

"It will be good to see her again. She is a nice person."

Shamrock nodded. "This is true. She didn't have to help us against Burnscar, but she did anyway."

"More than you know," Kid Win admitted. "We were under orders to avoid the Nine if we encountered them. I told her not to go down there." He shrugged. "But ... you know Hope."

Gregor nodded. "So she disobeyed orders. And now she is no longer in the Wards. She was fired?"

Clockblocker shook his head. "She left the Wards of her own free will. Because she didn't want to endanger us."

Gregor nodded slowly, massively. "Yes. That is the Hope I know."

"Hope."

The voice was beyond gravelly; it was scratchy, almost painful to hear. Hope turned from watching Vista and Miss Militia, to see Triumph, Assault and Battery,

"Ah ... Triumph," she said. "Hi ... how are you doing?"

"Alive," he grated. "Thanks to you." He smiled. "They say I died and you brought me back."

"It wasn't just me," protested Hope. "Miss Militia got Clockblocker to keep you in stasis until she could reach me. I just ... did my thing."

"Thanked them both already," Triumph told her. He spoke slowly; it seemed that he had to force the words out one at a time.

"Uh, you know," said Amy, "I can have a try at smoothing out your voice. If you want."

Triumph considered this, then shook his head. "Thanks, but no," he demurred. "Got this way, my own stupid fault. Never going there again. Prefer to keep it as reminder."

Hope stepped forward. "Well, I'm glad you're doing well," she said, and hugged him. He seemed a little taken aback by this, but returned the hug, albeit a little hesitantly.

Battery was not at all hesitant; in fact, she initiated the hug. "Thank you so much for saving my life," she said as she held Hope to her. "They say it was your healing that made all the difference."

Hope squeezed her tightly. "The only reward I need is to see people up and around afterward, happy and healthy." She grinned. "A thank-you never hurts, of course. I just like to know that I'm doing nice things for people that I love and like."

"Well," said Assault, "this is a thank-you from me as well." As soon as Battery let go of Hope, he enveloped her in a heartfelt hug. "Battery is my love and my life. I don't know what I'd do without her."

"You're entirely welcome, all of you," Hope said. "I mean it. I'd do it again any day of the week, and twice on Sundays."

"Well," he said with a chuckle, "I hope it never comes to that, but if you ever need anything, anything at all, you just come see us."
Hope nodded. "I'll keep that in mind."

"Taylor Hebert, I presume?"

Taylor turned to meet the gaze of Director Piggot. Sierra had just ushered off the last of her children, each clutching a Fruity Pop, and she was temporarily alone.

*I should have known it wouldn't last.*

The Director of the Brockton Bay PRT was dressed in a Miss Militia costume, complete with a rifle so elaborate that it had to be either a toy or some serious Tinker-tech. Given that her three companions were also carrying identical weapons, she was going for Tinker work.

"Uh ... Director Piggot, right? PRT?" she ventured.

Director Piggot nodded. "I've been looking forward to the chance to speak with you, Ms Hebert. I appreciate the fact that you are going to be testifying at the trial."

Taylor shrugged. "Well, people keep telling me that it's much more likely that they'll be convicted if I do testify, so ..."

Piggot actually managed to look sympathetic. "I understand that it must be difficult for you, to face them again after what you have been through."

"Yeah," said Taylor, her voice growing hard. "What I went through. I went through *hell*, Director Piggot. I went through hell for eighteen months. And all instigated by one of your Wards. And when I tried to get it stopped, it got swept under the carpet. Because a *Ward* was involved."

She took a deep breath, tried to get her temper under control. All around the periphery of her awareness, bugs were starting to gather. She dismissed them with an effort of will. "This happened on *your* watch. This trial wouldn't even be necessary if someone had taken the slightest bit of notice after I got sent to the hospital."

Piggot nodded. Her voice had become colder, but was tightly controlled. "I hear exactly what you are saying, Ms Hebert. There was a failure with the system, and I am having it investigated. I was personally never informed of the events of your hospitalisation, nor of the fact that Sophia Hess was involved in it, not until after Miss Militia brought it to my attention. That *was* the fault of the PRT, of the Protectorate, of the Wards."

She took a deep breath. "We cannot change the past; we cannot alter the fact that you were bullied and victimised by someone who was supposed to be a hero. But we are taking steps to ensure that it doesn't happen any more. Investigations have been launched into every case of reported bullying in every school that a Ward goes to, to ensure that they are not involved. And we have found cases, ongoing cases, and they are being dealt with. Capes and non-capes alike are being punished. No more sweeping it under the rug, no more preferential treatment." She looked Taylor in the eye. "It may be slow, and it may be late, but we *are* taking steps."

The anger drained out of Taylor, as she realised that the Director was being sincere. "I ... uh ... I guess that's all I can really ask for, isn't it?" she said awkwardly. "I don't ever want anyone else to go through what happened to me."

Director Piggot nodded sympathetically. "I can understand that," she agreed. She paused, frowning. "I have to ask; why did you take so long to speak to anyone in the Protectorate about this? And who did you speak to? I'd like to ensure that they receive a commendation for passing it on."
Taylor nodded. "Well, I wouldn't have even said anything – nothing else I had tried had ever worked, right? – but Hope had been flying around the city and encountered my dad. He spoke to her, asked her if she'd keep an eye out for me, and told her I'd been bullied. When she found me, she asked me about the bullying until I told her the details. She wouldn't let it go." She shrugged. "And then, I guess she told Weld, and they put two and two together."

Director Piggot shook her head and chuckled wryly. "That's Hope all over. I should have guessed." She nodded to Taylor. "Well, I'm glad we had this talk. I've got people to see, but the next time you see your boss? Tell her that I'm interested in having a talk with her as well."

"I'll, uh, do that," said Taylor. She watched Piggot move away, the other three women flanking her in a not-quite-military formation.

_Huh, _she thought. _She's human after all._

_Who would have guessed?_
In which the party goes on, Director Piggot meets an unexpected volunteer, and there is danger on the horizon

Five large refrigerated trucks stood in a row outside the tent; their thrumming generators kept the foodstuffs and drinks chilled. In the makeshift parking lot nearby, cars of all description were parked, more or less in neat rows. Heavy-duty generators chuntered next to the refrigerator trucks, powering the floodlights that kept the outside of the tent illuminated, especially around the row of portable toilets. From within, more light spilled out through the entrance, along with music, chatter and laughter.

Within, there were rows of tables bearing food and desserts, as well as paper plates and disposable cutlery. Other tables had simple benches pulled up to them, for those who did not feel comfortable with trying to eat standing up. Off to the side, another table served as a bar counter, dispensing water, soda and sweets for the children. No alcoholic drinks were being served; the combination of alcohol, cape powers and children was not one to consider lightly.

Many of the tables and chairs had been stacked upon one another until Miss Militia and Vista had entered the tent, whereupon Parian had had a quiet word with the youthful space-manipulator, and the tent had quadrupled its internal volume.

At the far end of the tent from the entrance, past the dance floor, was a raised dais, with a microphone stand and a stereo setup; speakers were attached to many of the light-stands around the inside wall of the tent. Light dance music was now playing, and the dance floor held people dancing alone and in couples, to whatever step they felt appropriate.

All of the civilians who had been present on the day had arrived, plus at least twice that many from other parts of the city. They mingled, chattered, compared reminiscences of the day, and enjoyed the party. More than a few had arrived dressed as their cape of choice; most came as heroes, but some chose to honour the villains who had stepped up for the climactic battle. There were a couple of Tattletales, a Skitter in an obviously homemade costume, a few Grues, and one girl in a dog mask, carrying a stuffed bulldog.

Lisa grinned at Faultline as the Crew entered the tent. "Welcome to the Slaughterhouse Zero victory party," she said. "That'll be ten dollars each for the ladies, and fifteen for the gentlemen."

Faultline looked suspiciously at Lisa, but did not quite manage to place her. "Thanks," she said, and handed over money for everyone.

Newter looked around with interest as he entered. "Wow, this is some serious party," he said happily. "Look at all the costumes. And the ladies. And the ladies in costume."

"You can look," said Gregor. "I do not intend to. I am happy as I am."

Shamrock smiled and held his arm a little more tightly.

"Flechette!" said Hope happily. "How's it going with you?" She hugged the Ward, as Amy gave Parian a slightly less enthusiastic embrace.

"We're doing well," Flechette said. "The party's kicked off all right. No-one seems to be causing trouble."
"Better not be," laughed Hope, "with all these capes around."

Flechette nodded. "Oh, by the way," she said, "I never congratulated you two on being together."

"Yes," said Parian. "I hope you'll be very happy."

Amy blushed deeply and buried her face in Hope's shoulder; Hope wrapped her arms around her and held her close. "We are, and I'm sure it will stay that way," she said. "And thank you. And I hope you're just as happy." She looked up. "Oh, hey, I think Weld is waving to you."

The Wards had colonised one end of one of the long tables, laughing and chattering to each other. They spotted Parian and Flechette and Weld waved them over.

Sabah looked uncertain. "Is it really all right?" she asked. "I mean, I'm not a Ward. I'm not one of them."

"Of course it's all right," Lily assured her. "I am, and you're with me." Taking Sabah by the hand, she towed her determinedly toward the group of Wards.

"Hey, Flechette, come sit with us!" called Clockblocker when they got close enough. "Bring your friend, we've got plenty of room!" He paused when he realised that he was addressing the 'wrong' Flechette. "Oh, whoops, sorry," he chuckled. "Didn't realise you'd done a costume swap. Whose idea was that, anyway?"

"Hers," said Flechette. Parian stuck her tongue out at her. "But you can't talk. You're only pretending to be yourself."

"So's Kid Win," Vista said gleefully. "He's got fake armour over his real armour."

"And you," said Flechette, "what's with the Shadow Stalker costume?"

"I call it 'Shadow Stalker – the good twin'," retorted Vista. "Can't you see the smiley on the mask?"

"Ah, so that's what that is," Parian said. "I was wondering."

"Come on, take a seat," Weld said cheerfully. "Parian, isn't it? You're the one who does those animated dolls?"

"Yes," said Parian nervously. She stepped over the bench and sat next to Clockblocker. Flechette took a little more time to get settled, trying to get her skirts in order and muttering to herself. Parian concentrated slightly, and the material of the skirts untangled itself and slid into place. Flechette gave her a grateful look.

"So what is that, anyway?" asked Clockblocker, who had observed this action. "Cloth-o-kinesis?"

"Something like that," said Parian. "I don't want to intrude."

Kid Win chuckled and handed her a bottle of soda. "Hey, you managed to convince Flechette there to wear a dress. I figure that's worth it."

"Watch it," Flechette said waringly. "These knives may be plastic, but that won't stop me from using one to nail your hand to the table."

"Hey, hey, truce, truce," grinned Kid Win, holding his hands up in surrender. "So how have you two been, anyway? No hassles out your way?"
"None lately," replied Flechette, snagging a bottle of cola for herself. "Everyone's staying on the down-low, keeping their noses clean. Actually, there's quite a lot of interest going around about Hope's plan for the city. I haven't have a chance to look at it myself, but I've heard quite a bit."

"What, the Christner Initiative?" asked Vista.

Flechette looked at her. "Is that what they're calling it?"

"Well, yeah," said Clockblocker. "We're figuring it's something the Mayor had some thinkers cook up, and he got Hope to ask everyone to help out with it."

Flechette was chuckling, while Parian seemed to be having a fit of the giggles.

"What?" said Clockblocker. "What's so funny?"

"The Mayor got that plan from Hope," Flechette informed him. "So did everyone else in Brockton Bay. In fact, she gave it to the villain groups before anyone else."

Weld frowned. "So where did she get it from?"

"Well, I'm not a hundred percent on this," confided Flechette, "but Parian heard the name 'Accord' being put about in certain circles."

"Well, damn," said Clockblocker.

Accord's reputation was not all that widespread, but those who knew him understood one thing; the man could make a plan.

"You know, I think I want to see how this turns out," Kid Win said thoughtfully.

Weld nodded. "So do I."

Clockblocker began to chuckle.

"What's so funny?" asked Vista.

"Can you see the Mayor's face when he finds out who put together his precious Christner Initiative?" he asked.

At the other end of the same table, Miss Militia turned her head at the sudden burst of laughter. "Well, the Wards seem to be having a good time," she observed.

Triumph nodded. "It's good to have fun," he replied in his scratchy, grating voice. "I remember being in the Wards. Lots of responsibility. Good to unwind."

"And I see they're accepting Parian into their group, at least for the night," noted Assault. "That's nice of them."

Miss Militia chuckled. "You don't know, do you?"

Battery frowned. "Know what?"

"Flechette and Parian are a couple," explained Miss Militia. "Officially, she's on detached duty as liaison during the truce period. Unofficially, she's living with Parian and keeping an eye on the villain groups." She shrugged. "We figure we have an outside chance of bringing Parian into the
Wards, and in the meantime, Flechette's flying the flag for us."

Assault grinned. "Bold move," he said, then took a drink of non-alcoholic beer. "Letting a hero associate so closely with a rogue cape. Who knows where it might end up."

Battery elbowed him in the ribs. "Oh, behave, Ethan," she chuckled. "I can't take you anywhere."

Hope watched Flechette and Parian settling in with the Wards, then looked down at Amy. "What's the matter?" she asked softly.

Amy raised her face, and her eyes were shining. "Nothing's the matter," she said with a tremulous smile. "I'm just so happy. When Flechette congratulated us, I thought I was going to cry." She hugged Hope tightly. "I don't think I could get any happier."

Hope returned the hug, holding her tightly. Then she looked over Amy's shoulder and a smile spread across her face. "Hey, have you met Faultline's Crew yet?"

Amy had her head leaned in against Hope's shoulder. "No, but if they're friends of yours, I'd like to." She turned and looked behind her. "Is that them over there?"

Hope nodded. "Come on, I'll introduce you. I met them in my first few days as a Ward."

As they got closer, Amy saw for the first time the costumes the girls were wearing. She stiffened slightly; Hope squeezed her hand and kept walking.

"Hey, Hope!" greeted Newter. "'Sup?"

"Rocking on, Newter, rocking on," replied Hope with a grin. "Guys, this is Amy. Once upon a time, she wore that." She pointed at Faultline's costume.


Amy shook her head. "Not Panacea," she said quietly. "I'm not that person any more."

Gregor nodded. "I understand," he said. "Sometimes you need to change something in your life. If the only thing you can change is yourself, then that is what you must change." Amy gave him a grateful smile.

Newter paused and looked at Gregor. "Dude," he said, "that was seriously profound."

"And it was seriously true," Hope added. She looked at Shamrock. "Do you mind if I give the big guy here a hug? Hugs are nice."

"Be my guest," said Shamrock with a smile. She stepped away and watched as Hope put her arms around Gregor as far as she could manage, then unfurled her wings and wrapped them all the way around him.

Gregor put his arms around Hope and hugged her back. "You still give the best hugs, my little Hope," he said. "Thank you."

"Always a pleasure, Gregor," she replied. "Always a pleasure."

"Well, I hope we haven't weirded you out too much with these costumes," Faultline said to Amy. "I get the impression you have issues."
Amy nodded fractionally. "Well, some issues," she said. "I'm getting over them. Slowly. But Hope's helping." As Hope let go of Gregor and stepped up behind her, Amy leaned back into the embrace she knew was coming. "And you're right, Gregor," she added with a smile. "She does give the best hugs."

Gregor looked at the pair of them. "You are happy," he said. "That is good. There is too much unhappiness in the world."

"Well, I'm working on that," said Hope with a grin. "One hug at a time."

"Amen to that," sighed Amy.

Kayden Anders banked over the open area, leaving a trail of light behind her. She could see the tent, hear the music. People were still arriving in ones and twos. *This is the place.*

Part of her was protesting at having to leave Aster to come, but she had left the baby in good hands. Theo loved the infant, and he had the other members of the Pure on speed-dial.

Coming around in a wide circle, she passed over the refrigerated trucks and alighted gently near the front of the tent. Taking a deep breath, she approached the entrance.

The teenage girl behind the counter was wearing a Hope costume that fell far short of the original, but bespoke a certain amount of effort. She greeted Kayden cheerfully enough, and charged her fifteen dollars for entry.

"Excuse me," said Kayden. "Doesn't it say on the invitation that it's ten dollars if you come as a cape?"

Lisa gave her a vulpine grin. "That only counts if you come as another cape," she explained. "Wearing your own cape costume is kind of cheating."

Kayden nodded. "That makes sense," she agreed. "Tell me, is there anyone here from the PRT? I'd like to speak to them."

"Oh, certainly," said Lisa. "Just over there, in fact." She pointed to a small group of women, each wearing a copy of the Miss Militia costume. Even in costume, their military bearing was unmistakable.

"Thank you," said Kayden. "I appreciate it."

"You're welcome," said Lisa, and turned to the next person coming up to the entrance. "Good evening sir, and welcome to the Slaughterhouse Zero victory party. That will be fifteen dollars, thank you. Any further donations will be gratefully accepted."

Taylor and Danny sat at a table not far from the dance floor. Sierra was sitting nearby, keeping an eye on the children as they ran to and fro. There were a few people on the dance floor, but it was mostly empty, especially since Vista had stretched the tent.

"So, are you glad you came, Dad?" asked Taylor.

He nodded, holding his visor so it would not drop down. "Yeah," he said. "Sierra's a nice kid, and she does a good job at keeping the children in line." He put an arm around her shoulders and gave her a brief hug. "You're taking care of your people. I'm really proud of you for that. Your mother
was like that; she was a real caregiver."

"I know," she replied softly. She put her arm around his waist, and squeezed him back, leaning her head on his shoulder. "I miss her too, Dad."

They both fell silent, watching the couples dancing and the kids playing.

Purity moved through the crowd, heading for the PRT contingent. She counted quite a few capes, and many more that were wearing cape costumes. Her lip curled as she spotted a black man wearing Legend's costume, but she controlled her reaction.

*If I am to be a hero, she told herself, I must let such things pass.*

The four PRT personnel were standing near one of the tables, watching the crowd and talking quietly among themselves. One of them spotted Purity approaching – no real surprise, as she had maintained the glow of her power – and alerted the others. No hostile moves were made, but they watched her carefully as she came up to them.

And then, with a sense of shock, she recognised one of them as Director Piggot herself. Kayden had not thought the Director to be up to field work any more; to be sure, she was bulky and overweight, but she seemed to have lost a little weight from her last television appearance.

"Ah – Director Piggot," she said. "I didn't expect to find you here, but you're just the person I want to talk to."

"Really?" asked Piggot. "And what did you need me for?"

Kayden took a deep breath. "I want to join the Protectorate."

The noise of the party went on around them, but silence fell between Piggot and Kayden. Finally, the Director took a step closer to Kayden.

"Say that again?" she invited.

"I want to join the Protectorate," reiterated Kayden. "I want to be a part of the amnesty. The Pure, I'm keeping them in line. No more criminal activity." She made a sweeping gesture. "I've looked at the plan, I can see the way the city is going to go. I want to be a part of it. I want my daughter to grow up in a good place."

Piggot looked around, spotted an empty table. "Let's sit down," she invited, "and talk about it."

Kayden smiled. *At least they haven't said no, yet.*

"Excuse me; do you mind if we sit here for a moment?"

Danny looked up, and blinked. "Uh, Armsmaster, isn't it?" he said in surprise. He was already feeling a little overwhelmed by the capes circulating at the party. It was somehow different to having met the Undersiders; they were Taylor's friends, her colleagues. Despite their powers, they treated him with respect, as an equal. He had seen their human sides, had seen them joking with Taylor and each other.

This, on the other hand, was *Armsmaster.* Despite what Taylor had told him, he could not suppress a distinct feeling of awe for the man. This was not someone he could casually joke around with.
Armsmaster nodded. "Yes, it is. And you would be Taylor Hebert's father?"

He knows who I am?

Well, of course he knows. He's Armsmaster.

Danny blinked, nodded vigorously, then pushed the visor back up. "Um, y-yes. I'm Danny – Danny Hebert. And this is Taylor, of course." He indicated the empty seats on the other side of the table. "Sure, sit down."

Armsmaster sat, and a tall slender brunette sat next to him. "Hello," she said quietly. "You can call me Dragon."

Taylor did her best to conceal her reaction. If the woman in front of her was telling the truth, she had just met the most famous Tinker in the world, face to face. "It's ... I'm pleased to meet you," she said.

Dragon looked back at her with an enigmatic smile. "It's nice to meet you too, Taylor," she said. Taylor was jolted by a realisation. Doesn't she know that I'm Skitter? I'm sure she does.

To cover her confusion, she looked over at Armsmaster. "Um, yeah," she said awkwardly. He's not acting as if he knows. Be friendly."It's, uh, nice to meet you too. I'm a big fan."

Inside Colin's helmet, a light pulsed. Lie. He shrugged mentally. It was no big thing. People told small lies all the time.

"I understand that you are a part of Skitter's organisation?" he said to her.

Belatedly, she recalled that he had a lie detector set up in his helmet.

Dammit, how do I say this?

"If I say yes," she said cautiously, "am I incriminating myself?"

The lie detector returned a curiously null result, neither truth nor lie. The weight was too much on the question, not a statement.

"I'm not here to gather incriminating evidence," he assured her. "I merely wish to pass on a message to her."

"Well, tell me the message, and Skitter will know about it just as soon as possible," she said, hoping the wording was ambiguous enough.

Her statement read as mostly truthful, although there was a flicker of a lie in there that he could not pin down. What's she hiding? he wondered. Another mental shrug. As I said, I'm not here for incriminating evidence.

"Please tell her," he said carefully, "that I want to offer an unreserved apology for my treatment of her, both before Leviathan and after, and my thanks for saving my life." He paused. "I would really prefer to say this to her face, so if she wants to meet me at any time, I will repeat what I have just said."
"Uh ... right," she said. "Okay, sure. Not a problem."

Truth.

"Thank you," said Armsmaster. He nodded to Danny, and stood up. "Enjoy the party."

Dragon stood up as well. "It was nice meeting you, Danny," she said. "And good luck, both of you, with the trial."

"Uh, thanks," said Danny, and watched them walk away. Then he turned to Taylor. "Okay," he said. "I can tell there was a lot more going on there than I could see on the surface. What's going on? What's with you and Armsmaster?"

Taylor sighed and shook her head. "That was bizarre. The man is a colossal self-absorbed prick. He's done his best to hang me out to dry three times now at least. And now he's apologising for it? And hanging out with Dragon, of all people?"

Danny was frowning. "Dragon ... isn't she some sort of Tinker?"

Taylor nodded. "About the best there is. I haven't seen much of her tech, but apparently she provides the Protectorate with a lot of their stuff."

"She sounds like a nice person," observed Danny. "Maybe if he's with her, she might be mellowing him out just a bit."

"Yeah, she does," Taylor agreed. "I just can't get over the fact that he apologised. Well, not to me, but to Skitter. But it's basically the same thing, even if he doesn't know it."

Danny shrugged. "People change. Sometimes it's for the better."

"Yeah, right," said Taylor. "How often have you seen that happen?"

"Not often," he admitted. He reached over and lifted her chin with two fingers. "But you've changed. In the last few days, you've gone from being a grim stranger to being my daughter again."

She had to chuckle. "I think you're exaggerating just a little, Dad."

He hugged her. "Not by much, kiddo. Not by much."

"Hey, Grue," said Hope. "Nice Legend costume."

Brian looked up. "Oh, hi, Hope, Amy," he said with a grin. "Take a seat. Enjoying the party?"

Hope sat down, making sure that Amy was between her and Grue, so that she would not be turning away from her to speak to anyone.

"Oh, it's great!" she enthused. "Everyone's talking to everyone, and people are all getting along wonderfully. I'm so glad Lisa arranged everything so well."

Regent nodded. "Say what you like about that girl, but she can put together an event."

"Oh, definitely," agreed Omake. "This party was a great idea. I'm having a ball." She nudged Trickster's arm. "I'm just waiting for someone to take me out on to the dance floor."
"I'm sorry," said Trickster, "but I'm kind of out of practice. I really don't think you want me walking all over your feet."

"I don't care," said Omake patiently. "I just want to dance with you."

"Hey," said Imp to Sundancer, "didn't you do ballet or something like that?"

"Yeah," said Sundancer. "Something like that. Why?"

"Well, if none of these other squares wants to get out there and dance, let's go show them how it's done." She was on her feet, tugging at Sundancer's arm.

"I dunno," said Sundancer. "It's sort of been years ..."

Genesis gave her a push. "You were the one saying you hoped there would be a dance floor. So go. Dance."

"Only if someone else comes out with me and Imp," said Sundancer. She grabbed Genesis by the arm. "Come on."

"Wait, what, me?" blurted Genesis, taken aback. "But I can't dance! I trip over my own feet all the time! If I don't have a partner, I'll fall over for sure!"

Amy gave Brian a nudge. "Go on," she said softly. "Ask her to dance. That way she doesn't have an excuse to back out."

Brian shot her a startled look, then looked at Genesis. "I'll dance with you," he said.

She looked at him in surprise. "You will?" she asked.

He nodded, rising from the table. "I'm not just good at mixed martial arts," he informed her gravely. "Would you like to dance with me?"

Genesis looked from Sundancer, who nodded vigorously, to Omake, who did the same and added a wide smile, then to Hope, who said, "Yes, of course, dance with him, you big silly!"

Genesis grinned at that, then took a deep breath, then another one. She smiled at Brian and said, "Okay, let's dance." Then she stuck out her tongue at Sundancer. "Now you don't have an excuse, smarty."

Grinning, Imp pulled Sundancer to her feet, and the four of them made their way on to the dance floor. Brian took Genesis' arm and walked with her, allowing her to set her own pace.

Once on the dance floor, Marissa started into her ballet routines; Aisha could not even begin to partner her on that level, but she danced all the same, improvising her own moves to suit what Sundancer was doing. Brian, on the other hand, was leading Jess in a more traditional dance form, supporting and guiding her through the movements.

Hope hugged Amy delightedly. "That was so sweet of you," she said, kissing her on the cheek. "Don't they look so cute?"

Amy rubbed her forehead against Hope's. "They do," she agreed, smiling dreamily. Then she added, apropos of nothing. "Do you happen to know how to dance?"

Hope pondered for a moment. "No idea at all," she confessed. Then she smiled and kissed Amy on the tip of the nose, making her giggle. "But I'm willing to learn, if you're willing to teach me."
Sierra had done her best to keep the children under control, but children will run around and do silly things. So when the others came to get her, she followed them to where one of the boys had fallen and skinned his knee. It was a bad scrape, and blood was flowing from the wound. Tommy was gritting his teeth, trying not to cry out, but she could tell it was very painful.

"Freddie," she said. "Go and find Hope or Amy. They can fix this." Pulling a tissue from her purse, she dabbed at the cut, trying to see how bad it was.

The minivan pulled up, and the six costumed henchmen began to disgorge from the back. Valefor, fully costumed as Bonesaw, but wearing a pair of sunglasses, climbed out of the driver's seat. Eligos got out of the passenger seat; he was dressed as Jack Slash, complete with a ridiculously oversized rubber knife.

"Damn," said Eligos. "More people here than I expected."

Valefor nodded. "And that's a PRT transport. There's capes here, and maybe PRT as well."

One of the henchmen looked a little nervous. "This might be a little too much heat for us, boss," he began.

Valefor looked at him flatly. "Your mind is currently your own," he lied. "If you want to keep it that way, you won't question me."

"Aren't we just doing a grab and run?" asked Eligos.

Valefor shook his head. "Maybe. But I'm interested in seeing the guest list now. Seems to me we have an opportunity here." He gestured at the tent, at the sounds of the party in full swing. "In any case, these people are disrespecting the efforts of Our Lord of the Waters in reshaping this city. They are rebuilding. If we play our cards right, we might get more than just money out of this." He looked at Eligos. "Are you with me?"

Eligos nodded. "Always."

Valefor set out toward the entrance to the tent. "Then let's kick this puppy."
In which an unexpected party-crasher gets more than he bargained for

Before:

Sundancer was lost in a world of her own. It had been so long since she had been able to get out on a dance floor and just let loose. Her ballet routines were coming back to her now, and it didn't matter if a flaw crept in here or there, or even that she wasn't wearing the appropriate footwear; all that mattered was the music, and the dance.

A group of people had gathered at the edge of the dance floor and were applauding her efforts. She didn't even notice.

"Whoa," said Kid Win. "Check out Sundancer's moves. That's serious dancing, right there."

"Let me see that," said Clockblocker. He turned in his seat and craned his neck. "Hey, yeah," he said. "That is pretty damn cool."

Vista turned to Flechette. "Why don't you two get out there and show the rest of us how it's done?" she asked. Her grin was just barely visible through the Shadow Stalker mask. "You know you want to."

Flechette turned to Parian. "You know," she said, "she has a point."

"I'm ... not sure," began Parian, but Flechette was already standing up.

"Come on," Lily urged, tugging on her hand. "Let's go cut a rug."

Reluctantly – but not too reluctantly – Parian got up from her seat. They moved off toward the dance floor.

"Great," said Vista. "Now which of you gentlemen is going to ask me to dance?"

"I don't dance," said Clockblocker hastily.

"Hey, don't look at me," he protested. "I can't dance in armour."

"And before you ask," said Weld, "I weigh six hundred pounds. Even if I don't break the dance floor, if I stepped on your foot, you would have a broken foot."

Vista crossed her arms on the table, and rested her chin on them. "Poop."

"Hope! Amy!"

Amy and Hope looked around; they had just gotten up from the table where the Undersiders and the Travelers were sitting, when one of Taylor's children ran up. His Skitter mask dangled around his neck, and he looked upset.

Zeroing in on Hope, he grabbed her hand and tugged. "You gotta come with me!"
"What's the matter, sweetie?" she asked, taking a few steps with him.

"Jimmy's hurt!" he babbled. "Sierra said to get you or Amy! His knee's bleeding!"

"Oh, that doesn't sound good," said Hope. She turned to Amy. "I'll just be a moment —"

"Oh, no you don't," grinned Amy. "I'm coming with. Where you go, I go. That's the deal. And then we go dancing."

Hope nodded. "And then we go dancing."

Each of them took one of the child's hands. Hope said, "Show us where Jimmy is, sweetie, and we'll fix his knee as good as new." She smiled down at him. He gazed back up at her with a look of trust and adoration.

The three of them moved off through the crowd. Trickster watched them go, then turned to Regent. "You and Imp have got something going on, don't you," he observed. "Even I can tell that."

Regent gave a sort of half-nod, half-shrug. "She's fun to kid around with, I guess," he said.

"So why aren't you up there on the dance floor with her?" asked Omake. "She seems to be having a lot of fun. She could be having even more fun if you were out there with her."

Regent shrugged lazily. "Eh," he said. "She's her own girl."

Imp gave up on keeping up with Sundancer, and just danced along with her. She was sweating with the exertion, but grinning wildly, improvising moves as she went along.

From time to time, she glanced over at Brian, dancing with Genesis. That ballroom crap didn't really work for her, but it did seem that they were very close together.

*Maybe there's something to that slow dancing stuff after all. You go, big bro.*

"Okay ... step ... two ... three ... turn. Step ... two ... three ... slide ..."

Jess held tight to Grue's left hand as he held it out before them. His hand on her lower back helped to steady and guide her movements, and her hand on his shoulder gave her much-needed support.

"I'm dancing," she said in wonder. "Dancing."

He smiled down at her, and her stomach did a little flip. He really was good-looking, even behind a mask. "Yes, you are," he said. "And you're doing quite well. Step ... two ... three ... slide ... how are your feet holding up?"

She grinned up at him. "I can't even feel my feet any more," she said. "But don't you dare stop now."

Battery looked with interest at the dance floor, which was slowly filling up. "It's been a while since I went dancing," she hinted broadly.

"Maybe later, after the kids have worn themselves out," said Assault. "Put on some slow-dance music and go for it."

"That guy in the Legend outfit and the Traveler girl seem to be doing okay," Miss Militia pointed out
mischievously. Assault shot her a dirty look.

"Maybe later," he repeated.

"Come on!" urged Shamrock, tugging at his hand.

"I am sorry, I cannot move fast through crowds," Gregor said, but he made his best speed. "What are we looking for?"

"It's Sundancer," said Shamrock, as they came to the forefront of the crowd. "She's dancing. Ooh, look at that!"

"It is very pretty," admitted Gregor. "But I would rather dance with you. On a dance floor that does not bend under my weight."

"Aww," said Shamrock, "that's so sweet. Thank you." She hugged his arm. "But doesn't she dance so well?"

"She does," agreed Gregor. "It is very pretty."

"Taylor," said Danny, "what you said about Armsmaster. How exactly did he try to hang you out to dry?"

Taylor looked sidelong at her father. "Are you sure you want to hear this?" she said. "It doesn't make him look very good."

He took a deep breath. "I'm sure," he said. "If I can stand to learn the truth about the Undersiders, then I can stand to learn the truth about the heroes as well."

"Okay," she began. "It started on my first night out in costume."

"The night you fought Lung?" he asked.

"Yeah, that night," she said. "After we took him down, Armsmaster talked me into letting him take the credit for his capture. Then later, when I tried to get him to help me ..."

"So the question now is," said Director Piggot, "once you are inducted into the Protectorate, what happens with the rest of the Pure? Currently, as you say, they are keeping their noses clean. Once you are no longer there to keep them in line, what is likely to happen?"

Kayden frowned. "Night and Fog are likely to do what I tell them. Crusader as well. But if I am no longer their leader ... yes, they may backslide."

"Then that is a problem," stated Piggot. "I can tell you now; if you are serious about joining the Protectorate and putting your powers to use as a hero, then we will be willing to work with you on this matter. For instance, we would be willing to allow them to simply leave town and take up employment elsewhere, on the understanding that if they came to our attention once more, we would have to come down hard on them."

Kayden nodded. "That's ... fair," she conceded. "What if I brought them in with me?"

Director Piggot considered this. "Crusader, I can see," she admitted. "Fog, possibly. Night ... I'm really not sure. The ability to turn into a horrifying monster, but only when no-one can see you? Not
much heroic potential there."

"I do see your point," allowed Purity.

Lisa was bored. She figured that in the next ten or fifteen minutes she'd be able to turn over the donation bin – a large plastic barrel, now with an impressive layer of money in the bottom – to her people and head up to the microphone. Then she'd be able to spring the big surprise...

Another guest stepped in through the entrance. A dozen impressions hit her at once, coalescing into a picture she didn't like at all.

*Dressed like Bonesaw.*

*Either a hefty teenage girl or a skinny effeminate guy.*

*Villain, cape.*

*Up to no good.*

*Sunglasses at night. Vision powers.*

*Long blonde hair.*

*Oh shit, it's Valef-*

Her mouth was opening to shout something, her finger was fractions of an inch away from pressing the red panic button taped under the table, when he lowered his sunglasses and smiled at her. Her mind went to warm, wet mush.

**During:**

Valefor felt the clicks in his mind, as his power took over the four people behind the counter. They froze, staring at him.

"Hi," he said. "Tell me something; how much money is in that barrel there?"

"Nine thousand, seven hundred and fifty-three dollars, forty-two cents," the girl in the angel outfit replied automatically.

"Nice," he said approvingly. "We'll be taking that on the way out. Now, are there many capes here tonight?"

"Yes," she said. "Nearly all the groups in the city are represented."

Eligos, moving in behind Valefor, whistled softly. The henchmen shifted uncomfortably.

"How about PRT and Protectorate?" he asked. "Those transports outside; who do they belong to?"

"There is a PRT contingent, including Director Piggot," she said. "Miss Militia and three members of the Protectorate are here, as are Weld and nearly all of the Wards."

He paused, recalling a couple of unpleasant incidents. "Are there any capes in here who can't see?"

She shook her head. "They all have excellent vision."
Valefor grinned unpleasantly. "That sounds perfect," he said. He turned to Eligos and the henchmen. "Now, this is how we're gonna play it ..."

The eight people made their way down the central aisle of the tables. One of the costumed henchmen carried an I-Pod with speakers attached, which was blasting out the Imperial March from Star Wars, just as loud as the small device could manage.

Eligos led the way, hamming it up with the rubber knife, grimacing at the crowd and making overwrought slashing motions. Valefor followed, brandishing a plastic saw, grinning maniacally as he waved it at the crowd. On either side of them and behind, the henchmen did their best to rock along to the beat of the march, waving their brightly painted 'toy' guns in the air.

People made way for them, clapped, whistled, cheered. It was obvious that there was going to be some sort of show. Some frowned, considering the costumes to be in bad taste, while others wondered why 'Bonesaw' was wearing sunglasses. But virtually no-one harboured any real suspicions, at least to begin with.

Neither Lily nor Sabah noticed the commotion. They were holding each other close, dancing slowly, enjoying the music and the moment.

"... so then he –" Taylor broke off, frowning. There were people dressed as Jack Slash and Bonesaw heading up to the dance floor, with costumed henchmen in tow. The Imperial March, that was actually kind of funny. But whose idea had this been? Lisa's?

Almost instinctively, her bugs checked on Lisa, fully expecting her to be following on, grinning her vulpine grin. But she wasn't. She and her men were closing the tent flaps, lacing them up. What's going on?

Lisa finished lacing up the tent entrance, and took up station in front of it.

Her instructions were clear enough. "Close the tent off and don't let anyone but me and my people in or out." Her entire world revolved around following them.

Deep inside her mind, where nothing and no-one could hear it ... she screamed.

"Hey now, this looks interesting."

Trickster was on his feet, watching the progress of the people in Slaughterhouse Nine costumes. He was a little disappointed that no more of the Nine were represented, but then, it would be hard to pretend to be Crawler or Mannequin, and somewhat embarrassing to dress as the Siberian.

Omake stood with him. "What are they doing?" she asked.

Trickster grinned behind his mask. "This could be cool. Let's go see."

He exerted his power, and suddenly two people who had been at the forefront of the crowd found themselves back next to the table, somewhat confused.

"That wasn't nice," Omake said in an undertone.

Trickster shrugged. "But it got us front row seats."
Hope and Amy heard the music, but didn't actually get a good look at what was going on.

"Looks like the main event's finally starting," observed Amy.

"Ooh, this will be fun," giggled Hope. "Won't Taylor be surprised!"

"Yeah," grinned Amy. "Come on, let's see about this knee."

Eligos and Valefor did not pause when they reached the dance floor; they just kept walking. Two of the henchmen peeled off, one to the left and one to the right.

The other four henchmen accompanied them on to the dance floor, brushing past the dancers, not so much pushing them aside as ignoring them.

Imp bumped into a henchman, bounced away, sat down hard. "Hey!" she protested. "Watch it, jerkwad!"

Brian saw the man bump Imp aside, and stopped dancing with Jess. "Hey!" he shouted at the man. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" He took several steps forward; Jess came with him, looking with concern at Imp.

The henchman took no notice.

Valefor stepped up on to the dais, with Eligos off to the side. The henchmen fanned out, two to either side of the dais.

He took just a moment to gloat.

*All of these people, he thought. I'm going to control them. I'm going to own this city.*

*I've been waiting for this all my life. This is where I was meant to be.*

Piggot turned in her seat, observing the henchmen closely, the way they moved toward the dais.

"You know something," said Senior Sergeant Katherine Annandale thoughtfully, "if you ignore the fact that those are toy guns, they'd look almost military. In fact, if those were real guns, this could be bad."

"But that was *Tattletale* on the front door," objected Sergeant Zoe Garbutt. "She'd ping on anything like that ... wouldn't she?"

"Yeah," agreed Annandale. "Unless this *is* something bad, and they've taken her out."

Piggot nodded. "Douglas, check the entrance."

Sergeant Lily Douglas stood and scanned over the heads of the crowd. Then she shot a worried look toward the Director. "The entrance is closed."

Piggot began to come to her feet. "Guns. Now."

She reached up, unslinging the laser rifle from her shoulder, as the other PRT soldiers followed her
lead.

Valefor gave a hand signal.

Two of the henchmen fired bursts of autofire into the canvas overhead. The bright orange caps, ruined by the bullets, fell to the floor in fragments. Blackness boiled out from Brian, spreading in all directions. He dived to the floor, pulling Jess with him.

Everyone's eyes were drawn to the noise, looking directly at the dais.

Director Piggot wrenched the rifle off her shoulder, but even her eyes were drawn to the noise.

Valefor took off his sunglasses.

Contact.

After:

The dark cloud billowed across the dance floor, covering most of the end of the room.

Grue had not been quite fast enough; nearly all of the people in the audience had been caught by Valefor's gaze before their view of him was blotted out. Those people sat or stood frozen, unreactive. Waiting for orders.

Dragon looked at Armstrong frozen beside her, and knew what had happened.

Valefor.

Grue has blocked his power, but he can still give orders to those who are affected.

Not if I can help it.

Closed off in the PRT transport, still scanning all frequencies, all approaches, Williams did not hear the gunfire from within the tent. But he did see Dragon's craft perform an emergency liftoff maneuver. It was only a short hop, taking just a few seconds. It landed right next to the end of the tent.

What the hell? he wondered.

The sense of power was overwhelming.

He had gotten nearly everyone before some bedamned cape had cut him off from visual contact. Probably Grue, from the almost palpable texture of the darkness.

But the numbers he had gotten. He could feel it. They were out there. Capes and normals alike. In his power. Under his control.

"Everyone!" he shouted, forgetting about the microphone. "If you can see Grue – kill him!"

I will not be denied, so close to my ultimate victory. I will not.
It was but the work of a moment to fix Jimmy's knee; Hope applied the lightest touch, the silvery-blue light flared, and the cut was gone. Sierra hugged Hope tightly.

And then the gunfire went off.

Hope pulled Sierra to the ground; Amy pushed Jimmy and Freddie down, and covered them with her body. Hope's wings unfurled, covering herself and Amy.

There was no more gunfire.

And then they heard the voice, exhorting people to kill Grue if they could see him.

Danny froze. He had been chatting with Taylor, then she had said something about Lisa, and then gunfire had gone off and he had spun to see what was happening. The violent motion had dislodged his visor – again – and by the time he pushed it up again, there was a cloud of darkness across the entire dancefloor area.

"Taylor?" he said. "What's happening?"

She didn't respond.

"Everyone!" he heard a faint voice call from within the cloud. "If you can see Grue, kill him!"

Great, thought Brian. I don't know how many people are under his control. I don't dare drop my darkness. He wasn't even sure that his darkness would stop Valefor from affecting him; after all, if he could see Valefor's eyes ...

Stalemate.

"Grue!" said Genesis urgently, her lips almost at his ear. "Give me some direction. He won't be able to affect my constructs."

He grabbed her hand, pointed at two of the henchmen. They were nervously scanning the darkness, unable to see or hear anything. "That way," he said, directly into her ear.

The construct was ten feet tall; it had talons and horns and a demonic visage. It loomed out of the suddenly thinning back fog, right in front of two of the henchmen. They barely had time to scream before it was upon them.

Valefor could hear barely anything. No sounds penetrated the muffling darkness. He heard a vague commotion, but the darkness persisted.

And then it dawned on him. He's inside the darkness too. They can't see him to carry out the order.

He groped for the microphone. "Everyone!" he yelled. "If Grue does not drop his darkness in the next five seconds —"

Dragon, flying her craft remotely, landed it right alongside the end of the tent where Valefor was standing. And then she cut in the crowd-dispersal siren.
Even inside Grue's darkness, the siren had an almost physical impact. Valefor could no longer even hear his own voice within his skull. There was no chance anyone else could hear his orders; no chance at all.

"What's going on?" asked Hope.

"I think it's Valefor," Amy said. "I read about him once. If you make eye contact, he can make you do anything."

"Can you –" began Hope, but she was cut off by the siren.

A lot of people around Danny looked from side to side. A few glanced at him, and he hastily dragged the helmet off. Taylor was looking at him.

"Where's Grue?" she asked. "I can't see him. My bugs can't see him. I have to kill him if I see him." She paused. "I hope I don't see him," she said. "I like him."

Danny felt a cold chill run down his spine. And then the voice echoed out again, only to be cut off by the shrilling of a siren.

The two henchmen who had peeled off from the main group stood outside of the roiling cloud of darkness. They couldn't see Grue either, or they would be shooting at him. For now, they watched the crowd.

Nervous fingers twitched on triggers. It would only take one wrong move to initiate a bloodbath.

Hope didn't need to finish the sentence. She and Amy had learned to think on the same wavelength.

*Can you snap them out of it?*

Amy thought about it. *If it's just a matter of brain chemistry ... why not?*

A man stood next to them, staring blankly forward. Amy grabbed one hand; Hope took the other. His biological information unfolded before her inner eye.

*I was right. Brain chemistry, for the win.*

She could see the alteration, right before her. With an encouraging squeeze from Hope's hand, she nullified it. The man blinked, looked around. They let his hands go, moved on.

Hope stood up, sneaked a peek around. The siren was too loud for speech, but she held up two fingers, and pointed left and right.

*Two bad guys, Amy figured she meant. One at each side of the tent.*

With further gestures, Hope indicated that she was going to take out the bad guys. Amy was to keep snapping people out of Valefor's spell.

Amy squeezed Hope's hand. *Be careful.*

Hope kissed her quickly. *I will.* And then she jumped on to a table, spread her wings, and took to the air.
It was a good thing, she reflected, that when Vista expanded the dimensions of the tent, she had also pushed the roof upward. Otherwise, this would simply not be possible.

The henchmen were smashed aside, scattered like ninepins before the creature's assault. Genesis was careful not to kill anyone, but she wasn't too worried about broken bones and heavy bruising. One got off a burst into its chest; it punched him so hard he flew back three yards before hitting the ground and skidding.

And then it was facing Valefor.

He stared it straight in the eyes. "OBEY ME!" he screamed desperately. "STOP!"

It reached out and took hold of him, taloned fingers closing all the way around his head. It squeezed, tighter and tighter ...

The air-blade sliced into its spine from behind, and it dropped its victim to the floor, then fell forward. On top of Valefor.

Eligos looked down and grunted. Valefor was out cold or dead; he couldn't tell. There would be no help from that quarter. Turning, he started edging his way through the darkness.

*I can't just sit here and do nothing*, Danny told himself. *Nearly everyone else is just ... frozen. I have to help. Somehow.* He got up, moved cautiously through the crowd.

Both gunmen, as twitchy as they were, saw Hope rise into the air on crystalline wings. They both opened fire on her; she was well above the crowd, so that the bullets that missed her merely perforated canvas. Those that struck her wings pinged off again; those that struck her skin stung like wasps, but did not penetrate.

She swooped toward one of the men, but became aware that the other was still shooting, in short bursts. If she got too low, she would endanger the crowd. Frustrated, she pulled up again. Both henchmen were still shooting at her.

*How do I do this?* she asked herself.

And then one gunman stopped shooting.

It had been easy for Dragon to slide along behind the bulk of the crowd. Hope made for a wonderful distraction. He never saw her coming. And she had built this body with enough power to deliver a worthwhile punch.

He slumped to the ground, and she kicked the gun away from his limp hands, then turned to see Hope swooping at the other gunman.

Amy eased through the crowd, seeking out capes that she knew, releasing them from Valefor's control. She wanted to cry as she saw Hope buffeted by the gunshots. *Oh, please be careful,* she begged silently.*If one of those hits you in the eye ...*

Bullets smacked into Hope's arms and body, stinging like hail. This guy would not give up, would
not surrender. *Can’t he see I’m bulletproof?*

Apparently he realised this fact at last, and swung the gun toward the crowd, still facing up at Hope. The threat was obvious. *Back off or I open fire.*

Hope backed off. She had no choice.

And then a lanky arm reached out of the crowd and pushed the gun up and out of line. A hard fist clocked him on the jaw. He staggered, recovered; he was a tough man, hard to put down in one hit.

Shaking his head, he focused on his assailant. A tall skinny man, in his forties. Not even a cape. He pulled his gun free, brought it down and into line. *Your funeral, buddy.*

Danny Hebert looked death in the face.

Which was about the point that Newter landed on the guy. It had been a beautiful leap, from thirty feet away, launching off of a table. He slammed feet-first into the guy's chest; the gun flew from his hands and skidded across the floor. A bright orange tail wrapped around the gunman's throat and face. Seconds later, the gunman was looking dreamily up at the roof of the tent, his eyes observing nothing belonging to any rational dimension.

Danny felt as though he was going to throw up. Newter looked at him with some concern, but was reassured when Danny gave him a shaky nod.

*Have to hand it to him,* he thought, as he set about securing the guy. *That took serious guts. Gave me just enough time to get set up.*

Eligos stepped from the darkness, already forming a blade of air in his hands. Hope was just landing, not five yards away. He launched it at her. She caught the motion, detected the life-spark emerging from the darkness, and turned; her wing swept around, just barely managing to deflect the attack.

Angered, he threw another one, and another. She deflected them, one after the other. The impacts jarred her wings, but she dared not let one past; the crowd was just behind her.

And then he turned and threw one up and away. She tracked it with her eyes; it was going to turn, swoop back ...

... into the crowd.

She knew she was leaving herself wide open. She could not help it. Eyes fixed on the ripple of distortion left by the air-blade, she powered on an intercept course.

Behind her, he snarled in triumph and crafted another air-blade, ready to launch it after her flying form.

The laser beam seared into his leg; he screamed at the pain, crumpling to the ground. Looking around wildly, he saw Director Piggot of the PRT, holding a laser rifle. The next shot, he knew, would not be a simple wound. His force field stopped kinetic damage quite well, but it was transparent, and let lasers through without hindrance.

Grudgingly, he raised his hands.

Piggot pointed after Hope, and made a throat-slashing gesture. Her gun, pointed at Eligos, allowed
Hope saw the air-blade gaining power and strength. It began its swoop back toward the people. It would strike them from behind, kill a dozen or more.

*Just one chance. I have to block it with my body.*

It would hurt, she knew. Quite a lot. Perhaps kill her. But she could not stand by and allow people to die, not like that.

And Amy was there. *Amy will be able to save me.*

*Probably.*

She steeled herself for the impact.

It never came.

A rush of wind blew her about for a moment before she regained control, but that was it.

*I don't get it. What happened?*

It was only when she looked back and saw Director Piggot standing over Eligos, that understanding dawned. She waved. *Thank you, Emily. Thank you, Amy.*

Emily Piggot gave her an ironic salute in return.

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**Finale**

Dragon had cut the siren on her craft. Everyone could hear again, but no-one was moving. Most were still under Valefor's influence, awaiting orders. Those that were not, watched the ones that were.

Darkness still roiled over the dancefloor, hiding the dais from view.

Hope and Amy stepped through the veil of darkness, guided by Taylor. She, of course, knew exactly where they were going. Danny came along too; he had, Taylor agreed, earned this.

Valefor lay on his back on the dais, out cold. A towel had been draped over his face. Grue and Genesis stood over him, along with Imp and Sundancer. Imp looked ready to kick him in the head a few times; Grue didn't look inclined to stop her.

"It'll take forever and a day to snap everyone out of it," said Amy. "We need a faster way."

"And until we do," said Brian, "I can't drop my darkness. That damn order will still be in effect."

"Right," said Hope. She glanced at Amy. "Shall we?"

Amy nodded. "Let's."

They crouched alongside Valefor, and Amy took over his biology. It was the work of a moment to heal the damage done by Genesis' creation, and then to wake him up. He groaned his way to consciousness.
"I wouldn't worry about trying to move," said Hope. "You're basically paralysed for the time being."

"Currently," said Amy, "this is temporary. We just need you to do something for us."

"Gnuh?" asked Valefor.

"Oh yes," said Amy. "You can't form words. That's deliberate. Wouldn't want you shouting an order. So. The girl at the entrance, and the three men. Release them from your power."

"Gnnngh." The tone of the voice indicated disagreement.

"That," said Taylor, "was not a request." A cockroach scuttled across the floor. It ran up under the towel, on to Valefor's face. Danny grimaced, but did not speak.

"Gnn." It didn't sound cooperative.

Three more cockroaches joined the first.

"Gnn! Gnh! Ungnnhh!" Valefor tried to thrash about, but all that happened was a few twitches from under the towel.


"Gnn." There was defeat in his voice. The cockroaches scuttled off his face.

"It's done?"

"Gnn."

"Let's just see about that," said Imp. She walked into the wall of darkness. From the other side, she could be heard shouting, "Hey, T-bird!"

More distantly came an answering shout. "Yo!"

"How do you feel?"

"Like I want to hurt some bastard!"

"How about your guys?"

"They want to hurt some bastard too!"

There was positive glee in Imp's voice. "Want to come say hi to the bastard?"

"I'll be right there!"

Moments later, Lisa exited the veil of darkness, to join the group standing around Valefor. With her was Director Piggot, laser rifle slung, as well as Dragon.

"PRT troops are on the way," the Director said. "They'll be here momentarily. In the meantime, I've got my people watching the crowd in case anyone does anything stupid."

"Uh – Director?" asked Amy. "Did you want to take over here?"

Piggot shook her head. "Not yet," she said. "I'm just here to ensure that there is no mistreatment of the prisoner."
Hope nodded, and gave her a smile. Piggot inclined her head gravely.

"Okay, Valefor," said Amy. "Here's the deal. You're going to release all control over everyone you've ever influenced. All of it. Now."

There was a pause.

"Once again," said Taylor, "this is not a request."

Director Piggot shot her a penetrating glance, but said nothing.

A long moment of silence passed, then Amy pressed, "Well?"

Valefor slumped. "Gnnh," he said dully.

"That means, yes," said Lisa. "He's done it."

Piggot smiled. "Well done."

"We have one more problem now," said Amy.

"Which is?" asked Director Piggot.

"He can do this again," said Hope bluntly. "He very nearly succeeded this time. How do we ... disarm him?"

"Skitter could pack his eyes full of maggots," said Imp. She stared at all the startled glances. "What?" she said. "She totally could!" She paused, glancing sideways at Director Piggot. "If she was here, that is," she amended hastily.

Danny looked at his daughter a little doubtfully. _Could you do that? Would you do that?_ She glanced back at him, and gave just the tiniest shrug. _Maybe. If I had to._

His hand found hers, and squeezed it. She squeezed back.

"I think ... we'll skip that idea," said Director Piggot dryly. "Do you have anything a little more ... humane?"

"Well," said Amy diffidently, "I have some ideas."

Piggot looked over at her. "Yes?" she said.

"I can't affect his powers directly," Amy explained. "They're too stable, too well established. But they depend on him having working eyes. So."

She began to tick off points on her fingers. "I can reformat the part of his brain that recognises visual input and connects with his powers. I can dissolve his optic nerves. Or I can give him severe cataracts, and rewrite his genetic code so that he will always get cataracts, even if his eyes are cut out and regrown from scratch."

"You can do that?" asked the Director.

Amy nodded and shrugged. "It's just biology."

Piggot frowned. "All three procedures are safe? No undue pain, no risk to his life?"
Amy nodded. "Oh, yes. I'll have Hope spotting for me." She took Hope's hand.

"I prefer the maggot idea," grumbled Imp. Grue reached out and mused her hair. She slapped at his hand.

"Well then," said Director Piggot, "given that he has just recently demonstrated the sheer danger inherent in his powers, and a willingness to use them, it's this or a kill order. As regional Director of the PRT, I'm authorising you to perform all three procedures, effective immediately."

Danny blinked. *All three procedures? She plays hardball.*

But then, he recalled looking down the muzzle of a gun, and found it hard to muster any sympathy.

"Thank you, Director," said Amy. She and Hope took hold of Valefor's hands.

"Hey," said Imp. "Can you at least make it *feel* like his eyeballs are being packed with maggots?"

Piggot raised an eyebrow. "I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that."

**Celebration**

As the PRT took away the bound prisoners – some of whom had required healing before they were ready to leave – Lisa stepped on to the dais and looked around the crowd. Grue's darkness had lifted, and people were starting to get a little restless.

"Ladies and gentlemen, heroes and villains," she said cheerfully. "Tonight has been quite eventful so far, hasn't it?"

Laughter rippled across the audience. She grinned her vulpine grin.

"Well," she said, "there's one more event to come." She looked around at the audience, then pointed. "Taylor, could you come up here a moment, please?"

Taylor looked around, a little perplexed, then glanced at Danny. He had recovered from his near-death experience, at least for the moment, and gave her an encouraging smile.

She joined Lisa on the dais, frowning. Leaning close, she whispered, "What's happening now?" The microphone caught her voice, and there was a stir of laughter from the audience.

Lisa leaned in to the microphone and said, "What's happening now, ladies and gentlemen, is that my good friend here, Taylor Hebert – turned sixteen today!" She grabbed Taylor's hand and held it high; Taylor was too surprised to resist.

There was a moment of stunned silence, both from Taylor and from the audience. Lisa pressed the play button on the stereo remote, and a jazz version of "Happy Birthday to You" began to blare from the speakers. And then the audience erupted in cheers and whistles and applause. Some people began to sing along with the song. A few even managed to get it right.

Taylor turned to Lisa. "Oh, you *didn't,*" she groaned. "Tell me you didn't."

Lisa nodded to the entrance of the tent, where Brian was proudly bearing in a huge frosted cake. As he came closer, Taylor could see it had "16" prominently embossed on the top in far too much icing.

"Oh, but I did," Lisa said, her grin more vulpine than ever. "I surely did." She hugged Taylor and
kissed her on the cheek. "Happy birthday. From all of us."

After a long moment, Taylor hugged her back. "Okay," she mumbled. "I'll blow out the candles on your stupid birthday cake. But I won't enjoy it."

"If you say so." But Lisa's grin said it all. She knew better.
In which the party winds down, connections get made, and people go their respective ways

Chapter Notes

Song lyrics are copyright to the song "50 Years" by the Uncanny X-Men.

Following the impromptu celebration of Taylor's birthday, and the obligatory cutting of the cake, most of the civilians had drifted away. The capes, however, remained.

"So," said Director Piggot. "Once this amnesty is established, you let me know which members of your group are willing to play ball. If, as you say, Night and Fog are a couple, and won't want to be separated, then we can work with that. I'd even be willing to work out a scheme by which we pay them to remain on the reserves list until they are needed."

Purity raised an eyebrow. "So, paying them to not use their powers?" she asked. "Isn't that kind of setting a bad precedent?"

Piggot winced. "I wouldn't put it quite like that," she said. "But basically, yes. They get a paycheck to stay at home, walk in the park, work on their hobbies, and when we call them in, they're expected to step up and do their bit."

Purity nodded. "I'll put it to them," she said. "I can't guarantee they'll go for it, but I think it's a fair chance that they will."

"Excellent," said Director Piggot. "I expect to hear from you as soon as they decide, one way or the other. In the meantime, you might want to think about how you're going to rebrand yourselves."

This time, Purity raised both eyebrows. "Rebrand?"

"Rename," explained Piggot. "New name, new costume. If you're going to be a hero instead of a villain, you're going to need an image change."

"Of course," agreed Purity, her voice heavy with irony. "After all, you could never allow a villain to join the Protectorate, could you?"

"No," agreed Director Emily Piggot of the PRT, "you certainly could not."

Kayden had to hand it to Piggot; she didn't even crack the slightest of smiles as she said it.

Perhaps she even meant it.

Standing up, Kayden leaned across and shook Director Piggot's hand. "Thank you," she said. "I have to go now – Theo will be wanting to get to sleep – but I will definitely be in touch."

Piggot stood as well. "You're welcome," she said. "I look forward to it."

"Weld."
"Yes?" Weld looked around. Miss Militia stood nearby, with Triumph at her side.

"I'll be heading back to headquarters now," she said. "Director Piggot will be leaving soon as well. Assault and Battery will be staying to accompany you back with the Wards. Dragon has indicated that she will be taking responsibility for Armsmaster's return. I'm relying on you to keep the rest of the Wards in line, and getting them back at a reasonable hour."

Weld nodded. "I can do that, ma'am." He nodded to her. "Thanks for letting us attend."

Miss Militia smiled. "I wouldn't have missed it for the world." She turned and walked from the tent, Triumph at her side.

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"Director Piggot?"

Piggot turned, recognising at once the face of the man approaching her squad.

"It's all right," she said to them. "What can I do for you, Mr Hebert?"

"I was just wondering; were you aware that Shadow Stalker's made two attempts on our lives in the last three days?"

She became much more alert. "No, I was not," she said. "I knew she was active, but not that active." She looked closely at Danny. "How, exactly, did you survive the attacks?"

"Uh, the first time, luck and road flares," he said. "We managed to keep ahead of her long enough for Hope to rescue us. The second time ... well, Amy made up some weird bugs for Skitter. Like fireflies on steroids. Skitter placed them around the house, and Shadow Stalker triggered one. Tattletale says it'll be a couple of days before she recovers."

Director Piggot considered this. "Well, I still don't like it. You should have contacted us."

Danny nodded. "I know, I know. But my daughter works in Skitter's organisation, which is still technically a criminal enterprise, so ..." He trailed off.

Piggot nodded. "Well, if we can push this amnesty through, there will no longer be a conflict. In the meantime, I'm going to be arranging extra security for you and Taylor at, and before, the trial. Just in case."

"Okay, I guess," he said. "I appreciate it." He paused. "Actually, about the trial. Can you ... tell me something? Give me some sort of assurance?"

She frowned. "What kind of assurance?"

"That the PRT is serious about this trial, about punishing the bullies."

"I can assure you, Mr Hebert," said Director Piggot, "that the PRT does not condone cape-instigated bullying in any way, shape or form." She paused. "Nor any other kind of bullying, come to that, but that's the only type that falls under our jurisdiction."

He nodded. "I just wish ... you'd found out about this earlier. About Shadow Stalker. What she was doing to my daughter. What they were all doing." A shadow crossed over his face. "I never knew. She didn't want to bother me with it."

"Your daughter is strong, Mr Hebert," said the Director. "I know strength when I see it, and I see it in her. She's got guts. She'll see it through."
Danny nodded. "Yes. She will." He looked her in the eye. "I nearly lost her. She ran away, because I questioned her about skipping school. But now ... I'm getting my daughter back. She's talking to me again. Telling me everything that happened. Introducing me to her friends." He wished he'd bitten his tongue on that last bit; if Piggot chose to ask which friends he meant, he would be forced to make up names.

But she didn't notice, or didn't consider it significant. "That is good to hear, Mr Hebert. I'm glad. Not all parents are as concerned about their children's welfare."

"She's all I've got," he said soberly. "If I lose her ... I lose everything I hold dear."

She put her hand on his shoulder. "I believe I know how that feels," she said quietly. "Trust me on this; the PRT is not going to let your daughter down a second time."

He nodded. "Thank you," he said. "I appreciate it."

She turned and left the tent, her squad moving in step with her. He watched her go, his expression thoughtful.

Alexandria clicked through the last forms, closed the program, then set about shutting down her computer. *Maybe a lap around the city,* she thought, *then home.*

The phone rang. She stared at it for the space of three more rings.

"Do I answer it?"

Leaning over, she checked the caller ID. *Piggot. Hm.*

*This might be important. Unusual things are happening in Brockton Bay these days. It's a good idea to keep on top of them.*

She pressed the button to answer on speakerphone, continued putting away her paperwork as she spoke.

"PRT Chief Director's office, Director Costa-Brown speaking."

"Ah, I'm glad I caught you, Director," she heard Piggot say. There was music and chatter in the background.

"Emily? I was just on my way out. Are you still at that party?"

"Yes, Director; I was just leaving myself. Sorry to bother you. But I've just been made aware of attempts on the life of Taylor Hebert. You know, the witness to the Barnes trial?"

"I am aware who Taylor Hebert is," Alexandria said flatly. "Attempts were made on her life? By whom?"

"Shadow Stalker. She has manifested new powers, and is apparently going after those who have hurt her the most. She's taken one shot at Regent already, and two at Ms Hebert."

She paused. "Also, I'm concerned that there may be mundane attempts to intimidate the witnesses; I don't trust this Barnes character as far as I could kick him."

"Very well," said Alexandria. "I'll have people brought in to boost your numbers. That way, you can assign a protective detail to guard her if need be."

"Thank you, Director."
"You're very welcome. Good night." Alexandria put the phone down, and considered. *Who can we spare right now?*

She made her decision, restarted her computer, and sent a brief email. One minute later, she was out the door.

Myrddin frowned as his phone pinged. *Who's emailing me at this time of night?*

He read the message, and his confusion only deepened. *The Director wants me to do what?*

However, the meaning was unambiguous, and so he had no real choice. Sighing, he made a phone call.

"Tecton? Myrddin. You and Raymancer are taking the redeye to Brockton Bay. Wanton can hold down the shop in your absence. I have orders to get you there as of yesterday."

A pause. "You'll be working alongside the Brockton Bay Wards, under Miss Militia. Now pack your bags; the plane leaves in fifty-five minutes."

"Sabah, Lily," said Hope with a smile. "Enjoying the party?"

"Oh, yes," said Sabah. She hugged Hope; Hope hugged her back. "I really am. Lily's an amazing dancer."

"You're the amazing dancer," retorted Lily. "I'm just plodding along." She accepted a hug from Hope, and returned it in kind.

Hope smiled. "I'm glad. Thank you both, for helping out."

"Oh," said Sabah, "it's my pleasure. Really it is." She paused. "Actually, I just had an idea." She looked at the benches and tables. "Those benches aren't really comfortable, are they?"

"Unfortunately, no," said Hope.

"Well, let's see about that," said Sabah, eyeing the side wall of the tent. "There's plenty of material there that's not really necessary."

"And then some more dancing?" asked Lily hopefully.

"Always some more dancing," Sabah assured her.

As Sabah went to work, cutting swathes out of the side wall, Hope leaned in to talk to Lily.

"So how's the dress going for you?" she asked with a grin.

"I'm actually getting used to it, believe it or not," admitted Lily. "It feels kinda nice. But in the long run, I still think I prefer pants."

"Me too," agreed Hope. "Skirts just get too flappy when I'm flying."

Hope couldn't see Lily's face, but she could tell there was a grin lurking in her voice. "Yeah, see," she said. "I just don't have that problem."

"So I have to ask," said Hope, chuckling at Lily's comment, "when the Fallen attacked ... did you
two ever actually stop dancing?"

"What?" said Lily. "The Fallen attacked? When did that happen?"

The note of surprise in her voice was so convincing that Hope had to laugh.

The party was winding down; it was now quite late at night.

*It's nearly time we were leaving; we'll have one more for the road ...*

Before going back to the dance floor, Parian had created several sofas, upon which the remaining guests were seated, as well as a large round mattress for the children.

*... it don't mean nothing ...*

The music coming from the speakers was soft and gentle; a slower, downbeat version of the classic song.

*... it don't mean nothing ...*

Brian and Jess danced to it, holding each other close. Jess was much more confident on her feet now, and they moved well together. She had her head up against his chest, her eyes closed, just enjoying the movement and the music.

*... so we gather around the table ...*

Flechette and Parian moved slowly to the music, totally absorbed in one another.

*... raise our champagne in the air ...*

Battery had finally convinced Assault to come up on to the dance floor; they had a good rhythm together, and they seemed to almost glide over the boards.

*... it don't mean nothing ...*

Armsmaster showed a lack of practice, while Dragon's steps were precise and neat. But despite his earlier reluctance, he seemed to be enjoying himself.

*... it don't mean nothing ...*

Gregor and Shamrock had dared the dance floor, and although the boards creaked, they held. His steps were ponderous, but with the slow beat of the music, this mattered not at all. Shamrock snuggled close to him as they danced, her expression blissful.

*... 'cause we've got this night together; we'll have here now forever ...*

Vista sat, contemplating a slice of Taylor's birthday cake. The remaining capes had separated out into groups, talking quietly. Hope was sitting with Amy and a few others; she had invited Vista to sit and talk with them, but right now the young cape just wanted to be on her own, to think. To brood, in fact.

It wasn't fair. She was the youngest member of the Wards, sure, but she had more experience than nearly all of them. But they treated her like a little kid. The boys didn't even want to dance with her. *Even Amy got to dance with Hope.*
A half-smile crept across her face. That had been funny, watching Amy coaching Hope through the steps, getting their feet sorted out, both of them trying not to laugh. They had both enjoyed the process thoroughly, but eventually they had gone back to sit with the others.

"I'm a superhero, dammit," she thought. "Is it too much to ask for, just to have someone to ask me to dance?" She didn't want a boyfriend right now – she was far too busy just being Vista – but to dance with someone, to hold someone in her arms and be held, just for one night ... was that too much to ask?

She stared morosely at the slice of cake. It seemed to epitomise her life right now; the odd one out, lonely, unwanted.

Sierra yawned widely and checked her watch. "Wow," she said. "It is late." She sat on one of Parian's sofas, with one child curled up in her lap and another snuggled into her side. Hope, Danny and Taylor each had another child curled up to them, while the remainder were tangled together on the round mattress, fast asleep.

Hope looked down at Amy, snuggled up half-asleep on one side of her, and at the child cuddled up to her other side, and nodded. "It is," she said. She looked at the children, all worn out from the party. "They're so cute, I hate to disturb them ..." she began.

"... but we should maybe think about getting them home," Taylor finished.

Lisa nodded. "Good idea," she agreed.

"We've got a car outside," said Sierra. "I'll drive them home."

"You've got a license?" asked Hope; Sierra wasn't much older than she was.

"Well, I can drive," replied Sierra with a grin.

"Ah, right," Hope said, with an answering grin. "I shall say no more."

Taylor stretched and yawned. "We might head off too," she admitted. "Dad?"

Danny nodded. "Might be a good idea, before I'm too tired to drive," he agreed.

Trickster leaned back on the sofa. "Some party, huh?" he said.

Omake snuggled into his side, holding his arm around her. "Mmm," she agreed. "It was a lot of fun. I met so many great people. And I had my dance, so I'm happy." She smiled. "But Sundancer, you wereawesome."

Sundancer was lying with her head up on the other end of the sofa, her feet resting on Trickster's lap. "I'm wrecked, is what I am," she said with a yawn. "I haven't danced like that in years. My feet are probably going to file for divorce in the morning."

Faultline chuckled, from the sofa opposite. "Well, you certainly had a good time. And I see Genesis is still out there with Grue." She paused. "I have to admit, I didn't see that one coming."

Newter grinned from his perch atop one of the tables. "Nah, it's Gregor who's the dancing fool. Shamrock's had a grin a mile wide since she convinced him to give it a try." He paused. "Hey, why didn't you get up there with Imp, Regent?"
Regent stretched and yawned from the opposite end of Faultline's sofa. "Hey," he said, "she was doing fine with Sundancer. As far as I'm concerned, dancing's what other people do."

Weld sat on the ground with his elbows propped up on a bench. "From what I hear of you, Regent, everything's what other people do, as far as you're concerned. Even if you're the one doing it."

Trickster chuckled, Newter and Clockblocker laughed, and the girls giggled. Even Faultline may have smirked behind the scarf covering her mouth. "Yeah, yeah, laugh it up," retorted Regent. "She likes my style just fine."

"I'm actually curious about that," said Clockblocker. "What's stopping you from just, you know, controlling her into doing whatever? Because that sounds pretty damn icky to me."

"Well, for one thing," said Regent, "how do you know I don't do it anyway? She might enjoy it. And for another, if I did do it, it would only last till I lost concentration, and then I lose track of her. And the next thing I know, I've got a knife in my kidneys."

"Huh," said Kid Win. "Mutually assured destruction."

"Sounds like most cape teams," quipped Newter.

"You're not altogether wrong," agreed Trickster.

Together, Danny and the girls got the kids into the car; the ones that were still up protested that they wanted to stay, but were asleep almost as soon as they hit the car seat.

Hope gave her a hug. "Take care," she said. "Drive safe."

"You too," said Sierra, hugging her back. She also hugged Taylor. "Once again," she said, "happy birthday."

Taylor hugged her back. "You're all terrible people for keeping the secret from me, but thanks. I really, really enjoyed it."

"That's the general idea, boss," said Sierra. She got in the car, started it, and drove away carefully.

"Hi," said Imp, from right beside Vista. She was grinning mischievously.

Vista jumped, barely holding back a yelp of surprise.

"Where did you come from?" she asked, feeling her heart rate double in pace.

Imp shrugged. "Wandering around. Thought you looked lonely. Could do with someone to talk to." She shrugged again, an expression of supreme indifference. "I can go, if you want."

Vista paused for a long moment. Imp went to get up.

"No," said Vista. "You're right. It would be nice to have someone to talk to."

"Hey now," said Imp warningly. "I'm not gonna be talking My Little Pony or crap like that. I'm all about the cape thing, you know?"

Vista smiled. "I think I can deal."
"Well," said Taylor, "good night." She gave Hope a heartfelt hug, and kissed her on the cheek.

Hope returned the hug and kiss, then smiled at her. "I'm glad you enjoyed the surprise," she said happily, then giggled. "The look on your face ..."

"You all suck, every single one of you," Taylor said without heat, "and I love you for it." She hugged Lisa, and then Amy, who was still rubbing her eyes. "Thank you, all of you, for a wonderful party."

Lisa's grin was as vulpine as ever. "You needed it," she said simply.

Taylor nodded. "Yeah," she said. "I guess I did."

Danny had the truck door open, and Taylor climbed in. Lisa hugged Danny, who returned the embrace. "Thanks for helping us out with this," she said.

"Hey, thanks for arranging the party in the first place," he said. "Even with the villain attack, it was still a lot of fun."

She grinned at him as he let her go, and feinted a couple of punches. "We'd better watch out; pretty soon you'll be dressing up as a hero and putting us all out of business."

"Hell, no," he said with feeling. "Once was enough."

Amid general chuckles, he got into the truck and started it. With one last wave from the both of them, he set the vehicle in motion and crunched out of the carpark.

"Okay," said Vista. "So you turn invisible, right?"

"Not ... quite," replied Imp. "But yeah, close enough for government work."

"But you're with the Undersiders, right?" persisted Vista. "I haven't heard much about you. Anything, really."

"I'm kinda new," agreed Imp. "I've been helping Grue out, and also with the move into the old Merchants territory. Some of the druggies don't want to change with the times. I've been teaching them otherwise."

"How do you do that?" asked Vista.

Imp grinned. "I screw with their minds."

Vista considered this, then decided that she didn't want to know any details.

"Actually, I got a question," said Imp.

"Shoot," replied Vista.

"Why are you wearing that Shadow Stinker outfit?"

Vista grinned behind the mask. "I'm pretending Shadow Stalker, the one in the Birdcage, is the evil twin, and I'm the good one." She tapped the mask. "See the smiley?"

Imp frowned. "Dunno what they're telling you in the Wards," she said seriously. "But Shadow Bitch isn't in the Birdcage. She's out and about."
Vista stared at her. "But she was tried and sent there."

Imp shrugged. "She never got there. And she's got some major new powers. Drains life. No fun."

"Well, shit," said Vista. "That sucks."

Imp nodded. "Yeah. She's tried to kill Regent once already, and twice with Taylor and her dad." She shrugged. "Apparently she doesn't want Taylor testifying."

"Damn," said Vista. She paused. "Wait, what? She's tried to kill them? Twice? When?"

"Two nights ago, and last night," said Imp promptly.

"Why didn't anyone tell us?"

Imp blinked. "No-one told you? Huh." She shrugged. "I guess ... what would you have done?"

"I don't know," said Vista, "but we would have done something. What Shadow Stalker did to Taylor sucks big time, and her dad's actually a really nice guy."

Imp nodded. "For an old guy, and for a non-cape, he was pretty cool tonight, wasn't he?"

"Yeah," agreed Vista. "Taylor's pretty lucky."

Taylor leaned her head against the window-frame of the truck door, letting the wind whip at her face. Her expression was dreamy.

"Penny for your thoughts, kiddo."

She turned to look at her father. "This is possibly the single best night of my life," she said. "All you guys just ... the whole party was a scam. A surprise party, just for me."

"You're worth it," he said seriously. "You've needed something good, something great, in your life for some time now. You don't have a boyfriend, so we did the next best thing."

She smiled widely, even as the tears came to her eyes. "You have no idea how much it means to me, that you did all this for me, just to make me feel better." She sniffled. "Great, now I'm going to start crying."

He tugged out his handkerchief and handed it to her, without taking his eyes off the road. "Cry away, kiddo. I'm not going to stop you."

She blew her nose and dabbed at her eyes, and felt more in control of herself. "You know something?" she said.

"What's that?" he asked, turning the truck up into the driveway.

"I've had such a good night, it didn't even bother me to see Brian dancing with Genesis." She shook her head. "I mean, I still think he's major hot stuff, but ... it's not bothering me." She got out of the truck, carrying his helmet. "I feel too good to even let that get at me."

"That's good, kiddo," he said with a smile, unlocking the front door. "I'm glad you had a good night."

She nodded. "Well, first things first, I'm going upstairs to change out of this costume. I know Lisa
likes to wear it, but seriously, I feel just too damn naked in it."

He nodded. "Good idea. I'll fix us a bedtime snack."

"Yeah." She sighed dreamily. "I'm gonna need to unwind, or I'll never get to sleep."

When Hope, Amy and Lisa got back to the gathering, the young heroes and villains were showing signs of starting to think about going. However, it took Lisa going over and turning the music off before the dancers finally noticed the passage of time. In fact, Lisa had to tap Flechette on the shoulder before she and Parian realised the music had stopped.

Assault and Battery were holding hands like teenagers when they walked off the dance floor. "We're going to have to do this more often," declared Assault.

"And you wanted to hold off till later," Battery pointed out.

Assault loftily ignored her jibe. "Okay, kids, ready to go?" he asked. "Dragon, are you good to get Armsmaster back?"

Dragon nodded. "There's room for two in my craft," she said. "We can manage." She was also holding Armsmaster's hand; he didn't seem inclined to let go.

Genesis and Grue separated a little sheepishly; the former got a high-five from Sundancer, while the latter came in for some cheerful ribbing from Regent and Imp.

Shamrock and Gregor came back to rejoin Faultline and Newter. "Did you have a good dance?" asked Faultline, with an arched eyebrow.

"Yes," said Gregor. "I enjoyed it a great deal."

Shamrock sighed. "Assault's right," she said. "We have to do this more often."

"We have dance floors in Palanquin," pointed out Newter with a grin.

"Which are generally loaded with screaming teens, and playing entirely the wrong sort of music," retorted Shamrock.

"Okay, fine," said Faultline. "We'll play the sort of music you like after the club closes. Does that meet with your approval?"

Shamrock hugged Gregor's arm. "Oh, yes," she said. "Yes, please."

Outside, as they watched Parian collapse the tent and fold it neatly in place, Genesis broke away from the Travelers and approached the Undersiders. She took Grue by the hand and drew him away a few steps.

"I ... I'd like to see you again," she said quietly.

"Really?" he asked. "I mean, I'd like to see you again too. Soon."

"Soon," she agreed. "Really soon." She stood on tip-toes, and kissed him, a warm press of the lips. Then she started heading back to the Travelers.

"Genesis," he called after her. She looked back, and he moved over to her. Bending his head close to
hers, he whispered, "My name is Brian."

She looked at him, startled. Then she caught her breath, and whispered back, "Jess."

One more quick, stolen, illicit kiss, then they separated, to head back to their respective groups.

Omake hugged her friend; Sundancer looked just a little jealous, but gave her another high-five anyway.

Regent didn't seem to have noticed the entire episode, while Imp was looking at Genesis speculatively as she formed a giant dragon-like creature out of thin air. Lisa just grinned at him with her vulpine grin, from where she stood with Hope and Amy.

"Shut up," he growled.

"I didn't say a word," she protested, without losing her grin.

"You didn't have to."

Just before the Protectorate contingent left, Kid Win approached Hope.

"Skitter got the package I sent her, right?" he asked. "I was going to ask her directly, but she never showed."

"She had other business," Hope said blandly. "But yes, she got it. And she worked out how to use it. She's actually pretty good with it."

Kid Win smiled. "Excellent," he said. "That's really, really good to hear."

One more surprise was in store for Taylor; when she came down the stairs in her jeans and T-shirt, there was a small pile of wrapped presents on the table.

"What the – where did these come from, Dad?" she asked.

"I have no idea," he said, working to keep a straight face. "The birthday fairy must have left them for you."

She nearly strangled him with the hug.

"That was Imp you were speaking to, wasn't it?" asked Weld.

Vista nodded, concentrating on bending space. The two Protectorate members and the four Wards were heading over the rooftops at what would normally have been breakneck speed; with her power in use, they didn't exceed a brisk stroll.

"Are we going to have another Flechette and Parian situation?" he continued. His voice wasn't censorious, merely interested. He wanted to know, just in case.

All the same, she blushed. "God no, nothing like that," she protested. "I don't like her, not in that way. Geez, you should know by now, I like boys."

"True," he admitted, "but stranger things have been known to happen."
"Well, it didn't this time," she said firmly. "Imp's just ... fun. Interesting. She does her best to shock you. And she's a girl who's nearly my own age, who I can talk to about cape stuff. Okay? Need anything else for your report?"

Weld shook his head, while Assault and Clockblocker chuckled out loud. "No, Vista, I don't need anything else. Just making sure, is all."

"Well, I hope she makes it into the Wards," said Vista firmly. "She would really shake things up."

*She's probably right,* mused Weld.

*The question is, would it be a good thing?*

The first present Taylor opened was obviously from Imp; she had not signed it, but there was a smiley with an impudent grin, and two little horns. She had to laugh at the contents; the first part was a comedic paperback titled *How To Pick Up Boys*. The second part was a pack of condoms.

"Oooh yeah," she sighed. "That's Imp, all over."

There was a card in an envelope; the card was a store-bought one wishing her a happy sixteenth birthday, with cheerful messages from Hope and Amy within. There was also a small note from Amy, inviting her to drop by the shelter and pick up her 'real' present.

Grue had found, she had no idea where, a DVD copy of *Kung Fu Panda 2* from Earth Aleph. She had liked the first one, so she was interested in seeing the second one.

But the best present came from her father. It was a small jewelry case, which she opened with trepidation. Within was a necklace with a fine silver chain, upon which depended a silver spider built around a gorgeous opal. As she held it up to the light, rainbow colours flashed through the precious stone.

"Oh. My. God," she breathed. "I love it." She turned to him, her eyes brimming with tears. "I love it. Where did you find it?"

"Oh, well," he shrugged, "I knew what I wanted for you, but I didn't know where to get it. So I had Lisa go looking, and I paid for it."

She raised an eyebrow. "Lisa has quite a bit of her own money, you know."

He nodded. "That's her present there." It was a much smaller jewelry box. This contained a pair of earrings, made of gold and onyx, portraying two perfectly crafted golden orb spiders.

"Wow," she said. "That's just ... wow."

He nodded. "I know." Indicating the necklace, he said, "Would you like me to put it on you?"

"Would you?" she asked.

He nodded, and lifted the necklace from the box. She lifted her hair out of the way, and he carefully clasped it around her neck. She let her hair fall back, and allowed the spider to drape down over her front. Even against the T-shirt – or possibly, *especially* against the T-shirt – it looked spectacular.

Carefully, she unclasped it, and placed it back in its box. Then she gave Danny a heartfelt hug. "I love it," she said, her face buried in his chest. "I love it all. Even Imp's present."
He had to chuckle as he held her close. "Happy birthday, kiddo. Happy birthday."
In which Tecton and Raymancer are introduced to the Heberts, the Pure discuss options, and Hope learns a little about computers

"Take a seat."

Miss Militia, Weld, Tecton and Raymancer found chairs and sat down, Weld and Tecton on specially-reinforced chairs provided for the occasion.

Director Piggot looked them over; Weld and Miss Militia looked well turned out, despite having attending the party the night before. Raymancer and Tecton seemed to be none the worse for the lack of sleep they had to be feeling; this was all to the good.

Each of the Chicago Wards was in costume; Tecton was holding his helmet under his arm.

"To use an old and hackneyed phrase," she said, "I presume you are wondering why each of you is here today."

"To venture a guess," said Miss Militia, "there are security concerns over the ceremony this afternoon?" She paused. "Also, regarding the attempts on the lives of the Heberts?"

Director Piggot's attention sharpened. "Where did you hear about that?" she asked.

Miss Militia nodded to Weld, who answered for her. "Imp told Vista about it last night, Vista told me, and I told Miss Militia when we got back to base."

Piggot nodded. "Indeed. Well, both points are quite valid. The ceremony today must go through smoothly; we do not need a repeat of last night's event, with the Fallen."

"Wait, what?" said Tecton. "The Fallen made an attack in Brockton Bay, last night? How many casualties?"

"None," replied Director Piggot. "We were very lucky. It was only Valefor and Eligos, with six normals. They are all in custody; Valefor has been ... neutralised. Everyone he's ever affected is free of his influence."

Tecton and Raymancer glanced at one another, then back at Director Piggot. "That's good to hear," said Tecton. "And you expect something like this to happen again, today?"

"I don't expect it, no," Piggot corrected him. "But I'm preparing for it."

Tecton nodded in understanding, then spoke up again. "Excuse me; this ceremony. Is that the thing about the Slaughterhouse Nine?"

"Yes," answered Miss Militia. "It's to unveil a monument to their defeat, and to honour those of us who took part in it." She shrugged slightly. "There'll also be some other announcements, but that's the basic gist."

"And we get to attend, and meet everyone who was in on it?" Raymancer asked. "Awesome."

Director Piggot raised an eyebrow, Weld stifled a cough, and Miss Militia managed to look impassive.

"You do realise that Miss Militia and Weld were both there, don't you?" Tecton said patiently to
"Oh!" said Raymancer. "Uh, sorry, it just didn't click for a moment there."

Miss Militia may have been smiling. Weld chuckled. "It's all right. You'll get to meet the others in good time."

"So," said Piggot, bringing attention back to her. "The ceremony. You'll each be getting a plan layout of the site. Weld knows the area; you'll be working under him. As I said, I don't expect any problems at the ceremony, but extra security will definitely be welcome." She paused. "However, this is not the main reason you were sent here."

"The, uh, Heberts?" asked Tecton.

Director Piggot smiled thinly, acknowledging the fact that he had been paying attention. "Indeed; the Heberts. Father, Daniel. Daughter, Taylor." She opened a folder and spun two photos across the desk. "They are currently under threat from an ex-Ward by the name of Sophia Hess, cape name Shadow Stalker." Another two photos joined the first two, one of Shadow Stalker in full costume, one in prison sweats.

Tecton leaned forward, picked the photos up and studied them one at a time, handing them on to Raymancer. "Do we know why they are under threat?" he asked.

Weld nodded silently. Tecton knows how to ask the right questions, he thought. I'll have to pay attention to that.

"We have a reasonable idea," Piggot informed him. "Are you aware of the Barnes trial?"

Tecton nodded. "I've heard of it. About capes bullying normals in schools, right?"

"Effectively," said Director Piggot. "Hess was attending the same school as Taylor Hebert, and both bullied her and actively encouraged two other girls, both normals, to bully and harass her to the extent that she was hospitalised with mental trauma."

"And so they're on trial now?" asked Raymancer.

"Yes," replied Director Piggot. "Now they are. The hospitalisation happened a year ago. We were only informed of the bullying, and other factors, a few weeks ago, by a third party. Hess had already been stripped of her Wards status and sent to the Birdcage on an unrelated matter, but the Nine attacked her transport, and she ended up manifesting new powers and escaping."

She took a breath. "The fact remains that the other two girls actively and willingly participated in the bullying, and so they are being tried as henchmen. We don't know why Hess originally chose to pick Taylor Hebert as a target, but it seems that she doesn't want her to attend the trial, even though she's just being called in as a witness. As a matter of fact, it's the PRT that's pushing the case against the girls. We want to send the message that criminal activity, even if you're told to do it by a cape, even if you're a minor, will get you jail time."

Tecton nodded, his expression one of enlightenment. "That's why they went through the schools in Chicago where Wards were attending, looking for cases of cape-related bullying. I wondered about that, at the time." He smiled slightly. "There were none. That crap doesn't fly, not on my watch, not with my Wards."

"It wouldn't be valid, even if it was intended that way," Miss Militia commented. "Weld only took over after the Leviathan attack. The previous team leader, Aegis, was killed in that attack."

"Okay, right," said Tecton, anxious to move along from the embarrassing incident. "So, we're going to be protecting the Heberts from this Shadow Stalker?"

Director Piggot nodded. "She has acquired darkness powers; apparently she turns into a shadow form composed of tentacles that can drain the life from someone by touch. However, she is still presumably still vulnerable to electricity. We know for a fact that very bright light harms her."

"Which is why I'm here," said Raymancer. "I was beginning to wonder."

"Okay," said Tecton, "that makes sense. But why am I here?"

"To back up Raymancer, if he needs it," said Piggot. "Also, as muscle. One of the girls, Emma Barnes, has a rather unscrupulous lawyer for a father. It's one of the reasons they've managed to skip out of being punished for so long. We don't know that he will get people to physically harass the Heberts, but I'd rather not take any chances. And a cape in bulky power armour makes for a great deal of intimidation value."

"You'll both be covering them at night," said Miss Militia. "Raymancer can be up while Tecton gets his rest, but will be on call at any time. In the daytime, Raymancer can catch up on sleep, while Tecton accompanies Daniel Hebert to his work. He's with the Dockworker's Union; they're currently assisting in clearing roads and other rebuilding efforts. You may actually be of some use there."

"I suppose I can," agreed Tecton. "But what about Taylor Hebert, during the day? She'll be unprotected."

Director Piggot smiled thinly. "Somehow, I don't think so," she told him. "You see, she works for Skitter's organisation."

"Skitter? The bug girl?" asked Raymancer. "The villain? So she's basically a criminal herself?" He shook his head. "Why are we protecting her again?"

"Because she needs protecting," Tecton said, trying to keep the sharpness from his voice.

"We have no evidence whatsoever that Taylor Hebert has done anything worse than associate with known criminals," stated Piggot flatly. "The bullying was not her fault, and predated her association with Skitter. We dropped the ball on that one, badly. We're not going to drop it again by letting her get assassinated by the very same cape who was bullying her, in order to shut her up."

"In addition," added Miss Militia, "there is currently a truce ongoing, with an amnesty in the works, for the Undersiders, as well as any other gang that wishes to cease their criminal activity and start fresh in the Wards or Protectorate."

"Oh, okay," conceded Raymancer. "I can get that." He frowned. "But what's a few bugs going to do to stop someone from turning up to where she's at and harassing her, anyway?"

There was silence in the office, punctuated by the soft clank as Weld put his hand over his eyes. Without even looking up, he said quietly, "There are so many things wrong with that question that I am not even going to try to answer it. But I'll refer you to Clockblocker. He can describe what an absolute joy it is to fight Skitter."

"And on that note," said Director Piggot, "I believe we're done." She nodded to the four of them. "Thank you for attending." The dismissal was plain. They got up and left.
Taylor left the house just as the sun was peeping over the horizon. She fell into the old rhythm, running steadily, enjoying the chill morning air.

As she ran, scenes from the previous night replayed in her head. The original party had been fun enough, but after the Fallen had been taken down, the Protectorate and the Wards congratulating her dad – her dad! – for helping out.

And then, Lisa's surprise announcement ...

It had taken her totally off guard. She hadn't so much forgotten that it was her birthday as she simply disregarded the fact as irrelevant. Skitter was needed more than Taylor Hebert at the moment, so anything that drew her attention away from being Skitter was to be put on the back burner.

What had also astonished her was the reaction from her friends, the slaps on the back, the hugs, the well-wishes. And the cake. The cake had been wonderful. The fact of the cake was even more wonderful.

She smiled to herself. And the presents ...

Under her top, the opal spider necklace was a hard lump against her chest. She had debated wearing it on her run, but it made her feel so special that she had to do it, just this once.

In a warm glow of happiness, she ran on.

"Good morning, sleepyheads," Lisa greeted with a smile. "How are we this morning?"

Hope put her arm around Amy and held her close. "We're good," she said. Amy snuggled into the hug. "I think the party went off really well."

Lisa nodded. "It did. It really did." She tilted her head. "There was something you wanted to ask me?"

Hope nodded and pulled out the memory stick that Miss Militia had given her. "Um, do you have a computer I could use to look at this?"

"Sure thing," said Lisa, and led the way to a small room, holding several computers, all in operation. A new-looking air conditioner battled the heat coming off the computers.

Lisa had a word with one of the operators and got her to make way for Hope to sit down at the keyboard.

Hope looked at the memory stick, and then at the computer. She turned to Amy. "Um, I'm not actually good with these things," she said. "I never really had the chance to learn, growing up. Can you show me?"

Amy smiled and hugged her from behind. "Of course I can, sweetie," she said fondly. She grinned. "Actually, it's kind of refreshing to find something that you're not awesome at."

Hope leaned her head against Amy's shoulder. "There's lots of things I'm not awesome at," she pointed out. "I just don't do them very often."

Tecton glanced around; no-one else was in earshot besides Raymancer. He paused in stowing things in his temporarily assigned locker to lean around the door.
"So what exactly were you trying to do, in Director Piggot's office?" he asked. "Trying to set the world record for most amount of feet in your mouth at once?"

"What?" said Raymancer, looking back at him. "Hey, T, those were perfectly valid questions."

"Some of them were, yes," agreed Tecton. "But 'how bad can it be to fight Skitter?' Haven't you heard of what she's done?"

"Well, some of it, yeah," admitted Raymancer. "But some of that's gotta be hype, right?"

Tecton shook his head. "I've done my research," he said soberly. "I wouldn't be so sure."

Raymancer glanced past Tecton and jerked his head slightly; Tecton looked around. Approaching them was a Ward in a white costume adorned with clock-faces, some of them animated and crawling over the surface in an unsettling manner.

As he came up to them, he removed his helmet, revealing a cheerful face with red hair and blue eyes. "Hey there," he said, offering his hand. "Clockblocker, but you can call me Dennis."

"Tecton," shaking the proffered hand. "Everett."

Raymancer didn't offer his hand. "I'll just stick with Raymancer for the moment, thanks," he said.

"No problem," said Clockblocker. "Suit yourself." He grinned. "Weld told me you were here. Said you wanted to know a bit about Skitter."

"Okay," said Raymancer. "How bad is she? Or good, or whatever."

"Oh god," said Clockblocker. "Where do I start?" He stared at the ceiling for a moment. "Right. Do you have any idea how many bugs are in this room, right now?"

Tecton shrugged; Raymancer looked around. "I dunno," he said. "Air conditioned, inner area. Maybe one or two?"

Clockblocker chuckled. "More like ten or twenty or fifty. Trust me on this. Now, Skitter could walk into a room like this, and she'd know exactly where every bug was and what it could do. She could control every single one, independently and en masse." He paused. "Her range is about half a mile, at our best estimate. In that area, she can sense and control every single bug. Independently and intelligently. All at once."

Tecton's eyebrows raised. "That could be ... bad," he said.

"Oh, hell yes, it's bad," Clockblocker agreed. "If you went up against her, you'd never see her. Or if you did see her, it wouldn't be her."

"Huh?" asked Raymancer.

"She does these tricks, with bugs. Piles them together into a sort of human shape, so densely packed that you can't tell if there's someone in there. Sometimes there is. Sometimes there isn't. I'm fairly certain she can see using her bugs too, so she never has to come closer than half a mile away."

He paused. "Now, just think for a moment, exactly how many insects and other bugs are needed to make a mass the same volume as a human being. She gathers swarms that large, and larger. Routinely."

Clockblocker looked at the both of them. "Your costumes leave exposed skin. No exposed eyes,
which I guess is a good thing. But nostrils and mouths? You're basically screwed."

He leaned forward. "Ever had a bug walk over your skin, and you got that cold chill down your back? Multiply that by about ten thousand, and understand that every single one of those ten thousand bugs is being independently controlled. Believe me, if she can reach your skin, your mouth, your nose, your eyes, hell, your ears, she can have you down on the floor, screaming for mercy – if you're still able to scream – in ten. Seconds. Flat."

Everett recoiled. "Christ." He paused. "There's still a truce on, right? We're not going to be fighting her?"

Clockblocker nodded. "And you can thank God for amnesty? We're going to be inviting her to join the you want to know something? I'm glad."

"Why?" asked Raymancer. "Got a little bit of a villain crush going on there?"

Clockblocker shook his head. "She's not my type. I don't even like her, not really. But she's an absolute nightmare to fight. I've been on the receiving end enough times to know. So we want her on our side. Somehow, in some form. Because the alternative sucks."

Tecton took a deep breath. "Well, if even half of what you say is true, and not just winding up the newbie, I'll be sure to be polite if and when I meet her."

Raymancer looked a little dubious, but nodded in agreement.

Clockblocker grinned. "Oh, you'll meet her. Just try not to piss her off when you do."

"Hebert household; Danny speaking."

"Mr Hebert, this is Emily Piggot."

"Ah, Director Piggot. What can I do for you?"

"It's more of what I can do for you, Mr Hebert. I have decided to assign two of our Wards as a protective detail for your family, effective immediately."

Danny blinked. "Two ... superheroes?" he said. "What, they'll be staying in the house?"

"Yes, Mr Hebert," Director Piggot confirmed. "You wanted an assurance that we are taking this case seriously. Here is the assurance."

He nodded, despite the fact that she couldn't see him. After all, he couldn't very well say no. "I guess ... sure. When will they be arriving?"

"They just lifted off. They should be arriving at your address in about ten minutes or so." She paused. "Were you and Taylor going to attend the ceremony today?"

He swallowed. "Uh, I am, sure. But Taylor ... she's got stuff to do. Skitter, you know," he added.

"I understand," she said tartly. "When I next meet Skitter, I intend to have words with her about cutting Taylor some slack, what with the troubles the girl's been through. Presumably she'll be allowing her to attend the trial."

"Oh, that's a definite," said Danny. "So, ten minutes, you say?"
"More or less," confirmed Director Piggot. "Have a good day, Mr Hebert."

"You too, Director," said Danny. He put the phone down, then called, "Taylor!" He paused. "Taylor?"

And then he remembered. She's on her run.

"So let me see if I've got this right," said Crusader. "You went to that Slaughterhouse Zero party last night. And spoke to Director Piggot of the Parahuman Response Teams."

"That's correct," Kayden confirmed. She held Aster close to her, rocking the baby gently in her arms.

"And you asked to be included in the amnesty they're talking about for the Undersiders," continued Crusader. "Asked to be allowed to join the Protectorate."

"So far, so good," Kayden agreed. She kept her gaze focused on Crusader. "Are you making a point any time soon, Justin?"

"And she said yes?" he asked, his voice heavy with disbelief. "Just like that?"

Kayden smiled. "It wasn't 'just like that', Justin. But yes, she agreed. She took note that you have all been playing nice, not causing trouble. They've taken ex-villains into their ranks before, and you have to admit, we would all make good assets to a Protectorate team."

"Unless the Protectorate have really changed their ways," Fog said, speaking up for the first time, "I doubt that we would fit in." He went back to reading his newspaper, or at least looking at it.

"Oh, I don't know," disagreed Night. "I could teach them so much about murder, maiming, evisceration, castration, torture, decapitation ... oh, I could go on." She smiled brightly. "More tea?"

*It would certainly be a learning experience for someone,* Kayden thought to herself.

"Yes please, dear," Fog said. "Are there any of those biscuits left?"

"Director Piggot understands that you two are a package deal," Kayden continued gamely. "She is also willing to simply employ you as reserves. Pay you a standing salary for simply being on call, and staying out of trouble."

Dorothy turned to look at her husband. "Pay us to *not* to kill people?" she said. "Is that what it sounds like to you?"

"And to be heroes when needed," Kayden stressed. "To step up when Night and Fog are needed." She paused. "Or rather ... whoever you choose to be."

Crusader looked at her curiously. "What do you mean, whoever we choose to be?"

Kayden sighed. "There is one additional condition to our joining the Protectorate. It's called 'rebranding' ..."

The PRT transport grounded on the street next to the Hebert residence. Danny heard the *whoosh* of its landing, the whining of the turbines as they spooled down. He opened the door and went out to meet them.

First out of the transport was Miss Militia. She nodded a greeting when she saw him.
Next out was Weld. "Good morning, Mr Hebert," he said politely. "I hope we didn't startle you."

Danny shook his head. "No, it's fine," he said. "Director Piggot gave me a heads-up. I've been expecting you."

The third person out of the transport was wearing a suit of metallic armour, which seemed designed to move its own weight, rather than depending on the wearer's strength. The shoulders were particularly bulky, as were the gauntlets. There was a full-face helmet, sporting a lens extending from the centre of the forehead.

The last one to alight had a much more lightweight costume, but only by comparison. His torso was covered by thin metal plates, and a mask covered one eye altogether, with a large lens over the other. Metal spikes radiated out from the lens.

"Daniel Hebert, I'd like you to meet Tecton and Raymancer," said Miss Militia. "They're from the Chicago Wards, temporarily assigned to Brockton Bay."

Tecton stepped forward. "Pleased to meet you, sir," he said, extending his gauntlet. Danny shook it gingerly, feeling the power that the teenage boy could exert if he so wished. However, he got his hand back intact, and shook Raymancer's hand as well.

"Well," said Danny, "not that I'm not pleased to see you, and no offence to you two, but ..." he paused, trying to think of a diplomatic way to say this. "I'm just curious about why you're assigning us people from another city, instead of two Brockton Bay Wards?"

Miss Militia nodded. "Valid questions," she said, then glanced around. "Uh, just out of curiosity, is Taylor not at home? I wanted to introduce them to her, as well."

"Oh," said Danny, "she's on her run. She runs, of a morning."

"Alone?" asked Tecton. "That's not a good thing. Especially if she does it regularly."

Taylor picked them up with her bugs long before she even turned the corner. Miss Militia, Weld, and ... who? Two strange capes? What's going on here?

She briefly wondered if this was some sort of sting; if they'd made her as Skitter and were swooping in to snatch her from her home. If so, was it even a good idea to go back, or should she just cut and run?

Isn't that sort of thing against the unwritten rule about outing capes, though?

She decided that it was technically not the same thing, although it did edge heavily on the aspect of involving one's family in cape disputes.

On further reflection, she noted that they didn't seem to be arresting her father, or even doing anything other than talking to him.

It only looks like Miss Militia, Weld, and those two strange capes. I figure I can chance it. Though ...

On the side of the PRT transport, out of the line of sight of any of the capes, Danny saw four symbols form, composed of bugs . After a moment, he made them out as S O S ?

Danny shrugged. "I can't very well stop her. I tried locking the door once." He shook his head
emphatically, and watched the bugs disperse. "It didn't go well." He paused. "Besides, she goes armed, and carries pepper spray."

"Well, from here on in," said Tecton, "one of us is going with her. We may not have to worry about her during the daytime, but in the mornings, she's vulnerable."

"Hey," said Raymancer, "don't look at me. I don't run." He shrugged. "Besides, I'm gonna be staying up all night. I won't be in any shape to run."

Miss Militia shot him a sharp look, but Tecton nodded. "He's got a point. Besides, I like running."

"Well, it's up to Taylor," said Danny, "but I don't think she'll object, so long as you can keep up." He looked up. "Ah, here she comes now."

Amy flicked through the screens on the display. The memory stick had contained a fairly hefty data file, which opened into a multimedia presentation outlining the Hope Accord in painstaking detail. She clicked through links, paging back and forth, showing Hope how it was done.

"This is really well done," she said. "It's easy to read, easy to follow."

"What's those things over there?" asked Hope, leaning in over Amy's shoulder and pointing to the left side of the screen.

Amy glanced that way. "Ah, those tabs? Looks like ... huh. Languages." She moused over them, and read off the languages. "English, Français, Español ..."

"French and Spanish," Hope filled in automatically.

"Right, I knew that," said Amy. "I can't even read those others, but I guess they're other languages. That one's in Cyrillic ... Russian, maybe?"

Hope nodded, rubbing her cheek against Amy's. "Russian, Arabic and Chinese."

"Why those languages?" asked Amy.

"They're the working languages of the United Nations," Hope explained. "What's that last tab for?"

Amy looked; it had a simple side-arrow for a marking. She clicked it. "How do you know that about the UN?" she asked, as a much larger list of what she guessed was languages sprang up.

"I've had dealings with them where I came from," Hope said. "I was on first-name terms with the Secretary-General." She smiled. "He was a nice man. Overworked, but nice." She peered at the new menu. "Ahh, all the other languages." She frowned. "Click one for me please, sweetie. I want to check something."

Amy obediently clicked one at random – it turned out to be Korean – and the text filling the rest of the screen flicked over to total incomprehensibility, at least for Amy.

Hope, on the other hand, started reading it, slowly at first and then with greater rapidity. She had Amy click through a few pages, then switch back to English. "Yeah, it's all good," she said. "The translation is really clear. I wonder who Miss Militia had doing it for her?"

Lisa had been watching the entire process with fascination. "Dragon," she said, speaking up unexpectedly. "That's my guess, anyway. I've seen her work before."
Hope nodded. "I'm going to have to thank her. She did a really spectacular job here." She frowned. "There's just one problem. I'm going to have to be a bit of a pain, taking up one of your computers, for the next week."

"Why's that?" asked Lisa.

"Because I'm seeing the Governor of New York on Monday next, and I have to be really familiar with how the Hope Accord comes together, so I have to learn it from front to back. And I can only do that by going through it. And I have to use a computer to do that ..."

Lisa chuckled. "Oh, is that all?" She pulled a drawer open. "Here's a tablet I'm not using." Plugging in a cord, she transferred the file across. "Here's a charger. Amy can show you how to use the tablet. Now you can study anywhere."

Hope blinked and accepted the tablet, and the memory stick. "Wow," she said. "I didn't even think of that."

Amy embraced her and gave her a solid kiss. "And that, sweetie," she said, "is why you have friends to think of things like that for you."

Hope hugged her back and returned the kiss. "Thank you, sweetie," she said. "I don't know what I'd do without you." She hugged Lisa next. "All of you," she added. "Thank you. I really, really appreciate this."

Lisa smiled her vulpine smile. "You're entirely welcome," she said. "It's not often I get a chance to help someone save the world."

Taylor jogged up to the group, slowing to a walk as she approached her father.

"Hi, Weld. Miss Militia," she greeted them. Turning to her father, she added, "Dad, what's going on?"

Weld nodded a polite greeting. Miss Militia answered for Danny. "Director Piggot decided that your father made some good points when speaking to her yesterday, and is assigning Tecton and Raymancer to be your security detail until Shadow Stalker is dealt with, one way or the other."

Taylor looked at the two capes and said, "So, babysitters, then?" She grinned to take the sting out of it.

"Bodyguards," Tecton corrected her. "I will be accompanying you on your runs and going with your father when he goes to work. Raymancer will be guarding us at night from any repeat attacks." He held out his hand, encased in a metal gauntlet. "I'm pleased to meet you."

She shook, her hand engulfed in the oversized metal appendage.

"Also," said Tecton, a little awkwardly, "I want to extend my personal apology that a Ward treated you so badly, and to express my appreciation that you are actually standing up and doing something about it."

Taylor stared at him. "Are you even allowed to say that? Isn't there some sort of legal liability thing?"

Tecton shrugged massively. "My care factor is near zero. The fact remains that Sophia Hess should not have been allowed to carry on with her activities for so long. But she did, and you suffered for it. As a Ward, I want to say that I am personally sorry for that."
"Yeah, well," said Taylor awkwardly, "it's nice to actually have the law on my side for once."

This drew a few confused stares, until Danny elucidated. "We tried to get the bullying stopped, but one of the girls has a lawyer for a father, and he knows all the legal tricks. So we were unable to make any headway." Looking at Taylor, he added, "Kiddo, you might want to go in and have a shower, get changed. You're all sweaty from your run. And while you're at it, do me a favour and pick up some of your things, okay?"

Taylor nodded. The inference was easy. Make sure that there's nothing that says 'Skitter' to our visitors.

"Okay, Dad," she said, and trotted up the path to the steps.

Once inside the house, she made a quick scan, her bugs sweeping over the contents of the living room. She almost missed the flat metal box with the adjustable light. Kid Win made it; Weld almost certainly saw it, and probably Miss Militia too. They might ask a few questions if they see it here.

Scooping it up, she dashed up the stairs with it, just as Danny entered with the four capes.

Taylor finished the shower and towelled off rapidly. Heading into her room, she threw on jeans and a t-shirt, and ran a brush through her hair. She looked wistfully at the opal spider necklace, but put it back in its box, not wanting to draw too much attention to her supposed job in Skitter's organisation. People might think I'm Skitter's girlfriend or something, she thought with a giggle. That could lead to some very awkward questions.

She paused for one more moment to look in at the mother web-spider and her brood of eggs, within which she could just barely start to feel the flicker of tiny lives. Bugs were tangled in the web over the mouth of the box, plenty to keep her going. Taylor tested the web with her fingertip; it was very strong, she knew. Stronger even than the Darwin's bark spider web that her current costume was made of.

I can't wait till these little guys hatch and are able to start spinning.

Tecton looked up as Taylor descended the stairs. She was pulling her long dark curly hair, still damp from the shower, into a hairband as she descended. Inside his helmet, he blinked.
When he'd first met her, his first impression had been of a tall, skinny girl, sweating from her run. She had been wary; there had been a barrier up then.

_I suppose she hasn't had much reason to trust the Wards, he mused, not after her experiences. And she's working for a villain. But that's not a factor, not in this situation._

Now, he could see her unconscious grace, the way she moved. Concentrating on her hair, she had an introspective look on her face, quite at odds with the hard, intense look she had given them as she approached from her run. He found the contrast oddly appealing.

Watching her descend the stairs, another thought intruded, unbidden. _You know, this might not be such a tough gig after all._ He pushed it away. _Professional_, he reminded himself. _Be professional._

She looked up, directly at him. He had the uncomfortable feeling that she had read his thoughts, directly out of the forefront of his brain.

"Sorry I took so long," she said with a smile. "But we can get started now?"

Miss Militia nodded. "We can," she said. "This is how we're going to work it ..."
"... and for the final order of business," concluded Miss Militia, "I will need both of you to read and sign these, please."

She unzipped the slim document folder she was carrying and placed a form in front of Danny, and an identical one in front of Taylor.

Danny looked at his, reading the first few paragraphs carefully, then stared at Miss Militia. "Non-disclosure agreements?"

She nodded. "It's a basic precaution. Tecton and Raymancer will be living in the house, spending all their time with you. It will be their choice whether to unmask to you, or stay in costume at all times. Likewise, it's their choice to tell you their real names. But whether they let you know deliberately or not, once you sign, you basically have to assist them in protecting their identities." She waved at the forms. "The wording is all in there."

"Isn't there a sort of unwritten law about that already?" asked Taylor.

Miss Militia nodded. "And for this situation, it's a written law. After all, they're here for your safety, your protection." She looked curiously at Taylor. "Do you actually have any objection to signing it?"

"Not in the slightest," said Taylor. "I was just asking." She waited till Danny had finished signing and dating his form, then signed hers.

"Actually, I have a question," said Danny. "I know I've already signed it, but what happens if one of us sees an urgent need to reveal that information, say, in order to save someone's life or something?"

Miss Militia nodded. "They thought of that. Paragraph two, section B. 'In time of urgent need'. Though you want to make sure it is really urgent need; we'd check, later."

Danny checked the relevant section. "Oh, so they did." He smiled. "Okay, I'm happy with it."

Taylor put down the pen. "I'm good too," she agreed. "Tecton and Raymancer are here to protect us; the least we can do is keep their secrets."

Weld smiled. "And that is greatly appreciated," he said. "It makes our jobs a lot easier."

"So, uh, how long are you going to be guarding us?" asked Danny.

"Up until the trial is done, and Shadow Stalker is no longer a threat to you," said Miss Militia.

"What if Shadow Stalker attacks us and is dealt with before the trial?" asked Taylor.

"We maintain the security detail on you," said Miss Militia. "I've asked around; Mr Barnes has gone to quite some effort in the past to keep his daughter out of trouble, and the PRT does not want their star witness to be harassed or intimidated."

"I don't believe he'd go that far ... would he?" asked Danny.

"The man threatened to bankrupt you," said Weld flatly. "And that was when he felt in control of the situation. Right now he must be feeling rather desperate. Desperate people have been known to make very stupid decisions. Decisions that could get people hurt or killed."
Not for the first time, Alan Barnes was regretting his choice of career paths.

Big name criminal lawyers get a whole speed-dial full of wiseguys who are ready to do a favour for the guy who got them off, he thought morosely. Who do I get? The guys I saved from paying half their assets to their wives. Not exactly what I need right now.

He tapped a fingernail on his desk thoughtfully. There has to be something I can do.

Picking up his phone, he flicked through the memory until he found the number he wanted. Then he dialled.

"So what happens now?" asked Taylor.

"Well, your father has to go to work," said Miss Militia, "and you have a job of your own, as I understand matters."

Taylor realised that all four capes were looking at her; she couldn't quite figure out their expressions. Disapproval? Curiosity?

She raised her chin. "Yes," she said. "Yes, I do." She got up from the table. "I'll just go and grab my bag."

As she returned from her room, with her backpack slung over her shoulder – the flap firmly strapped down – Weld spoke unexpectedly. "You know," he said, "once the amnesty goes through, and we offer Skitter a place in the Wards, you'll probably be out of a job."

"Oh," she said with a smile, "I think I'll manage."

The photographer's name was Gerard Hoskins. He was good at his job; he'd been doing it for several years now. For the most part, he did wedding shoots, official events, model shoots, things like that. However, once upon a time, very early in his career, the police had come knocking on his door.

To make a little extra money, he had done a photo shoot where the models wore no clothing and made no effort to hide that fact. This was unsavoury but not totally illegal ... until one took into account the fact that the models were, at the time, underage.

Hoskins was represented by one Alan Barnes, who successfully defended him on the grounds that he had been unaware that the models were less than legal for such a shoot. All photos taken at the time were destroyed, Hoskins paid a large fine but got to keep his license; all was well.

Hoskins had moved on from that. Ever since, he had been scrupulously careful about who and what he photographed in his official capacity; he didn't even do bikini shoots. And all of his models were strictly eighteen plus; he made a point of checking identification before even unpacking his cameras.

However, there were a couple of aspects about the case that Barnes had helped him conceal from the court, and so any time Alan Barnes needed incriminating photos to make a case in divorce court, Hoskins was his man. This was not to say that he did his work pro bono; Alan Barnes paid him handsomely for his time. Nor did he ever refer to the incident; he didn't have to. They both knew the score.

Of course, up until now, all of Hoskins' unwitting subjects had been over the age of consent – barring one or two special instances that led to a considerable sum being settled out of court. But this new one that Alan Barnes had him doing ... it cut too close to bad old memories for his liking. So he
"Wait a minute, Alan," he had said, when Barnes had first contacted him. "You're saying you want me to follow this girl around and take pictures of her? What is she, fourteen?"

"Fifteen," Barnes had said. "No ... wait ... sixteen, I think. I seem to recall her birthday was around this time of the year."

"Okay, sixteen," Hoskins had acknowledged. "That's still on the wrong side of eighteen. If I get caught pointing my lens at a minor, without her parents' explicit approval, there'll be hell to pay."

"I know she's underage," said Barnes patiently. "It's not like I'm asking you to take nude pictures of her."

Hoskins winced at the reminder. Barnes went on. "All I want you to do is tail her and take pictures of her meeting with supervillains."

"Supervillains?" repeated Hoskins. This day was rapidly going from frying pan to fire.

"I have it on good authority," said Barnes carefully, "that this girl, Taylor Hebert, works for the supervillain known as Skitter. Bring me one photo – just one clear photo – of her talking to Skitter or any of the other villains in that gang –"

"The Undersiders," supplied Hoskins, automatically. He kept up with the times.

"Them, yeah. One good useable photo of Taylor talking to – or interacting with, basically – a known supervillain, and I'll pay you double your normal rates."

"Quadruple," said Hoskins immediately. "If I'm dealing with supervillains, taking pictures of them, that's risky, right there. I saw the footage with the Pure."

"Triple," Barnes countered. "You've got a long lens. They'll never know you're there."

"Hell no," Hoskins snapped. "You want the photos for cheap, you buy a camera, take them yourself. You want professional level photos, you pay the going rate. And right now, the going rate is quadruple." He would have baulked altogether, but there had been virtually no business since the Leviathan attack, and if he shut Barnes out now, the door might get closed for good. Or Barnes might decide to reveal what he knew. This might kill his career, it might not. But he couldn't take the chance.

Barnes, for his part, gave in with bad grace. He needed Hoskins, and the man had a point. So he agreed to pay quadruple rate for any usable photos.

Which explained why Hoskins was sitting in his car with the seat reclined back, his telephoto lens draped with a thin cloth that obscured its shape but did little to impede its viewfinding.

A bug crawled across his sleeve. He didn't even notice.

So who are these guys? he wondered. That's Weld, of the Wards. Miss Militia, of the Protectorate. I don't know the other two. New Wards, maybe? Why are they visiting the Hebert girl? Questioning her about her involvement with Skitter?

He shot several fast frames of Taylor walking out to the truck, but swore when he checked them and realised that her face was obscured in each shot; once by a gesturing hand, once because she had
turned her head to address someone, and once blurred by a bug of some sort that had decided to land on the cloth at the end of the lens. The only really clear shot he had was when she was climbing into the truck, and all he could see was the back of her head.

Well, it didn't matter anyway, he decided. I'm guessing they're heroes, not villains. Barnes is paying for shots of her associating with villains, not heroes.

He watched as Weld, Miss Militia, and one of the capes climbed into the PRT transport. Taylor, her father and the other cape, the one in heavy metal armour, headed for the truck.

Well, I guess I'm just going to have to follow her and wait for a better shot.

Taylor leaned back in her seat, and glanced through the rear window of the truck. Tecton seemed to be doing okay, kneeling in the precise centre of gravity of the truck, bracing himself with his arms.

She grinned at her father. "Just so you know," she said, "there's a guy following us with a telephoto camera."

"What?" blurted Danny. "Where? How do you know?"

"Relax," said Taylor. "He was in a car, across the street and down a bit. I picked him up before we even came out of the house. He's not going to get anything usable."

Danny stared across at her. "You're being very calm about this." He paused. "Why is he trying to get photos?"

She shrugged. "I'm guessing a tabloid photographer who's heard about the trial, and wants to make some newspaper inches. He's not armed, so he's not intending to attack us. And my bugs can tell which way he's pointing his camera, and when he's about to take a photo. I think I can afford to be calm, this once." She grinned again. "Believe me, this is a huge step down from facing Lung, Bakuda ... or Leviathan."

"Yeah," he said distantly. "I can imagine it might be." He paused. "Any time you want to share some more, I think I can take it, now."

"Thanks, Dad," she said warmly. "I'll take you up on that some time when you're not driving. There's stuff that might come across as a little shocking, and I wouldn't want to have an accident." Her tone was light, but she meant what she said.

Some of the things I've done ... will Dad even be able to accept them?

He's accepted everything about me as Skitter so far. I just have to trust in his love for me.

And right then, right there, that thought was strangely comforting to her. Because she knew, deep down, she could do just that.

The truck pulled up at a homeless shelter, and Taylor got out. Hoskins pulled up just in time to get a shot of her leaning in the driver's side window to give her father a goodbye kiss.

Sweet kid. How did she ever get mixed up with a supervillain?

Then she hitched her bag on her shoulder and trotted into the shelter. The truck drove off again, the armoured cape still in the back.
What's going on there? he wondered. What's with the capes? But that wasn't his job. He wasn't a private detective. He was a photographer. His job was to point a lens and get a nice clear photo that could be used in a court of law.

He settled back to wait for Taylor to emerge from the shelter. For a moment, he wondered if she was going to be working there for the day, but dismissed the thought. This isn't even in Skitter's territory.

"Hi, Taylor!" said Hope, looking up from the oversized armchair that she was sharing with Amy. "So, did you like the presents?"

"You are mean and horrible, and I love you all very much," Taylor said. "They're awesome, even the one Imp gave me. How did you get them into the house?"

Amy grinned. "Well, Lisa knew you'd go up and change as soon as you got in, so we stashed them behind the seat of the truck, so your dad could bring them in while you were doing that."

Taylor leaned over and kissed them each on the forehead, in lieu of a hug. "I got everyone else's presents, but not yours. And I'm very curious."

"Ah," said Amy, climbing out of Hope's lap. "Wait here. I'll go get it."

Taylor perched on the arm of the chair as Amy headed for their sleeping enclosure. "You and her, still a thing, huh?"

Hope nodded. "It's doing her a lot of good, and I do love her dearly. So, as long as she wants to be with me, I'll be with her." She smiled. "And she's helping me figure out how to use this thing." There was a tablet in her hand, which she offered to Taylor. "I have a basic idea, but I still have to work at it. Tell me what you think of it."

Taylor accepted it; there was some sort of multimedia presentation going on. She flicked to the first screen, to the title page that read "Hope Accord."

"Wait a minute," she said, "Lisa said something about this. Accord made this up?"

Hope nodded. "And Dragon put it into electronic format, and added foreign language translations. She watched Taylor page through it with quick flicks of her fingers. "Okay, that's just not fair. Everyone else grew up using those things. I'm just a beginner." She shrugged. "I'm picking it up. But I'm still a novice with them."

Taylor grinned and handed the tablet back. "You'll get there." She nodded at the tablet. "It looks interesting. Worldwide?"

Hope nodded. "Worldwide." She looked around. "Ah, there she is now."

Amy emerged, carrying a shoebox which she held carefully. She got back to where Taylor and Hope were talking, just as Lisa joined them from the direction of the kitchens.

Taylor could feel bugs milling around inside the box, some of which were familiar, some of which were not. She accepted the box from Amy, and opened it. Lisa moved up alongside her, and gave her a one-armed hug; Taylor smiled and leaned into it.

Inside the box were bugs of different sizes and descriptions. "Five more web-spiders," she said, recognising the grey abdomens with the red cross on the back. "Excellent."
"One male, four females," agreed Amy. "Not pregnant, but you can start breeding them any time you like." She settled back into the chair; Hope put her arms around her.

Taylor had them scuttle out of the box and up her arm. "Half a dozen more relay bugs?"

Lisa nodded. "You said they're handy, so Amy made some more."

"Oh, they are, they are," said Taylor, as the relay bugs took flight and hid in her hair. "What are these other ones, that look like oversized wasps?"

There were two dozen of them, not identical in appearance, but she could tell that their internal structure was close enough. She noted that their venom storage sacs were somewhat oversized.

Amy grinned. "Ketamine wasps. Proof of concept. If these ones can deliver a big enough jolt to knock out a man, I can make inoculation wasps that can deliver enough of a disease vaccine to cure an outbreak."

"Ooh," said Taylor, causing the wasps to nestle themselves in her hair as well. "Those could come in very handy indeed."

Amy nodded. "We thought so." She paused. "What are the webs like?"

Taylor grinned. "Like piano wire. Stronger than black widow webs, stronger than Darwin's bark spider webs." A fly buzzed from her hair, carrying a small coil of fine line, deposited it in Amy's hand.

Amy found the ends and pulled it apart, tested the tensile strength. She looked at Taylor, her expression one of surprise. "This is ... wow, this is seriously strong."

Taylor nodded. "That's three strands, plaited. Imagine what a costume made of that would be like."

Hope nodded. "That's actually kind of awesome." She accepted the finely woven string and tugged at it herself. "Wow," she said in her turn, peering at it. "Three strands?"

"Three strands," acknowledged Taylor. She took a breath. "I have –"

"A problem?" said Lisa, grinning her vulpine grin. "That you'd like us to help you out with?"

Taylor nodded. "Exactly. You see, there's this guy who's been following me, taking photos, and I'm not exactly sure why, so ..."

Something in the air quality of the car had ... changed. Hoskins looked around, and froze. In the rear passenger seat there was ... something. Insects. A mass of them, the size of a human being. The shape of a human being.

He whimpered, deep in his throat, his sphincter abruptly clenching shut. Skitter, he knew. She knows I'm here. She knows I've been following Taylor Hebert.

I am so very dead.

The swarm turned a faceless head toward him, and made a complicated buzzing/humming noise. To his astonishment, he understood words. "Get out of the car."

He got out of the car. He really didn't have another choice.
The swarm followed, flowing over the seat and then reforming in front of him, towering over him by six inches or more. He looked up at it, heart palpitating; his ears were full of the buzz of so many insects, so many bugs. He had heard of some of her exploits, how everyone that had gone against her had been beaten. He had no cape powers, no magic lightning bolts, no suits of metal armour. All he had was a camera. Which was sort of what had gotten him into this problem.

"What do you want with me?" he asked at last, when the swarm did nothing more.

The swarm dissipated, flowing away into a nimbus of bugs. Standing there in its place was Skitter herself. Beside her was another girl, wearing a purple and black costume with an eye on the front; she sported a vulpine grin. Tattletale.

Skitter spoke ... or perhaps it was the swarm. Or both. Her voice had a resonant, buzzing, humming quality.

"Why are you following Taylor Hebert?"

He gulped. His throat was dry, he wanted to answer, but his tongue would not cooperate. But then Tattletale spoke.

"He's being paid to get pictures of Taylor associating with you, or me, or any other villain," she said. It wasn't a question. It was a statement of fact.

"Who's paying you?"

The buzzing hum of Skitter's speech unnerved him altogether. Sweat broke out on his forehead. "A-Al-"

"Alan Barnes," filled in Tattletale. "He wants to get evidence to discredit Taylor for the trial, so her testimony won't carry as much weight." She nodded toward Hoskins. "You didn't want to do this, did you? You were scared that with supervillains involved, your life could be in danger." She leaned forward, her grin widening. "Well, you were right."

Hoskins wanted to close his eyes, could not; he felt a little urine escape his bladder.

"Do you have any photos that can be used against her?"

He was about to answer in the negative, when there came a most welcome interruption.

Overhead, a crystalline chime sounded, and Hoskins tore his gaze away from the silently menacing Skitter. He looked up to see an angel with crystal wings, with a girl in her arms, coming in for a landing.

Hoskins had never been a religious man, but right then, right there, he gave thanks to the Almighty. The relief in his heart was so great that he nearly burst into tears. He knew of Hope; he had seen her in the news, on TV. She was a relatively new cape on the scene, but she was one of the good ones, of that he was sure.

Hope landed and furled her wings, as she let Amy down on to her feet. Lisa had coached her, so she hoped she was doing it right as she stepped forward.

"What's going on here?" she asked. "What are you doing with this man?"

Skitter kept staring at the poor guy, not speaking. She did the scary blank stare, Hope had to admit,
very well indeed. Tattletale turned to Hope.

"This lowlife's been following one of Skitter's employees," she said. "Sixteen year old girl. Been taking photos of her. Pervert, if you ask me."

Hope stepped forward; at the same time, Skitter and Tattletale stepped away from Hoskins. "Sir," she asked. "Is this true?"

She exuded confidence, friendliness, safety. The teenage girl at her side, he thought he recognised. Panacea? Another good guy. I'm safe. Oh thank god, I'm safe.

"My – my client," he managed.

"Alan Barnes, divorce attorney and lowlife," supplied Tattletale from where she stood. Hope looked at him questioningly.

"Yeah, that's him," he agreed. "He wanted pictures of Taylor associating with known villains." He held up his hands. "God's honest truth. Nothing more than that." Oh God, please believe me.

"I understand," said Hope. "You're just doing your job." Her voice was soothing, sweet, crystalline. She tilted her head questioningly. "Did you actually get any incriminating photos?"

He shook his head, disgruntled. "Not a one. The whole thing's a bust."

Behind his back, Tattletale nodded. Truth.

Hope smiled. "Well, then, I can't see a problem. May I see your camera, sir?" When he hesitated, she assured him, "I promise you that you'll get it back. I won't break it, or erase any pictures. I just want to be able to tell Skitter and Tattletale that you are telling the absolute truth."

Reluctantly, he held out the camera. She took it, worked out how to display the photos he had already taken, and paged through them. Shrugging, she showed them to Amy. "These look okay to you?"

Amy nodded. "Nothing incriminating there." She looked at Hoskins. "If I were you, sir, I would refrain from following people who work for supervillains. The supervillains might take it amiss." To punctuate her words, the swarm gave a menacing buzz.

"Oh, I will, I will," Hoskins assured her fervently. He accepted the camera as Hope gave it back. "Thank you, thank you."

Hope turned to Skitter and Tattletale. "Is that good enough for you?" she asked.

Skitter remained silent. Tattletale nodded. "Yeah," she said. "It's good enough for us." The swarm retreated away a little more; Hoskins breathed a bit easier.

Hope smiled at him. "Well, sir, I wish you a good day, and a safe drive." She raised an eyebrow. "And I would be careful about what jobs you accept from Mr Barnes in future. He seems to be a dangerous employer."

Hoskins nodded fervently. "You got that right." He gave her a shaky smile in return. "Thank you for saving me."

Hope grinned. "It is sort of my job after all." She gathered Amy in her arms. "Have a good day, sir."
Her wings unfurled and came down in a crystalline chime, and she was in the air.

Hoskins climbed back into the car. Putting the seatbelt on, he started the vehicle and put it in gear. A final atavistic impulse had him raise the camera and take three swift shots of Tattletale and Skitter walking away. Then he took his foot off the brake and drove away.

*If Barnes wants to know why I quit following her, I can show him these. I am never coming back here again.*

He drove for several miles, until his heart rate calmed down. *Thank God Hope was there,* he thought over and over. *That could have been really, really bad.*

*I’m going to have to do something nice for her. Maybe a photo shoot of her flying around and doing stuff and helping people. Raise public awareness of her.*

*And I’ll only charge my basic rate. Maybe give her a discount.*

As they walked back into the shelter, Tattletale turned to Skitter. "You know he just took a couple more photos before he drove off."

"I got that impression," Skitter replied. "Anything we need to worry about?"

"I can’t see it," replied Tattletale lightly. "He just wanted proof to show to his boss that it's a bad idea to come back."

"Did you see his face?" Amy giggled, sitting on Lisa's bed. She was leaning up against Hope, arms around her.

"I can't believe you actually had me do that," Hope replied. "I've never played good cop/bad cop before." She fixed an accusing glance on Skitter and Tattletale. "But you were *mean,* scaring him that much."

"He was in no danger," Lisa assured her. "And he learned a valuable lesson. You were a natural. You weren't going to let him get hurt, and he knew it." She gave Hope a hug. "Thanks for that. It really helped."

Hope gave her a kiss on the cheek and hugged her back. "You guys help me out all the time. It's only right to return the favour." She looked over at Taylor, still in her Skitter outfit. "So, do you think he'll be back?"

Skitter shook her head. "I doubt it. He had a real scare there." Her voice held amusement. "But I think you picked up another member for your fan club."

Hope rolled her eyes as she let Lisa go. "I don't *have* a fan club."

Amy grinned as she snuggled up to her. "Yes, you do. And I'm the president."

Hope rubbed noses fondly with her, then looked at Lisa. "So you and Skitter will be turning up to the ceremony with the rest of the Undersiders?"

Lisa nodded. "That makes the most sense. We'll be heading off in just a short while."

Hope smiled. "And no more problems with nosy photographers?"
"No," said Skitter. "He's long gone."

Finally, Hoskins pulled over and paged through the photos, preparing to erase them. The whole thing's a bust. And Barnes isn't going to pay up for dud photos.

But something about the last few photos got his attention. Something was niggling at him. He paged forward and backward, then enlarged them as far as the small screen was able, and did it again.

He prided himself on his photographer's eye, being able to pick out each individual element in a picture, so see what worked and what did not. And there was an element in there that his instincts were telling him was very, very important.

And then he had it. He pulled up at the photo of Taylor getting into the truck, her back to the lens. Her long dark curly hair was blowing slightly in the wind, with the sunlight shining fully on it.

Then he paged forward until he reached the best shot he had of Skitter and Tattletale walking away. Tattletale and Skitter both wore their hair loose, but while Tattletale's was blonde and straight, Skitter's was dark and curly. Blowing slightly in the wind. The sun shining fully on it.

He zoomed in on the hair, and then flicked to the other photo and zoomed in on Taylor's hair.

It was identical.

Both girls were tall, skinny, moved in a similar way ... and they both had long, dark curly hair of the exact same length. He could even see one strand with a peculiar twist, halfway up the length of the hair, repeated in both pictures.

For a moment, he wondered, Could they be twins? Sisters? Could that be the big secret?

And then his mind fixed on what had to be the real explanation. He grinned.

I'm gonna get paid after all.

He picked up his phone and dialled. "Barnes? Hoskins. No, no, no incriminating photos. Wait, wait, I haven't finished. My rates just doubled. Yes, again. Because trust me, you are going to want to see this."

At the back of his mind, he made his decision. As soon as I get paid, I'm leaving town.

Go someplace where the bugs are few and far between.
In which Tecton bonds with Danny, and villain and hero groups arrive at the ceremony

Chapter Notes

Apologies to anyone with ADHD for the joke. No disrespect is meant.

Danny checked his watch. The ceremony will be starting in an hour and a half. Time to go.

"Tecton!" he called. "Time to wrap it up!"

"One minute!" called back Tecton. "Almost got it!"

Danny pushed his hard hat back, wiped sweat from his face with his bandanna, then put the hat back on properly and moved over to see what Tecton was doing.

It had once been a hotel, extending two storeys above ground level, with an underground parking garage. But the waves generated in the Leviathan battle had swamped it and left the parking garage (and a dozen luckless cars) flooded with seawater. In addition, the ground had slumped somewhat, which made the foundations tricky at best, and the parking garage was now actually below the water table.

There was no question of salvaging the building. The owners had packed up and gone, gotten the best they could from the insurance, and moved elsewhere. Even the squatters in the area hadn't moved in.

The best chance, as they saw it, was to drop the entire building into the cavity of the parking garage, then ram it down from above and build something on top that didn't need deep foundations. Maybe a park. But the trick was dropping it in there. They had neither explosives nor a shot-firer.

Tecton maintained that they needed neither. Danny had advised the others to give him a chance. So he had paced around the building, gathering what data his power gave him, in order to figure out how to drop the building in just the right manner.

And now, it seemed, he was ready. He turned to the others. "Might want to stand back a ways," he advised them. "There could be a bit of flying debris."

They stood back a respectful distance, Danny among them. Tecton stepped up to the building, placed a hand on one of the huge concrete pillars that held the massive structure up.

"What's he doing?" said the man next to Danny. "Looks like he's listening." Another man hushed him.

Tecton drew back his arm, clenching the oversized gauntlet on the end. Then he slammed it forward; the impact with the concrete pillar coincided with the jolt as the blunt spikes within the gauntlet slammed deep into the pillar itself.

Retracting the spikes, he stepped over to the next pillar, even as the shockwaves he had set up rattled
through the structure, cracks beginning to spread. He waited a precisely timed interval, then smashed his gauntlet into the next pillar; the spikes crunched concrete, damaging the structural integrity of the building even more.

Without haste, he moved to the next pillar over, and then the next, timing it so that the shockwaves set up within the structure met and multiplied and magnified one another.

On the fifth pillar, the entire top storey fell in. Windows exploded; he covered the top of his head with his hand to protect himself from the falling glass.

On the seventh pillar, the rumbling throughout the building was clearly audible to everyone.

He hit the eighth pillar a resounding blow, then turned and walked toward the waiting men without even bothering to look back. The building started collapsing before he was halfway there. A cloud of dust rolled out and enveloped him; he walked out of it. By the time he reached Danny, the dust was beginning to settle and the subsidence was almost complete, only a little rubble sticking up above the level of the parking garage.

The men were silent, staring, disbelieving. They had seen the power of Tecton's suit while he worked alongside them, but this was an order of magnitude beyond that.

"We can go now, if you want," he said to Danny. Then he turned to the others. "Sorry, but I'm gonna have to leave you guys to clean up my mess."

His bantering voice broke the spell of silence that had gripped them even after the last echoes from the collapsed building had died away. They cheered and shouted, clapped him on the back and shook his hand.

"Okay, guys, enough," Danny was forced to say. "We've got to get going."

He got Tecton away from them, and they went back to the truck. With a little experimentation, they figured if Danny sat far over to the left, and Tecton sat toward the middle, he could just about fit into the front seat of the truck.

"You did that deliberately, didn't you?" Danny said as he drove along. "Played it out for drama."

"You could tell?" asked Tecton. "Could anyone else?"

Danny shook his head. "I don't think so. So how much of that was for show?"

Tecton considered. "Not really for show," he decided. "I could have set up the harmonics more quickly and efficiently, but doing it that way was the safest way to do it ... and yeah," he admitted, "the showiest."

"So how much of that was an attempt to impress me?" asked Danny.

Tecton turned to face him, although Danny could not see his face, of course, due to his helmet.

"None of it, sir," he said, the honorific mildly surprising Danny. "If you don't respect me by now, you will never respect me. I was just trying to ... look good, to make you look good to your friends."

Danny reflected on that. It was true, he considered, that his stock with the Dockworkers would likely have risen, since he brought such an obviously useful and effective worker along to the job. And Tecton was friendly and polite, and did more than his share without being pushy or condescending.
He was a good kid, Danny decided.

"We've got time to get back, shower, have a quick bite, then get to the ceremony," Danny commented. "You'll be wanting a shower too?"

"If you don't mind," said Tecton. "It was hot out there. My armour has cooling systems, but they're not that great."

"Let me guess," said Danny. "Old gym socks?"

"Oh, you have no idea how accurate you are," replied Tecton with feeling.

"Show me again," demanded Alan Barnes.

Hoskins obliged. He put up the picture of Taylor Hebert on the left, and the picture he had taken of Skitter on the right. Then he zoomed in on the back of Taylor's head.

"You can see here, the width of the shoulders, how far down the back the hair goes. And you can see right here how this curl of hair goes? Now look here. Resize for the same scale ... the hair is the same colour, same length. That curl, right there. Same shape."

Barnes looked, and was convinced.

"Okay," he said. "Eight times normal rates, right?" It was a touch on the exorbitant side, he figured, but this was truly new information. And if Hoskins can keep getting stuff like this for me ...

Hoskins nodded. "Plus some more." He named a figure.

Barnes blanched. That's beyond exorbitant, he thought. That's highway robbery. I need that money to pay for Emma's court costs.

"What the hell is that for?" he demanded.

"One," said Hoskins. "So I don't tell anyone else about this, or tell the PRT you've got information about the secret identity of a cape. You know how they come down on shit like this."

Barnes' eyes narrowed. He didn't have much experience on that end of matters, but it occurred to him that Hoskins was just as much at risk as he was. So why was he paying Hoskins to keep silent?

He opened his mouth to say as much, but Hoskins continued. "Two. I was physically threatened by Skitter and Tattletale. The only thing that saved my ass was the fact that Hope turned up just in the nick of time. So, danger pay."

He took a deep breath. "And three. I am never touching another camera again. Never taking another photo. It gets out that I took these pictures, I could wish that my name was only mud. So, a severance bonus. I'm going elsewhere, getting out of the photography business." He snapped his fingers. "So pay up."

Anger blossomed in Alan Barnes' heart. Hoskins wanted him to pay up money which Emma needed for her court costs, and then he was going to skip town altogether, depriving Barnes of his future services? I can pay him the eight times normal rates, sure, but he doesn't get to pull this sort of blackmail crap on me.

"I don't have to take this sort of extortion," he snarled. "I can pay –"
"You can pay me everything I just asked for. Remember, I don't have to give you the photos, either," retorted Hoskins. "You want 'em, you pay for 'em."

_Screw this_, thought Barnes. _He's leaving town. I don't have to play nice with him, not anymore. And if he wants to change the agreement, then I can change the agreement too._

"Did it occur to you, _moron_, that just showing me the pictures gave me the information I need?" Barnes grinned savagely. "I don't have to pay you a single goddamned red cent, you chiseller."

"Hey!" snapped Hoskins. "You owe me. You sent me after incriminating photos, I got incriminating photos."

Barnes rolled his eyes. "I sent you out originally to get a photo with Taylor in the same picture with a supervillain. Not to get a photo of Taylor _as_ a supervillain. By the wording of that agreement, I don't have to pay you diddly."

"Hey!" shouted Hoskins again, betraying his trailer-park origins. "That's just goddamned fancy lawyer doubletalk bullshit. You owe me, and you know it. You agreed over the phone. Eight times normal rates."

He wasn't mentioning the extra now, but it was too late. _That ship, _Barnes decided coldly, _has sailed._ It was time to cut all ties with Gerard Hoskins. The man was of no further use to him.

Inside, he smiled grimly. _He's seen me play hardball before, just never on him. Well, tough luck. He wants to get between me and Emma's well-being, he suffers._ "You changed the agreement first. I'm just changing it back to what we had at the start."

He pulled the SD card from the slot in his laptop and tossed it to Hoskins; the picture blanked off the screen. "Here's your property back, hotshot," he grinned. "Now I don't owe you cent one." He pressed a button on his phone. "Could you please send in Rodney from Security? I have a distraught man who needs to be escorted from the premises."

"Distraught? _Distraught?_" screamed Hoskins. "I'll distraught you, you slippery shyster son of a money-grubbing back-stabbing weasel-wording goddamned bitch!" He went to dart around the desk to get at Barnes, but the attorney rose quickly and put the chair between them. By the time Hoskins wrestled the chair off of him, the security guard was in the office.

It took two of them to manhandle him out the door, screaming and raving all the way.

________________________________________________________

Alan Barnes smoothed his hair down, put his chair back in place, and sat behind his desk.

_Do I need to worry about Hoskins? _he asked himself.

After a moment, he shook his head. _He's got the photos, not me. They've seen his face, not mine. He can't do a thing with that information that won't hurt him as much as it will hurt me, or more. And if he tries ... I'll sue him into a greasy spot on the pavement. He was nothing before I met him, and he'll go back to being nothing now. He's out of the picture. So to speak._

He dismissed Gerard Hoskins from his mind.

_Now, back to business._

_So Taylor Hebert is Skitter, the notorious supervillain_, he thought.
He went online, started paging through information on cape law.

Once they got back, Danny pulled the shades at Tecton's request. The Wards cape then started removing his armour. "I always figured I'd have to do this," he said as he pulled off his helmet and set it on the table. "So it's not much of a worry for me. You see my face, you see my face." He had sandy brown hair and pleasant features with a strong jaw.

"I can't imagine what it's like to have a secret identity, to need one," Danny commented. "I have enough trouble being me from time to time."

It took less effort to get out of the armour than Danny had imagined it would, and Tecton stepped out of the boots – wearing a t-shirt and shorts – grabbed the small bag that he had brought in with him, and disappeared upstairs with it. Soon, Danny heard the shower running. He set about making snacks, and eating his.

When Tecton had finished his shower and come downstairs, Danny went up, showered, and changed. By the time he was downstairs again, Tecton was in the process of armouring up again.

"I suppose everyone asks you this," said Danny, as they headed for the site of the ceremony, "but what happens if you have to ... uh, go, when you're wearing that?"

"It can get pretty damn uncomfortable, let me tell you," replied Tecton. He sighed. "I have thought, occasionally, about installing a relief system, like in a space suit, but I'm not good at that sort of engineering. There'd be a whole new set of problems with storage, with plumbing connections while I'm suiting up, and let's not even get into what happens if the storage tank takes a solid hit in combat."

Danny began to chuckle involuntarily. Tecton joined in. "I really shouldn't laugh, but I saw it happen to one guy in a suit," he said. "Took a direct hit, and the system purge pump kicked in. The same hit made his radio cut out, but that didn't matter a bit. We could hear him swearing just fine without it." He paused. "And the noise he was making when the radio came back on. We thought it was interference. But it wasn't. It was his feet sloshing inside his boots ..."

Danny was laughing so hard that he had to pull over.

The site of the ceremony, already being called Victory Park by some, held a large area of newly paved ground, in the middle of which sat the memorial itself. The memorial, a large chunk of shaped granite, was swathed in red velvet to replace the tarpaulins that had wrapped it up until that morning. A gold rope hung ready to unveil it when the time came. In order to prevent this from happening before its appointed time, an impassive PRT operative was stationed in front of it, wearing full dress uniform.

To each side of the paved area was a set of grandstand seating; in front of the monument was a podium with a microphone and speakers.

The ceremony had not started yet. The crowd milled about, capes mixing with civilians. Stands selling food and drink had sprung up almost magically, and the air was convivial. Sunshades overhung the grandstands, allowing respite from the midday sun.

Skitter walked through the crowd with Grue and the other Undersiders, reflecting that she had never
received such a positive reception whilst in costume, in ... basically, forever. People were still just a little standoffish, but she got smiles, waves, spoken greetings.

"Damn," said Regent. "I feel almost popular." He raised his sceptre, saluting the crowd; a few people clapped appreciatively.

"I don't like it," said Bitch. She was hunched in on herself defensively, although the people in the crowd gave her a very respectful berth. Three of her dogs moved with her, not on leads, but following her every move all the same. "I feel exposed."

"It'll be fine," said Skitter. "They actually like us. We did a good thing here." She turned to Bitch. "You should have been at the party." She paused, reconsidering. "Well ... maybe you would not have been happy there. But we missed you."

Bitch shot her a guarded look. "I don't like parties," she growled.

Lisa grinned her vulpine grin. "Hey Grue," she said, "look who it is."

Grue looked; through a gap in the crowd, he saw the Travellers. At the same time, Omake saw the Undersiders. He saw her elbow Genesis, who turned to face him. She couldn't see his smile under his helmet, of course, but he saw the expression that lit up her face. She started moving toward him, drawing the other Travellers in her wake.

"Grue," she said, taking his hands in hers. "It's good to see you. So to speak."

"It's good to see you too," he said, his voice echoing in the helmet. "I had a really good time last night."

"So did I," she said.

"Do you think we --" they both began at the same time, then turned to see their respective groups eyeing them with varying levels of amused speculation -- or, in the case of Bitch, with baffled irritation. Genesis blushed under her mask.

"Geez, guys," said Grue. "Can we get some privacy, here?"

Tattletale, grinning all the while, helped Skitter usher Regent and Bitch away. As they did so, Grue heard Bitch demanding, "What the hell? When did that happen?"

For her part, Omake hustled Trickster and the others off to the side, where they could converse with the Undersiders without intruding on the couple's privacy, such as it was.

This time, the Travellers had brought along Ballistic; he didn't look overly impressed at the attention Genesis was showing Grue, but nor did he have much of a say in the matter.

"Isn't this great?" enthused Sundancer. Even without the tiny star she could generate, she was still radiant.

"It is," agreed Taylor. "How are your feet?"

"Ugh," replied Sundancer. "I had to soak them for what seemed like hours last night before I went to bed." She smiled broadly. "But it was worth it."

Omake reached up to kiss Trickster on the lips. "It was," she agreed. "I've been me again for all of what, six days, and that party was the most fun thing I've done in forever."
Trickster smiled fondly down at her. "Honey," he said cheerfully, "you enjoy washing the dishes." He looked at Tattletale. "Go on, tell me I'm lying."

Tattletale snickered. "You're not lying," she said. "But can you blame her? Everything she does these days is new and interesting and fun."

Omake nodded vigorously. "Ooh," she said, "they have cotton candy over there. I remember cotton candy. Let's get some." Grabbing Trickster's hand, she towed him in the direction of the stand. Grinning, he didn't put up much of a fight.

Ballistic grunted. "She's been like that ever since," he said. "I'm glad she's staying with Trickster. It would drive me nuts."

Tattletale grinned her vulpine grin. "Reminds me of the meaning of the initials ADHD."

Ballistic looked puzzled. "What ...?"

Lisa's grin widened. "Attention Deficit – ooh, shiny!"


"That's okay," said Taylor. "It wasn't that funny anyway." She stepped closer to Bitch. "Just remember, when you get called up on stage, you can't bring your dogs. And don't punch the mayor if he gets too close. This is a celebration. I mean, seriously, you killed Crawler."

"With Amy's help, yeah," Bitch acknowledged. She nodded reluctantly. "That's the biggest thing they ever took down. I was real proud of them. Still am."

Regent grinned broadly. "That's the spirit."

Bitch glared at him.

He put up his hands. "What did I say? What did I say?"

Hope swooped over the crowd with Amy in her arms. They each wore a new outfit, specially made for them by Parian. Amy looked really cute in hers, Hope thought. Lisa had used the word 'stunning', and perhaps she wasn't far wrong.

She spotted the bulk of Gregor with the rest of Faultline's Crew, and backwinged, getting ready for a landing. The chime of crystalline wingbeats alerted those below, and they made way for her, clapping and cheering as they did so. She landed, letting Amy regain her feet, and bowed to the crowd as she refurled her wings. Amy was pink with excitement, holding tightly to Hope's hand. She looked very pleased with herself.

"Thank you, thank you," said Hope. "I love you all too." She smiled, then indicated the Crew. "If you don't mind, I'd like to go talk with my friends now."

The crowd parted for her, hands reaching out to touch her as she walked past. She spread her wings slightly, letting people run their fingers over the crystalline wingfeathers, eliciting musical notes as they did so.

"You," said Amy in a low voice, "are a terrible showoff." She grinned to show that she meant it in a good way.
"I know," giggled Hope. "And they love it."

Amy considered that. "True," she said. "And I love you for it too. You're not pretentious, or arrogant, or false. You're just you."

Hope grinned, raising an eyebrow. "Who else would I be?" She turned to Faultline as she reached the Crew. "Hi, Faultline. Good to see you all here."

Faultline's facial covering, a full-face welder's mask with a crack down the lens, gave no hint of her expression, but her voice was pleased. "It's good to be here. Right now, right here, capes are the flavour of the month."

"I know, isn't it great?" Hope impulsively hugged her. She seemed to be surprised, but after a moment, returned the hug.

"Not many people get to do that," warned Faultline as they disengaged. "If you want to hug someone, go hug Gregor."

"Thank you," grinned Hope. "I think I will."

Gregor had Shamrock by his side, and Newter on the other side. The crowd was giving them a respectful margin, but the looks and comments were not hostile. Newter was grinning like a maniac, while Gregor looked around stolidly.

"Gregor!" said Hope happily.

"Little Hope," greeted Gregor. "The party was good. Thank you for the invitations."

"I saw you dancing," agreed Hope. "You looked good." She nodded to Shamrock. "Did you ever dance professionally? It looked like it."

Shamrock nodded. "Just a little, in Vegas, once upon a time." She smiled and gestured. "Well, go on, hug the big lunk."

"If you don't mind?" Hope said. "I mean, you two are together ..."

Shamrock rolled her eyes. "And you're with Amy. And I can't see you leaving her, or him leaving me, over a hug. So hug him already. I know you both enjoy it."

Hope looked at Gregor; he looked back at her. She grinned; he shrugged. And then he picked her up in his arms and turned ponderously in a circle, holding her feet off the ground. She spread her wings, wrapping them around his oversized body as he turned on the spot.

After a complete circuit, he set her back on her feet, and she refurled her wings. "Hugs are always nice," she said.

"They are," he replied.

Amy watched the performance tolerantly. "She's like that with everyone," she confided to Newter. "Give her half an excuse, and she'll hug anyone."

"Not me," replied Newter. "Skin contact hallucinogens. With today's heat, she'd be counting flying pink elephants inside of three seconds."
Amy considered that. "You know something," she said contemplatively, "my body rejects poisons and diseases. No effect whatsoever."

Newter looked at her, startled. "What, totally? So you could hug me if you wanted?"

"Sure," said Amy. "I could." She paused for a long moment. "If I wanted to."

Newter paused, then spoke slowly and carefully. "So ... if I asked you to hug me ... would you?"

The longing in his voice was almost palpable.

Amy looked at him properly, for the first time. She looked past the orange skin, the prehensile tail, the blue hair, and saw a very lonely person. He had friends, but no-one who could touch him without suffering the effect of his powers.

She smiled. "Come on then," she said quietly, opening her arms. "let's see what you've got."

Hugging Newter was interesting, Amy decided. He was taller and heavier set than Hope – nearly everyone was, to be honest – and had longer arms. She could feel the tingle of sensation on her skin as her defences met and dealt with the hallucinogens that his body manufactured. She could also feel what was missing in Hope's hugs; the passion, the need, the desire.

She was still thoroughly in love with Hope, of course. And he was, after all, a guy. But it was interesting to hug someone different and see what it was like.

And then something touched her butt. Newter wrapped his arms around Amy and hugged her, feeling her arms embracing him in turn. It was wonderful. Having someone just holding him, being there, giving him the human contact that he so desperately craved from time to time.

He felt his tail curling around her as well, almost without his volition. It was just so nice to hold someone, be held in turn –

"Hey, watch the tail, buster!"

Immediately, he moved his wayward tail from her butt to the small of her back. "Sorry."

"It's all right," she said. "You're a teenage guy, it's more or less to be expected." Her grin took any sting out of her words as she let him go.

Amy moved back to Hope's side and took her hand once more. "So, Gregor still hugs nice, huh?" she asked, glancing sideways with a smile.

"Oh, for sure," said Hope. "And Newter?" She grinned. "I saw what he was doing with his tail."

Amy giggled. "If I was into that sort of thing, I might have let him keep going."

Gregor looked at Newter speculatively. "So, I am not the only one now to have a girlfriend outside of the team, yes?"

Startled, Newter stared at Gregor. "You – I – oh god, this is gonna be payback for all those comments and jokes I ever made about you and Hope, isn't it?"
Gregor nodded, never even cracking a smile. "I believe it is, yes."

Beside him, Shamrock stifled a giggle. Newter covered his eyes with his hand.

Labyrinth looked puzzled. "I'm not sure if I know what's going on."

Spitfire smiled behind her gasmask. "Let me see if I can explain ..."

Flechette held Parian tightly. "I've just got to go and stand with them for a while, okay, saiai?" she said. "I'm still part of the Wards, after all."

Behind her mask, Parian smiled at the endearment. "Yeah, I know," she said. "I'll be going up with Hope and Amy, the other rogues."

"You know," said Flechette, her voice playful, "there is a way you could be with me when I'm with the Wards ..."

"I know," sighed Parian. "And trust me, I'm really, really thinking about it, right now." She gave Flechette a smack on the butt. "Go on, go stand with your friends. I'll be here when you get back."

Flechette went, but not before giving Parian a look that awoke a warm feeling in her stomach. Sabah watched Lily walk away.

I do so love her.

I f**king hate him.

Hoskins sat in his car, gripping the steering wheel so tightly that his knuckles were white with the strain. He wished that his fingers were wrapped around motherf**king Alan c**ksucking Barnes' throat instead. He'd been threatened, played, screwed, and kicked to the curb. All he had were photos that endangered him more than they gave him anything to work with.

Well, I'm not getting my money from him any time soon, he mused savagely. Can I get money from the information I already have?

He considered his options.

Sell the information? It wasn't like a set of incriminating photos; he could only sell it once, and then it would spread by word of mouth. And sooner or later, word would get around as to who sold it to begin with. A cold chill settled over him.

Blackmail Skitter for cash? He barely had the first idea as to how to set up a blackmail scheme. Getting the money would be the hard part. That, he knew, and ensuring that the pissed-off supervillain with the bug powers doesn't find me and strip me to the bone with termites or something. The cold chill intensified.

Okay, so I can't get a profit out of this.

What can I do?

He paused for a long moment.

There was only one option, and he knew it.
It's likely gonna get me in trouble, but f**k it.

Purity swooped over the open area, and came in for a landing. Behind her, not travelling quite as fast, but still making good time, were Crusader, Night and Fog, each being carried by one of Crusader's ghost forms. Last in line was Theo, carrying Aster, as well as a bag of supplies for the infant.

He did want to come along so badly, Kayden mused. And this way, they both get to experience this historic occasion. Not that she will remember much of it.

She smiled. Two weeks ago, Jack Slash killed me; today, I celebrate his death.

This is a good day.

"I'm really not so sure that this is a good idea," snapped Carol Dallon as the Brockton Bay cityscape passed below.

"Mom, seriously," said Glory Girl as she carried her mother. "Everyone's going to be there. It's the biggest event in years." She looked unhappy. "I wish you'd have let me go to the party."

"There was no need," pointed out Brandish. "It was just useless frivolity. Slaughterhouse Zero, indeed. Just asking for trouble. And look what happened; the Fallen attacked. In my opinion, it's a good thing we all stayed away, just in case."

"Oh, lighten up, Carol," said Lady Photon, sharing the load of carrying Mark Dallon with her daughter, Laserdream. "Seriously, if you'd just let your hair down once in a while and allowed yourself to have some fun ..."

"Lighten up?" asked Carol. "It's me going easy on that girl that led to her running away like that. And I know something happened between you and her, Victoria. Something bad."

Victoria Dallon sighed. "Mom, it's fine. It was dealt with. It's over and done. I've ... okay, I haven't forgiven her, not really, but I've come to terms with it."

Carol frowned. "All I'm saying is that she's Marquis' daughter, and it's bound to come out sooner or later."

"Yeah, Mom," said Glory Girl, "and when were we ever going to tell her about that, anyway? When were we going to trust her with information about her real father, let her make her own choices? When were we going to treat her like a human being with all the rights and responsibilities of one, rather than hiding things from her and then treating it like it's her fault when she reacts badly to finding out the truth?"

There was a long silence. Then Carol Dallon spoke coldly. "When you're older, Victoria –"

"Actually," said Mark from alongside, "I am older, and I'm kind of curious about that too."

Carol looked around for support, caught the eyes of Sarah Pelham and her daughter, found nothing there. She compressed her lips and said nothing.

The rest of the flight went by in silence.
Danny pulled the truck into the nearly-full parking lot and got out, stretching his back. The trucks' springs creaked as Tecton levered himself out of the other side of the vehicle; it rose several inches in the process.

"Thanks for the lift," said Tecton. "I've got to go meet up with the others now, for site security. But I'll see you later."

"See you then," said Danny. "And thanks for pitching in with the boys."

"It was fun," Tecton assured him. "Later." He turned and moved off, as Danny went to find a place to sit in the grandstand.

"Nearly thought you weren't going to make it," said Weld. "It's just about time."

"Yeah, sorry about that," said Tecton. "Traffic was no fun."

"Well, you're here," Weld assured him, "so no harm done." He pointed to a spot near the grandstands. "You'll be covering that area. Raymancer will be opposite you. You'll be coordinating with the Protectorate capes on site."

"Roger that," Tecton acknowledged. He looked around. "Christ, there's a lot of capes here today. Heroes and villains both."

Weld grinned. "And if we play our cards right, there'll be more heroes than villains soon."

Tecton nodded. "I think I can live with that," he assured Weld, then headed off to his assigned place. The music began to play.
In which the ceremony goes through, the monument is unveiled, old acquaintances are renewed, and new ones are made

Speakers attached to the corners of the grandstands blared out "The Star-Spangled Banner" as Mayor Roy Christner walked across the open area and up on to the podium. Director Emily Piggot joined him, wearing her PRT dress uniform and walking tall; there were more than a few medals pinned to her front. Even now, she looked far more like the person who had won them, ten years ago, than she had a week previously.

They stood, hands on hearts, as the song ran its course, and everyone sat down.

"Ladies and gentlemen," began Christner. "Parahumans of all allegiances." He had to pause for an outburst of cheering and applause. Smiling genially, he went on.

"Eight days ago, on this very spot, an event of monumental significance took place. The Slaughterhouse Nine, a villain group that had terrorised the world for more than two decades, was brought to battle and finally crushed, once and for all."

He paused. The silence was absolute. Not a cricket chirped. Not a fly buzzed.

Tattletale flicked a sideways glance at Skitter, followed by a grin.

Skitter said nothing, but spread her hands slightly. *What?* her body language asked in faux innocence. Tattletale's vulpine grin merely spread wider. She knew very well that Skitter was suppressing all the bugs in the area, and Skitter knew that she knew it.

*And I bet he doesn't even realise that I'm doing it,* Skitter mused.

As the mayor began to speak, Danny shifted on the hard wooden grandstand bench to try to get comfortable. Beside him, a teenage boy was feeding a baby from a bottle; his attention was on the infant, with occasional glances at the mayor as he spoke.

Beyond the boy with the baby was a woman with mousy brown hair, who herself was spending more time watching the baby than the mayor.

"He does like to talk, doesn't he?" Danny commented quietly with a grin.

The teenage boy ducked his head and concentrated on making sure that the baby got her formula; however, the woman nodded and smiled in agreement.

"He'll talk and talk as long as he thinks someone is listening, and that he'll get some sort of political advantage out of it," she agreed, rather cynically, he thought. She indicated the velvet-swathed granite monument. "Were you here, on the day?"

Danny shook his head. "No, I only heard about it later. But my daughter, uh, works for one of the villains," he said. "They're being recognised for that, so I'm here to show my appreciation." He paused. "Danny Hebert," he introduced himself.

The woman smiled again. "Kayden Anders. And this is my son Theo, and my daughter Aster." She waited for something – a reaction, possibly? Danny thought the name sounded familiar, but he couldn't place it. When he did no more than look politely attentive, she extended her hand and he
shook it carefully, fully aware of his calloused palms.

"Well, I'm pleased to meet you, Kayden, and you too, Theo," Danny said. Theo raised his head and gave Danny a polite nod before returning his full attention to feeding Aster.

Danny looked back to the mayor, who had begun to speak again.

"For this we have to thank not only Miss Militia and our noble Wards, young heroes who will one day step into the shoes of their Protectorate mentors, but also a selection of unaffiliated parahumans, and even one of Brockton Bay's up and coming villain gangs, the Undersiders."

Some clapping attended these words; no doubt, these were people who worked for Skitter, or at least lived in her territory.

Behind his helmet visor, Grue grinned sardonically. *The way he's talking, we were all his idea.*

A muffled snort from Regent showed that he wasn't alone in thinking that.

A rail-thin man in a PRT dress uniform sat in the stands, watching the pair on the podium intently. *I'd heard rumours that Emily's health was declining,* he told himself. *It doesn't look like it. She's looking fitter and healthier than ever.*

Mentally, Thomas Calvert scowled. *And here I thought she was getting ready to retire. It looks like I won't be getting her spot for a few years yet.*

*I might have to do something about that.*

"The hero and villain groups had already established a truce in Brockton Bay, so that the Nine could be dealt with, without any internecine conflict. That truce, I am pleased to say, holds to this day." Christner smiled. "Also, due to their starring role in the defeat of the Slaughterhouse Nine, the Undersiders are being afforded an open-ended amnesty for past actions." He paused for effect, then added meaningfully, "Contingent, of course, upon their remaining on the right side of the law for the time being."

A ripple of laughter ran around the grandstands.

Vista could see across the way, where the Undersiders were waiting for their cue to move to the podium. Skitter was there, with Tattletale, Grue, Regent and Hellhound. Though she seemed to recall that she preferred Bitch. But Imp wasn't there.

*Darn,* she thought. *I was looking forward to getting together with her so we could get something to eat and talk about the cute boys on our teams. Looks like she's decided not to show.*

Slowly, she became aware that there was something in her hand, something that crinkled. She frowned, puzzled. *Huh?*

Lifting her hand to her face, she opened it, to find a small square of paper that had been roughly folded a couple of times. She opened it, to find a single printed word: LATERZ. Accompanying it was a smiley with tiny fangs, topped with a couple of little devil's horns.
"It has been suggested that other villain gangs in the city may also take advantage of this amnesty offer," continued Christner. "The PRT and the Protectorate are willing to let that happen, also under the specific condition that they commit no more crimes within Brockton Bay."

A murmur of surprised chatter ran to and fro in the grandstands, as people discussed this surprising development.

Danny looked around until he saw where the Undersiders were waiting. His eyes sought out Skitter. He'd only seen her in costume once before, and it was still a bit of a jar.

*My daughter, the supervillain. Damn.*

_Maybe I shouldn't feel proud of what she's done, what she's accomplished, but ...* damn.*

He smiled, and nodded, very slightly, in her direction.

*I'll always be there for you.*

Taylor smiled inside her mask. She had caught the smile and nod, just as he knew she would. *Thanks, Dad.*

Mayor Christner poured a glass of water from a jug on the podium and drank. Replacing it, he went on.

"But right now, we are here to honour and recognise those who put themselves forward and took part in the battle to destroy the Slaughterhouse Nine." He smiled. "First, we have the unaffiliated capes; the 'rogues', if you will." He paused. "Director Piggot, if you could do the honours?"

Emily Piggot stepped forward smartly to the microphone.

"God damn," muttered Clockblocker. "I am going to have to think of a new nickname for her. She's looking fitter every time I see her."

Kid Win elbowed him in the ribs; Clockblocker looked around to see Weld giving him the we-will-talk-later look. Inside his helmet, he rolled his eyes.

*What kind of a world is it where I can't make fun of the boss with her own name? Life just isn't fair.*

"The first one on the list," said Director Piggot clearly, "is a relative newcomer to Brockton Bay." And to Earth Bet, she knew, but did not say. "However, in the short time she has been here, she has challenged many basic assumptions about our society, defying conventional wisdom to achieve startling goals. She has saved lives, and changed lives, and helped more people than I can count. I am proud to call her my friend. Ladies and gentlemen ... Hope."

Hope smiled at Amy and squeezed her hand, then walked past the grandstand and up to the podium. Cheers and clapping filled both grandstands; significantly more than had greeted Christner and Director Piggot.
Hope shook Director Piggot's hand, then each kissed the other on the cheek.

"Thank you, Madam Director," she said, in her clear, sweet crystalline voice. "I am honoured to be here."

Mayor Christner had a small box on the microphone stand, and he was lifting something out of it. "We have had these medals struck to commemorate the occasion, to show the gratitude of the city, and indeed the nation, for your actions on the day."

It was a round silver medal, suspended on a dark blue ribbon. Mayor Christner held it up, Hope inclined her head, and the medal dropped neatly around her neck. News photographers had moved off the stands to capture the moment, and shutters clicked. Mayor Christner went to shake Hope's hand, but she would have none of that, pulling him into a hug before he knew what was happening.

Laughter arose as he awkwardly hugged her back, before she released him. With a smile, she moved down off the podium to the open area in front. For the news photographers, who had captured the hug, she unfurled her wings and spread them, giving them the change to take several good shots before furling her wings and taking her place.

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Newter grinned and elbowed Gregor in the ribs. "Your other girlfriend's in good form today," he said teasingly.

Shamrock gave him a dirty look. "Ignore him," she told Gregor loftily.

"That is fine," said Gregor placidly. "Your girlfriend is up next."

"Hope's not the only one in good form," muttered Newter, as Shamrock giggled.

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Director Piggot had to hide a smile as she addressed the microphone once more. "The next name is one you may not recognise; however, she worked among you for years under the name of Panacea, with New Wave. She has since left that group, and has renounced her heroic identity, but many here can attest that she is still just as heroic as ever. Ladies and gentlemen ... Amelia Claire Lavere."

Amy took a deep breath and walked up to the podium. Like Hope, she shook the Director's hand, and kissed her cheek. "Thank you, Madam Director," she said, her words amplified by the microphone. "It's really good to be here."

"It's an honour to have you here," said Mayor Christner. "I have to say, I am no fashion expert, but your dress looks wonderful. Where did you get it from?"

Amy smiled. "It was made for me by Parian," she said. She twirled, and the skirt flared. "She's really good at this sort of thing."

"So I see," said the mayor. "I believe I may have a chat with the young lady myself, on behalf of my wife." A ripple of laughter ran around the audience at his little sally. He held up a medal for her. "With thanks from the city and the nation." Amy lowered her head, and the dark blue ribbon dropped around her neck. More applause and cheering sounded from the stands.

Amy shook his hand, not quite daring to hug him as Hope had done, and went down to join Hope, flushed with pleasure. Hope took her by the hand, and they stood side by side.

"That is a very nice dress," commented Lady Photon. Beside her, Laserdream concurred. "Don't you
think so, Victoria?"

Glory Girl looked around, a little distracted. "Sorry, Aunt Sarah. Yes, it's a really nice dress." She looked pensive. "Amy looks so happy. Don't you think so?"

"Don't ask me about the dress," said Mark Dallon. "I'm not an expert on those, except to know that when someone says 'exquisite' or 'original' it means I'll be shelling out another few hundred dollars." He grinned at his daughter. "But you're right. Amy does seem to be really happy." A teasing note came into his voice. "Jealous?"

"No, no, of course not," Victoria said hastily. "I guess I'm glad. But ..."

"But what, pumpkin?" asked Mark softly.

She leaned against his side. "I miss her, Dad," she said quietly. "With all that's happened, I still miss my sister."

He put his arm around her shoulders. "So do I, Victoria," he said just as quietly. "So do I."

"Ladies and gentlemen ... Parian."

Parian walked up to the podium and shook hands with Director Piggot.

"We haven't spoken much," said the Director, "but I have heard good things about your efforts to keep your part of town safe. I understand that you have good relations with those around you?"

"Oh, yes," said Parian. "At least, since the Merchants attacked my territory and were taken into custody."

"And you had a hand in that too, didn't you?" said the Mayor.

"Yes, I did," agreed Parian. "But Hope, Flechette, Skitter, Vista and Weld were there as well. They did as much as, if not more than, I did."

"So, do you think you will be joining the Protectorate?" he asked.

"I'm not sure yet," she said cautiously, "but I am seeing distinct benefits from doing so." Not least of which, seeing my girlfriend full-time even when she is taken off 'liaison duty'."

"That's good to hear," he said heartily. "We need more heroes with your level of dedication." He held up the medal, and she let him slip it over her head. Then she shook his hand and moved down to join Hope and Amy. As she did so, she glanced off to the side, for just a moment.

Seeing Parian up on the podium, being congratulated and given a medal made Flechette's heart swell in her chest. That's my Sabah, she wanted to tell everyone. That's the girl I love.

She caught Parian's sideways glance, and smiled back at her. Her fingers brushed her lips momentarily. I love you.

At her side, Parian's hand momentarily closed, leaving two fingers sticking out.

I love you too.
"And now," said Director Piggot, "we will call the Undersiders up. Skitter, Grue, Tattletale, Regent and, uh, Bitch."

There was a titter around the stands as she stumbled over the last word, but it was quickly hushed as the five moved out to stand before the podium. Grue was the tallest; the darkness just barely leaking from his body and swirling around him. Skitter was impassive, expression invisible behind her insectoid mask and spider-silk costume; a minor swarm buzzed around her, while more bugs crawled over her costume. Regent grinned and waved to the crowd, holding his sceptre up like a conquering ruler. Tattletale had her customary vulpine grin in place as well, while Rachel tried to walk confidently, but obviously sorely missed having at least one hugely overgrown dog at her side.

"Since the formation of your group," Director Piggot went on, "you have rapidly become a growing power in Brockton Bay. You have, more than once, proved to be a distinct thorn in the sides of the Protectorate and Wards alike." She paused for breath, and was a little surprised by the laughter that rippled around the stands.

"However, you have always been careful to avoid loss of life, and you have assisted us on more than one occasion, sometimes even helping to neutralise rival criminal gangs, and during the Leviathan attack, you were right there, helping out." She paused again, to scattered applause.

"So," she continued, "it's not a total surprise to me that you were willing and able to step up this time, and do what was needed in order to crush the threat of the Nine." Also, I happen to know that Hope asked you to help, which makes it no surprise at all.

"In light of that," she said. "it gives me great pleasure to thank you all, on behalf of the city and the nation, for your efforts on the twelfth of June."

Carrying five medals, Mayor Christner stepped down to meet Grue. He had to reach up a little, and Grue had to bend down more than a little, before the ribbon went over the helmet and around his neck. They shook hands, and Christner went on to Skitter. She bent her head also, and the medal went around her neck. She took his hand and shook it just as firmly as Grue had.

One by one, he placed the decorations on them; reaching Bitch, he paused, nodded, and passed her the medal. With a firm nod of her own, she put it on. He hesitated, then she grabbed his hand, shook once, and dropped it again. There was a rustle of laughter from the crowd.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Director Piggot. "The Undersiders."

Grue and the others turned from one side to the other, bowing slightly, or – in Bitch's case – glaring challengingly – to further applause and cheering. Then they took their positions near Hope, Amy and Parian.

"Nicely done," murmured Skitter quietly, to Bitch.

"What are you talking about?" asked Bitch, in a slightly louder tone. "I didn't punch him, did I? Even though I wanted to."

"Which is why I'm saying nicely done," said Skitter. "You did well. No-one got hurt."

"Oh," said Bitch. "Okay. You should have said."

Omake clutched Trickster's arm as medals were placed on the Undersiders. "Isn't this great?" she whispered to him.
He nodded. "It is good, yeah. It would be better if we could find a way home. But it's good."

"Yeah," she agreed, leaning her head on his shoulder.

Beside her, Sundancer nudged Genesis. "Grue looks pretty cool out there, doesn't he?"

Genesis nodded. "He does." Her voice was a little dreamy.

Sundancer leaned in closer, and lowered her voice. "Is he a good kisser?"

Genesis turned her head, half laughing, half in shock. "Mars!"

Sundancer grinned unrepentantly. "Well, is he?"

Genesis smiled. "Yeah." And I'll be wanting more of that.

Skitter turned her head slightly, to see where her father was sitting. Next to Purity, she realised with a little surprise. Doesn't he know?

No. He wouldn't. He doesn't follow cape news. He might remember that Empire Eighty-Eight was outed awhile ago, before Kaiser's death and the split, but he wouldn't recall names or faces.

He was watching her – proudly, she thought. In any case, he was smiling.

In her mind, she giggled, feeling about six years old. Look, daddy, I got a medal!

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, our very own Miss Militia, head of the local Protectorate, and the Brockton Bay Wards." Clapping and cheering resounded as Miss Militia marched out, with Weld and the rest of the Wards following behind. Director Piggot continued speaking, reciting the names as they came out.


As she came to a halt, Miss Militia performed a complicated salute with a gorgeous eighteenth-century basket-hilted sabre, before spinning it and sheathing it in the slings at her side. There was a burst of clapping.

Weld simply bowed to left and right, drawing polite applause, then stood at parade rest.

Kid Win moved out alongside Weld, being careful not to come into contact with him; to have two of the heroes stuck together for the ceremony would give the audience altogether too much to laugh about. He waved to the audience, and they responded with applause and cheering.

Flechette strode out boldly, shouldering her arbalest. She saluted the crowd, garnering a few claps and cheers as she did so.

Clockblocker had no such inhibitions; he gave each grandstand an extravagant bow, drawing more laughter and clapping from the crowd. As an encore, he held up a brightly coloured rubber ball, and froze it, leaving it hanging in midair.

Vista was out last; she waited until the others were in place. Then she shortened space, stepping out to end up beside Clockblocker in a single stride. The crowd cheered and clapped once more.

"Showoff," murmured Clockblocker from behind his impassive faceplate.
"Says you," she replied, just as quietly from behind motionless lips.

Carrying the last six medals from the box, Mayor Christner stepped down from the podium.

"I will confess that when I first heard of the victory, I was a little put out," Director Piggot said over the microphone as Mayor Christner approached Miss Militia. "You see, they had not taken the time to inform me of the ambush before they pulled it off." She deliberately injected a note of chagrin into her words; this drew a ripple of laughter from the grandstands.

"But since then, I have come to realise that they simply did not have the time to jump through all the hoops. Miss Militia, as is her right and her duty, made the decision at the time to follow the plan and get the job done." She smiled. "And it worked, magnificently so. Congratulations to you and your Wards."

Clapping and cheering arose once more, as Mayor Christner placed the medals over the heads of each of the heroes in turn. Each time, he murmured a few words of congratulation, and shook their hands. For Weld, the medal had a felt backing glued on; the mayor had been informed of Weld's problems with metal, and precautions had been taken. It would not do, after all, for one of the heroes of the hour to absorb his medal.

Vista was the last to receive a medal; rather than shake hands, she hugged the Mayor, just as Hope had done. More laughter and cheering broke out as he hugged her in return, patting her on the back.

The heroes moved back to stand with the rogues and the villains, shoulder to shoulder with them, as they had done, eight days previously. Each wore his or her medal proudly, the silver glinting in the bright sunlight.

Hope stood proudly, clasping Amy's hand tightly. Parian, too, had slipped through the ranks of the heroes to stand beside Flechette, grasping her hand, the contact shielded by the bodies around her.

Mayor Christner went back to the microphone.

"Eight days ago, on this very spot, these fine parahumans put their differences aside and came together as one. They faced a menace that has, quite frankly, terrorized the world for twenty-four years. They faced it, they stepped up to meet it ... and they were victorious." He had to pause then, for the storm of cheering that nearly lifted the sunshades from the grandstands.

When he spoke next, he addressed them directly. "Each of you, standing here before me, has had a part in saving this city, saving the world, from further excesses of the Slaughterhouse Nine. No matter your intent in putting on the costume you wear, no matter your allegiance on the day; you stepped up, you joined forces, and together you prevailed against a foe that has defeated so many before you." He glanced to left and right. "Ladies and gentlemen, if you can just stand, to honour these fine people here?"

A rustle of movement as everyone stood.

"Brockton Bay Wards," said Mayor Christner. "Miss Militia. Undersiders. Parian. Amelia Claire Lavere. Hope. You have done this city, the world, a great service. I salute you. We salute you."

He did not actually attempt to salute, but he did applaud loudly; the gesture was quickly taken up by everyone on the grandstands. At his side, Director Piggot was indeed standing at rigid attention, right arm performing a parade-perfect salute.
Mayor Christner waited for the storm of applause to cease. "And now for the big moment." He nodded to the point just beyond where the Wards, the Undersiders and the Rogues had assembled, where the granite monument stood, swathed in red velvet. "It is time to unveil the monument to this great occasion."

Stepping down off the podium, he moved around the young parahumans to the monument, Director Piggot at his side. The PRT officer guarding it moved aside at their approach.

The news photographers gathered around, cameras at the ready. Around them, the Undersiders, the Wards and the unaffiliated heroes stood watching. Mayor Christner took one of the golden ropes, and handed the other to Director Piggot. At a count of three, they both pulled; the elaborate knot came apart, and the red velvet wrapping slid off the monument. It caught for a moment on one of the corners, but before anyone had time to step forward and free it, it came loose and slid to the ground. Cameras clicked, recording the moment. Flechette squeezed Parian's hand. *I saw what you did there.*

Parian squeezed back. *I know.*

The monument was made of rough-hewn granite, five feet tall and three feet square at the base, the sides sloping in to a flat top of two feet square. On top, it bore a sundial in bronze; a metal plug set into it indicated the exact time of day that the battle took place.

The four sides each told a different story. One depicted Hope, Amy and Parian, with their names, their pictures, basic information about them, and the parts they played in the battle. The next side had the same information about the Undersiders. The third side depicted the Wards, along with Miss Militia; this was notably more compressed than the other two sides, due to the larger number of people involved.

Finally, the last side held an understandably abbreviated account of the battle itself, from beginning to end. Missing were certain aspects of what happened *after* the battle, but that was more or less to be expected.

Around the top of the monument, in letters incised deeply into the stone and filled with brass, were the words *FOREVER ENDED THE MENACE OF THE SLAUGHTERHOUSE NINE.*

The people were coming down off the stands now to examine the monument, and to congratulate those who had taken part. Kayden moved through the crowd, holding Aster, with Theo at her side. She stopped in front of Hope, offering her a smile. Hope smiled back, then leaned in to admire Aster. "She's so cute," she said softly.

"She is," Kayden agreed, smiling fondly down at her. "She's my little angel." She looked at Hope. "You have my congratulations, and my sincere thanks, for helping put that monster in the ground."

Hope nodded in acknowledgement. "It had to be done," she said quietly. She moved up alongside Kayden and gave her a one-armed hug without disturbing Aster. "I'm just glad you two are all right." She indicated Amy. "Have you two met before now? I'm not sure if you have."

Amy shook her head. "Not socially, no," she said. "You're Purity, right?"

Kayden nodded. "Call me Kayden. And this is Aster."

"Awww." Amy leaned in to look at the infant, and reached out gently to brush back hair from her eyes. "She's so cute." She met Kayden's eyes. "And she's in perfect health. Though from the looks of
it, she's going to need a change in the next half hour or so."

Kayden smiled. "Thank you. That's really good to know."

Amy grinned. "All part of the service."

Hope smiled at Theo. "How are you doing today?" she asked.

"Great," Theo replied, pushing back an errant lock of hair from his eyes. "I'm really glad Kayden let me come along. Watching you and the others get your medals from the Mayor was awesome. And the monument – that's really intense."

Hope lowered her tone. "How bad was it ... with Jack Slash, I mean?"

He shuddered. "Bad. He kept talking about how he was going to kill me and Aster, and then Kayden when she came in. And then he said he was going to let us live, and give me two years to learn how to kill him. But then he heard two people coming, so he changed his mind and said that he'd play two out of three, instead. And then there was a lot of blood and pain, and I passed out, and then I woke up on the floor and Aster was crying."

Hope hugged him. "I'm just glad you're alive," she said softly.

He hugged her back. "Me too," he said feelingly. "Me too."

Danny made his way through the crowd. Other people were congratulating the Wards and Undersiders – even Kayden, the lady he had spoken to, was talking to Hope – and so he felt safe in walking right up to Skitter.

"Well," he said. "Congratulations. You're a hero. How does it feel?"

Taylor smiled behind the mask. "It feels kinda funny."

"You looked good out there, getting your medal from the Mayor," he said. "It's probably not really a good idea to hug you, but I will shake your hand."

And so he did, and no-one took a bit of notice.

Faultline and Labyrinth were looking at the monument when Miss Militia stepped up beside them.

"Please don't break it," she said half-jokingly to Faultline. "We've only got the one."

"Oh, I wouldn't do that to you," Faultline assured her. "It actually looks kinda cool."

Miss Militia nodded. "It does." She tilted her head slightly. "Are you likely to take up the amnesty full-time?"

Faultline nodded. "I'm thinking so, yes. With the way things are going."

Labyrinth turned to Miss Militia. "Is – is Mimi all right?"

Miss Militia frowned. "Mimi?"

"Ah," said Faultline. "Burnscar."
"Oh," said Miss Militia. "Oh, yes. She's well. Hope and Amy gave her some sort of treatment, and she's responding very well to therapy now."

"Oh," said Labyrinth. "That's good. That's really good."

She turned and wandered off; Faultline gave Miss Militia a nod and headed after her.

A crackle of static from the speakers made everyone look up. Mayor Christner was up on the podium once more.

"If you will excuse me for just a moment?" he said. "There are two more things I would like to say, before you can carry out your celebrations in peace."

The crowd began to quiet down, though there was some laughter and clapping.

"The first thing," he began, "is that the twelfth of June will now be a public holiday in Brockton Bay. It will be known as V-Nine day, and will be celebrated with a gathering at this monument." He smiled. "This year, we're celebrating it just a little late." Scattered laughter and applause greeted this comment.

"And the second thing," he said, "is this." He held up a large bound document with grey covers. Certain people in the audience recognised it, and waited for what he was going to say next.

"We are calling this the Christner Initiative," he said firmly. "It is an integrated plan for fixing the ills of the city. It has been approved by the city council, and the initial stages will be implemented by the end of the week."

There was more clapping and cheering.

"And now," he said, "let us eat, drink and be merry, for today we are among friends." He bowed to them all, drawing applause from the crowd. "Thank you."

"Well," said Weld to Skitter. "So the Christner Initiative's going through. Have you had a look at it?"

Skitter nodded. "We got our copy."

"Good to hear," said Weld. "It's very thorough. Have you read the appendix about integrating villains into the Wards?"

Taylor smiled behind her mask. For someone made of metal, Weld could be very transparent.

"I thought you didn't like working with villains," she said, almost teasingly.

Weld rubbed the back of his neck. "I've ... had occasion to rethink my attitudes," he said at last. "So," he said directly, "have you considered joining the Wards?"

Skitter inclined her head slightly. "In time," she said. "In time. What do you think of the name Weaver?"

Weld frowned. "Actually," he said, "I like it." He looked around at the crowd, in which the other members of the Undersiders could be seen circulating - except Bitch, who had gone off to the side, to be with her dogs. "Any of the others considering it?"

"I don't know," she said lightly. "You'll have to ask them."
"There you are," said Vista.

"What do you mean, here I am?" asked Imp innocently. "I've always been here." She grinned at Vista.

"You just love doing that, don't you?" asked Vista.

Imp nodded cheerfully. "Oh yeah."

"Hope," said Jessica Yamada. "I've been wanting to catch up to you and Amy."

"Doctor Yamada!" said Hope happily, hugging the doctor. "How have you been?"

"I've been well," replied Jessica. She returned the hug. "I've been working with Mimi. She's getting along really well since the treatment you gave her. Which actually gave me an idea for something that you and Amy could help me with, if you wanted to."

"Oh?" said Hope. Amy looked interested.

"You see," said Doctor Yamada, "I have this patient ..."

"Quinn Calle speaking."

"Alan Barnes. I have something interesting to add to your information about Emma's case."

"Oh?"

"Let's meet. I'd rather not say this even over the phone."

"You'd better come to my office. I know it's clean."

"I'll be there in half an hour."

Alan Barnes put the phone down. They say Quinn Calle's the best in the business. Let's see what he can do with this little gem.
In which there is a group photo, Kayden thanks a benefactor, and relationships develop in expected and unexpected ways

"You know what would be a great idea?" said Kid Win. "A group photo in front of the monument."

Weld nodded. "It would. Gather the troops; I'll talk to the others."

Clockblocker was, of course, willing to go along with it. Bouncing the brightly coloured ball on the pavers, he headed for the monument. Miss Militia was speaking with Director Piggot and the Mayor; she agreed as well, assuring the Director and the Mayor that she would be back shortly.

From a distance, Kid Win saw Vista talking with someone who looked vaguely familiar, although when he got closer, she was alone. It didn't seem worth pursuing, so he simply passed the word and went looking for Flechette and Parian. He found them in a relatively private corner, holding hands and talking softly together.

Hope and Amy were likewise easy to locate; Weld merely followed the sound of crystal chimes. They were talking to ... Danny Hebert, Weld recalled, the father of the girl who had been bullied by Shadow Stalker. Danny seemed agreeable to letting them go get a photo taken, and even volunteered for camera duty.

Weld found Grue talking to Genesis, one of the Travellers; he agreed to come over for the photo, and Genesis tagged along to watch. Regent was just as easy to find, being extravagant and flashy with his gestures. When he found Skitter, she was causing insects to fly in formation and perform other tricks for a group of wide-eyed children, so he asked her to find the other two.

Tattletale, as it happened, didn't need to be found; she was already waiting at the monument. Bitch was harder to persuade to come in for a picture, but Skitter managed it; this time she brought her dogs. "Because they were there too," she said obstinately.

"Good idea," said Weld. "Just not ... full size, okay? We want to be able to see everyone else."

Bitch agreed with bad grace, and they arranged themselves around the monument.

By unspoken agreement, they arranged themselves on either side of the monument so that it could clearly be seen, showing the face that detailed the battle. There were fourteen all up, so Danny had them arrange themselves seven to a side. He told Grue to stand on one side, with Miss Militia at his side, Regent beside her, and Weld at the outside. On the other side, he had Hope, Amy, Clockblocker and Skitter.

In front of them, still keeping clear of the monument, Bitch knelt in front of Skitter with her three dogs sitting obediently in front of her. Vista was beside Bitch, giving her and the dogs plenty of space. Beside Vista was Tattletale. On the other side of the monument, Flechette and Parian knelt in front of Grue and Miss Militia, and Kid Win finished off the line.

Danny lined up the camera, seemed confused for a moment by what he saw in the viewscreen, then shrugged and took the picture. He took two more for good measure, then handed the camera back to Miss Militia, from whence it had come. She looked over the photos, raised one eyebrow, then put the camera away.
Tattletale grinned. She knew exactly what was going on. Danny, looking at the phone screen, and Miss Militia, in looking over the photos, had no doubt found Imp peeking around the others, grinning madly and probably making rude gestures. It was so very like Imp.

As Miss Militia was on her way back to continue her conversation with Director Piggot, she was intercepted by Kayden Anders, the leader of the Pure. Behind her was a teenage boy carrying a young baby.

"Can I help you, Mrs Anders?" she asked politely.

"As it happens," said Kayden, "you have already helped me. I just wanted to thank you."

Miss Militia frowned. "I don't follow," she said.

Purity stepped aside and ushered the boy forward. He was heavy-set and seemed somewhat shy, but he carried the infant carefully.

"Miss Militia, I would like you to meet my stepson Theo, and my daughter Aster," she said. "Theo, this is Miss Militia. She was the one who killed Jack Slash."

Theo looked up at Miss Militia. "Hello, ma'am," he said. "I'm very pleased to meet you."

Miss Militia looked at the teenager. She had the distinct impression that he was referring to what Kayden had just said, rather than just being polite.

"Hello, Theo," she replied. In a gentler voice, she added, "Hello, Aster." Looking back at Kayden, she added, "She's a beautiful child."

Kayden nodded. "Two weeks ago, Jack Slash invaded my home, wounded Theo and Aster very badly, and killed me. The only reason I am speaking to you now – the only reason any of us are here – is because Hope was there." Her hand brushed unconsciously at her hair, revealing a silver mark on her forehead. "And then eight days ago," she went on, "you killed him."

"Killing me I can understand," she continued pragmatically. "I was a legitimate enemy. But for almost killing Aster, I could never forgive him. I was prepared to hunt him down and kill him for that, but you did it for me. And for that, I thank you."

Miss Militia nodded gravely. "It was something that had to be done," she agreed. "I understand you are talking with Director Piggot about joining the Protectorate?"

"Yes," said Kayden. "She has explained to me about 'rebranding'. I was thinking of going with the name Evenstar, while Crusader has chosen Legion."

Miss Militia tilted her head slightly. "Legion?" she enquired.

Purity smiled. "It's in the Bible. A man possessed with a multitude of spirits. They called themselves Legion."

"Ahh. Fitting," agreed Miss Militia. "And Night and Fog?"

"Well, they're willing to, as they put it, get paid for not killing people," said Kayden, "but they have not yet thought of new names that do not sound even more villainous."

"Well, we can work on that," Miss Militia said. "But thank you for letting me know."
Kayden smiled. "I think we each have much to thank the other for."

With a nod of agreement, Miss Militia moved on. Kayden went back to inform the others that it was time to leave.

"Is it just me," said Grue, as he and Genesis strolled away from the monument, "but are you more steady on your feet today than you were yesterday?"

"Oh, I am," said Genesis with a smile. "All that dancing with you must have helped my sense of balance." She took his arm. "I want to do more dancing. And kissing. Kissing was nice."

"Surely you've kissed other boys, right?" asked Grue idly.

She shook her head. "A few, I guess." She made a face. "Most of the time, boys were nice to me, but they couldn't see past the wheelchair. There were a few who were still interested, but they were basically creepers who were attracted to me because I was in a wheelchair. I didn't want my disability to be what put people off, or attracted them. I just wanted to be, you know, a girl who happened to be in a wheelchair, as opposed to a wheelchair with a girl attached, if you know what I mean?"

Grue thought about it. "I guess I do," he said. "I guess if I'd known you before ... I mean, if we had met normally, I'd like to think that I would treat you like anyone else."

Genesis smiled up at him. "I'm sure you would."

"So when are you free next?" asked Grue. "Because I've never enjoyed myself so much as I did, last night, with you."

Genesis nodded. "The trouble is, every time we see each other, we've got both our teams right there, and there's no privacy." She lowered her voice to a frustrated growl. "And I want to do things with you that really need privacy."

Grue looked around. "You know, if we wanted to find someplace private ... there's all these empty buildings around here."

"Ooh," said Genesis. "So there is."

"Remember this place?"

"Mmm, yes," said Flechette. "I remember what we were doing, the last time, too. Just before Vista interrupted us."

Parian turned to her. "Would you like to finish what we started, that time?" She took off her mask; her smile was suggestive. "I promise that we will have more than five minutes, this time."

Flechette smiled, and reached back to the door without ever taking her eyes off Parian's face. There was a metallic click.

"This time," she said firmly, "we lock the door first."

Taylor was so very glad she was wearing the mask. She had wondered what Grue and Genesis were up to when they oh-so-casually wandered away into one of the buildings; it didn't take long for her to figure it out. Fortunately, he brought up his cloak of darkness before she saw too much.
And then, in the next building, Flechette and Parian were doing *that*. Hastily, she pulled all the bugs out of that area; there were some things that she just did not need to know.

Tattletale was looking at her with a knowing grin. "You're watching them, aren't you?" she enquired with a lift of one eyebrow.


"Well, I admit, there *is* a choice," mused Tattletale. "Grue and Genesis, or Parian and Flechette. Or both, if you really want an education."

"I'm not watching either of them," said Taylor defensively. "Far too much information." She was *definitely* glad she was wearing the mask; from the feel of it, her cheeks must be flaming red by now.

"Well, I'm sorry it didn't work out for you and Grue," said Tattletale sympathetically.

Skitter shrugged. "I don't think it ever would have," she said, trying to be philosophical. "He told me that he thought of me more as a sister than anything else."

"Ouch," replied Tattletale. "Friendzoned."

"I don't mind," Skitter told her, and tried to tell herself it was true. "I'd rather have him as a friend than make a play and lose even that."

"Never mind," said Tattletale sympathetically. "I'm sure someone else will come along."

Skitter looked at her suspiciously. "Is that one of your intuition things, or are you just trying to make me feel better?" she asked.

Tattletale's grin was as vulpine as it ever got. "Yes," she replied.

"Amy?"

Hope and Amy looked around. Glory Girl stood there, twisting her hands together. Behind her stood Lady Photon and Flashbang.

"Vicky?" asked Amy. "What's up?"

Glory Girl shot an appealing look over her shoulder, but Lady Photon urged her on with a gesture. She turned back to face Amy.

"I ... wanted to say ... I'm sorry," said Glory Girl. "For being such a bitch. For hating you. For using my power on you." She paused, and took a deep breath. "And I miss you."

Amy blinked. "I ... um," she said. She started again. "I miss you too, Vicky. And I'm sorry for using my power on you too. It ... I ... my head was in a really bad place, then. But that's no excuse." She sniffled, the tears starting to flow. "I love you, Vicky. You'll always be my big sister."

It was Victoria who made the first move, stepping forward to enfold Amy in a hug. Amy hugged her back, while Hope smiled at the pair of them. She nodded to Lady Photon; she nodded back. No words were needed.

"So, Amy girl, do you want to come back home?" asked Mark as the two girls separated. "Because you can, you know. Any time you want."
Amy looked tempted; she glanced at Hope, who gave her an encouraging look. "What about Carol ... Mom?" she asked tentatively.

Mark's lips tightened fractionally. "Now that my head's in a better place, I can keep Carol in check," he said. "She won't bother you."

Amy took a deep breath. "But the thing is, you'll need to," she said. "And that will cause tension. So I think I'll stay away for the time being." She slipped her hand into Hope's. "Thank you very much for the offer, and I appreciate it greatly, but right now, I still need Hope, and Hope still needs me."

Mark nodded. "I can understand that." He and Glory Girl moved away.


She headed back to where the other members of her family were gathered; moments later, they lifted off and flew away.

Amy watched them go. "Should I have gone with them?" she asked doubtfully.

Hope took her in her arms. "Only if you wanted to, sweetie," she said softly. "Only if you wanted to."

"Once most of the villains have gone, we can release you from security duty," Assault said to Tecton. "How are you liking Brockton Bay?"

"It's all right," Tecton said, working his shoulders inside his armour. "More humidity, less wind." He paused. "The Heberts are good people. It sucks, what Shadow Stalker did to Taylor. You can see it in her eyes, she has trouble trusting anyone now."

Assault grimaced. "I'm the last person to say that people shouldn't get second chances, but I think Shadow Stalker had second, third, fourth and fifth chances, and screwed them all up. I just hope we can make things right for the girl. Give her a chance for a normal life."

"Amen to that," said Tecton. "Amen to that."

"Hey," said Battery to Raymancer. "How you holding up?"

"Oh, pretty good," said Raymancer. "I got a drink of water a little while ago. It's been really smooth. Apart from kids running around and screaming, there's not even been any loud noises."

Battery nodded. "The villains all been behaving themselves?"

"Like a dream," Raymancer told her. "This amnesty thing, they're really serious about it."

"Serious as a heart attack," Battery agreed. She looked around. "It's funny, a month ago, something like this, it wouldn't have happened. Heroes and villains just didn't get together on anything except for Endbringer attacks and, well, the Nine. But since the Wards and the Undersiders pulled together and hammered the Nine into the ground, there's been a lot of people looking around and going, hey, if they can do that, what can't they do?"

She smiled. "And I kind of believe in second chances. So yeah, I'm willing to give them a try at being good guys. Some won't make it, of course. But I'm willing to bet that some will."
Raymancer nodded. "I guess. But I guess I still need convincing. And you have some damn scary villains here in Brockton Bay, from what Clockblocker was telling me."

Battery grinned. "Let me guess. He went on his Skitter rant again?"

Raymancer nodded. "He does that often?"

"Only occasionally. Whenever he thinks that someone isn't taking her seriously enough." She chuckled. "It's about the only thing that he is serious about." A pause. "Not that Skitter isn't scary as hell, when you stop to think about what she can do."

She looked up to see Assault approaching. "Ah, there's my loved one now." She smiled at Raymancer. "Won't be long now. As soon as most of the villains have gone, you can go back to the Heberts'."

"Won't be too soon for me," said Raymancer feelingly. "I only got about four hours rack time this morning."

Assault grinned as he came up, having overheard this. "That's the life of a hero, I'm afraid," he said. "See you on the flip side." Linking arms with Battery, he moved off.

"Have you seen Genesis?" asked Trickster. "We're about ready to go, and we can't find her anywhere."

Skitter considered telling them what Genesis was presumably doing at that very moment, but thought better of it. "I'll look around for her," she promised, just barely avoiding saying 'them' instead of 'her'.

Darkness still roiled in the room where last she had seen Grue and Genesis. She sent bugs scuttling into the inky blackness. They found bare flesh, and climbed.

Jess squealed, her voice muted by the darkness. "There's bugs on me!"

Brian yelped. "There's one on me too!" Taylor, he thought. *If you're just doing this to mess with me...*

And then he looked up at the ceiling. Jess could not see it, of course, but his darkness was transparent to him. Above, a legion of cockroaches had spelled out the words HOPE U R FINISHED. A moment later, they reformed to say TRAV LOOKING 4 G.

"Ah," he said. "That's our wake-up call. Your people are looking for you."

She sat up, looking around, and he let the darkness fade away. The cockroaches had scattered into the corners of the ceiling. "How do you know – oh! Skitter?" Her voice took on an edge of outrage. "She's been watching us?"

He grinned. "She wouldn't do that. She's too polite. Anyway, her bugs can't see through my darkness. But she knew where we were, and probably what we were doing." He handed her clothes to her. "So this is her way of giving us a discreet heads-up."

She started climbing into them; he began to dress as well.

He coughed with slight embarrassment as he pulled his pants on. "I didn't realise you had never well, you know."
"Oh, yeah, I guess I should have told you," she said. "A girl in a wheelchair doesn't get all that many opportunities, remember?" She looked anxiously at him. "It wasn't ... bad for you, was it?"

"Oh god no," he hastened to reassure her, tucking his shirt in. "It was wonderful. Fantastic." He peered at her. "How was it for you?"

She tugged her top into place, then stepped up and kissed him thoroughly. "If that's what the first time is like," she said softly, "bring on the second, third and fourth times."

He cleared his throat. "I think we had the –"

"Oh, hush," she told him firmly. "You know what I meant." She handed him his helmet. "Now get dressed, lover. We're about to meet the worst thing since mothers-in-law – each other's team."

He grinned and pulled the helmet on. "Masks on," he said, and flipped the visor down. She settled her mask into place, then made for the door. He followed close behind.

They emerged from the building without being spotted and were halfway over toward the monument before Sundancer saw them. "There you are," she said. "We've been looking all over for you."

"Sorry," said Genesis with a grin. "We were exploring, and we lost track of time."

Sundancer stared from Genesis to Grue and back again. Genesis blushed. Sundancer clapped both hands over her mouth. "Omygod," she seemed to be saying, but it was quite muffled. "Ohmygod."

As Grue and Genesis accompanied Sundancer – who had removed her hands from her mouth, but still seemed incapable of intelligent speech – toward the monument, other members of the Travellers saw them and came to meet them.

"Finally," said Trickster. "We were wondering where you had gotten to." He glanced at Grue. "I was beginning to wonder if you'd kidnapped her."

"If I took her anywhere," said Grue, a note of amusement in his voice, "I wouldn't need to kidnap her."

Omake glanced suspiciously at him, then at Genesis as she nodded in agreement, and her eyes opened wide behind her mask.

"Well, Genesis," she said, after a pause to apparently get her voice under control, "now that you've rejoined us, maybe you can get our transport up and running so we can get home?"

Genesis raised her chin. "Certainly," she said.

As she lowered herself to the ground, preparing to form the dragonlike creature which would take them away, Sundancer moved up to support her.

"Did you –" she hissed.

Genesis smiled. "Uh huh."

"And did he –"

"Uh huh."
"And was it –"

Genesis' smile only widened. "Oh. Yeah."

Sundancer squealed and hugged her, drawing a surprised glance from Trickster and an irritated one from Ballistic. Omake merely smiled.

Grue watched the Travellers' dragon-thing take off and disappear into the distance, as Skitter approached with the other Undersiders in tow.

"I'm not even sure what to say at this point," she said after a moment.

He looked at her, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"She means," said Tattletale, "that she isn't sure how to ask you how serious you are about Genesis without sounding like a jealous bitch."

Skitter turned toward Tattletale. "That's not what I was going to say!"

"No," grinned Tattletale, "but it's what you wanted to say."

Skitter grunted something and then turned back to Grue. "Well, now that she's said it, I guess it's a valid question. How serious are you about Genesis?"

"Wait, you're not jealous?" asked Grue.

"Of course I'm jealous, you idiot, you're the best looking guy I've met in ages, the first one who's actually nice to me, and now you've known Genesis for all of two days and you're having sex with her instead of me. Why would I not be jealous?"

"Of course not," she said. "You told me, I'm like a sister to you. Now, can you answer the question?" She sounded almost convincing, even to herself.

"I'm serious," he replied flatly. "Utterly and totally."

"Is this going to be a problem between our team and theirs?"

"You mean, does she already have a boyfriend?"

Skitter shrugged. "Or girlfriend."

He shook his head. "Ballistic's not her boyfriend, and Sundancer's not her girlfriend. And Trickster and Omake are about as solid as they come. I'd lay odds that she doesn't have any romantic attachments in her team."

"I'll back those odds," agreed Tattletale, sealing the deal. "Though Ballistic was starting to show signs of interest in her since she got her legs back, but she's not interested in him. Probably because he's a jerk, and never gave her any sort of concession because she was in a chair."

Grue nodded. "So that's why he's been giving me the eye."

Skitter nodded. "So is there going to be a problem between you and Ballistic?"

Grue shrugged. "I am going to see Genesis again, and if he wants to make a thing of it, that's up to him. I can't see the rest of the Travellers backing him on it, though."
"Seriously?" said Ballistic. "Grue? What the hell?"

"Why not?" asked Genesis. "What's wrong with Grue?"

Sundancer leaned forward, watching the conversation avidly. Trickster and Omake leaned back against the sofa, his arm around her shoulders, relaxed and comfortable.

"Well, geez," said Ballistic. "I've been here all this time, part of the team. And as soon as you're able, soon as you're on your feet, you grab on to some guy who's not even in the Travellers?"

"So wait," said Genesis. "All the time I'm in the chair, you're a jerk to me, and as soon as I'm upwardly mobile, you think I should fall in love with you? Did you not think that maybe you might have been a little nicer to me before, or even afterward? Like, say, give me some encouragement in my walking? Offer to dance? Anything?"

"Uh," said Ballistic. "I didn't think of it, then."

Sundancer mouthed a silent 'd'oh!', then put on an innocent expression.

"No," said Genesis, giving Sundancer a sharp glance. "You just didn't think." She looked at Ballistic. "I'm going to keep seeing Grue. No matter what you think or say." She gave him a sad smile. "You're my friend. But that's it. We had a chance to be something more. Many chances. But you never took them. I'm sorry."

Something in what she said seemed to get through to Ballistic. "I'm sorry, too," he mumbled. "I didn't mean to make you mad." He paused. "I guess I was a bit of a jerk."

"Yes, yes, you were," agreed Trickster, taking his arm from behind Omake's shoulders and sitting forward. "We're all agreed on this, so the topic is settled." He looked from Genesis to Ballistic and back again. "Now, I happen to like Grue, so trust me, this could be a lot worse. We're basically allied with them, which is a good thing." He looked hard at Genesis. "But here's the question. If the Travellers clash with the Undersiders – will there be a problem?"

Silence fell. It stretched, while Genesis thought about that. She closed her eyes, then opened them and looked directly at Trickster. "In that case ... I would stand down. I won't hurt Grue, but I won't fight you, either."

Trickster nodded judiciously. "I can accept that," he said. "That's fair."

"Heading off now?" asked Hope.

"I think so, yes," said Faultline. "It's been a very good day, but we need to be back at Palanquin soon. Besides, Labyrinth doesn't get out much, so she's starting to feel a little tired."

Hope smiled at the girl in the green maze-patterned robe, and offered her a hug. Labyrinth accepted it, a little stiffly, as though she wasn't quite sure what they were for, but she accepted it all the same.

"I heard about what you did for Mimi," she said softly. "Thank you."

Hope smiled. "That was mainly Amy," she said. "I was just there."

Labyrinth smiled faintly in return. "You sow good wherever you go. How can I not thank you?"

Hope blinked. "I guess I try," she said, a little taken aback. "Someone else said that to me, a while
ago. Who was that? "Well, goodbye."

Gregor would not leave without hugging her as well; he quite obviously enjoyed the feeling of her wings wrapping all the way around his bulk. "Be safe, little Hope," he told her seriously.

"You too, big guy," she said with a smile. "It's always nice, seeing you." She turned to Shamrock. "Hug for the road?"

Shamrock smiled. "If Gregor can hug you, then I can certainly hug you, too." And she proceeded to do so.

In the meantime, Amy was eyeing Newter, who had sidled up with an air of vague hopefulness, like a puppy that suspected the existence of treats, but wasn't sure if he was going to get one. The more she eyed him with one brow raised, the more crestfallen he looked. But she couldn't keep a straight face for long.

"Okay, fine, come on," she grinned. His face lit up as she hugged him, and he returned the embrace.

It was ... different, hugging Newter. Hugging Hope was nice, because Hope enjoyed hugging people, and she could really make a production of it. Hugging Newter was interesting, because Newter was specifically interested in hugging her. The tingling feeling as her skin touched his was another interesting sensation, as her body dealt with his skin-level hallucinogens. And further in ...

Wow. He really is interested in me. Or at least his body is.

No, she realised. It's him. If she read the brain chemistry right, he was rapidly developing a crush on her.

That's actually kind of ... I don't know whether to say 'flattering' or 'disturbing'. She paused, thinking about it. I must be about the first girl who can give him body contact and stay rational, since he got his powers. Of course he's forming an attachment to me.

She paused, enjoying the hug, trying to think it through. Do I want to encourage him? Am I even attracted to him? Or am I being nice to him in the same way as Hope is nice to me? Is that even fair to him?

And then she felt his tail caressing her butt.

Mmm, she thought. That actually feels quite nice.

Almost immediately, it moved away, to the small of her back. And he learns fast, too, she thought with an inner grin.

"It's okay," she whispered, just for his ear. "You can put it back."

He blinked, hesitated, looked at her. She nodded fractionally. And then his tail slid down over her butt once more. It really did feel nice.

Before she disengaged from the hug, she kissed him gently on the cheek.

The look on his face was enough to make her giggle; he looked stunned and elated at the same time.

"I'll see you later," she said with a shy smile.
"Yeah," he said. "Later."

Her lips still tingled from the hallucinogens, making her wonder what it would be like to kiss him fully on the mouth.

One step at a time, she told herself sternly. I don't even know if I'm attracted to him yet. Hell, I don't even know if I can be attracted to guys.

But she suspected that she knew the answer.

Hope waved goodbye as the van containing Faultline's Crew pulled out of the parking lot. She turned to Amy with a smile. "Newter really seems to enjoy your hugs," she observed.

Amy nodded. "He does." She paused. "I enjoy hugging him, too," she said. "I really do." She looked Hope in the eye. "I think he – scratch that, I know he's attracted to me. And getting more so, all the time."

Hope nodded, unperturbed. "And how do you feel about him?" she asked.

Amy shook her head. "I – shit, I don't know." The expletive came unbidden to her lips. "I don't – hugging him, I feel ... something. It's not like with you. It's physical. I can feel his body reacting to me holding him, and ... I think I'm reacting to that." She hugged her arms around her body. "I don't know what I'm feeling. It's not like with you, and it's not like what I felt for Vicky." She closed her eyes. "I have no idea what the hell I'm feeling."

Hope took Amy in her arms and held her close. "Well, sweetie," she said softly, "we'll keep working at it till we figure it out, okay?"

Amy smiled, snuggling into her embrace. Her confusion ebbed, making way for a warm, secure feeling.

Hope could always make her feel better.

"Well?" asked Newter. "Aren't you going to tease me?"

Gregor put his broad hand on Newter's shoulder. "Teasing," he said earnestly, "is for when it is not serious."

Well, well, thought Faultline, in the drivers' seat. Well, well, well.
In which the ceremony comes to an end, and a pleasant evening passes at the Hebert household

Bitch was pushing power into her dogs, making them grow larger and larger, while a curious crowd of spectators watched from a very respectful distance. Grue and the other Undersiders waited for the process to be complete from a slightly closer vantage. Miss Militia approached them.

"I presume you're leaving soon?"

Grue nodded. "We've put in our time, let everyone see that the big bad Undersiders don't kick dogs or eat babies."

"Well, the bit about dogs, anyway," muttered Regent. Skitter elbowed him in the ribs.

"Yes, you have," agreed Miss Militia, discreetly ignoring Regent's comment. "And it's been appreciated."

"Excellent," said Tattletale, her grin bringing to mind a fox strolling out of a henhouse with feathers on its chin. "Every little bit helps."

Miss Militia shot her a suspicious glance, then apparently decided that Tattletale was trying to wind her up. She turned to Skitter. "Director Piggot wanted to make sure," she said, "that Taylor Hebert will be permitted to attend the Barnes trial. Also, she wished to express her displeasure that Ms Hebert was not free to attend this event with her father."

Taylor was once more glad that her mask covered her entire face; it was hard to keep a straight face, answering a comment like that. Insects buzzed around her, drawing the attention and making it hard for Miss Militia to focus on her form and hair – at least, that was the theory.

"I'm sorry that she couldn't make it today," she said, the swarm adding its buzzing overtones to her voice. "It was unavoidable. She will be attending the trial; you have my guarantee."

Miss Militia nodded; she didn't seem to suspect that anything was amiss. "Thank you," she said. "I'll pass that on." She paused. "Have you seen any indication of Shadow Stalker in your territory?"

Taylor shook her head. "No," she said. "It's all been very quiet."

"Excellent," replied Miss Militia, and walked away.

Skitter became aware that Regent was shaking with silent laughter. "What's funny?" she asked in some irritation.

"When you join the Wards," he replied, then had to start again. "When you join the Wards and have to unmask to them, they're going to look back on conversations like this and have a collective aneurysm."

"Some of them are bound to have their suspicions first," warned Tattletale.

"Still," said Grue, "it is kind of funny, when you think about it."

And, Skitter had to admit, it did contain a certain amount of humour.

But she still wasn't looking forward to it.
"Whoops," said Imp. "Looks like my ride's getting ready to leave."

"Damn," said Vista. "You haven't even told me about Grue yet. All you've done is talk about Regent."

"Seriously?" said Imp. "Grue's my brother. I'm not about to start talking about how sexy he is. I mean, eww."

"Yeah, sure," said Vista. "I'll see you around." She held up her hand; Imp high-fived her.

As she rejoined the Wards, Weld said, "Who was that you were talking to? I didn't recognise her."

"Talking to?" said Vista. "Um ..." She knew she'd been talking to someone. She just couldn't quite recall ...

"We ready to roll?" asked Imp, appearing in the middle of the Undersiders.

"Just about," Tattletale said. "Just as soon as Bitch gives the word."

Then Vista had it. "Imp," she said, snapping her fingers. "She's the sixth member of the Undersiders." She rubbed the back of her neck. "Now why couldn't I remember that?"

"Oh, wait, of course," said Weld. "I spoke to you about her last night."

"Yeah, you did," Vista agreed. "Why couldn't we remember her?"

"Duh," said Clockblocker. "Stranger powers."

"Oh," said Weld. "Yeah. Duh."

"See you later, guys," said Hope, just as the Undersiders were preparing to climb on to Bitch's dogs. She hugged Taylor, and Amy hugged Grue. She grinned at Tattletale. "And some of you we'll see sooner rather than later."

"Got that right," replied Tattletale. "Take care, you two."

"Always do," replied Hope. She turned to Bitch. "And thanks for turning up today. It was good to see you."

Bitch nodded stiffly. "It was good to see you too." She made a hesitant move toward Hope, and Hope stepped forward to hug her. Bitch put her arms around Hope and hugged her back. "Don't get killed," she said, then let go and climbed on to Bentley's back.

Wow, thought Hope. That's the nicest thing she's said to me yet.

Hope turned to Amy as the Undersiders, mounted on Bitch's oversized dogs, loped away. "Well, sweetie," she said, "shall we say our goodbyes and go as well?"

Amy nodded. "I think so," she agreed. "It's been a really wonderful day, but it will be good to get home so you can rub my feet, and vice versa."
"I'm in favour of that idea," declared Hope. "Let's go find people to say goodbye to."

Danny was already gone; Hope figured he had left just as soon as the Undersiders were gone. Tecton and Raymancer were also gone, quite possibly with Danny. Mayor Christner had been conveyed away at some point during the afternoon, as had Director Piggot.

The Wards and the Protectorate capes were getting ready to board the two PRT transports when Hope and Amy approached; Miss Militia came to meet them.

"We're just going," she said. "Did you want a lift?"

Hope considered it, then shook her head. "No," she said. "We're good. We were just coming to say goodbye."

Miss Militia nodded. "I'll be seeing you around," she said. "It was good to see you here."

Hope nodded. "It was good to see you too," she agreed. Miss Militia went to shake hands, but not altogether to her surprise, Hope hugged her instead. Vista came over to be hugged as well, along with Assault and Battery.

"We still need to have that girls' movie night," Vista told Hope. "You gotta bring Amy, and Flechette, and Parian." She looked wistful. "I'd invite Imp as well, but I suspect Weld would put his foot down."

"And if he didn't," said Miss Militia, "I would. We're not allowing a Stranger with Imp's capability into the base without a really good reason."

Hope nodded. "When we've got the time," she said, "we'll do it. I promise."

Vista nodded. "Okay. Let me know when you can, okay?"

Hope smiled and gave her another quick hug. "Will do, kiddo."

As the PRT transports lifted off, Hope gathered Amy into her arms and took off herself, heading back to the shelter.

By the time Taylor and Lisa got back to the shelter, arriving a few minutes separately from one another, and from different directions, Hope and Amy were already back. In fact, they were just emerging from the showers, Amy still drying her hair.

"That feels a lot better," she declared. She spared a smile for the two out-of-costume Undersiders, then strolled off to the sleeping enclosure that she shared with Hope; Hope, on the other hand, stayed to chat.

"So, what's on the agenda for the next couple of days?" she asked.

"Tomorrow, nothing much," Taylor said. "The twenty-second, however, is the trial date." She looked at Hope. "You'll be there?"

"Of course," Hope assured her. "Amy, too."

"Good," said Taylor. "I don't mind telling you, I'm really nervous."

Hope stepped in and embraced her; Taylor relaxed into the hug, returning it as readily as it had been
given. She rested her head on Hope's shoulder, closing her eyes.

"It's all right, sweetie," Hope said soothingly. "I'll be there. Your dad will be there. Amy will be there. Lisa, you'll be there, of course?"

"Well, duh," retorted Lisa with a sly smile on her face. "You think I'd stay away?"

"See?" Hope said to Taylor. "We'll be there, just for you."

There was the beep of a truck horn outside the shelter. Taylor raised her head and opened her eyes. "That's Dad." She smiled at Hope and kissed her firmly on the cheek. "Thanks, Hope," she said. "I really appreciate everything."

Disengaging from the hug, she grabbed her pack and hurried from the shelter, waving at the battered old truck as it pulled to a halt.

Hope strolled outside with Lisa, shading her eyes from the afternoon sun as Taylor got in. They waved as the truck pulled away.

"That's okay, sweetie," she said softly.

Lisa glanced at her with a smile. "You really care for Taylor, don't you?" she asked.

Hope nodded. "Well, I care for everyone – I love everyone, really – but yes, I do care for Taylor quite a bit. She's had such a hard time, she's got so much against her, and she still cares for people and tries to protect them."

Lisa nodded. She seemed to be working something over in her mind. "So, if it was Taylor and not Amy who needed you, you'd be with Taylor right now?"

Hope nodded. "If Amy didn't need me in that way and Taylor did, then yes, I'd be with Taylor."

"Huh," said Lisa. "Hope, you are a very strange and unique individual."

Hope gave Lisa a hug. "So are you, Lisa." She smiled. "And yes, I care for you too. Quite a lot, in fact."

Lisa returned the hug, her head on Hope's shoulder, eyes closed, just as Taylor's had been. Her body relaxed utterly as she surrendered to Hope's embrace.

"I know," she said softly. "I know."

____________________________

The new relay bugs, Taylor decided, were worth considerably more than their weight in gold. Sitting in the passenger seat of her father's truck, she could scan a majority of her territory, as well as the shelter, and wide swathes of Brockton Bay, including her father's house. *I have to breed more of these,* she decided. *Maybe set up nests around the city.*

"Did you give Tecton and Raymancer a spare key?" she asked idly. "Because they just walked in the front door."

Danny nodded. "I figured it was better than making them wait until we got home." He glanced over at her. "You have nothing incriminating in your room?"

She snorted. "I doubt they'll search, but no. Nothing they can point at for proof."
"Good," he said, pleased. "What about that Initiative thing? The one Hope gave you?"

"Oh," she said, "I gave that to Grue. He's the leader of the Undersiders, after all."

"Oh, okay," he replied. "They just seem to do what you say a lot."

She grinned lazily. "I acknowledge Grue as leader, and he lets me assert myself from time to time. It works for us."

Danny nodded. "I've known guys like that. Good leaders." He glanced sideways. "What are you gonna do with your medal, kiddo? It's not like Taylor Hebert can wear it in public."

"Dunno," admitted Taylor. "Bring it out and admire it from time to time, I guess."

Danny chuckled and reached across to ruffle her hair; a dozen bugs got out of his way as he did so. "Well, you earned it, and that's a fact."

She smiled at him. "Thanks, Dad. That means a lot."

When Hope entered the sleeping enclosure, she found Amy forming several bugs into a new hornet-like insect. The back end of its abdomen was pure orange.

"Ooh," she said with interest. "That one looks cool. What does it do?"

Amy looked up and grinned. "I got a good read on Newter's personal brand of hallucinogen today. So this bug's like the ketamine wasp, only it generates and injects that stuff instead. And it doesn't need as big a hit as the K-wasp; one little tiny dose should send just about anyone into la-la land."

Hope settled on the edge of the bed next to Amy and hugged her, careful not to disturb her work. "That's all kinds of awesome, sweetie," she said. "Taylor's gonna love you to death."

Amy rubbed her head against Hope's. "By the time she makes Ward, she's gonna have a bug arsenal that'll have every criminal in the city buying a ticket out of town, if I've got anything to say about it."

"Actually," said Hope. "That reminds me. You know the idea we had of taking a big bug and making it big enough for Taylor to ride?"

"Yeah," said Amy. "The 'big bug' concept, as we so originally called it."

"Well," said Hope, "I had an idea about that. Instead of a Hercules beetle, why don't we ..."

"So," said Quinn Calle, "are you absolutely certain that the information you have is true? That Taylor Hebert, bullying victim, is Skitter, insect-controlling warlord?"

Alan Barnes nodded. "I'm positive," he declared. "I've seen the proof."

Quinn's eyebrows hitched upward. "Do you have the proof?" he asked intently.

"Not as such, no," admitted Barnes. "But I know it for an absolute fact."

"Hmmm." Calle thought for a few moments. "Without photographic proof, we can't just spring it on them. But there are other tactics."
Alan Barnes nodded. "I was thinking of that myself. There are a few I've found handy in my line, which should not be too hard to translate into this forum."

Quinn Calle smiled thinly. "Now, now, Barnes, you have retained me for my expertise in cape law and experience in defending parahumans from criminal charges. Were I being divorced, I would bow to your expertise; in this instance, I suggest you bow to mine."

His handsome Hispanic features gave no hint of his thoughts, which was a good thing. Because although he had defended supervillains guilty of the most heinous of crimes, Alan Barnes struck him as ranking right up there with the worst of them. He was being paid; he'd do the job. But he could never like the man.

"You're the expert," conceded Barnes grudgingly.

"Yes, I am," replied Calle. "Now, this is what we're going to do ..."

Intellectually, Taylor knew that Tecton, at least, would have to remove his armour if he was to even sit on the sofa. But she still had the mental image of the bulky metal armour in the living room. She was vaguely aware of things happening in the house, but didn't care too much except that neither of them intruded into her room, which neither did.

So when she jumped out of the truck, opened the front door, and found a stranger sitting on the sofa, watching TV, her mind blanked for a moment. She stopped dead, bringing all the bugs in the area to high alert. "Dad ..?" she called over her shoulder. Then she spoke to the intruder. "Who are you?" she demanded.

Danny came up the steps behind her. "What's up?" he asked, concerned.

The stranger got up from the couch and came toward her. "Sorry," he apologised. "It's me, Tecton." He paused, and shrugged. "Everett. Everett is my name." A smile, as he held out his hand. "Sorry if I scared you, Taylor."

He had a nice smile. His hair was a sandy brown, medium cut, over pleasant features. He had a wide forehead and a strong jaw. While an inch or so shorter than Taylor, he was much broader in the shoulders, with obvious muscle rippling under the sleeveless T-shirt he was wearing. In fact, the shorts he was wearing revealed muscular thighs and calves, each equal to both of hers together.

Oh, my.

She realised that he was still holding out his hand, and she took it automatically. His grip was strong, but he didn't try to squeeze too hard. A nice, firm handshake.

Along with those nice, firm –

She cut off that line of thought abruptly. He's probably got a girlfriend. Or two. Or three. As hunky as he is, he's not going to notice me.

"Uh, Taylor?" said Danny, from behind her. "Can I come in?"

She blushed deeply as she realised that she was still standing in the doorway, holding Tecton – Everett's hand, and staring at all that holy crap, how does he fit that much muscle on to that much body?

As in a dream, she let go his hand and moved aside. Danny entered the house and nodded to Everett,
then headed for the kitchen.

"Uh, Taylor?" asked Everett. "Are you okay? You just zoned out for a minute there." He paused, his brow furrowing in concern. "Did you want to sit down?"

"Yeah." Sitting down was a good idea. If she didn't, she might fall down.

So she sat on the sofa, and Everett brought her a glass of water, which she gulped greedily.

_I must have been dehydrated_, she decided. _All that sun. Yeah. Dehydrated. That's it._

Closing her eyes, she leaned back on the sofa and sighed, feeling the coolness of the cushions behind her. She felt his weight settle on the sofa beside her. Without opening her eyes, she perceived him through the eyes of all the bugs in the room. Allowing for distortions, he was still one muscular guy.

"I've got to ask," she said, the question popping out before she could quash it, "how the hell do you fit in that suit?"

His laughter was warm and rich, and sent tingles down her spine. "There's more space in there than you'd imagine," he said.

She shook her head. "I should hope so," she agreed. She opened her eyes and looked around. "Where is it, by the way?"

"Oh, down in the basement," he said. "Out of the way, casual visitors won't see it."

"And Raymancer? Where's he?"

"Ah, your dad made up a camp cot in the spare room," Everett told her. "He's going to be on duty as soon as it gets dark, so he's stacking some zees right now."

Taylor nodded. She sneaked a peek, and found that her heart didn't immediately kick into turbo mode upon catching sight of him.

_But damn, he's got more muscle than Brian._

_Wider too._

_Brian's taller._

_Brian's with Genesis. Everett's right here._

_And I've just made a total idiot of myself._

_Is she okay? Everett asked himself. Ever since she walked in the door, she's been ... zoning out._

*I'm an idiot,* he told himself. *Just surprising her like that. Should have warned her. Probably freaked her right out. And she's been suffering bullying all this time. Yeah, Everett. Real bright._

"Would you like another glass of water?" he ventured. *With the scare I just handed her, fetching water is about my speed.*

"Oh, yes please," she agreed. "That would be wonderful."
This time, she had the presence of mind to watch him walking away. The rear view was impressive. *Damn,* she thought. *His muscles have muscles.* By the time he returned, she was lying back again with her eyes closed; without thinking, she reached out and accepted the glass and held it against her forehead without opening her eyes.

"Thanks," she murmured.

"You're welcome," he told her, and sat down again. She had taken her glasses off to rub the bridge of her nose, and when she opened her eyes, she had a somewhat unfocused, vulnerable look.

It was a look that appealed to his protective instincts. He wanted to gather her into his arms and vow to shield her from whatever dangers lurked without.

However, such an action would not be professional, and so he did not do it.

With her glasses off, she couldn't fixate on Everett's quite impressive musculature, which let her collect her thoughts. "So how was your day?" she asked him, although she knew quite well where he'd been and what he'd done.

"Oh," he said, glad to have something to talk about, "I went to help out your dad on the rebuilding and demolition in the morning, then to the ceremony in the afternoon. It was good." He paused. "I looked for you, but you weren't there. I was hoping Skitter might give you the afternoon off or something."

He paused. Taylor was confused. *He wanted to see me there?* She couldn't parse that thought.

"No," she said, "she had me doing other stuff. Boring, really. How did the ceremony go?"

"Well, I got to meet the Undersiders – well, see them, really," he said. "I didn't get to talk to them. I was just there as a visible deterrent in case anyone decided to do something stupid. Grue looks kind of impressive, and so is Skitter." He shuddered slightly. "I can't imagine letting bugs crawl all over me like she does. It must have taken her a lot of getting used to."

"She says it's basically second nature to her now," Taylor ventured. "To her, they're like an extension of her own body."

He was looking at her, impressed. "You talk to her a lot?" he asked. "What's she like, as a person?"

"Not a lot," she deflected. "Just now and again, when she wants me to do something. She's ... cold. A lot like the bugs she uses." She paused, as if searching for words. "Always thinking, always calculating."

He nodded. "I got that impression, watching her," he agreed. "Clockblocker gave me the rundown on how badly the Wards have had their asses kicked by her and the other Undersiders in the past, and after having seen them, I can understand why. She's one cape I don't want to have to cross without really good reason."

"She ... took me in, after I left home," Taylor said. "Gave me a place to live, gave me a purpose. Protected me. She's not bad, just ... different."

Everett peered at her. "You're not ... involved with her, are you?" he said, hesitantly. "I mean, it's none of my business if you are. I don't want to pry."
Taylor had to laugh. "No, god no. She doesn't ... there's no relationship there." She gave him a grin. "Trust me, I don't swing that way." A sigh, thinking of Brian. "There was one guy, associated with Skitter, that I kinda sorta liked a lot, but ... he didn't see me the same way. And now he's with someone else, fairly definitely." She paused, looking back at him, putting her glasses on. His face swam back into focus.

"So," she said, "I guess you've got a girlfriend back in Chicago? What's she like?"

He didn't answer for a bit, and she mentally kicked herself. "Sorry," she said hastily. "I shouldn't have asked that."

"No," he said, shaking his head. "No, it's all right. I had a girlfriend. She liked me all right, and we were getting fairly serious. So I decided it was time for the next step."

Taylor inhaled. He's telling me this? I'm not ready to hear about things like this.

"Next ... step?" she managed, trying not to let her voice rise into a squeak.

He nodded seriously. "I unmasked to her."

Relief slammed through her, and her breath gusted out in what was almost a laugh. "Oh, right," she said. "How did she take it?"

He closed his eyes momentarily. "Badly. We broke up a week later."

She put her hand on his shoulder. "Damn. I'm really sorry to hear that."

He shrugged, and she felt the play of muscles under his skin. "It happens. You never can tell. This is why some guys are never comfortable with unmasking to anyone." He indicated upstairs with his thumb. "Raymancer, for instance. He'll go back to Chicago, and the only people who'll know what his face looks like are the Director, Miss Militia and Weld. The rest of the Wards – nada."

"Yeah, well," said Taylor. "The mask is really important. You've heard of New Wave?"

"A little," said Everett, frowning. "Weren't they originally called the Brockton Bay Brigade?"

Taylor nodded. "Yeah. Panacea was one of them. You might have seen her at the ceremony. Her name's Amy, she goes around with Hope?"

"Ah yeah," he recalled. "Director Piggot made a big thing about introducing her."

Taylor nodded. "I'm not surprised. Well, the Brigade decided to prove that secret identities were a thing of the past. I mean, troubles like yours and other things do show up where the idea has flaws. But they unmasked en masse, changed their group name to New Wave. Wave of the future and all that."

"I seem to recall that," replied Everett. "Something happened, though."

"Yeah," said Taylor. "One of them was ambushed in his own home, out of costume. Killed. New Wave more or less fell apart after that. And there was no more talk of a general unmasking."

"Damn," he muttered. "That sucks." He shrugged again. "Well, I've learned my own lesson. If I get another girlfriend, it'll be someone who knows I'm a cape and is comfortable with it." He paused. "Maybe I should just limit myself to other capes."

Taylor nodded. "Makes a certain kind of sense." She grinned. "Sort of narrows the pool a bit,
"Yeah," he sighed. "The girls on my team are nice enough, but there's no-one there that really clicks, you know? They're either already in a relationship or officially not looking. Or they just don't want to date the boss."

*Or they're blind, deaf and dead,* thought Taylor, quite loudly.

Danny came through from the kitchen, from which appetising smells were starting to waft. "Dinner will be ready in an hour or so," he announced.

"Excellent," said Taylor. She turned to Everett. "Dad's cooking is really quite good," she said.

He grinned. "Smells better than mine, at any rate," he agreed.

They settled down on the sofa to watch the movie that Brian had gotten Taylor for her birthday. Everett was quite impressed that they could even get hold of it. "It's not even out here yet," he commented.


"So I see," agreed Everett. He leaned back; he was sitting on one side of Taylor, while Danny was on the other side. His presence was like a furnace heat to one side of her body; she was acutely aware of him, especially since she'd had to scoot down right next to him, in order to let her father seat himself.

"Are you okay, Taylor?" asked Danny, concern in his voice. "You're looking a little flushed."

"I had to go outside a bit today," she said. "I think I might have a little heatstroke or something. But Everett's been getting me water and I'm feeling a lot better now."

"Ah, okay," he said. "Just keep up that water intake. Don't want you collapsing on us."

"I will, Dad," she said obediently, and hit the remote to start the movie.

As the credits rolled, she leaned back on the sofa, weak with laughter. "Oh god," she said, "that was even better than the first one."

"I don't know," said Everett seriously. "It's always hard to top the first one in the series."

"What gets me," said Danny, "is that sending the duck to check on matters is what got him free. If they hadn't done that, the whole mess wouldn't have started."

Taylor and Everett both turned to look at him.

"You know I'm right," he said defensively.

"Ah," said Everett, "but he would have found some other way to break free. A leaf blown in on the wind, a fingernail clipping from one of the guards. Villains always find a way."

"Taylor?" asked Danny. "Surely you agree with me on this?"

"Sorry, Dad," said Taylor with a grin, "but I'm gonna have to side with Everett on this. Villains always find a way." In fact, just from watching it, she had figured out three different ways he could
have gotten free, but she didn't want to spoil matters.

Her father looked positively betrayed. "My own flesh and blood. I feel rejected." He rose from the sofa. "I go now, to drown my sorrows. Or at least check on dinner." Assuming a haughty expression, he stalked out.

Taylor chuckled. "My dad, the drama queen."

"I like him," said Everett seriously. "He's dedicated to what he does, and he really cares for you."

Taylor smiled at him. "Thanks. I love him a lot. And thanks for being here, to protect us." She found that she no longer felt like blushing when he looked at her, which was perhaps a good thing.

He shrugged. "It's my job." Then he paused. "But I'm enjoying it too. It's a bit of a change from the same-old-same-old." A boyish grin. "And the company could be a lot worse."

Taylor felt the treacherous blush creeping up her cheeks, just as Danny called out "Dinner's ready!" She busied herself taking off her glasses as Everett looked around and got up.

"I'll be along in a minute," she said. "You go get yours."

"Okay," he said lightly. "I'll see you at the table."

Later that night, up in her room, she had the male web-spider fertilise all the female web-spiders before the whole contingent started drawing out webs for her. The speed and volume of the web-spinning was frankly impressive, and the durability of the strands was a distinct improvement on even the Darwin's bark spider.

The dinner had been a great success; Everett had proven to be witty and intelligent, and had told anecdotes of his career in the Chicago Wards, which had left Taylor and Danny both laughing out loud.

Raymancer had entered the room just as darkness was falling, and eaten the meal that Danny had set aside for him. While polite and friendly, he did not seem to be willing to open himself up quite as much as Everett had, and kept things on a strictly professional footing.

Danny had excused himself to bed early in the evening, and Taylor had followed suit shortly thereafter; Tecton and Raymancer, after all, were there to guard the house, and she didn't want to be a distraction.

She watched the web-spiders beginning to weave the very first strands of web together to make her new costume, and smiled sleepily.

Even if he's not interested in me, she thought, I can still enjoy looking at him.

Raymancer lounged back on the sofa, flipping through TV channels with the sound on mute. Everett sprawled across the opposite end, legs stretched out straight.

"So, T," said Raymancer. "What's with you and, whatsername, Taylor?"

Everett frowned. "Nothing's with us. What are you talking about?"

Raymancer chuckled. "I saw you. You were watching her, and she was looking at you half the time and her plate the other half."
Everett shook his head. "You've got the wrong end of the stick, buddy. She's cute and all, and if she gave me any sort of signal, I'd be surely willing to go out with her, but there's three things wrong with that."

"Yeah?" asked Raymancer. "Do tell."

"Well, for one thing," Everett said, "every time I look at her, she looks away. I mean, I'm just here to protect her. There's nothing personal. She knows that. For another thing, it's just not professional to make any sorts of moves on a civilian like that. I'm here to do a job, not to pick up a girlfriend."

"And the third thing?" asked Raymancer.

Everett shrugged. "She's not a cape. I've pretty well decided that if I'm gonna date, it's gonna have to be a cape chick. No other way can I be guaranteed to avoid the shit I just went through with Becky."

Raymancer nodded. "That's fair," he agreed. "But you're wrong on one count."

"What's that?" asked Everett.

Raymancer grinned. "She's looking away because she's shy, not because she's not interested. In fact, I bet she's more than just a bit interested."

Everett shook his head. "I can't see it," he said,

Raymancer chuckled. "If I were a gambling man, I'd bet money on it."

There was an exasperated sigh from Everett. "Can we drop the subject?"

Raymancer grinned. "Sure thing, T. Sure thing."
In which Taylor has an encounter on her morning run, and new bugs are unveiled for Skitter

The new day dawned bright and sunny.

Raymancer looked up as the first rays of sunshine speared in through the windows, and stood up to stretch and yawn. He had taken a turn around the outside of the house once every hour for twelve hours, and in between had watched bad TV and drunk too much coffee, in order to stay awake.

But now that the sun was up, he could hit the sack. He wasn't needed for another twelve hours.

_And thank God for that._

Taylor sat up, yawned and stretched mightily. Her mind filled with impressions as she spread her senses out along the webworks of relay bugs, stretching across Brockton Bay.

Within the house, all was serene. Raymancer was just heading to bed, as Everett – Tecton – slept soundly on the sofa bed. Her father was also still asleep, snoring softly.

Outside the house was almost as quiet. A stray dog made its way along the fence, stopped to add its contribution to a post, wandered on.

Two streets away, a sedan was parked at the side of the curb, two men in it, conversing in quiet tones.

Taylor frowned. _What's that about?_

Several flies landed in and around the vehicle. The conversation resolved into a discussion of the ball game the previous night in Minneapolis. Which proved nothing; two men sitting in a car at this very odd time in the morning were not there merely to discuss baseball.

_I'll have to keep an eye out._

At the shelter, the staff was just beginning to rise and begin the day's chores. Lisa looked up as a fly buzzed past her, giving a knowing grin.

Hope and Amy lay in each other's arms, but while Amy was fast asleep, Hope was idly paging through screens on a tablet. But that was not what arrested Taylor's attention; there was _something_ in the enclosure with them, something that gave off the feel of an invertebrate she could control, but was yet cut off from her. Something large. She sent bugs running over it, but the size and shape ... _wow. Seriously?_

There were more bugs, trapped in a small box. They felt vaguely like wasps or hornets, but were neither. They weren't more ketamine wasps. A smile spread across her face. _I don't know what they are, she told herself, but I want to find out._

_Amy's bugs are promising to make life so much easier for me, it's ridiculous._

She spread her senses farther afield. _Hmm. With these extra relay bugs, can I find Sophia?_

But Shadow Stalker was lying very low indeed, for Taylor's bugs could not find any trace of her.
She's being sneaky. Dammit.

With her physical eyes, she looked around as she climbed out of bed. A square of silvery material, the size of a large pocket handkerchief, caught her eye. The web-spiders that had woven it sat dormant for the most part; the insects which she had trapped in their catch-webs had all been drained to empty husks. She directed a few more bugs their way, bringing them out of the dormant state to feed.

Then she examined the material that they had woven. Her puzzlement grew as she looked closely at it, donning her glasses. They had only barely started before she drifted off to sleep; she had expected to find a much smaller area of material. But they had taken the instructions she had given them and continued to repeat them, over and over, as she slept.

_Did Amy enhance the area of their brains that accepted my commands?_ she wondered. _Can I basically program these bugs with tasks, and go away and leave them to it?_ If so, it was a considerable step up from the 'follow my last command' condition that she already knew about.

The fabric was tough, tougher than what her current costume was composed of, if she was any judge. But it was significantly thinner and more flexible. _And this was just with half a dozen, over one night. What can three thousand do in an hour?_

She really, really wanted to find out. _Hurry up, _she silently urged the eggs. _Hatch already._

As eggs will do, they ignored her, slowly gestating.

Moments later, she was dressed for running, with pepper spray and knife stashed on her person. She trotted down the stairs, then paused as she passed the sofa bed. Everett lay sleeping upon it; she considered not waking him, but decided that it would be unfair to embarrass him by causing him to fail in his self-appointed duty.

His bare foot hung over the end of the bed. "Hey, big boy," she said with a grin, nudging it with her knee. "Were you gonna come running or not?"

"Hmm, wha, where?" he asked, blinking his way awake. He focused on Taylor, blinked again, and shook his head. "Sorry, what was that?"

"I'm going for a run," Taylor said patiently. "Did you want to come with?"

He stretched while lying down, muscles tensing and rippling up and down his form in a way most distracting to Taylor. By the time he finished, his mind seemed to have gone from neutral into first gear.

"Yeah, sure," he said, swinging his legs over the side of the sofa bed and grabbing his bag. "Give me a minute to freshen up and get shoes on."

"Take your time," Taylor said lightly, watching his rear view recede up the stairs. She was used to his presence by now, and could talk to him without stuttering or blushing, but he was still frankly impressive to watch.

_Why am I crushing so hard on him?_ she asked herself as he disappeared. The answer wasn't hard to pin down. _I like his face, and I do like muscles on a guy .. and I guess I'm rebounding just a bit from Brian, even though we never did anything._ A sigh for opportunities lost.
Meanwhile, Everett's polite, friendly, helpful, and a Ward. And he's only interested in other capes, so Taylor the bullying victim is someone to protect, not someone to be interested in. She looked down at her body with less than total satisfaction. *Yeah, he's gonna be interested in me. Sure.* Another sigh. *Well, I can look, anyway.*

Everett splashed water on his face and changed into sweats and running shoes. *Taylor must be feeling better; she seems happier and more alive than she was last night.* He grinned at his image in the mirror. *I wonder how she'd react if I told her how sexy she looks in sweats?*

Closing his eyes, he shook his head. *Professionalism, damn it. Hitting on the girl you're trying to protect is not the way to get things done. Besides, she's not a cape, and I'm probably not her type. The very last thing I want to do is freak her out all over again.*

He used the facilities, washed his hands, and trotted downstairs, looking somewhat more awake and alert. "Ready," he said. "How far do you run?"

"Oh," she said with a mischievous grin, "not all that far."

Ten minutes later, she was still running well. Everett was keeping up, but he was definitely starting to feel the pace.

"I thought ... you said ... it wasn't ... all that far," he gasped between breaths.

She shot a teasing glance over her shoulder. "It isn't," she replied. "We're only just getting started."

Grimly, Everett set his jaw and plodded on. He could take the pace and keep going, but the fact remained that he had a lot more body mass to haul around than she did. Although there was an unexpected benefit in falling behind a few paces; he got to watch, and appreciate, her back view. There was not an ounce of unnecessary flesh on her form, and her back and thigh muscles bunched and flexed in a rather distracting rhythm, even under her loose sweats.

They reached a hill, and she continued up it without slackening in speed; Everett had to slow just a little, which meant that he was some ten yards behind when he got to the top. That was when he saw the car, and the man standing next to it.

Taylor was aware of the car cruising along a nearby street, on an intercept course with her running path. She did a swift count of all the bugs nearby, and those she had with her. *If they want trouble, she decided, they'll get trouble.* She sighed in aggravation. It would have been much easier without Everett along to cramp her style.

"There she is."

"Okay, cruise up alongside, pull over, and give her the spiel. No rough stuff."

"You know, we could snatch her right off the street, let her go forty-eight hours later. No harm, no foul."

A *whap*, as a hand smacked across the back of someone's head.

"Ow!"

"You moron. She works for *Skitter*. The bug bitch would probably tear apart Brockton Bay to get
her back. And that's not even counting what the PRT would do. Now shut up and drive." A pause. "You stay in the car. I'll get out and give her the spiel."

Taylor grinned. As the car cruised up alongside and pulled over ahead of her, she slowed to a jog, then a trot, then a walk. A large man got out of the car, dressed in a three-piece suit.

"Miss Taylor Hebert?" he said, in tones that meant I know who you are, but I'm just making sure because I was told to.

"What if I am?" asked Taylor, tensing just a little. This sort of confrontation could always go bad.

"If you are, then I've got a message for you. An offer."

She heard footsteps coming up behind her, and her bugs confirmed that it was Everett. He moved up alongside her, still sweating heavily, and glanced sideways at her. "Who's this guy?" he asked quietly. "What's he want?"

"Wants to make me an offer," she replied, just as quietly.

"Miss Hebert, if you can ask your boyfriend to leave us to talk in peace, we can get down to business," said the man.

"He's not my –"

"I'm not her –"

Taylor and Everett spoke at the same time, and then stopped. Everett spoke again. "I'm not her boyfriend," he said flatly. "I'm her bodyguard."

The man eyed Everett; as wide and muscular as he was, the man had several inches and probably fifty pounds on him. "Just the one of you? Aren't you a bit young for this?"

Everett smiled thinly and pulled a leather folder from a zip pocket. He opened it to present an ID card to the man. "I'm older than I look. I'm a registered operative with the PRT. Assaulting me is equivalent to assaulting a police officer. Now, if you want to speak with Ms Hebert, you will do it while I am present, or you will not do it at all. Do I make myself absolutely clear?"

"And if I say no?" retorted the man.

Everett fished out a small black plastic object from the same pocket. "This is a panic button," he explained. "I press this, there's a PRT crash squad in the air in two minutes and thirty seconds. On site here in three minutes thirty." He paused for effect. "I figure I could hold out for that long. And the PRT would not be coming in light. They really do want their star witness testifying at the Barnes trial. No matter what her father says or does."

The man's face twisted in an ugly scowl. "We could do a lot of damage to you in two minutes, junior," he said threateningly. "All we want to is talk to the Hebert girl. So clear out."

There was a distinct click as Everett's thumb depressed the button. "I understand there are some very good healers here in Brockton Bay," he said lightly. "So I'll take my chances. You, on the other hand, now have less than three minutes thirty to make your case."

"Damn it, fine," snapped the man. "Miss Hebert, I'm authorised to offer you a hundred thousand dollars to drop it. Refuse to testify. Double if you tell the court that the whole thing was a put-up
Taylor stared, and then burst out laughing. "You're offering me a bribe?" she managed. "You want to pay me off?" She shook her head. "Not going to happen. Tomorrow, I'm testifying. Emma doesn't get out of it that easily."

Everett checked his watch, rather theatrically, Taylor thought. "Two minutes forty-five," he said.

"Okay, okay," said the man. "Double it. Two hundred to not appear, four hundred to recant."

Taylor shook her head. "Tell Mr Barnes, not a hope in hell. Emma made my life a misery for more than a year. She pays."

"Who said it's Alan Barnes paying us?" said the man belatedly. "He's got nothing to do with this."

"Who else would it be?" pointed out Taylor. "He's been protecting Emma from the very start."

"Someone else, someone who's also got a stake in this," said the man.

Everett shook his head. "Weak," he commented.

The man almost growled in frustration. He took half a step forward; Taylor tensed. Beside her, Everett also took half a step forward.

"Two minutes and counting," he said without even consulting his watch. "How far can you drive in two minutes?"

The man thought about it, then rounded the car and jumped into the passenger seat. The vehicle was already moving as he closed the door; it didn't quite leave rubber on the road, but there wasn't much in it.

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Everett watched the car disappear down the road. "Well," he said. "That was interesting."

Taylor frowned. "How come you didn't hit the panic button when you first saw them? They could have been willing to attack or kill us, easily."

"Because it's not a panic button," Everett said. "It's the key fob for my car, back in Chicago. I was just improvising." He shrugged. "They didn't strike me as professional muscle, and I figured I could keep them busy long enough for you to get away, if it came to that." He looked at her with respect. "There's no way they'd catch you on foot."

She stared at him. "So the whole thing with the PRT crash team, and the countdown, was all a bluff?"

He shrugged uncomfortably. "There is a crash team on standby, but I forgot my phone when I left the house. So I had to improvise." He paused. "I have to admit, when he offered you four hundred thousand dollars, I was impressed. You didn't even blink. In your place, I would at least have been tempted."

She shook her head. "There is no amount of money they can offer me to make this go away," she said in a low voice. "Have you been told what the girls did to me?"

He frowned. "Only in broad detail," he said. "I was given a dossier to look over, but it only covered the highlights."
"I'll tell you about it later," she told him. "We have a run to complete, and Dad will get worried if we're delayed. But when I tell you, you'll understand why I do not want Emma Barnes and Madison Clements getting away with this."

He nodded. "Okay," he said promptly. "Let's go."

On the way back, Everett had gotten his second wind, and he found it easier to keep up with Taylor.

*She faced up to that guy without a quiver, he thought. Didn't even budge at the mention of four hundred thousand dollars. He would make four of her, and she never backed down. She's some kind of girl.*

Taylor also had things to think about.

*Everett was right there, she thought. Even without his suit, he was willing to step in and protect me. A mental chuckle. I probably would have ended up protecting him. But he didn't know that. She paused. He didn't treat me like a china doll, and he didn't back down from that guy. And that trick with the fob. He thinks on his feet. I like that. He's some kind of guy.*

Danny had breakfast ready when they got back. "You're a bit late," he commented. "Everett hold you up?"

"Not so as you'd notice, Dad," said Taylor. "We had an encounter with some people Mr Barnes sent to offer me a bribe."

Danny stiffened. "What?"

"Relax, Dad," she told him teasingly. "Everett had it all under control." She explained about the trick with the key fob.

"I still think we should tell the police," he said firmly.

"Oh, I'll be making a full report to Director Piggot," Everett told him. "The trouble is, there's no proof that they were from Mr Barnes."

"Well, who else would they have been from?" snapped Danny.

"Mr Hebert, I've got no doubt that's exactly who did send them," Everett said placatingly. "But they outright denied it at the time, and Mr Barnes only has to look innocent and ask for actual proof. And we've got twenty-four hours before the trial, so there's no time to investigate and find out for certain."

Danny glanced at Taylor. "If you, uh, got on to Skitter, could she investigate?" he asked. The question in his eyes was slightly different; are you investigating?

As it happened, she was; the expanded range from her new relay bugs just happened to intersect the location of Alan Barnes' house, as well as the payphone that the car had pulled up to.

"It's a wash, sir," the spokesman of the two said over the phone, as Barnes sat in his study and listened. "We even went to two and four, and she still wouldn't budge. It was probably that PRT
Barnes slammed his fist on his desk. "God damn it. The PRT has a bodyguard on them?"

"Yeah," replied the man, hearing the thud and correctly interpreting it. "Tough-looking kid. We probably coulda taken him, but he had a panic button. And while I'm okay with throwing a scare into a teenager, I'm not going to even think about messing with the PRT. Those guys are geared to take down capes."

"Fine, fine," said Alan Barnes, acknowledging the point. "You tried. The money will be in your account. I'll put it in under 'yard work'."

"Pleasure doing business, Mr Barnes," said the man, and hung up.

_The hell it was_, he told himself. _Soon as I get paid, I'm leaving town. Like they say in the Army, this is above my pay grade._

"I suppose she could," answered Taylor, without hesitation. "But even if she did find the men, all they have to do is deny any involvement for twenty-four hours, and it doesn't change matters one way or the other." She grinned. "And listening in on Mr Barnes' conversations and reporting them, however incriminating, would not carry much weight with the authorities. After all, she is still technically a supervillain, and she'd have to use insects to listen in ..." she saw the pun coming, and couldn't resist, "... and I understand that bugging someone without a court order is definitely illegal."

Danny got it a second before Everett, and he groaned and covered his eyes – rather, his glasses – with his hand. "Oh, god, Taylor," he said. "That was painful."

Everett was staring at her. "I don't believe you just said that," he said. "That was possibly the worst pun I have ever heard, and I have told some horrible ones."

Shaking his head, he went to get his phone so he could make his report.

After he had gone, Danny hugged Taylor tightly. "Are you all right?" he asked quietly. "Really all right, I mean?"

She nodded. "Really all right, Dad. I had bugs ready to roll, and ... well, Everett was there, and he was ready to step in and defend me. He had my back, Dad." She smiled. "It's a feeling I've only had with the Undersiders, and with you. It's a good feeling."

He nodded. "Everett's a good man," he said. "He worked well with us yesterday, and he seems willing to come out again today."

"I'm glad you like him, Dad," she said, resting her head on his chest. "He's very stand-up. A lot like you." She paused. "I think I like him, too. A lot. Really a lot."

"Really?" he said, amused. "So ... not Brian any more?"

She shook her head. "Brian's ... with someone else, now. Genesis, the girl he was dancing with at the party. She's with the Travellers. I'm out of the picture, there, if I was ever in it." There was a slightly forlorn note in her voice.

He kissed her on the top of the head. "Don't worry, kiddo, you'll find someone."
"Like Everett?" she said. "Doubt it. Brian thought of me like a sister. Everett probably thinks of me the same way. I'm just too skinny."

Danny hugged her tighter, then let her go so he could rescue the eggs, which were on the point of burning. "You are my beautiful daughter," he said fondly, "and I would not change a thing about you."

"Not even ... you know?" she said with a grin.

"Not even that," he said firmly. "Get the plates?"

She got the plates.

Everett gave his report concisely and accurately, then waited for his orders.

Director Piggot thought for a few moments, then spoke.

"In your opinion, would stationing a PRT man or two at the house be a good security move?"

Everett paused. "I don't believe so, Madam Director," he said apologetically. "All it would achieve would be to draw outside attention to the house. The incident happened while Taylor was on her run. Barnes has to know that sending someone to the house would tip his hand too obviously."

Piggot apparently agreed with his reasoning. "Very well, Tecton. Continue your duties. You've done well, but please do not forget your phone a second time."

"Understood, Madam Director," agreed Everett fervently. "That is not going to happen again."

"See that it doesn't. Goodbye."

After breakfast, and each of them had showered, Tecton went into the basement to armour up while Danny dressed for work and Taylor made sure she had what she needed in the pack. She packed the rough square of web-spider material, but set the spiders to a new task.

Loading their webs with as many bugs as she could manage, she did her best to tell them to weave a left glove for her, with the basic measurements she had used for the original. Freshly fed and full of vigour, they set to with a will.

Raymancer was fast asleep upstairs as Danny locked the front door, and they each climbed into the truck. Danny dropped Taylor off at the shelter, as before, and drove on.

Accord looked up at the discreet buzz. He pressed the button to silence it. "Yes?" he inquired.

"Citrine to see you, sir," said the receptionist respectfully.

Accord ordered his thoughts, made a reminder note, then pressed the button again. "Send her in."

Citrine entered, her manner and bearing flawless, her appearance without blemish. She carried with her a slim postal package. "This came in the morning mail from Brockton Bay, sir."

He frowned. "I ordered nothing from Brockton Bay."
Citrine nodded. "I know, sir. It has already been checked for explosive traces and contagious agents. There is something electronic within, but that is as far as we are able to tell, sir."

He nodded. "Place it on the desk and leave me."

She did as he ordered, withdrawing from the room and closing the door silently behind her.

He picked up the package and slit the end with a knife that he took from a drawer. Out slid an electronic tablet and a sheet of notepaper.

The notepaper bore a computer-printed message.

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**Accord:**

*I am sending you this tablet on behalf of Hope. On it is the electronic version of what is now known as the Hope Accord, for your perusal. Please inform us of any inconsistencies in the electronic format.*

*The similar plan for Brockton Bay is in the process of being implemented. It has been accepted by all major powers in the city.*

*If there are any updates required for either plan, please contact us at once.*

**Regards,**

*Tattletale*

---

Accord read the note through twice, then switched on the tablet. He was unfamiliar with this model, but his power was up to the task of figuring out how to make it do what he wanted it to. Soon, he was paging through the multimedia display, allowing his power to compare what it was with what it needed to be, and finding virtually nothing to complain about. The numbers had drifted, of course, but they were still well within the acceptable margins of error.

Finally, he set down the tablet and stared into space. In his mind’s eye, he conjured the picture of a figure of perfection, softly glowing skin and crystalline angelic wings.

*Hope,* he thought. *She asks no pay. She champions my cause. She advances my plans. She brings order.*

He pressed the button once more. "Send Citrine and Othello to my office. I wish to speak with them."

---

Hope and Amy were up, having breakfast, when Taylor strolled in. Hope had her tablet on the table in front of her, paging through screen after screen of information. She looked up as Taylor entered.

"Hi!" she said with a smile. "Come on over, have a seat!"

Taylor smiled back; when Hope smiled, it was infectious. She sat down and looked at the tablet.

"Still studying the Hope Accord?" she asked.

Hope nodded. "I need to be able to go anywhere, highlight any connection, when I tell people about it," she said seriously. "If I don't know how it fits together, how can I explain it to others?"
Taylor nodded. "That's a very good point," she agreed. She put her arms around Hope and gave her a hug. "And I don't know if I'd ever be able to do it."

Hope hugged her back, and kissed her on the cheek. "And good morning to you too," she said with a smile.

Taylor smiled back, and reached into her backpack. "Check this out."

Hope took the rough square of silvery material. "What is it?"

"Try to tear it." Taylor knew that Hope was much stronger than an ordinary person, and was honestly curious about whether she could damage the sample.

"Okay," said Hope curiously. She took the edge in her hands, braced herself, and pulled. A few strands snapped, but no more. She set herself, and pulled harder. One more strand snapped. Nothing else happened, no matter how hard she exerted herself.

"Whew," she said, looking down at the material, almost unmarked by her efforts. "What the heck is that stuff?"

Taylor grinned. "Web-spider silk, woven into cloth."

"Oh my god," said Amy, leaning over to see. "That's awesome." She ran her fingers over it. "It's even soft. But you couldn't tear it?"

"Not even a little bit," admitted Hope.

Amy grinned. "Nice." She handed back the sample to Taylor. "Wanna see we've made for you?" she asked.

"Ooh, yes, please," said Taylor.

Hope got up with her, and turned to Amy. "Isn't that what you've made for her, sweetie?" she asked. "I don't recall being able to do what you can do."

Amy rolled her eyes. "You supply ideas and encouragement, and hugs," she said. "You're just as important to this as I am."

Hope smiled at her, and kissed her on the tip of the nose. "Thank you, sweetie," she said. "That's so nice to hear."

Lisa came strolling over, her vulpine grin in full evidence. "Taylor," she said, "you might want to ... let's say, disappear for a while. What Amy and Hope have to show you is something that Skitter needs to see."

Taylor nodded. "So I figured. Okay, I'll see you shortly." She moved off, sidling into Lisa's room at exactly the right moment that all eyes were turned elsewhere.

When she finished changing, she slipped out the back way and circled around to come in the front way, announcing her arrival with a large swarm of buzzing insects.

Hope and Amy met her at the front entrance along with Lisa; Amy opened a small box to release three of the hornet-like bugs, each of which had a bright orange abdomen.

Hope, on the other hand, held in both arms a creature that looked like it belonged in a horror movie.
It was insectile, but the body was fully six feet long, and the wings folded down its back extended a
good five feet beyond the tip of its tail. It looked like nothing more than a giant, slightly misshapen
dragonfly.

"Oh. My. God," said Skitter. She tore her eyes from the monstrous dragonfly-thing, and looked at
the three orange bugs that were now perched on her hand. "What are these?"

Amy grinned. "You know the stuff that Newter exudes from his skin?"

Skitter nodded. "I once used that stuff to take Lung down for the count."

Amy nodded in return. "I'm not surprised. These bugs generate the same stuff. One little tiny sting,
and they're counting flying pink elephants, as he puts it."

Skitter examined the bugs. "Oooh. I like." She then looked at the big creature, even as the orange
bugs concealed themselves in her costume. "This is not like you said the big bug was going to be."

Amy grinned again. "I'm working on ideas for that one. However, last night, Hope had another idea,
and this is what came of it." She reached out and laid a hand on the enormous insect. "I put in a
neural disconnect, so it couldn't do anything other than breathe until you were in direct control of it,"
she explained. "But now ... done."

Skitter felt the connection with the new creature flow into her mind, and she gasped. "It's almost ... 
smart?"

"Smart bugs?" asked Lisa. "Isn't that a contradiction in terms?"

"Bug brains are necessarily limited," Amy agreed. "I did what I've been doing with the other ones,
making them easier for you to control, and with this one I had a little more room, so I made it ... more
so. Also." She took a deep breath. "It's got relay bug enhancement, as well as spinnerets between its
limbs. It can literally cocoon someone and take them to the police, if you told it to. But that's not even
remotely the coolest bit. Get it to climb on to your back."

Hope lowered the bug to the ground, and it scuttled across to Skitter, then reared up behind her. The
legs opened wide, and then the thorax itself opened up to show a cavity, into which Skitter's body
fitted perfectly, from neck to buttocks. Specialised legs wrapped around her body and attached to one
another, leaving yet more for general manipulation.

The head, which had moved back for this operation, opened up in its turn, and fitted down over
Skitter's own head like a helmet, leaving only the mandibles of her mask visible. Her eyes were
covered, but that meant little; the dragonfly's eyes, the size of basketballs, gave her a complete three
hundred sixty degree circle of vision. She found herself able to choose between full colour, infrared,
ultraviolet and low-light vision at will.

"You fiddled with its eyes," she said in delight.

"Oh yeah," said Amy. "And that's the least of it. Tell it to fly."

At the thought, the long gossamer wings spread out with a flick; she suddenly realised that she had a
wingspan of some twenty feet. The wings began beating at a speed that she could not even follow,
and she felt her feet leave the ground. The abdomen curved down, and a pair of pincers closed
around her ankles, holding her legs firmly in place, in a straight line with her body. Aerodynamics
and balance, she realised. Cool.

Before she realised it, she was twenty and then thirty feet above the ground, the strap-legs holding
her firmly, and the huge dragonfly wings beating strongly at the air.

She heard the chiming of Hope's wings as she took off with Amy in her arms; the noise was clearly audible, despite her ears being covered by the dragonfly's modified head. *I'm getting the feed from its ears,* she realised. *It's very clear.*

"How does it feel?" called out Amy from ten yards away.

"Awesome!" replied Skitter. "I love it!"

Minutes later, Skitter returned to the ground, the large wings stirring up wind that blew dust and small pieces of trash around. Without her conscious control, the dragonfly-creature released its hold on her ankles as she came within touching distance of the ground. As she steadied her footing, it unclasped from its hold on her body, and climbed up to perch on her shoulder, like some massive, misshapen bird of prey. It was heavy, but she found she could stand the weight.

"So," said Amy, also back on the ground. "Is the flying the coolest bit, or what?"

Skitter nodded. "Without a doubt," she agreed.

"So," said Lisa. "What are you going to call her?"

Skitter stopped to think about this. "Falkor," she decided.

Amy frowned. "Falkor?"

"The Luck-dragon from the Neverending Story," explained Skitter. "I always cried while watching that movie."

Hope smiled. "That's a good name."

"So what does Falkor eat?" asked Skitter.

"Bugs," said Amy. "Rats. Basically, anything organic. I gave her the equivalent of a cockroach's digestive system." She smiled. "But if she starts acting poorly, let me know and I'll check her over for you."

Skitter approached Amy and gave her a hug. "Thank you," she said. "Really. For everything."

Amy hugged her back carefully. "Just ... do good with them, okay?" she asked.

Skitter nodded. "Oh, definitely."

Hope landed outside the PRT headquarters, letting Amy down on to her feet. Hand in hand, they approached the guard. "We're here to see Director Piggot and Doctor Yamada," Amy said cheerfully.

The guard nodded. "I was told you were coming," he acknowledged, and stepped aside.

"Thank you," said Hope politely, as they entered.

Doctor Yamada rose as Hope and Amy entered Director Piggot's office. "Ah, you're here," she said. "Thank you for coming."
Hope hugged her, enjoying the return embrace. "Of course, Doctor," she replied. "Amy and I owe you so much."

"Then the name's Jessica," said Doctor Yamada. "At least until you are seeing me in my professional capacity."

Hope nodded. "I may yet be doing that soon, Jessica," she said. "But for now, we're here to help you out."

"So you really can do this?" asked Director Piggot, coming around from behind the desk. She hugged Amy and then Hope; Amy took the time to give Jessica Yamada a hug as well.

"I believe so," said Amy seriously. "I'll have to see her to know for sure, of course. But I can't see a problem, once I can get into physical contact with her."

"That in itself could be a problem," said Doctor Yamada. "You see ..."
As Doctor Yamada spoke to Amy, Hope motioned to Director Piggot. "You may want to spread the word that if anyone sees a six-foot dragonfly flying around the city, please don't attack it. It belongs to Skitter."

Piggot stopped dead and stared at her. "You have got to be kidding me." She paused, and shook her head. "Sorry. You don't pull jokes like that. But seriously, I need details."

Hope nodded. "Amy made it for Skitter. It's based on a dragonfly, but Skitter can use it to fly with. She probably won't send it anywhere without her, so if anyone does see it flying around ..." She shrugged. "It will probably be her, taking it for a spin."

Director Piggot shook her head slowly. "Every time," she said. "Every time I think you can't surprise me ..." She took a deep breath. "Amy made this six-foot dragonfly thing?"

Hope nodded earnestly. "So Skitter can get around more quickly. We were talking about upsizing a Hercules beetle, but I had the idea to use a dragonfly instead. So Amy figured out how to make it work at that size. She says it's not as easy as it seems. I don't think it looks easy at all."

"Right," said Director Piggot. "I'll send out the word right now." She paused. "And you can tell Amy that she'll probably get a Tinker rating out of this, if she keeps this sort of thing up."

"Well," said Hope, "she does work with biology, and Skitter's pretty well decided to join the Wards, so we're giving her a more varied approach. Non-lethal attack bugs, and so forth."

Director Piggot raised an eyebrow. "Despite the word 'non-lethal' in that sentence, I feel a distinct level of concern over the phrase 'attack bugs'. What, exactly, are you referring to?"

"Oh, uh, the flash bugs; I think you know about those," said Hope. "Also, bugs that can inject other things than wasp venom." She paused. "Ketamine, for instance, or that stuff that Newter sweats out. If these work out, we have ideas, for disease stricken areas, of making bugs that can sniff out people suffering from a particular disease, and injecting the antidote right into them."

Piggot blinked. "Wasps that sting you with knockout drugs or hallucinogens?" she asked. "Can that even be done?"

Hope grinned. "When it comes to manipulating biology, I don't even try to second-guess Amy," she said. "She's a miracle worker."

"She's not the only one," was Director Piggot's oblique reply. She went back to her desk, shaking her head. "Attack bugs," she muttered.

"She's one of the more extreme ones," said Doctor Yamada, leading the way to the correct wing. "We call them Case Fifty-Threes. People who got powers and ended up ... inhuman."

Hope frowned. "Ah. I heard that phrase a few times when I first got here. I didn't know what it meant." She grinned wryly. "I didn't know what anything meant. For the first few days, I was extremely confused. It took a while for me to get my head together."

Amy nodded. "I remember. They brought me in to look at you."
"Case Fifty-Threes are marked with a tattoo, of an upside down omega symbol," remarked Doctor Yamada. "At first, we thought you might be one, but there was no mark, no tattoo."

"I don't think I can be tattooed," said Hope. "I've had things penetrate my skin before, but anything that got left behind when the skin closed over basically oozed out."

"You have a very weird biology, that way," agreed Amy. "Your powers are even set up in a totally different way to everyone else's. They shouldn't work, but they do."

"Shh," said Hope with a grin. "Don't say that too loudly; they might hear you and stop working."

Yamada had to smile at the banter between Hope and Amy. "Well, here we are," she said. They were standing outside an airlock-style door. "We had her moved here from the asylum where she is normally incarcerated; there was no sense in upsetting the other patients, whether what we do is successful or not."

She turned on the monitor outside the door. "No-one gets to go inside unless they are in a protective suit. We have one such suit. Without it, she'll rip your arms and legs off, strangle you in a heartbeat."

"Okay ..." said Amy carefully. "What are we doing here, again?"

"Sveta does not want to do these things," Jessica Yamada explained carefully. "She has agreed, both verbally and in writing, to any procedure that might allow her to have something approaching a normal life. But her tendrils, tentacles, call them what you will, react to her environment. She only has the most basic control over them, and if anything out of the ordinary happens, the tendrils attack."

"I seem to recall someone else like that, once upon a time," murmured Hope to Amy.

"Don't remind me," Amy replied. "I had nightmares about that."

"Well, at least she isn't going to eat me," Hope pointed out.

"Small mercies," Amy murmured. Hope smiled and kissed her on the tip of the nose. Amy giggled involuntarily and leaned up against Hope.

The monitor screen cleared, showing a fisheye view of the cell within. There was an odd construction, like a multi-level scratching post, bolted to the wall on the far side, and the walls had been painted in bright colours. The pale face of a woman seemed to be floating in midair, hair streaming around her as though she were drifting underwater, the disembodied head of a drowned woman.

"Hello, Sveta," said Doctor Yamada, pressing a microphone button. "How are you feeling today?"

"They put me in a new cell, Doctor Yamada," said the face on the monitor. "It's different. I don't like it." She sounded fretful, upset.

Yamada let go the mic button. "That's not good," she murmured. "When she's agitated, she has a lot of trouble getting her tendrils to behave at all."

Amy was studying the image on the screen. "How much does she weigh?" she asked abruptly.

"About fifteen pounds, more or less," Doctor Yamada said, "At least, that's what I'm told."

Amy frowned. "We're going to need another eighty to ninety pounds of biomass."
Yamada stared at her. "Where are you going to get that from?"

Amy grinned. "Where are the kitchens?"

"Hey!" said the man in the cook's outfit. "You can't take that!"

Hope hefted the side of beef on to her shoulder. "Please call Director Piggot," she said politely. "I'm sure she will ensure that you get another one. But for now," she said apologetically, "we need this one."

Doctor Yamada nodded in agreement, showing her identification to the man. "Tell her that Doctor Jessica Yamada said it was necessary."

"But I'd just finished defrosting that one!"

"Well, it's not like I could use a frozen one, is it?" said Amy pragmatically.

"But what do you need the whole thing for?" wailed the cook.

Hope grinned. "A friend of ours needs to gain a little weight."

"A side of beef?" asked Sveta. "Really?"

"Yes," said Yamada patiently. "We're going to leave it in the airlock, and open your side. If you can drag it out, that would be good."

Sveta looked distressed. "But what am I going to do with it? I don't eat raw meat. And even if I did, I couldn't eat a whole side of beef at once!"

Amy smiled. "Leave that to me," she said. She turned off the mic and looked at Doctor Yamada. "Is there anything else that we need to fix while we are working on her? Body and powers I can probably do; anything else?"

"Well ..." said Jessica. "Like virtually every Case Fifty-Three we've run into, she doesn't have any memory of before the event of getting her powers, but she does have occasional dreams of those times, so the memories have to be there somewhere. Are you able to ...?" She let the question trail off.

Amy took a deep breath, and looked at Hope. Hope took her hand and nodded encouragingly. Amy smiled a little shakily. "With Hope there to help me ... yes, I can try," she said. "Brain work is never really fun, because there are so many things that can go wrong with the best of intentions, but I trust Hope to keep an eye on what I am doing."

Jessica Yamada nodded. "I understand," she said. "Well, let's get this thing into the airlock."

Hope hefted the side of beef, and deposited it in the airlock, then stepped out and closed the door firmly.

Yamada keyed the mic switch. "Opening the inner door now, Sveta," she said. There wa a click, audible even through the outer door, and the inner door swung open. Immediately, a number of Sveta's tendrils lashed out, grabbed the door and swung it wide open.

Inside was revealed the side of beef, lying forlornly on the floor. It had been propped up against the inner door, and now it rocked back and forth slowly, deprived of its previous support. More tendrils
slashed at it, wrapping around it. Braced from the metal brackets on the far wall, Sveta easily hauled
the huge chunk of meat and bone into the cell, the tendrils cutting deeply into the flesh.

That was when the first complication happened.

Doctor Yamada pressed the button that was supposed to close the inner door. Tendrils lashed out
once more, and held it open.

"Sveta," said Yamada over the intercom, "please let the door go."

"I ... can't," replied Sveta unhappily. "It moved. I couldn't help myself."

"If the door is not shut, Sveta, then we can go no farther. In fact, we can't deliver any more food and
water to you. I really don't want that to happen."

"I'm not doing it on purpose, Doctor," protested Sveta. "I swear. I know you're trying to help me,
and I want you to do it, really I do." There was a catch in her voice. "I just can't stop them."

Hope peered in through the thick glass window of the outer door, and saw Sveta across the room,
some tendrils still wound around the side of beef, others gripping the edge of the door.

And suddenly, Sveta's bodiless face was there, just inside the window, tendrils waving and lashing at
her, trying to get through the window. Hope recoiled without thinking, but steeled herself and looked
Sveta in the face. "We will help you," she said softly. "I promise."

"Doctor ..." said Amy thoughtfully. "Sveta's tendrils are attracted by movement, right?"

Doctor Yamada nodded. "Yes. They lash out and attack any perceived movement."

Amy smiled. "Do you think that in a building this size, we could find a laser pointer somewhere?"

Yamada's eyebrows rose. "I would be surprised if we could not."

It took ten minutes to locate one, during which time Hope chatted with Sveta over the intercom. She
told her about the party, glossing over the attack by the Fallen, and about the victory ceremony. She
told Sveta about the Wards, and how nice they were, and about the Undersiders, and their foibles
and capabilities.

The laser pointer was delivered by Director Piggot herself. She arrived at a brisk walk, told the guard
accompanying her that he could be excused, and handed the laser pointer to Doctor Yamada. "I just
received a call from a very upset cook," she said. "He asserts you stole a freshly defrosted side of
beef."

Hope nodded. "We sort of needed it," she said. "Or rather, Sveta needs it."

Piggot frowned. "What for?"

"Body mass," said Amy bluntly.

Director Piggot raised an eyebrow. "Okay," she said. "I want to see this."

"Very well," said Doctor Yamada. She stepped up to the window and aimed the laser pointer past
Sveta so that it played on the far wall of the cell. Almost instantly, Sveta was over there, tendrils
lashing at the wall, trying to capture and crush the little dancing dot. "Now!" said Yamada.
Hope pressed the appropriate button, and the inner door slammed shut, mere instants before Sveta's tendrils would have caught it and held it open once more. Yamada weighed the pointer in her hand. "Very useful," she said, giving Amy a respectful look. "I'll have to keep that in mind."

Hope hugged Amy from behind. "That was good thinking, sweetie," she said; Amy turned pink with pleasure.

"Nicely done," said Director Piggot. "So what happens now?"

"Now ..." said Hope, trying to work out how to say it in an innocuous fashion. Finally, she gave up. "Now, we break the rules. A lot."

Director Piggot looked at her warily. "What rules are you intending to break, and why?"

Hope told her.

It took fifteen minutes of arguing before Piggot finally agreed that it could be done. Doctor Yamada was originally against the idea as well, but she came around first, and made a couple of useful suggestions.

As technicians worked on the outer door, Director Piggot muttered to herself. "I must be crazy, letting this happen."

Hope smiled. "Well, originally I was going to be going in there. I think Jessica's idea is much better." Footsteps sounded from down the corridor. She looked around. "And here he is."

Weld was not at all sure as to why he had been summoned so briskly by Director Piggot, but it was his duty to arrive when summoned, and so he reported.

To his surprise, he found himself being escorted into the depths of the PRT building, down to the special holding cells. And around one particular cell door, there were gathered several people familiar to him.

"Reporting as ordered, Madam Director," he said, stopping before Director Piggot and offering a salute. She nodded in response, and gestured toward Hope and Amy. "They've got a job for you. It's specifically suited toward your talents. They'll brief you."

The briefing took very little time. When they had finished, he said, "So ... that's it?"

Hope nodded. "I was going to do it myself, but you were proposed as a much better idea." She smiled. "To be honest, I wasn't really looking forward to it."

He nodded. "I can understand."

Off to the side, the techs finally completed their work, replacing the panel in the door.

"Now, you understand," said the lead tech, "with the interlocks gone, this door can now be opened, even if the inner door is also open."

Director Piggot nodded. "That's the idea. Hang around; we'll need you to put it back the way it was, afterward."

"Well, okay," he said. He and his offsider gathered their tools and retired to a safe distance down the corridor.
Piggot turned to Weld. "So, you're briefed on what you need to do?"

Weld nodded. "Pretty well." He started for the airlock door.

"Wait a moment," said Hope. She turned to the PRT guard, who was clad in the protective armour and carrying a containment foam sprayer. "Give me a glob of foam, please?" she asked, cupping her hands.

The guard's expression could not be seen, but his voice was doubtful. "That'll glue your hands together, you realise."

Hope smiled. "I'm good," she said. "Please?"

The guard's shrug was just barely visible, but he raised the nozzle of his sprayer and touched the trigger, dropping a small globule of containment foam into her cupped hands. On contact with air, it immediately began to swell.

"Thank you," she said, bearing it over to Weld. "Give me your arm,"

He held it out, and she smeared the still-hardening foam over his forearm and hand, giving him a tacky coating an inch thick.

"That should do it," she said. "Once she grabs you, she can't let go."

Weld shook his head. "I still can't get over how you can play with that stuff like modelling clay," he said, observing her clean hands.

She grinned, then leaned up to give him a kiss on the cheek. "Go do your stuff, hero boy," she said with a smile.

Weld stood in the closed airlock, unfoamed hand on the inner airlock door handle. "Ready?" he said out loud.

"Ready," confirmed Jessica Yamada, her voice tinny from the speakers.

"Ready," echoed Amy.

The inner door lock clicked open, but Weld held it firmly closed.

"Has she reacted?" he asked.

"Wait..." said Yamada's voice. "Some of her tendrils twitched... no, it's fine."

"Opening now," said Weld. He pushed the airlock door an inch.

Immediately, several tendrils lashed out at the door; he could feel them, tugging at it. He set his weight and strength against them, pulling back. Tendrils wriggled in through the minuscule gap... which was precisely what he wanted. He grabbed at one, missed, grabbed again. Got the very tip of a tendril. The others reacted, lashing at his foam-covered arm, wrapping around, sticking fast. He pulled harder on the door, closing it, preventing more tendrils from entering.

"Got it!" he said, louder than he intended. Then he felt the other tendrils trying to pull the door open again. He held it, but good god, she was strong!

"Now now now!" he yelled, straining to prevent the airlock door from being pulled open.
The outer airlock door swung open, impelled by Hope's more-than-human strength. Amy entered, reaching out, laying her hand on the tendril, so tightly stretched that it had cut through the foam and was now wrapped around Weld's metal forearm.

Contact.

Weld felt the tension go off the door.

"You can open it now," said Amy. "It's all right. She won't attack."

Weld paused. "Really?" he said cautiously.

Amy smiled. "Really really," she said. "She's in a sort of coma right now."

Hope nodded. "She's very cool like that," she said with a grin.

They gathered around Sveta, whose 'body' was draped over the side of beef, tendrils stretching here and there throughout the cell, like animated webs from a particularly unusual spider.

Amy picked Sveta up and cradled the disembodied head and the attached organs carefully in her hands. "Someone get the foam off of Weld's arm," she said. "I'm going to need all her tendrils free."

The guard, who had crowded in after them, pulled a canister off his belt and applied the spray; the containment foam melted away and the tendrils came free.

Then they began to animate, wrapping around the side of beef.

"Crap, she's waking up!" exclaimed Weld. Everyone but Amy recoiled.

Amy shook her head. "I'm controlling her tendrils. Telling the part of her nervous system that controls them that the side of beef needs to be grabbed." She paused. "Her conscious mind never even really gets a say in this." She crouched next to the side of beef and looked up at Hope. "Ready to get to work, sweetie?"

"Always, sweetie," agreed Hope. She crouched beside Amy, rearranging her wings to fit the new posture, and put one hand on Sveta's face in repose, and one on Amy's arm. Amy smiled and leaned across to rest her forehead gently against Hope's, before they began.

The tendrils seemed to spread over the surface of the beef, then sink into it. However, shortly after, a fibrous off-white covering began to spread over the surface, sealing it off from the air.

"What is that?" asked Weld.

Doctor Yamada stayed silent.

"It looks ... like a cocoon," said Piggot slowly.

"That's exactly what it is," said Amy distantly. "Now, can you please keep it down? This is the first time I've ever done this, and I need to concentrate."

The others shut up then, but Piggot drew Yamada aside. "Please tell me you have cameras recording this," she hissed.

Within the cocoon, digestive juices broke down the meat and bone into a nutrient-rich soup, ready to fuel the rebuilding of Sveta's long-lost body.

Amy started with the source of all of Sveta's problems; the structure of her powers. It was twisted, warped, not unlike Noelle's had been, although not quite as bad. It was also more stable, but not so fixed that Amy could not sever some connections and reconnect them elsewhere. The effort left her shaken and sweating; Hope put an arm around her shoulders and whispered encouragement into her ear. Amy felt her love and support as a physical thing, helping her to keep moving, keep working.

Next, she accessed the DNA itself. Sveta's genetic code had been basically unchanged by the onset of her powers; the power structure had only redirected how it worked. Amy changed that back, and started to build a body based on the genetic code she now had available.

Gradually, or so it seemed to her in her fugue state, the body within the cocoon re-ravelled itself. Amy gently drew Sveta's organs down into her new body, enlarging them as needed, and placing them into their proper niches. Other organs, which Sveta had not needed to this point, were grown and emplaced.

*I don't know how old she was, so I'll give her the body of a fit, healthy, developed eighteen year old.* She smiled to herself. *A better start in life than many people get.*

With the extremities growing in of their own accord – toes with toenails, fingers with fingernails – she turned her attention to the last aspect.

Pausing for just a moment, she leaned against Hope for comfort and strength. Hope kissed her cheek and whispered words of gentle encouragement into her ear. Taking a deep breath, Amy went back to work.

She redirected the control of Sveta's power so that rather than being almost entirely autonomous, she now had full conscious control over it. She also noted that Sveta's brain was not as large as it could be – the power, when activated, had sloughed away most of her body, including large sections of no-longer-needed brain tissue. So she rebuilt it from base principles, working in the currently extant portions to where they needed to go. From Hope's brain, she copied imprinted skills of basic movements of limbs and extremities, and implanted them into the newly-grown brain tissue, connecting them to the correct neural links for use of those limbs.

*This is harder than it was for Noelle.*

She pushed that thought aside, took a deep breath, and opened her eyes. "Doctor Yamada, could you please put your hand on my arm?" she said out loud.

Yamada frowned. "Why?" she asked, although she was already moving forward to comply.

"Because she lacks the basic brain structures for maintaining an adult woman's body, and I need to copy them off of someone," Amy replied. "I can't copy myself, and Hope lacks what I need."

Jessica Yamada placed her hand on Amy's arm. "Here you are," she said softly. "Take what you need."

Amy quickly rifled through her brain, finding what she needed, and imprinting the structures on to Sveta's brand-new brain matter. "Thank you," she murmured, closing her eyes again. "I've got what I need."
Yamada nodded and stepped back to stand beside Director Piggot.

"What was it like?" asked Piggot in an undertone.

Jessica shrugged. "Didn't feel a thing."

With the last neural connections completed, Amy ran through a quick self-test of the new body. Everything seemed to check out, although she had to make a quick adjustment when she realised that Sveta was suffering from a severe bone degenerative disease. In her previous form, of course, she would not have noticed any symptoms, due to a lack of skeletal structure. But in her current body ...

*Can't have that,* she decided, and with a tweak of Sveta's DNA, she fixed it.

Next came the memories. She could not read memories from someone's brain, of course, but she could find the areas of the brain where memories were stored. *That's interesting,* she thought.

The memories were there, but hardly accessible to Sveta's conscious mind. They seemed to be compressed and jumbled; some of them quite possibly missing, but much of them probably still there. So she decompressed them, letting them become part of the standard memory impressions in Sveta's mind.

At the same time, she de-emphasised the memories that Sveta had acquired during her time as a tentacled monster. *The less she dwells on those, the better,* she decided.

Eventually, finally, she decided she was finished. She looked at Hope. "Hm?" she asked.

"Mm," Hope agreed.

Amy looked up at the Director. "Could you please send someone to fetch two large hamburgers, a large glass of chilled milk, and a bowl of chocolate ice cream?"

Director Piggot took out her phone. "Certainly," she said. "Is this for some power thing?"

Amy shook her head. "No," she said. "I'm hungry, Sveta's going to be starving, and Hope likes chocolate ice cream."

She paused. "And she'll want some clothes, too."

In the end, the opening of the cocoon was almost an anticlimax. Amy ran her finger along an unseen seam, and the fibrous material parted, peeling away from the human female figure within, curled up in a foetal position. It fell away from her head, where long strands of what could almost be hair wrapped down and around her body, wet with unidentifiable fluids.

Amy touched her gently on the shoulder, and she awoke.

Sveta opened her eyes. Her position was odd, near the floor. She could not feel many of her tendrils; she presumed she had misbehaved once more, and had been tranquillised. *I hope I didn't kill anyone,* she said to herself.

Then she became aware that people were crouching next to her; she recognised the impossibly beautiful shining face, and the girl with freckles and frizzy brown hair. And beyond them, Doctor Yamada.
But there was something wrong; they were in the cell with her, and there was no protection between herself and them. She could feel strange sensations, and she did not know what they meant, but she did not want to kill anyone.

"You should not be in here with me," she said softly. "My tendrils will kill you."

The girl with the frizzy hair shook her head, smiling. "That's not going to happen," she said. "Give me your hand."

"My ... hand?" asked Sveta. "I have no hands."

The girl reached down, below the level of Sveta's chin, and to her surprise, she felt a hand clasp ... she looked down, and saw herself.

Hope and Amy had to assist Doctor Yamada in helping Sveta put on the lab coat which had been acquired for her. Sveta was closing her eyes, then opening them, and looking at her hands, before crying and laughing all at once. It took her a few moments to work out how to use her arms and legs again – Amy had made the proper connections, but Sveta had to figure out how to access them – but once she did, she hugged everyone in sight, even the guard.

She seemed to derive the greatest of pleasure from hugging someone tightly, then letting them go, laughing out loud, then hugging them again.

She was, as Amy had predicted, famished. She needed both hands to hold the burger, but bite by bite, she finished it off, as well as half the glass of milk. Amy stabilised her digestive system, so that she didn't throw it all up at once; as she put it, "you've never used this one before at all". But once her stomach had accepted it and was well on the way to digesting her first meal in this new body, it was time for a new experience.

Sveta loved the shower. She scrubbed herself all over three times, and rinsed water through her hair repeatedly. She ended up sitting on the floor of the shower stall, examining her feet and giggling as she manipulated her toes, one at a time.

When she came out, drying herself on a towel that someone had located, she was radiant. "How did you do it?" she kept asking. "How did you do it?"

Hope smiled; Amy shrugged. "It's what I do," the frizzy-haired brunette said. "But you should be thanking Doctor Yamada. It was her idea."

Dropping the towel, Sveta hugged Yamada tightly, totally ignoring the fact that she was altogether naked and not entirely dry. "Do you know how good it feels to be able to hold someone and then let them go?" she asked.

Yamada smiled and patted her on the back. "Not as well as you do, I believe," she said softly. "Come on; we need to talk about your powers."

They sat around a table in a private room behind Director Piggot's office. Sveta was now clad in a bathrobe – perhaps one of Piggot's own, as it went around Sveta twice. She was examining her hands, flexing the fingers, and smiling a little uncertainly, as if she were beginning to suspect that this was a dream.

"You still have powers," Amy assured her. "I could not shut that part of you off, and I would not even if I could."
Sveta looked up from her hands. "But I do not," she said. "My tendrils – they are gone."

Amy shook her head. "You still have your tendrils," she assured Sveta. "What do you think your hair is?"

Sveta looked puzzled. "My hair?" she asked. "But it lies there limply. It does nothing that I don't want it to."

Doctor Yamada smiled. "So want it to."

Sveta blinked. And then her hair came alive, writhing about her head as though she had just picked up a massive static charge. She reached up, caressing the ends of the hair-like tendrils. They wrapped around her arms and then released again. Then they formed into a tight coil atop her head.

"They aren't quite as strong as they were before," Amy cautioned. "But they are quite strong enough. They will now stretch perhaps twice as far as they could before, but the minimum length is about three feet." She grinned. "Of course, you never need to worry about brushing or styling your hair again."

"It feels so strange," said Sveta. "Just ... controlling them. I am so used to trying to hold them back, to prevent them from crushing someone."

"If I did not have absolute faith in Amy and Hope to know what they were doing, I would not be sitting here," observed Director Piggot.

Hope grinned. "I just love having Amy around," she said. She reached out and took Amy's hand. "You do such wonderful things for people." Amy squeezed her hand and smiled back at her. There was no outward sign, but Hope could feel the fatigue creeping through Amy's body; the rebuilding had taken a lot of her.

Sveta looked across the table at Amy and Hope, and to her left at Doctor Yamada. "I – I don't know what to say," she said. "I – my life – you have given it back to me." Her eyes were shining with unshed tears as she looked at Yamada. "And I think even my memories are beginning to return."

Jessica Yamada nodded. "I have no doubt you will need a little more therapy, Sveta," she said with a smile. "But the worst is definitely over."

Hope rose from the table, drawing Amy with her. She embraced Amy, holding her tightly, feeling the other's arms go around her. She could also feel the bone-deep shudders within Amy's body.

"Wanna go home now?" she whispered.

"Uh huh," replied Amy, just as quietly. "Please. Before I pass out in front of everyone."

They made their excuses; as they left, Sveta was discussing her future with Director Piggot and Doctor Yamada.

Amy was fast asleep, worn out, before Hope got halfway back to the shelter. Hope smiled down at Amy's sleeping face, peaceful in repose. She pushes herself so hard sometimes, she thought. And I love her for it. But she needs to rest a little more sometimes. After all, nearly all the villains are going to become heroes. That can only mean good things for Brockton Bay.
"Way I hear it," said Butcher, "all the villains in Brockton Bay are quitting."

"Yeah?" said Spree, leaning back on his chair. "All of them?"

"Big names, anyway," said Butcher. "Wussing out. Joining the good guys. There won't be enough for us to worry about."

"How about the heroes?" asked Vex. "You know, the ones the villains are joining?"

Butcher made a dismissive gesture. "Too many heroes in the one city? They'll ship 'em out, split 'em up, make sure they don't form subversive groups in among the heroes. They'll strip the city bare, because there won't hardly be any villains left to worry about."

Animos grinned. "And that's when we move in."

Butcher nodded. "That's when we move in."

Hemorrhagia spoke up. "And if there's any of the tough villains left in the city? Suppose they come after us?"

Butcher bared her teeth, and set her hand on the Gatling gun that she used as a sidearm. "We bury them."
In which Lisa and Hope achieve a closer understanding, Skitter assists the PRT, and there is a mysterious phone call

Falkor's wings thrummed loudly as Skitter swooped over Brockton Bay.

She gloried in the sensation of speed, of flight, of the ability to look down at the city rather than just sense it with bugs. *Is this why Hope loves to fly so much?*

Her bugs detected something rising fast beneath her, on an intercept course, seconds before Falkor's enhanced eyes picked it out.

As soon as she had made an identification, she relaxed slightly. *Kid Win, on a flying surfboard. Probably not going to attack me.*

She slowed her speed – she had known that dragonflies could move quickly, but Falkor's speed had taken her breath away – and waited for him to catch her up.

He seemed to be coming a little close for her own peace of mind, so she told Falkor to move aside a little.

This was another thing she loved about the massive dragonfly hybrid; she didn't have to tell it how to fly; all she had to do was express her need, and it did the rest. As Kid Win came up almost directly beneath her, Falkor suddenly darted sideways a good two dozen feet. The strap-limbs pressed hard into her body from the acceleration, but they continued to hold her in place.

*I didn't even know it could do that. Amy, you're a marvel.*

Kid Win came up level, standing easily on his flying surfboard, the red glow from beneath showing where the anti-gravity panels were. He seemed a little taken aback by her sudden evasive manoeuvre.

Skitter put Falkor into a hover, facing him. She was, in fact, facing mostly downward, but Falkor's bulbous eyes had a perfect view of him.

"*Whoever you are!*" called out Kid Win, his voice magnified by some sort of PA system in his helmet. "*I'm going to need you to land and identify yourself.*"

Skitter arched her back slightly, and hundreds of insects poured from the spaces under her armour panels, especially on her back, and took to the air. They formed a cloud between herself and Kid Win.

"*Hi, Kid Win,*" she articulated through the swarm. "*It's me, Skitter. This is my new transport. Like it?*

She moved closer to him, had Falkor's head move back off her own, lifted her head, and waved.

"Skitter?" he blurted, able to talk directly now. "Where did you get that thing from?"

"A friend of mine built it," she replied. *No*, she recalled. *Amy was quite definite in calling Falkor a female.*"Her," she amended.

"Some sort of ... *bug tinker?*" he asked, sounding confused.
She grinned under her mask. "I suppose you could call her that. It was Amy."

"Holy crap," he said. "She made that?" He paused. "Hang on, incoming call."

Amused, she waited. He didn't take long. "Sorry about that," he said. "I just got a heads-up from Director Piggot. Told me not to attack any six-foot dragonflies that I see flying around the city."

"Good advice," she said. "I'd take it, if I were you."

He nodded. "Oh, I intend to." He paused. "Does it have a name? Something that big and impressive needs a name."

Skitter nodded. "Falkor. You know, the Luck dragon."

"Nice," he said, impressed. "I'd really like to have a closer look sometime, if you don't mind. I've often wondered how I'd go about designing an ornithopter system."

"Sure," she said. "I'm just taking her for a trial flight, but some time later, for sure."

"Thanks," he said. "But just between you and me? When you join the Wards, you might want something prettier. That just says 'horror movie' to me. And you don't want to get on the wrong side of our PR guy."

Skitter grinned under her mask. "You have a PR guy? How did Clockblocker get his name past him?"

Kid Win laughed. "By being sneaky." He paused. "Whoops, gotta go. Take care and have fun." He gave her a sketchy salute and started descending again.

"I intend to," she replied. "Have a good day." Falkor's head dropped over hers, and she arched her back again to let the insects swarm back into her armour.

*Maybe the next big bug can have storage areas for carrying swarms. I'll have to take that up with Amy.*

Amy was still fast asleep when Hope carried her into the shelter. Lisa met them, smiling down at Amy's peaceful expression.

"Wow," she said. "She looks kind of wiped. Big job, huh?"

Hope nodded. She walked on through to the sleeping enclosure and started putting Amy to bed; Lisa followed on and gave her a hand. When they had her settled, Hope sat on the edge of the bed and leaned down to give her a gentle kiss on the forehead; Amy smiled and murmured something in her sleep.

"Aww, that's so sweet," Lisa said softly. "She's asleep, and she still recognised you and told you she loved you."

Hope felt her heart melt, looking down at Amy's sleeping face. "She does so much for people," she said. "She helps me so much. I don't know what I'd do without her."

Lisa grinned. "I suspect you'd make do," she said. "Besides, even if she found someone else to fulfil her physical needs, Amy would never truly leave you. She loves you for yourself, and for what you stand for."
Hope nodded. "I just want her to be happy." She smiled at Lisa. "I just want everyone to be happy, so long as any one person being happy doesn't hurt anyone else." She picked up her tablet, then rose and moved quietly out of the sleeping enclosure, leaving Amy slumbering peacefully behind her. Lisa followed, and helped her to adjust the hanging blanket.

"That's a beautiful sentiment," said Lisa quietly as they moved away. "I wish it was easier to implement in this world we live in."

"It's not even easy in the world I came from," said Hope, a little sadly. "And that world doesn't have Endbringers, or the Nine, or any of the other horrible things that this world has."

Lisa hugged her and held her close. "But I bet you made a difference anyway, didn't you?" she said with a smile.

Hope hugged Lisa back, leaning her head on the girl's shoulder. "I did, I guess," she said wistfully. "I just wish I'd done more." She sighed. "I wish I could go back, with one of Accord's plans, and help make everything right there, too."

Lisa kissed Hope on the cheek. "You'd leave us, your friends?" she asked jokingly.

"Of course I wouldn't," said Hope with a chuckle. "And you know it." She snuggled into Lisa's embrace. "I would come back to you just as soon as I could. In fact, I'd take you and Amy with me if I could. Show you what my world is like. Meet my friends. Some of them are almost as snarky as you are. I think you'd like them."

Lisa giggled and kissed her on the cheek. "Do you think you could trust us not to do something silly in your world?"

Hope nodded, her cheek rubbing against Hope's hair. "Of course you'd do something silly. Life's not fun unless you do silly things from time to time." She closed her eyes and held Lisa close. "This is really nice."

Lisa nodded, her cheek rubbing against Hope's hair. "It really is. I can't hug anyone else for long without picking up things about them that I don't want to know. With you, it's just ... nice."

"Mmm," agreed Hope. She began to hum wordlessly, the crystalline tones of her voice transmuting the sound into a gentle melody. The beat was soft and slow, and she began to move back and forth, dancing to the music.

Lisa picked it up and hummed along, recognising the music that was playing when Amy taught Hope to dance at the party, several nights previously. She began to move to it as well; although Hope didn't hit the beat perfectly, Lisa was always in perfect time with her.

Holding one another close, eyes shut to block out the world, they danced together to the haunting refrain that ran mostly through their minds.

"Now, one of the most important aspects of this case," said Quinn Calle, "is that you be seen to be a pillar of the community. No illegal actions. Most especially, no attempts to coerce or bribe the Hebert girl." He paused. "More accurately, no such attempts that could lead back to you." He gave Alan Barnes a penetrating look. "You haven't done anything like that, have you?"

"No," replied Barnes. The guys would have left town by now. No way even the PRT could have traced them this fast.

"Good," replied Calle lightly. "Because while my firm has a high tolerance for criminal activity, it has a low tolerance for stupidity."
When Amy wandered out from the sleeping enclosure, rubbing her eyes and yawning, she was wearing her bathrobe over her underwear. She saw Hope curled up in the oversized armchair, working away on the tablet. Lisa was perched on a nearby table, chatting quietly to her. She saw Amy, and nodded to her. Hope looked up and smiled widely.

"Hi, sweetie!" she said happily. "Did you have a good sleep?"

Amy nodded sleepily. "I woke up and you weren't there," she said, sounding a little lost.

"I wanted to work on this," said Hope, indicating the tablet, "and I didn't want to disturb you."

Amy nodded, then wandered over and crawled into her lap. Hope put the tablet down and put both arms around her, holding her close. Amy snuggled into the embrace. "Come back to bed, please?" she whispered. Putting her lips close to Hope's ear, she murmured something else, inaudible to anyone but Hope.

Hope smiled. "Of course, sweetie," she said softly. Rising from the chair, she carried Amy back to the sleeping enclosure.

Lisa watched them go, a wistful expression on her face.

Taylor sped over the city on wings of flashing gossamer. Falkor's worth was showing more and more; she had only had to stop once to let the giant insect feed and rest for a short while. Following Amy's advice, she had used spiders and stinging insects to flush out a swarm of rats. Moving faster than she would have believed, Falkor had killed and ingested a dozen of the rodents. More had been cocooned, and now hung on either side of Skitter, between Falkor's limbs. *Snack packs for later.* She had not even had to tell her mount to do it. *Falkor really is a smart bug. Amy, you're a genius.*

In the air once more, she curved toward the outskirts of Brockton Bay. Falkor's expanded relay-bug capability allowed her to keep track of her network, even as she covered new territory. She had put bugs in the car of the men who had confronted her and Everett, and had tracked them to the south and west of the city, after they left the phone booth. However, they had left her area of influence, so she was unsure whether they were still in the city, or if they had just left altogether.

There were, it was true, a lot of motels in this area of town. *If these men were booked into one of those, and if they haven't yet checked out ...*

She found them on the third sweep. Familiar bugs in the car, other bugs in the motel room that could make a basic visual identification on the men. *Bingo.*

Bugs turned on the phone in her armour compartment. Busy legs typed out a text.

Director Piggot looked up as her phone beeped, indicating an incoming text message. She considered leaving it, but changed her mind when she read the name of the author of the text. Picking up the phone, she read the message.

**TWO MEN CONFRONTED T HEBERT THIS MORNING, ATTEMPTED BRIBE.**

This much she knew. She snorted and read on.

**CURRENTLY IN THE BROCKTON GRAND MOTEL. ROOM 35. RENTAL CAR LICENSE PLATE MOSTLY OBSCURED. PACKING TO LEAVE. ADVISE HASTE.**
Director Piggot's eyebrows rose as she read the rest of the text, then she picked up her desk phone. "Daniels. Crash priority. I need a transport to get troops to the Brockton Grand Motel, out on I-95. Two men there, attempted to bribe our witness in the Barnes case. They're packing to leave. I'll send you details en route. Move!"

Falkor hovered, her wings thrumming loudly. Skitter decided that she liked the sound, the vibration. *It's like a back massage.* She concentrated on the bugs in the motel room.

"Where's my goddamn phone?"

"Where did you last put it down?"

"On the goddamn nightstand!"

Skitter grinned. It *had* been on the nightstand. As soon as his back was turned, cockroaches had pushed it to the floor, skated it under the stand, all the way to the back.

The other man sat on the bed, started putting his shoes on. He swore viciously as a lace broke. "These are new goddamn shoes! How can a brand new shoelace break?"

Skitter's grin widened. *Cockroaches are so handy like that.*

The rental car keys were in the jacket pocket, hanging next to the door. Three cockroaches hauled on a length of webbing provided by a cooperative spider, lifting the keys from the pocket and dropping them to the floor. More spiders worked on a length of line, stringing it at ankle height just outside the motel room door.

"Screw the laces! Let's just go!"

"Hey, why are you in such a hurry?"

"Because we failed to do the job, and the guy who was willing to pay four hundred thousand dollars shut-up money to a teenage girl might be willing to pay a little less to make sure we never say anything ever again."

"Does that sort of thing even happen, these days?"

"Do you want to find out the hard way?"

A thoughtful silence. "Good point."

Taylor shook her head. *You should be worrying more about me.*

The phone vibrated and danced, playing an old-school ringtone. Its owner got down on his hands and knees and peered under the nightstand, while the other man shut his phone and put it away.

"How the hell did it get all the way back *there*?"

"Fell down and you kicked it?"

"Can't have. I wasn't wearing shoes. I would have felt it."

"Well, it's *under* the goddamn nightstand. You figure it out."

"Yeah, yeah, shut up." He sighed, got up, and hefted the nightstand. He was a large man, and kept
fit. It moved easily. Half a dozen cockroaches ran out from under it. Three ran up his trouser leg.

"Ahh, jesus crap!" He dropped the nightstand on his foot. This provoked another burst of swearing. Then he was occupied in evicting the cockroaches from his underwear. This was not easy.

In the general noise and mayhem, they did not hear the PRT transport ground on the street outside.

"Okay!" shouted Daniels, as the transport came in to land. "Brockton Grand, room 35, red and white rental car! Skitter has eyes on, so you see bugs doing anything weird, pay attention!"

The troops ran in staggered formation, wearing light body armour and carrying sidearms rather than assault rifles. The latter were back in the transport if needed, but right now they did not wish for wild fire that punched through two walls and killed innocents on the other side.

"Where are the goddamn keys?"

"Who cares about the goddamn keys?" The last two words were screamed, as the man pulled his pants down around his knees and tried frantically to evict the three cockroaches that were trying so assiduously to make his close and intimate acquaintance.

"I had them in my jacket pocket! Did you take them?"

"Forget the f**king keys! Give me a hand here!"

The man by the door, with his hand still in the hanging jacket pocket, looked over at the spectacle thus presented, his partner with his pants fallen to his ankles, rummaging frantically inside his Y-fronts, and made his decision.

"Not f**king likely," he said, and decided to abandon the fruitless quest for the keys. In fact, he decided, it was best to abandon everything. He had his wallet in his pocket, and a man could run far and fast even in socks if he really had to. And right now, he was getting that feeling that he should really try.

So he yanked the door open, and took one step outside. The trip-line caught him at ankle height, and spilled him face-first on to the concrete pavement.

Daniels saw the arrow hanging in midair, composed of hundreds of bugs. It pointed the way down a shady corridor between units. Without breaking step, he led the way. Another arrow, a little farther down, pointed to the right. He followed that one, too.

And so, taking the short way through the complex, they arrived at the door to room 35, just seconds after a man wearing shirt and pants, but no jacket or shoes, burst out of the door, tripped over something, and face-planted on the pavement.

It was basically Christmas in July for the PRT contingent; he was still trying to get up when two officers took him in hand and zip-tied him.

It was readily apparent to the PRT soldiers that the two men that they were here to take into custody were not having a good day. It became even more apparent when they stepped into the motel room and saw the second man, stripped to his shirt and underpants, clawing vigorously at his crotch, while swearing at the top of his lungs.
The bust was actually somewhat less difficult than the struggle not to laugh.

Hope and Amy ate the midday meal somewhat later than midday. Hope was as unruffled as ever, although she ate with one arm around Amy's waist. Amy leaned against her, her eyes heavy-lidded, her expression one of satisfaction.

Lisa lounged against the far side of the table, taking a break between serving the residents of the shelter. Utilities had been reconnected to more than a few houses in the area by now, so that there were less people living in the shelter than before. Those that remained were looking forward to moving out, but had no word of complaint for the life they were leading.

"So, what was this big job you had?" she asked idly.

Hope looked up from her meal. "Oh," she said. "One of Doctor Yamada's patients. Her name was Sveta."


Hope looked at Amy and shrugged; they both giggled. Lisa glared at them. Hope grinned back. "Let us know when it's time for us to rejoin the conversation," she said. "You seem to be doing okay so far."

Lisa sighed in a slightly aggravated manner. "Okay, fine," she said. "Details, please. All I know about Garotte is that she's basically a face with tendrils, and they are very fast and very strong, and she'll kill anyone nearby."

Hope nodded. "Basically, yes," she agreed. "We basically ... well, Amy grew her a body from the face on back." She squeezed Amy gently; Amy leaned her head against Hope's.


Amy managed to look mildly offended. "Seriously, Lisa. When I do a job like that, I do it right." She smiled at Hope. "With Hope's help, of course."

Hope kissed her on the cheek. "Any time, sweetie."

"So wait," said Lisa. "Can you do this with any Case Fifty-Three?"

Hope didn't even bother asking where Lisa had learned that term. Lisa knew things.

"Um ... I guess," said Amy. "Whatever's biologically possible. If their powers are really out of whack, I can help a bit with that as well."

Lisa nodded, making the connection. "Omake," she said.

Amy nodded. "That was a bad one."

"But it turned out okay," pointed out Hope.

"Only just," Amy said, sounding less than altogether pleased.

Hope took Amy's chin in her hand and turned her head so they were face to face.
"Sweetie," she said softly. "I miscalculated. I'm sorry. I won't do it again. Okay?"

Amy smiled and closed her eyes, leaning in against Hope's chest. "It's okay," she said softly. "I know you mean it."

Hope kissed her on the forehead, then turned to look at Lisa. "I'm sorry," she said apologetically. "What was that you were saying about Case Fifty-Threes?"

Lisa smiled. "Just that there are a number of them right here in Brockton Bay who could probably do with a bit of body adjustment. If you were willing to take the time, that is."

"Um," said Hope. "I mean, I'm all for helping people, but –"

"I'll do it," said Amy promptly. She snuggled into Hope's side. "Won't we, sweetie?"

Hope grinned at her. "What I was going to say was, 'but I'd like to know that they are sure they want to be helped'. Also, yes, sweetie, I was going to point out that it's your choice to do this sort of thing. Always your choice."

Amy paused, and went very still. "Hope," she said in a quiet voice, "I'd like to ask you a question, and I really, really want you to answer truthfully."

Hope caught some of her mood; the smile left her face and she answered seriously, "If I can answer it at all, I will give you the absolute truth."

Amy nodded. "Okay, then. You said earlier that you love having me around because I do such wonderful things for people. But you also tell me that doing these things for people is entirely my choice." She drew a breath, and her voice had a catch in it as she went on. "What if I said that I didn't want to do it anymore? That I chose not to help people?"

Hope tilted her head slightly, then smiled. "Sweetie," she said softly, "I would respect your decision not to use your powers. I'd still help people as best I could on my own, of course. But I would also stay with you, because I know you like to help people, so if you ever chose not to, I would understand that you had a good reason for that. It would not change my opinion of you one little bit." She raised one eyebrow. "Are you deciding not to use your powers to help people?"

Amy shook her head hastily, trying not to let Hope see her tears. "Oh, god no. I – it was just a silly question that occurred to me."

Hope kissed her on the tip of the nose. "Well, you know how we deal with doing silly things."

Amy's grin was a weak one, but it was a grin. "We realise it, we fix it, and we move on."

Hope hugged her, with both arms this time. "Realised, fixed, and moving on." She looked back to Lisa. "So, knowing you, you've already got a list of those who need it most desperately. Yes?"

Lisa nodded, grinning. "Well, actually ...

Skitter brought Falkor down in a fast, flashy landing. The giant dragonfly's wings held steady all the way down, then burst into thrumming thunder in just enough time to halt the death-defying plunge and bring them to a hover, mere feet above the ground.

The PRT squad turned, guns coming up, but Daniels held up a hand. "Friendly!" he announced, even as the wind of Falkor's ground effect blew dust around him.
Skitter had Falkor bring her down to ground level, the leg-clamps and strap-legs released in sequence, allowing her to drop to her feet. Falkor's head lifted off last, letting them see the Skitter mask underneath.

She raised her arm, and Falkor took position on it; Skitter had to lean a little to maintain balance, but not overly much.

Insects swarmed from her armour, setting up a buzzing cloud around her.

"I see you got them," she said, and the swarm spoke almost as much as she did.

Daniels nodded. He may have felt as much trepidation as the rest of his squad, but Skitter had to admit, he didn't show it. "We'll take them back to base, sweat them a little."

"You could turn them over to me. I could get them talking."

He shook his head. "No. I have my orders. They go into containment."

Skitter nodded. "I can respect that." She turned to the prisoners. "I would suggest you talk to them. Sooner rather than later. Because it's amazing where bugs can get into." The flat tone of her voice, along with the accompanying buzz of her bugs, made the statement into a distinct threat.

At her silent command, Falkor fitted herself onto Skitter's back, and the bulbous-eyed head covered her own like a helmet. "Remember what I said," she told the prisoners, just before the huge wings kicked up dust and grit, and she darted skyward with an agility and rapidity enviable by many fliers.

"Are you gonna let her get away with that?" asked one of the men.

"Get away with what?" said Daniels.

"Threatening me like that."

Daniels shrugged. "I heard no threat. She just happened to mention that bugs can get nearly everywhere." His voice was studied, casual. "And she's right, too. They do get everywhere."

The prisoners did not look in the least bit happy.

"Faultline speaking." The voice was wary, ready to hang up.

"Hi, this is Hope?"

"Hello, Hope." Faultline's voice became much warmer. "How are you?"

"Oh, I'm doing fine," she responded. "And yourself?"

"Quite well," said Faultline. "So, what's your problem?"

"Actually," said Hope, "I was hoping to maybe help you out. Or more specifically, your Crew. Any of them who are not so happy with their appearance, Amy is offering to ... give them a body makeover with the result of their choice."

There was silence for a long moment. "Are you serious?" asked Faultline.

"Totally," said Hope. "She can make Gregor look more normal, give Newter a different skin tone, give him control over whether or not he exudes those hallucinogens ..."
Faultline paused for a long moment. "I'll have to talk it over with them," she said at last. "We'll get back to you, for sure."

"Take your time," said Hope. "In case they ask how effective it might be, tell them to call up Omake and ask her."

"Omake, with the Travellers, right," said Faultline. "Thanks. We'll be in touch."

"See you then," said Hope, and hung up.

She smiled at Lisa and Amy. "I think they're gonna say yes," she said, hugging Amy.

"I hope they do," said Amy. It would be a shame if Newter couldn't hug anyone except me for the rest of his life. He's kinda sweet, too, like a puppy that's not housebroken yet, but is really trying.

Taylor emerged from an alleyway, leaving Falkor to gobble down rats that her bugs flushed from the garbage. She'll be fine for the night, she told herself. I'll find her a niche somewhere she can rest.

She covered the rest of the way to the shelter at a fast walk. Lisa met her at the door with a strong hug.

"Hi, Lisa," she said, returning the hug.

Lisa grinned at her. "You've been doing stuff, haven't you? I just know you have."

Taylor grinned. "I may just have helped catch the guys who tried to bribe me this morning, and threatened Everett."

Lisa's eyebrows raised. "Everett? Ooh ... Tecton, right?"

Taylor felt her cheeks heating. "Shut up. Besides, it's not going to work. He had a bad breakup with a non-cape girlfriend, and now he's only interested in other capes. Plus, I think he's too caught up in protecting me to notice me as a girl." She sighed. "Plus ... I'm me. He probably wouldn't notice me as a girl even if he wasn't protecting me."

Lisa hugged her again. "Now, what have I told you about being confident in yourself?"

"I'm plenty confident," said Taylor. "But I'm also realistic." She looked around. "Where are Hope and Amy?"

Lisa smiled. "They went up to watch the sunset. Hope says it's stunning from ten thousand feet."

"Huh," said Taylor. "I might try that sometime."

Lisa was about to say something, when they heard the beep from outside.

"That's Dad," said Taylor, grabbing her pack. She gave Lisa a quick hug and kiss on the cheek. "See you tomorrow at the trial."

"I'll be there," replied Lisa with a smile, as she watched Taylor run out the door.

Faultline sat down at the head of the table, and looked at each of the faces around it. They were her friends, her Crew. People she cared for, people she would die for.
"Earlier," she said, "I got a phone call. It was from Hope." There was a stir around the table, but no-one spoke,

"She had a most startling offer for us, which is open to anyone." She paused, marshalling her words. "Amy says she can make any of you look more human – those that don't already, of course."

Dead silence. Dust motes could almost be heard drifting to the table.

"Hope called it a 'body makeover'," she said. "Your choice, and the resulting appearance will be your choice as well." She looked at Newter. "And she said something about giving you conscious control of your secretions."

She looked at each one in turn. "Taking her up on the offer is entirely your choice," she said. "You will be still part of the Crew, whether you do so or not. I suggest you sleep on it. I won't be calling her back before tomorrow anyway."

The meeting broke up, and they went their separate ways. But they each had a lot to think about.

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Evening in the Hebert household was a little more settled than the previous night. Raymancer had managed to get a good solid eight hours of sleep, and caught up on some more, so he was in a better mood, and more talkative. He still kept his mask on, however, and suggested that people call him 'Ray'.

"Not my real name," he said. "But it'll work for the time being."

Everett was more tired; he had been working hard all day, and Danny had nothing but praise for him. He and Taylor were more comfortable with each other, especially since the incident during the morning run.

"I'm just wondering if we should skip tomorrow morning altogether," he said awkwardly. "I know how much you like it, but ... even with me there, Mr Barnes could try something else."

Taylor had passed on the fact that the two men were in custody, as information that 'Skitter told me to tell you'. No-one showed any particular surprise.

"I'm going on the run," she said firmly. "Not sure what they can do with those men though," she said. "Leverage for tomorrow?"

Everett shook his head. "Director Piggot will likely keep them in custody until the trial is done. Attempting to pervert the course of justice is a big thing, but tomorrow's not the time and place to roll that one out."

Taylor nodded. A moment later, the phone rang. Danny answered it, then came to the doorway to the living room with a strange expression on his face.

"Taylor?" he said. "It's for you."
Director Emily Piggot of the Parahuman Response Teams was not a Benny Hill fan. In fact, she found his brand of humour to be immature and puerile. But her brain insisted on overlaying the helmet-cam footage of the bust at the Brockton Grand with the Yackety Sax soundtrack.

She paused the footage on the third run-through, trying hard not to laugh out loud. With her hand over her eyes, she muttered, "I do not believe that she put cockroaches in his underwear."

But it was all too believable. In fact, it was a very Skitter thing to do. Clockblocker will not be surprised at all.

She had restarted the footage, and was watching a trio of cockroaches dragging a set of car keys out from beneath the TV stand, when her intercom beeped.

"Director Piggot?" said her secretary. "You have an incoming call ..."

The two men sat in separate cells. A bored PRT guard sat at his station, updating routine paperwork on his computer.

They had been well treated; the one man's facial injuries had been tended to, and the cells were as comfortable as they got. But they had refused to talk without a lawyer present. And Director Piggot was not yet willing to let Alan Barnes know that his two patsies were in custody.

There was a scream from one of the cells; the PRT guard came out of his chair fast, reaching for his sidearm. But the prisoner was doing nothing dangerous; he was merely cowering at one end of the concrete box, as far away from the door as possible.

The prisoner sat in his cell. Haebus corpus, he thought to himself. They've got nothing on us. They can't charge us unless we talk. And no talking without a lawyer present.

A motion caught his eye. It was where no motion should be, up on the wall next to the fisheye camera over the door. A bug, slowly moving in a circle on the wall. He blinked and steeled himself. Just a bug, he told himself. Nothing to worry about.

But Skitter's words came back to him, quite clearly. "It's amazing where bugs can get into."

The bug was joined by another, and a third. They were small, apparently inoffensive. But there were more and more of them, all gathering in that small area of the wall not seen by the camera.

And then they started forming words.

I'M.

COMING.

FOR.
Then he felt something crawling across the back of his neck, and screamed.

The guard listened to the babbled words, then glanced at the area of wall. No bugs. Nothing. Even the bug that the man had claimed was on the back of his neck was no longer in evidence.

"Sorry," he said with a shrug. "Can't help you."

With his partner covering the man, he stepped out of the cell and closed the door.

"Wait!" shouted the prisoner. "I'll talk! I'll tell you everything! Just protect me from her!"

The guards looked at each other and shrugged. "Okay," said one. He pulled a laminated card from his belt. "You were probably read your rights before, but I'll just do it again, okay? 'You have the right to remain silent ...'"

22nd June, 2011. Morning.

Faultline sat once more at the head of the table, her welder's mask on the table beside her.

"Last night," she said, "I told you about the phone call from Hope. You've had all night to think about it." She paused. "Before you make any kind of decision, I want you to know that I will support whatever your choice may be. I would much rather keep you all as my friends and teammates, but if your choice is to become a normal person once more – if, indeed, that is even possible – then I won't stand in your way." She looked at the assembled Crew. "So, who's first?"

Shamrock stood up. "I just want to say that I love Gregor the way he is, and I wouldn't change him if he doesn't want to change." She sat down. There was a smattering of applause from the others.

Faultline smiled. "Thank you, Shamrock. Anyone else?"

Newter stood up and nervously cleared his throat. "I kinda like being me, and you're all really cool about the orange skin and tail and stuff, but if Amy can tone some of that down a bit, without taking anything important away, then I'm thinking I might give it a try." He looked at Faultline appealingly. "Not that I'll be going anywhere even if she succeeds. I like it here."

Faultline smiled and nodded. "Thank you, Newter," she said.

Gregor stood, still holding on to Shamrock's hand. "I will ask Amy what she can do for me before I commit myself," he said placidly. "I do not wish to change everything, and I may not change anything, but perhaps she can make suggestions. And I will stay with my friends here, no matter what happens." He sat down again; Shamrock kissed him on the cheek.

"Well said, Gregor," Faultline told him. She looked at the others in the room. "Elle? Emily?"

Spitfire shrugged. "I'm pretty fine. I owe you all big time, so I'll stay. I don't see a need to fix what isn't broken." She turned to look at Labyrinth. "Elle?"

Labyrinth didn't answer for a long time, apparently staring at something not on that particular plane of reality. Then she blinked and focused. "She fixed Mimi," she said, apropos of nothing.

"Huh?" Newter was the first to answer.
"Amy fixed Mimi," Elle said. "Maybe she can fix me, take away the bad days and leave the good days behind."

Faultline spoke gently. "That might lose you your powers altogether, honey. Are you sure you want to go there?"

Labyrinth looked back at her. "If it kept the bad days away, I might."

There was a long silence.

Spitfire put her hand over Labyrinth's. "If it comes to that, I'll be there to hold your hand while she does it."

Faultline nodded sharply. "We all will." There was a murmur of agreement from the other three.

She took a deep breath. "Well. I guess I'll make that call."

"How do I look?" asked Taylor anxiously.

Danny smiled at her. "You look just fine, kiddo. You'll knock 'em dead."

She looked down at herself. "I'm not used to wearing a dress. Are you sure I can't go in jeans?"

Danny shook his head firmly. "Remember what Mr Thompson said. It's all about image. You have to present yourself as being demure as possible. Jeans and T-shirt make you look tomboyish, rough, less feminine."

Taylor rolled her eyes. "I don't exactly look feminine at the best of times."

She wasn't quite doing herself justice there; the dress she wore was Parian-made. It came to mid-calf, and was made of a deep blue material that hung nicely on her figure. A deeper blue sash around her waist pulled the material in, and emphasised her (admittedly, not very prominent) bosom, without seeming to flaunt it. A sky-blue hairband, and matching sandals, completed her ensemble.

She had applied the very lightest of makeup, under the advice of Miss Militia; a faint dusting of rouge on her cheeks, and a dab of lipstick just a few shades darker than her natural tone, softened her features and made her look a few years younger.

Danny smiled and kissed her on the forehead, careful not to disturb her carefully-brushed hair. "You'll always be my little girl."

She smiled and leaned her head against his shoulder for just a moment. "Thanks, Dad."

"Anytime." He lifted her chin and examined her face. "Your makeup looks perfect. I can't even tell that you've got any on." He grinned. "You'll be fighting off the boys with a stick."

"Da-ad!" Taylor pulled her head away with a giggle, flushing slightly.

"What?" he grinned. "Your mom always asked me to check her makeup too." He took a deep breath. "How do I look?"

She looked him over critically. He had the potential to look silly, like a scarecrow dressed up in cast-off finery, but in point of fact, he looked quite dapper. Formal without being too formal.

"You look nice, Dad," she said finally. "I can't think of anyone I'd rather go to court with."
He smiled. "Well then, let's go down and see how the others are getting along." He offered his arm; she accepted it with a smile. Together, they walked out of his room and down the stairs.

Tecton was armoured up, ready to go; Miss Militia and Director Piggot were waiting with him. The Director was wearing her full dress uniform again; she was obviously out to make an impression on the public.

Tecton's expression could not be seen behind his helmet, but Miss Militia nodded approvingly. Even Director Piggot offered a small smile. "Very good," she said. "That will do very nicely." She glanced at the both of them. "There's nothing else you need to take with you?"

Taylor picked up a document case from the table. "No," she said. "I'm good."

"Then let's get this show on the road," said Director Piggot.

"Okay," said Butcher, sliding the Gatling gun into the back of the van, "that's the last of it. Everyone on board. Let's roll."

"I thought we were gonna wait till all the heroes were out of Brockton Bay," Vex protested mildly, even as he climbed into the vehicle.

"Ahh, that Barnes dog-and-pony show is on today," said Butcher. "They'll all be concentrating on that. And besides," she added, pointing to herself, "does this look like a face that waits?"

"I have to admit, you're right there," said Spree. He already had a dupe in the front seat, holding shotgun for him, and he dismissed it as he climbed in. "Besides, f**k 'em. The more heroes, the higher the body count. Right, guys?"

"F**king A," the others chorused as they found their seats.

Butcher, sans her usual decorations, climbed into the driver's seat, despite the fact that she wasn't the best driver in the world. But no-one else in the Teeth was quite willing to argue the point with her.

"Okay, we're gonna be a few hours getting there, so no starting fights," she said. "And if I hear one goddamn word of that goddamn bottles on the wall song, I will pull over and I will kill whoever started it. Clear?"

"Clear," they replied. With Butcher, that was not an idle threat.

"Right," she growled, and ground the gears. "Let's get this show on the road."

The PRT transport was waiting at the curb outside. Raymancer had opted to stay in and sleep, so Tecton walked outside with the Heberts, Miss Militia and Director Piggot. Tecton handed the ladies on board, starting with Taylor, then allowed Danny to board before climbing in himself.

The transport lifted off just as soon as they were all belted in, heading for the courthouse.

Private message from GstringGirl:

GstringGirl: Hey, how are you?

XxVoid_CowboyxX: Hey, haven't seen you around for while. Where you been?
GstringGirl: Dealing with private stuff. All sorted now though.

XxVoid_CowboyxX: What sort of private stuff?

GstringGirl: Private stuff is private. But hey, moved out of home. At long last.

XxVoid_CowboyxX: Yeah?

GstringGirl: Yeah. Can get pic now, show you I'm real girl, not middle aged pervert. Couldn't before. Parents way strict.

XxVoid_CowboyxX: Yeah right. Be warned, I know all photoshop tricks.

GstringGirl: Not photoshop!

XxVoid_CowboyxX: Okay, let's see one with you holding sign or something. Or doing something I know can't be shopped.

GstringGirl: What sort of thing?

XxVoid_CowboyxX: You living alone now?

GstringGirl: Not really. Roomies are nice though.

XxVoid_CowboyxX: How about one of them takes pic of you topless, holding hands over ta-tas?

GstringGirl: No!

XxVoid_CowboyxX: What's wrong with that? Nothing showing, right?

GstringGirl: Not going to happen.

XxVoid_CowboyxX: Okay, you got female roomies?

GstringGirl: One or two. Why?

XxVoid_CowboyxX: Pic of you kissing one of them?

GstringGirl: No! Why are you like this?

XxVoid_CowboyxX: Calm down, just a joke.

GstringGirl: Not joke, not funny. How about we just meet. You pick place & time, I go there first. You show up, you don't like, you leave.

XxVoid_CowboyxX: ... I guess.

GstringGirl: So where do we meet?

---

Sveta looked up from the keyboard. "Is it just me, or is he a real jerk?" she asked.

Weld raised one metallic eyebrow. "Jerk," he agreed. "So why are you even meeting him?"

"To prove a point to myself," said Sveta.
"How do I look?" asked Amy. She wore the same dress that she had for the ceremony, cleaned and pressed. It had been constructed by Parian from spider-silk supplied by Skitter, and was a masterpiece in understated elegance.

Hope smiled, took her face in both hands, and kissed her. "You look very nice, sweetie," she said. "You'll steal the show."

Amy smiled back. "Don't smudge my makeup," she said automatically. She barely looked like she had any on; Lisa had helped her to apply it. Hope had to admit, it enhanced her looks.

"I won't, I promise," said Hope.

"I think it's unfair that you look that good without makeup," grumped Amy, but not without humour.

Hope shrugged, with a tinkle of crystal. "It's probably for the best. Imagine if I could be made up. How unfair would it be then?"

Amy giggled. "You have a point."

At that moment, the phone rang. There was a pause, then Lisa called out. "Hope! Phone!"

Hope took the receiver from Lisa. "Hope speaking."

"Hello, Hope. This is Faultline."

"Ah, hi!" said Hope happily. "It's good to hear from you!"

"Thank you," said Faultline. "We have discussed your offer, and several of my Crew are willing to see what Amy can do for them."

"Excellent," said Hope. "I'll pass that on. Amy will be very pleased."

"I'm sure she will," replied Faultline. "Now, something that was not discussed yesterday. What sort of payment are you expecting for this? Money? Favours? Something else?"

Hope blinked. "Um. Payment?"

There was a long pause.

"You mean ..." said Faultline at last. "This is ...free? No strings?"

"Uh, yeah," said Hope. "It's what we do. We don't charge. If people need help, we help."

There was another long pause. "Right." Faultline seemed to be struggling to get her head around the concept. "Okay then. When can you come over?"

"Uh, we're going to the Barnes trial right about now," said Hope, "but after that, maybe this evening, we can drop in?"

"Certainly," said Faultline. "We'll be expecting you." She hung up.

Hope hung up as well, and looked at Lisa. Lisa grinned back. "She's a mercenary. She thinks in terms of payment for services rendered. She can't really handle the idea of a freebie."
"Ahh," said Hope, enlightened. She smiled, hugged Lisa, then went to pass on the word to Amy.

Faultline put the phone down and paused for a moment to gather her thoughts. Free, she thought. A service, a capability, that people would kill to get, would pay any amount of money for, and she's giving it away for free.

How does she even expect to make a profit that way?

It took her a while to wrap her head around the answer.

She's not in it for the money.

She shook her head. Damn.

The PRT transport grounded in the area of the carpark set aside for it. Tecton got out first, and handed Taylor down to the ground; this was necessary, as her skirt kept getting in the way. Danny allowed Miss Militia and Director Piggot to exit the craft before climbing out himself and offering Taylor his arm once more. Miss Militia and Director Piggot moved off, while Tecton stayed with the Heberts.

Taylor took the time to check in with her network of relay bugs. Unknown to virtually everyone but her, Falkor was perched on a nearby building, well within her range. The giant dragonfly connected her to everywhere else, and also carried a large selection of her most useful bugs, ready for deployment. She had some bugs on her, but not nearly as many as she was used to carrying; some were hidden in the depths of her hair, and the rest up under her skirt.

"Oh." Danny stopped walking for a moment. Taylor looked around, and saw Alan Barnes, with Emma beside him. Madison Clements and her family were nearby, but keeping a certain distance from Emma and her father. With Mr Barnes was ...

"Oh," she said in her turn.

"Who's that with Alan?" asked Danny in an undertone.

"That's Quinn Calle," supplied Taylor. "He's about the best parahuman criminal lawyer there is out there." She took a deep breath and lowered her voice. "If Skitter had been outed before the amnesty, he would have been my go-to guy."

"And Alan Barnes has him on his side," said Danny. "This isn't good, is it?"

Taylor shook her head slightly. "Not as bad as you'd think. The PRT also has some very high-powered legal talent on their side of the fence." She smiled. "Besides ..."

Danny nodded. "Yeah. Besides that."

At that moment, Alan Barnes looked over and spotted them. He moved in their direction, despite what might have been advice to the contrary by Calle. Emma moved alongside him.

Taylor was interested to note that Emma's mother and siblings were not apparent. Perhaps they're staying away? Or maybe just sticking with the spectators?

"Well, you decided to show after all, Danny," said Alan. "I'm kind of surprised that you're going through with this."
"Your daughter put my daughter in the hospital, Alan," Danny said flatly. Taylor squeezed his arm warningly, and he subsided slightly. "I'm only here to see justice done."

"Allegedly, allegedly," said Barnes with a broad smile. "Innocent until proven guilty. Democratic process of law and all that. So don't go saying that too loudly, or I might just have a case for slander."

Emma stared at Taylor, a triumphant expression on her face. "We're going to bury you, Taylor," she said. "By the time Mr Calle's finished with you, you will be so screwed."

Taylor gazed steadily back at her. "The case hasn't even started yet," she said. "Let's just see how it goes, shall we?" She became aware of at least a dozen news cameras pointed from all directions, filming the confrontation.

Emma flushed slightly. "Just make sure you don't break down and cry, Hebert," she said, the taunting tone of her voice clashing with the sunny smile she was displaying for the cameras.

Taylor smiled slightly. "The time when you could make me cry is long past, Emma," she said quietly. She squeezed her father's arm slightly, to get his attention. "Dad? We might want to get inside."

Danny Hebert broke off the staring contest with Alan Barnes, and nodded. "Right, right," he said. He nodded curtly to Emma, and even more curtly to Alan. "See you inside." A more cordial nod to Quinn Calle. "I admire your professional ethic, sir, if not the people you work for."

Calle nodded back. "It's a career, Mr Hebert," he said politely. "Some ... are easier to work for than others." He shepherded Barnes and Emma away, and Taylor let out the breath that she had not been aware that she was holding.

"Did he ..." began Danny. "Did he just tell us, more or less to our faces, that he despised Alan and Emma, and was only doing it for the money?"

Taylor grinned. "I think he did." The grin fell away. "Of course, that doesn't mean he'll go any easier on us."

Danny nodded soberly. "Very true. Well, let's get inside." Tecton, who had been standing to the side, moved ahead to open a path through the crowd.

A phone call to Regent had secured the services of his car; Alec himself arrived in it to pick up Amy and Lisa. Hope flew overhead as the large convertible negotiated the streets. Pulling up outside the courthouse, Alec grinned back at the two of them and said, "I'll be moving along now. Call me up when you need a lift back."

Amy smiled her thanks and got out; Lisa leaned forward and said, "Thanks, Alec. See you later. And you too, Aisha."

Aisha appeared in the front seat, twisted around, and said indignantly, "How did you know I was there?"

Lisa grinned slyly. "Because otherwise, Alec would have had us competing for the front seat. But he put us both in the back." She climbed out of the car. "We'll give you a call when it's over."

Regent grinned, let in the clutch, and the car roared off, with a still-spluttering Aisha in the passenger
Hope caused a minor sensation when she landed outside the courthouse. TV cameras swung her way, while still cameras clicked and flashed. Questions were called out; she fielded them with a quiet charm that quickly had the reporters eating out of her hand.

"Yes, I'm here to support the Heberts ... no, I'm not here to give evidence ... yes, I believe bullies should be punished ... yes, I was at the victory celebration ... yes, I believe capes should be held accountable for their actions ... no, I don't believe in registration for capes ... no, I don't consider those views contradictory ..."

Eventually, the reporters ran out of questions, and Hope was able to get through. By this time, Amy and Lisa had joined her; Lisa was shaking her head. "I can't believe how patient you were with them," she said. "Asking the same questions over and over and over."

Amy giggled. "That one guy. 'Any comment on the rumour that you have been romantically linked with Ryan Seacrest?'"

Lisa chuckled, repeating the reply that Hope had given. "Does Ryan Seacrest know about it?"

Hope grinned, and linked her arms through theirs. "They're paid to ask silly questions, in the hope that they'll get answers silly enough to print." She giggled. "I don't mind."

Lisa shook her head. "Better you than me."

Amy giggled again. "We'll let you loose on them, on the way out."

Hope shook her head slowly, sadly. "Those poor, poor reporters."

"Dad," said Emma Barnes, as she seated herself at the table, "did it seem to you like Taylor sounded really confident?"

"Of course she did," Alan Barnes assured her. "She doesn't know, does she?"

"But what if she does?" she asked. Truth be told, she was feeling rather intimidated. This was the worst trouble she had ever gotten into, and all of her father's wits and influence had not been sufficient to keep her out of this courtroom.

"So what if she does?" asked her father. "It's not like she could do anything about it. Not in public, not like this."

Emma glanced down the length of the table, trying to catch Madison's eye. Madison sat, head drooping. Her father sat alongside her, bolt upright with anger. Anger, she realised, directed at her.

But I'm not to blame, she thought uselessly. I can't be to blame.

A flash of inspiration. I can say Sophia's to blame. For all of this. I can just say that she made us do all of it. Threatened us, even. She immediately felt better. It's not like she can turn up and contradict me.

Quinn Calle came over to their table with a slightly older, and much more overweight, man beside him. "This is Mr Martins," he said. "He will be representing you for the duration of the trial."

"Wait, what?" exclaimed Barnes. "I thought you were --"
"I explained this to you," Calle said patiently. "I don't do well in front of juries. Martins here is a
senior partner in my firm, and he is entirely up to date on all the information. All of it," he stressed.
He pointed at the spectator's gallery. "I will be right there, observing everything."

"Well, okay," said Alan Barnes. "I don't like it, but if you say so ..."

"I do say so," Calle told him. "Now, I'll be going. Martins, they're all yours."

Martins nodded, exchanged a few quiet words with Calle, then took off his jacket and hung it on the
back of his chair before seating himself.

Quinn Calle made his way back toward the gallery, and it was only after he had gone that Barnes
realised that he had not even wished them good luck.

If it wasn't for Tecton, Taylor wasn't sure that they would have gotten into the courthouse at all. He
forged a path, and still the reporters crowded around, taking photos with (it seemed) the flashes right
in their faces and yelling innumerable questions, over and over. Questions about how was she
bullied, who did it, the time she spent in hospital.

At the advice of the District Attorney, she and Danny both replied "No comment," over and over
again. She was just thankful that the reporters had to stop at the courthouse doors.

They were both half-dazzled by flashbulbs and half-deaf from shouted questions by the time they got
inside. There were, she discovered with relief, many bugs of all description in here, and she began to
gather and move them. They were also useful for finding her way, at least until her eyesight
recovered.

She was heartened, when she entered the courtroom proper, to see Hope and Amy sitting toward the
front of the spectator's gallery. Lisa sat beside them, grinning her familiar vulpine grin.

Director Piggot and Miss Militia had already gotten in; it was a very brave reporter who would dare
to try to get in their way for one more picture, one more question. Not for them the spectator's
gallery; they were given seats off to the side. Tecton, mindful of the mass of his armour, joined them
and stood at parade rest.

Miss Militia had a cane with an ivory head beside her; Taylor had no doubt but that it was a sword-
cane or something similarly deadly. She wondered how much of a problem court security had with
admitting someone who was always armed.

Not my problem, she thought with a grin.

However, this did remind her of something. She sent her bugs scurrying over the walls and ceiling,
and began to locate the metal boxes attached discreetly around the room. They were in some rather
odd places, she noted, but then, the aim was to ensure that no hiding place was left to chance.

The controls, she was pleased to note, seemed identical to those in the one currently hidden in her
room at that very moment. Without turning on the lights themselves, she made sure the rest of the
controls worked properly, which they seemed to do.

If this works, she thought, I'm going to find Kid Win and hug him.

The courthouse was an old building, with many dark corners. Some of these were now much darker
than they should be; shadows roiled in them, easing ever closer to the courtroom where Emma
Barnes and Madison Clements were to go on trial.

It took much effort, but Shadow Stalker did not consume the bugs which she encountered in her path. She had half an idea that Skitter might be in the area, or even in the courtroom, and did not want to give anyone any sort of warning.

Soon ... she thought. Soon, it will be my turn.

"All rise."

Everyone who was sitting down stood up.

The judge, an African-American gentlemen of late middle years, entered the courtroom from his chambers, pulled his chair out, and sat down behind his desk.

"Be seated."

Everyone sat down again, save Tecton.

"This court is now in session."

Taylor took a deep breath. It was about to begin.
In which the trial commences, and many disturbing facts come to light, before a surprising interruption

The case was announced by the bailiff as "Parahuman Response Teams versus Emma Barnes and Madison Clements", with Judge Northwood presiding.

Northwood, distinguished looking with greying hair, looked out over the courtroom and cleared his throat.

"This is a most unusual case," he announced. "Normally, minors would not be tried in a venue like this, but their crimes have been deemed to be so serious as to merit their being tried as adult henchmen of a villainous parahuman. Also, I note the presence of several parahumans within the courtroom, and I am moved to question this."

He looked toward where Miss Militia sat with Director Piggot. "Your name is Miss Militia, is it not?"

Miss Militia nodded. "Yes, your Honour," she replied clearly.

"May I enquire as to the reason for your presence?"

"I am the head of the local Protectorate forces in Brockton Bay, your Honour," Miss Militia explained. "As the Protectorate acts as the parahuman arm of the PRT, Director Piggot has requested my presence here to represent the Protectorate, and so here I am."

Northwood nodded. "Indeed," he said, then shifted his gaze. "You there, in the armour. I presume you are also connected with the Protectorate?"

Tecton nodded his helmeted head. "Yes, your Honour," he confirmed, his voice only slightly muffled by the helmet. "My name is Tecton. I am the leader of the Chicago Wards, assigned to protection duty for the Heberts, and representing the Wards here today, under the command of Miss Militia."

Again, Northwood nodded. "I see," he replied. Shifting his gaze once more, he looked at Hope. "Your name is Hope, is it not? What is your reason to be here? Are you here to give evidence?"

Hope smiled. "No, Your Honour. Taylor Hebert is my friend. I am here to give her support and encouragement, nothing more."

"Very well," said Northwood, picking up a pair of bifocals and fitting them on to his face. "That seems to all be in order, then." He looked toward the table where Emma and Madison sat with their respective fathers and the redoubtable Mr Martins.

"You young ladies have been accused of a great many crimes, all to do with the wilful bullying and harassment of one Taylor Hebert, including physical and mental assault, destruction of property, and the sending of malicious emails and text messages, calculated to cause emotional distress, all at the behest of the criminal parahuman known as Shadow Stalker. How do you plead?"

Madison shrank farther into her chair; her father glared at Emma. Emma raised her chin defiantly. Alan Barnes glanced at Martins and shook his head slightly. Martins stood up, pushing his chair backward slightly as he did so; the legs squeaked on the wooden floor, loud in the silence of the courtroom.

"Your Honour," he said clearly, "my clients plead not guilty."
A rustling murmur swept through the courtroom; Northwood banged his gavel and it subsided.

Lisa was murmuring something; bugs clinging to her hair caught the words fairly clearly. Taylor scribbled notes on a piece of paper, slid them across to Robertson. The District Attorney accepted the paper, read it, and nodded once.

Danny looked questioningly at Taylor. She slid the note his way; he read it, and his eyebrows raised slightly.

"There will be order in my court," said Northwood firmly. "Counsel for the prosecution, you may proceed."

Robertson stood up. "Your Honour," he began, "I would like to commence by admitting exhibits one through ninety-seven into evidence." He unsnapped his briefcase locks – the sounds echoed through the courtroom like gunshots – and took out a sheaf of papers.

"One through eighty-four have to do with Taylor's personal diary, where she noted down time and place of each of the bullying incidents perpetrated by Ms Barnes, Ms Clements, and by Shadow Stalker in her civilian identity."

As he spoke, he approached the bench and handed the sheaf to the bailiff, who handed them on to the judge. "Eighty-five through ninety-seven are printouts of emails sent to Taylor by the girls, bearing unpleasant and malicious messages."

"Objection!" called out Alan Barnes.

Judge Northwood looked over his bifocals at him. "Mr Barnes," he said firmly, "you are in this courtroom today to support your daughter, nothing more. I am aware that you have courtroom experience, but you are most certainly not here in your professional capacity. Please contain yourself."

Alan Barnes looked more taken aback than abashed, but then began a hurried, hushed consultation with Martins.

In the meantime, Northwood was leafing through the papers. "This is a record of all of the bullying that Taylor Hebert was subjected to?" he asked. "It seems rather a lot."

"Oh, no, your Honour," Robertson replied quickly. "The bullying has been going on since September of two years ago. As you can see by the dates, Taylor only began keeping a record since September last year, the beginning of the summer term, at which point it had already been going on for a full year." Another rustling murmur swept through the courtroom. Northwood banged his gavel again.

"Let the record show," he said, "that exhibits one through ninety-seven have been entered into evidence."

"Objection, your Honour!" called out Martins belatedly.

"On what grounds, Mr Martins?" asked Northwood.

"The email messages could easily have been faked, your Honour. Anyone can make up an email account with Emma Barnes or Madison Clements as part of the name, and send mails purported to be
from them." He looked sideways at Taylor. "Ms Hebert may easily have done it herself, in order to substantiate this alleged bullying campaign."

Taylor decided that she didn't like Mr Martins.

"Objection!" called Robertson, immediately rising to his feet. "Counsel for the defence is throwing accusations at the witness. She is not on the stand, and cannot answer them. Nor is she on trial herself."

"Sustained," replied Northwood. "Counsel for the defence will refrain from addressing comments to, or about, the witness, until she is able to answer them."

"Yes, your Honour," replied Martins. "But my point about the emails is valid. They cannot be verified."

"Your Honour," said Robertson, who had not yet sat down, "I have exhibits ninety-eight through one hundred three here. They are subpoenaed records of the school computers dating back to last September, indicating which students were logged on to which computer at any time of day. The incidences where an email was sent from a particular computer, and the name of the student logged on to that computer, have been cross-referenced and highlighted." He walked forward, holding a thinner sheaf of papers. The bailiff accepted them and handed them on to Northwood.

"Your Honour," persisted Martins, "this still removes from consideration all the emails not sent from school computers. Also, any email not specifically sent by the defendants is null and void for the purposes of this trial."

"Understood," Northwood acknowledged. "Let the record show that exhibits ninety-eight through one hundred three have been entered into evidence. Also let the record show that of exhibits eighty-five through ninety-seven, those emails not verified by school records will be struck from evidence." He banged his gavel once.

"Your Honour," insisted Martins, fighting a desperate rearguard action. "I move that the written incidents be also struck from the record. Anyone can write anything about anyone. Even should the emails be found valid, if there has been no provable physical action taken, the offence is much less severe."

Robertson rose to his feet once more. "Your Honour, I have here exhibits one hundred four, one hundred five and one hundred six. They are the mobile phones belonging to Ms Barnes, Ms Clements and Ms Hess, respectively. They contain text messages addressed to each other, discussing further ways in which to torment Taylor. Correlations have been found between the text messages and written events dated after the text messages were sent."

He approached the bench for the third time, handing over the phones to the bailiff, each in a clear zip-lock bag. "Some attempts have been made to erase the damaging text messages, but the PRT has access to some very good tinkers, and the messages were easily retrieved."

He returned to his seat and sat down, a bland expression on his face.

"Thank you, Mr Robertson," said Northwood, accepting the phones. "Let the record show that exhibits one hundred four through one hundred six have been entered into evidence."

Robertson rose to his feet once more. "In addition, your Honour," he added, "I have personally spoken to the staff of Winslow High. Now that they are aware of the enormity of this case, each and every one of them is willing to be called as a witness to such bullying as they observed happening to
Taylor Hebert. We can do this, if you so wish." The tone of his voice indicated that he would be only too pleased to do so.

Northwood banged his gavel. "The written evidence stands, unless and until it is found invalid," he ruled. "Now, Mr Martins, kindly sit down. Mr Robertson has the floor."

Martins sat, deflated. Robertson nodded toward the bench. "Thank you, your Honour," he said politely. "For my first witness, I call Taylor Hebert to the stand."

Taylor's head was spinning. The back-and-forth between Robertson and Martins, via Judge Northwood, had been as rapid-fire as a professional tennis match. Or it reminded her of a battlefield, with Robertson bringing out each successive piece of evidence at a strategically crucial moment, undermining and destroying the enemy's resolve.

Danny scrawled a note and slid it to her. "Robertson on Xmas card list." She nodded, squeezing his hand once before she stood and walked to the witness stand.

"Place your hand upon the Bible."

Taylor did so.

"State your name."

"Taylor Anne Hebert."

"Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?"

"I so swear."

Robertson picked up the top sheet of the stack of papers and read from it, his voice clearly resonating through the courtroom. "September eight. Six vicious emails. Sophia pushed me down the stairs when I was near the bottom, making me drop my books. Tripped and shoved me no less than three times during gym, and threw my clothes at me while I was in the shower after gym class had ended, getting them wet. I had to wear my gym clothes for the rest of the morning." His flat, emotionless delivery somehow made it sound worse than it was.

He looked up from the paper. "Taylor, this is all from the one day?"

Taylor nodded, gulping. "Yes – yes, sir. I made sure to keep a careful record."

"So I see." Robertson went back to reading, his lips moving silently. His voice became audible toward the end. "... all three of them cornered me after school had ended and took my backpack from me, throwing it in the garbage." He looked up again. "I presume that 'all three' means Ms Barnes, Ms Clements, and Shadow Stalker, in her civilian identity as Sophia Hess?"

Taylor nodded again. "Yes, sir. I didn't know that she was Shadow Stalker, then. I just wanted the bullying to stop."

"A laudable ambition," commented Robertson. He paused, looking at her kindly. "Taylor, I have to ask this of you before we go any farther; did you, in any way, provoke these girls into bullying you? Is there anything you can think of that may have given them reason to do so?"

Taylor shook her head. "No, sir. I can't think of any reason. In fact, Emma was my best friend before
all this started." Her voice, despite all her attempts at self-control, caught slightly. "And then she
wasn't. And I still don't know why."

Robertson nodded. "I see." He let the moment stretch, let Taylor's words sink in, before continuing.
"Let's go back to the beginning of the bullying. When was that, exactly?"

Taylor took a deep breath. "It was the end of the summer break, two years ago. Two thousand and
nine. I had just gotten back, and I went to see Emma." She paused, looking at Robertson. "I wanted
to tell her all about the summer camp I had been on, you see."

He nodded. "As best friends do. Go on."

She smiled slightly at the encouragement. "Well, I got to her house, and Sophia was there. I didn't
know her then."

"Wait a minute," interrupted Robertson gently. "This is Sophia Hess? Otherwise known as Shadow
Stalker?"

"Yes," replied Taylor, nodding.

"And when you say you didn't know her, do you mean that you did not know who she was, or that
you did not know that she was Shadow Stalker?"

"Both," replied Taylor. "I had never met her before, and I had not heard of Shadow Stalker."

"Let the record show," said Robertson, raising his voice, "that Ms Hess was placed on probation
with the Wards in Brockton Bay in September last year, due to questionable actions in her costumed
identity. She had already been attending Winslow High for a year. Ms Barnes' father represented Ms
Hess in the matter, and pushed for her to enter the Wards in a probationary status, and for her to
remain at Winslow. Thus, Ms Hess was deliberately maintained in a position where she could incite
further bullying activities against Taylor."

He turned back to Taylor. "So tell us what happened on that day."

"Well," began Taylor, "I was a little worried about Emma, because she hadn't been returning my
phone calls for weeks. Something had happened, I didn't know what. So I went over there. Sophia
was there, and she was rude and aggressive. I thought Emma would back me up, and she just ...
didn't. Told me that she didn't want me around, that she'd been looking for a reason to break off the
friendship." She blinked rapidly, remembering the day. "So I ... I went home."

"So what happened then?" asked Robertson, his voice gentle.

"I tried calling her a few times," Taylor said, "but she never took the calls. So I stopped. And then,
after school let back in, the bullying started."

"So, what forms did this bullying take?"

"They pushed me," said Taylor, staring Emma straight in the eye now. "Shoved me. Took my
things. Played pranks in class." Her voice broke. "My mother's flute."

Robertson raised his head. "What about your mother's flute?"

"They broke into my locker. They took my flute. It was something my mom left me, something she
used, that my dad gave to me so I could remember her. Even if it was just a flute and a memory, I
brought it to school so I could feel like I had some backup, some memory of my mother's love, to
help me get through the day."

There was not a sound in the courtroom. It didn't even seem as though anyone was breathing.

"I confronted Emma, asked her to give it back. Begged her. Pleased. She told me that if it meant so much to me, maybe I shouldn't have brought it to school. Said that my mom wasn't backing me up so good if she let the flute get taken." There were tears running down her face now.

"Did you ever get the flute back?"

"I – found it," she hiccuped. "On top of the trash, in the bin." Another hiccup. "They'd ... what they'd done to it ... I couldn't even touch it. It was disgusting." She wrapped her arms around herself, her voice a whisper. "It was my mother's flute. She never did a thing to any of them. And they destroyed the one thing I had of hers, the one thing I held precious, just to get at me."

"Objection!" Martins was on his feet. "Witness does not have proof that it was either of the defendants who destroyed the alleged flute!"

"Taylor," said Robertson, "do you know for a fact that it was any of the girls who did it?"

Taylor managed to regain control of herself. "Not for a fact, no," she admitted. "But Emma knew how important it was to me, and when I confronted her, she never once denied having taken it. In fact, she taunted me for having lost it."

"Objection sustained," Judge Northwood ruled. "Circumstantial evidence is inadmissible."

"If you will, your Honour," said Robertson, "I have further questions I would like to ask of the witness in this instance."

Northwood gave him a level stare. "Carry on, Mr Robertson, but be brief."

"Thank you, your Honour," he replied. Turning back to Taylor, he said, "At the time when your flute was taken from your locker, was the locker itself tampered with?"

Taylor looked blank. "I'm sorry, sir," she said. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"Was the lock broken, or the door pulled off its hinges?" he clarified. "Could you see how they got into your locker?"

Taylor shook her head. "No," she admitted. "I just figured they worked out my combination."

Robertson smiled. "Could it have been," he said, "that Shadow Stalker – who, as we know, has the ability to move through solid objects – reached into your locker and abstracted the flute without ever opening the door?"

"Objection!" shouted Martins. "Counsel is leading the witness in speculation!"

"Sustained," said Northwood. "Counsel will rephrase his question."

Robertson nodded. "Taylor, do you believe that it is possible that Shadow Stalker took the flute from your locker using her powers?"

Taylor nodded. "Oh, easily," she said, then stopped, looking startled. "I – I never thought of that. How they could get into my locker so easily. I changed my combination several times, and it never helped."
Robertson looked interested. "So, you are saying that other items disappeared from your locker?"

"Just a few things," Taylor agreed. "Nothing of importance. I learned my lesson, after the flute. But they did put things in there." She shuddered. "I wondered how they got the door closed after that, but now it makes so much sense."

Robertson tilted his head slightly. "Put things in your locker? Such as what?"

He was already walking back to where his briefcase was.

Taylor took a deep breath. "Over the Christmas break, last year. They'd let up on me a little at the end of the year, and I thought maybe they'd given up on it. But when we came back in January ... I smelt something bad when I went to my locker. I opened it to see what it was." She paused.

"Go on," said Robertson quietly.

"It was ... feminine hygiene products. Soiled ones. A trash can full. Maybe two. My locker was half full of them. They'd been there since before the break."

There was a ripple of voices through the courtroom. Northwood banged his gavel.

"And then what happened?" asked Robertson.

"It stank," said Taylor into the silence that followed. "You can't imagine the stench. I went to throw up. I couldn't help it. And as I was bending over, someone grabbed my hair and shoved me into the locker."

"You mean, pushed you up against it?" asked Robertson, his voice grave.

"No," said Taylor. "Into the locker. With the filth. And they locked me in."

A rising tide of voices. Northwood banged his gavel several times. They quieted.

"So how long were you in the locker, Taylor?" Robertson asked gently.

"I don't know," said Taylor honestly. "Maybe two, three hours. Maybe more. I wasn't ... in my right mind, when I was let out. They say I was fighting, screaming, scratching, biting." She paused. "I was in the hospital for a while, before I recovered."

Robertson held up the papers he had taken from the briefcase. "Your Honour, this is exhibit one hundred and seven. Hospital records. It shows that Taylor was admitted with evidence of extreme mental trauma, and several minor infections caused by close and sustained contact with toxic waste."

He handed the papers to the bailiff, and Northwood examined them.

"Let the record show that exhibit one hundred seven has been entered into evidence," stated Northwood, and banged his gavel once. "Now, Mr Robertson, I hope you are reaching a point here."

"Yes, your Honour," said Robertson. "The evidence shows that the so-called prank played upon Taylor would have barely been possible without the use of Shadow Stalker's powers, and so it is quite possible and plausible that she also caused the losses from Taylor's locker, including the flute. And so, although the defendants were not directly responsible for taking the flute, and it cannot be proven that they had a hand in its destruction, they almost certainly knew about the theft and the destruction thereof, and are thus in part responsible."

"Objection!" shouted Martins once more. "Counsel is constructing a specious chain of logic to a
"Overruled, Mr Martins," said Northwood firmly. "I find the chain of logic compelling. Mr Robertson's conclusion stands."

"Thank you, your Honour," said Robertson. Turning back to Taylor, he went on. "Are you aware of any other instances where Ms Hess may have used her parahuman abilities to victimise you?"

Taylor shook her head. "I can't think of any," she said. "I had no idea she was a cape."

"That's fair," Robertson allowed. He paused. "Actually, to be honest, I have to ask you this question. Why did you not bring these matters to the attention of the school?"

Taylor blinked. "I did," she said. "I brought all this evidence – the emails, the written information – to the principal. There were several teachers there, who had witnessed the bullying. Emma was there, and Madison, and Sophia. And Emma's dad was there too."

"And what happened?" asked Robertson.

"Nothing," said Taylor flatly. "Emma's dad pulled some legal wording, and the principal listened to him. And then when I tried reading out all the things they'd done, they didn't want to listen. And then when Dad said he could take it to the papers, Mr Barnes threatened to take him to court, and keep bringing us back on appeal until we were bankrupt." She shrugged. "He's got a lot more money than we do."

There was silence in the courtroom.

"Well now," said Robertson. "Isn't that interesting." He tilted his head. "So you are saying that the school principal didn't want to know about the bullying?"

"I tried to ask them to transfer me away," Taylor said. "They refused. Said it was too hard. They offered to suspend the girls, but not for two months. Just for two weeks. A two week vacation, during which time they could – and did – plan revenge against me for having the audacity to complain about being bullied." Her voice was stronger now, bitter. Good. Let them know how I felt.

"Do you have any idea why they would act in this manner, why they would let them off so easily?" asked Robertson, apparently curious.

Taylor nodded. "They knew Sophia was a Ward. Apparently they tell the schools this, just so they can get out of class, or even skip classes, in emergencies. So they figured that she was due some sort of leeway. Also, she was in track and field, and they didn't want her to miss any competitions."

"There is a very large divide between leeway for a young superhero to get out of class, and leeway for a parahuman to incite others into bullying at school, especially the ongoing harassment that Taylor here was suffering," Robertson observed.

He took a short stroll up past the jury, every eye following him, then returned to stand before Taylor. "So, to sum up," he said. "Starting from the end of the summer break nearly two years ago," he said, emphasising the words, "you were subjected to a harassment campaign unlike any I have ever seen before. You were physically attacked, your clothing damaged, your personal items stolen and destroyed."

He paused for breath and then continued. "Schoolwork was vandalised and stolen, and you were subjected to personal attack via email and verbal taunting. You were locked into a locker containing biohazard waste, and left there for at least one hour, perhaps more, an experience that left you..."
hospitalised for some time due to mental trauma."

Another theatrical pause for breath, with a meaningful glance at the jury. "And when you attempted some sort of recompense, some sort of action from those who should have been looking out for your welfare, you got apathy and stopgap measures. Because the ringleader of your tormentors was a parahuman, and was getting preferential treatment because of it."

He paused again, looking at Taylor. "Is that about right?"

Taylor paused in her turn, thinking hard. "Yes, sir, I think that's about right."

Robertson nodded to himself. "Thank you, Taylor." He turned toward Martins. "Your witness, Mr Martins."

As Robertson went and sat down, Martins heaved himself from his chair. He approached Taylor, watching her with an avuncular eye. For her part, she eyed him warily.

"Ms Hebert," he said. "You say that you were unaware of Sophia Hess' status as a parahuman Ward, during the time that she was allegedly bullying you; is that correct?"

"That is correct, sir," she said carefully.

"However, you do know now that she is a parahuman," he said.

"Yes, sir," she responded.

He smiled. "Could you kindly tell the court when and how you discovered this fact?"

Robertson was on his feet. "Objection!" he called out. "The fact of Taylor's knowledge of the identity of Shadow Stalker is not germane to the case. She did not know during the bullying, and that is what this case covers."

"Sustained," affirmed Northwood. "Kindly stick to the matters facing this trial, Mr Martins."

"So you did not know she was a parahuman hero at all, until after the bullying ceased?" asked Martins. "You did not guess, you did not suspect?"

Taylor shook her head. "I had no idea, sir. When I did find out, I was most surprised."

"Hmm," said Martins. "Indeed." He took a breath.

In her seat, Lisa held a beetle in her palm. She tapped its shell twice.

Taylor caught Robertson's eye and gave him a fractional nod.

"Speaking of parahumans," began Martins, but got no further.

"Your Honour," said Robertson, rising to his feet, "I would like to request a conference in your chambers, immediately."

"Your Honour!" protested Martins. "This is unconscionable! I am being prevented from questioning the witness for the prosecution!"
"You have a reason for this request, Mr Robertson?" asked Judge Northwood.

"A very compelling reason, your Honour," affirmed Robertson. "I would further ask that this conference be attended by Mr Hebert, Taylor Hebert, Mr Quinn Calle, Mr Martins ..." he checked the note he held in his hand, "... Mr Barnes, and Ms Barnes." He paused. "Also, Director Piggot and Miss Militia."

"Very well," said Judge Northwood. "The list does seem to be rather inclusive." He banged the gavel. "Fifteen minute recess. Those persons named, to my chambers."

Judge Northwood's chambers were dominated by the shelves. Shelves on every wall, all but a few crammed with law books. Leatherbound, covering minutiae of the law that Taylor had not even known existed. She noted a few insects gnawing away at the pages of one, and told them to go elsewhere and stop damaging Northwood's books.

Comfortable looking chairs surrounded a coffee table; off to the side was Northwood's official desk, big enough for Falkor to perch on without hanging over too much on any side. Behind it, what looked like an antique chair, dark oak and stained leather.

Northwood went to the coffee machine in the corner and poured himself a cup. "Does anyone else want one?" he asked, the formality of the courtroom all but absent.

Danny accepted one, as did Mr Robertson, Miss Militia and Mr Calle. Mr Martins, Mr Barnes, Director Piggot and the two girls each chose not to take one. They were offered, and accepted, chilled water from the mini-fridge beside the coffee machine.

"Well then," said Judge Northwood, once everyone was equipped with a drink. "I have an idea what this is about, but this is the District Attorney's show, so I'll let him tell it. Robertson?"

"Thank you, your Honour," replied Mr Robertson. He sipped his coffee. "Martins, you should be thanking me. I just saved you from breaking the law."

"How's that?" asked Mr Martins, startled. Quinn Calle shot Martins a sharp look, and then another one at Robertson.

"Well, to explain that," said Robertson, "first off, we should quit dancing around the elephant in the room. There is a fact that everyone here knows, but not everyone here is aware that we all know it." He smiled at the looks of confusion on some of the faces.

When the silence had stretched a few moments, he spoke again. "Taylor Hebert is the parahuman known as Skitter."

Taylor watched them all carefully, especially Quinn Calle, Mr Martins and Emma and her father. Each showed surprise, but not so much that the news could be new to them. It was more of a shock to hear what they fondly imagined to be a secret, spoken out loud so blatantly.

"Wait," said Alan Barnes. "So you all knew this already?"

Robertson nodded. "Yes, we did. You see, last night, Taylor got a phone call ..."
In which there is an abduction, an unmasking, a romance and a consequence


Everett shook his head. "Director Piggot will likely keep them in custody until the trial is done. Attempting to pervert the course of justice is a big thing, but tomorrow’s not the time and place to roll that one out."

Taylor nodded. A moment later, the phone rang. Danny answered it, then came to the doorway to the living room with a strange expression on his face.

"Taylor?" he said. "It's for you."

Taylor got up and went into the kitchen, accepting the phone receiver from her father.

"Hello?" she asked.

"Miss Hebert," said the voice on the other end, "you don't know me, but I have something very important to tell you."

"Wait," she said. "Who is this?"

There was a pause, and she thought for a moment that he was going to hang up.

"I'm the guy who was taking photos of you the other day," he said reluctantly.

"I remember," she said grimly. "Skitter told me about you."

"Uh, this is what I'm calling you about," he said. "I know."

"You know what?" she asked. "That Skitter told me?"

"No," he said. "I. Know."

The emphasis he put on the third word left Taylor in no doubt as to what he knew, or thought he knew. A chill ran down her spine.

"Okay, so what is this?" she asked. "Some kind of blackmail thing?"

"No," he said hastily. "No, no, no. Nothing like that. I want to warn you."

"Warn me about what?" she said. That he knows?

"That I told Alan Barnes what I figured out," he said miserably. "And he's going to use it tomorrow, in court."

The chill returned, redoubled. He would, too.

"Where are you?" she asked. All the time she had been talking, since he had told her who he was, her bugs had been sweeping the areas of the city that she had relay bugs in.

And there he is. In a phone booth off the main drag.

"I'm not going to tell you that," he said. "I'm well out of this now."
"Sorry," she said. "Too late for that. Stay right where you are. You will be picked up."

"Wait, what?" he stammered. She converged bugs on the phone booth, made a swarm circle it. "Don't – don't kill me!" he begged.

"I have no intention of doing so," she told him crisply. "Now stay there. You will be picked up."

On her rooftop, Falkor came awake with a jerk, and took to the air. One forelimb reached back, grabbed a cocooned rat, and popped it into her mouth, cocoon and all.

_In-flight meal_, Taylor thought with a grin, as she hung up, then dialled the number for Director Piggot's private mobile number.

The phone almost rang out before it was picked up. In the background, Taylor could hear a rumbling sound. A _treadmill?_

"You've got Piggot," came the answer. "This had better be important. I was busy."

"I'm sorry to bother you, Madam Director," said Taylor. "But something very important has just come up. I really, really think you and Miss Militia should come over, as soon as possible."

There was a long pause. "This won't wait till morning?" said Piggot. "Tecton and Raymancer can't handle it?"

Taylor shook her head. "I'm really sorry, but it won't," she said. "If I told them, they'd just call you anyway. I need you and Miss Militia here, just as soon as you can make it."

Piggot obviously made a snap decision. "We'll be there," she said. "But it had better be just as important as you say."

"Thank you, Madam Director," said Taylor. "I really appreciate it."

Gerard Hoskins saw the gigantic dragonfly approaching, and nearly wet himself. _What the good goddamn f**k is that thing? Is it going to kill me? Eat me alive? Paralyse me and lay eggs in my flesh?_

The monstrous creature landed before the phone box, and reached out one clawed forelimb to pry at the closed door. The door began to open, before Hoskins screamed and slammed it shut again.

Taylor sighed slightly in impatience.

Insects began to pour into the booth, through the gaps above and below the door. Hoskins stood it right up until the point where they started crawling down his neck, then he opened the door and bolted out into the street. He made it two strides before something stung him on the back of the neck. Five more strides, and his knees went out from under him. He crawled a few more feet before his limbs stopped functioning. And then the world went dark as the thing loomed over him.

He was very dimly aware that it was engulfing him, and he didn't feel a thing. And then the world went away altogether.

Taylor strolled back into the living room. "Everett," she said. "Can I see you on the back porch?"
"Sure thing," said Everett, heaving himself off the sofa.

"Maybe I better come too," said Raymancer. "Shadow Stalker might be out there."

"Don't bother," Taylor told him. "Skitter's got a flash bug next to the back door."

"Okay, fine," he said with a grin, and went back to debating the finer points of old TV shows with Danny.

When Everett got to the back porch, Taylor was sitting on the steps. She made room for him; the steps were wide, which was a good thing, because what she lacked in bulk, he more than made up for. He sat down; interestingly, he was slightly taller than she was in that position. She figured he had shorter legs than she did.

"What's up?" he asked her.

"Everett," she said slowly. "What do you think of me? Am I a friend? Or am I just that Hebert girl you have to help guard until the trial is over?" Her voice was quiet, contemplative.

Everett paused, taken aback. "I ... uh." He paused again. "I like you," he said frankly. "I admire you. You're funny, you're smart, you've got guts, you don't back down."

She looked down at the ground. He realised that she still hadn't looked directly at him. "So I'm basically one of the guys, is that it?" she asked, in that same quiet, detached tone.

"Oh god no," he hastened to say. "You're more than that. You're pretty too. Sometimes I look at you and I just want to --" He broke off, blushing furiously.

She looked around at him for the first time. She had a strange half-smile on her face, just a little sad. "So ... what?" she asked. "You like me like me?"

He wanted to sink into the floorboards. He wanted to beat his head against the wall. He wanted to be anywhere but exactly there, answering that exact question.

He answered it.

"Yeah," he said. "I like you like you."

She didn't respond.

After a moment, he added, "Sorry."

"Why sorry?" she asked, in that same quiet tone.

"Because I think I just made a colossal idiot out of myself," he confessed. "Because that's obviously not what you wanted to hear."

She shook her head slowly. "That's not true. Either of it. But if it was, there'd be two idiots sitting here."

He stared at her, uncomprehending. "I don't get it."

"Because, Everett," she said bluntly, "I like you too. Like you like you. And I wish we were anywhere else, doing anything else, because then we might have had a chance. But I think I just screwed it up beyond all hope of recovery."
He shook his head. "I don't get it. I'm a cape, you're not. I wish it wasn't so, but that's the way it is. And as much as I like you, I've made that decision."

The sad half-smile had grown slightly. "Even if I told you that I'm perfectly okay with you being a cape?" she asked.

He wavered. She did seem to be okay with the idea. "Well, that and I'm going back to Chicago soon. It wouldn't be fair on either of us."

"You could have moved," she said. "Dad likes you." It didn't seem to him as though she was trying to argue with him; she was just presenting the points because they were there.

"I like him too," he admitted. "He's a stand-up guy." He tried to imagine calling Danny Hebert 'Dad', and found it strangely easy. "But what were you saying about you screwing it up?"

She shook her head. "You'll find out." She looked at him, and he was shocked to see a tear in her eye. "I'm sorry, Everett. I've messed everything up."

"What?" he demanded. "What's the matter?"

She shook her head again, and just then, he heard a familiar sound; the whine of the turbines of a PRT transport coming in to land.

"Wait, what?" he said. "What's happening?"

"You'd better go see," she said. "Go on. I've just got to go upstairs a moment."

With one last doubtful glance, he got up and went inside. She waited a moment, and followed.

Everett walked through the house; he heard Taylor run up the stairs behind him, but he was more interested in what the PRT transport was doing outside the house.

Director Piggot and Miss Militia emerged from the craft as Danny reached the front door and opened it. They crossed the lawn, climbed the steps, and walked inside.

"Well?" said Director Piggot. "Where is she?"

"Taylor?" said Everett. "She said she had to go upstairs. Why? What's the matter? Why are you here?"

"Because," said Director Piggot, "Taylor called me and asked me to get here as soon as possible."

Everett and Raymancer stared at each other. Each one shrugged.

"Taylor!" shouted Danny. "Director Piggot is here! She says you called her!"

"Down in a minute, Dad!" she called back, her voice slightly muffled.

"Well, hurry it up!" he called back. Then he turned to the Director. "I'm sorry, Emily. We're all under a lot of stress with the trial, but I didn't think Taylor was going to be acting out."

"I'm not acting out," said Taylor, from the stairs. Everyone turned to look at her. She was walking down the steps, slowly, reluctantly. She was wearing the complete Skitter costume, save for the mask, which dangled from her hand. Her expression was about the same as someone walking to the gallows.
Everett was the first to speak. "Taylor?" he managed. "Why are you dressed like Skitter?"

Director Piggot bore the expression of someone who has just been smacked repeatedly across the face with a large wet fish. "She's not," she managed.

Miss Militia was undergoing a similar revelation. "She *is* Skitter," she finished.

Raymancer rounded out the conversation. "Well, holy crap," he said.

The next few moments were pandemonium. Everyone was talking at once, except for Taylor. She just sat on the sofa, elbows on her knees, head down, waiting for someone to address her with a coherent question. Everett pulled a chair out to sit opposite her, and plumped into it. He didn't speak, just looked at her.

She raised her head and looked back. Well, she seemed to be saying, *now you know what I meant.*

He nodded slightly. *Now I do.*

"Okay, everyone shut up," snapped Piggot. "Taylor."

Taylor looked up questioningly.

"Why didn't you –" began Piggot, then stopped herself. "Okay, scratch that question. Many reasons for not unmasking before now. Some are even valid." She paused. "But why are you unmasking *now*? On the day before the trial?"

"Because Alan Barnes knows," said Taylor dully. "And if he knows, the whole world will know soon. So I thought you deserved a heads-up."

Director Piggot opened her mouth, then paused, then closed it. "Actually," she said after a moment, "that's quite a good reason."

"I have a question," said Danny. "How did you know he knows?"

Taylor hooked a thumb at the back door. "Because *he* told him."

From that direction came a deep thrumming noise, followed by a faint cry.

Gerard Hoskins felt feeling returning to his limbs. He was blind, but he could feel a swooping sensation as he flew? Fell? Dropped? Fleated? He had no idea where he was, or what had happened to him. But then there was a sudden *bump,* and light returned. He fell to the ground, as whatever was holding him let go, and he fell exactly twelve inches on to a scraggly lawn. And then he rolled over, saw what had been holding him, and managed a strangled scream.

This time he *did* wet himself.

Miss Militia was first out the door, with a large-bore pistol in her hand. She saw Falkor and levelled the gun, but did not fire. "This is your dragonfly pet?" she called back over her shoulder.

"I call her Falkor," said Taylor, moving up behind Miss Militia. "She won't attack you. She was just delivering this man."
As she spoke, Falkor's wings blurred almost to invisibility, and she shot skyward, almost too fast to see. Miss Militia blinked, impressed. Then she looked down at the man cowering on the ground, a dark stain spreading on his crotch. "And who is this?" she asked.

Cleaned up, wearing a pair of Danny's pants, he sat on the sofa, shivering in delayed reaction. "My name is Gerard Hoskins," he said, as he grasped a steaming cup of coffee in both hands.

"And this is supposed to mean something?" asked Miss Militia, when he did not continue.

"Uh, sorry," he said. "I'm a photographer. I've worked for Alan Barnes in the past. This time, he asked me to follow Taylor Hebert to her meeting with her boss, Skitter, and take pictures. Photographic evidence of connection with criminal warlords. Great for making someone look bad in court." His voice was bitter. "I'm really good at taking photos like that."

"If you weren't here to make things right," said Danny slowly, "I would be feeding you your own teeth right now." He shot a glance at Hoskins that made the man flinch. "I'm still not sure that I shouldn't."

"Danny, please," said Miss Militia. She turned back to Hoskins. "So, you obviously could not get pictures of Taylor with Skitter. What did you get?"

Hoskins shrugged. "Two pictures. Same lighting, same pose, same wind direction. Both of them from the back. Her hair was almost identical in both frames. Fluke shot. Only in one of them ..." His voice trailed off.

Director Piggot nodded. "In one of them, she was dressed as Skitter. Of course."

"It seems so obvious," said Raymancer. "Why did no-one ever see that before?" He paused. "Oh, wait. The scary bugs."

Miss Militia nodded. "Exactly. So. You sold these pictures to Barnes? Why are you coming to Taylor now? Or at all?"

Hoskins' voice rose in disgust. "I tried to sell them. I told him I wanted money to get out of town. He flat-out refused to pay me, had me thrown out of his goddamn office. Told me that all he needed was the information, and he had that."


Quinn Calle turned to face Alan Barnes. "Wait," he said. "You refused to pay him?"

"Well, what was I supposed to do?" blustered Barnes. "He wanted too much. I'm already spending too much on court costs, and then he wanted to chisel more out of me for two photos that I didn't even need." He looked at Calle. "If I'd paid him," he added, "I probably would not have been able to pay you."

"If you'd paid him," said Calle quietly, "we would not be in here talking about this."

He turned away, and began a quiet consultation with Martins.

"I'm just a little curious as to what happened next," said Judge Northwood.
"Well then," said Director Piggot, "we have a problem."

" Quite a large problem," agreed Miss Militia. "While Skitter has a good reputation in her area, many people are frightened of her, and she does not have a very good overall public image."

"I can only think of one real solution," said Director Piggot. She looked around. "Where's she gone now?"


"Oh god," said Danny. "He was pretty mad with her. I hope no-one's been killed."

Taylor had changed back into t-shirt and jeans, but Everett still looked at her as if she were in full costume, with bugs swarming around her. They stood a little way off the porch, facing each other, a little distance apart.

"I'm sorry," said Taylor, hopelessly, helplessly. Her arms were crossed over her body; the evening was not that cold, but she was shuddering.

"You lied to us," said Everett. "You lied to me." He paused. "I liked you. I thought you were a really nice girl. I thought I could trust you."

He turned away abruptly. "I thought we might have had a chance, even you not being a cape, even long distance. I could have visited, put in for a transfer. I could have handled being not in charge any more." His voice was angry. "But you lied."

Tears ran down her face. "I'm sorry," she said again. "I told you, I messed everything up." She sniffled. "I mess everything up."

"Oh god, don't do that," he said. "Don't cry. I can't handle that."

"Why the hell shouldn't I cry?" she snapped. "I finally meet a decent guy who's not taken, who's actually nice to me, and who doesn't think of me as a sister, and what do I do? I alienate you, just by being me."

"What I want to know is, why did you lie?" he asked. "Why did you keep up the pretence, even when we were getting to know each other? Surely you knew I was attracted to you?"

She shook her head, tears filling her eyes and streaking her cheeks. "No, I didn't," she said. "You were nice, and polite, and helpful, and oh, god, I wanted to just throw myself on you and rub my body all over you, but you never looked at me like ... that." She scrubbed at her eyes furiously.

"Looked at you like what?" demanded Everett. "The first time I saw you coming down the stairs, fixing your hair, my brain just short-circuited. And ever since then, every time you've been able to let down your guard, I've seen the real you, and I've liked it." He paused, frustrated. "But how am I supposed to look at you? I've been doing my level best to not be distracted by you, to be professional, and let me tell you, it's about the hardest thing I've ever done."

Taylor took a deep breath. "Everett. I'm a cape. I'm also a villain. I like you, a lot. But if you don't ... if there's no ... if I can't ... " Her voice trailed off. She turned away, shoulders hunched, shaking silently.
His arms went around her from behind. She jerked in surprise, then felt herself pressed back against his body. Despite herself, she felt an electric thrill run through her at the contact; his body was warm, and his arms around her felt so strong, so protective.

This was the first time they had had any real physical contact since they had shaken hands at the front door. She leaned back against him, felt his warmth dispelling the slight chill that had begun to permeate the night air. She wasn't shaking anymore, she noted distantly. *I must have been cold after all.*

"I like you too," he said, his voice in her ear, his breath warm on her neck. She shivered, but not from cold. *Do that again.*

He did that again. "But I'm an idiot and a moron, and I nearly talked myself into walking away from you forever, just now." She shivered again, and pressed back into him. Her hands found his arms and pressed on them, pulling them tight around herself.

"I don't know where we're going to go from here," he said quietly. *Does he know what that's doing to me?* "But I want us to find out together."

She let go his arms – his strong, strong arms – and turned within the circle of his embrace. She faced him directly, his arms around her body, and leaned into his chest, her head alongside his. Her arms stole under his, and tried to go around his body, but failed to meet behind his back. He lifted his arms slightly; her hands met, and her arms wrapped around him, holding him close.

"I want that too," she said quietly. "I really, really want that. I want to be with you, and find out what we can do, what we can achieve, together."

She lowered her head so that she was looking down at his collarbones. "I'm sorry I didn't give you more signals. When I'm in this sort of situation, I freeze. I can't think. I can't move. But you ... I ... that is ... I mean ... "

While she was still trying to unscramble the speech centres of her brain, he let go of her with one arm – that was okay, the other one wrapped nearly all the way around her anyway – and tilted her chin up slightly. Then he gently plucked the glasses off her face.

"Taylor," he said softly. "Shut up."

And then he kissed her.

She had a moment to be surprised. And then she was astonished. And then she wasn't thinking at all. Her arms locked around him, just as tightly as his were around her.

Of course, Danny chose that moment to open the back door.

"Tayl ... oh," he said.

Miss Militia, behind him, also peered out the doorway.

"Oh, indeed," she said.

They looked at each other for a moment, and Danny raised his eyebrows. "Well, at least they aren't mad at each other anymore," he offered.
What sounded suspiciously like a snort of laughter escaped from the female cape. "There is that," she agreed. Then she cleared her throat, quite loudly.

Everett jumped, broke the kiss, and looked around guiltily.

"Oh, shit," he said.

Taylor looked around as well. She looked less guilty and somewhat more dreamy. Everett could kiss.

"Oh, hi, Dad," she said. "Hi, Miss Militia." Then some rational part of her brain kicked in, and she blinked rapidly before rescuing her glasses from Everett. "Uh, it's not what it looks like?"

Danny chuckled. "I certainly hope it is what it looks like," he said. "I think I'd prefer that to you two not talking to each other."

"Was that what they were doing?" asked Miss Militia archly.

Taylor blushed to the roots of her hair; Everett was almost as red.

"Come on in, anyway," said Danny. "Emily says she has a solution."

Taylor and Everett looked at each other in mutual surprise. They headed for the house; it wasn't until they got to the porch steps that they realised that they were holding hands.

They sat side by side on the sofa; Hoskins had been moved to a chair to nurse his coffee. He didn't seem to want to sit near Taylor, for some reason. And he flinched every time a bug buzzed past.

Bugs seemed to be flying past him an awful lot, Everett noted. Taylor had a mean streak.

""My idea is simple," said Director Piggot. "You were already going to be joining the Wards, at an appropriate time. We just advance that appropriate time, for you." She nodded at Taylor. "You can join the Wards right now, if you wish."

Taylor's eyes opened wide, then she turned to look at Everett. He was staring back at her, just as inarticulate as she was. She looked next at her father. "Dad?" she managed faintly.

He nodded. "I think it's a good idea," he said firmly. "I really do."

Taylor felt a pressure on her hand. She looked down at it; somehow, her hand had found Everett's, and was squeezing it tightly, and he was squeezing back.

"I'll do it," she said. "I'll join. I'll be in the Wards." I'll be with Everett.

Director Piggot smiled at her. "Well, the paperwork can be filled out in the morning – if you'd given me a little more warning, I could have brought it along – but for now, I accept your offer to join the ranks of the Brockton Bay Wards." She held out her hand. "Congratulations."

It was most fortunate that Taylor was sitting to Everett's right, because it was unlikely that he was going to let go of her hand in a hurry. However, her right hand was free, and so she shook the Director's hand.

"Thank you," she said. "Thank you for everything."
"So ... you're saying that Taylor's in the Wards?" demanded Alan Barnes. "Since when?"

Director Piggot smiled lazily. "Since about six o'clock this morning, when we ferried out the paperwork to her. Her cape name's still officially Skitter, but we'll change that before we make the actual announcement, I suspect."

"And so," said Thompson, "as you are now officially aware that Taylor Hebert is officially a Ward, it is my duty to remind you that to reveal the identity of a Ward to the public is an offence under law."

Alan Barnes took on a mulish look around the jawline at this point. Taylor didn't need Lisa to tell her that he was not about to knuckle under.

"In point of which," continued Director Piggot, "I have had several of these prepared, one for each of you." She smiled. "Judge Northwood was informed of the facts before the trial, and has signed one for himself. District Attorney Thompson, also." She fanned out four forms, handed one to Quinn Calle and another to Martins. When she went to hand the other two to Alan and Emma, they did not take them.

"What are they?" demanded Alan Barnes.

"Non-disclosure agreements," Director Piggot explained. "It states that you are aware of Taylor Hebert's status as a parahuman and a Ward, and agree not to reveal that information to anyone without truly dire need."

"What if I don't sign?" asked Barnes aggressively. Quinn Calle had already risen and gone to Northwood's desk, in order to sign with his expensive-looking fountain pen. Martins was following suit, when Barnes called out to him.

"Martins!" he snapped. "Don't sign that! Remember our strategy!"

"Our strategy, Mr Barnes," said Quinn Calle, "is in ruins. Do not make yourself out be a bigger fool than you truly are." He watched Martins sign, took the form, and handed both back to Director Piggot.

"Thank you, Mr Calle, Mr Martins," said Director Piggot. She turned to Barnes. "You have been made aware that to reveal that information is an offence under law. You have motive and opportunity to reveal that information to a large number of people. If you refuse to sign – if either of you refuses to sign – then we will take that as implicit intent to break the law, and you will be held in custody until the trial is over."

"At which point," Thompson went on, "Emma goes on to whatever punishment the state deems fit for her, and you immediately start preparation for your next court appearance."

Barnes looked around wildly. "What next court appearance?" he asked.

"Attempting to pervert the course of justice. Paying two men to confront Taylor and her bodyguard, and offering a quite staggering amount of money to throw the trial," Thompson explained. He smiled. "They are currently in custody, and talking quite freely."

"We are also," put in Director Piggot, "thinking of bringing suit against you and Winslow High as an entity for assisting in bringing the name of the Wards into disrepute for allowing Sophia Hess to
carry on her bullying campaign against Taylor for so long, unchecked." Her smile was not altogether pleasant. "So trust me, Mr Barnes, Taylor Hebert's secret identity is the last thing you should be worrying about at this particular moment."

"Fine," snarled Barnes, dashing off his signature. Emma signed hers too, in a kind of daze. Barnes shoved the forms back at Piggot.

"Okay, Calle," he snapped. "Let's get back out there and see if we can't salvage something from this wreck."

Quinn Calle was examining his immaculate fingernails closely. He buffed them on his suit jacket, then turned to Alan Barnes. "I'm afraid that may not be possible, Mr Barnes," he said, almost apologetically.

Barnes stared. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," said Calle, "that when I said my firm has a high tolerance for criminal activity, but a low one for stupidity, I meant it. We have come to a juncture that requires me to insist on one of two things happening. The first option is that you step away from the case altogether, and allow Mr Martins to conduct your daughter's defence exactly as he sees fit, with no farther influence or interference from you. The second is that we refund your payment, less ten percent handling fee, and allow you to conduct her defence on your own merits, free of any interference or assistance from us."

He smiled slightly. "In the second instance, of course, you would then be able to afford to pay Mr Hoskins what he believes you owe him."

"You can't do that!" snapped Barnes. "The trial is still ongoing! We signed a contract!"

"Our contract, Mr Barnes," said Calle smoothly. "If you read it carefully, there is a carefully-worded clause that allows for this very eventuality. Regretfully," Taylor noted that his face did not look overly regretful, "I must insist that you come to a decision on this matter before we leave this room."

Taylor could tell that Alan Barnes was torn; he did not want to lose the legal expertise of Quinn Calle's firm, but nor did he want to let go of any control that he might have.

"I'll contest this!" grated Barnes. "I'll take you to the cleaners!"

Quinn Calle smiled gently. "You do what you think you have to, Mr Barnes," he replied. "But the clause does exist, and we do have the money to uphold our side of the matter. Quite a bit more than you do, I suspect." His tone hardened. "Kindly make your decision, sir. We run the case, without your attempts at criminal negligence to get in our way, or you run the case as you see fit."

Barnes' face was furious. Taylor felt only the faintest pang of sympathy for him. The shoe pinches, doesn't it, Mr Barnes?

"Fine," he burst out. "Go, and be damned. You've lost the case for me already anyway."

Quinn Calle inclined his head politely. "Very well, sir," he said. "I will contact my office directly." He smiled apologetically at Emma. "I regret to tell you, miss, that we did not have a large chance at a favourable outcome, but we were going to do our best." He turned to Judge Northwood, who had been watching the byplay with considerable interest. "Might I suggest, your Honour, an extension on that recess, so that Mr Barnes may re-familiarise himself with the facts of the case?"

Northwood nodded. "It's only fair," he allowed. "I will have the bailiff announce it." He looked at Barnes. "You have one hour, sir."
Martins turned to Taylor. "Sorry about that crack earlier, miss," he said awkwardly. "Barnes insisted on it. Said it might make you flare up."

Taylor compressed her lips. "It's fine," she said. "I've had worse. Trust me on that."

Quinn Calle looked at her respectfully. "Before I go, Miss Hebert, allow me to say that I was following your career with great interest. I suspect I would have enjoyed the chance to represent you in court, if it had ever come to that."

She smiled back at him. "Your number was the first one I would have called, if it had come to that."

He gave her a slight bow. "You do me too much honour. Mr Hebert. Mr Thompson. Your Honour. Director Piggot. Miss Militia." He shook hands with each of them, while Barnes seethed and Emma looked steadily more frightened.

And then he was gone, and there was a trial to get back to.

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Director Piggot and Miss Militia had gone, taking Hoskins with them.

"What's going to happen to me?" he had asked, although he seemed quite relieved to be leaving Taylor's presence.

"A quiet trial, and a reduced sentence, for your action in coming forward," Director Piggot had told him. "We will likely be taking action against your friend Alan Barnes. If you cooperate with us for that, perhaps even a suspended sentence."

He nodded his head jerkily. "That bastard," he had snarled. "He got me into all this."

"And then, you go far, far away from Brockton Bay," Miss Militia had added, as they escorted him out the door toward the waiting transport, "and never mention what you know about Taylor Hebert to anyone."

"Do I look like a suicidal idiot?" he had asked, just as the door of the transport had closed behind him.

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"Well," said Taylor.

"Well," said Everett.

"Well," said Danny.

Raymancer said nothing, because he was currently walking around the outside of the house. He didn't know it, but two flash-bugs were orbiting him at a distance, just in case.

"I'm gonna be in the Wards," Taylor observed, trying out the idea for size.

"Yeah," Everett agreed. "You are." From the tone of his voice, he approved greatly.

Danny grinned faintly. "Maybe they'll knock some corners off you. Bring you into line. Heaven knows I never could."
Everett and Taylor glanced at each other, and burst out laughing. After a moment, Danny joined in.

Danny had gone off to bed, pleading fatigue. "Don't keep the boy up too late," he had warned Taylor. "He's got a job of work tomorrow, before the trial." He gave Everett a mock scowl. "And don't you try anything with my daughter. I've got my eye on you."

Taylor grinned after Danny went upstairs. "He likes you," she assured him. "I think he's been waiting for a boyfriend – any boyfriend – to try that line on. It's a dad thing."

He grinned in return. "I sort of got that impression." He shifted slightly closer to her on the sofa. "So what sort of things should I not be trying on with you?" he asked with interest.

"Well, you certainly shouldn't be sitting this close to me on the sofa," she said, moving even closer, so that their legs were in firm contact.

"Really?" he asked. "And what else?"

"And you shouldn't be putting your arms around me," she said, putting her arms around him.

"Seems a little unfair," he observed, following suit.

They gazed at each other from a distance of a few inches.

"And what else shouldn't I be doing?" he breathed.

"Well," she replied, just as quietly, removing her glasses and putting them aside for safety before putting her arms back around him, "you really, really, shouldn't be kissing me about now."

Raymancer opened the front door, saw what was going on, then closed it again.

Great, he thought, as he continued his patrol. We come to a new city, meet a supervillain who's also a nice girl, and T's the one who gets to make out with her. Life's just unfair, if you ask me.

They were still in one another's arms, although not quite as close as before. Leaning back on the sofa, Taylor breathed heavily. "Wow," she said.

"Wow," he agreed. "That first time wasn't a fluke."

"No," she said. "It most certainly was not."

They kissed again, and it was just as good.

Everett became aware of her hands, pushing up his t-shirt. He eased away from the kiss and looked at her.

"Are you really sure we want to go there, tonight?" he said, once he'd gotten his breath back.

She looked back at him hungrily. "Don't you?" she asked.

He nodded. "I do, oh god, I do. But ..."

"But what?" she asked in quiet, urgent frustration.
Reluctantly, he pulled the shirt down again. "But there's still a lot of things up in the air right now, and I'm a guest under your father's roof, and if we do this here and now it's going to be frantic, and we'll be listening to every noise, and it just won't be as good as it could be."

He felt, as he pointed this out, that he was being a traitor to every sexually frustrated teenage boy ever. "I like you enough to want to do this with you, but I also like you so much that I want to make it really, really good for you." He looked her in the eye. "And do you really want Raymancer walking in on us?"

She shook her head with a strained giggle. "No, that could be really embarrassing." Another thought occurred. "Or Dad, coming down to see what the noise is about."

He shook his head, his eyes closed. "If I read your Dad right, what he meant was, we can do anything we like, but don't do that." He heaved a vast sigh. "So ... argh."

She nodded. "Yeah." Some of the urgency had ebbed out of her, and she leaned against him comfortably. "You know something? I thought I liked you before. I really like you now. Not many boys would have this much self-control."

"Self-control, hah," he said, grinning in self-mockery. "If you'd run your hands over my chest and back for about one more second, we wouldn't be having this conversation."

"Oooh," she said, intrigued. "Maybe I should ..."

He shook his head. "Much as I really want to ..." He drew her close and whispered in her ear. Her eyes grew wide, and the flush started up her cheeks. "... I don't think we should, right now. Not here, not tonight."

She gazed at him with smouldering eyes. "As soon as this is over, I'm taking you to my base. I have a bed there. A double bed. And a guarantee of privacy. And you are going to do what you just said to me. Twice."

He made his eyes go wide with mock fear. "Oh my, kidnapped to a supervillain's secret lair, and made to act out her every perverted desire. Whatever will become of me?"

Despite herself, she giggled. "Darn right, buster," she grinned. "Now let go of me before I rip your clothes off and we do it right here anyway." She didn't move her arms from around him.

"You let go of me first," he suggested. Nor did he move his arms.

She pulled him close and kissed him, hard. He responded. By the time they pulled apart, they were both breathing heavily.

"I've got to get upstairs," she said. "If I don't ..." She loosened her grasp on him.

"Yeah," he agreed, extremely reluctantly. He opened his arms, just allowing her to slip out of his embrace. She offered him the chance to cop a feel on the way. He took it, most gratifyingly. So did she.

It was about the most difficult thing in the world for her to get up and move away from the sofa. But she did; once she was no longer in physical contact with him, it was easier, but where his hands had passed, her flesh burned.

He watched her go up the stairs, looking back at him. The impulse came over him to follow her. She
would not stop him, he was sure.

But no. He respected Danny too much – he respected *her* too much – to resort to frantic, furtive sex on her father's sofa. Or in her own bedroom, next to Danny's.

He'd have to wait. Even though it was nearly killing him to do so.

She closed the bedroom door and leaned on it, heart pounding. Her head was spinning. She knew that if he knocked, she would open the door, and whatever he wanted to do, she would do, gladly.

*Oh god, why does he have to be such a gentleman? And why does that turn me on so hard?*

She undressed for bed, climbed in.

For the first time ever, the bed felt ... empty. It needed someone about Everett's size and build, right about ... there.

Her dreams were quite lurid.

So were his.


"Morning, Lisa."

She could *hear* the grin in Lisa's voice. "*So how are we this morning?*"

"Frustrated," she growled.

Lisa chuckled. "*Not the only one, Taylor. But. You're calling about something important.*"

"Yeah," said Taylor. She quickly filled in Lisa on some of the night's events. "What I need you to do is ..."

"*Sit back a ways, and let you know who's in the know, yeah,*" said Lisa. "*And when they're about to let the cat out of the bag.*"

Taylor grinned. Lisa could be frustrating in the extreme to work with sometimes, but she *got* plans. "That's the one," she said.

"Excellent," said Lisa. "*So spill. How good a kisser is he?*

Taylor breathed deeply. "I could tell you," she said with a grin, "but that would constitute sexual assault over the phone."

Lisa positively giggled. "*Excellent.*" They exchanged pleasantries, and Lisa rang off, citing shelter duties.

Everett was up and ready for the run. Taylor came down in her sweats – *oh god, she looks sexier than ever*– and handed him a glove made of some light, silvery material.

"What's this?" he asked.
"Proof of concept for my Weaver costume," she said.

"Weaver," he said. "Huh. I like it." He took the glove and examined it. "What's it made of?"

"Spider silk. Really special spider silk. Amy engineered some spiders to make the absolute strongest silk possible. They wove that for me."

"Amy?" he asked.

"Amelia Lavere. She used to be known as Panacea. She's a biokinetic like you wouldn't believe."

"Ah, yeah," he said. "I've heard of her."

He examined the glove more closely. The material shimmered, light seeming to slide off it. It was stretchy and light; it felt like he was handling something made of air.

"Try to tear it," she prompted.

Reluctantly, he tried. Grasping the thumb in one hand and the fingers in the other, he exerted himself. His muscles bunched, the glove stretched slightly, but when he released the pressure, it flexed back to its normal size.

"Damn," he said with respect in his voice. "That's some stuff."

"I'm thinking of making undergarments for all the Undersiders and Wards out of this stuff. It's light, breathable, and is actually really comfortable next to the skin." She grinned at him. "Would you like a set?" Her voice lowered a little. "It would mean me having to stretch a tape measure all over you."

He returned her grin. "When you put it that way, I'm good for that."

She leaned in and gave him a fast, teasing kiss. "Thought you might be."

Grabbing her arms, he kissed her again. This one was much more firm, much more enjoyable. She was just starting to melt into his arms when he broke it off. "We've got your run to go on."

"Run?" she asked. "What run?"

He grinned and swatted her on the butt. "Come on, let's get going."

The run went off without incident; Everett managed to keep up a little better this time around. The PRT transport arrived just about the time they got back to the house, and Taylor was taken up with filling out paperwork while Everett showered and changed.

June 22, 2011. A Little After Midday

As Taylor came down the steps on her father's arm, Everett frankly stared. He had thought she looked utterly desirable in t-shirt and jeans, laughing at a silly movie, even crying in the back yard. But this ... his brain locked up. He could not think of a single word to say.

Raymancer nudged him. "Dude, I think you're drooling."

"Shut up."
And so, they went off to the trial.
Chicago, a Few Weeks Ago

Everett ducked. The plate sailed over his head and shattered on the wall. "Hey!" he shouted. "Watch it!"

"You bastard!" shouted Rebecca. "How long were we living together? Three months? Three whole months before you finally let me know. What, wasn't I good enough?" She reached back and grabbed something else, let it fly. It was a plastic coffee cup with Wile E Coyote on the side. He caught it, stinging his hand, and put it on the sofa.

"I had to be sure," he said, aware his excuse sounded weak.

"Sure about what? That I wouldn't spill the beans about your little secret?" She grabbed a book from the table in front of her, hurled it. The pages came open in midair, and it flopped to the ground in front of him.

"No," he said. "That we were compatible. That we'd be together for a while. So I wouldn't tell you five minutes before you decided you wanted to split up."

"Well, let me tell you something, Tecton," she snapped, throwing an ashtray. It was made of heavy glass; he ducked again, and it thudded into the wall and dropped to the carpet. "Guess what. We're splitting up."

"But why?" he pleaded. "I told you, didn't I? I'm trusting you with this. That has to mean something, doesn't it?"

"Trust," she shot back. "Yeah. I thought I could trust you. I trusted that you had no strange little secrets hidden around. I trusted that you going out all the time was you and your buddies from school or something. But no, it was you and the goddamn Wards. If you got hurt, they'd know before I would." She glared at him, a tall slender brunette with blazing eyes. "I thought I could trust you. It appears I couldn't."


I thought I could trust you.

Everett heard his own words echoing in his ears as he stared at Taylor's stricken face. His angry words had cut her to the quick. Too late, he recalled the tirade that Becky had unleashed on him when he unmasked to her, and the very same words she had thrown at him — along with the crockery.

Taylor took a deep breath. "Everett. I'm a cape. I'm also a villain. I like you, a lot. But if you don't ... if there's no ... if I can't ... " Her voice trailed off. She turned away, shoulders hunched, shaking silently.

What am I doing? he asked himself. I opened myself up to Becky, and she rejected me. Taylor opened herself up to me ... and I'm rejecting her.
I don't have to repeat Becky's mistake. Taylor deserves better.

He moved forward, stepping up behind her and wrapping his arms protectively around her. She started, but did not pull away; he held her body against his. He felt her shudders gradually die away.

"I like you too," he said, his mouth close to her ear. "But I'm an idiot and a moron, and I nearly talked myself into walking away from you forever, just now."

Just like Becky did with me.

She shivered; he felt her lean back into him. Her hands pulled his arms tighter around her body. "I don't know where we're going to go from here," he said quietly. "But I want us to find out together."

Please, let me be there for you.

She turned around in the circle of his arms, and leaned in against his chest. Sliding her arms under his, she tried to wrap them around him, but did not succeed until he lifted his arms slightly. He liked the feel of her arms around his body; it made him feel secure, in a way that he only normally felt while inside his armour.

"I want that too," she said quietly. "I really, really want that. I want to be with you, and find out what we can do, what we can achieve, together."

His heart lifted. I didn't screw it up after all. I have another chance at this. We have another chance.

She lowered her head so that she was looking down at his collarbones. "I'm sorry I didn't give you more signals. When I'm in this sort of situation, I freeze. I can't think. I can't move. But you ... I ... that is ... I mean ... "

He grinned. Letting go of her with one arm, but keeping the other one securely around her, he lifted her chin and took her glasses off. She looked at him with huge brown eyes, from a face that was vulnerable and open as it ever was. And he wanted so fiercely to hold her, to protect her from the evils of the world.

"Taylor," he said softly. "Shut up."

And then he kissed her.

June 22, 2011. Brockton Bay District Court.

Tecton smiled inside his helmet as he recalled the previous evening. It had certainly shaken the foundations of his world – an apt comparison, considering his powerset – but everything had settled out all right. More than all right, actually.

It had been a long time since Becky threw him out. Too long. It was nice to have someone to just be with.

A note was handed to the bailiff; he stood and announced that the recess had been extended by one hour. Then he gathered the jury and led them out. They looked resigned now; earlier, they had been hanging on every word. Tecton bet himself that had they been asked to deliver a verdict at the end of the District Attorney’s questioning of Taylor, they would not even have needed to be empanelled.

Miss Militia came over next to him. "How are you doing, Tecton?" she asked. "You don't need to sit down for a while? We can get a reinforced chair for you."
He shook his head. "No, thank you," he replied. "I've been working the last couple of days with Taylor's father. Being able to stand still is actually quite a relief."

Miss Militia nodded. "Danny Hebert is a good man," she said. "He raised a fine daughter." She lowered her voice. "I wish the two of you much happiness."

He was glad his helmet was full-face; the blush that spread over his features must have extended to his hairline. "Uh, thanks, Miss Militia," he managed.

She accorded him another measured nod, then sat down beside Director Piggot once more, leaving him alone with his thoughts.

"Taylor, you were wonderful!"

Taylor rose from her seat beside Danny and looked around, just in time to be caught in a full-on hug from Hope. She accepted it, and hugged Hope back; it wasn't like she could get out of it in any case, and nor did she want to; being hugged by Hope was always a worthwhile experience.

Behind her, she spotted new faces, and her eyes flew wide open. "Brian! Aisha! Alec! You came!"

"Eh," said Aisha with a negligent flip of the hand. "We got bored, so we decided to come see how you were going." She looked around. "What, is it half-time? Have they stopped to change sides or something?"

"Seriously, Aisha," said Brian. "This isn't a game of basketball. They're in recess. Some legal matter needs sorting out or something."

"Recess?" asked Aisha, sounding puzzled. "Like in school?"

Alec raised an eyebrow. "You went to school?"

"Hey," she said defensively. "Watch it, dweeb. I've seen schools. I've attended. Sort of."

"Uh huh," said Brian. "So I heard from your social worker."

"And you can just shut up about that too, big brother," Aisha grumbled. "That school canteen caught fire by pure accident."

"Really?" asked Brian. "The way I heard it, someone was smoking where they shouldn't have, and threw the cigarette into a container of something extremely flammable to avoid being caught."

"Like I said," Aisha insisted. "Accident."

Taylor grinned and wandered over to where Lisa was sitting. She lowered herself into the next seat over, and nudged the blonde girl with her shoulder. "Hey, you," she said.

Lisa turned and grinned her fox-like grin. "Hey, you," she said. "You did pretty good up there. I make it seventy, eighty percent chance of guilty on all charges." Her grin sharpened. "Once Barnes tries his hand, maybe eighty to ninety percent."

Taylor raised an eyebrow. "That good, huh?" she asked. "Well, I suppose I'd better not get too overconfident, too soon." She put her arms around Lisa and hugged her. "And thanks for the names and the timing. You were perfect."
Lisa put her arms around Taylor in return. "You weren't bad yourself." She flicked a glance at where Tecton stood like an elaborate statue. "So, you and him, huh?"

Taylor rolled her eyes. "As if you didn't already know," she said. "You as much as told me, the other day."

"Did I?" asked Lisa innocently. Her eyes kept returning to where Hope and Amy had gone to speak to Director Piggot.

She looked at Hope in a way that no-one else could manage. She saw, from the angle of the head, the posture of the body, the bend of an elbow, far more than anyone else ever could. Patterns formed, split apart, formed new patterns. She saw the probabilities, the options, the almost-certainties.

Most people ... were a shifting morass of doubts, conflicts, barely concealed desires, worries, emotions boiling over. They worried about their bosses, their girlfriends, their boyfriends, their bank balances. Men lusted after women who were not their partners, and vice versa, and felt guilty for doing so. Lisa could not read thoughts, but she could read minds. From what showed on the outside, she could extrapolate what was going on within to a fair degree of accuracy.

And that was her blessing and her curse. Because she saw everything. Whether she wanted to, or not. Human society got along, for the most part, because people did their best to ignore ninety-nine percent of what everyone else was expressing, and only listened to the one percent that they wanted to hear.

So it was virtually impossible for someone to dissemble to her; she saw through a lie even before it was uttered. She saw the world as it truly was, saw through all the lies and half-truths and deceptions that everyone chose to accept because it was more comfortable that way.

Whereas she could not simply see the surface and leave it at that. Like an actor attending a showing of his own movies, she saw every flaw, everything that everyone else missed, everything that was out of place. Which meant that romance was essentially impossible for her; the pleasant lies that lovers tell one another, that they know are lies but choose to believe because it's more fun that way ... she could not ignore them, could not even make herself pretend to believe them.

It was worse in close contact with someone; every shift, every blink, every movement, betrayed inner thoughts. The few times she had attempted to be intimate with someone after her powers triggered had ranged from the ridiculous to the disastrous. She could draw them to her easily enough, her power letting her know moment by moment what they wanted, or what they thought they wanted. But when it came to it, when she wanted to abandon herself to the moment, she could not. It was impossible for her to focus past her power, to ignore what it was telling her about them. And so she had to stop, to pull away, to end it.

She had more or less resigned herself to a life alone, seeing people and all their secrets from the outside, drawing a vicarious enjoyment from manipulating people and events to her liking. She even became quite proud of being the smartest person in the room. It was, after all, all she really had.

But then she met Hope.

Hope was ... quite out of her experience. She bore no issues, no secret lusts or desires or indeed, secrets of any type. She was an open book, friendly and cheerful. She had no particular need for sexual contact, and thus had no hang-ups about it. What she did with Amy did not change her attitude toward the girl one iota; she was warm and loving and considerate to her, but could break off
the physical side of the relationship the moment that Amy no longer needed it from her.

Lisa had hugged her, quite often of late. And even in the closest of embraces, her power only picked up on Hope’s truly innocent desire to make Lisa, her very close and very loved friend, as happy as she could make her.

Hope was a pure soul, someone who loved everyone and hated no-one. She knew of all the baser desires and emotions that people felt, but they did not impinge on her nature; she felt neither lust nor avarice nor envy nor spite.

Lisa had recently decided that she would do everything in her power to ensure that Hope's aims and ambitions were met to their fullest extent. Because by the time Lisa had come to a complete understanding of Hope's true and essential nature, something unprecedented had happened.

While Lisa knew from the start that Hope was different from the normal run of humanity, it took her a while to appreciate just how different she truly was. As flawed as humanity was, Hope was yet able to love them and willing to do her unstinting best to help them. As Lisa came to realise this, she had also, to her own surprise, come to realise something else, something startling; if she was reading her own feelings correctly, she was more than a little in love with Hope.

It kind of made sense; Hope was, after all, the one person who could hold her and kiss her without giving her far too much information about subjects she didn't want to know about. But there was more to it than that; Hope's actions, her achievements, gave her for the first time a feeling of optimism about the world, about the future. To know her was to know ... hope.

But by the time she had finally come to this conclusion, Hope and Amy were a dedicated couple. Amy’s need, Lisa had to reluctantly admit, was greater than her own. But Lisa had plans in motion – she always had plans, no matter where she was and what she was doing – to perhaps assuage that need, to give Amy another outlet.

And then, perhaps, Hope would see the need in her.

________________________________________________________

Director Piggot looked up as Hope and Amy approached.

"You're looking well," said Hope, with a wide and genuine smile. "Thank you for being here. Taylor needs all the support she can get." She gestured around at the courtroom. "I'm so pleased that everyone turned up. Even some of her other friends."

Piggot rose from the chair and took Hope's hands in hers. "This is down to you," she said quietly. "All of this, here, today. Because you spoke so eloquently to Weld. Because you cared enough to say something."

Hope shrugged, smiling shyly. "I may have started it, but you are the one who brought it to here," she demurred. She looked from the Director to Miss Militia. "Both of you. For Taylor's sake, I want to thank you."

Miss Militia nodded. "A good thing is happening today," she agreed. "We should all be grateful."

"I think it's something that we should remember, and try to build on," Amy added, holding tight to Hope's arm. "I, of all people, know what it means when a cape does something that they truly should not. Especially someone who's supposed to be a hero."

Hope turned and enfolded Amy in a hug. "Sweetie, remember how it goes?"
Amy rested her head on Hope's shoulder. "Realise it –"

Hope smiled at Director Piggot. "Fix it –"

Amy finished with a kiss to Hope's cheek. "And move on."

Still holding Amy in her arms, Hope looked at the Director. "Actually, there was something I wanted to ask you. Tattletale wanted to know what the status of Scrub was."

Piggot frowned slightly. "The name is familiar, but –"

"That's the Merchant boy, correct?" asked Miss Militia. "The one who disintegrates chunks out of the scenery? We have him under restraint, pending final assessment." She looked at Hope. "Why is that?"

Hope shrugged slightly. "Tattletale said something about borrowing him for a while."

Director Piggot shook her head, more in disbelief than negation. "Seriously? Borrowing him for a while? What does she think we are, a lending library?"

"I have no idea," said Hope. "She just said that it was an idea she was working on."

Miss Militia frowned, and glanced at Director Piggot. "When Tattletale has an idea," she said, "it's probably best to listen."

"I'm totally aware of that," responded Piggot. She smiled thinly. "We'll work something out when all this is done with. I'm just going to make her wait for it."

Hope just grinned and shook her own head.

Amy snuggled into Hope's embrace. She so loved Hope.

Amy Dallon, born Amelia Claire Lavere, had not had very much luck with her relationships. At a very young age, she had been separated from her father, been taken to live with the Dallons.

Her new 'father', Mark Dallon, had been distant and withdrawn, suffering from chronic depression. Her 'mother', Carol Dallon, distrusted and disliked her, even as Amy strove to gain some measure of approval and love. Vicky ... accepted her. Loved her as a sister. And then rejected her when she finally took that step too far, confessing her need, and doing the unthinkable, modifying Vicky's brain so that she would feel the same way about her.

She had been in a bad place then, as low as she had ever fallen. But then Hope found her, picked her up, supported her. She talked Vicky into letting Amy fix what had been done to her, and healed that rift. She made things right. With Hope at her side, what had once seemed to be an onerous duty, crushing her beneath its weight, was now a pleasure and a joy. Life became ... fun.

Hope had even gone so far as to recognise the hurt, the needs, deep within her. Her needs, her fixations, had passed from Vicky on to Hope, and Hope had seen this and responded. And it was good. She loved Hope; Hope loved her.

But yet ...

Meeting Newter, hugging him, seeing the uncomplicated need in his eyes, knowing that she was the only one who could truly meet that need, had stirred something within her. It was affection, compassion ... and perhaps something more. For years, she had thought herself a lesbian, attracted
only to women. But was it possible that the fixation had been specifically to Glory Girl, that she could also be attracted to guys, to Newter in particular?

Not physically, not in any great sense, no; she had no particular fixation for orange skin, for cobalt-blue hair – which, she knew, was dyed. But he was very athletic, very lithe, and his tail had a most interesting teasing way of ...

She stopped herself from pursuing that line of thought. Lisa had suggested going to see the Crew, and seeing what her power could do for them, and Hope thought it was a good idea. Amy concurred. And if it so happened that she got to see Newter up close and personal once more, perhaps even see what it was like to kiss him properly this time – all in the name of scientific experimentation, of course. Hope's hugs and kisses were nice, but still she remembered holding Newter in her arms, and how different it felt.

And although she barely admitted it to herself, she wanted to do so again. Just to see what it was like.

"So," said Aisha, plunking herself down in the seat next to Taylor. "You and Tecton, knocking boots, huh?" She grinned lewdly. "Does he have an attachment on his armour for that?"

"Aisha!" exclaimed Taylor, her face going bright red. "No, he doesn't – I mean, no, we haven't ... done that, yet."

Aisha frowned. "Why the hell not?" she asked, her face furrowing in honest confusion. "I mean, I've never met the guy when he's been outside of the tin can, but I hear that he's pretty damn hunky. And after the way you were drooling over my big bro, I'm surprised you didn't jump his well-muscled bones on the first night."

"I was not drooling over Brian," said Taylor stiffly, trying to maintain some level of dignity. "I was merely ... appreciating the aesthetics of his form."

"Yeah," grinned Aisha. "I figure, if we'd come in ten minutes later when you were putting that furniture together that day? You and him would have been appreciating the whatsits of each other's forms all over the brand new kitchen table."

"Aisha!" said Brian reproachfully.

Taylor hid her face as she blushed crimson once more. At the same time, she couldn't help giggling. Perhaps it was because she saw a grain of truth in Aisha's words.

"Sorry, kiddo," she said. "But Brian never saw me in that way, not really." She peered up at him through her fingers; she could feel that her cheeks were still flaming red. "Did you?"

Brian scratched the back of his head, looked embarrassed. "I ... sorry, Taylor, not really," he admitted. "I mean, I like you a lot, but ... not in that way, not really." He paused, and smiled. "But you and Tecton, huh? I'm glad."

"Hey, I got a question," put in Aisha. "Where does he carry the handcuffs? And who gets to use them on who first?"

"Christ Almighty," said Regent. "I think someone's been feeding her red meat. She's really on form today."

Aisha held up two hands without even looking, showing him both of her middle fingers "Screw you, dweeb."
"Maybe later," he responded without missing a beat. "But I want to be on top this time."

"Hah," said Aisha. "You'll be lucky to be in the same room."

Lisa, without appearing to look, saw Director Piggot talking to Hope, and correctly divined the outcome of the conversation. Excellent.

Amy also; she saw the shifting thoughts and emotions in the way she stood, snuggled into Hope's embrace, and her smile grew more vulpine. Oh, definitely excellent.

Then she saw Taylor sit bolt upright, hands going to the chair arms.

Something's up. But her power could not get anything aside from it not being nearby.

What does she know that I don't?

The van tooled into the outskirts of Brockton Bay. Vex leaned on the window sill, looked out.

"Huh," he said. "The place is looking good. You'd never think Leviathan and the Nine had been here less than a month ago."

In the front seat, Butcher grinned savagely. "By the time we're done, they'll be wishing Leviathan had never left."

Animos stretched. "Any places to eat around here? I'm starving."

The van pulled up at – wonder of wonders – a working traffic light. Several bugs flew in through the open window. No-one took any notice.

Butcher ground the gears. Someone beeped behind the van as it was slow to move off, then cut around her. Butcher swore at them, the anger boiling up within her.

"So where we going to go first?" said Spree.

"Some place to eat?" asked Animos hopefully. Everyone ignored him.

"You know," said Hemorrhagia, "they've got this monument to the Nine, where they kicked their asses for good and all. Right in the middle of the territory of their most powerful warlord."

Butcher smiled. The Slaughterhouse Nine had encountered earlier incarnations of the Teeth, and those members had not survived to tell the tale. A monument to the Nine sounded exactly like what she wanted to vent her anger on. And a Brockton Bay warlord? Bring it.

"Okay," she said. "Who's got the map? Let's go there."

Taylor got up from her chair and walked toward Director Piggot and Miss Militia. Lisa watched her with concern, but did not follow. She knew something was up, but she didn't know what, not quite yet.

The people living in Victory Park were used to following Skitter's commands. This one didn't need much encouragement to follow; they had also heard of the Teeth. They grabbed their children, their loved ones, and left, the insect conglomerates directing them.

On the roof of the building nearby, Falkor awoke from whatever dreams insects have. She spread her long gossamer wings and darted from the rooftop, heading for Victory Park. As she reached the limit of Taylor's range, she released a relay bug from her internal cavity, and kept flying.

Director Piggot turned to observe Taylor's approach. "Miss Hebert," she said formally. "How are you feeling?"

Taylor nodded briefly. "Well, thank you, but we have a situation."

Both Piggot and Miss Militia turned their full attention to Taylor. A day previously, had she said those exact same words, the statement would have elicited polite interest, no more. Now, knowing who and what she was, they were considerably more than politely interested.

"Situation?" repeated Director Piggot, beating Miss Militia by only a few tenths of a second.

Taylor nodded. "The Teeth are in town. They're heading for Victory Park."

Piggot blanched. She didn't even consider questioning Taylor's grasp of the situation. The glowing report submitted by Daniels after the Brockton Grand raid, and the way Taylor had located and secured Gerard Hoskins, had given her a very high estimation of Taylor's capabilities.

"There are hundreds of people there," she said, horrified. "They'll be massacred!"

Taylor shook her head. "I'm clearing it out now. It'll be touch and go, but I think I can have it empty by the time they get there."

"I'll alert the Protectorate and the Wards," Miss Militia said promptly. "Who's in the contingent of the Teeth?"

"Butcher I know for sure," said Taylor. "She's got four of them with her. Three men and a woman."

Miss Militia muttered something to herself; it sounded like a prayer. "Butcher," she said. "Butcher the Fourteenth. So the ones with her are probably Spree, Vex, Animos and Hemorrhagia." She looked at Director Piggot, even as she pulled her phone out. "Not a Mover among them, except for Butcher. Perhaps we can contain them in the park."

"Any of them immune to poison, or don't have to breathe?" asked Taylor flatly.

Miss Militia considered. "Not as such," she admitted. "Butcher's got a tough skin, and she's really hard to kill. Not that you want to kill her, of course," she added.

Taylor shook her head. "No thank you," she agreed. She didn't want fourteen minds screaming at her in her own head.

Miss Militia made the call, then snapped her phone shut. "I'm going," she announced. "I think I need to run this operation from the front."

Piggot nodded. "Good luck," she said. Miss Militia merely nodded as she stood and left the courtroom at a rapid pace.

"Hopefully," said Taylor, "we won't need luck." Piggot, Amy and Hope all looked at her curiously.
Taylor grinned. "Falkor is on the way to Victory Park. She's got some of your best bugs on board, Amy."

Amy smiled in return. She knew exactly what her bugs could do.

"Oh," said Hope. "Oh dear." But she was smiling.

Director Piggot frowned. "Hope mentioned non-lethal attack bugs to me before. Would someone care to fill me in?"

"Well," said Amy, "I took the common wasp ..."

The van rolled into Victory Park and pulled to a halt. All five of the Teeth climbed out, stretching limbs and rolling their heads on their necks, as people will do after a long drive.

Butcher went around to the back of the van and extracted her Gatling gun, along with her other accoutrements.

"Okay," she said, "let's see this monument."

As they walked, Vex looked around. "Is it just me," he said, "or is this place empty?"

"There's tents and stuff," Spree said. "But you're right. I can't see anyone moving."

Butcher shrugged. "No need to waste ammo then."

Falkor zipped across the rooftops at her best speed. This was, Taylor had to admit, much better than the speed Falkor could make when carrying her. But then, Taylor was significantly heavier than the modified dragonfly.

She slowed dramatically when still a little distant from the park, keeping low over the rooftops until she could come to rest in a convenient spot.

Vex looked up. "What was that sound?"

Butcher looked around in irritation. "What sound?"

Vex frowned. "Sounded like a chopper, or something similar. But not quite." He paused. "But it's gone now."

Butcher grinned; or at least she showed her teeth. "Probably a Tinker lurking around somewhere." She looked around, searching for human forms, found nothing. "He shows his head, I'll blow it off for him."

Falkor's body cavity opened; the swarm contained within spilled out, forming up and moving toward the edge of the roof. Other insects in the vicinity, having been brought together to create the Skitter-clones, now began to form up in swarms around the edge of the park.

"Let's go, people!"

Assault led the way, moving at a trot toward the waiting PRT transport. He climbed on board, followed by Battery and Triumph. Weld led the Wards toward the second transport.
They lifted off simultaneously; Assault opened a voice channel to the other transport, spoke for the benefit of everyone in both craft.

"Okay, people," he said. "Our best information has them in Victory Park. There are only five of them, but don't let that fool you. Butcher, Animos, Hemorrhagia, Vex and Spree. These are killers, people. Only the biggest hitters are to take on Butcher, and subdue her fast – she can put a bullet anywhere she can see you, and she can see through walls to do it. But for God's sake don't kill her."

He went on to describe the capabilities of the other Teeth. "Miss Militia will meet us en route, and we'll work out a viable strategy once we see the lay of the land. Fortunately, it appears there are no civilians in the area."

Butcher and the other Teeth stared at the monument. "That's it?" asked Vex, his voice disbelieving.

Spree popped a couple of dupes; they walked around the monument, looking at it from all sides. "Looks like," one said.

Animos muttered something under his breath. "Not even a description of the Nine, or who they killed. Shit."

"Well, I know what to do about that," said Butcher, grinning widely. "Target practice."

"Oh, shit," said Spree. Everyone backed off, moving away from Butcher. She flicked a switch, and the barrels on her Gatling began to spin as she paced backward from the monument.

"Which side should I hit it from?" she asked.

"Does it f**king matter?" said Spree. "It's toast anyway."

Butcher nodded. "True." She lined up casually and fired a single shot. The thirty-millimeter round took the gnomon off the sundial, punching through the building opposite and disappearing into the middle distance. Then she switched to full-auto and fired at the monument itself.

Heavy steel-jacketed bullets met granite, and chewed it away like hot water eroding ice. The dense stone cracked, then chipped, then came away in chunks and fragments that spalled and sprayed across the park. Butcher's laughter sounded as loud and as harsh as the rapidfire bark of the Gatling.

A swarm of insects coalesced over the remains of the monument. It spoke, in a buzzing, humming tone.

"You shouldn't have done that."

"What the f**k?" Butcher loosed two rounds into, and through, the swarm. Then she frowned. "There's no-one there."

Vex sprayed a multitude of tiny shards through the swarm; the razor-sharp forcefields destroyed the insects. Another swarm arose in its place. "Surrender. Lay down your weapons."

Butcher laughed again, triggered her Gatling, then frowned and looked down as the barrels ground to a halt. Strange silvery webbing was wound around the barrels and the mechanism, jamming it tightly.

"Oh, you did not just do that," she snarled, pulling out another gun.

The swarm hit them from the side, pouring around them, nipping and scratching and stinging; they
threw up their arms to protect their faces and eyes, but in another moment, it was gone. Animos had become his beast form, looking for something, anything, to howl at. Vex had a loose shell of forcefields circulating around him, ready for another assault. Spree was spawning dupes as fast as his power allowed.

"You can't beat us!" growled Butcher, firing two shots at the insect-clone.

"You already lost."

Butcher looked around with enraged astonishment as first Vex crumpled, then Animos. Hemorrhagia was the third to fall. Spree took longer, but his primary body went down, followed by the rest of him, like dominos.

She became aware of a strange insect, like a large hornet, perching on her cheek, prodding her tough skin with its stinger. She slapped it, splattering its guts over her face, then wiped it off roughly.

"Whatever you used on those idiots," she growled, "it won't work on me."

Then she grunted with surprise and fell over.

Ketamine wasps crawled inside her open mouth, to where the tissues were soft, and stung and stung and stung.

Assault looked with surprise at the wall of the transport. Insects were forming words, holding steady against the buffeting of the aircraft.

TEETH DOWN. CLEAR TO MOP UP.

"Well, shit," he said.

They came in carefully anyway. Butcher and the other Teeth were lying motionless next to the ruined monument; a humanoid mass of insects stood nearby.

"They have each had a strong dose of ketamine," the Skitter clone told them. "Butcher has had a dose of Newter-style hallucinogen, plus lots of ketamine. I would recommend sedation until you can figure out what to do with her."

"Wow," said Clockblocker, surveying the would-be battlefield. "Don't I feel redundant now."

Miss Militia's transport grounded, and she joined them. "Don't complain," she said. "It's better than the alternative." She paused. "Just be glad she was on our side for this one."

"Yeah, I think I'll just go sit down for a while," said Clockblocker.

Director Piggot's phone buzzed. She answered it, spoke a few words, and listened. Then she looked up at Taylor. "Apparently it's all over," she said. "Well done."

Taylor shrugged. "I had some very useful bugs to work with."

Piggot nodded. "Just one thing?" she said.

"Yes?" asked Taylor.
"Next time ... could you perhaps leave them *something* to do?"

Taylor grinned. "I'll try."
In which Barnes questions Hope, Robertson questions Emma, and Shadow Stalker makes both an entrance and an exit

Taylor sat in the witness stand. Mr Barnes was still preparing his notes. The recess had passed all too quickly, even after the incident with the Teeth. She had wanted to talk to Tecton, but there had been no opportunity to do so. Tonight, she decided. I'll talk to him tonight.

She admitted to herself that right now what she really wanted was a hug from him. Because despite her father's reassurances, despite Mr Thompson's smooth expertise, even despite the unexpected departure of Quinn Calle and Mr Martins, and Lisa's prediction on the case, she still felt butterflies in her stomach.

What do I really want from Everett, anyway? she asked herself. She had to pause to think about it. He's nice. He's a good friend. I love it when he wraps his arms around me, and the kisses just blow my mind. She paused. But should I be really thinking about having sex with him?

The question was a far different one when viewed in the harsh light of day, than when in the middle of a makeout session, such as the one last night. She considered it seriously.

I like him a lot. Really a lot. I enjoy spending time with him, and I think he enjoys spending time with me. He's good looking, and he's got a body to die for, and he's really nice to me ... and I need someone, dammit.

But do I need him in my bed, or just in my life?

She groaned mentally, recalling the feel of his muscles under her hands, the burning kisses, the sheer blinding desire to go farther with him. I want him, that's for certain. I want him to take me to bed and do things with me – to me – that I've only imagined.

She breathed deeply, getting her body back under control. But should I? she asked herself. Is this a good thing to do, right now, the way my life is at the moment?

Her brain wasn't sure; her libido leaped up and down like a gibbering baboon, trying to impress upon her the sincere urgency that yes, of course she should do this.

Of course, she realised, if I decide that sex is not on the table at the moment – an image sprang fully formed into her mind, of her lying spreadeagled across the kitchen table, with Everett, gloriously naked – no, no, god, stop it! Firmly, she erased the image.

She took another deep breath. If I decide that, then we're going to have to put a stop to our makeout sessions. Or at least put rules on them. Because another night like last night? I don't know if I'll be able to control myself. And Everett wasn't far off losing control last night either.

She sighed. It's not easy being good.

Mr Barnes stood up and approached the witness stand. Taylor sighed inwardly. Time to get my head in the game.

At least the butterflies were gone; they had disappeared sometime while she was debating what to do about Everett. Another thing I can thank him for.
"Miss Hebert," Alan Barnes began, as if he had not called her by her first name a thousand times, as if she and Emma had not been best friends for years. "Is it not true that on the twenty-fourth of April, you physically attacked my daughter in front of dozens of witnesses, in a totally unprovoked manner?"

"Yes, but –" Taylor began.

He spoke over the top of her voice. "And is it not true that you had to be subdued and restrained by the superheroes on site, to be prevented from attacking her again?"

"Well, sort of, but –"

"Yes or no?" he pressed.

"Well, yes, but –"

"And is it not true that you have not been back to school since that incident? That you are in fact not living at home any more? That you've run away and are now living on the streets?"

Whispers of comment in the spectators' gallery. Northwood banged his gavel; the noise subsided.

"No, sir, it is not true," she said clearly.

He stared at her. "I will remind you, Miss Hebert, that you are under oath, and that perjury is a serious crime."

"I understand that, sir," she said. "But I am currently living at home, in my father's house, and I have never lived on the streets." Thank you, Lisa.

"Indeed," he said. "But you did run away from home for a while; that's correct, isn't it? Where were you living? With supervillains?"

"Objection!" said Robertson, rising to his feet. "Your Honour, Counsel is badgering the witness."

"Sustained," Northwood ruled. "Kindly confine your cross-examination to the case at hand, Mr Barnes."

"Actually, Your Honour, may I answer that last question?" asked Taylor.

"Certainly, if you wish to," replied the judge, a little surprised.

"I was living with friends for a while," she told Alan Barnes directly. "And then, after Leviathan, I was living in a shelter for a while. But I was never living on the street."

Barnes stared at her, obviously trying to work out another line of attack. She met his eyes directly. Finally, he said, "No further questions, your Honour."

Robertson strolled over toward the stand, his pace slow, his manner confident. He smiled at Taylor and began.

"Taylor, the incident that Emma's father – sorry, I mean the counsel for the defense – referred to, what actually happened?" His tone of voice suggested, you and I know that something different really happened, don't we?

She took a deep breath. "I had been off school for a week. This was just after Bakuda attacked the
city, and I had been caught in one of the bomb blasts. I had a little concussion, nothing serious."

"So you were suffering from a head injury at the time," he noted. "Is it possible that you were not thinking too clearly?"

"Objection!" shouted Mr Barnes. "Counsel is leading the witness into speculation!"

"The witness has a better chance of knowing whether she was thinking clearly or not, than anyone else around her, your Honour," Robertson retorted immediately.

"Overruled," Northwood noted. "Witness will answer the question."

"I think I may have been," admitted Taylor. "I was having mood swings. But I was going back to school the next day. We were actually in the mall to get school supplies." She paused. "We were waiting to get out, and we ran into Mr Barnes." Another pause. "Dad didn't know that Emma was behind the bullying then. He spoke to Mr Barnes, and then Emma came up, and she didn't even say a word. We just looked at each other. And then she smiled at me."

Mr Robertson looked puzzled. He really was a very good actor. "She smiled? That's good, isn't it?"

Taylor shook her head. "Not the way she did it, sir. It was the same smile she used every time she'd done something to hurt me, like when she threw my mother's death in my face, or when she and the others tipped juice and cola over the toilet wall into my cubicle –"

"Objection!" shouted Mr Barnes. "Witness is describing events that may or may not have happened, and are prejudicial against the defendants!"

"Sustained," ruled Northwood. "Witness will confine her testimony to provable events."

Robertson smiled at her. "Did you see them do this?"

"Oh, yes," said Taylor. "And when I came out, they were still holding the empty containers. And laughing at me."

"Your Honour," said Robertson, "I believe that makes it a provable event."

"So noted," agreed Northwood. "Objection overturned. Please continue."

Taylor took a breath. "Well, anyway, any time she did anything to get at me or hurt me, she used to give me that same smile. So this time, she was standing beside her father, and she gave me that smile. And this time, this one time, I just –" She paused. "I just hit her."

"Did you slap her or punch her?" asked Mr Robertson quietly.

"I slapped her, I think," said Taylor. "Yes. My hand was open, so I must have slapped her." She paused. "It's funny. I don't actually recall doing it. I just remember the smile, and then seeing her lying on the ground, and my hand stretched out in front of me."

"And what happened after that?" asked Mr Robertson. "Did you attack her again?"

"No, I was too stunned," said Taylor. "I couldn't believe I'd done it. But I wouldn't have had a chance, anyway. She grabbed me and put plastic cuffs on me. Threatened to have me charged."

"Who grabbed you?" he asked. "Not Emma?"

time, but it was her."

This time the rustle of comment from the spectators' gallery was quite audible; Northwood had to bang his gavel twice to settle it down.

"So, what you're saying," said Robertson, "is that when you unexpectedly came face to face with the girl who had been bullying you for years, when you were still under the effects of a concussion, and she gave you a taunting – is that the right word, taunting, smile?"

Taylor nodded. "It's the right word, yes, sir," she said.

"So she gave you a taunting smile, and you simply reacted. Slapped her ... which, under the circumstances, I would consider to be a fairly mild reaction. And then you were intercepted by a parahuman, her good friend and fellow bully – who is, I will remind the jury, now a wanted criminal – and put into handcuffs? Really?" His voice seemed to express a certain level of disbelief. "Isn't that a bit of an overreaction? Putting handcuffs on a teenage girl?"

"Really," she assured him. "I still have the cuffs. Dad had to cut them off me."

"So what happened after that?" he asked, although he knew the answer quite well.

"After that is when I was called in to the school to answer for hitting Emma, and we tried to present the evidence of bullying," Taylor said simply.

"Hmm yes," he agreed. "So it was. And we all know how that turned out."

She nodded. "Yes, sir. It didn't go well."

"Well then," he said. "To address another of the concerns raised by the counsel for the defense, did you indeed run away from home?"

She shook her head. "No, sir. I left home. My father did not try to stop me. As I told Mr Barnes, I moved in with friends. It was nice. They let me have my own space." She smiled. "We played video games a lot."

"And have you been back to school since?" he asked.

"No, sir," she said. "At first it was because I really didn't see the point, after the experience that I'd already had. They would have known, then, that they could do anything they wanted to me, and anything I said would be discounted by the school. So no, I didn't go back." She shrugged. And then, Leviathan happened, and there wasn't really any school to go back to."

"But you say you are living at home now?" asked Mr Robertson.

"Yes," agreed Taylor. "Dad and I have had our differences, but we're working on mending them. I've moved back in, and we've had my friends over a couple of times since. Dad gets along with them really well."

"Well," he said. "That's really nice to hear." He turned to the judge. "No further questions, you Honour."

"Does Counsel for Defense wish to cross-examine the witness further?" asked Judge Northwood.

"No, your Honour," said Alan Barnes, not even bothering to look at Taylor.

Northwood nodded. "Miss Hebert, you may be excused."
"Thank you, your Honour," said Taylor, standing, and finding to her surprise that her knees were shaking. She managed to control the reaction long enough to get back to the seat at the table beside her father. On the way, she caught sight of the Undersiders, as well as Hope and Amy, each giving her a discreet thumbs-up, all except for Aisha. She was sticking her tongue out, crossing her eyes, and giving her two thumbs-down; Taylor had to suppress a giggle.

As she sat down, her father leaned across, grasped her hand, and gave it a squeeze. "You did well up there," he whispered. "I'm so proud of you."

She squeezed back. "Thanks, Dad," she replied. "Mr Robertson really helped prepare me."

"Yeah," he said. "But this is where it gets interesting."

"Your Honour," said Robertson, "I would like to call Emma Barnes to the stand."

Emma was proud of herself; even though she could see how badly it was going for them so far, her voice did not tremble when she gave her oath with a hand upon the Bible.

But then Mr Robertson, the District Attorney, was approaching her, and she was certain that his questions were not going to be as friendly and easy to answer as the ones that he had asked Taylor.

_Remember what I've got to say and how to say it, _she told herself. _Stay calm. Don't let him fluster you._

"Miss Barnes," he said smoothly.

_He called Taylor by her first name, why not me? _Tears prickled behind her eyelids. _He wants to make me trip up, wants to make me look bad for the jury. Why is this happening to me?_

But he was still speaking. "... Taylor Hebert?" he asked. To her horror, she realised that she had missed the entire question.

"Excuse me, but could you please repeat the question?" she asked in a small voice.

He smiled genially at her, as if he wished her nothing but goodwill and kindness.

"I asked you, Miss Barnes, how long you have known Taylor Hebert?"

"Um ..." She paused. "Since ... first grade? Ten years? Eleven?"

He smiled. "That's a long time. More than half your life. How long were you friends with her?"

She could see the teeth of the trap now. But she wasn't sure how to avoid them. "Since first grade, I guess. Same length of time."

"Now, now, that's not true," he chided gently. "Is it now? You and Taylor ceased being friends back in September of two thousand and nine, didn't you?"

She took a deep breath. "... yes," she managed.

He smiled. _There you go. That wasn't so hard after all, was it?_

"Eight or nine years," he mused. "That's still a very long time to be friends with someone." He paused. "Taylor says that you were her best friend. Would you consider that she was your best
friend?"

The teeth were closing in. "Uh, mostly?" she managed. "I mean, I had other friends in that time, but I guess Taylor and I were pretty well close for most of it."

He nodded understandingly. "I can see how that goes." He paused. "You and she were close. Who was the better at schoolwork?"

*Where is this going?* she asked herself.

Apparently her father had the same question in mind. "Objection, your Honour. Counsel is asking the defendant a series of meaningless questions."

Robertson turned to face the bench. "Your Honour, I am merely attempting to verify the past connection between Taylor Hebert and the defendant."

"Overruled," Northwood ruled, "but please try to reach a point sometime soon, Mr Robertson. The defendant will answer the question."

"Thank you, your Honour." He turned back to Emma. "Would you like me to repeat it?"

A titter of laughter ran along the spectators' gallery. Emma felt her face heating up. *He's going to throw that in my face every chance he gets, isn't he?*

"No, sir," she said firmly. "I recall the question. Taylor was better at schoolwork. She was always smarter than me." *They're probably expecting me to try to bad-mouth her. Let 'em chew on that.*

"So, you being such close friends, she would have helped you from time to time with your schoolwork, is that correct?"

The question was so bland, so inoffensive, that she answered without thinking. "Yes, sir, she did, from time to time."

"Now, Miss Barnes," he said, in that same gentle tone of voice. "I can understand cutting ties with her; sometimes people just grow apart. But by all her testimony, by your own statement, you were close friends. You did things together. She helped you with your schoolwork. She confided things to you. She, in fact, considered you her very best friend."

He paused, staring directly at her. "So, I have to ask this question. Why, from September of two thousand and nine, did you treat her as shamefully as you did? How could you do such things as you did to her, for *eighteen months*? What possible reasons could you have had?"

She took a deep breath. She had been waiting for this question, or a variation thereof, for the whole time that Mr Robertson had been questioning her. The teeth were about to clash shut on her. She had only one chance to avoid them.

In her modelling career, she had learned how to counterfeit emotions fairly skilfully. *After all, she thought cynically, even if the model's having a bad day, she's still got to show that dazzling smile.* So she bit her lip and forced the tears to well in her eyes.

"I'm – I'm sorry," she said, artistically putting a catch in her voice. "I couldn't help it. Sophia – Shadow Stalker – she made us do it."

A rustle of murmurs sprang up in the spectators' gallery; Northwood banged his gavel once.
Taylor leaned across to her father. "That can't be true," she murmured.

He shook his head in agreement. "No, it can't," he said. "But they don't know it."

And indeed, the jury seemed to be taking in her statement avidly.

Apparently, Robertson was not expecting this answer. "I beg your pardon?" he asked, "She _made_ you do it? How?"

Emma sniffled, and forced a tear to roll down her cheek. _Taylor's not the only one who can cry in the witness stand._ It wasn't hard; all she had to do was think about the consequences of losing the case.

"She – she threatened us," she said. "Threatened our families. Said that if we told anyone, she'd come and kill us all in our sleep."

"But – surely you could have gone to the police," said Robertson, trying to regain control of the situation. "Told the PRT, the Protectorate."

She shook her head and sniffled again. She _had_ the jury now, she could tell. They were spellbound. Vaguely, she wondered what the headlines would read. _BRAVE TEEN SPEAKS OUT ABOUT ORDEAL, perhaps._

After all, it's _not like she can say she didn't do it._

"She told us she had friends in the PRT and the Protectorate. She'd find out if anything was said. She was a _Ward_. She could deny it, and then we'd just ... disappear." She shrugged. "I didn't know if she was lying or not. I didn't want to take the chance."

She looked across the courtroom at Taylor. "I'm really sorry, Taylor. But I didn't have a choice, not really."

Some of the women in the jury were dabbing at their eyes; Emma could see it in her peripheral vision. It wouldn't do for her to look at them directly.

Of course, they also cried for Taylor. _But I can heap on the heartbreak, make them think I'm the victim too, then I might just walk after all._

She glanced across to where Madison's head had lifted for the first time; the other girl was staring at her with scarcely concealed hope. _Oh yeah, she'll follow my lead. She'd be a moron not to._

"Still," said Robertson, "I find it hard to believe that –"

And that was when the lights went out, and the doors slammed shut.

Taylor was sitting bolt upright, mind seething with outrage at Emma's blatant attempt to shift the blame. _That's just not true,_ she told herself. _Sophia never forced them to do a thing. She may have turned Emma against me in the first place,_ she amended silently, for the sake of fairness, _but Emma and Madison were happy to go at it all by themselves._

Thus, she was somewhat taken aback by the plunge into darkness and the sound of the doors shutting.

_Shadow Stalker. She's here._
Hope stood up, her glow amping up until it almost hurt the eye. She climbed on to a chair, the better to be seen by everyone; the soft pearlescent light from her body bathed everyone in a steady glow. "Everyone stay calm," she said. "I'm sure this is –"

Darkness roiled down the central aisle of the courtroom, and then coalesced into the figure of a teenage girl, not three paces from the District Attorney.

"Nope," said Shadow Stalker. "It isn't. It's me." She grinned a slightly manic grin. "I'm back."

Emma's mind went blank with terror. Oh. Shit.

Taylor tensed. The bugs in the various lights moved back and forth, adjusting focus and direction, as she had practised. When she gave the command, Shadow Stalker would be bathed in light far brighter than the midday sun. She went to give the signal –

Lisa tapped the shell of the beetle, twice. "No," she said softly. "Don't. Let her speak."

Taylor nearly ignored her, nearly unleashed the blast of the lights. But she trusted Lisa, trusted her instincts and her power. So she waited.

Hope frowned. Taylor should have turned on the lights by now. Why hasn't she? She looked over at Taylor, and saw that she was watching Shadow Stalker carefully, but showing no sign of distress. Is she waiting for something? Perhaps for Shadow Stalker to attack someone?

Hope didn't know, but people were starting to show signs of fear. She stepped down from the chair.

"Everyone," she said, her hands held high. "Please. Stay in your seats. If you stay calm, everything will be all right."

She moved down the aisle toward Shadow Stalker. "Sophia," she said evenly. "You're not here to hurt anyone, are you?"

Shadow Stalker looked around at her. "I wouldn't try to get close enough to use those wings on me, Hope," she said warningly. "I'll eat you alive. Literally."

"I'm not about to attack you," Hope replied simply. Sincerity rang through her words. "I just want everyone here to be safe, to be able to go home to their loved ones at the end of the day."

"Well, what we want and what we get is way different, from time to time," Sophia told her. "I'd like to be able to go home to my family. Not gonna happen. So there's gonna be some disappointment here today."

She looked around. "Most everyone here's safe, to be honest. I got nothing against any of you. The spectators, the Judge – hi, Judge," she called, waving. "Good old Miss Piggy over there ..." She paused, squinting in the poor light. "Good god, what happened? You actually look like a human being."

Director Piggot compressed her lips and said nothing, but she kept darting looks at Taylor. Hope could tell what she was thinking. Why hasn't she set them off yet?
But Shadow Stalker was moving on. "Dear old Taylor Hebert ..." She paused again. "Wow, what happened to you? Did you suddenly grow a fashion sense or something?"

Taylor ground her teeth, but did not answer. She had a flash-bug in her hair; if Sophia attacked her, it would do its job. *But she hasn't yet. Why?*

Sophia was wandering around in a circle, peering at the spectators. "Nope ... nope ... nope ... damn, Skitter's not here. I was kinda hoping she would be. Now, *her*, I wanna lunch on." She grinned. "Skitter and I got *history*. She was the one who started me down this long and sorry path."

She paused, head tilted to one side. "Well, actually, it started before that. But when Skitter discovered my identity after Leviathan, I knew I had to kill her. Trying to do that ran me head-first into Hope," she said, with a gesture toward the glowing parahuman, with fingers that seemed to trail black smoke. "She was in the way, I tried to remove her, but what I didn't know was that Skitter and the Undersiders were hunting *me*." 

She sighed in exasperation. "One thing led to another, I got used as a conduit to get into PRT headquarters, whereupon I was promptly captured again and sent off to the never-never. But I'm back now, bigger and badder than ever."

She treated her frozen audience to a brilliant smile. "But I have a list, and you can surely bet I'm checking it twice. Top of the list is Skitter. Then there's the other Undersiders, mainly Grue and Regent, but Tattlebitch and Doggy-Bitch I'll kill too, just for shits and giggles, folks. Just for shits and giggles."

She pondered, finger on chin. "Who else? Oh yeah. Hope, you're on my list too. Sorry, but that's the way it is. You're all kinda shiny, but I figure I can get past that."

She strolled toward Hope, who watched her come without apparent fear. "Just wanna find out my threshold for you ..." she muttered, apparently to herself. She approached closer and closer, frowning in puzzlement.

"What the hell?" she muttered, when she was just a foot away, Hope's light seeming to illuminate her less than her surroundings. "I'm not trying to feed off you, but ... your light's not affecting me, and I'm feeling better all the time. Not as hungry. How are you *doing* that?"

"Um ... no idea?" said Hope. She paused. "If you don't feel hungry, you won't want to kill anyone, right?"

Sophia grinned tightly. "There's such a thing as making an example, honey," she said. "But yeah, this means my timetable just got a lot looser." She gestured. "Come on. If you stick close, I won't feel like snacking on anyone." Hope obediently walked alongside her.

"I've only got three other people on my list," Sophia went on. "Taylor there's one of them. You *had* to go to the principal. Doesn't do me much good right now, but hey, revenge is its own reward." She grinned darkly. "And then there's the last two. Madison Clements and Emma Barnes."

Madison gasped, but quickly restrained herself. Emma exclaimed audibly.

Sophia turned and went back toward the witness stand; Robertson stood aside as she approached. "What's that, Emma?" she asked sweetly. "Didn't think the poor bitch Shadow Stalker would turn up, just as you were throwing her to the wolves?"
"It's not that – I just – I mean –" stammered Emma.

"It's all right," Shadow Stalker soothed her. "You were just doing what Emma Barnes does best. Making sure you didn't get in trouble, with the help of your daddy the lawyer." She grinned. "Actually, I just had an idea. You're gonna die today, you and your little gal-pal Madison, but I'm gonna make it easier on you. I'm gonna tell everyone what you really did; by the time I'm done, you're gonna want to die."

"But – but I –" began Emma.

Sophia took a step forward, darkness beginning to roil up around her. "Shut. The fuck. Up," she advised. "Or what I'll be saying about you will be posthumous. Get me?"

Emma nodded and shrank back in her chair.

"Good," said Shadow Stalker lightly. "So. Mister District Attorney. What I've heard so far of the case is pretty much on the up-and-up, but there's details I know that Emma and little Madison there are not gonna spill. So ask."

Robertson floundered for a moment, then recovered his mental balance. "Okay," he said. "Just from curiosity. What exactly happened with Taylor's flute?"

"Ah yeah, the flute," Sophia responded. "I remember that. I saw her take it out of her bag and put it into her locker, so as soon as I got the chance, I reached in there and grabbed it."

She shrugged. "I thought if it was new, I might be able to get a few bucks for it, but it was all old and worn. So I didn't know what to do with it. But then Emma came to me and asked if I'd taken it. I said, sure. She told me to— and I quote, ladies and gentlemen – fuck with it. To do something disgusting to it, so she'd never be able to use it again." She shrugged again. "So I did."

"Okay," said Robertson, "how about the locker?"

"Damn," said Sophia, "that was our best one yet. See, Madison had the idea before the Christmas break, and she and Emma helped me gather all that disgusting crap from the special trash cans they have in the girls' toilets."

She looked at Robertson to ensure that he was following this. "I mean, Emma didn't think of it, but she was laughing her head off, thinking of the look on Taylor's face. So, we all held our breath getting the shit into her locker. I had a pair of gloves on, and I just dropped handful after handful through the door until we were out."

She grinned. "It all worked out perfectly. The original plan was to just watch her throw up when all the shit just rolled out of her locker. We'd told a few people that something special was gonna happen, but not what. So everyone got a good show. She opened the locker, and bent over, and was just starting to lose her lunch. But then I thought, hey, why not, and came up behind her and shoved her right into the locker, in with all the crap."

She pointed at Emma. "Now she was thinking on her feet. Me, I was gonna just hold the door closed for a bit, then let her fall out, all covered in shit and pads and tampons and spew. Take a few photos, share them around. That woulda been good. But Emma had her brainstorm then. 'Quick,' she said. 'Lock her in.' So we pushed the door all the way to, put the lock on, spun the dial, and she was locked in."

Another grin. "Some of the weak sisters wanted to let her out. But we said, piss off, we'll let her out in a minute. So they left. And we went to class." She sighed. "That was a good day."
Robertson had, of course, cross-examined the worst offenders in the city at one point or another, so he hid his thoughts well. "So," he said, "all these other things that Taylor has told us happened? The shoving down stairs, the dumping juice and cola over toilet walls, throwing clothes into the shower, stealing art projects? I mean, the list does go on."

"Oh shit, if she wrote it down, it probably happened," Sophia said carelessly. "The emails too. All of that shit. Me, I lost count of what I did to her. I was just having too much fun. Emma and Madison too."

"I see," said Robertson. "So, two other questions."

"Shoot," said Sophia grandly.

"First off, I know Emma knew you were a parahuman. But did Madison?"

Sophia shook her head. "Not at first. Not until the locker bit. When she found out, she just said, 'Huh, cool,' and kept on handing me shit to put in there."

Robertson nodded; Madison looked stricken. "So, the allegations that you threatened the girls to cooperate with the bullying. Is that true?"

Sophia Hess threw back her head and laughed; the sound had the echo of madness in it. "Oh god," she giggled. "You have got to be kidding. Seriously. Me, threaten them? I wouldn't have had to. They were like pigs in shit. Seriously, it was more Emma's idea than mine to fuck shit up for Taylor so much."

Emma looked like she wanted to sink through the floor.

Robertson raised a finger. "Okay," he said. "I know I said two questions, but I have one last one."

She raised an interrogatory eyebrow.

"Why do it at all?" he asked. "What was it all about? Why did you three have it in for Taylor so much?"

"Because it was fun, mainly," said Sophia. "And because she'd been Emma's friend. See, back in the day, I saved Emma and her dad from being fucked up by the ABB. After that, she realised that she'd been looking at life all wrong. You see, it's all about who fights and lives, and who gives up and dies. So she changed her life around. But there was Taylor, who had lost her mom awhile ago, sob sob, boo hoo, and she was still getting over that."

She took a breath. "Emma had the idea to see if Taylor was worth knowing, or was just another weak sister. So we started fucking her shit up. But the more we did it, the more she just ... let us. And after a while, it became a habit." She giggled. "Shit, if she'd ever actually turned around and showed that she had a spine after all, we wouldn't've known what to do. Maybe we would've let up, maybe we would've kept it up, just to make sure it wasn't a fluke. But she never did."

She smiled at Emma. "And now, I figure I've fucked your world up just about as hard as I can, so you know something? I'm gonna end things for you. Trust me, it's not gonna get any worse than this." She took a step closer to the witness stand.

Hope stepped in front of her. "I'm not going to let you do this," she said.

Sophia shook her head in disbelief. "How the hell do you propose stopping me?"
Hope gave her a sorrowful look. "Like this. Sorry."

Looking past Sophia, she caught Taylor's eye and nodded firmly, once. *Now.*

Taylor caught the nod, and in forty-three mechanisms built into lights all over the courtroom, forty-three bugs surged forward.

The lights had been aligned and focused carefully as Sophia had moved around the room, so that they didn't need shifting. Each bug ran forward on its little track, tripping micro-switches as it did so.

The lights came on.

Forty-three lights, as powerful as Kid Win could design with a built-in power source, blazed forth. They were focused, and they were aimed. Shadow Stalker was in the precise confluence of all the beams that could reach her.

She screamed, high and harsh; the shadow-tentacles which had been reaching out from her, smoked into nothingness. No-one could see through the intolerable glare; Taylor had bugs hanging on Sophia's prison sweats, and had her eyes shut tight. Hope, closest to the beams, had her hand over her eyes, and still she was dazzled.

If anyone could have seen her, they would have seen her flesh evaporating like smoke, like mist in the midday sun. She *sublimed* away; her voice rose to a shriek, then cut out altogether.

When Taylor cut the lights back to a normal level of illumination, it seemed as though darkness had fallen once more, so bright had been the lights. But peoples' eyes adjusted back once more, and they started looking around. Chatter rose, and Northwood's gavel did not bang.

"Everyone, please stay calm," said Hope. "The danger is over now, I believe."

She knelt down and ran her fingertips over the area of floor where Sophia had been standing when the lights cut in. "I hope she's at peace now," she murmured.

Things got just a bit confused after that.

Taylor got up and walked over to where Hope was still kneeling. She put a hand on the glowing parahuman's shoulder. "I'm sorry," she said softly. "I know you didn't want to do it."

Hope stood and wrapped Taylor in a hug, one that was soon returned. "I know, but it had to be done," she said. "She was dangerous, and she would not have stopped. Thank you for doing what had to be done."

Judge Northwood sent someone out to check on the lights. It seemed that the power breaker had been thrown, just before Sophia had pulled the doors closed.

Aisha was looking most irritated; Brian glanced over at her. "What's the matter? Eyes still sore?"

"Shit no," she said. "Still seeing spots, but that's about it. No, what pisses me off is that Shadow Bitch just got royally fucked over, and I couldn't see a fucking thing."

"You know, that's all we get out of you," said Alec with a grin. "Nothing but complaints."
Aisha gave him the finger.

After the main lights had come back on, and everyone had settled down again, Judge Northwood wearily banged his gavel. "We will continue this sitting at nine o'clock in the morning. Court is adjourned."

As the spectators and participants filed out of the court, PRT techs entered with samplers and sensor equipment, to locate and analyse anything that might remain of Shadow Stalker.

They found ... nothing.
In which hardball is played, Brian is embarrassed, Taylor speaks to Everett and Amy performs experimental surgery

As the spectators filed from the courtroom, the level of chatter rising dramatically now that the judge had retired to his chambers, Director Piggot rose and caught Hope’s eye. Hope rose, Amy at her side, and went to see what she wanted.

"Hope, Amy," said the Director, slightly awkwardly, "we have a slight problem."

Hope glanced around quickly, but there didn't seem to be an immediate danger. "Problem, Madam Director?"

"Not here, not here," Director Piggot added. "It's about the Teeth. As you know, Taylor managed to subdue them – " she smiled at Amy, " – using your specialty bugs, and they have since been taken into custody by the PRT."

"Well, that's good news, isn't it?" asked Hope.

"Yes, and no," admitted Pigott. "The leader of this contingent was Butcher." She took a deep breath. "Butcher is a special case, and is very problematic. She is the fourteenth to take the name. Each earlier Butcher was killed by his or her successor, and gained not only a measure of the powers of all previous Butchers, but also the voices of said Butchers in his or her head."

She sighed. "We think one Butcher was a hero, who was driven insane by the voices shouting at him night and day, until he was killed by one of the Teeth, who became the next Butcher." She gave them a tight smile. "You see the problem."

Hope nodded. "I see why you can't just execute her. Because whoever did it would become the next Butcher. But why not just incarcerate her?"

"Because she can teleport," said Amy unexpectedly. "I remember reading about that."

"Precisely," said Director Piggot. "We can keep her sedated, but that's only a short term solution." She took a deep breath. "I truly hate to ask this of you, but if you have the time, and if you think you can do something about this – perhaps cut off her ability to teleport somehow – then I would be even more deeply in your debt if you could assist the PRT in this matter."

"Well, sweetie," said Hope, looking at Amy. "It's your choice. I'm thinking we could at least look at the problem, but I am seriously not going to tell you what to do here."

Amy nodded seriously. "You're saying that if and when she wakes up, Butcher is going to probably escape and kill again?"

"I don't have to be Tattletale to say that this is a distinct possibility, yes," said Pigott. "Worse, she would likely break her teammates out. Worse yet, they would then be loose in Brockton Bay."

Amy nodded. "Then I'll do it." She smiled at Hope. "I'll want your help, of course."

Hope smiled back at her. "Always and in any way, sweetie," she confirmed.

Amy hugged her tightly; Hope embraced her in return.

"You do know that I fall in love with you all over again, every time you say that," Amy whispered in
"Why?" asked Hope, slightly bemused. "It's only the truth."

Amy smiled. "That's why," she murmured. She turned to Piggot. "Where is she being held?"

"PRT building holding cells," replied the Director. "If you get there before me, don't wait; I'll send word ahead."

Amy nodded. "Understood. We'll get over there just as fast as we can."

Hope smiled at the Director. "We'll see what we can do."

Piggot nodded. "Thank you. I appreciate it."

They turned to leave, then Hope spotted Taylor discreetly waving to them. She stood with the other Undersiders, and Hope smiled in return. "Let's go say goodbye to them, too," she said to Amy.

Amy smiled, taking her hand. "Let's do that."

"Well, it's looking good so far," said Hope. "I don't know why you held off on the lights, but it was very good timing all the same."

Taylor grinned. "Blame Lisa. She told me to wait." She lowered her voice. "Could I ask you for a really huge favour?"

Hope blinked. "Sure. What is it?"

"Um ..." said Taylor, looking embarrassed. "Not you. Amy."

Amy looked slightly taken aback as well. "Uh, sure. Got a new idea for a bug?"

"Not really, but I will need more Newter hornets," said Taylor. "One of them took down Butcher, but only after she crushed it."

"Ew, sorry about that," said Amy. "I can make more when you need them, if you want. Was that the favour?"

"No, no," said Taylor. She leaned forward and whispered into Amy's ear.

Amy stared at her. "Are you sure?" she asked.

Taylor blushed furiously. "I'm sure," she hissed, then whispered some more.

Amy's look of confusion cleared. "Ah, I gotcha," she said, with what looked remarkably like a dirty grin.

Taylor's blush seemed to deepen dramatically. Amy's grin widened. "Well, I can do that for you," she said. "Two months long enough?"

Taylor nodded. "Yes, that should do it," she said. "Can you do it now? Please?"

Amy nodded seriously. She took Taylor's hand; from habit, Hope took her other one. It was only a very small change, taking a fraction of a second.

Amy let Taylor's hand go. Taylor frowned. "Was that it? I didn't feel anything."
"Trust me," said Amy. "It's done." She smiled at Taylor. "Now, I hate to run off on you, but we have to go and do something about Butcher."

Taking Hope's hand, and saying goodbye to the other Undersiders on the way, they made their way out of the courthouse.

"Barnes. A word, if you will."

Alan Barnes looked up from gathering his notes, to see the District Attorney standing nearby. "What do you want?"

Robertson smiled thinly. "A word, is all. It will only take a few minutes."

Barnes breathed deeply through his nostrils. "It will have to be. I need to get home, get this case into order before –"

"Yes, I understand. Now, for the last time, I want a word with you. Now. One more delay, one more prevarication, and what I intend to say to you goes off the table for good."

There was a note in Thompson's voice that Alan did not like. There was a threat there. Well, what harm can it do to listen to whatever he has to say?

He left the notes stacked half in the folder, told Emma to wait for him, and went to see what Robertson wanted.

Once Robertson had Barnes in a private corner, he took out his digital recorder and popped the batteries out of it, then put them both back into his pocket separately. "This conversation is not being recorded by me," he said evenly. "Is it being recorded by you?"

Alan took out his own digital recorder, switched it off, removed the batteries, and put recorder and batteries back into his pocket. "Not any more," he said. "So, what is your offer?"

"I have a deal for you. Two deals, in fact." Robertson shot his cuffs. "The first deal involves you."

"I'm listening," said Barnes warily.

"I'm willing to drop the suit I was considering against you and the school – it's barely there anymore anyway – in return for you paying the Heberts a sum of money, to be arranged, and voluntarily revoking your license to practice law in this or any other state of the Union," said Robertson. "You have so thoroughly abused your powers and privileges in this matter that I cannot abide you being allowed to do so for a moment longer."

His voice hardened. "Refuse this deal, and I come after you with everything I've got, every misuse of your power, every time you assisted Shadow Stalker, every time you shielded her from official scrutiny, every time you made it easier for her to bully Taylor Hebert."

Thompson's voice was dead level. "I will nail you to the wall, and have you very thoroughly disbarred, as well as taking you to the cleaners. Accept the deal, pay the Heberts restitution for the mental anguish and physical trauma you helped cause to Taylor, revoke your own license, and the rest of it doesn't happen to you."

Barnes closed his eyes for a second. He could see it happening. It could happen. It would happen.
"Okay," he said at last. "Suppose I accept this deal. What's the other one?"

Thompson smiled, entirely without humour. "That one's about the girls."

A chill ran down Alan Barnes' spine. "No," he said reflexively. "We'll fight it. Call a mistrial –"

"Mistrial or no mistrial," said Thompson sharply," everyone in the courtroom heard Shadow Stalker explain everything that you and Emma tried to cover up."

"Hearsay –" began Barnes, but Thompson overrode him again.

" – doesn't apply in this case. What she said had to do with information already in our possession, it specifically incriminated her on several counts, and it could even be argued that it was a dying declaration. I can guarantee you, the Judge will allow it as evidence."

He paused. "And even if he doesn't, we still got it all on the court recorders. It gives me some very specific lines of enquiry to pursue, once I get your daughter and Madison back on the stand. Are you sure that neither of them would crack? Madison may just give up Emma to get a break."

Alan knew he was telling the truth. *She just might, if her father told her to."

"Okay," he said wearily. "What's the deal there?"

"They both plead guilty on all the charges that apply. Madison gets six months of juvenile hall."

Barnes looked warily at him. "And Emma?"

Robertson took a deep breath. "Emma, if she pleads guilty, goes to juvey until she turns eighteen. At that point, her record is examined, to see if she needs to spend any more time behind bars. I don't think that'll happen, though."

Alan blanched. "Until she's eighteen - !"

"Barnes, she *locked* Taylor Hebert in a locker *filled with biological waste*," snapped Robertson. "Taylor could easily have *died* in there. She did suffer a tremendous amount of mental anguish. Not to mention the continual torment that your daughter inflicted on her before and after that incident." His lips tightened. "I'm almost hoping you *don't* take the deal for her."

Barnes did not want to ask, but he had to. "What happens if I don't?"

"Her crimes are bad enough, she's old enough; I'll push to have her tried as an adult," said Robertson, his voice deadly calm. "I will read out every single incident about her from Taylor's notes, in front of the jury. I will show them photos of the locker, explain exactly what was in there. They'll convict; believe me you, they'll convict. She'll get at least five years, in general population, in a women's prison."

*My Emma, in an adult prison ...* Barnes closed his eyes.

Robertson's voice became contemplative. "She'll get along well enough; she's a big girl. Mature for her age, even."

Barnes knew very well what he meant. *Good-looking. Well-developed. But too small to fight. She wouldn't last an hour on her own.*

He caught Barnes' eye, raised an eyebrow. "I'm sure she'll make *lots* of new friends in there. In fact, she'll be spoiled for choice. She certainly won't be lonely; she'll have someone to cuddle up to in bed,
every single night of her stay. I'm sure she'll learn all sorts of interesting skills in there."

Barnes felt his gorge rising. What would happen to his Emma in prison ... it did not bear thinking about.

"Stop," he croaked. "Stop. I'll take your deal. All of it. Just ... stop."

Robertson patted him on the shoulder. "That-a-boy," he said pleasantly. "I knew you'd see reason."
He strolled away, humming a light tune. Sonovabitch wanted to play hardball, he thought. He doesn't know what hardball is.

Alan Barnes found a toilet and threw up everything he had eaten for the last day. Then he washed his face, and went back to find Emma.

"Honey," he said, "I've got to talk to you about something ..."

Brian said goodbye to Hope and Amy, then turned to Alec. "So," he said. "You good to give me and Lisa a lift?"

Alec rolled his eyes. "Sure," he said. "Why not? That's all I seem to be doing these days, giving my friends a lift." He lowered his voice. "I kinda miss the days when we robbed banks, and dodged the Wards in between times. It was more fun."

"Yeah," said Brian. "Fun. Also, scary verging on terrifying, most days. I'm kinda liking the way things are now."

"Me too," said Lisa as she joined them. "Did you realise, every single positive thing that's happened in Brockton Bay over the last month or more can be attributed, directly or indirectly, to Hope being here?"

"What, really?" asked Alec as he led the way out through the courthouse corridors. "Even ... I dunno, Brian meeting Genesis?"

"Hope and Amy healed Genesis' spine," said Lisa, tickling off a point on her fingers. "Hope came up with the plan that helped us take out the Nine." Another point. "Without that plan and that victory, we wouldn't have had the dance or the ceremony the next day."

"Christ almighty," muttered Brian. "When I next see Hope, I am gonna give her the biggest hug and kiss."

Lisa grinned her fox-like grin. "She'll like that. Be prepared to get one back." She paused. "Of course, it's up to us that she's still alive. Remember when Shadow Stalker nearly killed her? So we get some of that credit too."

Brian nodded as they headed down the stairs. "Okay, this trial. How is that down to Hope?"

Lisa's grin widened. "She met Taylor's dad, who asked her to pass on a message. So when she met Taylor, she got to talking. Taylor told her about the bullying. She told Weld, who told Miss Militia, who told Director Piggot."

"Um ..." said Alec. "Director Piggot extending the truce and giving us an amnesty?"
"Well, apart from the victory over the Nine," said Lisa, "Hope and Amy healed the Director of some health problems. She's since been able to get herself back toward healthy shape, so she's feeling a lot less bitter about the world and about capes in general."

Brian frowned as he opened the car door for Lisa to enter. "So ... what would the world be like if she hadn't turned up?"

Lisa looked up at him as she sat on the seat and moved across. Her bottle-green eyes were uncharacteristically sombre. "You really, really don't want to know."

Taylor climbed out of the truck and stretched. "First things first," she said. "I want a long hot shower. It's amazing how a day at court tires you out."

Danny smiled as he came around the truck. "I'll say it again, kiddo," he said fondly. "You were great up there on the stand. You said everything just right." He ruffled her hair gently.

"I was just telling it like it was," Taylor said. She had Falkor lurking in an empty lot a mile away, scarfing down rubbish and rats. Insects around would warn her if anyone seemed likely to discover the massive dragonfly. She was really, really pleased with the creature's performance, especially today. *Amy,* she thought, *I really, really owe you for this.*

And then she thought of the other thing that she owed Amy for, and a pleasant warmth curled in her stomach.

On entering the house, they found Everett, in shorts and t-shirt, watching TV.

"Hi," he said, getting up. "Taylor, I want to tell you, you did really great today. I mean, fantastic." He hugged her, making the warm feeling spread rapidly to every extremity. She hugged him back, and they shared a relatively chaste kiss. Danny watched tolerantly.

"Yeah, well," she said, suddenly a little shy. "I just did my best, you know?"

Everett chuckled. "More than just your best," he said with a grin, then turned to Danny. "Mr Hebert, do you know what she did today while she was in court?"

"For the first part, it's 'Danny', not 'Mr Hebert,' Everett," said Danny with a grin. "And for the second part ... not really. Unless it has to do with Miss Militia running out of the courtroom in a tearing hurry during the recess."

Everett grinned. "You've heard of the Teeth? The villain gang led by Butcher?"

Danny nodded. "I've heard of them, yes."

Everett nodded. "Well, they came into Brockton Bay, today. Went to Victory Park. Butcher shot up the monument with a Gatling gun firing thirty-millimeter rounds."


"The Teeth don't believe in overkill," Everett said simply. "They figure the more, the better. Well, Taylor here spotted them on the way in, told Director Piggot that they were there, then swarmed them. Brought them down with the specialty bugs that Hope's friend Amy's been apparently working on." He shrugged. "All the PRT and Wards had to do was walk in and secure them."
Danny looked at Taylor with renewed respect in his eyes. Taylor flushed. "It wasn't that big a deal," she protested.

Everett burst out laughing. "They would have given the Wards a serious headache, and you soloed them, waiting for court to start up again," he said. "That, my dear sweet modest Taylor, is one hell of a big deal."

Taylor blushed more heavily. "I am going to have a shower," she said. "You men can get all the hero worship out of your systems while I'm doing that. Okay?" Without giving them a chance to demur, she headed upstairs.

"It's a good thing she's joined the Wards here in Brockton Bay," commented Everett after she disappeared.

"Well, I agree, yes, but why do you say so?" asked Danny curiously.

"Because after this little exhibition of sheer capability, virtually every city with Wards in it is going to want to recruit her." He chuckled. "I'd try to recruit her for Chicago; hell, I'd step down so she could lead the Chicago Wards. But she'd never go."

"Why not?" asked Danny.

"Well, duh," said Everett. "Her dad lives here, and she loves him dearly."

"Oh," said Danny. "Oh, yeah." He nodded at Everett. "You're pretty perceptive."

"Obvious things, yeah," said Everett. "Little things like notorious supervillains being the same person as the girl I'm supposed to protect and I'm starting to fall for big time, not so much."

Danny looked at him narrowly. "You sound serious."

Everett looked uncomfortable. "You sound serious."

Danny nodded slowly. "I can relate. Well, here's the thing. I've found out the hard way that trying to stop Taylor from doing what she wants is the surest way to set her heart on doing it. So, any doubts I have, I'm going to keep to myself. Just ... don't hurt her."

Everett's eyebrows rose, as did his respect for Danny Hebert. The man was deadly serious.

"You got my word on that," he said. "Taylor and I won't be doing anything that she doesn't want to do, and I'm not going to make her any promises I can't keep."

Danny nodded. "That's good enough, I guess," he allowed. "Not perfect, but good enough for now."

He nodded toward the kitchen. "I'll go start dinner. Is Raymancer still asleep?"

"Ah, no, he was picked up when I got dropped off," said Everett. "After Shadow Stalker bit it, the Director decided he wasn't needed here anymore. He'll be staying in Brockton Bay until the trial's over and done, though."

Danny nodded. "Fair enough, I guess," he said. He headed for the kitchen, then paused. "So ... how many were in this gang that Taylor took down?"
"Five, including Butcher," said Everett, sitting on the sofa. "One of them was a duplicator, which would have complicated matters a bit. But she handled it, apparently."

"Damn," said Danny, heading into the kitchen. *She took down a villain gang without even breaking a sweat. I really don't know my daughter anymore.*

"Okay," said Hope. "What were you thinking of doing?"

They were in the PRT prison infirmary. Butcher was strapped down to a gurney; a blindfold was fastened over her eyes, and an IV fed fluids into a needle that had been punched through the hardened skin on the inside of her elbow. The doctor in charge had confided that he had bent half a dozen before managing to penetrate her skin with one at just the right angle.

Hope looked up at the containment foam sprayers, set to go off if Butcher even looked like waking up. She hoped that would not happen; while the foam didn't stick to her, if she was engulfed, she would be trapped all the same.

"I'm thinking of doing the opposite of what I did for Sveta and Mimi," said Amy. "I made their powers easier to access. If I can make Butcher's harder to access, especially the teleportation, then that would make it easier to hold her."

"Sounds like a plan," said Hope with a smile. She leaned across and planted a peck on Amy's lips. "Kiss for luck," she added.

Amy smiled. "Thanks," she murmured. "I think we might need it."

They joined hands, then each of them took one of Butcher's hands.

"Hey, could you do a detour for me?"

Brian looked at his phone, which displayed a text message, as he called forward to Alec. It was late afternoon and the shadows were just starting to lengthen.

"Depends on where," said Alec without turning his head. "If you want to go by way of Boston, you're out of luck. But I'm willing to listen."

"Um, drop me at Genesis' place?" asked Brian. He cringed, expecting reactions, and was not disappointed.

Aisha turned around and knelt up on the seat, her grinning face appearing over the top of the front seat. "Woo hoo!" she crowed. "My big bro's gettin' some!" Her voice was loud enough to be heard at the side of the road.

"It's not like that," he protested.

Lisa turned to him and grinned her vulpine grin. "Oh, yes it is," she contradicted him. "Trust me on this."

Alec half-turned and grinned back at him. "So, she's decided to see what it's like to do it in a bed, huh?"

Brian began to wish he hadn't mentioned Genesis. *But of course Lisa would have figured it out anyway.*
"Whatever," he ground out. "Can you just drop me there already?"

Alec chuckled. "Sure thing ... stud."

Aisha's laughter echoed into the evening air. Brian hunched down into his seat.

Savoury odours were filling the house when Everett came down from his shower. Taylor met him at the foot of the stairs. "Can we go outside for a bit?" she asked. "I want to talk to you about something."

"Uh, okay," he said. "Sure."

"Dad," she called out, "Everett and I are just going for a walk, okay?"

"Sure," he called back. "Don't be too long."

"We won't," she replied, and led the way to the door. He followed, a little mystified, but quite willing to go where she wanted.

Out on the footpath, she gazed across the suburban rooftops to the setting sun. She reached out and took Everett's hands, and stood there, looking at him in the reddish, dying light.

"Every time I look at you," she said softly, "I find another thing to like. Another reason to want to be with you. That's a really weird feeling for me. I've spent far too long not being able to trust anyone or anything."

She paused. "I've learned that I can trust my Dad, no matter what. And I'm starting to learn that I can trust you. It's a funny feeling. Scary. It's a leap into the unknown, not knowing, but having to believe, that you would catch me."

He said nothing, taking her words in, looking back at her. She was grateful for that; anything he had to say would make this far more awkward.

She let go his hands, and moved into his arms. He enfolded her in his embrace, allowing her to wrap her arms around him. She stayed that way for a few moments, not speaking, just enjoying the physical contact.

"I'm incredibly attracted to you," she went on. "I've only felt anything like this around one other guy before. Grue, from the Undersiders," she added, before he could ask. "He's with Genesis, from the Travellers. He never really saw me that way. So. There's no-one between us, no-one in the way. Just ... you and me."

Experimentally, he kissed her. She returned the kiss fiercely, digging her nails into his back. When they broke off the kiss, she was breathing heavily.

"I ... wanted to say something," she said. "I want to be with you. I want to be with you," she repeated, with extra emphasis. "We have the choice, to have sex or not to have sex. We have to make that choice." She paused, to collect her spinning thoughts. "I think it would be better to not have sex, at least for the time being, at least until the trial is done. After that ..." She took a deep breath. "After that, we'll see where we are."

She pulled back a little, to see his face, to look into his eyes. "Is that all okay?" she asked.

He nodded. "It is with me. But ..."
"But what?" she asked.

"But last night, we didn't have sex by what has to be the closest damn margin in recorded history," he said frankly. "If you had looked back once, if you had said one word, I would have followed you up the stairs."

She nodded. "And if you had said one word, if you had followed me up the stairs ... I wouldn't be a virgin anymore. I would have done whatever you wanted. I would have let you do whatever you wanted to me."

He shivered, although the evening chill had not yet set in. "Uh, sorry," he said, and shifted position.

Taylor grinned with embarrassment. "Whoops," she said. "I didn't mean to do that."

He grinned. "It's okay. So, when you say, not have sex, what did you mean?"

Taylor looked him squarely in the eye. "I mean, everything short of this-goes-in-there sex. But there's got to be rules, otherwise either you or I will find ourselves stepping over that line before we even realise it."

"Rules?" he asked, his throat closing so that the word almost came out as a squeak. She had moved close to him, and her proximity was making him uncomfortably ... uncomfortable. And he had the feeling she was doing it deliberately.

"Yes," she said softly. "Rule number one. One of us has to be wearing pants of some kind, at all times. Who it is can change, but the one person has to put pants on before the other one takes them off. No pulling the pants down, reaching inside, or pulling anything out. Rubbing and fondling the outside is quite fine."

He made a noise in his throat. She was quite deliberately rubbing against him. It was driving him insane.

"Rule number two," she went on. "If one of us says that they want to have sex, that they want to step over the line, the other person has to ask, are you sure?"

She stopped moving and held him; it was possibly more disturbing than when she had been moving. Now he could just feel her warmth pressing against him.

"Rule number three," she said. "Either of us can say stop, at any time, and the other person has to stop. We can also call time-outs if we feel we're getting out of control."

She stepped back, allowing cool evening air to intrude between them. He allowed himself to relax slightly. The torture – the sweet, sweet torture – was over.

"Oh, and one other thing," she said softly. "I saw Amy before we left."

He nodded, managing to get his voice under control. "Yes, I saw." There was a question in his voice.

She smiled. "I asked her to make me infertile for the next two months. So if we do happen to step over the line, if we do happen to go too far ... I'm not going to get pregnant. No matter what happens." Her smile turned into a grin. "Just so you know."

"Wow," he said at last. "You did that for me?"
She shook her head. "I did it for me, for my peace of mind. Because I can't guarantee to control myself around you. For you ... it's just a fringe benefit." She tilted her head. "So, the rules. Did you get them, or do I have to write them down?"

"No," he said. "I got them." They were burned into his mind in letters of fire. He couldn't forget them if he tried. "Someone's got to be wearing pants, someone has to ask are you sure, and we can call time outs if we have to."

She nodded. "Close enough." She leaned in and kissed him gently on the lips. "Thanks for being a good sport."

"You are a mean, mean woman," he grumbled as he followed her back inside.

"I know," she said. "But I'll make it up to you, later." She smiled teasingly. "With interest."

For that, he believed, he could certainly forgive her.

Amy dived into Butcher's physiology, then deeper. Her DNA opened up before Amy's inner vision. Finally, she pushed that final step, and reached the structure that contained and defined the powers of the woman lying on the gurney.

And she frowned. Because there was one power structure, well-defined and set in place. But above it, there was another, attached via some mechanism she could not work out. And another on top of that. And yet another.

Overall, she counted thirteen extraneous power structures stringing out from the first one. Each one must be the powerset of one of the previous Butchers, she decided. Somehow, they were attaching to the person who killed them.

She shuddered. She could not imagine having thirteen other voices in her head, telling her what to do. She couldn't even rely on her own judgement, so she had Hope assist her in such matters.

"Found the powers," she muttered. "Whole string of them. No way to shift control to unconscious."

"Okay," murmured Hope. "What are you going to do?"

"See if I can jar them loose," she answered. "That should leave her with just one set of powers. Much more manageable."

"Okay, sweetie," said Hope. "I'm right here, remember."

"I know," responded Amy. She took a deep breath, and concentrated.

Trying to knock loose the one attached to Butcher's original powerset didn't seem to work; there was some force holding it in place.

So she moved her attention up the line until she came to the outermost one. This was a mixmash of powers, strangely set up. And she could now feel that it was the one exerting the attractive power on the other powersets. Like a magnet attaching to a line of paperclips, she decided.

*So if I knock the magnet loose ...*

She exerted herself to do just that. The attractive force between the original Butcher power structure and the second Butcher's powers seemed to be weaker than the forces forming a power structure itself. But it was slippery, hard to grasp. It resisted her efforts.
Below them, Butcher rolled her head and mumbled something in her sleep.

One of the techs called, "She's waking up! Get out of there!"

"No!" called back Hope. "She's not!"

And Amy finally managed it. She got a firm grip on the initial power structure, exerted force, twisted ... and it popped free.

Bereft of the attractive force, the other powersets began to drift away, losing themselves in whatever otherworldly mists surrounded the body whose biology and powers she was manipulating. She watched the last one disconnect from Butcher – not Butcher any more, she realised. Whoever this person had been before killing Butcher, she would never be Butcher again.

She broke the connection, and smiled at Hope.

"I think that's done it," she said. "They should be able to –"

And a searing pain struck her in the middle of the forehead, and she doubled over with a scream.

Hope rushed to her side, holding her and sending a pulse of pain-relief into her. "What is it?" she asked anxiously. "What happened? Did your power backfire?"

Amy felt her body changing, becoming more powerful. She felt muscles bulging and growing, forcing her clothes to stretch. And she heard the voice begin to yammer in her brain. Bellowing orders, screaming insults, hammering at her intellect.

"Oh, shit," she managed. "I think I'm Butcher now."
In which Butcher is dealt with, Faultline's Crew get power adjustments, and all of the ships come back to the shore

Hope held Amy tightly. "Tell me what to do. Tell me how I can help."

The tech called out, "What's happening in there? What was that she said?"

Another tech said, "I think she said she was Butcher."

Amy looked at Hope with eyes full of pain. She unclenched her jaw long enough to mutter a few words of explanation, then closed herself down again.

Hope held her in her arms and whispered, "I'll get you help. I promise." She kissed Amy tenderly on the lips. A shudder went through the girl's body, and she seemed to relax slightly. Tears leaked from her eyes.

Hope scooped up Amy in her arms and headed for the doorway out of the quarantine section. As she neared it, the heavy plexiglass door slid closed in front of her.

"Please open the door," she said firmly. "I have to get out."

"Sorry, no can do," the tech's voice crackled from over the intercom. "If your friend just became Butcher, she's now the most dangerous parahuman in the city, bar none."

"She's still in control of herself," insisted Hope. "There's exactly one person who can help, and I'm taking her to that person." She forced control into her voice. "If I don't do this, and soon, she will go insane. Please don't do this to her." Or to me, she didn't say.

"I'm really, truly sorry about this, Hope," said the tech regretfully. "But my orders under this circumstance are ironclad. We can't let – holy shit!"

From the techs' point of view, the door basically exploded outward. Later, when they ran the footage back, they could see Hope's wings unfurling as she stepped forward. The first blow smashed a huge star-shaped crack in the middle of the supposedly unbreakable plexiglass barrier. The second one buckled the door and drove it off its tracks. The third blow shattered the plexiglass altogether; the sheet held together, but was ripped from its framework, crashing to the floor.

Hope stepped through the now-open door, even as the containment foam sprayers deployed automatically. A mass of foam built up around the still-unconscious ex-Butcher, splattering on Hope's back and wings. She stepped forward, letting it peel off her wings; her shirt tore away from her, as did her pants.

Damn, she had time to think, that stuff always destroys my clothes.

"I'm really sorry," she said to the techs as she passed the console, "but I really have to get Amy out of here. You can't help her. I know who can."

They watched her go silently, wide-eyed.

The guard had his rifle levelled as she approached the door. "Don't come any closer," he warned. "I will shoot. Go back and submit her to quarantine. This doesn't need to get messy."
She looked him dead in the eye. "If you shoot and kill her, you become Butcher," she said simply. "If you shoot and kill me, I would like to think that Amy would control herself. But I cannot guarantee it. She loves me. Please don't put this on her."

He hesitated, then slammed his fist on a large red button. Loud clunks came from the door that he was guarding. Then he put his rifle up with a sigh. "Do what you want. I've just locked this facility down. Nothing gets in or out, without outside approval."

She approached the door, looked at it carefully. There was no way her wings would bash through this one. The guard stepped aside, keeping a very respectful distance. "I am going to have to try to get out," she said matter-of-factly.

"I can't stop you from trying," said the guard. He went back and stood with the techs. "But you're not getting out through that door."

Hope leaned down to Amy and said, "Sweetie? Can you stand?"

Amy nodded fractionally, eyes tightly shut, and Hope lowered her to the ground. Amy stood, swaying slightly, leaning on Hope.

Hope forced her fingers into the crack between the doors, pushing the rubber seals inward, then heaved outward, trying to force them open.

The doors pulled apart half an inch or so, then sprang back. She breathed deeply, tried again. Again, just half an inch.

She felt tears starting in her eyes. *I can't fail Amy,* she told herself. *I can't.*

She threw her all into the effort; again, the door resisted the force that she was exerting. But just as she felt herself beginning to flag, more fingers forced their way into the now-open crack, and force was applied outward, more force than she was able to apply.

She looked across at Amy, arms reaching between hers, fingers jammed in the door crack, and they both threw their all into it.

The doors shifted ... moved ... creaked ... groaned.

There came the sound of complicated crunching and tearing, within the walls themselves, as the locking mechanisms gave up the fight against the combined strength of Hope and Butcher.

The doors slid apart.

She heard startled exclamations from the guard and the techs, but she paid them no heed. Amy had fallen to her knees in front of her; Hope scooped her up and ran.

There were other barriers, but they weren't as formidable as the doors. In one corridor, doors slid closed at either end, while gas was pumped in. Hope had microstructures in her sinuses and throat that could capture smoke particles before they ever reached her lungs. The gas had just as little effect on her as it had on Amy. She reached the far door and smashed it open.

They tried using containment foam, they tried using stun bolts, they even tried rubber bullets. She weathered it all; containment foam peeled away, stun bolts were deflected by her wings, and rubber bullets stung but did not impair her movement.
Still, she was battered and bruised by the time she had almost reached the exit. Amy was starting to cry, a soft, hopeless sound that tore at Hope's heart, and hardened her resolve.

In front of her were Weld and Clockblocker. Behind her were Kid Win and Vista.

"Please," she said as she approached Weld. "Please. I need to get her help. There's only one person who can do anything about this."

Abruptly, the corridor stretched; Weld and Clockblocker were standing in the far distance. *Vista.*

Hope tensed for the sudden shrinkage that would bring Clockblocker to striking distance in a heartbeat. *One hit, and I'm done. And Amy loses.*

There was a cry of pain from behind her, and space snapped back to normal. *What the ...?*

"Sorry," sobbed Amy. "Had to."

Hope glanced over her shoulder; Vista was on her knees, clutching at her arm. Kid Win was bending over her. *Amy must have used Butcher's powers.* She looked down at Amy; she could only imagine the extremity that the girl must be in if she was using that power to cause pain. *Oh, sweetie.*

"We have to go," said Hope. "Please." She stepped forward. Weld went to grab her; her wings flicked his hands aside, then one smashed into the side of his head. He wasn't hurt, just surprised, but it was long enough. She hit him again and again, drove him back, then tripped him – right into Clockblocker.

The white-clad Ward cried out as he was forced to avoid six hundred pounds of stumbling metal teammate, and Hope took the opportunity to slip past. *So close. I have to make it. Amy depends on me.*

"We'll make it all up to you later!" she called back over her shoulder. "I promise!"

She turned the last corner. And stopped.

Because the Protectorate was on site.

________________________

Director Piggot stood before the entrance, with the Brockton Bay Protectorate arrayed on either side of her. Miss Militia held an elaborate gun of some kind, levelled at them both. Assault and Battery stood side by side; Battery's suit was charged to its maximum, the blue lines on her costume glowing brightly. Triumph stood loosely relaxed, but Hope knew he could release a stunning shout in an instant. Even Armsmaster stood there, unarmed but in his trademark armour.

"Hope," said Emily Piggot, "I like you and I trust you, but I'm going to need a really, really good explanation of what's going on here."

Hope took a deep breath. "Director," she said. "Emily. We've cured Butcher, like you asked. But the original Butcher has infected Amy. Amy told me so."

She paused at a whimper from Amy, and kissed the girl on the forehead. "She's holding on right now," she went on, "but she can't do it forever. He's trying to drive her insane, like they did with the other hero who became Butcher. If she stays here, she goes insane, and becomes the greatest danger to this city, a danger that can only be contained, never destroyed. And if that happens, Amy ... dies." Her voice broke a little at that.
"I have a solution," she went on. "Amy told me what to do. There's a cape who can help. Her name is Omake. I just have to get Amy to her before it's too late," she said, with urgent stress on the words.

She looked at each of them in turn. "You know me," she said simply. "I don't lie if I can help it. You know that I wouldn't even be doing this if I didn't think there was a chance to save her. Please," she said. "Please trust that I know what I'm doing here."

Piggot looked her dead in the eyes. Without shifting her gaze, she said quietly, "Opinions?"

Triumph blew out a gust of air. "Was dead, now alive," he said in his grating, scratchy voice. "Gets a pass from me."

Battery nodded. "I owe her my life too," she said.

She looked at Assault. He nodded. "I say trust her," he said.

"Armsmaster?" said Piggot quietly.

"She is telling the exact and literal truth," said Armsmaster. "I do not know this Omake, but Hope truly believes that she can help." He paused. "Not that it's relevant, but she also saved my life. I say trust her."

Miss Militia paused for just a moment after Armsmaster spoke.

"I owe Hope nothing personally," she said quietly, "but I have seen the works she has done, the personal sacrifices she has made. We owe a great deal to her. I say give her the chance." She raised her gun to point at the ceiling.

"Thank you for your recommendations," said Director Piggot. She closed her eyes for a moment, and made her decision.

Brian knocked gently on the door. It opened almost immediately, and Jess smiled widely at him. "Come on in," she said happily.

He entered, and looked at her as he closed the door behind him. Her hair was dishevelled and tied back with a rag, and she wore T-shirt and shorts, both liberally bedaubed with dust, spider-webs and other, less identifiable, marks. More dust was smudged on her cheeks and forehead where she had wiped away sweat.

He thought she looked utterly desirable.

"So what's this about?" he said, leaning in close to peck her on the lips. "You asked me to come over quick, but nothing about why?"

She smiled and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Well, I don't really need a reason why, do I?" she asked softly, returning the kiss with interest and enthusiasm.

"No," he admitted, putting his arms around her. "I was just curious, is all."

She grinned. "Well, actually, I did have an ulterior motive." She stepped back, letting her hands trail over his body as she let him go.

"Oh, really?" he asked with an answering grin. "And what might that be?"

She pointed at several long boards leaning up against the wall. "Shelves."
"Shelves?" he repeated stupidly.

"Yeah," she said. "Everything's quiet, so I decided to do some serious cleaning and renovation. Got the invalid lift out of the damn bath at last, scrubbed all the walls, cobwebbed everywhere ..." She paused. "I might get Skitter to come over and de-infest my place. If she wants about a million spiders for whatever reason, I can give her that."

He chuckled. "I'll keep that in mind. So, shelves?"

She nodded. "Now that I'm upwardly mobile, I can reach the higher shelves. So I want to put in higher shelves, to put more stuff on." She sighed. "But these shelves are not the easiest things to put up with just one person, and I'm sure as hell not risking a back injury ever again." She looked at Brian. "Now you're a big strong man, so you can help me, right?"

"Huh," said Brian. "So you really did want me for my body."

"Yes," she declared. "Your tall, strong, muscular body. With two arms and two hands, with which to put up shelves."

He sighed. "Well, so long as we're straight on this." Shrugging out of his shirt, he went over and picked up the first shelf. "Where do you want it?"

She watched the play of muscles in his back, and her mind short-circuited just a little bit. "Oh, anywhere will do."

The PRT transport grounded in front of Trickster's base. He looked at the front door monitor in alarm, staring at the Protectorate members piling out of it.

"Christ almighty!" he shouted. "We're being hit!"

"What?" exclaimed Noelle, starting up from the chair she was sitting in.

"Protectorate just showed up at our front door!" he said, turning to her. "Something big is going down. I think someone, somewhere, screwed the pooch. The amnesty's done with. Get word to the others; they might be next."

And then there came a knocking on the door. Not a simple polite knock, and yet neither was it the splintering crash that would herald a raid.

Noelle frowned. "If we were being hit ... would they knock?"

Francis blinked in confusion. "Um ... maybe?"

She picked up the hooded mask that lay over the back of her chair. "Mask up, dear," she said. "I'm going to go and see what our guests want."

Taylor helped Danny clear the dishes away from the table after supper. Everett volunteered for the washing-up, which wasn't much; he had them cleaned and dried in a remarkably short time.

"So, what do you think is going to happen with the trial tomorrow?" asked Taylor. "Lisa says eighty to ninety percent chance of guilty on all charges, now that Mr Barnes is running the defense, but I don't know how that changes since Shadow Stalker attacked."

"Lisa?" asked Everett curiously. Taylor was leaning against him with her head on his shoulder, and
her hand resting on his.

"Friend of ours," said Danny. "Really good at calculating odds."

"Ah," Everett replied. He frowned. "His best bet would be to call for a mistrial, have a new jury chosen. That would force you to go over your testimony all over again." He took her hand in his, holding it gently. She squeezed his fingers. "It's never the same the second time round. The new jury might not react as well to you; it's hard to bring up the same level of spontaneous emotion."

He turned and kissed the top of her head. "When you were telling what had happened to you ... I just wanted to go over and hold you, tell you that would never happen again." He chuckled. "Might have gotten me in a bit of trouble."

Danny grinned. "Might just have, at that." He frowned. "So, do you think a mistrial would give them a better chance?"

Everett paused. "Not ... really," he said. "There's all the evidence, plus what Shadow Stalker basically confessed to in front of several sworn officers of the law – and a judge." He shook his head. "He might be able to draw it out, but they'll get a conviction. Maybe not on every single count, but enough to make it work."

Danny nodded. "Right." He yawned. "Well, I'm off to bed. Turn off the lights when you go up, okay, Taylor?"

Taylor nodded. "Night, Dad."

"Good night," added Everett.

Halfway up the stairs, Danny turned. "And before I forget, Taylor, the spare room is still made up for Raymancer. Could you deal with that in the morning? Strip the bed, everything like that?"

Taylor nodded again. "Okay, Dad," she said. "Night."

"Night, kids," Danny said, and went up the stairs and out of sight.

Everett turned to Taylor. "What was –"

She silenced him with a kiss. He decided that this was no bad idea, and returned the kiss with some enthusiasm. When they finally broke the kiss, she was sitting astride his lap, and his hands were cupping parts of her anatomy that she would normally have objected to anyone touching..

She leaned in close to him, whispering in his ear. "Dad was telling us that the spare room, which is at the opposite end of the house to his bedroom, has a made-up bed in it."

He stared at her. "You mean -?"

She nodded and stood up, pulling him to his feet. "Let's go," she whispered.

Noelle opened the door; on the step stood Hope, with Amy in her arms. Amy was moaning and twitching, and clutching at Hope.

She would later note that Hope was quite naked, but this did not seem relevant at the time.

"Omake," said Hope. "Please. Amy needs your help."
Behind Hope, the Protectorate stood arrayed. Another transport, a little farther down the street, was disgorging Wards.

"What ... is going on here?" she asked. Then she stopped herself. "Come in," she said. "Let's get her resting."

They settled Amy down on to the sofa, and Omake laid a cool hand on her forehead. "She's feverish," she noted. "Is it okay if I copy her?"

"That's what we came here for," confirmed Hope. "Copy me too, while you're at it."

So Omake concentrated for just a second, and copy of her stepped to one side. Then she put her hand on Hope's arm and a second copy appeared, this one the same utterly gorgeous angelic being who had manifested once before.

"Amy told me that Butcher's powers were attached to the latest Butcher in sequence," explained Hope. "She got them free, but the original powerset attached to her, and is now trying to drive her insane." She held Amy's hand, squeezing it gently, then looked at the Omake-clone of Amy. "Could you remove it from her?"

"Of course," said the clone. "What happens then, though?" She paused, looking at Hope. "Ah," she said. "I understand."

Omake herself nodded. "A good plan. Ingenious, in fact. Yours, or Amy's?"

Hope smiled, but it was strained. "Amy's. Please?"

The clone nodded and bent over Amy, who was murmuring to herself. She concentrated for a long moment, then recoiled with a cry.

"It – it's done," she gasped. "He's in my head. And he's angry. Hurry – let's go!"

Amy convulsed as the Butcher shard left her, then collapsed back on to the sofa. Hope knelt beside her, lifted her head. "Amy?" she whispered. "Sweetie?"

Amy opened her eyes, her body returning to its normal shape, muscle disappearing as quickly as it had formed. Her face was etched with lines of pain, but these were already fading. "Hope," she murmured. "You did it. You got me here."

Hope kissed her. "Of course," she said softly. "I said I would, didn't I?"

Amy's arms went around her, and squeezed her as though she would never let go.

The door opened, and two hooded figures emerged. One seemed to be making heavy weather of it, clutching at her head; the other, a gorgeously feminine glowing angel with sapphire-blue crystalline wings, was supporting her.

Hope had explained the plan to Director Piggot on the way, so there was no demur as the Hope-omake took the Amy-omake into her arms and lifted from the ground. The heroes piled back into the transports, and they gave the pair an escort to the coast. And then they turned back, while the two Omake-clones flew on.
Out to sea they flew, sapphire-blue wings beating steadily. Occasionally, the Hope-omake spotted a ship or boat by its lights, and altered course to avoid it. In her arms, the Amy-omake writhed and clutched at her head, moaning and muttering to herself.

The long hour passed. The pair were far out to sea. The Amy-omake was sweating and writhing, biting her lip till the blood flowed. "Please tell me it's almost over," she groaned.

"We're nearly there," the Hope-omake assured her. She smiled down at her companion. "You're being very brave. I admire you."

The Amy-omake looked up at the Hope-omake with eyes full of pain. "I can't take it any longer. Do something, anything. Please."

The Hope-omake lowered her face to that of her fellow clone, and kissed her gently. Deep blue energy pulsed through the contact, dulling the anguish. Both closed their eyes, so as not to see the end coming.

The Amy-omake dissipated first, vanishing like smoke. The Hope-omake smiled sadly, not opening her eyes. I hope she creates us again sometime.

She vanished also.

The Butcher shard found itself with nowhere to go, no-one to latch on to. No-one had killed the clone it was attached to; it had simply ... ended.

The shard, bereft of an attachment point, drifted back into the limbo that claimed all such shards of deceased parahumans.

Butcher was dead.

Brian and Jess lay together on her bed, sheets and clothing scattered far and wide. A ceiling fan overhead spun slowly, gently stirring the air and cooling the sweat on their bodies.

"Mmm," she murmured, lying with her head on his chest. "You can come over and put up shelves for me anytime."

"Really?" he replied with a lazy grin. "Seems to me we put up all the shelves you had."

She stretched luxuriantly – and quite distractingly – against him. "Oh," she purred, "I can always get more shelves." She sat up. "I think we need a bath. We're all sweaty."

"And whose fault is that?" he asked rhetorically.

"Hush, you," she retorted, pulling him to his feet.

"And is it big enough for two?" he asked.

"I told you, I just removed an invalid lift. I think you'll find it's big enough for two."

As it turned out, she was entirely correct.

Quarrel opened her eyes as they cleared the last of the containment foam from her body. She grinned savagely as she attempted to fight free of the light restraints upon her.
"What?" she protested. "What?"

A doctor smiled benignly at her. She tried to bring him to his knees with agony, to stop his heart, to cover him with festering wounds. He didn't seem to notice, applying a stethoscope to her chest.

"What the hell did you do to me?" she shouted. She paused. "Where are they?"

The doctor looked at her in mild surprise. "Where are what?" he asked.

"The other voices! My powers! I'm Butcher, dammit!"

Director Emily Piggot of the PRT leaned over her bedside from the other side. "Not anymore, I'm afraid," she said in a tone of extreme satisfaction. "Butcher is gone. We had him ... removed." She smiled, or at least showed her teeth. "Of course, you're still liable for all the crimes you committed as Butcher." Her smile widened. "I hope you're ready to spend a very long time in prison."

She turned and strolled away, leaving Quarrel staring at her back in disbelief.

One thought kept running through Quarrel's mind. It wasn't supposed to end like this.\n
*Not like this.*

Taylor and Everett stood beside the camp bed, face to face. The bed was not wide, but it would be wide enough. As Danny had said, it was still made up. Taylor looked at Everett, and he at her. Now that the moment had come, they were strangely reluctant to take the next step.

"You remember the rules?" she murmured.

He smiled. "As if I could forget." He paused, feeling his heart rate increase exponentially. "What happens now?"

Her answer was to reach out and take hold of the hem of his t-shirt. He had to help her get it over his head.

Slowly, with the awkwardness of stifled eagerness, they undressed one another, until they were standing in their underwear. He couldn't figure out her bra, so she unhooked it and let him remove it. Then, looking him straight in the eye, she put her thumbs in the waistband of his boxers and tugged them downward.

Omake closed her eyes and opened them again. "They're done," she said. "Both dissipated." She smiled. "And I'm not Butcher."

Hope hugged her first, followed by Amy. "Thank you," said Hope. "Thank you so very much."

Amy didn't need to say it. She just held Noelle close. Noelle hugged them both back, then held Amy close to her and kissed her on the top of the head.

"What you did for me," she said softly, "I would help you a million times and never count the cost."

Amy snuggled into her embrace. "For what you just did, whatever debt you think you owe? It's done," she said softly. "Can you please hold me for a while? I'm kinda beat."
Noelle smiled. "Take as long as you like." She kissed Amy gently on the tip of the nose. Amy murmured in pleasure and closed her eyes.

Hope stood watching them fondly for a moment, then crossed the room to Trickster. "Sorry about the scare we gave you," she said. "But Director Piggot insisted on an escort, to make sure we got here okay."

He nodded and grinned crookedly, dangling his mask by one finger. Hope decided that his large hooked nose gave his features a character all of their own. "Hey," he said. "Getting rid of a major threat like Butcher? Well worth it." A chuckle. "I might have to ask Amy to give me back the ten years you scared me out of, though."

Hope grinned. "It's a deal."

"Hey," he said, "is it true that Skitter rick-rolled the Teeth from across town, while she was eating lunch?"

Hope giggled. "Just about," she said. "But they destroyed the monument."

"Eh," he said. "We can rebuild that. Maybe add a post-script. 'On this site, the Teeth did try to wave their dicks about, and were owned by a teenage girl with a bunch of bugs.'"

Hope was laughing so hard that she had to sit down.

Taylor and Everett lay entwined on the camp bed, breathing heavily. He was wearing just his boxers; she had not even that.

"Oh my," she breathed. "Oh my, oh my, oh my."

"Wow," he agreed. "That was ... intense."

She giggled. "I told you I wanted to rub my body all over you."

"Whew," he said. "I didn't know you meant literally." He kissed her gently, lovingly.

She returned the kiss. When it finally ended, she asked, "Is real sex really as good as that?"

"Better," he told her. "No comparison."

She smiled in the darkness. "If you're not just pulling my leg ..."

He caressed her back, his large hand sliding downward over her smooth skin. She shivered under his touch, and not from cold. "Yes?" he asked teasingly.

"I can't wait till the trial is over."

He concurred, heartily.

"Are you sure you're up to this?" asked Hope anxiously.

Amy nodded. "After that, using my powers to help someone is just what I need. A booster for my confidence."

Hope smiled. "You do know that I have absolute faith in you at all times, right?" she said.
Amy smiled despite herself. "That's a start," she allowed. She reached up and caressed Hope's cheek. "You are so good to me. You never abandon me, never reject me. You're there for me." Her expression became tender. "And while I was struggling with Butcher, with that voice screaming in my mind, you never let me forget that you were there, that you loved me, that you had faith in me. It helped so very much."

Hope kissed Amy's fingertips. "I'm glad," she said. "I couldn't do much else, but I could do that."

"It was enough," said Amy. "It was enough." She looked around as Hope flared her wings and glided in for a landing outside Palanquin. "Ah, we're here."

"Sounds like a fairly hair-raising afternoon," said Faultline, pouring drinks. "I'm guessing you don't drink, so is juice all right?"

"Definitely, thanks," said Hope. Amy smiled and nodded. She sipped at her drink as she looked out at the dance-floor. The club was shut, and the music being played was strangely familiar. There were only two people on the floor, circling slowly together in each others' arms; Gregor and Shamrock.

Faultline followed her gaze. "Took me forever to find that music," she said. "But they seem to like dancing to it. Costs me nothing." She gave Hope a direct look. "And talking about cost. I'm having trouble getting the part about not charging for your services. What's wrong with asking for a little quid pro quo? I know I'd be willing to pay."

"It's hard to explain," said Hope. "We're living well enough. We don't need extra money. And ... okay, look at it like this. Suppose we set prices. Ten dollars per patient. So we're doing okay. And then someone comes in and says they want to jump the line and pay fifty dollars to be healed right then. And then someone else says no, I'll pay five hundred if you heal me first. So soon, the only ones getting the benefit are those with the most money. And meanwhile, the ones who need it most are the ones with the least money. So, we don't charge. Whoever needs it, gets it."

Faultline nodded. "I can understand that, in a theoretical sense," she admitted. "But it still feels funny not to pay you."

Amy looked up. "I have a solution," she said. "You can owe it."

"Owe it?" asked Faultline. "To you?"

Amy shook her head. "No. You just remember that you were done a favour by someone who didn't ask for anything back, and someday, when someone else needs a favour and you can afford it, you help them out."

Hope smiled across at her. "I like it. That's perfect."

"Hey," said Amy. "I got it from you."

Faultline nodded slowly. "Okay," she said. "I can do that." She paused. "Okay," she said, "I guess we're better get down to it."

Amy had requested a private room so that she could see each of the Crew separately, and they could make their decisions free of any imagined criticism from the others. Hope sat in, because Amy didn't want to face this sort of thing without her, and because the Crew knew and trusted her.

The first person that Amy saw was Gregor the Snail. With him was Shamrock.
"I don't need any fixing," Shamrock assured them, "but Gregor asked me to be here."

"This is true," said Gregor in his ponderous way. "I want her to be part of any decision. She is part of my life."

Amy nodded. "I can understand that," she said with a smile. "Okay, Gregor, I'm just going to examine you, okay? I'm just going to touch your arm. You shouldn't feel anything strange at all."

He nodded and put his massive arm on the table before him. "Very well."

Amy placed one hand on it; her other hand found Hope's. Hope also placed her hand on Gregor's arm.

Hope turned to Amy and grinned. "What did I say?" she asked. "He's got an awesome setup in there. I have no idea what most of that stuff even does."

Amy nodded. "I do," she said. "And I can't change much without altering the balance of your powers dramatically, I'm afraid."

"I would rather no change at all then," said Gregor phlegmatically.

"I can do cosmetic changes," offered Amy. "Remove some of those shells, give you a skin tone closer to normal, maybe fix your fingernails." She paused. "And I've had a certain amount of success unlocking the memories of Case Fifty-Three, if you want me to have a shot at that too." She squeezed Hope's hand, and got a return squeeze.

Gregor looked at Shamrock. She smiled at him. "I don't care about your skin tone," she said, "but the shell idea and the fingernails I like."

He nodded. "Good. So do I." He turned to Amy. "If you can fix the shells and the fingernails, I would be happy. I do not need to know where I came from. I am happy here. This is my home."

Amy nodded. "I can do that. Hope?"

"Right here, sweetie," said Hope, squeezing her hand.

As Amy had said, the change was cosmetic. The whorled shells on Gregor's skin seemed to detach and fall to the floor. His fingernails seemed to shed away, pushed off by growths that appeared in the nail bed and extended to become healthy-looking fingernails of a size and proportion appropriate to his hands. The whole exercise took less than thirty seconds.

He examined his new fingernails, then showed them off to Shamrock. "I like them," she declared.

"Good," he said. "So do I." They rose from the seats. "Thank you," he said.

As they left, Shamrock had his hand in both of hers, examining his new nails closely.

The next one in was Labyrinth. Faultline came in and sat off to the side, silent but watchful. Labyrinth, for her part, sat there placidly in the chair, not paying any particular attention to them.

"What is it I can help you with?" asked Amy.

Labyrinth looked at her. "You fixed Mimi. Can you fix me?" she asked.

"Um," said Amy. "I really don't like doing brain fixes. And your power depends on your mind. I
might accidentally change the way your power works."

Labyrinth did not seem disturbed. "Can you make the bad days go away?"

Hope looked at Amy; Amy shrugged. "I can only try. Can we have your hands, please?"

Labyrinth held out her hands; they were slim and delicate. Hope took one, while Amy took the other. They joined hands, and Amy went looking into Labyrinth's brain.

"Well," she said at last, "I can do something, and I'm reasonably sure that it won't make your powers harder to control. In fact, I might be able to make control easier for you; you'll be able to make things happen more easily, and you'll be able to control the content more readily." She smiled. "And I can do something about the bad days, too."

She paused for a long moment, until it became apparent that Labyrinth was not going to speak. Faultline, in her chair, made gesturing motions. *Go on.*

"Do you want me to do that?" she asked.

Labyrinth nodded slowly. "It would be good to not have bad days."

Amy took a deep breath. "Right then." She squeezed Hope's hand. "Let's do this."

Labyrinth's mind was a tangle of strange perspectives and stranger connections. Amy could see that she had had mental problems from a young age, and that having powers had not helped her much. But the powers were not dependent on her mental structure, and so Amy could assist her, at least a little.

She set about dealing with the cycle of depression, adjusting chemical balances and hormone flows so that the cycles were flatter and the average emotional peaks were higher. On her worst days, she would feel moderately down, nothing worse than she was feeling right at the moment.

Amy also studied her power structure, rearranging some of the control structures connecting it to her mind so that her unconscious did not control quite so much of it. As a final touch, she edged some of the brain structures a little closer to normality so that Labyrinth would not be quite so detached from reality. However, she was aware that a certain amount of detachment was necessary for the power use, so she set it up so that Labyrinth could access this detachment at will.

The adjustments took longer than they might have, mainly because Amy was checking and double-checking what she was doing before doing it; the last thing she wanted was to leave Labyrinth a cripple, mental or physical, with no way of fixing her.

However, she was finished at last. She let go Labyrinth's hand and leaned back with a sigh. "Done. Most I can do. Sorry can't do more." She was sweating, as though she had just run a race.

Hope gathered Amy into her arms; Amy leaned gratefully into the embrace, as Faultline addressed Labyrinth.

"Elle?" she said. "How do you feel?"

Elle looked up. "I'm feeling ... lucid," she said. "My head is ... clear." She paused. "Wow. I can actually string three thoughts together without two of them becoming tangled up. It feels ... weird."

"And your powers?" asked Faultline. "Do they still work?"
Elle turned and gestured to a blank wall. It turned into the stone wall of a house, bearing an oaken door with roses climbing over the lintel. The change was startling, impressive. She nodded, and let the door and roses fade from view. "I think so," she said. "They certainly seem to."

Faultline nodded. "Well, that looks good to me," she said.

"Keep an eye on her, and let me know if anything changes," said Amy, from within Hope's arms.

Faultline nodded and rose. "I will," she said. Elle opened the door, then turned in the doorway. "Amy," she said. "Hope. Thank you. Even if it's just for the night. Thank you."

"You're welcome,' said Amy. Hope nodded in agreement.

The last visitor was Newter. He sat, somewhat ill at ease, opposite Amy and Hope.

"What's the matter?" asked Amy. He muttered something and looked away.

"Sorry," said Hope. "I didn't hear that."

Newter looked up. "Can I talk to Amy alone please?" he asked, almost shyly.

Hope glanced at Amy, who shrugged. "Okay," said Hope. "I'll be outside. Call me if you need me."

She rose, smiled at Newter, and left the room.

After the door closed behind her, Amy looked at Newter. "Hope is my best friend, and more than that, she's my girlfriend," she said in neutral tones. "What is it that you can't say in front of her?"

Newter squirmed. "I can't stop thinking about you," he confessed. "Since the ceremony. You hugged me and kissed me on the cheek." He looked at her, his eyes full of longing. "I can't forget that. I dream of it."

"Really?" she said. "Would you like me to hug you again?"

"Would you?" he asked.

"Of course I would," she said with a smile. She stood up; she had thought of hugging Newter again more than once since that day, though apparently it had not been on her mind as constantly as it had been upon his. She grinned. "I might even kiss you again, if you're lucky."

He rose, and moved into her arms with alacrity. She held him close, feeling the tingling as her skin defenses dealt with his hallucinogens. He sighed; she felt the shudder deep within him as he relaxed into the hug. She also realised something else.

"My," she giggled, "you have been looking forward to hugging me, haven't you?"

His cheeks turned a darker orange as he pulled back a little. "Don't tell Hope, I don't want her mad at me," he begged.

Amy cupped his face in her palms. His shyness and timidity were positively adorable, and she felt a rush of affection for him. "Dear sweet Newter," she said softly, "Hope is not the jealous type. If she knew you felt this way about me, she would positively encourage us to do something about it."

And then she kissed him.

The rush was not something she had expected. She felt his lips responding, his arms going around
her as hers went around him, and then his tail, oh his tail. The closeness of him, his obvious need for
her, did something to her body that had it responding to what his hands and tail were doing to her.
Responding in ways that she had rarely felt, even with Hope.

She felt her heart rate increasing, her face flushing, her body throbbing with need.

With a supreme effort of will, she pushed away from him. "No," she gasped. "Not yet."

He stared at her, hurt. "What?" he asked. "Why?"

"Have to ... fix you," she managed. "Fix problems you have." She smiled. "And then we can have
personal time."

Because she had come to a realisation.

*I'm not gay.*

*I'm bisexual. I like boys as well as girls.*

*And Newter does things to me that ...*

She tried to stifle the treacherous thought, but it would not stay down.

... *that Hope just can't do. As much as I love her.*

"Okay," she said briskly. "What did you want done?"

He blinked, still stunned by the abrupt change in gears. "Um ... make it so I don't accidentally drug
people just by brushing past them? Maybe make my skin less orange?"

"That I can do," she said cheerfully. Raising her voice, she called, "Hope!"

The door opened, and Hope entered. She seemed utterly oblivious to what had just gone on before,
and Amy grinned. *Good old Hope.*

"We're going to make Newter a little less profligate with his hallucinogens, and work at changing his
skin tone. In that order, of course," said Amy.

"Cool," said Hope. She took Amy's hand, and grinned at Newter. "I love watching Amy at work,"
she confided. "It's like poetry in motion."

He gave her a sickly grin, and took Amy's hand as well. Amy nodded to Hope. "Take his other
hand," she said. "I'll make sure you don't get blitzed out."

Hope took the hand, and, true to her word, she felt nothing more than a mild tingling down her arm.

Amy set to work, adjusting the control Newter had over the release of chemicals into his sweat and
saliva and other body fluids.

"Right," she said, sitting back at last. "You can release them at will, and the moment you stop
releasing them, your body will reabsorb them. Sound good?"

Newter nodded. "Sounds good to me. And the skin?"

Amy frowned. "More of a problem. I can maybe try to build in a chameleon effect so that you can
look human if you concentrate. But that might take a while to fine-tune correctly, given that it won't
be a part of your actual powers."

Newter nodded. "Um, could we maybe try that later?" he asked. "After I've had time to think about it?"

Amy nodded. "Of course," she said, and smiled.

She rose and stretched; Newter's eyes followed every inch of her body, from her toes to her fingertips. Hope, watching, raised an eyebrow slightly.

Then Amy turned to Hope. "Would you mind much if I stayed here tonight?" she asked.

"Of course not," agreed Hope. "Why?"

Amy smiled. "Newter has a little problem I want to help him with."

Hope frowned. "Little prob – oh!" she gasped, then grinned. "You want to have sex with him."

Amy nodded, hooking one arm around Newter and pulling him close. "And he wants to have sex with me. And I have a feeling it's gonna be an all-nighter."

"Wow," said Hope. "See, I told you I wasn't fulfilling your needs properly."

"Yeah, yeah, you were right and I was wrong," grinned Amy.

Newter stopped trying to sink through the floor long enough to stare at Hope.

"You don't mind?" he asked, in tones of deep disbelief.

Hope shook her head. "Not in the slightest. Amy thinks she will be more happy sleeping with you than with me, so I say have at it. Mind you," she said, leaning forward with a mock scowl, "you'd better show her as good a time as she thinks she's going to be having, or I will come after you with a big stick."

Amy giggled. "No you won't. And besides, I have a feeling both of us are going to have a wonderful time."

Newter could only look from one to the other with bewilderment.

"Come on," grinned Amy, "let's go tell the others."

Faultline took the news with equanimity. Shamrock and Spitfire hugged Amy, followed by Labyrinth, who still seemed slightly shocked at the way she was now perceiving the world. Gregor gave Newter a high-five, once he found out about the change in capabilities.

"It is good to be able to shake hands with my friends," he said, doing just that. He also hugged Amy, and then Hope.

"It is always good to see you, little Hope," he said. "You bring good things into our lives."

She smiled. "I try, guys," she said. "I try."

She gave Amy a hug before she went. "Take care, sweetie," she said. "Are you sure you'll be okay? I can stay here if you want. They've offered me a bed."
Amy shook her head. "I'll be fine," she said. "I think I'm really looking forward to doing this. And as much as I love you and depend on you ... tonight, I wanna see what I can do, okay?" She grinned. "I don't want you hovering like a mother hen."

Hope giggled. "Okay, sweetie," she said, kissing Amy on the tip of the nose. "You just let me know when you need a lift, okay?"

Amy smiled. "Of course," she said, hugging Hope tightly. "And thank you. I love you so much."

"I love you too, sweetie," Hope responded. She let Amy go, spread her wings, and took to the air in a welter of crystal chimes.

Amy turned and took Newter's hand. "Okay," she said with a smile. "Let's go see what you've got."

Hope glided in toward the shelter; it was now quite late at night, and she was just a little tired. For all that she had spent a good portion of the day in court, she had also done quite a bit else.

She landed outside the shelter and walked in. Lisa was cleaning down one of the tables, and looked up as she entered.

"Amy not with you?" she asked.

Hope shook her head. "No. She decided she wanted to stay over at Palanquin." She smiled. "She and Newter were making eyes at each other when I left." She dropped into a chair. "I hope they have a good time." More quietly, she added, "I hope she'll be all right."

Lisa sat down beside her, and put a hand on hers. Hope smiled at her gratefully.

"So how do you feel about this?" asked Lisa.

Hope paused, looking pensive. "Strange. Like there's a hole in my life. I mean, I'm glad Amy's found someone to sleep with who can really do things for her, but it feels like I want to reach out and gather someone in, and there's no-one to gather in."

"Sounds like you're lonely," said Lisa.

Hope frowned. "But I've never felt this before. And I spent quite a bit of time not having anyone to be with."

Lisa smiled. "But you've just spent the last few weeks of your life in a very close, intensely personal relationship with someone who you care for very deeply. It doesn't matter that you don't have a particular need for sex, or for much else, for that matter. You care for her so much that it hurts. And when she's not there, you want to see where she is."

Hope blinked. "I suppose you're right," she said. "I ... feel weird. Unbalanced." She rose from the chair. "I suppose I should go to bed," she said uncertainly.

"Wait," said Lisa.

Hope stopped and looked at her. "Yes?"

"Amy is with Newter tonight, yes?" said Lisa.

Hope nodded. "She doesn't need me, tonight. Maybe that's why I feel so strange. Not being needed."
Lisa shook her head. "I wouldn't say that you're not needed," she said. "The world needs you. The country needs you. Brockton Bay needs you." She paused, then took the plunge. "I need you."

Hope blinked again. "You?"

Lisa moved in close to Hope, put her arms around her. Hope hugged her back, enjoying the warmth of contact. "I can never hold anyone for long," Lisa said softly, "because I get too much from them. But you ... you give me nothing but good feelings." She looked up at Hope. "Please?" she said. "Be with me? Tonight?"

Hope looked at her, saw the needing in her eyes. Felt the void within her open to the need, realign her perspectives. She had always loved Lisa, as she loved everyone else. But now she wanted to be with her.

"Of course," she said softly, and kissed Lisa gently on the lips.

Lisa took her by the hand, and led her to her bedroom.

The door closed behind them.

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Taylor and Everett

Taylor looked Everett dead in the eye as she hooked her thumbs in his waistband, and pulled his boxers down. Then she sank to her knees in front of him.

Everett gasped as she brought her hands up to cup and grasp his erection, sticking out before him like a battering ram.

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Taylor gasped as she cupped it and measured it with her hands. *Oh my god,* she thought. *He’s enormous.*

Even as she brought her mouth to the glans and began to lick and suck at his very head, her other hand slipped down inside her panties and started rubbing at her sex, which had suddenly become very moist indeed.

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He groaned and arched his back as her hand and mouth did their best to encompass his girth; she gradually, slowly managed to fit him into her mouth, her tongue still flicking away at him.

He felt the eruption building in his balls, and he tried to grunt a warning, but it was too little, too late.

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His hips jerked forward, and then he sprayed his seed convulsively, splattering over her face, her naked breasts, her stomach and in her hair. She coughed and choked and managed to swallow what had gone into her mouth.

“Oh, jeez,” he said. “I’m sorry.”
She looked up at him, with semen running down her face and dribbling off her left nipple, and grinned. “Hey,” she said. “It’s a good thing we decided not to have sex. This monster wouldn’t have been halfway inside me before you blew off.”

She took the hand from her pantie, reached up, collected the driplet that had collected on her nipple, and slid her hand down her pantie once more. “Oh yes,” she sighed, as she slid her cum-slick finger into herself. “That feels so very good.”

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The very sight of her, covered in his seed, her taut breasts, and rubbing his cum into her pussy, made the blood rush into his loins once more. Surprised, she stared at his erection, bobbing again at eye level. “Wow,” she said. “It really does recover fast.”

He smiled tentatively. “I just want to have sex with you so badly,” he confessed.

“Was that a request?” asked Taylor, rubbing herself harder now.

He took a deep breath. “No. Sorry.”

---

She grinned and wiped most of the semen from her face, then stood up and kissed him. At the same time, she swung astride his rigidly erect penis, her longer legs allowing her to stand with it between her thighs, his pubis pressing against hers, his cock nestling up in her ass crack.

As he kissed her back, she squeezed her thighs together on his cock. To him it felt almost as good as being inside her; it was hot and tight, and he could feel the moisture of her pussy soaking through her panties directly on top of his erection.

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They fell back on to the camp bed more or less by mutual design; she ended up underneath, with him poised over her. His erection was still trapped between her thighs, and he began to pump his hips. This forced his cock back and forth between her thighs, and also dragged the top of his erection over her extremely sensitive – if panty-clad – pussy.

The sensation was incredible.

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He pumped his hips faster and faster, having to glance down once or twice to ensure that he hadn’t accidentally slipped inside her panties and inside Taylor as well. But he hadn’t. Her pussy was liberally soaking her panties and his cock with her juices, and this was making it easier to slide back and forth, even as she clamped down with her thighs.

And then she let out a bitten-off scream, and he unleashed a muted shout, and she bucked up at him a few seconds before he jerked his hips and splattered more sperm all over the bed and all over her panties.
They both had to lie back for a few moments after that.

“Wow,” she said, her voice rough. “Is it always that good?”

“Better,” he assured her. “Much better.”

She looked fondly at his penis, which had now shrunk, even if it still oozed the occasional white droplet. “Is it gonna jump out at me again if I touch it?”

He grinned. “Probably not. Two in such a short time is amazing.”

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She smiled and handled him carefully, lifting the length up to examine the underside and the testicles in the scrotum. He felt a stir as she ran her cool hands over his manhood, but nothing eventuated.

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“Well, then,” she said briskly, after she had caught her breath. “My turn now, I think.”

He grinned and reached over her – brushing his chest against her now-erect nipples – to reach his boxers. She grabbed him, running her hands over his muscular body, down his back, and clutching his ass. Then she kissed him.

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He felt the sparks ignite in his mind, and he kissed her back. His hands caressed her breasts, rubbing and tweaking the nipples, and slid down to rub at the outside of her panties, where they were soaked through and through.

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She groaned and kissed him harder, then wriggled a leg under him. By the time they broke the kiss, she was under his body, legs spread. He was fully erect once more, his hips thrusting without conscious volition, the head of his penis indenting the cloth covering her soft, sweet young pussy lips.

She looked up at him hungrily. “Everett,” she said huskily. “Please make love to me. Please.”

Reaching down, she began to pull her panties aside, to allow him access ...

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Everett gulped. This was perhaps the most difficult thing he had ever done. “Are you – are you sure?” he asked, pulling his hips back. If she says yes, he thought, I won’t be able to hold back.

---

Taylor blinked in frustration, and then her mind cleared slightly. She sighed, and readjusted her underwear. “No,” she admitted. “Thank you, Everett.”
He nodded, and sat up to pull the boxers on. “I think I’d better put these on for a while,” he said.

She took a deep breath of the cool night air. “It might be a good idea,” she said, though not without just a little regret. She looked at his erection as it pushed out the front of the boxers. “Maybe I should, you know, make you come again.”

He shook his head. “That would be selfish of me. Besides, as you said, it’s your turn.”

She grinned. “So it is.” Lying back, she lifted her hips and skinned out of the panties, dropping them over the side of the bed. Then she lay back and spread her arms and legs for his viewing pleasure.

“Oh my god,” he said, “you are so sexy.”

She shook her head, giggling and blushing. “I’m not sexy. Emma’s sexy. She’s a model.”

“No, no,” he said. “I like your body. It’s all ... there. Nothing wasted.” He put his hands on her knees and ran them slowly up her thighs; she drew in her breath as he got closer and closer to her crotch.

To her mild disappointment and frustration, he neatly evaded her inviting pussy lips and the small dark bush that sat above them, instead leaning forward and skimming both palms up over her smooth, flat stomach.

When he reached her breasts, he cupped them, each hand easily encompassing one, gently squeezing and moulding them in his large hands. Taylor breathed more sharply as he began to rub her nipples between thumb and forefinger, bringing them to taut hardness.

“Oh my god,” she whispered. “That feels so good.”

He grinned, leaned forward, looming over her body, and lowered his lips to her left breast. She gasped and her hips bucked upward as he sucked her nipple into his mouth and began to nibble on it, keeping up the suction.

She nearly went cross-eyed with pleasure as he kept licking and sucking and nibbling one nipple, while caressing and rolling the other between his fingers. And then he slid his hand back down her belly to cup her sex.

Pausing in his ministrations on her nipple, he asked in a whisper, “Is it sex if anything but my penis goes into your vagina?”

At the same time, his hand was caressing and squeezing and rubbing her pussy lips; her legs spread farther apart, quite without her conscious volition.
She arched her back in a spasm of pleasure. “No,” she grunted. “Just your penis. Oh god, keep doing what you were doing!”

---

He grinned and lowered his mouth to her other nipple, causing her to let out a strangled cry of pleasure. And then he parted her labia with his fingers, feeling the hot moisture welling out, and began to rub at her clitoris.

---

Taylor arched her back again, pulling his head down toward her nipple, clutching at his hand over her groin, biting back a high-pitched scream as she orgasmically screamed.

He kept doing it, even taking her nipple between his teeth and gently nibbling it, sending waves of mind-blowing sensation through her body. Down below, she felt his finger very slowly, very gently, begin to slide into her well-lubricated pussy. She clenched around him as he slid his thick finger in and out of the first inch or two of her vaginal canal, and another orgasm blasted through her.

---

He lifted his head from her breast. “Wow,” he said. “You’re wet.”

Still rubbing gently at her clit with one finger, and penetrating her lightly with another, he moved his face up to where she was slackly staring at the ceiling, and kissed her. She clutched at him, running her hands over his back and shoulders, as she melted into the kiss.

---

Shudders of pleasure were rippling through her as he kept on doing what he was doing to her.

When they broke the kiss, she looked at him with vast, dark eyes. “Everett, please,” she whispered. “What?” he asked. *If she asks me to make love to her again, I won’t be able to say no*, he realised.

---

“She kissed me,” she groaned. “Lick me. Down there. Between my legs. Oh god, do it to me.”

She closed her eyes, felt him lick and kiss his way gently down her body, each touch a spark of fire that ignited her soul.

If he had just chosen to doff his boxers and take her right there, right then, she would have taken him inside her gladly.

But he didn’t. His kisses and licks, teasing, gentle, driving her out of her mind, went right down to her sex, and then off to one side. She became aware that he was licking and nibbling at the inside of her thigh, right next to her streaming vagina. The sensations were driving her wild.

And then her world exploded.
As his mouth fastened on to Taylor’s sopping pussy, Everett felt her convulse, her back arched, her pussy flooded, and she came again with a high-pitched cry.

He began to eat her out. He was good at this; Becky had made sure he learned properly, and never talked with his mouth full. His tongue flicked over her labia, teased her clitoris, and delved into her soft wet pussy itself.

---

The sensations were beyond belief. Her mind was melting. She had thought it was good when he first started to apply his tongue and lips to her pussy, but this was beyond her expectations, better than the rubbing her pussy had gotten from his cock.

She came again and again, pushing her crotch hard against his mouth.

---

*What’s the definition of the ideal lover? A guy with a twelve inch tongue who can breathe through his ears.* Everett recalled the old joke as he lapped at her vagina, sliding his tongue to and fro, keeping her at a fever pitch of excitement. He nibbled a little at her clit, sending her over the edge again, in a big way.

---

Taylor clutched at her own breasts, squeezing and kneading them, as she arched her back at another orgasm, not even trying to keep her voice down.

But finally, the exquisite sensations died away, and she could breathe again. *Holy god, what was that? I think I just got hit by a train.*

---

Everett crawled back up over her body, poising himself over her. “Up for a little more grinding?” he asked with a grin.

“Oh hell yes,” she said.

“Good,” he replied. “Lift your legs. I want to try it a different way.”

---

Obediently, she lifted her legs, and found them trapped under his armpits. She was spread out, unable to move, her pussy wide open to anything he wanted to do. *If he decides to put it in me ...*

... *I won’t argue. Really, I won’t.*

---

But he didn’t. Instead, he pressed his boxers-clad erection directly on to her soft, soaking, upturned pussy. Through the thin layer of coth, the underside of his rigid erection made direct contact with her spread labia, pressing against her exposed clitoris.
And then he began to move. Back and forth. Slowly at first, and then more quickly.

To him it was rather pleasant, but nothing like the sensation her squeezing thighs had imparted to him.

---

To her it was like nothing on earth. His cloth-covered cock slid up and down between her labia, rubbing over her clitoris, sending indescribable waves of sheer blind orgasmic ecstasy blasting through her. She bucked up against him, forcing her pussy hard against his boxers, coating them liberally with her secretions.

---

He pushed down harder, feeling the pleasure building, feeling the orgasm coming on. His hips pumped faster. She clutched at him, digging her nails into his shoulders.

He didn’t realise that the back and forth motion was making his boxers ride down slightly; the head of his prick protruded out of the waistband.

---

She didn’t know that it was the head of his cock plowing between her labia, catching at her clitoris, giving her an insane pleasure jolt with each rub-thrust he made. All she knew was that she was in seventh heaven, and it was getting better all the time.

---

The boxers rode down a little more, and more of his cock slid between her labia. She exploded into another orgasm. He drew back for another thrust. One more would pull enough of his cock free that he would, quite accidentally, be able to penetrate her.

At that moment, he came. Sperm boiled out of his cock, splattering her bare pussy, coating her labia, dribbling into her virginal hole.

Everett felt something funny, reached down, and realised that his penis was partially AWOL. Gulping, he tucked it back inside. That was too close.

---

Taylor lay on her back, stark naked, with drying semen on her face, her breasts, her belly and her pussy. She was breathing heavily, having experienced a firecracker series of orgasms that far outperformed anything that masturbation had ever managed for her.

“Holy crap,” she murmured. “That was ... insane.”

Everett, lying beside her, nodded. “That was ... yeah,” he agreed. “Insane.”

Taylor leaned over and kissed him, which occupied them both for some little time. When they separated, she reached over the side of the bed to locate her panties. “I think it’s your turn again,” she whispered.
After she slid back into her panties, Everett divested himself of his boxers. He reached for her, but she smiled and pushed him back. “Just lie back and think of England,” she advised him with a giggle. “Or Brockton Bay.”

Climbing on top of him, she straddled his hips, her barely-clad pussy pressing down on his groin. At the moment, there was no interest there; as virile as Everett was, he still needed a little downtime to resurrect himself.

She started with kisses all over his face, and then to his neck and chest. As she did so, he caressed and rubbed her breasts as they hung down over him, where he could easily reach them. She breathed more heavily, and dug her nails in to the muscles on his ribs. She felt something begin to stir under her crotch, and ground down on it with her sopping panties.

Evrerett felt the stirring too, and Taylor’s response. The sensation as she ground down on him was insane, and he felt his hips thrusting upward in response. The revival of his erection proceeded apace.

She had to leave his crotch alone as she slowly worked her way down his body, rubbing her breasts and nipples over his chest and abdomen, and then over his erect penis itself. It was an unexpectedly sensual experience for Everett, and managed to bring him to full erection by the time she got down to him.

Wow, and I thought she was joking about rubbing her body all over me.

By this time, she was somewhat more at ease with his cock, and grasped it confidently. Slowly, sensuously, she began to lavish the head with kisses and licks, while stroking the shaft and gently cupping his testicles.

The sensation was incredible; she actually seemed to be fitting it into her mouth this time.

For his part, he bent his knee slightly, so that his big toe was level with her pussy, as she knelt over his cock, and began rubbing at her pussy through the cloth of her panties.

She gasped, and pushed herself down on the toe, which wriggled most distractingly.

Slowly, carefully, she was managing to engulf more and more of his rigid erection within her mouth; it had almost managed to reach the back of her throat. She didn’t think she could get much more in,
so she began sucking and licking at his cock, caressing and rubbing at it with her hands.

---

He groaned and thrust his hips up at her greedy mouth, feeling the warm tight wetness, along with her naughty tongue and her rapidly-moving hands. He couldn’t believe it; his aching balls were gathering to produce one last blast of sperm. One last hurrah.

---

She licked and sucked and rubbed and caressed him, and he became more and more excited under her, his hips thrusting upward, and his groans becoming louder. His toe was also becoming more insistent, and had found her clitoris, and was rubbing it to very good effect.

And then, almost unexpectedly, he exploded one last time. It wasn’t the jets of semen that had gotten her the first time, but a few minor spurts, barely enough to splatter her face. She licked them off and sucked it clean, then gave it a gentle kiss.

---

As she lay back down beside him, she put her arms around him.

“That was wonderful,” she murmured.

“Yeah,” he replied. “Sex would have been better, but not by much, I will admit.”

She kissed him fondly. “Thank you for asking if I was sure.”

He grinned and kissed her back. “Thank you for not asking a second time.”

She snuggled up against him. “Do you think Dad heard anything?” A giggle. “I think I got pretty loud there.”

He chuckled as he leaned over to get his boxers. “I’m guessing that he’s working very hard not to hear anything.”

As he slipped them on, she giggled. “Maybe we should have given him earplugs.”

He chuckled and put his arms around her. “Mmmm. This is nice.”

“Oh yeah,” she said. “I didn’t used to like cuddling, but now I do.”

He yawned. “I’m beat. Think we should head back to our beds? I don’t think we should do any more tonight.” He chuckled. “I don’t think I can do any more tonight.”

She nodded sleepily. “Yeah, good idea.”

They remained in each other’s arms, warmly comfortable, unwilling to let go.

“Five minutes,” he said, “and we get up and go back to bed.”

“Okay,” she said. “Five minutes.”
They were asleep in two.

**Hope and Lisa**

Hope lay face-down on the bed, groaning softly in utter ecstasy. Lisa did not have the ability to read her anatomy that Amy did, but her incredible intuition did much the same job. And so she was able to find just the same points, manipulate her wings in just the same way, and dig her thumbs into just the same nerves to give her a thoroughly incredible experience.

Eventually, Lisa finished, and Hope just lay there, awash in a haze of pleasure.

“Thank you, Lisa,” she said softly, rolling over to smile at the blonde girl. “That was wonderful.”

She blinked. “Why are you naked?”

For Lisa was indeed unclothed; her slim body was exposed to Hope’s gaze, from her taut, smooth breasts, to the neatly trimmed bush between her thighs.

She leaned in and kissed Hope gently, her nipples brushing against Hope’s chest. Hope kissed her back, as sensuously as Amy had taught her, and Lisa growled deep in her throat. She tugged at Hope’s lower lip with her teeth, and Hope responded by cupping her breast and squeezing gently.

“Oh, my,” murmured Lisa. “It appears Amy taught you well.” She lay down alongside Hope, caressing her hand down the androgynous cape’s flank to her narrow hips. “But I think I’ll teach you something more.”

Hope looked politely interested, even as she continued to fondle Lisa’s breast. The pleasure was evident in the blonde girl’s face, especially when she rubbed the erect nipple between thumb and forefinger. “What are you going to teach me?” she asked.

Lisa arched her back and bit her lip as Hope tweaked her nipple, then leaned in and kissed Hope hard on the lips, reaching around behind to pull her into the kiss. Hope returned the kiss, sliding her tongue into Lisa’s mouth and feeling Lisa’s leg slide between hers. She had nothing there, of course, but she felt Lisa begin to grind her crotch against her own thigh.

When they separated, Lisa’s bottle-green eyes were smoky and hot with arousal. “I’m going to teach you how to make love to me,” she said softly.

“Oh, I already know how to do that,” said Hope. “Amy says I’m very good with my tongue and fingers.”

Lisa shook her head. “No, that’s not making love,” she said softly. “That’s just foreplay. You’re going to learn how to do more than that.”

Hope blinked. “How am I going to do that?” she asked. She leaned in and kissed Lisa, fondling her breast again.

Lisa kissed her in return, then took her hand and pushed it down to her crotch. She opened her legs, letting Hope see her delicate pussy lips framed by her soft thighs. She pressed Hope’s fingers into her lips. “Spread them,” she murmured.
“Deeper,” urged Lisa, and Hope slid her fingers deeper into her; Lisa arched her back and moaned softly. Without being told, Hope found Lisa’s clitoris and pressed her thumb on it; Lisa kissed her again, and her tight vagina squeezed against Hope’s fingers.

When they broke the kiss, Lisa was pressing something into Hope’s hands. “What’s this?” asked Hope.

“Put it on,” said Lisa. “I’ll show you how to use it.”

Hope puzzled over it. “Put it on where?”

“It straps on around your hips,” Lisa explained. “Here, I’ll help.”

She assisted Hope with donning the strap-on; when she had finished, Hope possessed a bright pink plastic penis of medium size, thrusting forward from her hips.

She looked down at it and wiggled her hips; the thing wriggled from side to side. She giggled; “I look ridiculous,” she said.

“It's not built for looks,” said Lisa, and giggled. “Well, maybe it does look a little ridiculous.” She paused. "You know, if Amy grew you a penis ..."

Hope shook her head. "I like me the way I am," she said firmly. "I'll wear the silly plastic thing." She looked at it and giggled again.

Lisa smiled at her. Hope was so refreshing, so direct, so innocent. And all she wanted to do right now was please her, please Lisa. Lisa lifted her chin. "Bring it up here," she said softly. "I need to wet it down."

Obediently, Hope moved up the bed on her knees, until Lisa could bend down and suckle on the plastic erection, sliding her lips up and down it.

Hope watched her quizzically. "Am I supposed to be feeling anything out of that?" she asked. "Because I'm not."

Lisa giggled. "No, sweetie, I'm just lubricating it for when it first goes inside me." And it also makes me feel as though I am sucking my lover's cock, and that makes me feel so damn hot.

"Oh, okay," said Hope. She looked down at the thing again. "You really want me to put this inside you?"

"Oh, yes," sighed Lisa. "I really, really do." She held Hope close and kissed her; Hope kissed her back, caressing her hair and face. "You see, Hope, every time I have ever tried to get this intimate with someone, it's been like a marching band travelling through the room at the same time as the radio is blaring at the top of its volume. What they want to do, what they wish they could do, things they want to do that I don't want to do, what they're going to be doing later, secret excitement at having sex with an underage girl ... you see what I mean?"

Hope nodded solemnly. "And you don't get this with me?"
Lisa smiled and kissed her again. "No, thank god. All I get from you is 'how can I best make Lisa happy'? Which is just one reason that I'm more than half in love with you right now, even before this."

Hope frowned. "Well, of course that's what you get from me. It's what I'm thinking about."

Lisa giggled. "You, my darling, darling Hope, are a wonder and a treasure. Now, please take that silly plastic penis and show me what Amy taught you, before we make love."

"Okay," said Hope, and kissed Lisa tenderly.

She moved down the bed and knelt between Lisa's spread thighs, bending down to lick and lap at her sex. Lisa arched her back and moaned; her legs fell apart even farther.

She clasped and squeezed her breasts, tweaking the nipples, as Hope continued her ministrations, bringing Lisa to a fever pitch of arousal.

She really was very good at it; Lisa knew full well that one of Hope's talents was to read the body of anyone she touched. She could feel if they were injured, ill, in pain ... or feeling pleasure. So she automatically knew what felt best, and did it more.

And oh my god, she's blowing my mind. Lisa panted and moaned and writhed on the bed, as Hope dutifully worked at giving her pleasure.

"Enough," she groaned at last. "Oh god, I could take that all night, but enough." Hope looked up enquiringly. Her face was clean of any of Lisa's secretions, due to another little quirk of her powers; nothing stuck to her. The only impressions Lisa got from her were That tasted nice and Wow, Lisa is turned on, and What can I do to make her happy now?

"Now, get between my legs and start rubbing that thing up and down between my labia," she said softly. "Make sure you coat it properly with my juices. And - oh hell, you know how to make me feel good. Just do what you do best," she concluded, lying back and taking a firm grip on the bedstead.

"Okay, sweetie," said Hope, getting down so that the plastic penis could reach, and she began to rub it around the outside of Lisa's vagina, up the middle and over her clitoris. Lisa clenched her teeth to avoid crying out, as Hope's expert touch hit every button she had, and a few she hadn't known existed.

"You're very close to an orgasm," said Hope diffidently. "I can give you one now with my mouth, and then we can put it in afterward."

"No ... no ..." said Lisa tightly, between her teeth. "Put it in me now, please, oh god, make love to me."

So Hope carefully placed the rounded head of the dildo at the entrance to Lisa's pulsating vagina, and gradually began to push it into her. Lisa, wild with the sensations and with her arousal, tried to buck her hips up to meet it, but Hope held her down, so as to avoid causing her pain by excess speed of penetration. And Hope was very strong.

Lisa's mind was slowly dribbling out her ears. She had long since lost the capacity for rational
thought, much less coherent speech. She writhed under Hope's grip, but could not throw her off, could not change the slow and steady pace of that first penetration, the first entry of even an artificial penis into her delicate young virgin pussy.

As aroused and lubricated as she was, Lisa's vagina could have taken a much more forceful entry than that which Hope was making. But that would have occasioned her a certain amount of pain, and this way was giving her more pleasure. *Much* more pleasure.

Hope was thrusting in and out slowly now, as the dildo was mostly inside Lisa, opening her up more, affording her more pleasure, getting her used to the length and thickness of the plastic penis. Her careful, gentle thrusts were driving Lisa wild, teasing her so exquisitely.

And then Hope pulled almost all the way out, and then thrust the dildo all the way into Lisa's vagina, burying it to the hilt inside her.

Lisa went off like a firecracker. She arched her back, her vaginal walls clenching at the invading penis, and she screamed out her orgasm to the four winds. Hope had a hand down at her clitoris now and was rubbing it hard, while continuing the thrusting, measured, repetitive, sliding in and out of Lisa's slippery wetness, driving her into one orgasm after another.

Hope smiled to see that Lisa was enjoying herself so much; she lowered her mouth to Lisa's breast, and sucked on the nipple, nibbling it gently to increase the flow of pleasure. At the same time, she stepped up the tempo of her thrusting, with the idea that more friction might produce more results.

It got results, all right. With one final deafening scream, Lisa arched her back, dug her nails into Hope's back, and passed out cold.

---

She came to a few minutes later; Hope was sitting up on the bed, watching her anxiously. The plastic dildo sat on the bed beside her.

"Amy never did *that,*" said Hope, looking concerned.

Lisa giggled, and pulled Hope down into a hug. "I'll bet she didn't," she said, and kissed Hope several times. "Christ almighty, that was ... how the fuck did you pull that off?"

"Um ... well, I know the *mechanics* of it," said Hope. "So I read what was happening to your body, and made some educated guesses." She looked at Lisa. "You did enjoy that, didn't you?"

Lisa rolled her eyes, and gently explored her still-throbbing sex. "Yes, Hope, I enjoyed it. I enjoyed it so much that Behemoth and Crawler could have sung a duet at the end of the bed, and I literally would not have known about it."

Hope giggled. "I'm glad. Thank you for letting me be your first time." She hugged Lisa closely.

Lisa hugged her back. "Well," she said softly, "someone else, somewhere else, may have had a better first time than me, but I'd be astonished if it happened more than once a century."

Hope snuggled into her; Lisa could read her emotions. Not pride for doing such a good job, although she had surely earned that. All she felt was a reflection of the pleasure that she had given Lisa; she felt good *because* she had made Lisa feel good.
Lisa kissed her fondly and caressed her thigh. Hope felt no particular arousal from such a touch. It wasn't love-play on Lisa's part, merely deep affection. "Want to go again?"

Hope sat up. "Ooh, can I?" She sounded positively eager; Lisa giggled.

"Yes, Hope, you can." She pondered. "I think this time we might try it from behind." She kissed Hope firmly. "Just remember, I'm more able to take it now that you've given me my first time."

"I'll remember," said Hope obediently. "I'll still be careful not to hurt you, but I'll remember."


Hope smiled. "I know, sweetie," she said. "I love you too."

And she does too, Lisa knew. And she cares for me. And she likes me. And that makes me a very, very lucky person.

Lisa got off the bed, then turned and bent over it, resting her weight on her arms. Hope strapped the dildo on once more, and stopped to give her a kiss. Lisa returned the kiss fervently. "If you make my second time even half as good as my first time ..." she said, and trailed off, not quite sure what to say next.

Hope giggled, and caressed Lisa's breasts, tweaking the nipples and making her draw her breath in sharply. "I'll do my best," she said cheerfully.

---

Now, how do I do this best? Hope asked herself as she got around behind Lisa.

First off, make sure she's well lubricated. She got down on her knees and clasped Lisa's thighs with her arms to steady herself. Then she began to lick her, long steady strokes, from her clitoris bud all the way up to the little brown rosette of her asshole.

Lisa stiffened. Oh my god, that feels insane. She's licking everything. Oh god, how can it feel this good and still be legal?

Hope began paying attention to specific parts of Lisa's anatomy; first, she flicked her tongue back and forth over Lisa's clitoris until it stood out stiff and proud, then she continued to work it with her thumb while she drove her tongue into Lisa's vaginal canal, slurping deeply of the streaming juices. Lisa tried to rise on to her toes and thrust her butt back at Hope's face, but Hope did not falter with the steady tempo of her work. She tongue-fucked Lisa until the blonde girl was on the edge of an orgasm, then squeezed her clitoris, which sent her over the edge.

While Lisa had her head hanging, recovering from that one, Hope traced her tongue up to Lisa's tight ass, and flickered it back and forth over the brown pucker, slowly worming it inside. Two of her fingers slid inside Lisa while she did this, while another continued to play on her clitoris. Lisa's eyes opened wide and she tried to rise on her toes once more. Soft whimpering sounds were all that she could articulate.

And then Hope rose to her feet, and began sliding the dildo between Lisa's labia once more. She
rubbed it over her soft wetness, getting it well lubricated, then rubbed it over her clitoris making her arch her back and gasp. And then, before Lisa really had a chance to realise it, she placed the head of it at the entrance to Lisa's thoroughly lubricated vagina, and slid it into her.

It felt as big, if not bigger, the second time around. This was due, Lisa knew, to the different angle of attack, but my god! it makes a difference!

"Is this okay, sweetie?" asked Hope, thrusting slowly in and out of her, feeling the waves of pleasure that Lisa was experiencing.

"Oh god yes," moaned Lisa. "Keep doing it. Please don't stop."

"Okay," said Hope, and steadily began to up the tempo. Lisa hung on for dear life, and felt the next orgasm building.

And then Hope changed her tactics. She thrust into Lisa's wet and willing vagina six or seven times in a row, a steady progression, and then on the last thrust, she pulled Lisa hard back on to the dildo, penetrating her more deeply than normal. Lisa gasped, felt her arousal building sharply, relishing the feeling of Hope having total control of the tempo, of being mastered, of the pleasure that resulted.

"It's very strange," she mused, in some logical corner of her mind. I like being in charge. Manipulating events. But Hope is doing this to me and -

She never finished the thought, because at that moment, a monumental orgasm blasted it from her mind.

It was followed by several more; Hope had found the balance, and was playing her pleasure centres like a violin. Lisa came violently again and again, as Hope used every trick she had learned to keep her at the optimum level of pleasure for as long as possible.

Amy could do this just by laying a hand on her, Hope knew. But I have to work at it.

It's fun.

---

Eventually, Lisa collapsed face-forward on to the bed, unable to take any more without her legs giving out. Hope let the plastic penis pull free of her, and helped her on to the bed, where she lay semi-conscious for a while. Hope removed the artificial penis and lay next to Lisa, holding her close, waiting for the shuddering to recede.

Finally, Lisa's eyes focused on Hope. She looked ... satisfied.

"Are you feeling okay?" Hope asked solicitously.

Lisa smiled lazily. "If there's anyone in the city who says they're feeling better than me right now," she said smugly, "I'll call them a liar." She leaned in and kissed Hope soundly. "You, my dear sweet love, have just given me a truly wonderful gift."

Hope kissed her back. "Well, it was kinda weird and interesting and fun," she said. "But I'm glad you had a good time."
For some reason, Lisa started laughing then, and did not stop for some time. Hope just held her. She was so glad Lisa was happy.

**Brian and Jess**

Brian put down the screwdriver. “Well,” he said, wiping his brow, “that’s the last of them.” He gave the shelf a proprietory pat. “That should work for you.”

Jess watched the play of muscles in his back, his dark skin shiny with sweat, feeling the warm feeling in her stomach wander southward, to form a particular sensation of moisture between her thighs. *I want him so badly right now.* She picked up a couple of books and went to stand next to him. Standing on her tiptoes, although it was not entirely necessary, she reached up and put them on the shelf beside him.

The movement pulled her shirt out of her shorts, lifting it up to reveal a band of white skin between; Brian’s eyes were drawn to that. And then he realised that she had unbuttoned her shirt; Jess’ movement had caused it to fall open.

Underneath it, there was nothing except soft creamy flesh, in various exciting shapes.

But the moment was spoiled when a muscle spasmed in her foot, her balance shifted, and when she tried to regain it, one foot tangled behind the other.

*Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit,* she thought. *I shouldn't have tried to show off. Standing on tiptoe isn't something I've done much of yet.* Her eyes clenched shut in anticipation of the bruising impact.

But instead of floor, she found herself landing on strong, muscular arms. She took a moment to orient herself, taking several short panicky breaths, before she opened her eyes. Looking down at her was Brian's face, concern written all over it.

"Are you all right?" he asked gently.

She wrapped her arms around him, held him tight. It didn't matter to her that her bare breasts were pressed against his equally bare chest. What mattered was that he had just saved her from a nasty fall, and that she just wanted to hold him.

"Yes," she managed at last. "I was stupid. I've been using my legs all day, and when I do that, they sometimes twitch or spasm or cramp at the wrong moment altogether. I wanted to show off, and seduce you, but I just did something stupid and I nearly got hurt." She buried her face in his shoulder. "I feel like such an idiot."

He held her tightly; he had felt a moment of panic when she began to fall. *Thank god she fell toward me and not away. I'd never forgive myself if she got hurt when I was standing right there. It's all right,* he assured her. "We all do silly things. Hope even has a little saying about it."

"Really?" she asked, interested. "Is that the one that goes, 'Do something silly, realise it. -'"

"Realise it," he chimed in, "fix it, and move on." Yeah, that's the one." He smiled down at her, then gently tilted her chin up so he could kiss her. She kissed him back, the warmth in her heart spreading as she felt his arms continue to hold her, safe against the world and against accidental falls.
"Well," he said, after they came up for air, "you did something silly, it's been realised, we've fixed it, so if you want, we can move on." He grinned down at her. "What was next on the agenda?"

"Next on the agenda," she giggled, "was where I lured you into the bedroom with my feminine wiles, and had my wicked, wicked way with you. Because I understand a bed is a much nicer place to make love than a hard floor. And has less bugs."

He chuckled. "Now, you know Skitter wasn't doing that to mess with us. She was passing on a message. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if she kept the bugs off us until that point, because she knew we didn't want to be disturbed."

"Huh," said Jess. "Really. Wow." She ran her hand over his chest. "Well, neither Hope nor Skitter are here, whereas you and I are definitely here, so what are we going to do about this?"

"I think," said Brian with a grin, "that the bedroom can wait just a little longer. Because I've got ideas."

"Oh?" asked Jess, intrigued. The way he said 'ideas' sent a frisson of excitement dancing down her nerve endings.

"Yeah," he said. "Have you ever done it standing up?" Then he realised what he'd just said. "Jess? Could you please slap me on the forehead?"

"Okay," she said, and smacked him lightly there, giggling. "What was that for?"

"Because I'm an idiot and an insensitive jerk. You've just spent the last ten years in a wheelchair. Your standing activities have been few and far between, and upright sex almost certainly wasn't one of them."

"This is true," she said, still vastly amused. "But it's not your fault. Besides, the look on your face was utterly classic." She curled her arm around his neck, leaned up and kissed him. "Realised, fixed, moved on," she said gently. "Now, what was that about standing sex? I find myself aroused and intrigued."

---

He placed her on the ground, waiting till she was sure she had her footing, before running his hands up under her shirt. This opened it wider; he cupped her firm breasts in his hands, squeezing them gently and tweaking the nipples. She sucked in a gasp of air, and raked at his chest with her nails.

He slid the shirt off her shoulders, letting it fall to the floor, then gently pushed her back against the wall. Leaning in, he kissed her, the pressure of his mouth on hers pinning her in place. Then he undid his belt and stepped out of his jeans; his erection sprang out, thick and hard and black and bobbing gently before him.

“Oh, my,” she whispered, staring at it. “What are you going to do to me with that?” She felt her excitement returning, stronger than ever. I want him so badly.

He grinned, running his hands over her breasts again, causing her to arch her back and moan at his touch. As she watched, his hands then travelled down to her waist, where he took hold of the waistband of her shorts. Slowly sinking to his knees, naked and erect before her, he pushed them down past her hips; they fell to her ankles, and he steadied her legs as she stepped out of them.
For that simple act of consideration, she felt her heart melt, and her arousal increase yet more. *I want to know Brian better. I really do.*

Running his hands up her thighs, he lifted one leg and placed it over his shoulder, opening her thighs and exposing her soft, moist sex to him. He leaned in, merely breathed on her, and she nearly came on the spot.

Then he went to work on her. He had a surprisingly delicate touch; this she knew from her blazing memories of the time they had spent together after the ceremony. But memory is one thing, and being reminded is another altogether. *Oh god, Brian, what are you doing, oh god, keep doing it, don't stop don't stop don't stop*

Carefully, seriously, he worked to give her the maximum amount of pleasure. He wanted this day to be special for her; he wanted every day to be special for Jess. She had had so many bad days, he wanted to make them all up for her, by making every day with him a good day.

He did not know, could not know, that such were her burgeoning feelings for him, they could read cookbooks to each other, and she would still count it as a good day.

She clutched at his head, jerking back against the wall, as she came convulsively, his busy tongue and fingers driving her over the edge again and again. She cried out like a wounded animal, the sounds torn from deep in her throat.

Finally, he let her relax, lifting his face away from her, secretions running down his chin.

"You said you scrubbed your walls," he murmured, reaching up and shrugging her other leg on to his shoulders, taking her weight so that she had to press back against the wall. "That's good. I didn't want to get your back dirty."

Suddenly, she realised that she was straddling his shoulders, and that his face was right there. *Is he going to eat me again?*

And then, slowly and carefully, he stood up, her back sliding up the wall as they rose together. Her head was up near the ceiling when they came to a halt, and she looked around with interest. *I've never been this tall before.*

Leaning in, he kissed her slick, moist sex; a shiver of utter pleasure rippled through her. Then he looked up at her. "Spread your legs," he murmured. She hesitated; her legs on his shoulders were all that held her up. "Trust me," he said softly. "I will not let you fall."

*And he won't, either.* He had proven that to her. She trusted him; she only had to show it.

She spread her legs.

True to his word, she did not fall. Her thighs slid off his shoulders, down his biceps - *those strong, strong biceps!* - and into the crook of his elbows. She slid down, until his face was level with her breasts. He took advantage of this by licking and sucking at her taut nipples, driving her almost insane with pleasure. And then he pulled his hips back and bucked them up slightly, and she felt it. Felt the tip of his hard, hard cock, pressing at the willing warm wetness of her soft pussy lips, now spread quite far apart.
Quite without meaning to, she let herself sag down slightly; his penis almost found her entrance, but slipped away again, brushing her clitoris as it went. She moaned, then reached down and took hold of it. He groaned at the contact, groaned louder as she deliberately rubbed it back and forth between her distended labia, driving him wild with desire, and sending herself perilously close to orgasm.

Then she seated it firmly where it was supposed to go, and let herself sag a little farther. It penetrated her slightly; he bucked his hips upward, and she moaned as he slid farther into her.

Slowly, ever so slowly, she began to slide down on to his thick, throbbing cock. She could not speak, could not articulate, past a series of gasps and groans as his hard member slid into her, slowly, inexorably, sensuously. And he kept moving his hips, sliding his cock in and out of her, over and over again, each penetration just a little deeper, a little more arousing.

_Oh god, Brian, I knew you were a sensitive lover, but this is beyond belief._

Brian felt that his head was about to explode. He was so close to climax, so close to letting it all go inside her. _But I want to make it good for her. I don't just want to come as soon as I'm inside her._ He bit his lip and concentrated on not coming just yet.

When she finally stopped moving, almost the entire length of his cock was inside her tight wet pussy, and she was pressed up against the wall, her arms around his neck. Her mind was exploding in fireworks of pleasure; he hadn’t even started fucking her yet, and she could was so close to orgasm that she could taste it.

He nuzzled her neck, then licked her nipples; she arched her back and moaned, the movement itself nearly sending her over the edge.

She stared into his eyes desperately. "Do it," she begged in barely more than a whisper.

She gasped as he pulled almost all the way out of her, supporting her knees on his bent arms. And then he thrust back into her, his full length sliding all the way up into her slippery wetness, driving into her all the way to the hilt, until their pubic hair meshed.

She exploded. Pleasure blasted through every inch of her body, causing her to arch her back and clench her muscles around his thrusting cock; he managed two more thrusts before he went off as well, blasting jet after jet of hot cum deep into her hungry vagina.

He pressed her against the wall, forcing her thighs open even farther, as he continued to thrust into her. She gasped at the sensation, feeling herself so open to him, so vulnerable, so unable to resist her urges and his, so not wanting to resist.

He continued licking and biting her nipples, driving her into another orgasm and yet another, as she clawed at his back and cried out as if in pain. But finally - it seemed forever, but it must have only been a few seconds - his spasm was over and he felt himself begin to shrink inside her. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him; he reciprocated, pulling back so that she was able to close her legs just a little.

"Oh my fucking god," she whispered, still unable to talk properly, "that was ... oh god. I thought the first time was good."

Brian smiled. He had done well after all. He held her gently, his penis slowly shrinking until it slithered out of her.
"It was, it was," he assured her. "But we were rushed then, and now ... we aren't." He kissed her again; she kissed him back.

"Well," she said, with amusement and definite interest in her eyes, "here's to not being rushed." She grinned at him and nodded downward. "Now, unless you're thinking of holding me here until you're ready to have me against the wall all over again - and, just a note, I'm not actually against that in any way, shape or form - it might be nice if I can stand up again. Without all the sex going on, this is just a little uncomfortable."

He nodded. "Okay, sweetheart," he said, and bent his knees to let her down to the ground. Partway there, she let out a sharp cry of real pain.

"What?" he asked. "What did I do? Did I hurt you?" _Jess, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I never want to hurt you._

"No, no, it's not you," she said, her face twisted in pain. "Cramp. Hip muscles. Held position too long. Get me to bed, please. Need to straighten my legs. Oh god, it's going to hurt."

All thoughts of further sex play left his mind as he carried her to her bedroom and placed her on her back. Gently he massaged and coaxed her legs until she was lying straight out on her back, breathing softly, unwilling to move unless the pain returned.

"Where did you learn to do that?" she asked him. With a gesture, she invited him to lie down beside her.

He complied, his weight pushing the mattress down, causing her to roll into his arms. She did not resist, but put her arms around him as well. They kissed for a time, then pulled apart; she moved her leg experimentally, curling it over his. It moved easily, without pain.

"I belong - belonged - to a gym," he explained. "I learned sports massage while I was there. Dealing with cramps and strained muscles is something I'm used to." He smiled at her. "It's come in handy, from time to time."

_"I'll say,"_ she murmured, sliding her leg farther over him, and moving her body so that her breasts brushed back and forth across his chest. _"And your hands are good for so many other things too."_

He grinned. "Seriously, I'd like to give you a full-body massage. Your back and legs may be healthy, but going from not using them to using them full-time can cause problems." He leaned in and kissed her. "Let's say you've just upgraded to a brand new Porsche, and it's time to bring it into the garage and give it a tune-up."

"Mmmm," she murmured. "Full body massage. Does this mean you'll be running your hands all over me, while we're both naked and alone in my bedroom?"

He considered this. "Why yes, yes, I believe this might be the case," he said, as if surprised.

She stretched, then halted at a twinge from one calf. "And absolutely anything might happen between us, as consenting adults?" Her voice was a purr, her gaze direct and heavy-lidded.

He leaned in and kissed her. "Oh, it almost certainly will," he assured her.
"Oh, good," she breathed. "I was hoping you'd say something like that."

---

Jess had to admit, she had heard of massage being used as a seduction technique. It was almost a cliche. But Brian genuinely seemed more concerned about massaging her than copping a feel - although he did enough of that as well. She breathed heavily, thinking about the sensual way his hands moved over her, bringing her to a fever pitch just by touching her.

However, this did not get in the way of the sex. He started with her laying on her back, beginning at her toes and working his way up her legs. She didn't have massage oil, but she had baby oil, and that seemed to work quite well. The cold sensation of it being poured on to her flesh was even a little bit of a turn-on.

He worked his way up her legs, his strong fingers finding and working out knots in her muscles. Her drowsy murmurs let him know she was enjoying it, even when he had to dig quite hard for a particularly stubborn knot; the release of tension afterward made it all worthwhile.

_I'm actually really enjoying this_, he realised. Of course, Jess was naked, and working on a naked woman was always arousing, but there was more to it than that. He was actually enjoying making Jess feel better, helping her body work more efficiently.

Her thighs were problematic; the largest muscles in the body where there, and the ones he really wanted to get at were on the underside. But he decided to do the ones on the front first, and then deal with the others when she turned over.

She felt herself growing warm inside as his probing hands approached the centre of her sex. Eyes partially closed, she let her thighs fall open a little, as she moaned softly. He took the hint; pouring some more oil into his palm, he massaged the juncture of her thighs, running his hands over her labia, which were even now starting to swell with arousal. It felt _amazing_. She caught her breath as he flicked his oil-covered finger over her clitoris, then arched her back as two fingers slid into her, slowly and sensuously.

"Oh my god," she said, "Oh my god." And then he moved on, the colossal bastard, leaving her pussy aching for more, rubbing oil into her stomach.

Brian grinned; he wondered how long it would take her to react.

It wasn't long. She sat up, grabbed his wrists, and said, "No you don't, buster. You get down there and finish what you started."

He leaned in and kissed her, his hands caressing her breasts, leaving them slick with the oil and sensitive to touch. She grabbed the bottle, poured some on to her palm, then ran her hands up and down his throbbing-erect penis, coating it in the oil. He gasped at the sensation.

"Now you know how it feels," she said, kissing him hard. Then she lay back and spread her legs for him, in the ancient classic pose, her slick oil-covered sex inviting his entry.

He climbed on top of her; grasping his slippery member, he poised it at the entrance to her wet and willing pussy, and then slid inside her.

They both cried out; the sensation was _incredible_. She was already hot and wet and slippery, and the
oil on his head and shaft only made it more so. He began to move his hips slowly, then sped up a little as she grabbed his hips. "Yes," she gritted from between clenched teeth. "Faster. Harder. Now. Please."

He took the hint, and thrust into her deeper and harder and faster, spurred on by her growing cries. With the oil to aid them, it felt like they were having sex in a dream; her thighs clamped around him as he drove deeper and deeper into her slick, slippery wetness. She was hot and tight, her vaginal walls clamped down hard on him, and still he thrust hard into her, her pants and moans rising to a crescendo.

Brian felt his climax approaching, a volcanic heat just behind the head of his cock to match the volcanic heat into which he was plunging his penis. He'd had no idea it could be this good. He lowered his mouth to her breasts, licked and sucked them despite the taste of oil, and then took her nipple between his teeth.

She arched her back beneath him, crying out in release, as her walls clamped down hard on his thrusting manhood. Despite the oil, the friction was now insane, and he felt himself start to come. Her nails dug into his back as he slid into her over and over again, burying his cock to the hilt within her, even as his seed jetted inside her.

Jess didn't know which way was up, and didn't care. She was coming again, and he was coming inside her, that she knew. And the fact excited her; she came again and again under him and around his plunging manhood, her slippery wetness clutching at him.

The storm eventually passed, leaving them lying breathless on the bed in each other's arms. They held each other for a long time.

"Wow," he said at last. "Just ... wow."

"God damn, Brian," said Jess. "I don't know how you do it, but ... god damn."

He grinned, and kissed her. "You seemed to help just a little bit there," he mentioned.

She kissed him back. "It might be a bit soon to tell," she said, "but I am falling seriously in like with you."

He looked uncomfortable. "Not that I'm averse to a relationship," he said, "but all we've done so far is dance, kiss and screw like rabid weasels. It's fun and all, but I don't want you to be disappointed when one day you realise I'm not the man you fell in ... like, or love, or whatever, with."

She went up on one elbow. "Now you listen to me, Brian Laborn," she said, tapping him on the nose with her forefinger. "Who spent the afternoon putting up shelves for me?"

"Well, yeah, me, I guess," he admitted.

She nodded. "And when I fell over, who caught me?"

He nodded. "Me, but really, it was nothing."

She shook her head. "Not to me, it wasn't. Believe me, it wasn't." She leaned in and kissed him. "And when I had cramp, who helped me straighten my legs? And who's in the middle of giving me a full-body massage?"
"Well, yeah, okay, fine, me," he said, then kissed her back. "I just think I should be doing more for you before you decide that I'm the one."

She cupped his face in her hand. "You are a very strange man, Brian Laborn. And I love you dearly." A frozen moment passed between them. "Like. I mean 'like'."

He smiled lazily. "I think I'll go with 'love'." His hand strayed to her breast, gently rubbing the nipple. "Now, do you want me to continue the massage, or should we cuddle up together and talk about whatever comes up?"

She grinned. "Well, you haven't finished the massage yet. So get that done, and we can talk." A sideways glance. "Besides, we can always interrupt the massage if something comes up again."

"That we can," he agreed. "That we can." He retrieved the bottle of baby oil, now sadly depleted, and sat up on the bed. "Okay, I'll be doing your back and thighs now. They really need work."

Obediently she rolled on to her front. "Just watch those hands, buster," she said. "Don't you go touching my butt unless you really, really mean it."

He grinned, and poured oil on to his palm.

---

The back massage went well; he found several knots and a vertebra that had shifted slightly, and put it all right. He worked hard, digging deep with his thumbs, making her grunt a few times, but the spreading relief was something that she really enjoyed.

But the sensual feeling of running his hands over her began to return life to his penis, and soon it was bobbing in front of him as he straddled her thighs, massaging her lower back. She felt it prodding at the juncture of her buttocks, and breathed faster, feeling wetness encroach once more between her pussy lips. But he seemed oblivious to this, gradually working his way down to the base of her spine.

True to his word, he skipped her buttocks, and went to work on her thighs; she could almost have cried with the frustrated tension. His strong hands probed and dug in, and she felt knots of tension she had not known were there just disappear.

At last he was finished, and he sat back with a sigh of satisfaction. It was only then that he noticed his bobbing erection. Good god, he thought, how long has that been there? He could even see tracings of precum over her buttocks, where it had obviously been prodding and probing.

"Jess," he said reproachfully, "you should have told me what my cock was doing."

"What?" she said, startled. "I thought you were doing it on purpose!"

He shook his head. "I just got caught up in what I was doing."

Deliberately, she spread her thighs until her soft, moist sex was visible. "Well, go back and do it properly. Massage my butt like you mean it." She had no idea what the sensations swirling around in her gut and groin really meant, but she wanted to find out.

He knelt between her thighs and poured the last of the oil from the bottle directly on to her buttocks,
trickling it from one firm, taut rounded globe to the other. She felt it trickling cold down into her ass-crack, where she felt a thrill of pleasurable sensation, before it oozed on, to run down over her overheated pussy. Moaning, she bent her knees, lifting her buttocks into the air.

"Okay," he said, "do you want me to put it in you, or massage your butt?"

"Can't you do both?" she asked, her voice low and throaty.

So he did both. She gasped as he took hold of her hips and guided his thick cock into her well-lubricated pussy, sliding deep inside her.

"Oh ... god yes," she moaned. "That is so good. So damn good."

He began a rhythm of slow, steady strokes as he massaged her butt. His strong hands clenched and squeezed them, causing her to arch her back as he pulled them apart. He felt where the oil had trickled down the cleft of her buttocks, and he followed it with his finger; she drove her hips back at him hard, feeling him drive in to her pussy all the way to the hilt. *Oh god, Brian, what are you doing to me?*

When he reached the soft rosebud of her asshole, he found that this was as lubricated as the rest of her butt; he slowly massaged the small brown pucker, making her gasp out loud again. "More," she moaned. "More."

Slowly, making sure that his finger was liberally coated in oil, he pressed into her, sliding his digit in between her ass-cheeks, penetrating her rectum itself. She shuddered, moaned, clenched her cheeks around the invading finger ... but never once did she tell him to stop.

When his finger was as far in as it could go, he began fucking her ass with it, in the same tempo as his cock was sliding in and out of her well-fucked pussy. At the same time, he reached under her and tweaked her clitoris. She arched her back, screamed, clenched her ass and pussy muscles, and came explosively.

When she had caught her breath, she looked back over her shoulder. "Oh my god," she moaned. "That feels insane. You're fucking my ass with your finger."

"Do you want me to stop?" he asked solicitously.

"No. Yes. I want you to take your finger out of my ass, and put your cock in there."

"It's a good bit bigger," he warned her. "It might hurt."

"If it hurts," she assured him, "you'll find out."

---

In the end (so to speak) it did take them some time, and part of a fresh bottle of baby oil, before Brian managed to wedge his now thoroughly impressive erection between Jess's butt cheeks and into her anus. The only thing that stopped Brian from calling it to a halt was Jess' steadily increasing levels of arousal, the more he worked at stretching her ass.

Slowly, carefully, he worked it into her butt; she gasped and moaned and gave every indication of being on the brink of orgasm. For his part, he had never felt anything tighter or hotter around his
cock, in ... forever. Jess whimpered when he withdrew from her, but it was only to give himself a quick re-coating of oil, and he slid into her once more.

With the fresh lubrication, it went easier, slowly pushing more and more of his cock deeper into her exquisitely tight ass. Face down on the bed, she whimpered and moaned and clutched at the covers, reaching back to rub and probe her streaming sex frantically.

Finally, he managed to work it all the way home; his testicles bumped softly against her wet pussy.

"Oh my god," he groaned. "Oh my god." He dared not move; if he thrust even once, he would lose it, he was sure. But he had to. So he pulled a little way out, and then slid into her again. She cried out with pleasure and just a little pain. He stopped.

"Keep going," she begged. "Keep going. Don't stop."

So he did it again. And again. And he felt the pressure mounting in his balls, the hot sensation swelling his rampant erection. *I'm gonna come hard, and soon.*

"Are you close?" he asked her.

"Oh god yes!" she screamed. "Don't stop! Oh god, don't stop!"

She had never felt sensations like this before. Sex was great, sex was mind-blowing. But this ... this went beyond mind-blowing. Her ass was stretched to the very limit, and every time he moved, she was sure something would tear, but the sheer blinding orgasmic pleasure that this was affording her was ... apocalyptic.

Under her urging, he kept thrusting into her tightly filled ass, harder and deeper, speeding up as she stretched to accommodate him. And then, suddenly, she was there. She screamed gutturally, her back arching, pushing back hard on to his thrusting cock, as the blinding waves of pleasure smashed all coherent thought from her mind.

This set him off; he felt his cock erupt, spraying jet after jet of white seed deep inside her tightly-filled ass. He pumped a few more times, driving her into a second and third orgasm, then he finished cumming, his cock still held in a vice by her rectal muscles.

Slowly he pulled out of her, the head of his cock leaving her abused anus with an obscene *plop*. She gasped as cool air invaded the interior of her rectum before it slowly eased back into shape once more.

He lay down beside her, panting for breath. She was in little better shape, still twitching, clutching at the covers, her ass still in the air. Taking her in his arms, he held her close. "It's okay," he said softly. "We're done for now."

Gradually she came back to herself. "That was ..." she began, then started again. "I don't have words to describe it." She kissed him. "Thank you for that."

He grinned. "I kinda enjoyed it myself," he admitted. "How's your ass?"

"Sore," she said. "It's gonna be sore for days. We won't be able to do that one again for awhile." She kissed him; he responded with ardour. When they separated, she went on. "But we *will* do it again. This time with K-Y. Proper lube. And we're gonna take our time enjoying it."
He held her close. "It's okay," he said softly. "I think we can figure out other things to do in the meantime."

She giggled. "I'm sure we can." She stretched luxuriantly and sighed. "You know something?"

"What?" he asked.

"It is so much nicer in a bed."

He nodded. "Oh yes indeed."

---

Amy and Newter

Amy smiled at Newter, He looked nervous, but then, so was she. They sat on his bed, upstairs in the nightclub called Palanquin. Perhaps a foot of space separated them, but so much loneliness and heartbreak, on her side anyway, was also there that it made it hard to initiate any sort of connection. Especially one of this level of intimacy. The old habits, of pulling back, of ducking and covering, were very strong.

But still, the ice would have to be broken somehow. She took a deep breath. "Have you ever ... done anything ... with a girl before, Newter?" she asked gently.

He shook his head. "Started to, a time or two, but every time they get the buzz-juice in their bloodstream, they're basically lying there spaced out.". He looked at her. "How about you?"

"With a girl or a boy?" she asked with a giggle.

He coloured, his cheeks going a darker orange. "Boys, I meant," he said. Then he paused. "But girls too, I guess."

She giggled again. Typical guys. Always after the sexy stories. For a moment, she was tempted to make up a lurid epic about her and some imagined girlfriend, but desisted; he was too sweet to do something that nasty to.

"No, neither," she sighed. "Unless you count Hope, of course."

"Yeah," said Newter. "How does that work, anyway?"

Amy giggled. "What you have to understand is that Hope is utterly asexual. No sex organs, she doesn't have sexual attraction, and she doesn't feel - or need to feel - sexual pleasure."

"Okay," said Newter dubiously. "Nothing?"

Amy nodded. "Nothing.". She smiled. "But she has a mouth and fingers - and toes, oh my god, her toes - and she is entirely willing to make me feel good in any way that I ask."

She undid the front of her jeans, reached down, and began rubbing her clitoris gently. "She'll eat me out, or suck on my clit, or nibble my nipples, or anything else I ask of her.".
Putting her hand farther down her pants, she started sliding her finger between her labia, feeling her arousal grow. Newter was watching her, fascinated.

"Sometimes, when I'm feeling naughty," she confided, "I give her a bit of a pleasure burst.". She giggled. "I'm not supposed to do that, even though she enjoys it a lot, so she has to punish me for it. Usually, she gives me a good spanking, which really turns me on, and then she makes love to me all over again.". She sighed. "Sometimes I wish she really was a real girl, or a boy, but then I remember that most of the reason I love her so much is that she is who and what she is."

"Wow," said Newter. "Sounds like you really have something special going on with her."

Amy sighed dreamily. "Oh, yes. Every day, I find out all over again just how special she really is."

Newter frowned. "Um, so don't take this the wrong way, but why me? If she's so wonderful, why are you here with me instead of home with her?"

Amy smiled and leaned over to kiss him lightly on the lips. After a moment, he returned it, a little stiffly. She giggled. "Why don't you get your pants off? After all, we are going to be having sex. And while we're doing this, I'll tell you."

She stood up and stepped out of her jeans, just leaving her panties on. At the same time, she pulled off her t-shirt, revealing a plain white bra beneath. Dropping her clothes on the floor, she sat down in the middle of the bed, cross-legged.

Newter looked a little stunned, but he had taken his jeans off, as well as his underwear. His penis, a delicate peach colour, was becoming quite erect with little need for any manual assistance.

Amy grinned. "You want to know why I am here tonight, instead of in Hope's arms."

Newter nodded.

Amy took her bra off. "Do you like my breasts?"

Newter nodded, mutely.

"Do you want to touch them?"

Another nod.

Amy smiled and scooted her butt forward on the bed until she could lie down where Newter could easily reach her breasts. "I'm going to close my eyes, and you can do anything you want to my breasts. Touch them with any part of your body.". She grinned. "And you can use your tail to touch me anywhere you like."

She suspected that she had just overloaded his brain. "Anywhere?" he asked, his voice strained.

She smiled up into his eyes. "Any. Where," she confirmed, then closed her eyes. A moment later, she opened them. "And Newter? Please use your hallucinogens? They feel so nice on my skin.". Then she closed her eyes again.

The first touch was feather-light, across her nipple, so light that she would have doubted that it was
there, save for the tingling that it left behind. Then he used his fingers, then his tongue, then his entire mouth, first on one breast, then the other. She was careful to make appreciative noises, letting him know what was nice and what was really nice.

And then she felt his tail. It wasn't touching her breasts. That didn't matter; they were being well taken care of. Where it was touching her was ... everywhere. Her stomach, her cheek, her arms, her legs ...

She realised that this must have been the original feather-light touch that she had felt, for now she was feeling it all over her body, leaving trails of tingling flesh, her entire body afire with sensation.

It was deeply arousing.

She opened her eyes and pulled Newter's face down to hers, and kissed him thoroughly. Their tongues met, and she swallowed some of his saliva, and the tingling went right down her throat.

*How will it feel when he comes inside me?* She really, really wanted to find out.

Sitting up, she smiled at him. "You can keep touching my breasts. But I wanted to answer your question."

At that moment, his tail came sliding up between her thighs; she opened her legs to give it greater movement. It wriggled back and forth across where her labia pressed against the cloth, giving her all sorts of tingly sensations.

"You see," she said, taking hold of his now solidly erect penis and leaning down to nibble on the very tip, "when I told you to do what you wanted with my breasts, I didn't have to give you any direction. You did some extremely nice things, which I would like you to keep doing, please."

He seemed to be frozen, breathing very shallowly, but he was also definitely paying attention.

She paused and looked up at him, to make sure she did have his attention. "Hope, on the other hand, though I love her dearly, would have just cuddled me, unless I specifically asked her to do something. It's good to have a lover who doesn't need direction." She looked into his eyes long enough to make sure he had the point, then turned back to his penis and sucked the very head of it into her mouth. He leaned back and groaned, but she felt the tip of his tail pressing against her panties, trying to wriggle past the elastic.

Oh my. Anywhere, indeed.

Without ceasing her attentions on his oh-so-erect penis, she reached back and tugged her panties down off her hips, first one side and then the other. His tail-squirmed into the gap thus created and rubbed up against her labia, and then slithered between her ass cheeks, the very tip probing at her delicate rosebud.

With a gasp, she moved her ass sideways, pulling her panties down a little farther, and lifting her legs. Immediately, his tail hooked her panties, skimmed them off her legs altogether, and then returned to her buttocks, worming in between them. Lifting one leg, feeling very perverted indeed, she took hold of one buttock and pulled them as wide apart as she could. *Are you going to do what I think you're going to do?*

And then she felt the very tip of his tail pressing once more on the tingling entrance to her asshole, wriggling its way into the tight orifice, and slithering inside. She gasped, her eyes going wide, as he invaded her most secret, most sensitive place with something that slithered, that wriggled, that acted
far more like a living thing in its own right than a mere appendage. *Oh my god oh my god oh my god.*

She continued to suck on his cock; absently, she noted that he was almost about to climax, and she eased him down a notch while allowing the pleasure to build and build for him. He hissed through his teeth, his tail slithering farther and farther into the palpitating depths of her asshole, writhing and twisting and driving her utterly wild.

And then his tail withdrew from so far up inside her, and slid into her again, and she came violently, screaming his name.

Still immersed in the haze of pleasure, she rolled on to her back, opened her thighs, and pulled him on top of her. Lifting her legs and placing them on his shoulders, she clenched her asshole around his slithering tail as she guided his eager cock into her pussy.

As he slid all the way into her hot slippery vaginal canal, she finally let him climax; he unloaded such a series of jets of cum into her that she thought he might faint from sheer pleasure. But a tiny tweak from her allowed him to stay hard and keep thrusting, and keep thrusting he did.

***

They made love all night; whenever he began to flag, she gave him a little boost.

Sometimes he swapped orifices, so that she was on all fours, or bending over the bed, or just lying face down with her butt in the air, while he fucked her asshole with his cock and invaded her vagina with his agile, twisting, writhing tail.

She could never tell which of the two position was more insanely, pervertedly, exciting to her. Although she did her very best to find out.

Sometimes one or the other would perform oral sex on the other; she would suck on his penis until his eyes bulged, or he would eat her out, his saliva making her pussy tingle and spark until her eyes crossed. And no matter who was doing what to whom, his tail would be sliding into whatever orifice of hers that was unattended, and setting her very mind on fire.

Sometimes, they just rested. During these times, she gently handled his cock, while he suckled on her breasts or fingered her pussy and ass, but kept his tail out of her for awhile. This made the sensations when he reintroduced it all the more memorable.

While they rested, when her mouth and his were both free, they chatted.

***

Newter found her a fascinating person to chat to. She was sweet, and sexy, and she liked him as a person and as a boy. He listened to her stories, of how she met Hope and gradually fell in love with her, and hoped that someday she would see him as more than a guy with orange skin and a tail.

"Amy," he said, during a lull in the conversation, "would you be able to let me change my skin colour?"

She considered this, while slowly and gently masturbating him back to full erection.
"I could," she said. "There's a simple melanin change that can be done. It will be a two-state change, and will take about an hour for a full change. You won't be able to pause it. Basically, your body will produce a reaction that will change you skin colour one way or the other, depending on a particular hormone being produced. And I can hook up the production of that hormone to specific brain activity. Think hard of the colour blue for a full minute, and the change one way will take place. The colour orange will change you back.". She sat up and looked at him. "Do you want me to do this?"

He swallowed. "Yes, please."

She nodded. "Okay.". Lowering her head, she began to suck his cock, drawing it deeper and deeper into her mouth, her tongue driving him absolutely insane with arousal. When he came, his body tingled all over; she took the load in her mouth and swallowed it all, with apparent relish.

"Okay," she said with a grin, looking at his utterly shattered expression. "It's done.". She lay back on her side, her touch restoring his cock to its former glory in just seconds. "Now, do you want to fuck me again, or are you too worn out?". Lifting her leg, she let him see that he had full access to both orifices.

He smiled at her. "Which way would you like it?" he asked, knowing full well that she was wildly enthusiastic about both ways.

Stretching languorously, and highly distractingly, she smiled, closed her eyes, and said "Surprise me."

So he did. And she was indeed mightily surprised. She hadn’t known he could get both his cock and his tail into her asshole at the same time.

 ***

She swam up from a dream of being penetrated from every angle by sex-hungry tentacle monsters, to blink at the time on the bedside clock. “Urgh,” she mumbled. “Hope. Ring Hope.”

Parts of her body still tingled from the lubricious exercises that she had undertaken the night before; Newter was solidly asleep. She had drawn heavily on his reserves to ensure that he was able to keep performing all night. Silently, she resolved to make it up to him.

She found her clothes, or at least her pants and shirt, and struggled into them. Where her panties or bra were, she did not know. But at least her phone was in her pocket.

It took her four tries to dial Hope.

“Hello,” came the familiar, comforting voice. Amy felt a rush of love for her.

“Hi, sweetie,” she managed. “Can you come pick me up, please?”

“Of course, sweetie. I’ll be there just as quick as I can.”

*Of course she would. This is Hope. God, I love her.* “Thank you, sweetie,” said Amy. “I’ll see you then.”

“I love you,” Hope told her. Amy felt tears fill her eyes. Hope would have to know what she had
been doing all night, and still she said that like it was the easiest thing in the world.

“I love you too, sweetie,” said Amy. She wanted to say more. She wanted to tell Hope that she was the most wonderful person in the world. But her finger automatically hit End before she could think of something that worked.

*Oh well, I’ll tell her when I see her.*

Leaning over to give Newter a fond kiss, she stumbled out the door to Newter’s room, into the corridor, in search of a bathroom. She hadn’t been told where they were.

A bright voice behind her said, “Oh, hello. Amy, isn’t it?”

She turned and blearily studied the red-haired woman.

“Shamrock?” she guessed.

Shamrock grinned and nodded. “Wow,” she said. “You’re a mess.” She grinned again. “Though from the noises you and Newter were making, I’m not surprised. What’s up?”

“Lookin’ for bathroom,” mumbled Amy. “Hope’s comin’ to pick me up. An’ Newter …”

“What about Newter?” asked Shamrock.

“Pushed him pretty hard,” Amy said. “Make sure he gets big meal, lots of fluids, when he surfaces.”

Shamrock nodded. “Okay,” she grinned. “I’ll show you where, then would you like some breakfast? Gregor and I have just started making it.”

Amy’s stomach growled loudly. She nodded. “Please?”

***

She drank a cup of coffee and ate two pieces of toast before falling asleep facedown in the scrambled eggs. Gregor, who was making the toast, carried her upstairs to Newter’s bed again. Newter was still fast asleep and never stirred.

She slept until Shamrock came into the room and shook her awake. “Hope’s here,” she said. “Come on, I’ll help you downstairs.”

When Amy was in Hope’s arms, she kissed her and then shut her eyes. They were much more comfortable shut. All that nasty light couldn’t get in. Hope would take her where she needed to go.

She loved Hope so much.
In which there are four wake-ups, a conclusion and a leadup to a meeting

Taylor

Taylor blinked her way to wakefulness. Beyond the initial awareness of what her bugs were reporting about the city, near and far, she drifted. Her brain took awhile to reboot, and she just lay there for a time, enjoying the closeness of Everett's warm body, his arms about her, one of her legs thrown over his ...

Factors clicked into alignment, and her eyes opened wide. Oh fuck, we fell asleep in the spare room. She moved, and from the feel of his skin against hers, realised that they had not even bothered to put any clothes back on.

She pulled back the light sheet that covered them both, and confirmed her diagnosis; Everett was wearing boxers and nothing else, and she had just panties on.

And then, to further compound her problems, she realised what had woken her up. The sound of the shower running.

Dad's up.

He's gonna know we spent the night in here.

What's he going to think?

While she knew that he must know that they had spent at least part of the night in this room, she figured he would expect them to show at least a modicum of discretion.

Her face flaming with embarrassment, she tried to ease out of bed so that she could get dressed. Normally she would have stopped to appreciate Everett's body one more time, but right now she had vastly more important matters to deal with.

And then she hit a snag. Everett, asleep, didn't want to let go. In fact, he murmured something and began to nuzzle her neck.

Shivers went right down her spine, and her resolve weakened. I mean, Dad knows, right? He probably thinks we had sex all night in here. It's not like he'll be surprised ...

No, she told herself firmly. I have my pride. An internal sigh. Even though the rest of me wants to settle back into bed with him ...

"Everett!" she hissed. "Everett!" She shook him as hard as she could.

He blinked awake. "Huh? Wha?" Then his eyes took her in, and he smiled. "Mmmm. Good morning, sexy." He blinked again. "Wait, did we –" He paused, observing their state of undress. "Did you and I -?"

She shook her head. "No, I don't think we had sex," she said. Unless our unconscious urges took over after we went to sleep. But if they did, it happened without a trace.

"But we did fall asleep instead of going back to our own beds," she went on urgently. "Quick, get up, get dressed. If you're on the sofa bed when Dad comes downstairs, we can still pretend."
He shook his head, confused, as she pulled free of his grasp and began pulling on her clothes. "I don't get it. If he told us this bed was here ..."

She pulled up her jeans and buttoned them, then looked around for her bra. "It's all about appearances. If we appear to have slept in our own beds all night, he can pretend that we did. If we blatantly flaunt that we spent the night together – even if we didn't technically have sex – then he's less able to ignore it."

Rolling off the bed on to her side, he found his shorts and pulled them on. Cockroaches scuttled under the bed and came out dragging the offending piece of underwear. She bent down to pick it up, and they straightened up together, face to face.

Time froze for just a moment. She leaned in and kissed him softly, tenderly, and the spell was broken. "Thank you for following the rules, last night," she said quietly.

He smiled and caressed her cheek; she turned her head to kiss the palm of his hand. "Thank you for proposing them," he said. "They weren't easy to follow, but they made things a lot more fun than a flat prohibition."

"Which we just might have ignored altogether," agreed Taylor, slightly muffled, as she pulled the t-shirt on over her head; she had no time to put on the bra right now. She tilted her head. "Hurry up; Dad just finished his shower."

He hurriedly pulled on his own shirt, and carefully opened the door to the spare room. Padding down the corridor, he headed down the stairs to the living room below, just as he heard the bathroom door open.

Lowering himself on to the sofa, he pulled the blanket over himself and feigned sleep.

Taylor didn't have much time; she shoved the bra in her back pocket, stripped the case off the pillow, pulled the sheets from the bed, and bundled it all up together. She emerged from the spare room, carrying the load, just as Danny emerged from the bathroom.

"Morning, Taylor," he greeted her. "Ah, thanks, you've got those sheets."

She nodded. "Thought I'd do it before I went on my run. He knows. He has to know."

"Good thinking," he agreed, his expression polite and bland. "Did you sleep well?"

She felt her cheeks heating, and she lifted the pile of sheets to hide the lower part of her face. "Yeah, never better. You?"

His expression never changed, but she got the distinct impression he was laughing at her. "Moderately well. I heard some strange noises a couple of times during the night. Thought it might be cats fighting outside or something."

She blushed harder. Dad, you're mean. "Probably," she agreed. She turned and pulled the spare room door shut. "I'll just get these down to the laundry, and then go on my run."

"Good idea," he said. "I'll get breakfast started."

He headed downstairs; she followed him.
Everett heard Danny coming downstairs. He moved around in a hopefully convincing impersonation of someone just waking up, and sat up to nod at Taylor's father. "Morning, Mr Hebert," he said.

Danny returned the nod. "I told you before, Everett," he said. "Off the work site, you can call me Danny. When you have to call me Mr Hebert, that's when you know you're in trouble."

Everett nodded. *Did he just say that he knows that we slept all night in the spare room, and that he's not mad?* He shook his head as Danny headed into the kitchen. *For an uncomplicated man, Taylor's dad can be awfully subtle.*

Following her father, Taylor came down, carrying the sheets upon which they had spent the night. She smiled at him, then said clearly, "Good morning, Everett."

*For her Dad's benefit, of course.* "Morning, Taylor," he replied. "Ready for your run?"

"In a minute," she replied. "I just have to put these on to wash." She hefted the sheets in way of explanation.

He nodded and watched her walk past; even dressed in jeans and t-shirt, knowing what he knew now of the body beneath them, he wanted to just sweep her up in his arms and carry her upstairs to her bedroom.

*But no; it's daytime now, and we have to be good.*

A movement caught his eye, and he blinked. The bra which she had shoved into her pocket had worked loose, and fallen on the floor behind her.

He cleared his throat; she didn't hear him. "Taylor!" he hissed.

She glanced around; he nodded to the floor just at her feet. She looked down, and blushed crimson. Hastily, she dropped the sheets on top of it, just as her father walked out of the kitchen, and picked them all up, the item of underwear now hidden from view.

The run went off without incident. No cars full of vaguely threatening men, no attempts to kidnap or otherwise silence her, nothing much out of the ordinary at all. Everett kept pace with her, admiring the springy way in which she ran, feet seeming to barely touch the ground. He also admired other parts of her, remembering the night before.

Toward the end, she slowed to a halt. "Everett," she said. "I need to ask you something."

"Okay," he said. "Ask."

Her eyes were serious as she looked at him. "How do you feel about what we did last night? Does it change what you feel about me?"

His first impulse was to immediately reassure her, but then his cautious nature took over and he took stock of his feelings. He felt that she knew what was going through his mind, and rather than being impatient, appreciated that he was taking the time to think it through.

"Last night ..." he said at last. "I enjoyed it. It was frustrating in that one way, but still hugely enjoyable. Your rules, they worked well."

She nodded. "Good. I'm glad you weren't *too* frustrated." She grinned wryly. "At least, no more than I was."
He chuckled appreciatively. "As for my feelings about you ... hmm." He paused. "Understand, if we had discarded the rules and just gone ahead with it last night, I would still feel very strongly about you. We both wanted it – we still both want it – and I could no more blame you for being weak, than you could blame me." She met his grin, both of them entirely too aware of the depth of their temptation.

He took a deep breath. "But. We both managed to keep to the rules, and so I feel that I know you just a little better as a person than I did yesterday." He smiled. "And I find that I respect you as a person more than ever." He raised an eyebrow. "I don't know what you wanted to hear, but that's what I feel."

She nodded. "Thanks, Everett," she said. "I didn't know what I wanted to hear, but I like it." She leaned in and kissed him, a soft warm contact of the lips that sent a hot buzzing up and down his spine. "And for the record," she said softly, "I feel exactly the same way about you. Just so you know." She smiled and turned away. "Now come on, slowpoke; we've got a run to finish."

Brian

Brian stretched luxuriously. He had had a great sleep, very restful ...

... his brain reconnected the dots, and he rolled over to see the face on the pillow beside his. As he recalled the previous night, she opened her eyes and smiled at him.

"Good morning, honey," Jess said softly. "Sleep well?"

"Hell yes," he agreed. "Must be something about strenuous exercise that always puts me right to sleep." He leaned in to kiss her; she smiled lazily and ran her hand over his chest and abdomen.

"I'll strenuous exercise you, you sexy great beast," she purred.

"Funny," he grinned. "That's what I thought you did all last night."

Jess pounced on him, holding his wrists down to the bed, smiling down at him. Slowly, she straddled him. "I'm not finished yet," she promised him.

Well, he thought with an inner grin. There goes the day.

Hope

Hope slowly awoke, gradually becoming aware of her environment. The bed she was lying in was strange, softer than she had become used to. She was holding someone close in her arms ... Amy?

No, it didn't feel like Amy. Her hand traced over smooth skin, down over a graceful back, farther down ...

"If you keep doing that," said a familiar voice, "I'm going to want you to follow up with some action."

Hope's eyes fluttered open, to see blonde hair instead of brown, and a pair of amused eyes, deep green instead of brown, regarding her from just a few inches away. Not Amy. Lisa.

Memory returned. I slept with Lisa. Because she needed me.
And wow, was that an education.

Lisa smiled, as though reading Hope's thoughts, word for word – and for all Hope knew, she was doing just that. Her smile was lazy, and bespoke of extreme satisfaction.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," smiled Lisa. She leaned in and kissed Hope softly. "I just want you to know; last night was ..." She paused. "Wow. Words fail me. They really do."

Hope grinned. "I'm glad you enjoyed it. It was fun and interesting for me too. And I learned a lot." She pulled Lisa into a close embrace. "And thank you for the back and wing massage. It was really, really nice."

Lisa nodded. She didn't have Amy's ability to read Hope's anatomy, but her intuition stood in fairly well for that power, and often gave interesting results. Which meant that when Lisa set about giving Hope a back and wing massage, the end result still left Hope semi-comatose from sheer pleasure.

"I know," she said, with her vulpine grin making itself evident. "Trust me, I know. Hell, I think there were people in Kansas who knew."

Hope giggled. "I do get a little noisy, don't I?" she agreed. "I hope I didn't wake anyone up."

Lisa smirked. "No more than I did," she responded. She flopped back on the pillow, her eyes raising to the ceiling, unseeing. "Oh, man," she said. "Talk about exceeding one's expectations."

Hope smiled, then leaned over and kissed her. "You had a great deal of need," she observed. "I believe we addressed that need."

"Oh god, did we ever," agreed Lisa fervently. Then she pulled herself up to a sitting position. "Which reminds me," she said. "Roll over. You've earned yourself another back-and-wing. Two. Ten. But I can only give you one at a time, so I'll give you that first one now."

Hope smiled. "Okay," she said. "If you want to, I won't stop you."

Obediently, she lay face-down on the bed, holding her wings up out of the way as Lisa straddled her thighs. As Lisa's thumbs dug into muscle knots and relieved the tiny aches and pains, she sighed and relaxed to the attention.

She lay on her side, smiling at Lisa as the girl reached over the side of the bed. The back and wing massage had not been strictly necessary – none of the major joints or muscles had gone seriously out of place since the last one – but it was still an intensely pleasurable experience. And only Lisa and Amy can do them for me. And they both like doing them. Wow. I am so lucky.

"Ah, here we are," said Lisa with a grin, coming up with the strap-on. Hope giggled to see it; it still looked ridiculous to her.

"So I see we're not done with this," she observed as she accepted it from Lisa.

"Oh hell no," agreed Lisa. She watched with hungry eyes as Hope prepared herself. "I've got a lot of catching up to do."

Hope lay with Lisa in her arms, the latter only partly awake. Hope was mildly tired, but Lisa was utterly spent; the smile on her face now was totally different from the fox-like, knowing grin that Lisa generally presented to the world. I think I like this Lisa better, thought Hope. She's sweeter, more
This was not to say that Hope loved her or cared for her any the less. It was just that she just plain liked Lisa better when she wasn't working some scheme or other.

Her phone, tucked into her pants pocket somewhere on the floor, buzzed raucously.

Even as Hope used a wing to drag it toward her, Lisa roused herself to say groggily, "It's Amy, calling for a pickup."

Hope smiled and kissed her in acknowledgement, then reached down and retrieved the phone.

"Hello," she said cheerfully.

"Hi, sweetie," came Amy's voice, sounding somewhat groggy. "Can you come pick me up, please?"

"Of course, sweetie," said Hope promptly. "I'll be there just as quick as I can."

"Thank you, sweetie," Amy replied. "I'll see you then."

"I love you," Hope said.

"Love you too, sweetie," said Amy, and hung up.

Hope sat up in bed, pulling her arm out from under Lisa's body. "You were right, of course," she said with a grin. "I've got to go and pick her up. You'll be all right?"

Lisa opened her bottle-green eyes and gave Hope a heavy-lidded stare. "If I were any more all right," she murmured, "they'd have to license me as an addictive substance." She closed her eyes again, waved vaguely with her fingers. "Go, go."

Hope giggled, already pulling on her clothes. She leaned over and gave Lisa a gentle kiss on the lips, to which Lisa responded with a sleepy Mmmm.

Letting herself out into the morning bustle of the shelter, she closed the door carefully behind her. People looked at her a little curiously; she greeted them politely, and made her way out of the shelter, to where she could spread her wings and fly.

She glided in to a smooth landing outside Palanquin; Gregor opened the front door to her.

"Little Hope," he said with as much cheer as he could muster. "It is good to see you."

She smiled happily and hugged him, a process which both of them always enjoyed immensely. "It's always good to see you too, big guy."

As she entered, she looked around. "I kind of expected to see Amy waiting outside for me. Where is she?"

"I believe she is asleep once more," Gregor said. "Newter also." To her astonishment, he winked ponderously. "They made much noise last night. Shamrock found it very amusing. I found it very noisy."

She grinned and grabbed his hand, holding it up to examine the new fingernails. "How are these going for you?"
"They are very good," he said. "They look much better than the old ones, and I think they will be more useful." He looked up toward the stairs. "Ah, there she is now."

Hope looked also; true to Gregor's word, Amy was descending the stairs, assisted by a grinning Shamrock. She went to the bottom of the stairs to meet them.

"Morning, Shamrock," she said. "Morning, sweetie."

"Good morning, Hope," grinned Shamrock. "Here to take your delinquent girlfriend away, I see."

Hope frowned. "I hope she hasn't been any trouble," she said anxiously. She took Amy in her arms. Amy smiled at her, kissed her on the cheek, then seemed to fall into a light doze while still on her feet.

"Oh, no," replied Shamrock. "But I hope you give us time to put in some soundproofing before she comes over again." She giggled. "Let's just say, Newter is spark out, and Amy isn't much better. But they certainly improved the shining hour."

Hope giggled. "Well, I'll try to give you warning." She scooped Amy into her arms. "I'll get out of your way then, shall I?"

"Wait a minute, please," said Labyrinth from an unexpected direction. Hope turned to see that an ornate staircase had formed where there had only been a wall before; Labyrinth – Elle – was walking down it, her hand trailing on the balustrade. She reached the bottom and the staircase packed itself back away into the wall like some insanely expensive conjuring trick. Elle walked up to Hope and kissed her on the cheek. "Thank you," she said. "Thank you for all your kindness. And thank you for bringing Amy over last night." She leaned in and kissed Amy as well; the brunette murmured something but did not stir.

"I see you're doing well, then," said Hope.

Elle nodded. "I can see and hear what is truly there to see and hear, and I can reach my shapes and my worlds with no hesitation, no interference with my emotions. And if I wish to remain in the real world, here I remain," she said. She smiled; it was a bright, energetic smile, far from the hesitant, uncertain expression Hope had seen on Labyrinth's face at times before. "I believe I might take up reading books or watching TV; I certainly have enough attention to spare for it now."

Hope smiled and kissed her in return. "I'm glad," she said. "It's always nice to leave people happier than I found them."

"That's a good philosophy," agreed Elle. "Come on; I'll walk you out."

They strolled outside, with the morning breeze still blustering along the street. "So, did Amy really take Butcher into herself, to save the previous Butcher?" Elle asked.

Hope smiled wryly. "Not on purpose, I can assure you," she said. "But Butcher is dead and gone now. We worked something out."

"Well, that's nice to hear," said Elle. She reached up to ruffle Hope's hair. "You take care now. And tell Amy she's welcome back any time."

"I'll do that, once she wakes up," grinned Hope. She unfurled her wings and was about to take to the air, when Elle held up a hand. "What's up?" she asked.
"Uh ..." said Elle, looking for once like the timid, uncertain girl Hope had first met, "would you be able to ask the PRT if I could visit Mimi sometime? Because I'm sure she doesn't get many visitors."

Hope nodded judiciously. "I can certainly raise the matter with Director Piggot," she said. "She and I get along well, these days."

Elle snorted. "Get along well, yeah, right. Word is, she's as proud of you as she would be of her own daughter."

Hope blinked. "Oh. Wow." She looked at Elle. "Thanks."

Elle shrugged. "Welcome." She stepped back to give Hope room to use her wings. "Later. Visit anytime."

Hope nodded. "I will." She raised her wings once more, and brought them down; the crystalline chime echoing down the street.

Hope half expected Amy to sleep all the way back to the shelter; however, they had been in the air less than two minutes before the cold rush of air brought her to blinking wakefulness.

"Whew," she said. "That's better than a cold bath. I needed that."

Hope smiled down at her. "How are you feeling, sweetie? Did you have a good night?"

Amy blushed heavily, and grinned all at the same time. "Oh. Hell. Yes," she said. She let her head roll back and her mouth open. "Wow. Just wow."

Hope smiled. "That's really good to hear, sweetie," she said fondly. "I presume Newter had a good night too."

Amy giggled. "If he says he didn't, I don't think there's anyone on the street who would not call him a liar."

Hope laughed out loud. "Gregor said there was a bit of noise."

Amy blushed again. "Maybe just a little," she admitted. She looked up at Hope. "You were okay, sleeping alone?"

"Oh, I didn't sleep alone," said Hope promptly. "I slept with Lisa."

There was a silence that made Hope wonder if she should not have been quite so forthright. When Amy spoke next, her words were carefully articulated.

"When you say 'slept' with Lisa, do you mean 'slept' or 'slept'?"

Hope blinked. "Um, both?"

There was a longer silence. Then Amy said flatly, "When we get back, I am going to punch that conniving bitch right in the mouth."

"Wait, what, why?" protested Hope. "Lisa didn't do anything wrong."

"Oh, really?" snapped Amy. "Well, wrap your wings around this one, sweetie. Fact one: Lisa knew that Newter and I had a certain level of interest in each other from the first time we hugged. Fact two: Lisa knew that if someone really needs you, you want to be with them. You're attracted to them."
Hope went to say something, but Amy overrode her. "Fact three: Lisa suggested that we go and see if the Crew wanted any body mods done. Fact four: Lisa knew that you'd be missing me just a bit when you got back, so there she was with a shoulder to cry on, and an offer to share her bed, just for cuddles. And once you were in there, it would only be a short step to asking you if you could do just a little thing for her ..." She paused. "How am I doing?"

"Pretty good, sweetie," said Hope cheerfully, "except for that last bit. Lisa didn't connive me. She put it to me straight. And last night, you really didn't need me. And she did."

There was more silence. Eventually, Amy said, "I'm still going to punch her in the mouth."

Hope rolled her eyes. "Okay, sweetie," she said, "can you do me a favour? Answer me five questions, and then tell me if you're still mad at Lisa."

"Okay," said Amy warily. "I know you've talked me around like this before, but it's not going to happen this time."

Hope grinned. Challenge accepted. "Okay, sweetie," she said, "speaking honestly; who's better in bed, me or Newter?"

Amy was startled, caught unaware. "Um ..." she began. "You're better at cuddling afterward. Newter always wants to play some more."

"Not cuddling," said Hope firmly. "The other stuff. Who's better?"

Amy took a deep breath. "Newter," she said. "Sorry, sweetie, but ... yeah, wow," she said. "Wow. Just ... wow."

Hope nodded. "Okay," she said. "Given that you spent the night with Newter, and Lisa spent the night with me, given your personal judgement of performance, who do you think had the better time last night between you and Lisa?"

Amy frowned. "I can see what you're doing," she said, then reluctantly added, "Me."

Hope grinned. "I'm glad, by the way," she added. "That means I won't have to chase him with a stick."

Amy giggled. "What's the third question?"

"This is a simple one. Who am I holding in my arms right now?"

Amy smiled up at her. "Me."

Hope leaned down and kissed her gently. "So who do you think has the best of both worlds?"

Amy smiled and kissed her back. "I do," she murmured.

"Okay," grinned Hope, "Last question. Given that Lisa is indeed a conniving bitch, and as such is the reason you just had the night that you did, and given that the only time Lisa is going to get to spend time with me is whenever you choose to visit Newter, and given that any other time, you still need me more than she does, and so I'll be sleeping with you for as long as you want me ... who's getting the better end of this deal, all ways concerned?"

Amy burst out laughing. "Okay," she said. "You win. I won't punch her in the mouth." She subsided into giggles. "But I might just kiss her."
Hope grinned. "You'll have to wake her up first. She was pretty wiped out when I left her to pick you up."

Amy's eyes opened wide. "Wow, what did you do to her?"

"Well, that's the weird part," said Hope. "I barely had to use most of what you showed me at all." She paused, then told Amy the rest of it.

This time, Amy's eyes and mouth both opened wide. "No!" she gasped. "You didn't!"

Hope nodded, looking somewhat bemused. "I did. She seemed to enjoy it. Lots and lots of times."

"Oh my god," murmured Amy. "Oh my god." She shook her head. "Poor Hope. We're corrupting you so badly."

Hope giggled. "I didn't mind. It was weird but very educational. And Lisa had a real blast."

Amy shook her head. "I'll just bet."

There was a long pause. Then Amy said meditatively, "I wonder if she'd let us borrow the strap-on?"

Hope glided in for a landing outside the shelter. Amy had dozed on the flight, but was awake now, and as soon as Hope had stopped and let her down, was marching into the shelter. She had a rather determined look on her face. Hope followed on, greeting people as she went.

Brooks, the medic, caught Hope's eye as Amy headed for Lisa's bedroom.

"Uhh," he said. "There was a lot of noise from Lisa's room last night."

Hope nodded. "I know," she said. "I was in there." She smiled at Brooks.

He looked embarrassed. "We were wondering if everything was all right."

Hope nodded. "Trust me," she said, "it's perfectly okay."

She gave him a genuine smile and followed after Amy, leaving him scratching his head.

***

Amy pushed open the door to Lisa's bedroom and saw Lisa flat out asleep, fully naked, on top of the sheets. One arm trailed over the side of the bed.

She walked up to the side of the bed and studied Lisa's face in repose. It seemed ... peaceful. Cute. *I could fall in love with a face like that.*

Hope entered a moment later. She stopped, looking puzzled. "Why are you taking your clothes off, sweetie?" she asked.

"Because if I'm gonna be getting into bed with someone who's already naked, it's only fair," Amy grinned.

Hope shrugged. "Sounds reasonable to me," she said, and skinned out of her own clothing.
Lisa was asleep on her side; Amy said, “Help me roll her on to her back.”

“Okay,” said Hope. “But why?”

Amy smiled. “So I can thank her.”

***

Lisa was aware of the most incredible pleasure. It surged through her body, setting her skin alight, blasting her out of the dream state into reality. Groggily, she opened her eyes, looked down her body, and saw Amy in the process of eating her pussy, and doing a bang-up job of it too.

“Amy?” exclaimed Lisa. “What are you –“

She didn’t get any farther, although the answer to the question was self-evident, because just then, the orgasm hit, blasting her conscious mind down to bedrock for a few moments.

When she came back to herself, Hope was cradling her and caressing her face, giving her gentle, loving kisses. Amy was still eating her. The feelings she was generating with her mouth and tongue on Lisa’s hot wet sex were driving the blonde girl out of her mind.

After Lisa’s fourth or fifth orgasm (Lisa wasn’t counting) Amy finally let up on her. Crawling up on the other side of Lisa, she hugged the blonde girl and kissed her, but in a far more sexual way than Hope had.

Lisa was confused; the multiple orgasms had rattled her brain badly, and she could not piece together two pieces of data at the moment.

“What was that for?” she asked.

“That,” said Amy with a smile, “was me saying thank you for last night.”


Finally, finally, her power was kicking back in. Amy and Newter had had spectacular sex. All night. Amy was really grateful that …

“Wait, what?” she managed. “You know I arranged this just so I could sleep with Hope, and you’re still thanking me?”

“Yes,” replied Amy, with as much intensity as she could. “If you hadn’t, then I would probably not have had the night I just had. And oh my fucking God.”

Lisa stared at her, then at Hope. “If I’m reading this right, you had a better night than me.” Her eyes widened. “Holy shit. His tail. He …” Abruptly, she shook her head. “I didn’t want to know that. I didn’t want to know that.”

Amy giggled. “Oh, yeah. He went there. Over and over again.” She hugged Lisa. “I just wanted you to know, thank you. Really. For everything.” She kissed Lisa again. “And anything I can do for you … just let me know.”

Lisa smiled and stroked her cheek. “I might have some ideas, sometime.”
Hope grinned and hugged her. “Maybe we can do those ideas later? Taylor will be getting to court soon.”

“Ah,” said Lisa.

“Yeah,” said Amy.

They made it to court just in time.

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"All rise."

Everyone in the courtroom – save those already standing – rose to their feet.

Judge Northwood entered, his robes sweeping behind him. He pulled out his chair and sat behind the bench.

"Be seated."

Everyone who was going to sit down, did so.

---

Taylor and Danny sat at the same table as District Attorney Robertson. Opposite sat Alan and Emma Barnes, and Madison and her father. Off to the side were Director Piggot, Miss Militia, and Tecton at parade rest in his armour. Behind, in the spectators’ gallery, were Lisa, Amy and Hope. It appeared that Brian had other business, and Regent and Imp had apparently become bored of the whole thing.

But they turned up on the first day, Taylor told herself. They made the effort. And Everett is here. It was odd; she was well able to take care of herself, with the armoury of bugs at her beck and call, but she still felt safer with him standing there.

She was also getting a certain vibe off of Robertson; expectant, maybe? Anticipatory? And the looks he was getting from the Barnes party; he was lucky neither Alan nor Emma was a cape, or his life expectancy would be very short indeed.

This also puzzled Taylor; on the previous day, when Robertson had been whipsawing them nine ways from Sunday, they had not glared at him as they were today.

She took a moment to soak in the impressions of the hundreds and thousands and millions of bugs that populated the city and were, due to Amy’s relay bugs, all under her direct control. Nowhere in any of the areas she could see was there anything she had to worry about. Large swarms of bugs flew down the streets in her territory; people stopped briefly to look up, then carried on with what they were doing.

In Victory Park, work was already under way on emplacing a new monument. The PRT wanted this monument to be extremely visible to the population; leaving it destroyed for any amount of time was not an option. She momentarily formed a swarm-clone, which nodded approvingly at the workmen, gestured for them to carry on, and dissipated again.

Showing the flag. It could be very effective.
But what had her puzzled was the small box that Amy was carrying. In it, she knew, were more bugs, some which she recognised as Newter hornets – twelve more, if she counted right – but there were others that she could not place.

*Amy, she asked silently, what have you got for me today?*

She could hardly wait to find out.

"This court is now in session," declared Judge Northwood, banging his gavel. "Before we begin proceedings, does either Counsel wish to bring any matters to the attention of the court?"

The silence stretched. Taylor glanced at Robertson, who seemed to be showing more and more tension. Just as he began to open his mouth, Alan Barnes stood up.

"If it please the court, your Honour," he said, the words grudging, as though they were being forced from his lips, "my clients would like to reverse their plea of not guilty, and throw themselves upon the mercy of the court."

Pandemonium.

Everyone was talking at once, even the members of the jury. Northwood had to bang his gavel for almost a minute before the voices quieted down.

"One more outburst like this," he warned, "and I will have the court cleared." He gestured at Mr Barnes, and at Mr Robertson. "Counsels will approach the bench."

Mr Barnes and Mr Robertson went up to the bench. Taylor could hardly believe it; beside her, Danny looked almost shell-shocked.

"Did you know, Dad?" she whispered.

He shook his head. "God, no. Robertson kept it under wraps. My god, how did he arrange it?"

She shook her head. "He must have made Mr Barnes see reason somehow."

But a thought struck her, and she noticed motion in one particular bug that she had planted that morning. It was emplaced on Tecton's helmet, and the motion indicated that the armoured hero had turned his helmet, to look directly at Taylor. She looked back. And she knew that both of them had exactly the same thought in mind.

*The trial is over.*

After conferring with both counsels, Judge Northwood declared the trial to be over, and dismissed the jury. He would, he said, hand down his judgement in due course.

However, Robertson had a very good idea of what the judgement would consist of, if Taylor was reading the pleased glint in his eye correctly.

"Well," said that worthy as he shook hands with Taylor and then Danny. "It's been a most interesting trial. I've found it both enjoyable and instructive."

"Thank you, Mr Robertson," said Danny warmly. "Your assistance and encouragement have helped us tremendously. I just wish there was something we could do for you."
Robertson shrugged modestly. "Only doing my job, sir. Only doing my job."

Taylor grinned. He wouldn't find out for months, if ever, but there had been an incipient termite problem in his walls. Last night, the termites had all mysteriously decamped, and busy ants had packed mud into the spaces they had already excavated.

She turned to Danny. "I'm just going to say hello to the others. Thank you again, Mr Robertson."

Robertson grinned at her. "Hey, it's good to have friends in high places."

_Oh yeah. He knows which side his bread's buttered on._ Taylor didn't know whether to be disappointed or amused. But then she realised something important.

_He didn't know that I was Skitter when this whole thing started, and he treated me just the same then. So he's not trying to curry favour; he's just making a joke._

She grinned and nodded. "True. So very true."


Hope hugged her first, followed a close second by Lisa and then Amy.

"I'm so glad for you," Hope said. "I mean, I guess this means that Emma and Madison go to juvenile hall or something –"

"Madison gets six months, Emma goes in till she's eighteen, then her case is reviewed," said Lisa matter-of-factly. "And Mr Barnes voluntarily relinquishes his license to practise law, and pays your dad a huge lump sum in reparations, on the quiet."

Hope grinned at Lisa. "I am never going to see a movie with you for the first time," she said fondly. "But as I was saying, I suppose they'll go to juvenile hall, and it won't be pleasant for them, but they did do the wrong thing, and I suppose it will do them good in the long run." She hugged Taylor again. "But it means this is all behind you. It's over. You've got some sort of closure."

"Yeah," grinned Lisa. "The trial's over." She glanced meaningfully from Taylor to Tecton and back again; Taylor blushed.

"Seriously?" she said "Can't you leave anything alone?"

Hope looked at Amy. "Do you have any idea what she's talking about?"

Amy shrugged. "Nope. But then, right now, I'm kinda forgiving of Lisa. She can have her little hints and inside jokes." She grinned at Lisa. "Today, you've _earned_ them."

Taylor stared from Amy to Lisa and back again. "And I have exactly zero idea of what you are talking about." She paused. "And come to think of it, both of you look almost indecently pleased with yourselves. What's going on?"

"Oh, uh," said Hope, "I –"

Amy held up a finger. "Not out loud, in public, I think," she said. She leaned in and whispered in Taylor's ear. Taylor's eyes went very wide behind her glasses, and she stared at Amy. "No, really?" she said. Amy nodded smugly. "But he –" Amy leaned in and whispered again. Taylor stared at her. "Okay," she said, shaking her head. "Too much information. Way too much information."
Amy giggled. "Wait till you hear what Lisa did."

Taylor looked at Lisa with a raised eyebrow. "I'm almost afraid to ask."

Lisa grinned and whispered in Taylor's ear. Taylor stared at her. "What, with a –"

Lisa nodded. "Oh, yeah."

Taylor shook her head and looked at the three of them. "Wow. Just wow. You three ... just tell me that it was worth it, at least."

Amy nodded. "I can't even begin to say how good it was."


Taylor looked at Hope, who shrugged. "It was fun and interesting. And I learned lots of stuff that I never knew before."

"I just bet you did," giggled Taylor.

This set Amy and Lisa off, so that when Danny came over to them, Hope was watching the rest of them with a slightly bemused eye while they giggled helplessly.

"Uh ... do I really want to know what's so funny?" he asked.

Hope grinned. "Probably not. It's good to see you, Danny." She gave him a hug. "Congratulations."

He hugged her back. "Thanks. And thanks for everything."

"Hey," she said. "Helping people is my thing." She gave him a smile. "And I always like meeting new friends."

"Talking about new friends," said Amy, "I have a couple of new ideas for bugs." She indicated the box she was carrying. "Show you outside, Taylor?"

"Definitely," said Taylor. She glanced at her father. "See you outside?"

"I'll be along in a minute," said Danny. "Got to sign some paperwork." He headed off, but before anyone could move toward the door, Director Piggot approached the group with Miss Militia and Tecton in tow.

"Emily, good to see you," said Hope happily. "Uh, about yesterday ..."

Piggot waved a hand airily. "It's covered. Insurance will deal with the damage. We're going to have to review our security procedures, however. And I think it might be a good idea if Amy apologises to Vista in person. But apart from that." She glanced at Taylor and Lisa. "We had a word with Miss Alcott."

Taylor frowned. "You said you weren't going to bother her."

Piggot nodded. "Yes, but we considered this important enough. We asked her two questions. The first one was, what are the chances of Butcher ever reappearing? And the answer was, zero percent."

"Wait, what?" asked Taylor. "You killed Butcher?" She stared at Hope and Amy. "But I thought"
that was impossible."

Hope grinned and put her arms around Amy. "You should know by now," she said, kissing Amy fondly on the cheek, "with us, the impossible just takes a little longer."

"So I am beginning to learn," agreed Piggot. She looked at Taylor. "And with the trial at an end, you and your father are no longer under threat. Also, there was the second question."

Taylor got it first. "You asked the same question about Shadow Stalker." Lisa just grinned; she didn't even need to guess.

The Director nodded. "And we got a zero percent rating as well. She will never reach the public eye ever again." She smiled slightly. "So this means that you no longer need a security detail."

"Oh," said Taylor, looking at Tecton. "Oh." She paused. "So he'll be heading back to Chicago?"

She felt the bottom begin to drop out of her world.

"Normally this would be the case, yes," agreed Director Piggot. "But under the circumstances, I took the liberty of asking Kid Win if he'd mind transferring. He's amenable to the idea, so he will be going back in Tecton's stead." She smiled at Taylor. "I understand Tecton rather likes the weather here in Brockton Bay."

Taylor stared at her. "Oh my god," she said. "Thank you." The world suddenly looked a lot brighter to her.

"Whatever for?" asked Piggot. "The decision has nothing whatever to do with you. I have no idea what you're talking about." She nodded to Lisa, spared a smile for Hope and Amy, and turned to go. Then she paused.

"Oh," she said, "I understand that Tecton has some personal items at your house. He'll be dropping over later to retrieve them." She went to walk off, but Hope raised a hand.

"Uh, Emily?" she said.

"Yes, Hope?" asked the Director.

"I spoke to Labyrinth this morning. She asked if she could have permission to visit Mimi. That is, Burnscar."

Piggot considered this. "I will have to check with Doctor Yamada, but I do not see why not."

Hope smiled. "Thank you. I appreciate it."

Director Piggot nodded. "You're welcome."

Then she was gone. Miss Militia gave them a general nod, as did Tecton, as they followed her.

Hope hugged Taylor tightly. "That's awesome news about Tecton!" she said breathlessly. "Isn't Emily a sweetie?"

"I don't know what's weirder," said Taylor, hugging her back. "The fact that you're on first name terms with her, or the fact that you think she's a sweetie." She shook her head. "I have no idea if she's doing it to be nice, or just trying to keep in good with me."

"Well, you are the most powerful Ward in Brockton Bay," commented Lisa.
"But she never did anything like that for any of the other Wards, powerful or otherwise," Amy protested.

"I think she's just doing it to be nice," declared Hope. She looked at the blank stare everyone else gave her. "What?"

Taylor shook her head. "Never mind," she grinned. "Amy has some bugs. I want to see them."

The four of them crowded around as Amy opened the box. "Okay," said Amy. "The Newter hornets were successful, right?"

"Oh yeah," said Taylor. "Dropped Butcher in her tracks."

"Good," said Amy. "Have twelve more."

Taylor smiled as a dozen large bugs with orange abdomens flew up out of the box and secreted themselves in her hair.

"Now," said Amy. "When I checked out Gregor last night, I noted that he can generate some really interesting slimes. So I made a bug this morning that creates something very similar. It's organic, but it expands a little like containment foam when exposed to air. It will seep into cracks and then harden five seconds after it is applied. It's got a tensile strength equivalent to web-spider line."

"So ... a glue-bug?" asked Lisa.

"Basically, yes," said Amy. "Now, some refinements. Its carapace has a coating that makes sure it doesn't get stuck to its own gunk. And it can spit a substance that dissolves the stuff." She grinned. "But it'll sure as hell freeze up machinery and power-suit joints. I made a dozen. Those are the ones with the blue-grey abdomens."

The glue-bugs left the box to join the Newter hornets.

There were half a dozen bugs left in the box; these had strikingly red abdomens but lacked wings.

"And what do these do?" asked Taylor. Lisa looked at the bugs, and her eyes opened wide.

Amy grinned. "Have you ever heard of binary explosives?"

Taylor blinked. "Wait, seriously?"

Amy nodded. "They put down a glob of what is essentially organic plastic explosive. Then they turn around and spit on it. Then they run like hell. Ten seconds later, more or less, it goes off like a little tiny grenade. Sound, heat, light. It should blow out most door locks, or set something flammable on fire."

"What if you stepped on one?" asked Hope.

"Fifty-fifty chance it would mix the components, and the bang would blow your shoe off your foot. Normal people would also probably sustain an injury to the foot as well."

"But you'd still have ten seconds," said Taylor.

"More or less," said Amy.

"More or less," agreed Taylor. She nodded, and the bugs ran up her arm and into her hair. "Well, I'll
trust that the bugs are safe in their normal state."

"Oh, entirely," said Amy. "I'd be careful where you had them nest."

"You'd better believe it," said Taylor fervently. "I think I'll be using them very sparingly."

"Probably a good idea," agreed Amy. She smiled at Taylor. "So, I hope you like your new bugs."

Taylor hugged Amy. "I love them. Thanks."

Amy smiled and hugged her back. "It's nice to be appreciated."

"Amen to that," agreed Hope.

Sveta

"Are you **sure** you'll be okay doing this?" asked Weld for the third time.

"I'll be **fine,**" Sveta assured him. "I need to do this." She leaned up and kissed him on his cold metal cheek. "Thank you for worrying, though."

He smiled. "I feel sort of responsible for you. Just be careful, okay? We don't know who this guy really is."

"Well," said Sveta lightly. "We're about to find out, aren't we?" She smiled at him.

"Don't worry," she said, "I'll be fine."
In which Hope and Amy discuss evil manipulation with Lisa, Sveta meets with Greg, and Taylor and Everett are home alone

Danny glanced at Taylor as they rattled toward home in the old truck. "Well, kiddo, it looks as though I'll be able to go to work after all," he said cheerfully. "Here I was thinking this trial would last for weeks, if not months. I certainly would not have put it past Alan Barnes to drag it out just as long as possible until you just didn't want to face the stand again."

Taylor shook her head. "I think he would have if he could have, but I have a suspicion that Mr Robertson had a word with him yesterday. And whatever he said ..."

Danny nodded. "Yes, it certainly worked. I wasn't joking about adding him to our Christmas card list. He's a good man."

And that, Taylor knew, was an accolade her father awarded to few people. He had already awarded it to Everett, which did not lessen her feelings for the burly young man in the slightest.

"I'm certainly grateful for the trial being over," she agreed. In more ways than one. "Now I've got more time to prepare for my public debut as a Ward. The costume's coming along, but Amy's told me to hold off on the armour panels as yet. She says she has a surprise she's been working on, but she wants to get it just right."

"Now those are two people I have all the time in the world for," said Danny decisively. "Hope is just plain nice to be around, and Amy is a very pleasant person as well."

Taylor grinned. "You know, you just referred to Hope and Amy as more or less the same person."

Danny blinked. "Huh, I did too. They do seem very close, don't they?"

Taylor nodded. "Don't spread it around, but they are actually a couple. A real couple."

Danny frowned. "But doesn't Hope ... isn't she ..."

Taylor nodded. "It's one of those things, Dad. I'm not even sure I want to try to explain it. But they make it work, and from all appearances, they are very happy together."

"Oh, definitely," said Danny. "But from what I see, most people that Hope spends time with end up happier by definition. He shot a sideways look at Taylor. "And talking about happy, you have a secret grin on your face that's been plastered on there since we left the courthouse. Do I want to know, or does it have to do with what you girls were giggling about when I spoke to you?"

Taylor had to grin. "I really don't think you want to know those details, Dad," she chuckled. "But I'm just happy about Everett."

He frowned. "What about him? He'll be going back to Chicago, won't he?"

She shook her head, barely able to contain herself from squeeing in happiness. "No. Director Piggot told me. He's requested transfer to Brockton Bay. Chicago's getting Kid Win."

Danny's eyebrows rose toward his meagre hairline. "Really? They're doing that for you?"

Taylor giggled. "Director Piggot flat-out denied that they were doing it for me, in that way that says 'of course we're doing it for you, silly.' She giggled harder. "And then Hope called her a sweetie."

Danny chuckled. "She would."

"And Everett is dropping by later, to pick up his stuff. So I was thinking when you go to work, I might stay, so I can get the spare key off him."

There was a silence then, which told her without words that her casual gambit had not been casual enough.

He shot her a glance that she privately called the 'Dad look'. It was extremely cynical, and basically said, *I've been alive longer than you've been a teenager; you can't put one over on me.*

Clearing his throat, he said, "Not to sound too crude about it, Taylor, but I'm hoping that's the *only* thing that you're looking to get off of him."

Taylor, who had of course been thinking about getting much more than a spare key off of Everett, flushed guiltily. "Dad!" she protested. "Really!"

"Really," he repeated, raising his eyebrows. "Taylor, I love you and trust you, but Everett is a very nice boy, and I have seen how hard you two have fallen for each other."

He took a deep breath. "Now, I'm not mad at you, and I am in no way going to punish you for this, but I happen to have glanced down the stairs as I was heading into the shower this morning, and the sofa was empty. And after I came out, Everett was fast asleep on it. Which leads me to wonder if my darling daughter and her erstwhile boyfriend did not spend the night in other than separate beds."

Taylor flushed harder. "Dad," she said weakly, "yes, okay, we fell asleep in the spare bedroom. But we didn't have sex. You have to believe me. I'm still a virgin."

Danny frowned, and didn't speak for a few moments. "Okay," he said. "I trust you when you say that. You could, after all, have lied and denied it. In which case, I would have known. So you and Everett managed to keep things under control; good." He turned a worried gaze on her. "Because the way things are going right now? The last thing we want is you getting pregnant."

Taylor giggled. "It would look good, wouldn't it? Brockton Bay's newest Ward, a sixteen year old unwed mother." She sighed. "Of course, if it came down to it, Everett would probably propose, because Everett. He's nice like that."

Danny cleared his throat. "I hope you would never depend on that in a pinch," he said severely.

Taylor grinned at him. "No," she said. "Yesterday, I asked Amy to make me infertile for a couple of months, just in case. It never actually came up, but it's a nice backstop."

Danny was silent for another few moments. "I don't know whether to be angry for you planning to possibly have sex, or relieved that you thought about it and took precautions," he said eventually.

"Well, as we didn't actually do it, I'll be happy to go with 'relieved'," replied Taylor. She paused. "I'm not going to say how close we actually came, but we didn't."

"No," said Danny slowly. "That's not actually a detail I need to know." He looked steadily at her. "Though thank you for being honest about the rest of it. I really do appreciate it. I do not want to be the sort of dad who has to sneak around trying to find out what his daughter is doing."

"And I'd rather you knew what you needed to know, instead of worrying and wondering," said Taylor readily. "I know you love me and care for me, and trust me, Dad, I appreciate that beyond all measure."
He reached across the cab and ruffled her hair. "And I appreciate the fact that you love your dear old Dad too," he said. He paused. "Does the trial being over mean that you'll be moving out again?" he asked quietly.

Taylor frowned. "I don't know. I've been pretty well able to maintain my holdings from a distance, thanks again to Amy – god, I love that girl! – and her relay bugs. I really don't have to go. To be honest, I haven't been thinking about it. And I am rather enjoying being at home again. It's a comfortable surroundings."

She paused. "Tell you what, I'll go see how things are going in my territory, and if everyone's happy with the way things are, I'll come back for another few days."

He nodded. "That's fair. I'm happy for you to drop in once or twice a week, more if you can manage it."

She grinned. "If I can't get away, I might just send Falkor to pick you up."

"Falkor?" he said. "Is that the big dragonfly thing you've got?"

Taylor nodded. "Amy made her for me. And she's great. She could carry you, easily."

He gave her a sideways glance. "I think I'll drive, actually."

She giggled. "Falkor's very convenient. Self-parking, even."

"I'll, uh, take your word for it."

"So, Dad," she said tentatively. "About me waiting for Everett ..."

He looked at her directly. "And were you planning to, uh, do something with him that you have not done before?"

She thought about prevaricating. Then she looked him straight in the eye. "That's what we were planning on doing, yes. Once the trial was over."

He seemed taken aback by her directness.

"Taylor," he said eventually, "you are a very irritating young lady, do you know that?"

She frowned. Of all the responses she had expected, this was not it. "Uh, why do you say that?"

"Because most teenage girls would have lied or told half-truths that I would then have been able to catch them out in, and thus felt justified in being angry at them for lying to me," he said. "But I asked you a direct question, and you gave me a truthful answer. It kind of makes it hard to get angry at you for it."

She chuckled. "You knew what the answer was, Dad," she said with a grin. "You knew it and I knew it. So what's the point in lying?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Your point is valid. Well then. Now I face a dilemma."

She didn't speak; she suspected his last statement was more for effect than to invite a reply.

A moment later, she was proven right, as he went on. "On the one hand, I am a protective father, who desperately wants his daughter to remain a virgin until her wedding day, and preferably for ten years after the fact."
She had to giggle at that. He affected not to notice.

"On the other hand, I know full well that my daughter is a healthy young woman with healthy urges, and her boyfriend is a healthy young man, also presumably with healthy urges."

He paused. "Please don't fill me in, Taylor; I really don't need to know." She giggled again.

With a deep breath, he continued. "And so between the two of them, their collective ingenuity, especially given that they are both going to be in the Wards together, will almost certainly allow them to find some time and place together to scratch that itch, where I cannot reach or follow."

He glanced at Taylor, and continued. "So. You are proposing to meet him in a time and place where you have safety, privacy and comfort. There is no fear of pregnancy, and I am certain that he is a kind and considerate young man who will do nothing that you don't want him to." Taylor nodded involuntarily at that.

She suddenly realised that what he was doing was working at convincing himself of the facts, and felt a great rush of sympathy for him.

He turned to look at her directly. "So, as a protective father, I am going to ignore certain facets of this situation, and I am going to ask you, as a favour to me, to remain home and make sure you get the spare key off of Everett, please?"

Taylor felt the grin on her face growing wider by the second. "Of course, Dad," she said. "Just as a favour to you, of course."

He beamed at her. "Thank you, Taylor. You are a most considerate daughter." He paused and mused as if to himself. "Though we may as well let him keep it. Once he moves to Brockton Bay, he might want to stay over some nights. Get out of the base for a while."

Taylor nodded. "I like that idea. But is it okay for me to stay and help him, uh, pack?"

He nodded solemnly as he pulled the truck into the driveway. "Of course. Everyone knows that men can't pack bags."

She waited till the truck was stopped, then leaned across and threw her arms around him. "Thank you so much, Dad. This means so much to me."

He looked mildly at her, and said in such an innocent tone, "I have no idea what you are talking about," that she had to laugh.

Hope winged slowly over the city with Amy and Lisa in her arms. "Thank you both for being there for Taylor today," she said to them. "I really appreciate it, and I know Taylor does too."

Lisa grinned up at her. "Well, you know I would have been there anyway."

Hope nodded. "It doesn't make me appreciate you being there any less," she said, leaned down and kissed Lisa gently on the lips. Lisa closed her eyes, enjoying the kiss, and leaned a little closer in toward Hope.

Hope then smiled at Amy, who was watching tolerantly, and said, "And you didn't have to be there, but you were, so thank you too, sweetie."

Amy smiled back at her. "Hope, my darling," she said, "you were there, so of course I was going to
be there.” Hope giggled and gave her a kiss as well; Amy snuggled a little more closely in toward her.

"And thank you both," said Hope, "for not being jealous over me. You know that I love you both, and I will spend as much of my time with you as you need."

"Which reminds me," said Lisa with a vulpine grin, "when are you next going to see Newter, Amy?"

Amy burst out laughing. "Seriously, Lisa?" she said. "You're usually much better at manipulating me than that."

Lisa's grin widened. "Ah, but now I have planted the seed in your mind. And it will grow there, and sooner or later you will go over to see him, and then — she waited for a dramatic beat, — I will pounce!"

She paused. "Imagine a pouncing motion, please," she added, while Amy and Hope giggled. "I'd do it here, but free-fall doesn't agree with my health."

"It rarely does," agreed Hope gravely. "Dare I ask what you will do once you have pounced?"

Lisa's eyes gleamed wickedly. "I believe I will let you wait in anticipation," she said.

Amy giggled. "You do know that she won't actually anticipate anything?" she said. "Whatever you ask her to do, she'll do happily, but if you have nothing in mind, she'll just cuddle you."

Lisa made a face at her. "You are not helping my image as an evil manipulator," she complained.

"Oh, is that what you are?" asked Hope innocently. "I was actually wondering."

Lisa tried to scowl, but ended up giggling with the other two.

Greg Veder felt unaccountably nervous as he entered the open-air food court. Okay, he told himself. I have my phone set to dial 911 at a touch. I have a screamer that will deafen anyone in five yards. I'm in the open, there are many people around. I'm about as safe as anyone could be when meeting someone they have only spoken to online before now.

He glanced around. Looking for a girl with light blonde hair, with a magazine with a red flower on the cover on the table in front of her. Red hairband. Right.

Feeling a little like James Bond, or maybe one of those guys off that Mission Impossible show, Greg sauntered down through the tables, looking casually around, not making eye contact with anyone.

I wonder if she even showed? he asked himself. She's probably got one of her friends watching me with a camera filming me to see if I make a dick out of myself. Or maybe she's not slender and blonde, but short and fat and brunette.

Argh. I need to focus.

And then he saw her. Slim figure, delicate features, nibbling gently on a chicken nugget as if she were not totally sure as to what to make of it. Her teeth were very white. Her hair was ... he couldn't pick the colour. It was a sort of faded blonde ... maybe wheat? Not bleached. But it spilled over her shoulders and the back of her chair, and he imagined running it through his fingers ...

"Hey, watch it, buddy!"
Greg jerked back to himself, and apologised to the guy whose girlfriend he had almost walked into. *Smooth move, Ex-Lax.* People were looking around at the raised voice; he was sure everyone had memorised his features and would later check him up online to see if he was a wanted criminal.

The girl was still there, carefully straightening the magazine so that the red hibiscus? Hyacinth? Hydrangea? on the front cover was in the geometric centre of the table.

*It has to be her.*

And then he saw the guy in the coat and hat, collar up and hat pulled low, at the table four seats down. He was sure the guy was watching him. It was the way he hadn't reacted when everyone else had turned to look.

*Or maybe he just doesn't care?*

Whatever, Greg was not going to just walk away now that he was so close.

He walked up to the table and paused by it; she looked up at him expectantly.

"Uh, I'm meeting someone here?" he said, hating the way his voice squeaked on the last syllable. Her face was beautiful. "Uh, G?" I am not gonna say 'g-string' in front of this crowd.

She smiled, and her features were radiant. "Cowboy?" she responded. "Please, sit down."

Suddenly feeling as though someone had replaced his brain with cotton wool and his knees with strands of spaghetti, he plumped into the seat.

"I, uh, I, uh. I'm Greg," he said breathlessly.

She giggled; even her voice was beautiful and soft. *I bet she's a great singer.*

"You can call me Sveta," she said, in an enchanting accent.

"Sveta?" he repeated stupidly. "Is that Russian? Your accent is really nice."

"I do not know," she said softly. "I am ... shall we say, an orphan."

"But surely you'd know if you were from Russia or some other place," he said. "Even if you were an orphan."

She frowned slightly. "It is more complicated than that, Greg," she said. "I prefer not to talk about it."

"But how complicated could it be to know where you came from?" he persisted. "I mean, seriously, you have to have a passport just to get into the country."

"Please," she said, "can we not talk about it?"

"Okay," he said, a little mystified. "But I don't see that it's such a big deal." He took a deep breath. "So what do you do for a living?" he asked. "I bet you're a singer. You have a beautiful voice."

She shook her head. "No, I'm not a singer. I don't know how to sing." She smiled. "I do want to learn, though."

"So what do you do?" he asked. "Play the piano?" He had noticed that she had very long, shapely fingers.
She shook her head again. "No, Greg, I'm not any kind of musician." She took a deep breath. "Can we not talk about this either?"

"So what did you want to talk about?" he asked, mystified. *Don't all women like to talk about themselves?* "Space Opera? I could give you some good hints and tips about that. You know, as you've been having trouble playing it."

Again, she shook her head; her wheat-coloured hair swayed with the motion. It almost seemed to him that the swaying motion continued long after her head stopped moving.

"I'm not playing that game anymore, Greg. I don't have the problems I had, and I already told you, I've read up on all the hints and tips. But now I don't need the game to pass the time. I'm doing other things now."

"Like what?" he asked. This conversation was not going how he had envisaged it, with himself cool and suave, charming her with his intelligent wit.

"Going for walks. Enjoying the sunshine." She looked up and let the sunlight fall on her face. "Living."

Greg frowned. "So basically, not doing much then."

"Okay," she said. "This was a mistake." Abruptly, she stood up.

Instinctively, he reached over and grasped her wrist. "Sveta, don't go," he said.

She stopped, and gave him a cold look. "Please release my wrist at once."

And then a voice at his shoulder said, "It would be a very good idea to do as the lady says, sir."

He looked around, and while he could not see well in the glare of the sunlight, the skin of the guy wearing the hat and coat seemed grey, as if he wasn't even made of flesh and blood.

Suddenly very aware that he did not know everything about this situation, he let go Sveta's wrist.

"Greg," she said, "Up until a very short time ago, I had no outlet except to be online. I was very, very lonely. I just wanted friends to talk to. People to connect with. But I could not talk about myself, could not show pictures. I will not tell you why. But all I wanted was for someone to accept me as I was. Not to accuse me of being a middle-aged stalker guy, just because I could not, would not meet with you, or send you pictures of me wearing very little." She took a deep breath. "So I will tell you in direct terms, Greg. Leave me alone. Do not message me, do not chat to me, do nothing to communicate with me. Do you understand me?"

Greg stared. "But I –"

She slapped him, hard. The impact rocked his face to one side.

"Man, he thought dizzily. She can slap!"

"Leave me alone," she snapped, her voice cutting across the buzz of conversations. "It's that simple. Leave me alone."

She turned and walked off, her wheat-blonde hair flowing in the breeze, the guy in the coat following.

Greg sat, rubbing the red mark on his face.
Damn, he thought. She can hit.

Ah well, at least she really was a woman.

Maybe the next one I meet will actually like me.

"Well," said Weld, once they were out of sight, "that could have gone better."

Sveta smiled brilliantly and linked her arm through his. "Better than I thought it would, actually," she admitted.

"Really?" he asked. "It seemed to go downhill pretty damn quick to me."

"He's not quite as big a jerk in real life as he is on the forums," she said. "Still a jerk, and still someone I don't want to associate with, but not as bad as he could be."

Weld nodded. "This was basically a wasted trip, then."

"Oh, no," said Sveta. "I wanted to slap him for the comments he made online. He just gave me the excuse." She grinned at him. "Thanks for the backup."

He grinned back. "Anytime."

The PRT transport grounded on the street outside the house; Tecton got out and approached the front door. Behind him, the transport lifted off again.

Taylor got up and opened the door for him; he paused and then stepped in through the front door.

"I didn't expect to see you here, Taylor," he said. "Aren't you usually out and about being Skitter or something?"

She grinned and shut the door. The shades were already pulled. "I can be Skitter right here," she said. "And I waited here for you. My dad's gone to work."

He took his helmet off. "So basically," he said, "we're alone in the house."

"For the next few hours, yes," she confirmed, standing on tiptoe to kiss him. It sent sparks right down to her toes.

"So we could ..." he paused.

"We could, yes," she said softly.

"And your dad ..."

"Pretends not to know, because he would prefer we did it in safe circumstances than sneaking around," she said simply.

He managed to conjure a look of disappointment. "But you were going to abduct me to your supervillain lair, and have your wicked way with me," he said with a grin.

She kissed him again. He kissed her back, a process that took a little time. Then he headed for the basement door. She followed along. "In case you hadn't noticed, I'm a Ward now," she pointed out cheerfully, "and that makes it a superhero base." She grinned. "Though I'm willing to call my
bedroom a supervillain lair if that sounds better to you."

He chuckled as he removed bits of his armour. "I can go with that. But I still do want to see your base. It sounds awesome."

"I kinda like it," she agreed.

He stepped out of the armour and came up the stairs to meet her. They held each other and kissed, deeply, their tongues sliding around one another sensuously. Her hands ran over his back, and his clasped her buttocks hard. She rather enjoyed the sensation.

When they finally separated, both of them were breathing hard.

"So what now?" he asked, his voice ragged.

She wondered what he would do if she just started taking her clothes off. Or his clothes. She suspected that he would not put up any sort of a struggle.

"Now," she said, trying to keep her voice level, "we make sure we have collected all your gear, and it's ready to go."

"Oh," he said, "I did that before we left for court."

"No, you didn't," she told him.

"Yes, I -- oh, wait," he said, picking up the hint. "I may have forgotten one or two items."

She giggled. "Well, let's go make sure that everything is packed right. Let's check the bathroom first."

Obediently, he followed her up the stairs, and into the bathroom. She closed the door. He looked enquiringly at her.

"We're going to have a shower together," she said softly. "And I am going to soap that glorious body of yours all over. And you're going to soap me all over. And then we're going to dry off. And then, I'm going to drag you to my supervillain lair, and have my wicked way with you."

He swallowed. "Not that I'm disputing your plan ... but that shower stall isn't very large. There won't be much room in there for the both of us."

Taylor grinned and peeled off her top. "I know," she said.

Everett smiled.

Underneath her top, Taylor was naked to the waist; Everett had thought he had not felt a bra while he was kissing her. She placed her glasses carefully on the washbasin, then bent to push down her shorts. Her panties -- if she had been wearing any -- went with them; when she straightened up, she was as naked as one could be. He was still struggling with his shirt, his fingers suddenly all thumbs as he eyed her slender, sexy body.

Reaching into the shower cubicle, she turned on the water, made it a good hard spray, and waited till it was the right temperature. He was standing, shirt mostly unbuttoned, watching the way her breasts moved and changed shape as she leaned and stretched sideways.

Already, his erection was threatening to burst from his shorts. She grinned, ran a hand over the
outside of the bulge, then proceeded to unbutton his shirt for him. He made vague motions to take it off as she dropped to her knees and pulled his shorts down.

He still could not believe this was happening, as she fondled and caressed his rigidly erect penis. But he wasn’t arguing; she was in charge, and that was that.

She thought that he might even be thicker than the last time she had seen his cock, but she couldn’t be sure. *But I certainly know what to do with it, this time,* she thought. Her breasts jiggled very slightly as she opened her mouth and took part of his length between her lips.

He clutched the towel rail and groaned as her hot, wet mouth enfolded his cock, sucking him inside, her tongue flickering and dancing around his head and shaft. Her hands were stroking, rubbing, cupping his balls.

His obvious arousal was doing something drastic to Taylor’s body too. As she suckled on him, her breasts felt engorged, her nipples stood out proudly, and the warm feeling in her stomach coalesced in her tight young pussy, flooding her with moisture.

“Oh shit, shit, shit, gonna cum!” groaned Everett. Taylor sucked harder.

At the last moment, she pulled her face back, mouth open, waiting.

His hips spasmed, and jet after jet of thick white semen shot from the head of his jerking cock, splattering into her mouth, over her face, and down over her breasts and stomach. She kept pumping it with her fist until the very last spurt was done, then leaned in and delicately licked the last of his semen from the now exquisitely-tender head of his cock. He groaned again.

She wiped her mouth as she stood up, and kissed him on the cheek. “I had to do that,” she said with a giggle, “or it would have had someone’s eye out.” He gave a startled chuckle at that. “Now,” she continued, “you’re gonna have to wash me down. In you get.” Taking his hand, she stepped into the shower cubicle and tugged him with her.

Obediently, he followed.

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Taylor decided that having someone else – someone for whom your body is an endless treasure of delights – soaping you down in the shower *had* to be the next best thing to sex. Everett didn’t *miss* anywhere, and his hands roamed over her body slowly and sensually, driving her to greater and greater heights of arousal.

She soaped him also, running her hands all over his body, the hot water and the slick sensations making this an entirely new level of pleasure from when she had done this to him in bed. From the way his penis sprang back to attention, it was obvious that he was enjoying this at least as much as she was.

She was facing into the blinding spray when she felt him kneel before her, his large hands caressing and running around her ankles and then up her calves to her knees. Then they caressed their way up her thighs. She was waiting for his hands to touch, to fondle her sex, but then her pushed her gently back against the cubicle wall, and lifted her legs, one at a time, so that her thighs rested on his shoulders.
And then he cupped her buttocks in his large hands, squeezing almost hard enough to cause her pain, the sensation making her groan out loud ... and pulled her sopping wet pussy on to his mouth.

She came explosively, over and over again, as his tongue delved so far into her that she was sure he was tickling her tonsils. He ravaged her clitoris, nibbled on her labia, and over and over again, slid into her with his oh so talented tongue. Her cries of utter ecstasy echoed in the small bathroom as she wrapped her legs around his neck and let herself fall back against the cubicle wall.

The hot water hammered on the back of his head, and on her belly and breasts, and she clasped herself, squeezed her breasts, and pinched her own nipples, as the sensations blasted through her.

Shifting his position slightly, he lifted her with his hands under her buttocks, and went at her again. This time, his tongue reached her ass as well as her pussy, and she erupted all over again, the new sensation making her feel as though her head was exploding and her toenails were catching fire.

Finally, he let her down; she wobbled, unable to stand for a moment, such was the total and thorough reaming that his tongue had given her tight wet vaginal canal. She clung to him as he kissed her tenderly; she kissed him back, their lips pressed hard together.

His now extremely turgid erection pressed against her hip; for a moment, she considered simply bending over and letting him have at her, right there in the shower. Such was the flaming heat, the sheer arousal, in her pussy right now that she felt she could take the entire length and thickness of him with the greatest of ease.

But no, she wanted her first time to be in a bed, where they could take it slowly and gently and thoroughly enjoy each other. And while hot wet soapy slick shower sex sounded powerfully attractive to her right now, it would also be over too quickly.

She wanted this to last.

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Everett wanted Taylor so badly it hurt. He wanted to lift her up, hold her against the shower wall while he gently fed his erection between her distended pussy lips, let her slide down on to him, make glorious, glorious love to her. And he felt that should he propose doing this to her, she would not say no.

He was highly gratified at her spectacular reaction to his oral attentions. Becky had taught him that, but she had also been critical of his work, always making sure to find a little fault with his or that, always making him try a little harder.

So with Taylor, he tried the best he could, and he strongly suspected that his best was actually quite good enough for her.

Her oral skills, while obviously underdeveloped, were coming along nicely too; her first attempt at sucking his cock had been enough to set him off, but the one just now outside the shower had made his eardrums rattle with the climax she had engendered within him.

He found it kind of touching that although he was the more experienced lover, she was obviously devoting a great deal of time and effort to making up the difference. And he had absolutely no complaints on any of what she was doing. None whatsoever.
Once her knees would hold her, but before she could give in to the temptation to demand that Everett just take her *right here, right now!* she turned the water off and stepped from the shower, water beading on her smooth skin. Everett, following, was sure that he had never seen anything quite so sexy.

She took a large towel from the rack and handed it to him, then took one herself. He began to rub his face dry; she held up a hand. “No,” she said. “You dry *me*. I’ll dry you.”

Everett had never realised that the experience of drying off someone else – and being dried off in turn – could be quite so erotic as he and Taylor made it. The towels were thick and rough and scratchy dry, and absorbed the moisture from their bodies quite readily. But Taylor found it necessary to go over his body twice over, the soft touch of the towel sending amazing sparks of arousal through his body.

For his part, he did the same for her, even gently lifting her thigh – she supported herself on his shoulders – while he dried right up between her legs, and rubbed over her pussy and ass, to her obvious pleasure.

So he did it twice more.

She looked like she was about to throw him to the bathroom floor and take him then and there, so he stopped; she gave him an extremely smouldering look, and hung her towel on the rack. He did the same. Then she picked up a pair of panties, very tiny, very sheer, very lacy, very black, from the washbasin and stepped into them, tugging them up over her hips.

They made her look more naked than ever.

He approved.

She glanced down at the obvious signal of his definitive approval, and smiled. Going to one knee, she cradled it in her hands and kissed the very tip, gently. He groaned; if she started sucking it again, like she had before, she was going to need another shower.

But she didn’t; leaving him throbbing with insanely urgent need, she opened the bathroom door and padded out, closely followed by Everett’s erection, which was towing Everett behind it.

Her back view while running had been very nice indeed; however, her back view while wearing that incredibly provocative pair of panties was mind-blowing.

For just a moment, he imagined her running in just those panties. He thought his brains were going to dribble out his ears.

His erection got a good grip on his balls and dragged him along in Taylor’s wake.

In the bedroom, she closed the door, then turned to face him.
“Everett,” she said softly, “could you please take my panties off for me?”

*Oh my god.* Everett had helped Becky out of her clothes many times; last night, he had even done it for Taylor. But this one simple act, gently removing this one last bastion, this one barrier that lay between them and what was to happen next ... it was among the most erotic things that he had ever done.

She felt his hands so gently touching her burning skin, felt the delicate fabric slide down over her slim hips, whisper down her thighs and calves until she could step out of them. Now, symbolically and in reality, she was uncovered to him, open to him. To whatever he wanted to do with her, to her. Her body would welcome it. *She* would welcome it.

Gently, she kissed him. Then she climbed on to the bed, scooting to the far side, propped herself up on to one elbow. Her leg was cocked up so that he could see her hot wet sex at the juncture to her thighs. Silently, she patted the bed beside her.

He needed no encouragement. The bed was not overly narrow, but he was bulkier than normal, and once he was comfortably on it, his rigid erection nearly bridged the gap between them.

She nodded to herself. *I was right. My bed did need Everett, right about there.*

Her heart thudded in her chest. She and Everett lay facing one another on her bed; to her it seemed roomy, but with the both of them on it, there wasn’t much room to spare. *Which means that we’re going to have to be very close together.* She couldn’t actually fault this logic.

“Everett,” she said softly, tracing her hand down his flank. ‘I notice that you are not wearing pants.”

He nodded; he seemed to be having a little trouble controlling his breathing. His hand – so warm and strong! – traced a similar path to hers, exciting a trail of sparks that ran through her nerve endings until she thought that her hair would light up.

“You’re not wearing any either,” he observed. This was self-evidently true; after all, he had just removed the pair she had worn into the room.

“Well, that’s one rule broken,” she breathed. She took a deep breath. “Everett,” she said, and her voice was almost a sob, such was her desire for him, “would you please make love to me?”

Everett’s excitement, already obvious, increased visibly. She reached down, grasped his thick erection, stroked it gently, pumping it back and forth. Clear precum was already oozing from the tip. He gasped, then in an unsteady voice, said, “Taylor, are you sure?”

She reached to gather him to her, and whispered her answer into his ear.

“Yes.”

Then she kissed him. He kissed her back, and slid a finger between her open vaginal lips, easing it into her hot wet slippery depths. She arched her back and gasped into his mouth. “Oh god,” she moaned, “oh god, oh god, oh god.”

Her hand on his cock squeezed, and pumped a few more times; he moaned in his turn.

She went to slide down to suck on him some more; he shook his head. “No,” he managed. *If she*
sucks me now, it'll end up all over her face.

She was as wet as she was ever going to get, that was for sure. He kissed her again, rubbed her pussy. She slid toward him, opening her thighs to him, trying to guide him into her.

He wanted her so badly, to thrust into her, to hold her down, to see the expression on her face as she took his cock inside him ...

“No,” he murmured again. “Your first time, you be on top. Control ... hgggn ... penetration.”

Scooting toward her, he rolled on to his back. His cock thrust toward the ceiling, a tower of flesh and blood, as hard as any rock.

She whimpered with her want for him. Her kiss on his lips turned desperate, then she was kneeling up, straddling his hips. He steadied her, helped her move forward. She reached under herself, feeling his throbbing erection, rubbing it back and forth between her labia, almost sending herself over the edge into an orgasm, nearly causing him to shoot off.

The pleasure he was feeling was so intense that it was almost pain. He looked up at her. Taylor, wonderful Taylor. Supervillain Skitter who owned so much of the city. Weaver, the hero who was to be. All contained in the same lithe body poised over his achingly hard erection. All Taylor. All the woman he wanted.

His hands slid up from her hips to her breasts, and cupped and cradled them, rubbing gently. She caught her breath, then slowly began to work herself down on to him.

His eyes nearly crossed as he felt the head of his cock start to slide into her; the heat, the tightness, the slickness, all made him feel as though steam were leaking out his ears.

“Oh, holy jesus fuck!” he blurted. “Oh god, this is so good!”

For her part, Taylor whimpered, feeling him open her up, spread her pussy lips, distend her swollen labia even farther.

She slid down farther.

Everett had to hold back mightily on the impulse to avoid grabbing her hips and thrusting up into her. *She's still a virgin,* he reminded himself. *Careful, be careful.*

But his self-control was rapidly eroding.

A whimper was torn from her, this one of pain. She had settled as far as she could go, and her hymen was resting on top of the head of his cock.

“Everett,” she whispered.

“Taylor,” he whispered back.

“It hurts,” she whimpered.

He clenched his eyes shut. *I want her so badly.*
“If you want to stop,” he said, forcing the words out, “I will.”

It was the last thing, the very last thing, he wanted to do. But if such was her choice, he would do it. *For her, I would do this.*

“No,” she said. And then, stronger, “*No.*” She took a deep breath, and forced herself downward. Inside her, the thin membrane tore. His cock pushed past it, farther into her slippery, hot depths.

Her first cry was one at the pain, then there was another almost immediately as he penetrated her more deeply; this one was not of pain. She felt his thick member sliding up into her body, his hands on her hips, grasping her, moving her up and down on him, slowly, gently, starting the rhythm, sending waves of shivery pleasure through her, overcoming the single pain of her torn hymen.

Each thrust into her drove a little deeper, each withdrawal a little less, until she looked down in a haze of pleasure and found that her sparse pubic hair was meshed thoroughly with his.

*Holy shit,* she thought. *It's in. He's in me. I'm not a virgin anymore. I'm actually having sex.*

*Fuck, I feel so full.*

He had no idea how he had lasted so long without cumming. Her vagina pulsed about his invading cock; she was hot, tight, wet, slippery, clenching around him. The sensation was *astounding.*

“Oh god,” he blurted, “I love you..”

She looked down at him, feeling the pleasure increase as her no longer virgin pussy relaxed and expanded to accommodate him. “Oh, Everett,” she whispered. “I love you too.”

Slowly, she began to ease up and down; he groaned at the sensation. Gaining confidence, she moved faster and faster, the movement of his thick penis causing waves of unimaginable pleasure to radiate from the walls of her hot, slick vaginal canal.

“Oh fuck,” he groaned, his hands fastened on to her hips. “Gonna cum....” His hips bucked, shoving his cock hard up into her, and he felt himself explode, massively. From his balls all the way up to the tip of his cock, it felt like fire was running the length of his manhood, and blasting up into her tight clinching slippery wetness.

He cried out as he came, shouting her name, thrusting up into her, all thoughts of gentleness gone.

She felt him thrust into her, felt the first jets of his cum, and then her own orgasm smashed into her. They came together, his cock driving powerfully into her, his semen spurting hard into her womb, as she screamed out, a wordless cry of sheer blinding pleasure.

Her pussy clenched hard around his thrusting cock, her own body shook uncontrollably, as every single nerve ending lit off like New Years Eve. She felt his cock deep inside her, his seed spraying into her depths, and cried out her passion, over and over again.

Eventually the storm passed and she slumped down over his body, full length on him, his cock still trapped within her. She looked at his face from a distance of three inches. “Oh, Everett,” she whispered. “Oh god, I love you so much.”

He looked up at her, his eyes still coming back into focus. “Taylor,” he murmured. “You are so
wonderful."

She kissed him, then kissed him again. I can't believe I've just had sex, she thought. Then she corrected herself. No. We made love. Nothing that good, that tender, could be just 'sex'.

“That was ... amazing,” she murmured.

“Mind-blowing,” he agreed.

She grinned. “Wanna see if we can do it again?” She wiggled her hips and lightly clenched her still-quivering vaginal canal.

He felt himself stir, deep within her. He kissed her back. “Mmm, yes,” he murmured.

She rose up to straddle him once more, and began to work her hips in gentle circles. His cock responded like a trouper, slowly hardening once more, making her eyes go wide as she felt it swell within her. “Oh god ... oh god ... “ she gasped.

Slowly, but with growing confidence, she began to ride him, rocking her hips back and forth so that he would not slide out of her before he was fully hard. When he was fully extended into her once more, she began to lift and lower her hips, sliding up and down his thick cock.

The sensations were, if anything, more intense the second time around. She worked her hips on him, feeling him respond and swell and thrust into her, sending sparks of pleasure flying through her body. Reaching down, she caressed and rubbed her clitoris, fractions of an inch from where his swollen penis slid in and out between her tightly stretched labia.

He caressed her thighs, her hips, her breasts. His fingers rubbed and squeezed her almost painfully erect nipples. She moaned and arched her back in reply.

They rode together to a series of orgasms by her, that culminated in a massive climax for him; he came into her again, crying out as his cock jetted his seed deep inside her body. She felt a massive burst of pleasure hit her at the same time, nearly taking the top of her head off.

This time, there was going to be no third performance, not immediately. She more or less fell forward on to him, body limp, nerve endings still twitching and buzzing from the intense pleasure that she had just undergone. He was pretty much in the same state; his cock was deflating and beginning to withdraw from her.

He kissed her gently and rolled on to his side, allowing his penis to side from her still-wet vagina and flop to his hip. A little blood stained her thighs, but not much. Just her hymen, he thought.

He kissed her again and again, gently, tenderly, feeling like he just wanted to hold her forever.

***

It took a little while for her to come back to herself. She felt warm, loved, safe, secure. Pleasure still swam lazily through her body, a comfortable afterglow. She felt tender but not sore; the pain from her broken maidenhead was entirely forgotten.

Oh wow, she thought. So that's what it's like. Making love, not sex. Oh wow.
She lay in his arms. The sensations that were still swirling through her body, she had no names for. But she felt as though she were a new person, an imago burst from the chrysalis. She wanted to laugh; she wanted to cry.

She wanted to do it all over again.

Her face turned up to Everett’s, and she kissed him. He returned the kiss. His hands started moving over her body, and she gasped with the renewed sensations. How could such a thing be so wonderful and still be legal?

Tears flowed from her eyes at the strength of her emotions.

“What’s the matter?” he asked in concern, kissing away the saline droplets. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

She smiled. “No,” she told him truthfully. “I was just thinking about how good this is.” A giggle. “And about all those poor women who aren’t about to make love with you ... again.”

She slid a leg under him; he got the hint, got up, poised over her.

Her hand found his erection, grasped it, pumped it slowly, felt it throb in her grasp. He arched his back, poised over her. She opened her thighs, rubbed his head back and forth between her labia, rubbing over her clitoris and vulva, sending messages of pleasure singing through her entire body.

He tensed up, wanting to thrust, wanting to enter her. She looked back up at him, leaned up, kissed him. She wanted him inside her so, so badly.

“Yes,” she murmured. “Now.”

She placed his penis at the entrance to her vagina, and he pushed. Smoothly, she felt his thickness spread her open, push her oh-so-sensitive,, oh-so-swollen labia aside, enter her, penetrate her. She gasped as he slid into her, a long smooth sensuous glide that only ended when there was no more of him outside of her.

“Oh my god, Everett,” she murmured. “That just feels better every single time you do it.”

He started working his penis in and out of her, slowly, smoothly, gently, sending sparks of pleasure throughout her body, making her bite her lip and arch her back. His smile was gentle, loving, and oh so thoroughly desiring of her. “When you’re right, Taylor, you’re right,” he agreed. “I want to do this with you forever.”

He lowered his face to her breast, never pausing in his slow, measured strokes, and began to lick and nibble at them until she was gasping for breath. All the while, his cock sliding in and out of her was driving her not-so-slightly insane from the ever increasing levels of pleasure.

She ran her hands over his body, grabbing his buttocks, feeling his muscles clench and then relax as he continued his steady, sweet torture of her pussy, sliding ever so deeply into her slippery wetness, over and over again.

He looked down at her; she looked up at him. “Taylor,” he breathed. “I love you.” And then he kissed her. It was the sort of kiss that they had first enjoyed, out in the back yard; it wiped out her cognitive processes and left her gasping for breath. When she came back to herself, Everett had increased the tempo on his thrusting, and she felt herself teetering on the edge of orgasm.
Very deliberately, he lowered his head and nipped at her nipple.

She arched her back, dug her nails into his back, and exploded in a series of orgasms that rocked the bed. And they didn’t stop, even as her body was writhing under him in the extremity of her pleasure, even as she was clenching around him, he was still sliding his penis deep into her vagina.

A moment, an hour, a year later, she felt through the waves of pleasure that he was speeding up again. She tried to keep up with his thrusts, push her pussy up at him, take his cock as far into her as possible, but the jagged blasts of orgasm kept throwing her off balance, sending her brain spinning into the void.

And then he came, pushing deep inside her and crying out her name as he ejaculated, spurting hot jets of semen hard into her spasming pussy. It seemed that he came forever, filling her to the brim and beyond, but surely that was merely an illusion.

***

Eventually, she stopped coming, and lay there, shattered and shaken, beneath him. He rolled off of her, letting himself slide from her wet pussy, and lay there, trying to catch his breath.

She reached over and caressed his face, pushing back strands of sweat-sodden hair from his forehead. “Oh my god, Everett,” she murmured. “Is it always this good?”

He smiled weakly, looking as shattered as she felt. “I don’t know, my love. It’s never been this good for me before.”

She leaned in and kissed him lovingly, tenderly. “So I was okay?”

He began to laugh, softly, tiredly, his shoulders shaking. “Oh god, Taylor. Oh god. If you were any better, I’d be needing CPR right now.”

She felt the warm glow spreading through her, and rolled into his arms, holding him tightly. “Oh, I love you so much, Everett. Even without this, here, today, I love you.”

He stared at her, intently. “You really mean that?” he said. “I mean, really? Not just saying it for something nice to say?”

She grinned. “What, did you want me to say it with bugs?”

His return grin turned into a weary chuckle. “No, sweetie, no. I’ll accept it from your lips.” He kissed her softly. “I love you too, Taylor. Even if you didn’t want to take me to bed, I’d still love you.”

She closed her eyes and snuggled up to him, resting her head on his chest. Her heart was so full right now, she didn’t want to move, didn’t want to think. She just wanted to lie here and be in love with Everett.

***

_I have been alone so long, she thought. No friends since Emma, until the Undersiders. Dad tried to help, but I pushed him away. I never thought I would find love. Someone to be with. Someone like Everett. And I nearly pushed him away too, but he wouldn’t go. And I am so glad of that._

I am so lucky I met him.

***

He lay there musing, his eyes on the ceiling, his arm around Taylor, hand gently stroking her hair.

So much pain in her, he thought. So much anger. So much hurt. She pushes people away, even the ones she loves the most. She nearly pushed me away. I nearly let myself be pushed. I nearly rejected her. Tears threatened, but he blinked them away. I nearly hurt her all over again. I nearly did that to her. Thank god I managed to pull my head out of my ass in time.

I am so lucky I met her.

***

After a few moments of extremely comfortable closeness, Everett broke the silence. “Just from curiosity, where did all that showering and drying and panties thing come from? I mean, seriously, it was such an enormous turn-on, but I was wondering where you got the idea.”

She giggled, a little self-consciously. “I asked my friend Lisa; she suggested it.” She stretched luxuriantly, her breasts rubbing against his chest. “And oh boy, did it work.”

He nodded, caressing her hair and her back. “It did,” he murmured. “Those panties ... just watching you in them, blew my mind. And when you asked me to take them off you ... damn.”

She nodded, her head rubbing against his chest. “That was the idea. I thought it would turn you on. But ... when you did it, I thought I would come on the spot. It was such a rush, having you take those off me, leaving me naked, just for you.”

“It did turn me on,” he confirmed. “So goddamn much.” Putting his hands under her arms, he moved her up slightly, so that he was able to kiss her. “I want to do that with you every time we make love from here on. It was like we were getting married, and I was taking off your wedding dress.”

She stopped, stared at him, her expression slightly shocked. “Everett,” she said, her voice a little higher pitched than normal. “Did you just say you wanted to marry me?”

He stopped also, looking at her face. “I ... I guess,” he said at last. “Is that a bad thing?” He paused, then rushed on. “Yesterday, when you came down the stairs on your father’s arm, all that I could think of was that the wedding march should be playing.” He studied her face, his expression a little worried. “If I’m pushing too hard, too far, saying things I shouldn’t, just tell me now, and I’ll shut up.”

Very gently, very lovingly, she leaned in and kissed him. “Everett,” she said softly. “Seriously. I love you, but until you brought it up, I had not ever thought of getting married. I hadn’t even thought I might have a chance to get married. And this is a bit sudden. But ...” She kissed him again. “But on my eighteenth birthday, as soon as I join the Protectorate, if we’re still together, then I’ll marry you. Okay?”

He grabbed her and rolled over so that she was half-pinned under his bulk. She yelped slightly, but it was more giggle than yelp. He smiled down at her; she grinned up at him. “What do you mean, ‘if we’re still together?’” he asked, kissing her several times to make his point.
“Well,” she pointed out, “you might find someone you like better than me.”

“That,” he said firmly, “is not going to happen.” He paused. “Wait, you just accepted my proposal. Does that mean we’re engaged?”

She giggled. “After what we’ve just been doing? I don’t think we could be any more engaged than that.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” he said with a grin, rolling back over and pulling her on top of him. “I can think of several ways.” Under her, his penis started to thicken and rise.

“Oh?” she giggled. “And how might that be?” She wriggled over his growing erection, sitting up so that she could rub her moist slippery labia up and down along its length.

“Like this,” he said softly, lifting her hips; his erection sprang up. She reached down and guided it into her, letting out a soft gasp as he penetrated her.

Slowly she slid down on to him, engulfing his hardness, causing him to arch his back and catch his breath with pleasure renewed.

“Oh yes,” she purred, moving her hips in a most distracting manner. “I can definitely see your point.”

***

Slowly, gently, they made love once more. It was no longer the frantic coupling of earlier, but the gentle completeness that comes with a growing knowledge of one another’s bodies, of two lovers who know how to give as well as take.

And all was well with the world.

They lay in one another’s arms, enjoying the closeness, the intimacy. She was content to hold him; he was content to be held. Gentle murmurs and soft touches enhanced the closeness without actually giving rise to anything that may need to be addressed.

_Everett is mine, all mine,_ thought Taylor sleepily. _I won’t ever let him go._

_Taylor needs me, and I need her,_ Everett’s thoughts drifted. _I never want to let her down._

Slowly they drifted into a doze, still holding one another. The warmth, the love, the closeness, the security. It was all there.

***

Taylor blinked awake. She looked at the clock on the nightstand, but remembered that her glasses were on the washbasin.

“Everett?” she mumbled.
“Mmph?” he replied.

“Everett, what time is it? I can’t see.”

Gradually, he stirred himself. Turning his head, he looked at the clock. “Nearly three,” he mumbled.

“Um,” she said. ‘You remember when we stopped?’

He chuckled wryly. “I had other things on my mind. When’ll your dad be home?”

“Five, I guess,” she said. “You won’t get in trouble staying too long?”

He shook his head. “Miss Militia said to call the transport back when I was ready to go. Off duty as soon as the trial ended.”

“Oh,” she murmured. “Good.” She shifted position, scratched herself, kissed him. “This has been a really, really, really good day for me.”

He held her comfortably. “I think I can accept that. I’ve had a spectacularly awesome day myself.” He kissed her back, then noticed the uncomfortable pressure as he shifted his weight. “Oomph.”

“Hm?” she asked.

“Gotta use the bathroom, sorry.”

She grinned as she let him go and sat up out of his way. “Darn biology. Gets in the way every time.” Then she blinked. “Um, yeah, I think I need to go too.”

Climbing reluctantly out of bed, they padded naked along the hallway to the bathroom. Like a gentleman, he allowed her to use the bathroom first, waiting discreetly outside until she had finished.

While he was relieving himself, she turned on the shower. “We’re just a bit sweaty,” she said to him. “Might want to clean off before we get dressed again.”

“You have a good point,” he agreed as he finished up. “Want to go separately, or share again?”

She smiled slowly and took his hand. “What do you think?” she asked.

***

The shower was different, this time. There wasn’t the incredible sexual tension between them, the sheer blinding lust that had had them hyperaware of each other’s bodies. Before, they had been set to go off on the slightest trigger; now, they were far more relaxed, more able to enjoy the togetherness, the intimacy.

The attraction was still there of course, and under the hot water, the slippery soaping – for Taylor again soaped Everett down, and he did likewise for her – the arousal was almost immediate and very strong.

“Oh my,” murmured Taylor when his erection made itself known. “Looks like you’re not all played out yet.” She went to one knee and began to lick and caress it. He grunted and arched his back. Looking up, she grinned wickedly, and stood.
“I so, so wanted to do this, earlier,” she said, and turned her back on him, bending slightly and leaning against the shower wall. Her butt was thrust out toward him, legs spread slightly.

He reached under her, found her sex, rubbed it gently, spreading her labia with his fingers. She moaned and pushed against him.

Taking hold of her hips, he slid his erection between her thighs, rubbing its top side against her labia, pushing between them, sliding back and forth so that the head rubbed over her clitoris, back and forth.

“Remember when we did this, in the spare room?” he murmured.

She pushed harder back at him, reaching down to rub her clitoris. She squeezed the head of his cock, and then tucked it inside her.

“Oh yeah,” he groaned. “That’s what I wanted to do then too.” Holding her hips, he gently pushed into her; sliding deeper and deeper inside her slippery wetness. Her vagina clamped on to him, driving him wild with pleasure.

She braced herself against the corner of the shower stall as he took her from behind, his cock pistoning powerfully into the very depths of her being. She cried out as he drove her into an orgasm, then another one. He felt his pleasure mount, and then he cried out in his turn as he came, ejaculating his semen deep inside her.

They held each other in the afterglow, slowly soaping each other again. Their lips met, and they kissed, and caressed one another. Taylor discovered anew the sensation of having his water-slick hands running over her body, and decided that she really, really liked it.

The shower turned into a languid affair; he recovered after a little time, and this time, he pressed her up against the shower wall, and pinned her arms to the wall above her with his hands. She spread her legs invitingly, and he accepted the invitation, sliding into her until he was bedded into her up to the hilt. While he kissed her, she lifted both legs, gasping as she felt him wedge that last inch or so deeper into her overstuffed vagina, and wrapped her legs around his waist.

And then he started making love to her, slowly and gently, pushing her hard up against the shower wall, his arms under her buttocks, hers around his neck, his erection buried deep within her.

They took their time about it this time; he slowly worked his cock within her, moving his hips in time with hers, making slow, gentle, wonderful love as the hot water pounded on his shoulders and ran down both their faces.

Gently, he teased her into one orgasm after another. He was almost spent; he didn’t have anything left after this. So he set out to give her the very best that he could.

Taylor was moaning and quivering in his grasp. She couldn’t think, couldn't talk, couldn’t do much other than hold on to his neck, wrap her legs tighter around his waist, and kiss him.

Inevitably, he felt his own state of arousal build to the point where he could not hold it any anymore. When he did come, it was with a strangled cry that was echoed by Taylor, as she felt him coming within her.
They sank to the floor of the shower cubicle, still holding one another, as his deflating penis slid from her. He sat with his back against one side of the cubicle; she sat across his lap, arms still around his neck. His arms wrapped strongly around her, his body pressed against hers.

“Oh ... my ... god ...” she managed.

He kissed her. “Oh god yes,” he replied.

She rested her head on his shoulder. “I cannot believe we just did that.”

“Did what?” he asked. “Just now, or all of it?”

“Both. Neither.” She snuggled into him. “I just can’t believe that my day has been so fantastic.” She looked at him directly. “I don’t get days like this. I really don’t.”

He reached up to brush wet hair from her eyes. “Well, now you do,” he said.

She was silent for a time. He was content to hold her. Holding her naked body in the shower, in fact, was a very nice thing to do.

“I want you to meet Hope,” she said eventually. “I like her a lot. And I think she’s the reason we met.”

“Well then,” he said promptly, “I certainly want to meet her. Especially as she’s a friend of yours.” He kissed her gently. “And your friend Lisa. She sounds very perceptive.”

She giggled. “Oh, you have no idea.” Then she shivered. “I think the water’s starting to run cold.”

He nodded. “I think so to. Maybe we’d better get out.”

***

They climbed to their feet and turned off the water, then stepped from the stall. Once again, they dried one another; this time, instead of being unbearably erotic, it was sweet and loving and caring.

They went to her room, where he watched her dress; with a wicked gleam in her eye, she picked up the panties she had worn before, and put them back on.

“Watch it,” he said with a grin. “I might just drag you back on to the bed again.”

She giggled. “I might not struggle.” But they knew there was nothing more for the bed, not right now. However, they could certainly joke about it, and did.

He held her wet hair out of the way while she did up her bra; over that, she dressed in t-shirt and shorts, the crisp clean fabric feeling good against her skin.

Together, they walked downstairs. He had decided to put the clothing he had been wearing back on; after all, he was going to be donning the armour once more.

Pulling the PRT comm unit from his bag, he thumbed it on.

"PRT Control," came the response.
"Tecton, requesting pickup from previous location," he reported.

"Roger that, Tecton. Transport will be launching shortly. ETA ten minutes."

"Thank you, Control. Tecton, out."

He dropped the comm back into the back and stood, looking at her. She looked back at him, her eyes large and sad behind her glasses.

"I wish you didn't have to go," she said simply.


She nodded. "I get it," she said. "I don't like it, but I get it." She manufactured a smile. "I can’t wait till we’re together again."

He smiled back, although he wasn't feeling too happy at the moment either. "I'm looking forward to it, too."

They moved into each other's arms. Their kiss was slow and sweet, sad and loving. Taylor sniffled and wiped away a tear, "Oh, just go and put your armour on."

Everett seemed to have something in his eye too. "Okay, I guess I'll do that." He leaned in and pecked her on the lips. "I love you," he whispered.

She followed him to the basement door, and watched him descend the steps to where his armour waited. "I love you too," she murmured.

"So, I'll see you," she said, standing on the second bottom step of the basement. He nearly had his armour on by now.

"That's a guarantee," he told her. "They'll be announcing Weaver joining the Wards in the next few days, with a short TV spot and everything." He grinned. "And then they'll start talking action figures."

"Action figures," she said doubtfully.

"Hey, don't knock it," he said with a grin. "We all have trust funds, and the proceeds go right in there."

She grinned. "You do know that Skitter already has a horribly large bank account, right?"

"Sorry?" he said with a grin. "I just missed what you said."

"I'm gonna miss you," she said firmly.

He clomped over to the steps, and she leaned over and kissed him.

"Today was ... wonderful," she said, and kissed him again. He knew she wasn't talking about the court case. "I want to thank you for being you." She sniffled. "I'm not going to cry. I'm not going to cry."

He grinned at her, although it seemed he had a little water in his eyes too. "Taylor?" he said.

"What?" she asked.
"Do you know what Miss Militia said when I requested to transfer here?"

She frowned. "What?"

"She said, 'Good.'" He grinned.

She grinned back, and kissed him on the tip of the nose. "Thank you. Now put your helmet on and get outside. I think I hear your ride coming."

He climbed into the PRT transport, and turned as the hatch closed. The slim figure in the doorway waved as the transport climbed into the sky. He waved back, even though he knew she couldn't see him.

He leaned back for the ride back to the base.

He would see Taylor again. Soon.

Danny's truck pulled up in the driveway, and she opened the door before he was all the way out of the truck. She met him in front of the vehicle, squeezing him tightly and resting her head on his chest.

"Wow," he said after a moment, hugging her back. "From this, it was either really good or really bad."

She grinned up at him. "I'll let you guess."

"Good," he said, ruffling her hair. "I'm glad."

"Me too, Dad," she said. "I think I'm in love."

He cut a sideways glance at her. "Really?" he said. "I mean, seriously?"

She nodded. "Oh yes," she said. "Seriously."

He hugged her. "Then I'm glad," he said. He turned to go inside.

She lingered, for just a moment, looking out toward where the PRT transport had vanished, not an hour ago.

She would see Everett again. Soon.
"Okay, Weld and Clockblocker you've met," said Miss Militia, showing her eye to the retinal scanner. "How many of the others do you know?"

"Uh, I met Aegis and Shadow Stalker once," said Everett. "The others I've seen from a distance, but I wouldn't say I know them. So effectively no-one in the Wards here now."

Miss Militia nodded. "Understood. Well, there will probably be some faces that are strange to you. I'll do the introductions, then leave the rest to you." The reader beeped, to indicate a match.

He nodded as she hit the button to open the door. "Thanks. I appreciate it." He took a deep breath. "And thank you for -"

She held up a hand to stop him as they stepped through the door. "Tecton. If the next thing you say has to do with Skitter, Weaver or Taylor Hebert, then officially, I have no idea what you are talking about. Unofficially, you're welcome. Is that clear?"

He nodded uncertainly. She gave him a firm nod in return. "Good."

Raymancer was sitting at the table, talking to the other Wards. There were indeed some faces that he did not know, including a willowy blonde who didn't even seem to be wearing a costume, just jeans and a t-shirt. They all looked around when he entered the area.

The first to rise was Raymancer. "Hey, T, you made it!". He stood up and came over to slap him on the shoulder. "What's this I hear about you staying back in the Bay?" He leaned closer and lowered his voice. "Is it about the girl?"

Everett nodded. "Yeah, but don't spread it around," he confirmed just as quietly.

Raymancer nodded. "Gotcha. Well, let me introduce you to the rest of the lunatic asylum."

Miss Militia nodded. "It appears you are in good hands, Tecton. I'll leave you to it."

"Thanks, Miss Militia," he replied. She turned to go, and he went with Raymancer to meet the other Wards.

"So hey," said Clockblocker, "did you get to meet Skitter while you were out and about?"

*What do I say to that?* wondered Everett briefly. "Oh, uh, sort of," he prevaricated. "She came to the house once, but didn't stay long."

"Ah, checking on the Hebert girl?" asked Kid Win. "I heard a rumour that they might be in a relationship."

Everett started to laugh, turned it into a snort. "That one is definitely false," he assured the other Tinker.

"So what was it like, doing bodyguard duty?" asked Vista curiously. "They didn't give you any trouble?"
He shook his head. "No, it was like being back home. Family situation. Danny, the father, he's a nice
guy. Salt of the earth. The sort of guy who'll be there to make sure Brockton Bay gets rebuilt. And
Taylor, she's, well ..."

He had no idea what to say about Taylor. *She's a nice girl? She's really sweet? She's actually
Skitter?* He had seen her happy, sad, laughing, crying. He had seen her eaten up by anguish, and in
the throes of passion. He was sure he did not know everything there was to know about her yet, but
he was equally sure that he was in love with her.

"... she's, uh, Taylor, I guess," he finished lamely.

"Jeez, come on, T," chuckled Raymaster. "I just got done telling them how you had a thing for her."

"Yeah," said Clockblocker. "Details. We need details."

"Well, you won't be getting them from me," Everett told them, his face starting to heat up. "Taylor's
a nice girl, and she doesn't deserve to have anyone her behind her back." Toward the rear of the
group, he saw Weld, nodding slightly in approval. *Of course, he would be in the know. *"If you want
to find out how things are between us, go ask her."

"It's okay, settle down," said Kid Win. "Dennis, seriously, not cool."

Clockblocker shrugged. "Hey, how else am I going to find out all the juicy gossip?"

"Not from me," Everett told him firmly.


"Well, I think you're a real gentleman," declared Vista, equally firmly. "Isn't that right, Sveta?"

The last member of the group sitting around the table raised her eyes to meet Everett's for perhaps the
first time since he had been introduced to her. She was pale-skinned, with a pretty face and a slender
figure. Her long pale-blonde hair was done up in an elaborate ringleted coiffure that was at severe
odds with the casual clothing she was wearing.

"I think so, too," she said, in a soft, gentle voice. "I wish there were more people like you around."

"Yeah," he agreed. "Don't we all." He frowned. "I'm sorry, but my memory must be going on me. I
distinctly remember looking at the fact sheet for the Brockton Bay Wards, and I cannot recall seeing
you on it."

She smiled and shook her head. "That's because I'm not. I'm just staying with the Wards until I can
find somewhere to go."

"Yeah," said Clockblocker. "She's a ward of the Wards."

There was dead silence, for a moment, then Weld stepped forward. "Clockblocker," he said in a
disgusted tone of voice, "I have no sense of smell, and even I think that pun stinks."

Everett laughed with the rest of them, but he was curious now. "If you don't mind me asking," he
said, "if you're not a Ward, why ...?". He gestured at the building around them.

"Why am I here?" asked Sveta. She smiled sweetly. "I'm a Case 53. I've been offered a chance to
join, but I'm still making up my mind."

"Case 53? Wow." Everett scratched his head. "I wouldn't have picked it."
"Thank you." Sveta seemed inordinately pleased at his comment. A moment later, she went on. "I didn't always look like this. I used to be known as Garrotte."

Garrotte. Everett had heard that name. He tried to recall the file, then stared at the slight, pretty girl before him. "If you're Garrotte," he said at last, "then you've gained a great deal of weight."

A few people chuckled at this; Sveta merely smiled. "It wasn't me," she said. "Doctor Yamada spoke to Hope and Amy, and asked if they could do something. I'm not sure who did what, but …" She gestured to her body. "They also did something to my powers, to give me conscious control of them. So now, I can wear clothes, eat normal food, walk on the street, and be human." A glorious smile suffused her face with joy.

"Well," said Everett, "allow me to congratulate you. I've known a few Case 53's, and …" His voice trailed off. "Um, how can I get in touch with Hope and Amy?"

Unexpectedly, it was Clockblocker who spoke up. "I've got their number. I'll give it to you." He gestured Everett to one side. "Got your phone?"

Everett nodded, pulling it out. Clockblocker got his own phone out. "They healed my Dad," he said as he pulled up the number. "He had leukaemia. Amy healed him once, back when she was Panacea, but it came back. When she and Hope went through Brockton Bay Central a little while ago – did you hear about that?"

"I heard they cleared the entire hospital," said Everett. "That's can't be true, can it?"

"Close enough," said Clockblocker. "All but the maternity ward. The rest – done. Everyone healed, cured, fixed and walking out the door. My Dad was in oncology. Amy told me later that when she healed him this time, she tweaked his genes so he wasn't susceptible to it any more. So now we have Dad back." He gave Everett a mock glare. "So you be sure and be polite to them, okay?"

Everett nodded. "I'll do that. I have something to be thankful for them too."

Clockblocker looked at him curiously. "Oh? You barely got here. What have they done for you?"

Everett grinned. "I'll tell you sometime. Got that number?"

"Sure," said Clockblocker. "Here." He read it out, and made sure Everett had it. "It's the number for the shelter they're living in."

"Thanks," said Everett. He moved off to a quiet area, and dialled.

"Brockton Bay Central Shelter, Lisa speaking." Her eyes were already searching out Hope and Amy.

"This is Tecton, of the Wards," she heard. Taylor's boyfriend. He sounded nice.

"Hello, Tecton, of the Wards," she replied sweetly. "This is Lisa, of the Shelter. How can I help you?"

Tecton seemed taken aback for a moment. "Uh, are Hope and Amy there, and may I speak to them?"

"They are, and you may," she said, raising her hand to catch Hope's eye, then pointing at Amy.
Amy and Hope had been quite comfortably curled up together in the oversized armchair. Hope was studying her tablet, to make sure she had a good grasp of the material on it, while Amy was snuggled into her embrace, half asleep and happy to be so.

"Uh, sweetie?" said Hope, looking at Amy. "Looks like there's a phone call for you."

"Mmph?" mumbled Amy; she had just been enjoying the memory of some of the wilder stuff she and Newter had done the previous night.

"It's Lisa," said Hope patiently. "She says there's someone on the phone for you."

"Oh," said Amy, looking a little put out. "I was so comfortable, too."

Hope kissed her, then scooped her up in her arms, got up herself, and carried her over to where Lisa held the phone. Amy accepted the receiver with all the aplomb of a top-flight waiter accepting a tip, and held it to her ear.

"Amelia Claire Lavere," she said, stifling a yawn.

Back at the table, the topic of conversation had shifted back to Skitter.

" Seriously," insisted Kid Win. "She's got this dragonfly thing. I kid you not. Long as a person is tall, and I know that, because it was carrying her, and it was longer than her."

"But that's impossible," said Clockblocker. "Listen, I've been reading up on bugs since we first encountered Skitter – "

" – first got our butts handed to us by Skitter – " interjected Kid Win.

" – right, right," agreed Clockblocker, "and there's things about bugs that can't be overcome. You can't have one at that size."

"I and my helmet cam beg to differ," Kid Win pointed out.

"Okay, okay," said Clockblocker. "You can't just scale one up. It won't work. Spiracles, for instance."

There was silence. Then Sveta asked carefully, "Please, what is a spiracle, and do I want to know what it does?"

"Bugs breathe through them," said Clockblocker. "They're sort of holes in the body that draw air in. Normal bugs are really small, so the air doesn't have to travel very far, but in one the size of a person, the air would have to travel quite a way, and the mechanism they use just wouldn't work."

"But would something else work?" asked Weld, drawn into the discussion despite himself.

"Um, I guess," said Clockblocker. "But whoever designed it would have to be a genius."

"Or Panacea," Weld reminded him.

"Or that," Clockblocker agreed.

"I like Amy," Sveta declared. "And Hope. When I get married and have children, I'm going to name my first two after them."
"Actually," said Kid Win, "I think it's already happening. There's a lot of girl babies being born now, named Hope. It's actually an online statistic."

Weld raised his metal eyebrows. "That doesn't actually surprise me," he murmured.

"Ah, hello," said Everett. "This is Tecton."

"Oh," said the girl on the other end. "Taylor's boyfriend?"

Oh wait, he recalled. Taylor said she had Amy make her infertile. So she knows about me already. He paused. I wonder how much more she's told her.

Taking a deep breath, he forged on. "Yes, that's me," he said. "I've, uh, just been speaking to Sveta."

"Oh!" Amy's voice sounded delighted. He heard her say to someone else, "He says he's been talking to Sveta!"

Another voice, one that sounded like crystal chimes, said, "Tell him to say hi for us. And ask him how she is!"

With a sigh, he said, "She's fine. She seems to be really enjoying life. And I'll tell her you both said hi. But listen, this is important. You are the ones who ... fixed her body?"

"Yes, I did that," said Amy. "Hope helped. But that was us, yes." She paused. "Why?"

"I was just wondering," said Everett. "There's a Ward I know. A Case 53. She's got ... appearance problems. I was wondering if you could ... maybe help her out?"

"If her problems stem from her power, then I can't promise anything," said Amy firmly. "But if it's just body shape, I can help, I guess. Where is your friend? In Brockton Bay?"

"No, no," said Everett. "She doesn't even know about this yet. I wanted to check with you before any promises got made. I can contact her, though, and see what she says."

There was some discussion off the line at the other end. Then Amy came back on the line. "We can definitely have a look at her. Just give us a time and place, and we'll be there."

"Oh, thank you," said Everett fervently. "Um ... how much do you charge ...?"

"No charge," Amy said firmly. "We don't charge, but we choose who we help."

"Okay," said Everett. "That's great. I'll owe you big time for this."

Amy giggled. "Not if you've made Taylor as happy as Lisa says you have." Everett blinked. Does everyone know about me and Taylor? And what do they know?

"I guess, sure?" he said, evading the issue. "Thanks. I'll get back to you."

"Night, Tecton," he heard, and there was a yawn in the voice. The phone clicked in his ear. Damn, I meant to ask her to thank Hope for me.

"Right," he said, and dialled another number.

Amy looked up at Hope. "Damn," she said. "Now I'm awake." She sighed and stretched; Hope
grinned and let her do so, supporting her easily on her arms. "Let's call Taylor up. I want to get those bugs sorted out for her."

Hope smiled and kissed her gently. "I'm sure she'll love you for it."

Amy grinned. "Yeah, plus I want to hear the lowdown on Tecton."

Hope giggled.

"Gully. Phone for you."

Gully looked up from the TV, confused.

"Who's calling me?" she asked. Nobody ever calls me.

"Tecton."

"Huh," she said, accepting the phone. "Weird." She held it to her ear. "Everett. Why are you calling me?"

The phone in the kitchen rang. Danny answered it. A moment later, he looked around the door. "Taylor, it's for you. Amy."

"Ooh, okay," said Taylor, jumping up. She slid past him into the kitchen and took the receiver. "Amy, how are you?"

"Trust me, I'm great," Amy replied. She sounded quite pleased with herself. "Listen, would you be able to steer some bugs my way, and then come on over? I've been looking some stuff up, and I think I can give you some interesting options."

"Sure," said Taylor.

Two dozen bugs flew into the shelter and landed in four neat rows of six in front of Amy. "That enough?" came Taylor's voice over the phone.

"Enough to go on with till you get here," agreed Amy. "I'll see you then?" She paused. "Oh, and I've just been speaking to Tecton on the phone. He sounds quite a hunk."

"Oh, seriously," grinned Taylor, "you have no idea." She frowned. "Why were you talking to him?"

"He called me," explained Amy. "He wanted to know if I could help a Case 53 friend of his. Hope said that it sounds okay."

"You two are just too nice for your own good," said Taylor.

"Hope says being nice is its own reward," said Amy, "and I'm beginning to see it that way myself."

Taylor smiled. "Well, given her results, I'm not arguing. I'll be over soon."

"See you then," agreed Amy, and hung up.
Taylor went back into the living room, and leaned over to give Danny a hug. "I'm going out for a bit," she said. "Amy says she's got more bugs for me."

Danny smiled. "She does so much for you. They all do. You're lucky to have such friends."

Taylor nodded. "Oh, don't I know it." She dashed upstairs to grab her backpack. Falkor was already on the way.

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Everett paused, to collect his words. "Gully," he said carefully, "Have you ever heard of Garotte? She's a Case 53."

"Yeah, heard of her," said Gully shortly. "She's killed lots of people. She's in an institution or something. Why?"

"Because I just had a chat with her." He paused. "Gully, she has a body."

Gully shook her head. "No, must be someone else called Garotte. The one I know of is a face with tentacles. Real strong. Don't get in her reach, or she'll rip your arms off."

She heard his voice, the excitement in it. "No. Seriously. I just spoke to her. She had a body grown for her. And the person who did it is right here in Brockton Bay."

She went very still. "You had better not be fucking with me, Everett, or I swear ..."

"Gully." His voice was dead serious. "You taught me nearly everything I know about the earth. I owe you for that. I'm telling you this because I think you really need to know."

She thought about that, was conscious of her heart pounding in her chest. "This person ... can they help me? Will they help me?"

Everett's voice had a grin in it now. "I just rang her. She says she'll try. It's the girl who used to be Panacea, with New Wave. She's partnered with Hope now. You've heard of Hope?"


"Apparently not," Everett replied. "Panacea – Amy – is willing to meet with you and see what she can do for you. All you've got to do is get to town and give her a place and time."

"Just like that?" asked Gully. "No strings? What's the cost gonna be?"

"I asked that too," said Everett. "She doesn't charge. But she doesn't make promises either."

"I guess that's fair," said Gully slowly. "Do you think she can help me?"

"Excuse me for a second," said Everett and the phone clunked down. Gully waited.

The phone was picked up again. "Hello?" said a soft voice, made delightful by a Slavic accent. "Is this Gully?"

"Yes," said Gully. "Who is this?"

"This is Sveta," came the voice. "Everett asked me to speak to you about what Hope and Amy did for me."
Gully blinked. She was talking, on the phone, to Garrotte. "Uh, yes?"

"Believe him when he tells you they can help you," said Sveta happily. "I was a face with tendrils. Now I have hands and feet and arms and legs and a body and breasts and ... all of it. Hot showers are heaven. Sleeping in a bed is wonderful." Her voice lowered conspiratorially. "Now all I need to do is find someone nice to share the bed with." A giggle.

Gully blinked again. "So ... you are saying I should do it."

"Yes!" said Sveta emphatically. "Yes, yes, a thousand times yes! If you are a Case 53, like me, then yes!"

"Wow, okay," said Gully, feeling a little overwhelmed by the enthusiasm. "I'll do it. Put Everett back on, please."

"Bye! Look me up when you get here," said Sveta, then the phone was handed over.

"Well?" asked Everett.

"Assuming this isn't some kind of prank," said Gully, "I'll see about getting some leave."

"I wouldn't pull that sort of shit on you," Everett assured her. "And trust me, you want to do this."

"Okay, I'll trust you," said Gully. "I'll let you know when I'm on the way."

"Excellent," said Everett. "I'll see you then."

Gully put the phone back on the cradle, and went to find her immediate superior, the head of the San Diego Wards. She had a request to make.

Now, how am I going to word this?

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Everett went to find Sveta. "Just by the way," he said, "I was just talking to Amy before. She and Hope said hi, and wanted to know how you are."

He was surprised by the vehemence of Sveta's hug. But it could have been worse, he reflected. She could have used her tendrils.

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By the time Falkor dropped Taylor off outside the shelter, Amy had gotten some work done. She looked up with a smile as Taylor entered.

"Taylor!" Hope ambushed her with a hug, followed closely by Amy.

"It's nice to see you guys too," grinned Taylor. "Thanks for everything." She looked up to see Lisa approaching.

Lisa looked her over, and her eyes widened. "Oh my holy god," she murmured. "Taylor. You have been busy."

Taylor turned bright red. "Shut up," she mumbled.

Amy turned to Lisa. "Seriously? Taylor got some?"

Lisa nodded. "Taylor, my friends, is no longer a virgin. Not by any stretch of the imagination."
Hope squealed and hugged Taylor again. "Was it good?" she asked. "Please tell me it was good."

Taylor nodded and mumbled something. Lisa said, "And that would be a yes. Emphatically so."

Hope squeezed Taylor; Amy added her hug to the mix. "That's awesome," said Amy.

"Okay, okay, enough about my sex life," snapped Taylor. "How about we do what I came over here to do?"

Amy and Hope giggled and let her go; Amy led her to the table. Lisa grinned her fox-like grin, and watched.

"Okay," said Amy. "You see here some comatose bugs. They have the same characteristics for breeding and pheromones that the other ones do."

Taylor looked at them curiously. She could just barely feel their presence, but they were inaccessible to her otherwise. Two different spiders; one with a blue cross, one with a yellow cross. And there was something like a beetle with a hugely swollen abdomen, black with gold trim.

"They look distinctive enough," said Taylor. "What do they do?"

Amy reached out and ran her finger over the half-dozen spiders sporting blue crosses. They became active, and Taylor felt her control snap on to them. "Spiders?" she asked. "Like the web spiders?"

"Very like," agreed Amy. "The web is almost identical, except that it's coarser and exhibits extreme hygroscopic qualities. It's not quite as strong, though."

"I know that word," said Taylor. "To do with water?"

"It attracts fluids to it," said Amy cheerfully. "If you have a piece of cloth or whatever made of this stuff, it makes a perfect sponge."

"Okay," said Taylor. "Cute and interesting, but I don't see ..."

Amy grinned. "I'm getting to that." She brushed her hand over the next six bugs. These were the spiders with the yellow crosses. "This type creates webbing that weaves really close together, and repels fluid just as hard as the first type attracts it. Once again, not quite as strong as base web, but still very strong."

"Okay," said Taylor, "I'm seeing a theme here. But what use is it to me, except to waterproof stuff? And what's this last bug for?"

Amy's grin was positively smug. She brushed her hand over the beetles, and they began to wander around the table. Taylor automatically took control of them. "They produce something ... a sort of viscous fluid ... lots of it." She frowned. "Not another glue bug." Studying the beetles, she shook her head. "This isn't fast or agile enough for a combat situation."

Amy shook her head. "No, it's not." She giggled. "Have you ever heard of shear thickening fluids?"

A few minutes later, Taylor had the idea. "So ... if I get the hygroscopic webbers to make a loose-weave sheet, double thickness, and the shear fluid beetles drop their fluid all over it ..."

"Which will soak right through; you won't even need to spread it," Amy pointed out.

"... right," said Taylor. "Then I enclose the whole thing in the webbing that repels liquid, to stop the
fluid leaking out or evaporating. And then I enclose that in standard webbing. So we have effectively six layers, about as thick as a flannel shirt. Which should stop ... what?

"Anything I can think of," Amy said soberly. "Barring cape powers, of course. But I really want Miss Militia to go to town on one of these armour panels, once you make them up, to see if what I think will happen, will indeed happen."

"And the shear thickening fluid will make it as rigid as steel when it gets hit, so it spreads the impact?" asked Taylor.

"That's the idea," said Amy. "Incidentally, each of those sets is one male, five pregnant females. Enjoy."

She squeaked with surprise as Taylor grabbed her and hugged her tightly.

"You are," said Taylor, with as much emotion as she could muster, "the most wonderful friends I could ever have." She grinned. "Even if you did embarrass the hell out of me over Everett."

Amy grinned. "So it was that good, was it?"

Taylor grinned right back. "Let's put it this way ..."

As she spoke on, Amy's jaw dropped. Lisa looked smug. And Hope listened politely and with much interest. She also made mental notes.

Falkor let Taylor off in her back yard, and zoomed off into the night air. Taylor let herself in; the TV was still on. Danny looked up from the sofa as she entered the living room.

"How did it go, kiddo?" he said.

"Very well indeed," she said. "I have bugs to do things I never thought of before. My new costume is gonna rock."

"Excellent," he said. Standing, he stretched. "Might as well head to bed. Big day tomorrow." He gave her a half grin. "Pity Everett still isn't staying here; we could do with a hand."

She shrugged and grinned. "Well, you could make a request to the Wards ..."

He chuckled and ruffled her hair. "Night, kiddo."

She smiled at him, then paused. "Um, Dad,"

"Yes?" he asked over his shoulder as he headed up the stairs.

"One thing that happened today ...?"

He stopped and looked around. "Yes?"

"Uh ... Everett asked me to marry him."

He descended the stairs again. "What did you tell him?"

She gave him a half-smile. "That I'd see how I felt on my eighteenth birthday."

He smiled and leaned in to kiss her on the forehead. "That's my girl."
She hugged him. "Thanks for not being mad."

He hugged her back. "Why should I be mad? You're making all the right decisions."

She smiled at him. "Thanks, Dad. That means a lot to me."

"You mean a lot to me."

In perfect companionship, they walked up the stairs together.

As she headed to her room, Taylor was already planning out the armour panels. *And if I make elbow pads and knee pads ...*

*This is gonna be awesome.*
In which Skitter freaks out Clockblocker and returns to her roots, and Gully has reason to be grateful

Friday

"And here's where it actually happened." Weld gestured at the newly rebuilt monument. "Right on this spot, near enough, is where Hope grabbed Jack Slash and took him out of the battle."

Behind his helmet, Tecton frowned. "I heard Jack Slash was some kind of badass; you couldn't touch him. No matter where you hit, he wasn't there."

Clockblocker nodded. "Yeah, he was. But our Hope has some tricks up her sleeve." He leaned in toward Tecton. "I gave you some tips about Skitter the other day. Here's some about Hope. Do not ever underestimate her. She is sweet and kind and nice, and she will literally give you the shirt off her back or her last bite of food, and she will bring you back from the dead if she can possibly do so ... but she's also the one who planned this whole shebang, caught Jack Slash, and held him down so that Miss Miltia could put a bullet in the back of his head."

"I don't get it," said Tecton. "You're saying she's some kind of badass, but she isn't?"

"What I'm saying," said Clockblocker, "is that she came into Brockton Bay, and within a week of joining the Wards, she had virtually every villain group in the city eating out of her hand. Director Piggot gave her a rating of Master 0, just for that."

"I still don't get it," said Tecton. "How did she pull that off?"

"We're still trying to figure that out," Weld assured him. "She seems to do it by being nice to people. Really nice. All the time." He shrugged. "I don't get it either. But it seems to work for her."

"Heads up!" said Clockblocker. They turned, and saw a swarm encroaching over the far side of Victory Park. In the midst of it was a large winged shape, insectoid in nature. "Shit," he said. "It's Skitter."

"Okay, stay calm," said Weld. "She's probably just dropping in to say hi."

"You hope," retorted Clockblocker.

Tecton smiled behind his helmet. *I finally get to see Taylor in action as Skitter.*

The swarm swirled overhead as Skitter came in to hover just feet above the ground. The enormous dragonfly supporting her, partly wrapping around her upper body, covered most of her head and gave her a very creepy, very insectoid look. Some sort of strap or restraint let go, and she dropped lightly to the ground. The dragonfly went straight up, faster than a helicopter could manage, the noise of its wings almost thunderous, and hovered overhead.

More of the swarm surrounded Skitter as she walked forward. Tecton found himself admiring the entrance. *Even knowing who she is, under all of that ... I am seriously impressed. Taylor is not someone to mess with. Ever.*

*Is it wrong that I'm so turned on right now?*

Taylor grinned behind her mask as she approached the trio of Wards. *Weld knows I'm technically a*
Ward, and Everett knows that I would never hurt him. Poor Clockblocker. He's going to have a tale to tell later.

She spoke, and the swarm spoke with her. Every insect buzzed and hummed and chirped, so that her voice was almost lost in it, but the words came through crystal-clear.

"Tecton. Welcome to Brockton Bay."

"Thank you," he replied, grinning broadly behind his helmet. He could feel a couple of bugs on his cheeks; she knew he was grinning. "It's nice to be here."

"Thank you for guarding Taylor Hebert. I hope we can be friends."

"It was my pleasure," he said gravely. "And I hope so too. Or much, much more.

"I look forward to watching your career closely." She turned to Weld, indicated Clockblocker with a nod. "You are well?"

Weld nodded gravely. "We are. Thank you for asking. And thank you for dealing with the Teeth."

"They came on my territory, would have attacked my people, destroyed the monument. It was the least I could do." She nodded at the new monolith. "It's a good job of rebuilding. Was anyone hurt?"

"Not that we know of," replied Weld. "But that was mainly due to you. We owe you a debt of thanks."

"Yes, you do," buzzed the swarm around her. "And someday, I may collect."

She turned back to Tecton. "Goodbye. I will be watching you."

Stepping back, she raised her arms. Falkor dropped out of the swarm like a meteor, came in from behind at head height, tail high, wings thrumming menacingly. The enormous dragonfly barely slowed as it scooped her off the ground; one second she was there, and the next she had disappeared into the swarm.

Tecton blinked behind his helmet. God damn. She is impressive.

I think I just fell in love all over again.

Clockblocker let out a long, audible breath. "Jesus Christ all-fucking-mighty," he said. "That was fucking terrifying."

"What?" said Tecton innocently. "She landed, she spoke to us, she said some nice things, she left. What's the problem?"

Clockblocker seemed to be in the grip of some strong emotion. "Dude. She knows you. She's going to be paying close attention to you, personally. Doesn't that creep you out just a little bit?"

Tecton was so glad his helmet was full-face. He could in no way keep a straight face. "Well, not really, no. She said she wanted to be friends."

Clockblocker shivered. "Christ. You're made of stronger stuff than me, then." He turned and headed back toward the vehicle. "Let's go, before she comes back."

Weld fell into step next to Tecton, but not too close. Tecton, after all, was covered in metal armour. "Was that what I think it was?" he murmured.
Tecton nodded his helmet. "Yeah, that was just her dropping in to kiss me on the cheek and tell me she loves me. And apparently to freak out Clockblocker."

Weld chuckled. "She's definitely got that down." He paused. "So you and her are really ...?"

Tecton nodded again. "We are a thing, yes," he confirmed.

Weld nodded. "Congratulations. I hope you're very happy."

Tecton nodded again. "We are."

From the vehicle, Clockblocker called out. "Come on, or I'll go without you!"

Weld chuckled. "Let's not keep the man waiting."

When they got back to base, a PRT officer came over to Tecton. "Just got a message. Friend of yours is coming in from San Diego. Name of Gully?"

Tecton nodded. "Wow, she made it in today? That was fast work."

"I wouldn't know," said the officer. "ETA is ... hour and a half."

"Right, thanks," said Tecton. He went to catch up with Weld. I think I need to be here when she arrives.

"Okay, so Gully's coming here," said Weld. "I know her. She's a good person. But why is she coming here?"

"I'm hoping Amy will be able to do the same thing for her that she did for Sveta," confessed Tecton.

Weld stared at him. "Holy shit," he said. "Now why didn't that occur to me?"

Tecton shrugged, massively. "No idea. Maybe you're too close to the problem?" He tilted his helmet, looking at Weld. "Would she be able to do anything with you?"

Weld shook his head. "It's been tried. I sidestep the Manton effect either way. To biokinetics, I'm inorganic. To people who manipulate nonliving stuff, I'm alive."

"Damn," said Tecton. "I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it," said Weld. "I cope. But your idea to get in contact with Gully ... have you even spoken to Amy first? She might not like being imposed on like this."

Tecton nodded. "I did that first," he confirmed. "She's okay with it."

Weld nodded. "Well," he said. "It looks like you've covered all the bases. Get in touch with Amy; when Gully arrives, I'll come with you. I want to see this."

Amy put the phone down and turned to Hope. "That was Tecton," she said. "His Ward friend is coming in soon. Her name is Gully. He and Weld will be bringing her here."

Hope nodded and hugged her. "I'm really proud of you for doing this," she said happily. "It's such a nice thing to do."
Amy hugged her back. "Well, I have a good example in you, sweetie," she said, and gave Hope a kiss.

"Parian."

"Hi, Sabah, it's Hope." The crystalline tones were unmistakeable.

"Hello, Hope." Sabah smiled. "How are you?"

"Oh, Amy and I are doing very well. How's Lily?"

Parian smiled at the girl nestled alongside her, half asleep, and leaned across to give her a kiss. "She's fine. We're both just fine."

"Excellent," said Hope. "I have a favour to ask of you, if that's okay?"

Sabah sat up in bed. "What favour is this?"

"Amy and I are going to be doing a body modification on a girl in the Wards, a Case 53. She's going to be needing new clothes. We've looked her up, and she's not going to be able to wear the clothes she'll be coming to us in."

"Huh," said Sabah, and climbed out of bed. "Sure, I'll come over. How soon?"

"She'll be here in about an hour and a half, if I understood Tecton correctly."

"Sure thing," said Parian. "We'll be there." She put down the phone and started looking for her clothes. "Lily?" she said.

Lily stretched and rolled over. "Yeah?" she asked lazily.

"Get dressed. We're going out. And what did you do with my panties?"

Gully stepped off the transport. Tecton was there to meet her. As it was in the open, he was armoured up.

"Tecton," she said by way of greeting.

"Gully," he replied. He clasped her hand. Even with his powered armour gauntlet, he felt the strength of her grip. "Did you want to grab a bite, or are you good to go?"

She looked at him. Her gaze was intense. "Tecton, I've been building myself up to this all the way here. If I take one step back, just one, I won't be able to even think about going through with it. I'll be too terrified. So take me to her."

Tecton clasped her on the shoulder. "Trust me," he said. "You will not regret this."

She shook her head. "The only reason I'm here is because I trust you," she said.

Weld joined them, and they climbed on to a different transport. With a whoosh of turbines, it climbed into the sky.

Falkor dropped Skitter off near her base, then zipped off to a nearby rooftop, where she would be
She is so, so handy, thought Taylor. *I have no idea how I coped before I had her.*

She made her way into the house, moving quietly. Her bugs showed the kids moving around, Sierra and Charlotte taking care of them. Nothing seemed amiss; everything looked peaceful and quiet.

In fact, her entire territory seemed to be remarkably peaceful now. Since the Merchants had gone down, their territory had been subsumed by the Undersiders, who would soon be in the Wards. Thus, the areas would in effect go back to city control. However, she suspected that many of the people therein would want 'their' Wards still running the show.

*I wonder how that'll work out for them?*

She recalled that the Christner Initiative was due to enter the initial phase today. There was not even the need for a conference to decide who was to do what, as each major participant had a copy. It would be very easy to tell if anyone was failing to pull their weight, or worse, attempting to profiteer off the rebuilding effort.

Normally, she thought with a grin, *I would seriously expect someone to try to pull a fast one. But with everyone on the same page - and the fact that it's Hope who asked them to be a part of it - I think this might even work.* Her grin widened. *Master Zero, indeed.*

She entered the living area, pulling her mask off as she did so. Three of the children turned and saw her. "Taylor!" shouted Aiden. "Taylor's back!"

And then she was being more or less mobbed by the avalanche of kids. She dropped to one knee, smiling and hugging them. *God, have some of them grown already? I only saw them a few days ago.* She felt tears in her eyes. *I missed this.*

Sierra emerged from the kitchen. "Taylor!" she exclaimed. "It's so good to have you back!"

Taylor gently shook off the children and gave her a hug. A little surprised, Sierra returned the hug. "You don't usually give out hugs this easily," she said with a grin.

Taylor grinned back. "I do now. I've changed just a bit." She took a deep breath. "I've had the time to sit down and talk to Dad about ... well, stuff. And things are looking good between us."

Sierra nodded. "That's excellent. I like your dad. He's good people."

"Daddy Danny?" piped up Aiden. "Are you bringing Daddy Danny here?"

At once, the rest of the kids joined in with their chorus: "Daddy Danny! Daddy Danny!"

Laughing, Sierra shushed them and sent them about their play. "Not today, kids," she said. "Maybe another time."

Taylor nodded. "I'd like to bring him here. I want him to see where I've been living."

Sierra nodded in agreement. "There's a big gap between you as his daughter, and you as Skitter, isn't there?"

"Yeah," said Taylor. "And I want to close it." She took a deep breath. "I've joined the Wards," she said quietly. "The paperwork's been signed, but I'm not officially on duty yet."

Sierra stared at her, eyes wide. "Seriously?" she asked. "Why? What happened?"
"It was to stop the court case from being screwed up," explained Taylor. "I mean, there's more to it than that, but that's what it boils down to."

Sierra nodded. "Now for the big question. Now that the trial is over, are you moving back in?"

"I ... don't know," confessed Taylor. "I've missed living here. But ... I'm enjoying being at home again. Dad cooking breakfast. Our chats. Little things like that. It's amazing how much I've missed it."

Sierra nodded sympathetically. "Well, I'm sure you're aware that the territory is running like clockwork. No problems, everyone is helping with the rebuild. And your popularity when you took down the Teeth ..." She shook her head. "Seriously. People love you."

Taylor smiled faintly. "It took long enough," she said sadly. "And now I'm going to be changing my name and my costume, and they have to get used to me all over again."

Sierra chuckled. "Somehow I think they'll figure it out. People aren't that stupid. I mean, sure, they'll all pretend the new you is not the same as Skitter, but they'll know."

Taylor smiled and hugged Sierra again. "Thanks. That makes me feel much better." She headed for the stairs. "I think I'll go and check on my lair now."

Sierra nodded. "No-one's been up there. I've made sure of that."

Taylor smiled. "Excellent."

She climbed the stairs, unlocked the door, entered.

It hadn't been touched, of course. She knew that. The bugs had not detected any intruders.

She went to the terrariums, found a couple of empty ones. Bugs crawled from her hair; relay bugs, web spiders, Newter hornets, ketamine wasps, the other bugs that Amy had so thoughtfully gifted her with. All female, all pregnant.

*I'll be putting nests in different parts of the city, but it will be good to have breeding colonies here too.*

She made sure all the other bugs were still healthy in their glass cages, and headed up to the bedroom.

Entering the room, she sighed as she looked at the large bed. It was immaculately made, untouched since the last time she'd slept in it. *I so wanted my first time to be here.* Walking over to the bed, she trailed her hand over the sheets. *Maybe next time.* A smile curved across her face. *That's something to look forward to. It was nice to see Everett.*

After awhile, she went back downstairs to sit and chat with Sierra.

It was nice to be able to relax and spend time with her friends for once.

When the transport grounded outside the shelter, Gully looked with some puzzlement at the large horse-like stuffed toy standing outside the building.

"What the hell?" she asked, pointing at it.

"Ah," said Weld. "She must have called Parian in. Heh, goood thinking." He grinned. "You'll see."
He led the way across to the entrance to the shelter. Tecton followed, looking around with interest. Gully followed Tecton, clutching her shovel as if for assurance.

Hope met them at the entrance to the shelter. "Weld!" she said happily, hugging the metal Ward. Weld hugged her back carefully. "It's good to see you! You should come over more often!"

Weld smiled. It was hard not to be cheered up by her. "You know, there's always a place in the Wards for you."

Hope shrugged. "I know, but I can do more good here." She grinned at him. "And you know why I left."

He nodded. "True." Turning, he said, "And this is Tecton, and that's Gully."

Hope hugged Tecton, armour and all; she had to put her wings around him to hug him properly. "It's good to meet you at last," she said. "I saw you in court, but that's hardly the same."

He nodded. "I saw you too. That was good work with Shadow Stalker."

She sighed. "I didn't want to have to do that, but ... yeah." She turned to Gully. "Hi," she said. "I'm Hope. Do you hug?"

Gully looked a little taken aback. "I ... what?"

"Do you hug?" repeated Hope. "I like to hug my friends."

"She does," agreed Amy, arriving at the door. "She does it a lot." She grinned at Gully. "I'm Amelia Claire Lavere. I'd advise you to let her hug you, so we can get on with it."

Gully was eight feet tall, but had a severe hunchback that made her actual height a little shorter. She also had a very bad overbite. Her muscular frame seemed almost distorted and inhuman due to the malformations; her black hair fell almost to her feet.

She felt she could pick up Hope and snap her between two fingers. And yet here she was, offering to hug her.

Feeling like she was in some sort of dream, she shrugged and opened her arms. "Okay, fine. Let's hug."

It was the first time she had been hugged that she could remember. The feeling of having another person wrap her arms – and wings! – around her body, and just hold her ... was intense. She had intended to just give Hope a quick hug back, and be done with it. But she found that she didn't want to let go, that it was just too good to end.

She had tears in her eyes when she finally disengaged from the hug. Glaring at Amy, she growled, "I hope you're not gonna try to hug me too. Once a day is enough for me."

Amy grinned. "No, I'll just be dealing with your physical problems. Parian here will be dealing with your other problems, afterward." She gestured to a girl wearing a white doll-face mask, a blonde wig and a frilly frock. Another girl, with a heavy crossbow of some sort slung over her back, stood next to the doll-faced girl.

Gully pointed. "Flechette, I know. But Parian, I don't. What sort of problems are you talking about?"
"Well, for one thing," said Parian, "those clothes you're wearing? They won't fit you, after. I can deal with that."

"Oh," said Gully. "So you really can ...?"

Amy smiled and stepped forward. "Give me your hand," she said softly. At the same time, she joined hands with Hope, and Hope held out her hand as well.

What is this, ring-a-rosey? Gully was confused; she glanced at Tecton. He nodded encouragingly. So she handed off her shovel to him, and took one hand in each of hers, swallowing them up in her grip.

After a moment, Amy smiled at her encouragingly. "We can certainly do something with you," she said. "Straighten your back, fix your jaw. How tall do you want to be, and do you want to lose any mass while you're at it?”

Holy shit holy shit holy shit, this is actually happening. Gully's heart froze in her chest. She couldn't speak. Amy waited patiently.

"Seven feet," she managed at last. "Can – can you take much off without reducing my strength?"

Amy nodded. "Oh, sure. Most of your strength comes from your power, anyway. I can tell what's needed and what's just extra bulk." She took a deep breath. "Now, we need privacy for this. Also, a drain."

"The showers?" suggested Hope.

"Good idea," said Amy. "The showers it is. Come on." She let Hope's hand go, and they started leading Gully toward another door. Gully followed. Her only other option was to run away.

Once in the shower block, Amy had Gully strip. It was the first time she had done so in anything except utter privacy for quite a long time, and she felt unexpectedly embarrassed.

Amy grinned disarmingly. "Don't worry. We're not going to stare at your body. I don't care what people look like, Hope loves everyone regardless of appearance, and Parian probably considers you a challenge, right, Parian?"

Parian nodded. "Hopefully less of a challenge, after this," she said.

Gully blinked. "So what are you?" she asked Hope. "Some sort of Case 53 I haven't heard of?"

Hope shook her head. "It's a long story," she said. "I'm from elsewhere. But I'm here to help." She smiled. "Ready?"

Gully stepped out of her panties; Hope collected the clothing and handed it all to Parian. "Here you go."

Amy grasped Gully's hand; Hope took the other one. They linked hands and held tight. Amy took a deep breath. "Hope," she said. "This could be painful."

Hope nodded. "Right." A sliver-blue light flared, and Gully felt a whisper of sensation run through her.

"What was that?" she asked warily.
Hope smiled. 'Nerve block. Having your spine reset might hurt a little, otherwise."

Gully blinked. "I guess."

Amy nodded to Hope, then to Gully. "Let's do this. Hold tight, this could be a bumpy ride."

Amy sent her perceptions into Gully's body. She had long since mapped out what needed to be done, what needed to shift to where. She just had to set it in motion.

She did.

It was the weirdest sensation. Gully literally felt her spine realigning itself, as if an invisible hand were running along the vertebrae, pushing them back into place. Her head rose, aligning forward on her neck, as her shoulders rose and her muscles stretched and reshaped to fit. Her entire skeleton changed shape, with a series of alarming pops and clicks and other strange noises that bones should not really be making.

She supposed absently that she should be in excruciating pain right now, but all she felt was the strange sensation of her body becoming the shape it should be, of tendons and ligaments stretching or shrinking. She swayed on her feet, to be steadied by Hope, who never stopped smiling at her.

And then she felt her skull reshaping itself, her forehead pushing out, her jaw resetting itself, the very teeth in her gums moving to fit themselves to the new alignment so that she could chew properly.


The girl in the doll mask moved around them, turned a tap, and water sprayed over Gully's back. Gully didn't question why.

"Now this next bit is perfectly normal," said Amy, soothingly. "Do not freak out."

Even with that warning, Gully nearly screamed when her skin opened up, and pinkish fluid started draining on to the floor, washed down the drain by the shower.

"What -?" she managed.

"Excess mass," said Amy. "Nearly done."

And in a moment, it was. The openings in her skin sealed over without even a scar, and Amy led her away from where the last of the fluid was washing down the drain.

"Okay," said Amy. "We're done." She released Gully's hand; Hope did likewise. Amy pointed at a mirror toward the other end of the shower block. "Go see."

Reluctantly, not wanting to see, but not daring to not look, Gully went and stood before the mirror.

Slowly, she touched her face. Opened her mouth. Clicked her teeth together. Reached up to touch the back of her neck, between her shoulders. Looked down at herself.

Seven feet tall, perfectly proportioned, muscular without being unsightly, well built, a face that was at least attractive if not pretty ...
That's not me.

Oh my god, it is me.

How is it me?

She felt tears welling in her eyes, and she fell to her knees.

"Oh god, oh god," she whispered as the tears ran free. "Oh, god."

She felt cool arms encircle her; and she hugged Hope back fiercely.

Hope hugged her, held her while she wept. She kept on looking at the mirror and touching her face with wonder, then bursting into tears all over again.

By the time the first emotional rush was over, Parian had long finished altering her clothes. Even her underwear had needed adjusting.

Assisted by Hope and Amy, Gully dressed herself, standing tall and proud in her reshaped clothing. She turned to Amy and hugged her tightly, feeling a few more tears leak from her eyes.

"I owe you," she said fervently. "I will always owe you for this."

Amy hugged her back. "Just do something nice for someone else sometime. If you know any more Case 53s in the Wards ..."

Gully nodded. "I will tell them," she promised.

Hope smiled. "Good," she said.

"And when I get a chance, I am going to give Tecton the biggest kiss," promised Gully.

Hope giggled. "Not too big a kiss," she suggested. "He has a girlfriend already."

"Damn," Gully said feelingly. "I had ideas for giving him more than a kiss."

Amy shrugged. "I'm sure you'll find someone nice," she said with a grin.

Gully turned to Parian. "And thank you," she said. "It fits perfectly."

Parian nodded. "You're easy to fit," she said. "If you ever want anything else ..."

"I'll be in touch," Gully agreed. She turned to the door. "Is it wrong that I'm scared to go out there?"

Hope took one of her hands, Amy the other. "Let's go," said Amy. "Face the world."

She couldn't say no.

They walked out of the shower block, to where Weld was conversing quietly with Tecton and a blonde girl with her hair in a French braid. Each of them turned to look as Gully emerged.

Tecton actually leaned to look past her. "Excuse me, miss," he said politely, "but I was just waiting for a friend of mine?"

She had to laugh. "You idiot," she said fondly. "It's me. Now give me my shovel back before I take
Weld looked her up and down approvingly. "Damn," he said. "You're no more a Case 53 now than Lisa here is." He looked at Amy. "You do good work."

Amy shrugged modestly. "It wasn't hard. I just had to tell her body to get into the shape it was supposed to be in."

Weld rolled his eyes. "Right. Not hard. Says the biokinetic."

Amy giggled.

Hope hugged everyone before they went, while Gully hugged Amy again.


Amy nodded. "If I ever need help, really need it – I will."

Gully smiled and held her close. "I'll be there. Any time."

After the transport lifted off, Amy turned to Parian. "Would you and Flechette like to stay for lunch?" she asked.

Parian looked at Flechette, who nodded. "That sounds nice," she said.

Sveta was somewhat surprised when a seven foot tall statuesque woman loomed out of the crowd and swept her up in a bone-crushing hug. But when she realised who she was, it was all made clear.

"So she has done her work on you, then?" she asked with a smile. They sat, heads close together, drinks in front of them.

"Oh, yes," said Gully. "I was terrified. I really was. What was it like for you?"

Sveta closed her eyes and shook her head. "I didn't know what was going on. I was too scared to listen to them telling me what they were going to do. But once it was done ..."

Gully drained her drink, poured another. "Oh yeah, once it was done ..."

They got drunker and drunker as the evening went on. Sveta was having one drink to Gully's five, but she was becoming remarkably tipsy as well. And every time either of them felt like stopping, another memory of the time before came up, and they drank to blot it out.

They got smashed.

**BANG BANG BANG**

Gully rolled over, feeling like a maniac with a bass drum was playing heavy metal inside her head.

"What?" she called out, then regretted it as the drummer redoubled his efforts.

"Transport's here to take you back to San Diego!" came the call through the door. "Twenty-four
hour leave is almost up!"

"Urgh," she muttered, swinging her legs out of bed and sitting up. "Okay!" she called. Then she frowned. She wasn't even wearing her underwear.

**Naked? Why am I naked?**

There was a stir behind her. She looked around, to see Sveta's face, blonde hair tousled everywhere, emerging from the bedclothes.

"Gully?" she whispered. "Oh my god, did we -?"

Gully closed her eyes for a moment, remembering.

They lurched along the corridor, giggling, bouncing off the walls, not caring. Sveta was a high as a kite; Gully was pretty damn smashed too. Gully had her arm around Sveta's shoulders, while Sveta was steadying herself with an arm around her taller companion's waist.

Gully stopped and looked around her blearily. "Where'n hell are we?" she asked. "They gimme room, but f***ed if I know where."

Sveta, giggling helplessly, collapsed into a heap at her feet. "'S along this corridor," she confided. "Guest rooms. Show you where, 'cos you're a guest."

Gully looked down at her. She felt like bursting into tears of gratitude. "You do that for me?" she slurred. "You're bes' person inna worl'."

Sveta looked up at her, and her hair came curling up to wrap around Gully's shoulders, to pull Sveta to her feet.

"Damn,," said Gully admiringly. "Good trick."

Sveta took hold of Gully's arm and began to tow her along the corridor. "You know why 'm helpin' you?" she asked. "'Cos you're 'nother case fif'y ... fif'y somethin'. Freak like me. We gotta stick t'gether."


They reached what, to Gully's fuddled senses, looked like a familiar door. "My room," she said, in tones of deepest surprise. She fumbled out her key and tried it.

"Doesn't fit," she lamented in drunken despair.

"Lemme try," said Sveta, taking the key from her and turning it around. This time it fitted. After two tries, the door opened, and they tumbled inside. Gully crawled up on to the bed and sat on it. Sveta plumped herself down beside her.

"Need rest." declared Sveta in much the same tones as one setting up a base camp before attempting the summit of Everest. "Find my room in a bit."

Gully felt a rush of affection for the girl beside her. Sveta had helped her find her room. Not many
people would do that. Not many people would help a case fifty-something. Thingy. Freak. Sveta was so nice to her. Tears welled in her eyes.

"You're th' bes' person in alla worl'," she slurred. "You c'n rest here all you want. Be my guest."

Sveta wanted to cry. Gully was so nice to her, letting her rest in her room till she could remember where her own room was. And she understood Sveta too, she knew what it was like to be a thingy, freak. Case something. Some number. But Gully understood her, been there herself.

"You're won'r'ful friend," she said, and leaned against her. "So nice."

Gully remembered the nice angel. She had hugged Gully. Hugging was a nice thing to do. She put her arms around Sveta and hugged her. It felt ... nice.

Sveta felt Gully hugging her, and hugged her back. It was so nice to hug someone without killing them. Hugging Gully was nice. Gully was a fellow case something. Number. She was special. "I love you," she mumbled.

"Love you too," Gully slurred. Hugs were nice. You hugged people you loved. She loved Sveta. There was something else you did with people you loved. Gully remembered what it was.

She kissed Sveta.

Sveta felt the warm pressure of Gully's lips on hers, and automatically kissed her back. She couldn't ever remember having kissed anyone before, but there were some things that transcended mere memory.

A coil of warm feeling awakened in her stomach and spread outward. She squeezed Gully's breast, rubbing the nipple through the cloth.

Gully felt the same spread of drunken arousal in her own body; Sveta's attention to her breast only hastened it. There was something else she should be remembering.

"I'm straight," she mumbled. *That's right. Guys are what turn me on, not girls. Cocks, not pussies.* Then she kissed Sveta again anyway, because she was there, and it felt like the right thing to do.

Sveta giggled, her hands fumbling at the buttons of Gully's shirt. "So am I," she said, pulling the shirt open and kissing Gully again. And it was true; men were her turn-on. But right now, she was drunk enough and horny enough that it didn't matter. And Gully was big enough and brawny enough that Sveta was just a little bit turned on by hugging her anyway. And Gully did have such nice breasts ...

Gully felt her bra come off, and then Sveta's hands and mouth were all over her breasts. Pleasure exploded through her, and she grabbed Sveta and kissed her again, then pulled the smaller girl's t-shirt over her head and discarded it. She was never quite sure how she lost her pants and underwear, nor Sveta hers.

But she was kissing and licking and mauling Sveta wherever she could reach, and Sveta was doing the same to her, with the addition that her hair was joining the party, caressing Gully wherever she was sensitive. Which, given her state of drunken arousal, was quite a few places.

Her memories after the fact would be mercifully fragmentary, but she retained flashes, such as forcing Sveta's thighs apart and thoroughly eating out her pussy while Sveta moaned and thrashed
on the bunk, and her hair did obscene and lubricious things to Gully's own breasts and pussy and ass.

Or dragging Sveta to the floor on top of her in a wild sixty-nine, where orifices were plundered at will and at random with fingers and tongues alike.

Or being held down by Sveta’s hair while the slighter girl used the handle of her own shovel as a makeshift dildo to bring her to yet another screaming orgasm.

They possibly did more embarrassing things than that, but thankfully, her memory was either unable or unwilling to reveal these things to her. Eventually they must have fallen asleep or passed out, until the thunderous knocking on the door woke her.

Gully blinked her head clear. "We don't tell anyone about this," she said.

Sveta sat up, covering herself with a sheet. "No," she agreed. "We do not."

Gully sighed. "Still ... thank you," she said. They exchanged a brief kiss.

"You're welcome," said Sveta. "I'll see you sometime, hey?"

Gully nodded, climbing into her clothes. "Gonna join the Wards?"

Sveta nodded. "I think I might." She gave Gully a hopeful smile. "Maybe make up for all the bad things I ever did."

Gully nodded and picked up her shovel. "We can only try." She went to the door and opened it. "Goodbye."

"Goodbye."

And Gully walked out the door, into the rest of her life.
In which Miss Militia gets a new scarf, Tecton gets a present, and Hope opens a door

Saturday

Amy carefully lifted the screen-print template away and looked closely at the end result. "I don't see a problem with it," she said. "Do you, Lisa?"

Lisa peered at it critically. "Not as such, no," she admitted. "It's at least as good a job as the original."

Hope looked on with interest. "That looks so much fun," she said. "Where did you learn to do it?"

"At school," said Amy.

"I went on a summer camp," said Lisa.

"You guys had the most fun growing up," commented Hope. "Once Mom ran away, Dad kept me home from school until I managed to get away myself. So I never got to do any of that fun stuff." She shrugged. "Besides, I was the shy little ugly albino girl. That was life for me."

Lisa hugged her. "Not any more, dear. We'll teach you how, and you can do the next one, okay?"

Hope smiled brilliantly. "Okay!"

Taylor smiled as well. Hope's happiness was rather infectious.

"Okay," said Director Piggot, "what do we have here?". She gave Hope a mock frown. "You know I don't like to be disturbed on a weekend."

Hope grinned at her. "You'd be working anyway, Emily, and you know it. But Amy and Skitter have come up with some things that we think you might like to see."

Piggot raised an eyebrow. "You do realise that it's only your involvement in all of this that lets me sleep at night with the knowledge that a biokinetic of Amy's calibre is working so closely with someone of Skitter's capabilities. Without your moderating influence, the concept is frankly terrifying."

Hope giggled. "Amy's just a sweetie, and Skitter wouldn't do anything nasty, would you, Skitter?." She looked at them expectantly, Amy in her casual clothes, Taylor in her Skitter costume.

Skitter cleared her throat uncomfortably, but did not speak. She and Piggot shared a glance. Oh yes, thought Director Piggot. We both know what Skitter is capable of.

"Uhh," said Amy, "when you found me, I was in a really bad place. There were several ways I could have gone, none of them nice.". She hugged Hope's arm. "You saved me. In every sense of the word."

Hope put her arms around Amy. "And I'll never leave you," she assured her. She smiled at Director Piggot. "Okay, I guess things could be worse. But they aren't. So, do you want to see what we've got?"
Emily Piggot nodded. *They could most certainly be worse,* she silently agreed. "Well, now that you have me here, you may as well show me."

"Thank you, Director," said Taylor gravely. She reached into the compartment on her back and drew out a slim glove made of a shimmering, silvery material, and handed it over to the Director.

Piggot took it and handled it curiously. "What's this?" she asked. "Is it made of the silk from your new web-spider?"

Taylor nodded. "It's what I'm making my Weaver costume out of. Amy engineered the spider to create silk with the absolute optimum durability and elasticity. Dozens of times stronger than Kevlar, extremely flexible, has a certain amount of give in it. Once the current batch of eggs hatches and they mature, I'll be able to produce costumes and body stockings, more or less to order."

Piggot frowned. "I think we should get Miss Militia in on this."

Taylor nodded. "Good idea.". She paused. "And maybe Tecton too please?" she ventured hesitantly.

The Director gave her a level stare. "Very well," she said at last. "Just be aware that very few people here know about your ... special circumstances ... and so I would strongly advise you to be circumspect."

Taylor nodded. "I understand, Director," she agreed. "Thank you."

Miss Militia had a look of concentration on her face as she drew the glove on to her hand. She flexed her fingers experimentally. "It's easy to move in," she said, more to herself than to the others in the room. "Feels good.". She ran her other hand over the glove, front and back, then looked up. "Palm and fingers are rougher than the back of the hand. Deliberate?"

Taylor nodded. "I used a coarser weave, for the grip."

Tecton stood alongside her, almost close enough to touch. She wanted to hold his hand, but his massive metal gauntlets made that an exercise in futility. So she concentrated on enjoying the fact that he was there.

Miss Militia nodded approvingly. She pulled the combat knife from the sheath at her hip, gripped it firmly with the gloved hand, made several thrusts and lunges with it.

"Good," she said. "It works."

Then she swapped the knife to her other hand and made a quick slash with the razor-sharp blade across the palm of her gloved hand. Piggot drew in her breath sharply, but there was no blood. In fact, the glove showed no sign of damage. Reversing the grip on the knife, she stabbed her palm several times with the point. The material indented, but failed to penetrate.

"Very nice," she said approvingly. "But even if it does stop bullets, there will still be considerable bruising and trauma."

Amy grinned. "I'm glad you brought that up," she said.

Director Piggot looked askance at the half-carton of eggs that Amy had requested be brought from the kitchens down to the firing range. "This has the odour of a cape stunt or a conjuring trick," she said suspiciously.
Hope grinned. "A little bit of column A, a little bit of column B," she said cheerfully. She watched as Amy pulled out the length of silk and let it unroll with just a little bit of a flourish.

Miss Militia started. "That looks like my scarf," she said, sounding mildly surprised.

Hope nodded. "We patterned it after the one you loaned me for the party," she explained. "They screen-printed the colours on it this morning."

Amy handed the scarf to Miss Militia. "Tell me what you think," she invited.

Miss Militia ran it through her hands. "It's a heavier weave than the glove," she said. "Thicker. Not overly so, though. Still quite reasonable."

Amy grinned and held out her hand for it; Miss Militia handed it back, watching her curiously. With Hope's help, Amy securely wrapped the half-carton of eggs in the scarf, knotting it securely. "Can we fix this up as a target?" she asked.

Director Piggot was watching with more and more bemusement as Tecton walked downrange and affixed the scarf-wrapped carton up to a target plate. Some PRT soldiers who had come down to use the target range were now drifting over to see what was happening.

Once he was done, Amy pointed at the incongruously brightly coloured target downrange. "Now," she said, "let's see if you can't break those eggs from here."

"Ear protection first," said Miss Militia. Everyone donned the high-tech earmuffs that let them hear speech –mostly – but cut out the louder noises.

Miss Militia smoothly lifted the Glock 17 she was holding and placed the laser sight on the bright bundle. Five times she fired; five times she hit. The scarf looked unruffled, undented.

Frowning, Miss Militia levelled a .44 Colt Python at the target. Six loud reports echoed across the range. The scarf seemed to twitch slightly, but no yolk or white seemed to be making its way down the metal backing plate yet.

Tecton turned his helmet to face Skitter, but said nothing. The bugs she had on his face picked up his raised eyebrow, his look of amusement. Very slightly, she nodded back to him. Oh, yeah.

Now Miss Militia held a Smith & Wesson .500, two-handed. "Hollow-point," she muttered. She fired five shots; the racketing concussions were painful, even through the ear protection they all wore.

"Christ," muttered one of the PRT men. "That thing should be in fuckin' shreds by now."

No-one disagreed.

Abruptly, Miss Milita held an M4 assault carbine. Lining it up carefully, she loosed a burst that sparked steel all around the target, but did no apparent damage to the scarf or its contents.

Hope held Amy and giggled. Despite all the guns going off, despite all the noise, this was fun.

The gun morphed into an FN FAL. Bringing it to her shoulder, Miss Militia fired several carefully aimed shots. There was no apparent reaction from the target.

Now she held a Barret .50 calibre sniper rifle, with no scope but fitted with iron sights. Clearing her throat, she announced, "Armour piercing."
Taylor held her breath. *Amy said it was good for this, but ...*

Miss Militia lined up over the open sights at the target not ten yards distant. She fired once, chambered another round, fired a second time, worked the action, fired a third time.

As the echo of the thunderous reports died away, everyone stared at the bundle. It had twitched from time to time when being hit, but no more than that.

Sheathing the combat knife, Miss Militia turned to Director Piggot. "We're done here," she said as she took off her ear protection. "I'd need an open combat range to test anything heavier," she added with a shrug.

"I see," said Piggot, taking off her own protection. "Well, let's see what damage you did."

Miss Militia nodded, and retrieved the bundle. Placing it on the unloading table, she unknotted the scarf and pulled out the half-carton of eggs. It had sustained a little damage from the barrage; the cardboard was slightly dented here and there, and one corner was slightly torn. Inside, one of the six eggs was cracked.

As Director Piggot and the PRT men stared at the barely damaged carton, Taylor retrieved the scarf, snapped it like a whip, rolled it up and handed it to Miss Militia. "From me to you," she said cheerfully. "For being such a good sport." Miss Militia took it almost reverently, staring from the carton to the scarf and back.

"All right," growled Director Piggot, as the PRT men crowded around Miss Militia, admiring her trophy. "Suppose you tell me just how you managed to pull that off."

Amy grinned. "Specialised thread and shear thickening fluid," she explained succinctly. She didn't have to say any more. Piggot got it. From the look that crossed her face, she *really* got it.

"And you can make more of this?" she asked sharply.

Amy shrugged. "Ask Skitter. I just provided the bugs."

Taylor nodded soberly, when Director Piggot turned to her. "I can. It's fairly slow at the moment, but once I have some more up and running, I should be able to do bulk quantities. Also, those body stockings," she gestured to the glove Miss Militia still had not removed, "can be done with a waterproof lining at twice the thickness and almost twice the strength."

Damn, thought Tecton. *Is she this awesome all the time?* He decided that yes, she was.

Piggot frowned. "I'm going to have to take that scarf to the techs for analysis and testing, you understand," she said. Miss Militia did not quite clasp the scarf to her chest, but it was a near thing.

"Or not," said Taylor, retrieving two more items from her storage compartment. One was a square of the same material, about the size of a pocket handkerchief. "This has exactly the same properties as the scarf. Your techs can go to town on it." Director Piggot took it, crumpled it into a ball, smoothed it out, and examined it closely. It seemed to have the same thickness and weight as flannel, and was about as soft.

"Very well," she said. "This will work."

"And one more thing," said Taylor, holding out an item that looked like a balaclava with an open face and lowering her voice. "This is for Tecton.". Tecton was indeed standing right there, but so
were the PRT men, and Director Piggot had asked her to be circumspect.

Tecton looked at the head protector, then at Taylor. *She made me a bulletproof headpiece out of spider webs*, he thought. *She really does love me.*

Miss Militia nodded. "Certainly," she said. "And thank you." She took her old scarf off, and fitted the new scarf into place. "I truly appreciate it."

"You're welcome," said Taylor. She handed over a small package. "And could you please ensure that this gets to Alexandria?"

"You realise that we'll have to check it to ensure that it's not dangerous before it goes," said Director Piggot. She paused. "And … do you realise that Alexandria is probably *tougher* than your spider silk armour?"

Taylor nodded. "I know," she said, with a grin behind her mask. "I know."

She sneaked a sideways look at Tecton. He looked back at her. Each knew what the other was thinking. *I can't wait to see you again.*

---

Miss Militia looked at Amy. "You are the one who created the spiders, the insects, that Skitter used to make these things?" she asked.

Amy nodded. "She's really good," said Hope, hugging her proudly.

"I am not arguing with that," agreed Miss Militia. "But how did you get the exact right genetic design to create the silk and the fluids? It would take a research and design team *years* to get it right. Even a Tinker would take days or weeks of research."

Amy nodded. "Well, first I had to look up things like the exact chemical makeup of such things, and how they worked. And then once I knew what I was doing, I worked with bugs, making them secrete organic versions of the synthetic fluids, testing them, modifying the bugs, testing again. A test cycle takes about thirty seconds. I went through about a hundred and fifty iterations before I found the optimum mix to use."

Miss Militia seemed to be calculating in her head. "So … about three-quarters of an hour, then."

"With rest periods," Hope said firmly. "I made her take those."

Amy leaned affectionately on Hope's shoulder. "She did. All up, it took me about two hours."

Miss Militia shook her head. "I will be recommending to Director Piggot that you be given a Tinker rating. You are outperforming many dedicated Tinkers that I know."

Amy went pink with pleasure. Hope hugged her.

---

They rode up in the elevator together, Tecton having been assigned to 'escorting' the visitors from the building. The moment the doors closed, Taylor pulled off her mask, security cameras be damned. Tecton removed his helmet and they shared a long kiss. Amy and Hope did not comment; they just watched and smiled.

"I miss you," said Everett, about a fifth of a second ahead of Taylor. They shared a shaky laugh, then kissed again.
"It'll be Tuesday," he said when they separated again.

"Tuesday?" she asked, a little dazedly. Right now, he could have told her the day was November, and she would have happily agreed.

"TV spot and official induction into the Wards," he said. "They'll probably contact you."

"Oh," she said. "Oh, okay.". *I'll be in the Wards. I'll be with Everett.* A warm feeling spread through her.

Hope cleared her throat; one wingtip tapped the floor indicator. They were nearly back at ground level. Taylor quickly fitted her mask back on, as Tecton replaced his helmet.

As the doors opened, she turned to him and said sternly, "Now, you be sure to wear it. Okay?"

He nodded obediently. "Yes, I will.". *You made it for me? Of course I'll wear it.*

"Good.". She walked out of the lobby with Hope and Amy. Tecton's eyes followed her all the way.

It was late evening at the shelter. Most of the staff and residents had gone to bed; Lisa was doing some last-minute chores before turning out the lights. She came into the main area and heard low voices, familiar ones. She grinned her knowing grin. *Ah, that's what they're doing.*

Strolling closer, she heard Amy asking Hope a question about the Hope Accord. Hope thought for a moment, then answered it. She must have gotten it right; Amy rewarded her with a kiss.

Lisa grinned again. *I suspect Hope's retention rate has improved dramatically since Amy started helping her.*

It was a sweet, sweet scene, and she hated to break it up. *However ...*

Hope and Amy looked up as Lisa leaned over the back of the oversized armchair they were curled up together in.

"Sorry, kids, but lights are going out," she told them.

Hope nodded amiably. "Okay, sweetie," she said. "Probably time I carried sleepy-head here to bed, anyway.'. She grinned down at Amy.

Amy did not disappoint. "'Carry'? 'Sleepy-head'?" she exclaimed in mock indignation. "Listen, just because you only need four hours a night."

Hope giggled, then leaned in and silenced her with a kiss. Amy returned it, her eyes half-closing and her arms sliding around Hope's neck. Lisa watched with a fond expression on her face.

When they separated, Amy looked up at Hope and murmured, "I'm ready to be carried to bed now, sweetie."

Hope grinned, scooped Amy up in her arms, and rose to her feet; Lisa helpfully took the tablet off Hope's hands. But when Hope started toward the sleeping enclosure that she shared with Amy, Lisa said diffidently, "You don't have to sleep there tonight."

Hope stopped and looked at her curiously; Amy raised her head as well.
Lisa blushed. "You can both sleep in my bed tonight. With me." She rushed on. "I've been waiting for Amy to see Newter again, so I could pounce on you, but I can't wait anymore. So I'm pouncing anyway."

Hope raised an amused eyebrow. "So what form would this pouncing take?" she asked. "Because I'm not going to do anything that will make Amy unhappy."

Lisa smiled at the both of them. "Well," she said, "I was thinking that Amy and I could start by teaming up to give you a back and wing massage like no other."

"I think I like that idea," said Hope. "Amy?"

Amy smiled up at her. "I think I do too," she said softly. Her eyes promised much, much more.

Lisa grinned. "I thought you might," she said, holding the door open for them.

They entered; she followed behind.

Lisa closed the door as Hope, amid giggles, deposited Amy on to the bed.

By the time Hope turned around, Lisa had her shirt off, and was reaching for her bra catch.

“No,” said Hope softly. “Let me do that for you.”

She undressed Lisa slowly, lovingly, fingers caressing her skin as she did so. Her lips kissed their way down Lisa’s spine after she gently removed the bra, as she reached around to undo her jeans.

Lisa sucked in a breath as Hope slid her arms down inside the jeans as they fell away from her waist, caressing her thighs gently, smoothly.

Hooking two fingers in the waistband of Lisa’s panties, Hope slid them down, caressing and kissing as she went. As Lisa stepped out of the underwear, Hope stood; her arms went around the blonde girl and their lips met in a kiss that left Lisa weak at the knees.

“Oh my god,” she murmured, running her hands over Hope’s chest. “Are you sure you – no, you still don’t feel sexual arousal, do you?”

Hope shook her head and grinned. “But I’ve learned a lot from you, and from Amy, and from what Taylor told us about Everett and her.”

“So I see,” said Lisa, still trying to get her heart rate under control. “That was amazing.” She turned to Amy, who was lying on the bed, watching them with a fond smile on her face. “Are you able to give her sexual feelings?”

Amy nodded. “I guess I could, but Hope is against the idea.”

Lisa nodded firmly. “Good. Don’t. I doubt we’d survive the experience.” She kissed Hope again. “Having you as an asexual lover is just about all I can handle.”

Hope giggled and kissed her back. “Now, I think I have to deal with Amy.”

Lisa smiled and climbed on to the bed. “Go ahead,” she invited, leaning back in a comfortable
position to watch.

Hope helped Amy off the bed, and started undressing her as slowly and tenderly as she had Lisa. Gently, lovingly, she caressed every square inch of skin thus exposed, kissing in all the sensitive spots, making Amy catch her breath more than once.

By the time Amy was naked and on the bed with her, Lisa was gently rubbing herself, sliding her fingers between her labia. She reached out her hand to Amy’s lips; Amy licked and sucked her fingers clean. Then she gathered Lisa in for a kiss; it was brief, but left them both breathing hard.

Then they both turned to Hope, who had just climbed on to the bed as well.

“I do believe,” said Lisa softly, “that we were going to start with a back and wing massage.”

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Hope didn’t struggle very hard as the two naked girls held her down and removed all of her clothing. All three were giggling by the time she was also naked.

“It’s funny,” Lisa remarked. “I don’t think I’d be able to do anything with just Amy in the room, but with you here, Hope, I’m rather enjoying myself with her.”

“I’m glad,” murmured Hope, face down on the bed as they started the massage. “You are my two very dearest friends, and .... ooooh, that feels so good. And I love you both very much. I am so glad you are able to love each other as well.”

Amy giggled, and dug her thumb into a vertebra, eliciting a click and a groan of pure pleasure from Hope. Lisa kissed Amy briefly, then hooked one of Hope’s lower wings under her shoulder, and bore down and twisted at the same time. There was a complicated pop-crack-pop, and Hope let out a cry; “Oh god, yes please, do that again!”

Amy giggled and replicated the action with Hope’s other lower wing; this also cracked and popped satisfyingly, giving Hope another spasm of utter ecstasy.

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They worked her over thoroughly, massaging everything from her neck down to her tailbone; Lisa’s intuition and Amy’s sense of Hope’s body combined to leave her utterly devastated after the fact. They did not leave a single muscle knotted, a vertebra unclicked, or a joint uncracked.

And nor did they confine their attentions to her; they shared kisses frequently, and caressed one another more and more often as the massage went on.

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Once the massage was done, and Hope was left lying semi-comatose on the bed, making little mewing noises of pleasure – which Amy found utterly cute and adorable – Lisa turned to Amy.

“Well, now,” she purred.

“Well now?” asked Amy with a smile.
Lisa nodded, and pounced on her. Amy found herself lying back on the bed, with Lisa over the top of her, holding her wrists down on the bed. Her breasts hung and bobbed enticingly, but Amy could not reach them.

Besides, she kind of liked this. It made her arousal rate increase dramatically.

Lisa suddenly dipped her head and gave Amy a hard kiss on the mouth; forceful, demanding, uncompromising. Amy felt another thrill of arousal. She wished Lisa would kiss her again like that.

“You like this, don’t you?” purred Lisa. She didn’t look like a fox any more; she looked like a sexy, sexy jungle cat, crouched over her prey. Deciding where to sink her fangs in first.

Amy hoped it would be somewhere sensitive.

“Yes,” she admitted in a small voice. “I like it.”

Lisa dipped her head again; her teeth found Amy’s nipple, which was almost painfully engorged as it was, and nipped at it, drawing it upward, almost to the point of actual pain, before letting it go. Amy let out a soft cry of mixed pain and arousal.

“Did that hurt?” asked Lisa, her mouth next to Amy’s ear. She nipped at Amy’s earlobe. Amy shuddered in pleasure.

“Yes,” she whimpered.

“Did you like it?” She nipped at Amy’s other earlobe. Amy’s breathing rate increased, into little gasps of pleasure.

“Oh, yes,” she breathed.

Lisa kissed her again, her lips bruising Amy’s, hard, demanding. Amy felt a flush of arousal wash through her.

“Do you want me to do it again?” growled Lisa, licking her lips.

Amy nodded, mute.

Lisa shook her head, letting her hair fall down, brush against Amy’s breasts, ticking them, driving her wild. “Oh no,” she purred. “You have to beg for it.”


Lisa lowered her mouth, opening her lips to expose her teeth, which looked very white and very sharp. When she was so close that Amy could feel her breath, she said softly, “Are you sure?”

“Yes, please,” whimpered Amy. “Please, please, bite me there.”

Lisa’s teeth closed on her nipple, and she lifted her head. Amy’s breast stretched upward below it, and she felt the pain beginning, and the pleasure that went with it. Just before the pain was about to become unbearable, Lisa let it go, and it snapped back into shape. Amy let out a low, sobbing cry, and bucked her hips; that had almost brought her to climax.
Lisa looked down at her. “You are a very bad girl,” she breathed.


Lisa smiled. “I think you need to be punished.”

Amy nodded.

“Wait there. Do not move. Do not touch yourself. If you do ... I will be very angry.”

Lisa let go of her wrists, got off her. Amy lay where she was put. She did not dare move.

When Lisa reappeared, she had the pink plastic strap-on attached to her hips. Amy licked her lips. “What are you going to do?” she whimpered.

Lisa smiled cruelly. “You know what I’m going to do,” she purred. “Spread your legs. I’m going to fuck you senseless.”

The words, carefully chosen, hit Amy right on the libido; her legs fell open automatically.

Lisa got down between her thighs, placed the head of the dildo at Amy’s vulva, and then paused. “Do you want this?” she demanded, holding Amy’s arms to the bed once more.

Amy nodded. “Please,” she whispered. Her vagina ached for it. She burned for it.

Lisa shook he head. “That’s not how to say it,” she murmured.

“Oh god,” said Amy. “Please fuck me. Stick that thing in me and fuck me senseless.” She was literally panting with desire at this point; Lisa had hit her every button with laser-guided accuracy.

Lisa leaned down and gave Amy a hard kiss, still demanding, still uncompromising. And as she did so, she moved her hips, and the dildo slid into Amy’s waiting vaginal canal.

Amy cried out as it penetrated deep within her slippery depths, and Lisa bit her lip to shut her up. “Quiet unless I speak to you,” she commanded. Amy shut up. Lisa began pumping her hips in a slow rotating motion, which slid the dildo in and out of Amy, and drove her insane at the same time.

“Why do you want to be punished so badly?” asked Lisa, still thrusting into her.

“Because I’ve used my power on people,” whimpered Amy. “And sometimes I hurt them without meaning to. And I let people suffer because I was scared of working on brains.”

Lisa began to thrust harder now, deeper; Amy twitched and moaned as the plastic penis slid in and out between her distended, slick labia.

“And you use your power to influence people all the time, don’t you?” Lisa charged her. “You enjoy being the famous Panacea, or Amy Lavere, the healer who is partnered with Hope?”

Amy could not speak for a moment as she bucked her hips up to meet Lisa’s thrusting motions. “Yes,” she whimpered. ‘Yes. Yes.”

Lisa kissed her hard again, driving her arousal to almost incandescent levels. “And you’re enjoying
letting me do this to you, degrading you, aren’t you?”

She could feel Lisa holding her right on the edge of orgasm as she fought to answer. “Y ... yes,” she managed.

Lisa nodded, dipped her head, and nipped her swollen nipple; this drove Amy over the edge into a spectacular orgasm, crying out again and again as Lisa kept up the pressure on her.

When Lisa finally relented and got off her, Amy was quite unable to move. She just lay there, arms and legs akimbo, eyes glazed, panting quietly. Hope had never given her an orgasm quite as good as that one; Newter may have, but she was having trouble remembering right at the moment. Or thinking coherently, for that matter.

Lisa leaned in from where she lay beside her, and kissed her gently on the lips. “And that’s for ambushing me, yesterday,” she said with her trademark vulpine grin.

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Hope giggled, from where she lay, propped up on one elbow. “That was weird, but awesome,” she said. “How did you do that?”

Lisa grinned as Hope got up, rounded the bed, and sat next to her to unbuckle the dildo. She leaned down to kiss Lisa gently. Lisa kissed her back.

“She has a lot of guilt,” she explained. “Deep down. From using her powers, from not using her powers, from using her powers wrongly. She’s had so much guilt piled on her from an early age, from her foster mother and others, that no matter what she does, she accumulates more guilt.” She raised an eyebrow. “This is why she enjoys you spanking her so much.”

Hope frowned. “But I’m normally gentle with her, and she enjoys that.”

Lisa nodded. “She does. She loves being with you, because you’re quiet and undemanding and gentle, and she knows that you will never ask her to do anything that she doesn’t want to. And for the most part, she wants to feel warm and safe and loved with you. But once in a while, she will feel the need for punishment, which is why she sometimes acts out with her pleasure burst. She wants you to spank her.” She caressed Hope’s cheek with her hand. “You are truly good for her. Don’t ever forget that.”

Hope smiled as she strapped the dildo on to herself. “Thank you,” she said softly, then she turned and pushed Lisa back flat on to the bed. She leaned down and kissed her gently, holding her wrists in place.

“Oh,” said Lisa, with a lazy grin. “This looks interesting.” She kissed Hope back, their lips lingering together.

Hope nodded. “I had a thought. Amy feels guilt from the use of her power. Do you ever feel guilt from the use of yours to hurt others, or even just to get what you want from them?”

Silver-irised eyes calmly observed bottle-green ones, and Lisa suddenly felt a lot less sure of herself. She knew who was in control here, and it wasn’t her.

“Um, maybe?” she ventured.
Hope leaned down and kissed her again, but this time it was a lot harder. Lisa’s nipples both went hard, and she felt a shiver of pleasure down her spine.

“Is that your final answer?” breathed Hope, moving her hips so that the dildo slid up and down between Lisa’s suddenly very slippery labia.

Lisa arched her back and grunted at the sudden rush of pleasure.

“Oh god, yes,” she breathed. “Yes, I do feel guilty.”

She looked surprised at herself, briefly, then she moaned softly as Hope pressed the dildo directly down on her clitoris.

"And are you going to try to do better in future?" pressed Hope. She began very deliberately, to slip the very tip of the dildo in and out of Lisa's intensely aroused vagina, causing her to gasp and writhe and moan under Hope.

"Yes," she groaned. "Oh god, yes, yes, yes!"

"Good girl," breathed Hope, slowly and teasingly licking and sucking on Lisa's nipple. At the same time, the dildo began to slowly inch its way into Lisa's pulsating vulva, gradually disappearing between her swollen labia.

The conflicting waves of pleasure rippled through Lisa's body; she couldn't think straight. But even when Hope started, Lisa had been unable to discern her intent, other than a general aim to make Lisa feel really good. Which she was indeed doing, albeit in an utterly teasing manner. Lisa found the fact that she could not predict Hope's actions, was totally at her mercy, to be thoroughly arousing.

"You .. can .... put .... it .... in .... faster," she gasped. I'm not a virgin any more; I can take it now, she meant to say.

"Oh, I know," grinned Hope. And kept doing exactly what she was doing, switching her mouth to Lisa's other nipple.

Lisa gritted her teeth. Oh god, she's driving me insane. She could feel the building orgasm, almost taste it. Desperately, she tried to buck her hips up to meet the down-sliding dildo, but Hope had her wings holding Lisa's thighs down. And Hope was very strong.

Lisa was almost crying from the overload of pleasure by the time Hope finished penetrating her with the dildo, working her hips in slow circles that had Lisa's brain more or less dribbling out her ears.

Holding Lisa on the very knife-edge of orgasm, Hope leaned down and asked very softly, "Would you like to come?"

Lisa nodded wildly. "Oh god yes yes yes please yes!" she blurted.

So Hope applied her lips to Lisa's nipple, sucked it very hard into her mouth, and bit down on it, just short of the pressure needed to break the skin. At the same time, she pulled the dildo almost all the way out of Lisa's hot slippery vaginal canal, then began sliding it in and out of her with deep, powerful strokes.
Lisa went off like a row of firecrackers on Chinese New Year. As Lisa had done to Amy, Hope did to Lisa, keeping up the pressure, keeping the pleasure going, blasting her with orgasm after orgasm after mind-shattering orgasm.

When it came to the matter of making those she cared for feel good, Hope was a very quick study.

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Eventually, of course, she relented and allowed Lisa to come down off the heights of pleasure. Carefully, she eased off of Lisa, kissing her tenderly as the blonde lay there drooling slightly, her eyes not quite rolled back in her head.

"Wow," giggled Amy, who had almost recovered from her own ordeal by climax. "You really did a number on her."

Hope grinned. "That was the general idea, sweetie.". She began to unstrap the dildo.

"Whoa, hey not so fast," Amy protested playfully, scrambling around Lisa and putting a had on Hope's arm to stop her.

"Oh?" said Hope, giving her a kiss. "I'd think you'd be a bit tender after that."

"Oh, I am," giggled Amy. "But I wasn't thinking of putting it there.". To illustrate her point, she got down on all fours on the bed and wiggled her butt suggestively at Hope, looking over her shoulder invitingly.

"Really?" asked Hope, her eyebrows rising.

"Really," confirmed Amy, even as Hope got up behind her and took hold of her hips. She sighed with pleasure as the dildo slid home between her taut, rounded buttocks. "Ohhhh, yeah ..."

***

The rest of the night passed more or less in the same manner. Hope assisted Lisa and Amy in pleasing one another, with and without the strap-on, driving each girl to mind-blowing orgasms. Once in a while, she managed to get them both off at once, which feat was rewarded by being double-teamed by them in the matter of a back and wing massage.

***

They slept, woke, made love, slept again, woke again, made love once more ...

In short, a good time was had by all.

Which went a long way toward explaining why, the next morning, both Lisa and Amy had a certain amount of trouble walking, and Hope couldn't stop grinning.

Sunday

Alexandria opened the package. Inside were two notes.
Techs have checked this over. All seems fine. Skitter does good work.

Hannah.

Alexandria:

I understand you still have to breathe, and that is a vulnerability at your power level. Please accept this with my compliments.

Skitter.

Beneath the notes was an item that she figured out was a face-mask, designed to fit over her mouth and nose. In fact, it was designed to pull over her head, with a wide strap that went around the back of her neck, so that it could not be dislodged by random violence.

She put it on.

The mask covered her mouth and nose easily, the elasticity holding it in place. She could breathe quite easily through it.

Well, that's all well and good, she thought. But will it work against water?

More than one cape with water powers had tried to drown her in the past, after all.

Going to the small bathroom, she stripped down and stepped into the shower stall. Turned the shower full on. Lifted her face to the blast of water.

She breathed easily. No water got through the filter.

I find myself impressed, she told herself. Tinker gadgets could do this sort of thing, of course, but there were no moving parts. Just this shimmering white fabric.

Costuming up, she launched out the window, moving fast that anyone watching might have only seen a blur, if they were lucky.

She flew north.

Niagara Falls was on the Canadian border. Alexandria flew up the river, right down near water level. She entered the falls, flew up against the flow of the thundering tons of water. Her face was turned upward, her mouth open.

She breathed easily.

Out of the falls she soared, into the sky, still wearing the mask. Her costume dried off under the rush of wind.

Three drops of water had been forced through the filter mask by the unimaginable pressures. Three drops. And she had breathed easily the whole time.

She took off the mask, examined it closely. Then she put it back on again.
I have been pending judgement on the Tecton situation, she pondered. It is irregular to move Wards about in such a manner. But now ... I believe that I will allow the situation to continue.

She smiled behind the mask. *If he is being such a good influence on her, who am I to argue?*

Hope knocked on the front door to the Palanquin nightclub. After a few minutes, it opened a crack and a voice said, "We're closed - oh, hi, Hope."

A chain rattled, and the door swung open; Newter stood there, but there was something different about him. Then Hope got it. "Your skin!" she said happily, looking at his very human skin tone. "Amy changed it for you!"

Newter nodded and gave her a hug, one that she returned with interest.

Amy was right behind Hope; he embraced her, then kissed her thoroughly. She responded enthusiastically to both hug and kiss, wiggling her butt when his tail caressed it.

"Well," she murmured wickedly, "you haven't been idle since I saw you last." Given her tone, there was little doubt in his mind as to what she meant.

"Oh, uh I -" he began lamely, but she cut him off with a gentle kiss.

"Relax," she giggled. "Nor have I. It's fine. We're good. You're a sweet boy, but I'm with Hope. I just like what you do to me in bed."

He blushed fetchingly and gestured helplessly, trying to warn her that her friends were right there and listening. She grinned and leaned closer. "Don't worry," she whispered wickedly. "I only told them about the good bits."

This didn't help; he couldn't remember any bad bits.

Lisa came to his rescue. "It's good to see you again, Newter," she said, giving him a quick hug. "Ignore Amy; she got some last night, and she's still feeling her oats."

"Newter should be feeling a whole field of oats," came Gregor's mildly amused, placid voice. "Last night, he went upstairs with three girls." He turned to Newter. "Were they really triplets?"

"Gregor!" said Hope happily, and hugged him ferociously; he responded in kind.

Amy raised her eyebrows and looked at Newter with interest. "Well?"

Newter was now blushing furiously. "No. They just looked a bit alike."

Amy giggled. "Well, at least you haven't been lonely."

Newter shook his head. "No, but ... I'd still like to ... sometime ..."

She smiled and kissed him gently rather than teasingly. "I'd love to, Newter. Anytime you want to."

Lisa cleared her throat. "While making Newter blush is cute and all, we are here for a reason."

"And that is?" asked Gregor.

Lisa smiled. "I'd like to talk to Labyrinth."
"Wait, what again with my powers?" asked Labyrinth. Faultline sat next to her, not speaking.

Lisa took a sip of coffee. It was quite good. "I believe you can reach other worlds with them," she repeated patiently.

"Well, yeah, I pull my places and things from worlds I see ..." began Labyrinth, but Lisa cut her off, looking excited.

"No," she said. "You manifest them. On the border between our world and everything else." Her eyes were beginning to sparkle now. "I thought I'd need Scrub for this, but the job Amy did on you is amazing. I think you can do it on your own."

"Do what?" asked Labyrinth.

Lisa told her.

Faultline's mouth dropped open. "You have to be kidding," she said.

Lisa just smiled her vulpine smile.

They stood in the empty lot. It had been devastated by the Leviathan attack, and had since been cleared of most of the rubble. The Christner Initiative would not touch this area for a little while.

"So who owns this particular block of land?" asked Faultline; she had a suspicion, given that Lisa had brought them specifically here.

Lisa grinned. "In the end, me," she confirmed. "I want legal control of whatever Labyrinth manages to achieve here."

"So what do I do?" asked Labyrinth. "How do I do this?"

"Start by making a wall," said Lisa. "Something that doesn't have a door in it. Be very plain about that. It doesn't have a door, window or other opening."

Labyrinth nodded. "I can do that," she said. She looked at the centre of the lot, and all of a sudden, granite flagstones began to emerge from the ground. They flipped outward, forming a paved square some twenty feet across. And then the ones in the middle rose from the ground, revealing themselves to be blocks. More blocks built themselves out of the first ones, until a solid stone wall fifteen feet wide, ten feet high and three feet thick loomed over them.

It had taken maybe fifteen seconds from beginning to end.

"God damn," muttered Faultline. "That was impressive, even for you."

Labyrinth smiled. "I'm still discovering what I can really do with my powers."

Lisa grinned. "Okay. You've locked off that wall? It's not going to change any more?"

Labyrinth nodded. "Not until I tell it to go away."

"Good," said Lisa. "Now open a door in it."

Labyrinth flinched. "But ... you told me not to."

"No," said Lisa. "I told you not to make it with one. Now I'm telling you to make a door in it."
Labyrinth frowned. "But that'll break ... there'll be ... I won't have ..." She looked at Lisa. "The doorway won't have an other side. Where will it go to?"

Lisa frowned. "Can you assign a place?"

"Oh, sure,' said Labyrinth. "But there are so many choices. Which one do I pick?"

Lisa pointed at Hope. "Can you assign it to wherever she comes from?"

Labyrinth frowned. "You mean, you're not from Brockton Bay?"

Hope shook her head. "Nope. From some other Earth."

"Okay, then," said Labyrinth. "I can tell it to go to wherever you're from."

She faced the wall and concentrated. Gradually, the blocks in the middle thrust outward, deformed, made the shape of a doorway. Stone folded away to reveal wooden planks, roughly nailed together. As they watched, it improved; the wood smoothed itself, a veneer painted itself over the top, the door acquired carvings and scrollwork. A brass handle folded itself out of the wood.

Labyrinth drew a deep breath. "Right," she said. "It goes to wherever Hope's from."

Hope stared at her, then at the door. "That's ... home, on the other side?" she said faintly.

Labyrinth nodded. "Near as I can tell," she said.

Hope took a step toward it.

Amy clutched at her hand. "Hope," she said desperately. "Please don't leave me."

Hope turned back to Amy and took her in her arms. "Sweetie," she said softly. "I am needed here. You need me. I would never leave you in need. You know that."

Amy clung to her. "But if you step through, you might not want to come back," she said, her voice muffled by Hope's shoulder.

Hope looked at Labyrinth. "That's stable?" she asked. "The door? The wall?"

Labyrinth nodded. "It will hold indefinitely."

"Good," said Hope. She looked at Amy's face, and kissed her. "Wanna come with?" she asked.

Amy stared at her. "You'll take me with you?" she whispered.

Hope grinned. "Well, I'm coming back, duh," she said. "But I thought you might want to see what my world is like. Whatever is where Brockton Bay is, here."

Amy grabbed her in a bone-crushing hug. "Of course I'll come with you," she said. "I'll go anywhere with you. Forever."

Hope giggled. "Well, I don't want to spend forever in there. I've got an appointment with the Governor of New York tomorrow."

She took Amy's hand, and they stepped up to the door. Hope reached out and turned the handle.

It opened.
They stepped through.
In which Hope travels back to her own world, and has a reunion with an old friend

Chapter Notes

This post is composed mainly of a chat conducted between myself and Jiopaba, who plays the character of Robin Maestra (also a GURPS character). All editing mistakes are mine.

They flew south and east, over an undulating landscape. A highway cut through the trees near the coastline. Behind them, the blocky granite wall with the door in it stood incongruously atop a small rise.

Amy had been initially surprised that an alternate version of Brockton Bay did not exist on the site; however, the terrain was subtly different, and the eponymous Bay did not actually exist as such, looking more like a marsh.

However, as interesting as this was, they wanted to find civilisation and make sure this really was the world Hope had been born in. So they followed the road.

It was a small convenience store with a service station attached. In fact, Hope would have overflown it altogether, save that there was a jaunty sign outside that read, "CyberCafe!"

Hope landed on the road outside, and she and Amy looked at the sign, and at the roadhouse that it was attached to. Neither looked very prepossessing. But a cyber-cafe would allow internet access, and that was what Hope really needed. She needed to know.

With Amy close beside her, she walked across the rough asphalt of the roadway, on to the smooth concrete, and then pushed open the glass door. A bell attached to the door clanked a few times, then gave up.

The old lady behind the counter peered at them over smudged glasses. "Can I help you?" she asked. "Oh, you're a pretty one, aren't you?" she added, catching a proper look at Hope.

Hope smiled in return. "Can we use your computer, please?" she asked politely.

"Certainly, certainly," said the old lady. "I'll just unlock it for you, shall I?"

She bustled out from behind the counter and inserted a key into the front of the flat box of the computer; turning it produced a click from inside.

"Can't have people just using it, no, we can't have that," she said on her way back to the counter. "That'll be a dollar every ten minutes, thanks."

Amy shrugged, and dug out her purse. She pulled out a twenty, glanced at Hope, who shrugged in return, and handed it to the woman. Hope leaned across and kissed Amy gently. "Thanks, sweetie," she said softly. Amy smiled and hugged her.
They had more than three hours to play with, but it took nearly ten minutes of that for the wheezing old machine to stagger to its feet and establish an internet connection.

"Christ," muttered Amy. "Please tell me that this is not the cutting edge of this world's computer technology."

Hope grinned. "Oh, no," she said. "I've seen much better. Never used one, of course, but they exist." She peered closely as the logo formed on the screen. "Wow. Windows 95? I didn't know they even had computers running that anymore."

"This one's barely running it at all," commented Amy dryly.

It was true; every keystroke required a delay before the computer registered it. But slowly, carefully, Hope managed to type in the site name she wanted. Hitting Enter, she waited.

And then the webpage formed, detail by frustrating detail. It took more minutes, but finally it was there, on the screen. Amy stared. "Wow," she said. "The Hope Foundation?"

Hope nodded. "It was set up by people who are grateful to me for helping them. Each of them donates just a little bit in, and lets me use it as spending money." She grinned. "The card I used to access it is somewhere back in PRT headquarters, I think. I'll bring it next time. But for now ..."

She pulled up another screen, and waited for it to load. It was the member forums. She scrolled through the last two months' worth of messages, showing that people were becoming more and more concerned about her absence.

Hi, everyone, she typed. I'm okay, really. I've been away, and I won't be staying long, but I'll be coming back on every now and again. Hugs to everyone.

She grinned at Amy. "Hopefully, that will stop them worrying."

In New York City, a girl lounged in front of a computer. She had the fastest internet connection available, and she still thought it woefully slow.

She had iridescent blue hair, wore a Yankees t-shirt and sweatpants. She was less than five and a half feet tall, and skinny with it.

She'd been lounging there for precisely fifteen seconds, and was bored already.

A fly buzzed across the room.

Her computer pinged. She read the message as it popped up in the lower right-hand corner of her screen.

New message to Hope Foundation site. Member: Hope.

"Oh, hell no, buddy," she muttered, sitting up and typing on her keyboard. "You do not get to hack my friend's account."

She was a reasonably good computer user; with the right program, she located the sender's IP. It was farther up the coast, north of Boston.

Let's see now ...

On a hunch, she pulled up listings for cybercafes in that area.
And there it was, right in the middle of the target zone.

"Gotcha."

Standing up, she stretched, went and changed clothes, and headed downstairs. Turning northward, she started walking.

Upstairs, the fly had travelled less than a millimetre from the moment when she had sat up.

"Well," said Hope, "that seems to be —"

And then there was someone sitting in her lap, pulling her face into an admittedly not very prominent bosom.

"Hey!" came a jubilant voice in her ear, "look who I found!"

Hope grabbed her, hugged her. "Robin!" she exclaimed with joy.

"Hope!"

"I missed you!" Hope hugged her tightly. "Missed you, missed you, missed you!"

"Hope!" Robin paused for approximately two-fifths of a second. "Wait, we're not doing that joke? Oh, okay. I missed you too! You've been gone for like ten years."

Hope looked a little taken aback. "What, really? It's only been two months for me."

She leaned over, checked the date on the computer. "No, it's still 2011." Then she turned back to give Robin a mock glare. "You scared me."

Robin rubbed the back of her neck a bit. "Ahaha... well, maybe not actually ten years. It feels like it's been that long though! It's not my fault my powers are weird. I had to walk over half this town to find you, and the fact that it only took three minutes didn't mean it didn't take nine hours."

Hope grinned. "Good point. Sorry to make you look around like this." She turned to Amy, not releasing her hug. "Amy, this is Robin Maestra, one of my best friends. Robin, this is Amelia Claire Lavere. She's my girlfriend." Amy raised an eyebrow. Hope grinned. "Okay, one of my girlfriends."

Robin raised an eyebrow. "One of? Huh... wait, you got a harem before me? That's not fair."

Hope looked slightly embarrassed. "It was an accident, I swear."

Amy grinned. "Yeah, I followed her home and she had to keep me."

Robin laughed. "Damn. I wish cute chicks would follow me home." She waited a beat. "Well, cute chicks who aren't like, fangirls."

"You still get those, do you?" asked Hope.

"Oh yeah," she sighed. She raised an eyebrow at Hope, and gestured at Amy with her head. "So, are you dating your cult now?"

Hope put her hand over her face. "No. Amy's someone different. Please tell me the cult's gone away."
Robin laughed again and shifted a bit, since she didn't seem inclined to hop off Hope's lap and Hope didn't seem inclined to move her. "You wish. I think they're trying to recruit. If they get a million followers they can become a tax-exempt religion I guess. They're a ways off though."

Hope shook her head again. "They mean well, they really do, but ... gah."

Amy looked at Robin with interest. "So you're a cape too then?"

To Robin's interest, despite being described as Hope's girlfriend – and there was a story, she was sure – this Amy didn't seemed particularly jealous about seeing Hope with another girl on her lap.

Robin glanced over at Amy quizzically. "Ah? You must be from out of town if you have to ask that... where exactly have you been, little Hope, eh? I gave an interview on CNN last month."

"Ooh, I have to see that," said Hope. "Yeah, I've been out of town. Amy's from ... there. I've been busy." She started laughing. "This was gonna sound so silly."

Robin raised an eyebrow. "Try me."

Hope was still giggling. "I've been in another dimension, trying to save the world."

To Robin, Amy seemed to take this preposterous statement totally seriously. Amy took Hope's hand. "And succeeding."

Robin nodded. "I spent twenty minutes yesterday tying braids into a squirrel's hair." She did not elaborate.

Amy looked at Robin, her brow furrowing. "Wait, what? Braiding a squirrel's hair? What .. how ... why...?"

Hope giggled. "She does this."

Robin hummed for a moment in thought and winked at Amy. "I have infinite free time. But anyway, that's... actually not the weirdest thing people suggested might have happened to you. And I know you wouldn't lie... at least not without a reason good enough that I would agree with you lying to me and so act as if I believed it anyway, so... that's cool. What's this other world like?"

Hope shrugged. "A bit nastier, but there are some really, really nice people there. Powers have been around since the eighties, and there are monsters that crawl out of the ocean or dig out of the ground or descend from the upper atmosphere every few months and do their best to kill thousands or millions of people till they're driven away."

Robin winced. Amy looked totally unfazed at this description of her world.

"Ouch," said Robin. "That sounds... crappy. You can always ask if you need help, you know. Don't know how much good I could do, but I'm sure there's lots of folks who would lend a hand if you explained the situation. You've got a certain way about you. Seemed like you have it under control though if you're coming back here for whatever reason."

"Oh, I'm back because I finally got a way back," said Hope cheerfully. "I just wanted to make sure this was really home. But I can't stay long. I'm meeting the Governor of New York tomorrow to present a plan to end world hunger, disease, stuff like that."

She frowned. "I appreciate the offer, but I really don't know if there would be much that could help."
These things are walking weapons of mass destruction. They don't even dare try nukes on them. One of them, Leviathan, sank Kyushu and Newfoundland."

Robin blinked. "Kyushu as in... the third largest island of Japan? Wow that sounds horrible. Worst thing that's happened around here lately was an oil spill. Which is... bad, but not that bad."

"Oil spill?" said Amy. "I can help with that." She paused. "I mean, ordinary oil, right? Not some tinker created stuff?"

Hope caressed her cheek fondly. "Sweetie, I keep telling you, We don't have Tinkers here."

Robin smiled at Amy and blinked at the unusual term. "Er, yeah, it's normal oil. It's an ongoing thing though. It's not like a tanker broke open and dumped oil everywhere. It's more like someone knocked a hole in the world under the ocean and now it's venting oil everywhere."

Hope blinked. "Oh. I'd love to help with the cleanup ... but I do have to go back tonight."

Amy frowned. "How far down?"

Hope looked at Amy. "You got an idea?"

"Uh... let me check." Robin disappeared between one eyeblink and the next.

Amy blinked. "Wow, she really is a cape."

Hope grinned. "Yup."

Hope tapped on the keyboard, tried to access a news service for anything about the spill. The computer started grinding away. Hope sighed. "This is gonna take a while."

Amy grinned at Hope. "I thought you didn't have sex partners here."

Hope giggled. "No, Robin and I aren't that way. She's just ... enthusiastic."

"Oh," said Amy. "I see. She was that." She kissed Hope. "She's nice. A little flighty, but nice." She frowned. "Is she a teleporter?"

Hope shook her head. "No, sweetie. She just speeds her own personal time up, or slows it down, whatever is more useful to her." She smiled. "We both have weird worldviews, which is probably why we get along so well."

Amy grinned. "I can see that. There's a really bizarre kind of chemistry between you."

Hope giggled. "The sort of chemistry that you normally get in a mad Tinker's lab, right?"

Amy's eyes twinkled. "I didn't say that ..."

Two minutes after she disappeared, Robin was abruptly there once more. Instead of parking herself on Hope's lap this time, she instead pulled out a chair to sit down. She was wearing different clothing, and held a small manilla folder full of paper, which she laid down on the desk.

"Okay, so I went to the company who was originally drilling to get the data, but they were too slow, so I just took one of the public information packets and then measured it myself. The source of the spill was 220 meters deep."
Hope opened the folder and started looking through it.

"That's doable," said Amy. "With a pressurised suit, with his armour mods attached ..."

Hope looked at her. "You're thinking Tecton."

Amy nodded. "I'm thinking Tecton."

Hope looked concerned. "Would we be able to borrow him?"

"For what it's worth," said Robin, "I can get at it myself. That's how I got the data on how deep it is. I just took a meter stick and measured it by moving the water out of my way. There's just no way to plug it, since it's a big ass hole in the bottom of the ocean."

Amy grinned. "We have a friend. He's really good at earthmoving."

Robin nodded. "That could work. We tried something like that with this one guy who 'commands the elements' or some pretentious crap. He couldn't get down there and be capable of moving earth at the same time though, and he's too much of a pretty boy to get in a submarine, so... I think his name was Foursquare or something."

[Author's Note: this is a dig at another character of mine, an elemental controller called Quattro. Thanks a heap, Jiopaba.]

[Co-Author's Note: You're welcome.]

"Alternatively," said Amy. "Do they really need this oil?"

Hope looked at her attentively. "What do you have in mind, sweetie?"

Robin shrugged. "I don't know. Did it matter? I guess it might... I could find out. Stopping it would be plenty at this point, but if we could repair the drill and start safely extracting the oil again or something, that'd be nice. I don't keep up much on economics."

Amy grinned. "Oil isn't much different from containment foam, when you come to think about it."

"Oh, economics," said Hope. "We can fix that for you. There's this guy I know ...

Robin shrugged. "I could just read a book on it if I want to know."

Amy shook her head, trying not to grin. "Oh, god. Accord would love this world. No Endbringers, no Slaughterhouse Nine. Just room to plan."

Then she looked back at Robin. "But no, I can plug that hole. How wide was it, how deep did it go into the ocean floor before it hits the oil reservoir?"

"Here," said Robin. "That's what I stole these for." She flipped open the folder and slid it across the table to Amy. "It's the internal company report on the oil spill. I guess they're actually underrepresenting how bad it was in the news?"

Amy looked it over, and bit her lip. "Damn." She shook her head. "If we'd gotten here a week ago ...

Robin didn't disappear so much as shift into a different posture. There was no intervening state in
which she moved, but she was suddenly holding a glass of water and offering it to Amy. The ice in
the glass made a cracking noise as if it had just been put in.

"Here. I had to get bottled water since taps move too slow. Hope you don't mind." She paused.
"Actually that's a backwards sentiment isn't it? I guess most people aren't from a town where the tap
water was super yummy."

Amy smiled. "Thank you. Um ... " She drank about half of it. Then she carefully spat in it and stirred
it with her finger. The water turned a murky red as she did so.

Handing it back to Robin, she said, "Can you get this really deep in the vent? Dump it into the oil
and then get out. It should cause a reaction, turn it into a solid foam, block the vent." She paused.
"I've given it enough iterations to get big enough to block the vent without turning all the oil down
there into foam."

Hope smiled, watching her. She seemed entirely unsurprised.

Robin blinked at the strange actions, but after a quick blinking movement accepted it back. She
blinked again and it vanished. "Sure. I can go do that now if it's time sensitive I guess? It's kind of a
boring trip though, so I'd like to hang out for at least a few more minutes before I make it again."

Amy nodded. "It's good for a bit." She smiled at Robin. "Is your hair natural?"

Robin smiled back in turn. "Wouldn't you like to know?" She paused for a beat and then shrugged.
"Since you want to know, I'll tell you. It was natural, because if it isn't there's no way it'd be worth
the effort to re-dye it every thirty minutes."

She gestured at Hope. "Ascending into the form of a crazy beautiful crystal-winged angel kid was a
weird reaction, but I suppose everyone was changed a little bit. I can't get a tan anymore."

Amy nodded. "That could be a pain." She grinned. "I was just thinking. Newter would be so
jealous."

Hope giggled. "He would." She turned to Robin. "He's a friend of ours who dyes his bright blue, for
fun."

Amy nodded. "That, and his orange skin."

Robin winced a bit. "Neuter? Was he best friends with Spay?"

"But you changed that," said Hope. She giggled at Robin. "No, Newter as in newt, a sort of lizard.
He has a tail. And he can climb on walls."

Amy sighed. "And he's awesome in bed."

Robin nodded. "Ah, I see, I see. That's interesting I guess. We have some supers like that." She
paused. "The weird appearance thing that is, not the awesome in bed thing."

Hope raised an eyebrow at Amy. "I thought you changed his skin colour."

Amy shook her head. "Gave him the ability to change back and forth. It takes him about an hour to
get done."

Hope grinned and hugged Amy. "That was really nice of you, sweetie," she said. Amy smiled and
kissed her.
Robin blinked at the affection. "I'd ask what's up with that, but I know I'm not patient enough to listen to the whole story in normal time. You'll have to write it down for me some time."

Hope giggled. "I will."

Amy grinned at Robin. "We've done some things together. Bonded, you might say."

Hope leaned her head against Amy's. "There was the time that Noelle ate me."

Amy shuddered. "Yeah, no. Let's not go there."


Hope shook her head. "No, ate as in ate me. Swallowed me."

Robin nodded. "I don't judge."

Hope tried again. "I would have been dead or worse if it hadn't been for Amy."

Robin hummed again and shrugged. "Ah, I guess that sounds pretty serious then. You aren't dead though, so that works out. It'd suck if you died. There's only like five thousand interesting people on this planet."

Amy nodded in agreement. "I really, really, really love Hope."

Hope held her affectionately. "I love you too, sweetie."

"Gaaaaaaaay."

Amy shook her head. "No, I'm bi, and she's asexual. Get it right."

"Where all the heterosexual people at?" Robin looked around theatrically. "Anybody? Anybody? No? I'm Robin-sexual, so I guess that's nobody in here. Ah well."

Amy chuckled at Robin's joke.

"So if I'm asexual, and you're bisexual, what's Lisa?" Hope asked of Amy.

Amy frowned. "Whatever works for her, I guess."

"Enlightened Narcissism was where it's at," Robin declared. "I'm so jealous of people who can clone themselves."

"Ooh," said Hope. "We should introduce her to Omake."

"I know that word, but I don't understand it in that context." Robin stared at Hope through half-lidded eyes.

"That's Noelle," said Amy helpfully. "The same person who ate her." She paused. "Don't worry, she's all better now. She doesn't do that anymore."

Robin waved her hand. "No thanks. I have a lot of fetishes but vore isn't one of them."

Hope grinned. "She touches you, makes a clone of herself, with the other person's powers. So if she touched you, she could make one of herself with your powers."
Robin paused in surprise. "Huh. That'd be cool..." She blinked into a slightly different pose again and sighed. "On second thought though, I don't know how well that would work out. We might lock each other into maximum time dilation if we saw each other as a threat. Escalation between us would be weird."

"She wouldn't see you as a threat, I don't think," said Amy. "Besides, I have it on the very best of authority that she quite likes kissing girls."

Hope giggled.

Robin hummed again. "Hmm... well, I might be interested then. If nothing else, it'd be interesting to be able to show someone else what the world looked like from my perspective." She reached into a pocket on her bomber jacket and pulled out a deck of cards, then scattered them into the air fifty two pick up card style. "If I didn't have to come back down to find someone to talk to, I might not come back down at all though."

She blinked again and the cards were suddenly laid out on the table in four suits from low to high, fanned out neatly.

Amy nodded, impressed. "You do that time thing well," she said.

"Actually," said Robin, "I have very little control over it where it really counts. It makes life super boring."

"Wait a minute," said Hope. "You can stop your own personal time altogether, right? Or rather, make it infinite."

Robin went to nod but then paused. "I'm... not actually sure. It would take a really long time to notice if anything was still happening if pause myself though. If it's not infinite, it's close enough as makes no difference on a human timescale at least."

Hope nodded. "It's just that we know a guy who can freeze people and things in time. Like, he touches you, and it's ten minutes later."

Amy nodded. "Clockblocker."

"Yeah," said Hope. "I wonder how his power would react with yours?"

Robin oohed in enthusiasm at the thoughts this knowledge elicited.

"Dunno. I know I can't quite speed myself up infinitely. I hit three thousand to one dilation and then advancing further takes a discouraging amount of energy. I can go higher, but there's no point. I don't know if I could actually hit Warp 10 though."

She paused, thinking about it. "If my control can reach infinity then our powers would either cancel or I would ignore his. If it's not, I'd probably be stopped. If he's not actually stopping you but slowing you to an extreme degree, I might move in slow motion, or only be ten times as fast, depending on relative degree."

Amy nodded. "It might just be a no-sell. No matter what happens, the thinkers and tinkers will want to see it happening, though."

Robin nodded. "Also, haha, Clockblocker? That's good."

Hope nodded. "I had to have it explained to me. He apparently snuck it past the PR guy by
announcing it live on TV before they had a chance to ask him."

Robin grinned. "Nice. Sounds like something I'd have chosen for myself if I was capable of maintaining a secret identity."

Hope shrugged, eliciting a tinkle from her wings. "I've never needed one."

"Yeah, it's a lifestyle thing. Some folks can pull it off, pretend to be normal. You never wanted to be normal though, and I don't have enough patience to live life one to one."

Amy nodded. "I used to maintain one. Then Mom and the others decided that we were going to be all avant-garde and the way of the future, so we unmasked." She didn't say any more; Hope hugged her closely.

Robin nodded at Amy. "That sounds like a crap deal to me. At least I got a choice. It's just easier to pick up new hobbies than it is to suppress my power twenty four seven to pretend to be normal."

Amy looked at Robin. "After we unmasked, a villain killed my uncle's girlfriend in her own home," she said quietly. "It drove the team apart." Hope held her close again.

Robin glared down at the table with a frown. "That sucks. If I'd'a been there I'd have disassembled that guy right where he stood."

"It got bad for a while," Amy admitted. Then she leaned her head into Hope's shoulder. "But I'm with Hope now, and everyone knows who I am, and I don't care."

Robin smiled up at them. "Yeah, I can see it worked out for you in the end. I'm happy for you."

Hope smiled back at Robin. "She's an awesome healer, and a biokinetic too. You should see the bugs she can make." She paused. "You might want to do something about that oil sometime too, you know," she added with a grin.

Robin sighed and shrugged. "Yeah yeah. I could use a bite to eat and some sleep anyway. I'll be right back." She disappeared.

Amy shook her head. "She really does live life to every second, doesn't she? She'd leave Velocity standing."

Hope nodded. "You're not wrong, sweetie." She paused. "About the oil on the surface?"

"Ah," said Amy. "I can whip up something that'll eat that, leave carbon dioxide, hydrogen, trace elements. Will that do?"

"Can't see why not," said Hope. She grinned. "Ooh, I just had an idea."

Amy looked at her suspiciously. "What idea is this?"

Hope's grin got wider. "We take her back with us. Show her Brockton Bay."

Amy's eyes opened wide. "Oh god. I don't know who would be more shell-shocked. Her or them."

Hope giggled. "Yeah, isn't it great?"

Amy gave Hope a quizzical look. "Okay, I have a question. Without cape powers, without the Nine and other stuff happening, without the Endbringers, even allowing for no tinker tech ... why is this
Hope considered that. "You do realise," she said, "not all conflict comes from powers. Not all devastation comes from the Endbringers. And they tell me Jack Slash was a nasty customer even before he got powers."

Amy shook her head. "Not getting it."

Hope sighed, turned to the computer, and typed in a search query. Amy watched her. "What's 'nine-eleven'?' she asked. "Is that like 9-1-1, emergency police call?"

Hope shook her head sadly as the page gradually came up. "I'm afraid not," she said softly, and moved aside so that Amy could read the article.

Amy started reading through, her face becoming more and more horrified as she did so. She looked up at one point. "This was nothing compared to an Endbringer attack ... and the Nine killed more people in one day ... even Nilbog, in Ellisburg ... but in a world without powers ... oh god."

Hope held her close. "Yeah," she said softly. "We have our monsters too. It's just that, where you come from, since powers started emerging, you forgot the monsters you had before."

"Be fair," said Amy, trying to smile, "I was born ten years after Scion was first spotted."

Hope giggled and kissed her on the tip of the nose.

Robin blinked back in, but seemed to stutter to a flickering stop halfway across the room and transition into normal walking speed. She approached the counter and purchased a drink, paying with a card, and then came back to sit down.

Hope smiled to see her. "How did it go?" she asked.

"Well, whatever that stuff is, it seemed to be working. I only hung around for like ten seconds to see because bailing that much water was boring, but it did seemed to work."

Amy smiled. "It's just a simple bacterium. But I hate to ask you this ... can you go back again and put something else in the oil on the ocean, to eat it?"

Robin smacked her head straight down on to the table, without seeming to hold back much. However, as she did so, she darted out a hand to catch her falling cup of coffee. In the same motion, without seeming to look, she scooped the spilling liquid back into the cup before it hit the floor "Yeah, sure," she said, her forehead still flat to the table.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry," said Amy, her voice genuinely apologetic. "I meant to give you the oil eater bug when you went the first time, but I forgot."

Robin shrugged and leaned back to drink her coffee. "Ah, it's fine. It's a little annoying, but I'm pretty patient by now. It's just that after my powers kicked in, nothing was fast to me. I can only enjoy the travel time in the sense of looking at the scenery, not the 'I'm moving forty thousand miles an hour' sense. And it still took thirty hours from my perspective."

"I wish it was closer," said Hope. "I'd do it myself."

Robin blinked and slid a bottle of water across the table to Amy. "Eh, I don't mind really. It's a little tedious, but I honestly have infinite time. If you did it, it'd use up eight hours of a potentially finite
amount you have in your life. If I do it, it uses up thirty of my numberless infinities." She grinned. "My time comes cheap."

Amy smiled and took another drink. When she put it down, the backwash was rapidly turning a deep green. She screwed the cap back on, shook the bottle up, and handed it to Robin. "Pour that into the spill. It should break it down into see-oh-two, hydrogen and whatever else is in there."

Robin stowed the bottle in her pocket. "Alright. I'll be right back then." She went to move but then paused. "For what it's worth, it's not as bad as it used to be. I discovered recently that since I can pick up a bicycle, I can take it with me when I speed up time. That and finding out you can download a copy of Wikipedia to an iPad saves me a lot of grief these days." And then she was gone.

The old lady moved slowly around from behind the counter and approached Hope and Amy. "Your friend moves around quickly, doesn't she?" she said.

"That she does," agreed Hope. She stood. "Would you like to sit down?" she asked. "You look like you have sore feet."

"They'll be sore no matter whether I'm sitting or standing, honey, but thank you very much," said the old lady. She carefully lowered herself into the chair. "Oh, that is a bit better," she said.

Amy reached out and took her hand. "Would you like to not have sore feet?" she asked quietly.

The old lady peered at her. "Oh, I'd love that, dear, but that's never going to happen for me. They're sore when I go to bed, and they're sore when I get up."

Amy smiled and glanced at Hope; Hope nodded. Amy concentrated just a little.

The old lady's face cleared dramatically. "Oh my," she said. "That feels wonderful." She lifted her foot, put it down again. Then she peered at Amy. "What did you do?"

Amy smiled; Hope put her arm around her. "I just did what I thought needed doing," she said. "I hope it helps."

Standing up, the lady leaned over and gave Amy a smacking kiss on the cheek. "Oh, it will," she declared. "Thank you again." Much lighter on her feet, she went back behind the counter to serve a group of customers who had just come in.

Amy smiled at the old lady's retreating back. "You're welcome," she smiled.

Robin blinked back in, wearing a new outfit again. She had on a light blue zip up hoodie over a t-shirt with a picture of a robot on it, over top cargo pants. "Alright, that's done. Would've been quicker but I stopped to help put out a fire."

Hope grinned. "We didn't notice." she said. She gave Robin a quick hug. "And thanks." She paused. "Listen. Got a proposition for you. How would you like to come see where Amy comes from?"

Robin paused for a moment, and then hummed in concentration. "Ah... give me a couple days to think about it? I'd need to set my affairs in order in case I somehow manage to die over there." Then she was gone.

"A couple of days?" asked Amy. "We can't wait that long, can we?"
Hope grinned. "A couple of days for her, sweetie. A lot shorter for us."

Robin flashed back in wearing a fancy looking suit with jacket and skirt. "Quicker than I thought, actually. I had to stop by and see my lawyer, but he was out, so I just wrote up a new will and some instructions in case I don't send word within a year of one to one time."

She paused, looking at them both. "Oh, wait, I didn't actually say, did I? Yeah, I think it'd be realDly cool to visit this place. I want to see what Hope's been up to anyway."

Hope grinned at Amy. "What did I tell you?"

Amy stuck out her tongue at Hope; Hope giggled. Then she turned to Robin. "It's up the coast a little way. Middle of nowhere, really."

"That's cool." Robin reached under the table and pulled out a large backpack and a duffel bag. "Is gold an acceptable currency on this world? Also, do you guys have AC current? I'd hate to have to rely on my hand generator to keep my iPad charged, even if I can't use it when it's plugged in anyway."

"Well, yes and yes," said Hope. "Most paper currency is actually still the same, actually; anything pre-1985 should be good."

"Oh, beyond kickass... oh, oh!" Robin blinked in exclamation. "Double oh, they released a new iPad while you were away. It's totally sweet. I love this thing. Steve Jobs is the best."

"Cool," said Hope. "I've never owned one, but I hear they're very nice."

"Oooh, ooh, ooh," said Amy to Robin. "I want to see you and Legend in a race."

Robin hummed for a moment. "Is he... Legend- wait for it... -dary?"

Hope giggled. "He's a really nice guy. And he can fly really fast. Really, really fast."

"Don't forget the lasers," said Amy dryly.

"Sounds cool. Hey, should I bring anything I might not already have? Do you guys need some supplies or something? Food, munitions, music? ... sex toys? I can get almost anything but heavy fissionables." She paused. "Actually, I bet I could get those too with the right justification. Might not be legal though."

Amy seemed to choke for a moment. "Um, we're good," she said in a high pitched voice.

"Suit yourself," said Robin. She looked at Hope. "He carries lasers, does he?"

"No," said Hope, "he shoots lasers from his hand. They turn corners."

Robin tapped a suspicious looking object on the table for a moment, but it was gone when Amy looked. "Really? That didn't sound very... well... uh... law-abiding to the rules of physics, but actually that sounds like bullshit considering what we are."

Amy shook her head. "Legend and physics haven't been on speaking terms since he got his powers."

"Actually," said Hope. "What movies have come out recently on DVD?"

Robin pulled out the aforementioned iPad and pulled up some of her saved data before sliding it across the table to Hope. "That's this month's releases."
Hope manipulated it with a little more skill than the last time Robin saw her trying to use one of those things. "Oooh," she said. "Bring it. This should be fun."

"Er, wait, did you say on DVD?" said Robin. Then she shrugged. "Actually, it doesn't really matter. I have a standing agreement with some guys in Hollywood who can hook me up with screening copies of films in exchange for a few favors. Anyway, that's the new movies."

Sweet," said Hope. "We can always come back and get more. But I guess Lisa and the others will be waiting on us. We should get back soon."

"You know Lisa will know it's us the moment we go to open the door," said Amy.

"Hrrmm..." Robin squinted a bit as she worked on the iPad. "Why does the internet have to be so slow? America's internet sucks everywhere but like three places."

Hope grinned at her. "Robin, sweetie, everything and everyone is slow compared to you."

Robin sighed. "Yeah... OH! Google was rolling out this awesome Google Fiber thing though. I bought a house in Kansas City just to get in on that. It's thousand megabit or some nonsense. It's almost faster to pull a file off the internet than it is to save it to an external hard drive over there. They're still working out the kinks, but it's incredible." She shuddered in almost sexual glee.

Amy frowned. "Google? I've heard of them. They were going to be the next big thing, then the Simurgh happened."

Robin stared blankly at Amy for a moment. "Your world doesn't have Google? Wow... whatever this Simurgh thing is, I want to kick its stupid face in now."

"So does everyone else, trust me," said Hope. "She's one of the Endbringers."


"She floats in orbit," said Amy. "In full view. Asleep or something. Then once in a while she flies down and causes people to go insane, and wrecks things."

Hope nodded. "They tried firing missiles at her once. She took them, made them into a bigger missile, and fired it back. The crater's still radioactive."

"That's utterly bullshit. I'll have to look into that while I'm there. No clue if my power would make any sort of difference, but it's not like it'd cost me to see if there's anything I can do to help." Robin frowned in thought, but got over it after half a second or so. "Anyway, don't you guys have to talk to the Mayor of New York or something before we go?"

Hope shook her head. "No, I've got an appointment with the Governor tomorrow, back home in Amy's world." She grinned. "There's this guy Accord, I think I mentioned him? He makes the most amazing plans. He made one to fix world hunger, disease, crime, everything. I'm talking to the Governor, so he can get me an introduction to the Secretary-General of the UN."

Amy grinned and nudged her. "You nearly said 'back home', didn't your?" she said teasingly.

Hope smiled and leaned against her. "And what if I did?" she asked softly.

Amy kissed her gently. "Nothing," she said, but there was a smile on her face.
Robin grinned at the two, making an utterly ridiculous face. "Awwww, you're just adorable!" She waved her hand vaguely. "It's like watching puppies in a basket. You two are totally stupid for each other."


Robin nodded. "I can tell... I think I've mentioned that before... maybe? It's been a while. Anyway... I'm in decent with the governor, but the United Nations and I rarely get along these days, so I don't think there's much I can do to speed up your meeting. Which is a shame, since tomorrow is like four years away, but normal people are stupidly patient like that so it probably doesn't even bother you I guess."

"Oh, I'm good with y- our United Nations," Hope said. "I get along with the SecGen really well. It's just the other one I haven't met yet."

Robin nodded. "You know Hope, if you prefer the other place more, you don't really have to keep referring to here as your home. It's a big universe, and while some people will miss you, there's obviously nothing stopping you from visiting. If you think of that place as home, you can call it such. It's not like I'm going to be offended on behalf of the world. This place is boring anyway."

She laid her arms on the table and rested with her chin on them, staring at Hope through half-lidded eyes. "... multiverse. Megaverse. Whatever."

Hope sighed. "I still sort of think of here as home. I spent six months being a superhero here. Everyone knows me."

Amy hugged her strongly. "Everyone there loves you too, silly. Didn't you notice?"

Hope looked a little embarrassed. "I ... guess?"

Amy grinned at Robin. "This one. She ends up in Brockton Bay, all confused and so cute. She gets press-ganged into the Wards. So then she proceeds to break nearly all the rules, and ends up with nearly every villain gang in the city eating out of her hand. And she doesn't realise what sort of influence she has." She shook her head and kissed Hope fondly.

Hope kissed her back. "It isn't quite like that."

Amy raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

"The Merchants never liked me."

"The Merchants were drug-addled dicks. And look where they are now."

"Okay, the Nine."

Amy shuddered. "No, not the Nine. They are not acceptable as a comparison. And anyway, Mimi, Riley and Doctor Manton."

Hope rolled her eyes. "Okay, fine, you have a point."

Hope looked around at the sound of camera phones clicking. Oh, she thought. People have finally realised who I am.

And then she realised that the camera weren't pointing at her after all. At some point, Robin had
disappeared and changed into a ridiculously overblown 'Founding Fathers' costume, and was now standing with one foot up on her chair. A live hawk rested on one leather-glove clad fist and she raised an American flag aloft with the other.

She looked around as Hope and Amy stared at her.

"Oh, don't mind me."

Hope grinned. "We're boring you, aren't we?"

Robin grinned back at Hope. "Actually I do this every day."

Hope shrugged. "I can believe it. Where do you get the hawk from?"

"I stole it from the zoo. It took a while to convince it not to claw my eyes out, but it's small enough I can carry it with me in stoptime. I'll put it back in a bit. I just figured since we were going soon, this would be my last chance to make a ridiculous scene for a while."

Hope giggled. "You really expect that you won't be making ridiculous scenes in Earth Bet?"

Robin smiled even wider. "Maybe, maybe not. If I'm gone for too long my fans might be disappointed though. Something they'll just have to live with I suppose." She shifted her hand a bit and the hawk screeched at her with a very distinctive noise. "I would have gone with a bald eagle, but those are harder to find, never domesticated, and actually this red tailed hawk makes the bald eagle noise anyway."

Amy just couldn't seem to make a comment. Robin appeared to have really stunned her this time.

"Real bald eagles sound totally stupid," Robin went on. "I want to laugh at them every time I hear one." She nodded seriously.

"I think they're cute," said Hope cheerfully.

"You think everything's cute," said Amy with a grin.

Robin laughed. "I was going to say that! I almost did, oh man. That's great."

Amy giggled and offered Robin a high-five.

"The crystal-winged Hope was a creature whose fundamental nature time did not change, it seemed." Robin smiled and tossed the flag into the air in a spinning movement so she could high five Amy. As it fell, she snatched it out of the air and twirled it once more before resuming her pose.

She turned and glanced at the flag. "Man, I totally fumbled that. It took like six tries to catch that thing."

Hope grinned. "Yes, well. Shall we go?"

Robin nodded and disappeared again. She returned after ten seconds or so dressed in a normal casual outfit. She looked a bit like a skater punk in her t-shirt and shorts. The blue hair and lithe build only reinforced the image.

Amy shook her head slowly. "We are not going to introduce you to Clockblocker. I think the universe might implode or something."
Robin pouted. "Aw, but he sounds pretty cool... eh, whatever." She started smiling again almost immediately and put on her backpack, hefting the heavy duffle bag up over one shoulder. "Oh by the way, Hope. I picked you up this while I was out."

"What's that?" asked Hope.

Robin leaned down to the floor and picked up a box done up in blue wrapping paper with a silvery bow. She held it out to Hope.

"Oooh," said Hope, and Amy, in almost exactly the same tone of voice, with only Hope's crystalline overlay to tell the difference.

Hope accepted it from Robin. "You shouldn't have," she said, before undoing the bow.

"Nah, I totally should have. From my perspective a normal person's birthday only happens like once in a century, which was totally lame, so I've been giving out birthday presents to my friends every month for a couple months now. You just missed one when you disappeared, so this is your last three."

Hope lifted the lid to find a brand new iPad nestling in the wrapping. She took it out of the box and looked at it. "Wow," she breathed.


Hope's eyes filled with tears, and she hugged Robin. "Thank you," she said. "It's really nice."

Robin grinned and hugged Hope back. "Ah, it's nothing. I figured it'd be pointless to buy you a car or something, since you like flying so much anyway. Weird teenager if you ask me." Hope giggled and stuck her tongue out at Robin.

Amy smiled at Robin. "It's really nice. Thank you." She looked at Hope. "Um ... when is your birthday, anyway? You never said."

Hope shrugged, looking at her new pad. "Dunno. Dad never celebrated it. I figure I'm about sixteen, so that's what I tell everyone."

"But ... didn't you join the Wards?" protested Amy. :They would have required a birthdate then."

Hope shrugged again. "I just put in January second to keep them happy. Because, you know, January first would have been a giveaway."

Amy's eyes filled with tears and she hugged Hope hard. "That's wrong!" she said. "And I hereby declare today to be your birthday. You are now seventeen, by order of me!"

Hope looked extremely surprised. "I ... what?" She looked at Amy, her expression suddenly vulnerable. "Really?"

Amy nodded back firmly. "Really."

Hope smiled. "Okay," she said. "It's my birthday. Thanks, sweetie." She felt a lump starting in her throat.

Suddenly, confetti was raining about them, and Robin was blowing a noisemaker loudly in their ears. Amy didn't even jump this time. However, she was moderately startled to find that she was now wearing a party hat, as were the other two.
Robin raised her voice and waved her arms around enthusiastically. "Hey everybody! Hope just turned 17! Who wants to sing Happy Birthday with me?!

Hope embraced Amy, the tears starting to flow, as a couple of the customers turned to watch. They declined to sing, but the lady came out from behind the counter, and helped sing a rather off-tune and badly rendered version of "Happy Birthday". Hope thought it was the most wonderful song in the world. She would have sung along, but there was a huge lump in her throat, and she was trying hard not to cry, and failing.

Robin danced around like a gleeful maniac, moving at speeds that were noticeably inhuman for the first time rather than just blinking in and out of the world. As the customers decided that the show was over and turned away, she turned back to Hope and Amy.

"And now you get seventeen spankings, right? That's how it works, yeah? Maybe Amy can help you with that one." She grinned suggestively.

Hope's tears slid off her face, and she giggled at the look on Amy's face. "I don't know," she said. "Amy prefers to receive rather than give ...

Amy blushed bright red. "Hope!" she exclaimed.

Robin made a strange noise. " Whoo, Jerry, Jerry, Jerry!" Both Hope and Amy looked at her oddly.

"No? Nobody? Anybody? Jerry Springer is a lovely example of why I think the human race is a bunch of hilariously inept dorks." She sighed. "Ah well! Come on, let's get going! I'll pick you up a cookie cake on the way. Maybe I'll pick up forty cakes. Forty cakes. That's as many as four tens. And that's awesome." She all but danced out the door in a cheerful mood.

Hope packed her iPad back in the box, clasped Amy's hand firmly, and they walked out the door. Amy turned to wave to the old lady, who waved back.

Hope took Amy in her arms, spread her wings, and took to the air. Tears still leaking from her eyes, she smiled at Amy. "Thank you, sweetie," she said softly.

Amy smiled back. "You deserve much, much more from me, sweetie," she replies.

Robin walked outside in their wake, then ran back into the shop and drank the rest of the coffee she ad left sitting there ten minutes ago. Then she ran back out the door with a smile on her face. "Aw, yeah."

She spotted the airborne figure of Hope carrying Amy, and started walking after them. Once she caught up, she had a rest.

Amy peered down at Robin, hundreds of feet below. "How fast is she moving?" she asked.

"Probably a gentle stroll, if I know her," said Hope. "With frequent naps."

Amy shook her head. "She's very nice, but she is a strange, strange person."

"And you're saying you don't know anyone else like that?" grinned Hope.

Amy said nothing, just grinned back and kissed her.
A little time later, they glided down to a stop on a small rise, where a blocky granite wall seemed to have been emplaced for no good reason. Set in the wall was an ornate wooden door, with a brass handle.

Robin sat on a foldable lawn chair, staring at the door from ten feet away. A small table next to her held a pitcher of lemonade, and there was a glass in her hand.

"I guess this is our destination?"

"This is it," agreed Hope. "Now, I'm going to be serious for a moment. Through that door was a world with all the bad things I told you about. There are people there with really nasty powers. There are also organisations set up to deal with capes - people with powers. Some of them have legal standing. So we don't just have carte blanche."

"Well, you do," pointed out Amy.

Hope rolled her eyes. "That's just because you and I helped out Director Piggot."

"And that thing with you and the Nine. And Jack Slash," Amy reminded her.

Robin packed away the comical setup in the space of a moment, and stood seriously before the two of them, nodding at Hope to continue.

"Right, right," Hope said. "The point is, don't take anything for granted. Don't prank people, because they might not be the sort of people it's safe to prank."

"And Tinkers," put in Amy. "They build stuff. All sorts of stuff. So even mechanical stuff won't necessarily -"

"- or even usually -" adds Hope.

"- follow the normal rules of physics," finishes Amy.

"I understand. Especially if my behaviour might in some way reflect on you, I'll be sure to behave. I can't guarantee I'll be perfectly serious in every situation, but for all that I make light of this stuff, it's just because I have a lot of time to get used to it. You don't have to worry about anything I'll do, hopefully."

Hope smiled at Robin. "Thanks. I appreciate it." She paused. "Oh, and don't tell people you're not from Earth Bet." A frown. "What do we call this world?"

"Earth Awesome." Robin interjected immediately.

Amy grinned. "Earth Hope, duh," she said.

Robin shrugged. "Eh, that works too."

"Yeah," said Hope. "There's a couple of earths. Earth Aleph, and Earth Bet. Bet's the one Amy's from ... and the one I'm starting to call home," she added, with a sideways glance at Amy.

Amy giggled and kissed her on the cheek.

Hope took a deep breath. "Well, time to introduce you to our friends." She stepped forward and opened the door. She and Amy stepped through.
Robin pulled her duffel bag off the ground and smiled as she followed behind.
Lisa and the other two leaned back on the comfortable sofa that Labyrinth had summoned up for their comfort. A shade overhead kept the sun off them, and a tinkling marble fountain kept them supplied with cool water.

"You know," said Faultline, "we're going to see if you can pull up a wet bar, next time."

Labyrinth smiled. "It could be an interesting trick," she agreed. "I wasn't even sure I could do this, but now that I know that I can ..." Her voice trailed off, suggesting many possibilities.

"So what are you going to do about being able to open doors to other worlds?" asked Lisa. "Because I would strongly suggest keeping that on the down-low until you get yourself organised. And the PRT is definitely going to want to have a hand in it."

Labyrinth looked at Faultline. Faultline nodded. "This is true," she said. "I'm strongly thinking of pulling us out of the mercenary business. Labyrinth can open a gate, and then charge a rental, so much per year, to allow it to stay open. The person on whose land it is charges individual transit fees, and we both make a killing."

"Out of the mercenary business, huh?" asked Lisa, her grin sharpening.

"Well, so to speak," allowed Faultline. "Criminal mercenary activity, anyway."

"And the PRT?" asked Lisa.

The grin was audible in Faultline's voice. "I'll give them a discount."

"Not free?" asked Lisa, with an answering grin.

"Hell no," chuckled Faultline. "We'll tell 'em the gates have a use-by date, and that they have to be renewed."

Lisa nodded. "And this one?" she asked, indicating the doorway in the granite wall.

Faultline tilted her head. "I'll give that one to you as a freebie, for putting us on to this," she decided. "And because it goes to Hope's world, she gets to say who goes through."

"That's fair," agreed Lisa.

Labyrinth lifted her head. "Someone's just on the other side," she said.

Lisa tilted her own head slightly. "It's Hope, and Amy ... and someone else," she said.

All three stood; the fountain, the sofas and the sunshade folded away into the ground, as if they never
Hope turned the handle and opened the door. She and Amy stepped through; Robin followed them. For all that she was stepping through a dimensional portal into another world, it felt exactly like walking through a normal doorway.

On the other side of the door, instead of semi-wilderness, there was a cityscape. Buildings in varying stages of disrepair surrounded the empty lot which Robin stepped on to. And facing the door were three women, two of them in costume.

The first that Robin saw was a teenage girl with a know-it-all smirk; she had dirty blonde hair done up in a French braid. The second was a girl in a hooded robe patterned with a finely-done maze pattern in green. And the third wore urban combat gear, along with a welding mask. The visor of the mask had a crack across it.

"Hey, cool," said Robin with a grin. "Are these your minions, Hope?"

The blonde girl burst out laughing, the girl in the robes raised an eyebrow, and the one in the welding mask didn't seem to react at all.

Hope giggled. "No, silly. These are my friends. I don't have minions."

Amy muttered, almost under her breath, "Just the whole city, is all."

Robin grinned. "Really? You should get some. I'm sure it would take you a lot longer to get bored with them than me. Having minions is tons of fun."

Hope grinned back. "I like people to be with me because they want to be. Anyway, this is Lisa, my other girlfriend," she said, indicating the blonde. "And these are Labyrinth and Faultline. Labyrinth is the one who built the gate, and Faultline's her boss." She paused. "Everyone," she said, "this was Robin Maestra. She's one of my best friends from Earth Hope."

The girl called Lisa appeared to have calmed down a bit. "Earth Hope?" she said. "Yeah, I can go with that."

Robin frowned a bit. "Earth Hope seemed like such a weird name. Yeah, it'd be great if everyone thought that our world was full of people like Hope, but that'd be like naming Tatooine 'Planet Luke Skywalker.' If we're being dishonest, we may as well just call ourselves Earth Totally Bitchin', and if we're being honest we should call ourself Earth Boring As Fuck."

She glanced around. "I say ourself, but I suddenly realize I'm the only person here who thinks of that place as my home. Does that mean I get to name the planet?" She grinned.

Hope thought about this for a moment. "Well, I guess, sure," she said.

Robin rubbed her hands together gleefully and glanced about with a positively evil look on her face. "I'll need a moment to think of a cool name." She stopped for about half a beat mid-motion, freezing perfectly in place, and then continued. "We're calling it Google Earth, for the most awesome thing it has that this place didn't."

"Google Earth or Earth Google?" asked Lisa. "Because the naming convention is to have 'Earth' as the first part."

"And what's a Google?" asked Labyrinth.
"Well," explained Robin, "Google Earth was a service offered by Google, where they stitch together
countless thousands of increasingly detailed aerial pictures of the planet into this massive map
which gets downloaded onto your computer as you zoom in on various sections. If it didn't exist, I'd
have no goddamned clue how to find a place from the air, and I'd waste whole minutes wandering
around like 'What the hell does Taiwan look like from low earth orbit?"

She nodded in agreement with herself. "Also, Google was a really fantastic company that's basically
Hope but as a multinational corporation. Their motto was 'Don't Be Evil,' and they sell me one
gigabit synchronous internet for like seventy bucks a month and I just love the hell out of them. Own
a lot of stock there."

She froze in thought for half a second, then continued. "They're making augmented reality headsets
now I hear, so you can blog and take pictures with your glasses."

"Damn," said Faultline. "That sounds handy."

"You just want one for your mask," pointed out Lisa.

"Yeah, basically," agreed Faultline. "Normally if I wanted something like that, I'd have to go to a
Tinker."

Robin blinked. "Hmm... I have no clue if they'd work in this universe without the appropriate
network backbone, since Google has billions of dollars of servers all over the goddamned world, but
maybe I'll bring over my beta set when it arrives and see if someone here can replicate it. You guys
have mad scientists, right?" She looked to Hope and Amy.

Hope cleared her throat, sounding suspiciously like a laugh. "They call them Tinkers, but yes."

Robin nodded. "Anyway, not really relevant now. The stuff was only concept phase for now.
Probably won't get a prototype out for another three thousand years." She thinks for a moment. "I
don't know what that was in normal people terms. I suck at telling time. My watch was always
infinity hours fast."

"Armsmaster could probably build you one that would fit into your watch," Lisa observed.

Robin cast a glance at Lisa. "Really? Would he accept payment in gold ingots for his services?"

"He works more or less for the government," explained Lisa. "So if it would benefit them, he'd do it
for free." She stared at Robin. "You're a cape. Your power is control of time, focused on yourself.
You do things like braid the fur of small animals to pass the time. Also, you are lesbian or bisexual,
but since you got your powers, you haven't been able to enjoy intimacy with anyone, due to sheer
boredom." She stopped. "Sorry, I'm getting so much off you."

Robin blinked a couple times then looked at Lisa. "What is my favourite colour?!"

"Right now, it's blue," said Lisa. "This could change, however. Your experiential baseline is so long
that this conversation is probably taking the equivalent of hours for you."

Robin screamed wildly and waved her arms around in the air. "Oh no, she's reading my mind! How
horrible!" Then she disappeared.

Everyone looked around.

Robin reappeared about five seconds later eating an egg roll. "What the fuck happened to this town?"
"Leviathan happened to it," explained Lisa. She looked at the egg roll. "Where did you get that from?"

"Fao Leng's Chinese Cuisine, like nine blocks west of here." Robin took another bite.

Lisa nodded. "Time manipulation. Definitely useful. And no, I don't read your mind. I just read ... you. Everything you say, everything you do, everything you think, leaves a tell. I read the tells."

Robin pointed at Lisa with her egg roll. "You're lucky I have eidetic memory or I would have no clue what you're talking about." She ate the rest of her snack at about thirty times normal speed and then dusted off her hands. "Yeah, it's pretty cool. It's a shame there's no marginal increase in fun to be obtained from supervillainy which is worth having to put up with the crap of being a supervillain, because I bet I'd be awesome at it. I designed the anti-speedster security systems which protect banks back home." She shrugged.

Lisa shook her head. "It's weird. I'm getting tells off of you like a movie in extreme fast-forward. You're almost flickering, to my perception."

Robin tilted her head at Lisa. "Really? What's this look like, then?"

She suddenly blurred at the edges, seeming very indistinct, like a Robin shaped fog.

Lisa shut her eyes. "A migraine," she said. "Please stop."

Robin stopped as soon as Lisa closed her eyes and shrugged. "Heh, sorry about that then. That's kind of neat, how your power interacts with mine. I'll try not to stand in your field of view for too long then. That was like, two hours in three seconds anyway, so that'd be hard to do by accident." She smiled.

Lisa smiled wanly back.

"Well," said Faultline, "we should be getting back." She looked at the door in the wall. "How do we stop anyone going through that and wandering into the other world?"

"Or coming through from there," added Labyrinth. She looked at Hope and Robin. "Is it okay if I lock it for awhile?"

Robin smiled. "We could just hang up a big sign that said Gate to Planet Endbringer or something. Nobody would go there, right?"

Hope rolled her eyes. "You would."

"Fuck yeah, I would," agreed Robin promptly. "I'd be all Shadow of the Colossus up in that place."

Hope sighed. "And we can't trust people here to be any more sensible than that, so ... yeah." She looked at Labyrinth. "Please."

Robin waved at the door. "Goodbye, home universe. See you around."

Labyrinth looked at the door; she didn't seem to do anything special, but it seemed to fold itself into the wall, until there were just granite blocks there. "When I open the door there again, it will automatically lock on to your world," she said. She nodded to Robin. "It's nice to meet a friend of Hope's."

Robin snaps the fingers on her right hand into a thumbs up and points at Labyrinth with a smile. "Do
you know what the word 'vim' means? Cuz' I'm trying to think of it but I can't." She paused a beat, then, "I mean, it's great to meet you too."

She seemed to stutter half a step to the side, her head bent over a small book. "It means enthusiasm!"

"It's to do with having energy, right?" asks Labyrinth, even as Robin spoke. "Uh, yeah." She looked rather taken aback at Robin's enthusiasm.

Faultline shook her head. "I think this is going to be an interesting visit. For us, and for you."

Robin shrugged in turn, putting her dictionary away. "If you say so. Does this world have Johnny Depp?"

She looked to Hope here, but then remembered that Hope was always super broke back home. "I don't know why I'm looking at you. You're just a poor girl. Can't get no sympathy. Caught in a landslide, no escape from reality."

"Yes, I think it does," said Hope. "But the movie industry has been dying hard since the Endbringers started attacking."

Robin shrugged. "Man, glad I'm not from a horrific deathworld. This place surely is hell. I've got a bunch of movies with me anyway." She flitted in little stuttering steps to look at different things for a moment before standing next to Hope. "So, are we just going to hang out here all day? It's not like I need a tour or anything. Let's go do whatever you normally do."

Hope nodded. "Faultline gave us a lift here, but I can just fly Amy and Lisa back to the shelter." She nodded again, to Faultline. "Unless you think the rest of the Crew would like to meet Robin."

"That could be interesting," allowed Faultline. "Though how's Robin going to be getting around? You've only got the two arms."

Robin made a noise like 'pfffft' and waved an arm dismissively. "Like I need a ride. Gravity is for chumps." She turned around and pointed at the wall, "I see you!" She spun again, "No, over there!" She transitioned instantly through a series of funny poses and then jumped into the air and didn't come down.

"Hah! I have successfully faked out the universe. See how amazing I am? Even gravity didn't get me."

"Oh," said Amy. "You fly, too?"

Robin nodded over at Amy. "Psh, yeah. I'd have to be literally retarded to spend eight plus centuries screwing around with the ability to control time and not figure out how to leverage it into flight at some point."

Amy shook her head. "So why did you walk back?"

Robin tilted her head. "It's kind of annoying to fly, honestly. It's fun, but it's not an intrinsic part of my powers like Hope's wings. I can enjoy it, but I always have to devote some portion of my brain to manipulating the flow of time around me to make it work. And ironically, this use of my abilities diverts enough from my ability to dilate time that I'm not any faster flying than I am walking, and I'm actually slower than I would be riding a bike."

"So ... you do need a ride," said Faultline.
Robin blinked over at everyone. "When I say 'not any faster than I normally move,' I'm still referring to a speed that would look like about forty thousand miles an hour from your perspective."

"Ah," said Labyrinth. "Well ... that sounds adequate." She looked at Robin. "Did you want to come over and visit, or maybe later?"

Robin shrugged. "Whenever's fine. I've got time."

Hope giggled. "Yes, sweetie, you do." She looked at Faultline. "I'm good for the time being. Let's go introduce Robin to your ... minions." She tried to make the word sound menacing. It came out as adorably cute.

Robin attempted to lightly pinch Hope's cheeks suddenly and failed. She blinked for a moment and settled for squishing her face in from the sides to make a funny face. "Awwww, you're so adorable when you're being serious. Or when you're not being serious. Or when you're not doing anything at all." She paused. "Also, have you been swimming in the butter again?"

Amy giggled. "She is all of that. And you know stuff doesn't stick to her."

"Oh really? Let's test that!" Robin disappeared for a brief instant.

Amy looked around. "Uh oh."

When Robin appeared again, she was holding a small unlabelled shopping bag, from which she withdrew a stack of post-it notes. "Test number one." She peeled one off and stuck it to Hope's forehead.

Of course, it fell off.

Robin nodded, as if she had expected this. "Tests number two through five hundred." A shower of rainbow post-it notes started falling from various places on Hope's exposed skin as if she were shedding scales.

Hope giggled. "You know this never works, Robin."

"Ridiculous. No-one is more unsticky than duct tape is sticky." That said, Robin pulled out a roll of silvery duct tape and started pasting strips onto Hope's arms and face. Just as the post-it notes did, they also fell to the ground.

Labyrinth was giggling helplessly by now, and neither Lisa nor Amy could keep a straight face.

"That's the most bullshit power! I mean, come on!" Robin threw her arms up in disgust and stalked off a few paces. "I know people are always like 'Robin so OP, Valve please nerf!', but even I can't just ignore Duct Tape like some horrible physics-cancelling eldritch abomination." She turned around and pointed an accusing finger at Hope. "You're the devil."

Lisa grinned. "You should have seen their faces when she started playing with containment foam like play-dough."

Hope put on her most innocent expression, which for her was pretty damn innocent. "Me?" Her expression suggested that, not only would butter not melt in her mouth, but it would come out more refrigerated than it went in.

"Damn you. Damn you to Australia." Robin cleaned up her mess in the blink of an eye and leaned on Hope as if she were an end table, floating six inches off the ground to manage it. "So anyway,
were we doing something serious? I honestly forget. Finding a place that sold Duct Tape and sticky notes took like five hours."

Hope rolled her eyes. "Yes, we were going to introduce you to Newter and the others."

Amy looked puzzled. "Damn you to Australia? Is that some sort of curse from your world?"

Robin nodded at Amy. "Yeah, Australia is where we imprison our Endbringer-equivalents. It's a horrible deathworld. Even the little creatures there are terrifying monsters. The spiders are so big they have hit point bars."

Hope sighed. "It's basically the same as Australia here, guys. Except that Canberra's still there."

Robin blinked. "Oh, huh. I was sure your guys' version had to have been annihilated in nuclear hellfire or something." She turned to Hope. "You didn't mention it was this bad."

Hope shrugged. "I still don't know what you have against the place. The koalas are just so cute."

Robin put on a serious face and frowned at Hope. "Dingoes ate my baby." Then she floated off imperiously.

Hope sighed. "Okay, okay. So the wildlife is a little ... wild. But we're not going there." She went after Robin and hugged her. "Did you want to meet Newter? He's got hallucinogens on tap."

Robin smiled and hugged Hope back. "Sure! Sounds like a real trip."

Labyrinth giggled. Hope rolled her eyes. "Okay, that was bad."

Faultline inclined her head. "Come on, let's go."

They got to the car, and Faultline stopped. "Oh," she said. "We were full up on the way over. Five seats, six people. How are we going to fit everyone in?"

"Oh, I can fly alongside," said Hope cheerfully. "I like to fly, anyway."

"I'll come with you," Amy stated immediately. "Lisa can ride in the car." She stuck her tongue out at Lisa, who grinned back.

Faultline looked at Robin. "So, did you want to walk, fly or ride?"

Robin shrugged. "If it's all the same, I'd rather not ride around in a vehicle. I either have to expend great effort absolutely suppressing my powers, or grow steadily more insane from not being able to do anything at all. Me in a car isn't a comfortable experience for anyone."

Hope nodded vigorously. "Trust me when I say that she is absolutely correct on this."

"Understood," said Faultline. She got into the car, along with Labyrinth and Lisa. As the car pulled away, Hope grinned at Robin. "I'm fairly certain you can keep up," she said, and took off with Amy.

Robin smiled and vanished from sight as she strolled along the street with her hands in her pockets. She casually walked past the frozen car to lean against the next stop sign along the way, while looking back to see where Hope and Amy were.

Several minutes later, the car pulled up alongside a large building with the name Palanquin on the front. By the time Hope and Amy landed, and the others got out of the car, Robin had been sitting
outside for several hours. She raised a hand in greeting but otherwise didn't look up from the newspaper she was reading.

Faultline opened the door and entered. "Everyone, front and centre!" she called. "We have a visitor!"

Labyrinth followed her in, then Hope, Amy and Lisa.

Robin walked in last and folded the paper back up, just before it seemed to dissolve into ashes, which themselves disappeared dramatically. She put on a tough face and nodded at the others, then turned aside to Hope and muttered under her breath. "I burned my index finger. Can you fix it?"

Hope grinned and took her hand; there was a silver-blue glow, and the burn healed flawlessly. She raised her eyebrow, giving Robin a quizzical look. Robin, for her part, tried to play it off as though nothing of consequence had happened.

Hope shook her head. "Why do you do it that way?" she asked, just as quietly.

Robin rolled her eyes. "I thought it would look cool, but I burned it so fast that nobody even saw it happen. Also, I forgot my fireproof gloves at home." She crossed her arms over her chest. "Whatever, I still looked cool and you know it."

Hope sighed. "It did. But if you hurt yourself doing something that looked cool ..."

"Then it means you're an artist, willing to sacrifice for what's important," Robin nodded. "Besides, it would have healed in... six minutes or five days, depending on how you count time."

Hope gently kissed her on the cheek. "Silly Robin. I never like it when you get hurt, no matter how fast you heal."

Robin grinned down at Hope. "Jeez, you're such an idealistic little twerp."

Hope nodded seriously. "Yes." She grinned back. "And you like me that way."

At this moment, more people started entering the room. A girl with a gasmask was first to come in, then a skinny guy with orange skin, a prehensile-looking tail, and cobalt-blue hair. Last was a couple; a hugely overweight man with skin so translucent that his organs and bones could be seen through it, and on his arm a strikingly attractive redhead.

Robin looked them over. "So are these your minions?" Her voice briefly shifted into an utterly diabolical pitch, which probably took countless hours of practice to achieve.

"Nah," said Hope, with a giggle. "They're Faultline's."

Robin pointed at the orange man for a moment with a strange look in her eyes, and then transitioned to a thumbs up. "Oh yeah! You gotta have blue hair!"

He stared at her hair. "Where do you get your dye from?" he asked enviously. "I gotta get me some."

Robin sighed and leans back with a shrug. "I'd hook you up if I could, but I don't dye my hair. That and my inability to ever get a tan are like Hope's crystal wings. People who get powers on our world often get weird little secondary manifestations like that."

Newter's tail curled out from around his body. "Oh, trust me," he said feelingly. "So do we." He glanced at Hope. "Though not many of us have quite so many cool little powers as she does."

Hope grinned at him. "I have exactly one power," she declared. "I'm an angel with crystal wings."
Robin nodded. "And I'm the fastest thing alive." Her eyes drifted to the side for a moment and she bobs her head. "Oooh, sonic boom, sonic boom~" She hums some song or other.

"Speedster?" asked the girl with the gasmask, the interest in her tone evident even through the muffling effect.

"Yeah!" Robin nodded enthusiastically and took out her deck of cards. "Technically I suppose my power would be 'Control Over Time' if I'm stating it like Hope did, but I rarely ever use it to slow things down" She sprayed the cards into the air and then blinked a few feet away, sitting with her legs crossed on the ground in front of a house of cards she had built, using all fifty-two cards.

Newter whistled in applause. The redhead stepped forward and clapped. The big guy with the translucent skin nodded ponderously. "That was very impressive," he said.

"Oh, sorry," said Faultline. "Everyone, this is Robin Maestra. She's a time manipulator. Robin, this is Newter, Gregor, Shamrock and Spitfire." She indicated the orange guy, the big guy, the redhead and the girl with the gasmask, in turn.

Robin swept up her cards in an instant and stood up to nod to each of them as they were introduced. "Cool. Nice to meet you all."

"Any friend of little Hope is a friend of ours," Gregor said placidly. Robin got the impression that he never got very excited over anything.

"Yeah, Hope is some weirdity nexus point like that even back home," agreed Robin. "If she's friends with two people, then those two people are also best buddies when she's around, even if five seconds before she showed up they were trying to tear off each others' heads."

Faultline looked over at Lisa, and Lisa looked back. "You ... may have a point there," admitted Faultline. Lisa just grinned, looking very fox-like.

Robin nodded with satisfaction and skipped around the room like a stuttering record, slipping in and out of visibility depending on how fast she moved as she looked at things.

"So what sort of trigger event gave you your powers?" asked Newter. "I can't imagine what would give anyone that level of time manipulation."

Robin shrugged with a slightly tilted head. "I don't know about 'Trigger Event.' I got my powers at the same time Hope did. It's just a thing that happened." She tapped a foot on the ground. "As to why I got this power though..." She sighed.

"Wait," said Faultline. "No trigger event? For either of you?"

"Nope," confirmed Hope. "Just ... powers. One day. Bam, and done."

"Damn," said Newter. "That sounds weirdly cool. But like ... why? How?"

Hope shrugged. "I'm still trying to figure that out."

Robin nodded. "I'm one of the first people in our world to have ever gotten a degree in the study of hyperpotentiology, and I honestly haven't the faintest clue. I can tell you a lot about it, but even I can't answer 'why' with all the time in the world to look. Like, why did almost everyone get powers that seem so fitting to their character? There's exceptions but... I mean, Hope becoming an Angel over every other possibility is a perfect example of why it's weird."
"How is that weird?" asked Hope. "I quite like it, actually."

Amy smiled and leaned against her. "Me too," she said softly.

Robin frowned. "It's cool in that sense, but I wouldn't mind if whatever was handing these out was less stupid. Even with all the time I've had to adapt to it, I'd still be tempted to give up these powers if I could."

She paused. "Well, actually, probably not now. I dislike the side effects, but I'm not suicidal, and there's a better than even chance I would age into dust if the capacity was returned to me."

"I would not change back, even if I could," said Hope firmly.

Robin shrugged. "I like having the powers. I just wish it would actually feel fast to me. I spent my whole life working towards a career with fast things. If NASA didn't work out it was going to be the Air Force. If the Air Force didn't work out, I'd race cars." She sighed. "I got to fly an SR-71 Blackbird a couple months ago in exchange for a favour to the US Government. I hit Mach 3.5 and my perceptions automatically accelerated so much that I was passing the clouds at fifteen miles an hour."

Amy frowned. "But if it felt fast, wouldn't it be dangerous to you? You're used to having all the time in the world to react; what if you simply failed to react in time?"

Robin smiled. "Then I would have fulfilled a dream I've had since I was five years old. I would have lived fast, died hard, and left a massive impact crater."

Newter snickered at that.

"I'm serious," said Amy. "Would you really want things to look so fast to you, if your mind couldn't react fast enough to do something about any problems that come up?"

Robin nodded. "Yes, absolutely. The thrill I would get from that feeling of living at the ragged edge of my abilities to keep up was all that kept me going some days. It was the one absolute pleasure I derived from life. I was an adrenaline junkie."

She sighed. "If I put a gun to my head right now, I'd have thirty years to think about my choice before the bullet reached my head, and then when it got there my powers would kick in the other direction and it would bounce harmlessly off my frozen skull. There's no danger in life like this, and from the perspective of the me who first got these powers, it is the worst imaginable hell."

Hope looked at Amy curiously. "Sweetie?" she asked.

Amy frowned. "I'd be interested in seeing how your powers work," she said.

Robin tilted her head. "In what sense? I've had a long time to analyse them, and I don't think there's anything that can be done about my issues with them. I can control them right up to the point where real danger happens, and then my perceptions accelerate without bound to ensure I always have enough time to react to the danger. If I choose not to, then I freeze and become invincible."

"No," said Amy. "Inside your head."

Robin straightened her head just so she could tilt it again. "I have no clue what that would look like... I can't sit still enough for an MRI."

Amy smiled. "I don't need one."
Robin shrugged. "You can take a look if you want I suppose. Don't know what you'll see."

Amy and Hope walked over to where Robin stood, and Amy took Robin's hand. As she did so, Robin froze in place. She even stopped blinking.

Amy took her hand; Hope automatically took the other one. Hope frowned as her power tried to read Robin's body; it was there, but it was slowed to the point that she could barely make anything out.

Amy was having just as much trouble. Getting a full read on Robin's biology was amazingly difficult; her power was actually being repelled by the immensely slowed timescale present within Robin's body.

Finally, she sighed and shook her head, and they both let go.

Robin starts moving again and frowned. "Dammit. I didn't even do that on purpose. The instant you touched me my powers went 'No amount of speed can remove me from this situation before they can destroy me', and tried to freeze me in time. A perfect example of what I was talking about I suppose. Whatever aspect of me decides what is 'Dangerous' does so completely without my intervention."

"Well, I could basically see how you go together," said Amy, "but I wasn't able to see how you make your powers work." She shrugged. "Hope's powers are the same, actually; no individual cause."

"Well, whatever works." Robin shrugged.

Amy sighed. "I don't think there's actually much I can do, overall," she said. "I really don't like messing with brains. Too much potential for too much to go wrong."

Robin nodded.

"And your defenses are very ... powerful. I would have had to override and tell your power to turn itself down, just to get a good read. Which would have been a great stress on both of us." She paused. "I mean, I can't affect someone that Clockblocker's frozen, either. I guess it's much the same thing, only you're doing it to yourself."

Robin sighed but waved it off. "It's fine. After all this time it would have been surprising if you could fix that." She crossed her arms under her chest. "Anything that put conscious control of my abilities absolutely under my control would probably utterly screw up my danger sense anyway. I'm not nearly as good at making use of sensory data as my powers are, so it's really unlikely that I'd be able to react to things like someone firing a bullet at me from behind before the sound reaches me like I can now."

Hope wrapped her arms around Amy. Amy leaned back against her. "I wanted to help," Amy said quietly. "Maybe adjust your perceptions so you could make something feel fast while still being in perfect control. But your powers don't work in any way like that I can make out."

Robin nodded. "Yeah, there's no physical part of the brain that directly corresponds to a parahuman using their abilities." She waved a hand ambiguously. "Well, that's not to say that parts of the brain don't respond when that happens, but it's a secondary thing. If you're religious, you might consider it an effect that the soul causes or something. Eitherwhats, there's no good explanation I've found yet."

Amy cleared her throat. "Actually, here, there is a part of the brain that does just that. We call it the corona pollentia."

Robin drew back for a moment and blinked. "That's... oh, right. Different world, different source of
parahuman powers I guess. Of course the rules for it would be different here." She suddenly hunched down with a fake teary expression. "So much for Doctor Maestra!"

Hope giggled and hugged Robin. "It's okay," she said soothingly, and planted a kiss on her forehead. "I still wuv you."

Robin stood up and spoke in a Chinese accent. "One more thing..." She coughed. "You're still adorable."

"So are you, sweetie," grinned Hope, ruffling Robin's hair. "Even if most of the time you're doing it faster than the speed of sound."

Robin smiled. "If you stand close enough to me while I'm moving really fast, the speed of sound is almost as fast as the speed of light." She shrugged. "Well, that's a mismatch in scale I suppose. If you stand close enough to me, the speed of light is like three thousand times fast as well."

Hope shook her head. "And people say I see the world in a weird way."

Robin laughs and skipped away. "Anyway, I'm done being mopey. Let's do something fun!"

Lisa grinned. "You could go and freak out Director Piggot."

Hope giggled. "That's mean." She considered. "Though ... Emily probably would appreciate being given a heads-up for a new cape in town."

"If my last name was Piggot," commented Robin, "I'd change it."

Lisa's grin widened. "She used to be fairly overweight. Clockblocker apparently called her Miss Piggy. But now she's exercising and losing weight, all thanks to guess who?"

Robin nodded her head seriously. "It must have been Carmen Sandiego."

"You," said Hope fondly, "are ridiculous."

Robin returned the sentiment. "Says the Crystal Angel Kid who thinks she can change the world with hugs. Conventional logic says I'm just silly, and you're insane."

"Uh ..." said Lisa. "She actually has changed the world with hugs." She paused. "Well, this corner of it, at least."

"I agree," said Gregor unexpectedly. "Little Hope's hugs are not to be trifled with."

Robin nodded. "Just because you're right didn't mean you're not insane. If I believed that spooning ice cream into a computer makes it run better, I'd be crazy. Even if I then developed a power that made machines exposed to ice cream work twice as well in my presence, I would still be crazy. I'd just be correct and crazy."

"Well, then." said Hope, "I like being insane."

"Me too," agreed Amy with a giggle. "I'm definitely nuts about you."

Robin rolled her eyes. "You're all a bunch of mixed nuts."

"I'll actually agree with that," said Lisa. "And I hate to cut this short, but I think I should be getting back to the shelter soon?"
Robin looked to Hope.

Hope nodded. "Good idea," she said. "Let's go." She stopped to hug Gregor - he was so large, her wings had to unfurl to wrap around his body - then the others. Amy hugged Newter and kissed him fairly thoroughly. He responded in kind. Lisa watched with interest, and not a little amusement.

Robin waved a fist jokingly. "Oy, get a room!"

Amy finished her kiss, then grinned at Robin. "We will, later."

Lisa grinned at her. "You know, that will leave me to have Hope all to my own."

Amy grinned back. "And I'll be with Newter. Your point being?"

Lisa looked at Amy, then at Newter, then shrugged. "Okay, fine. We'll call it a draw."

Amy giggled.

Robin disappeared for a second and then returned to stand in front of Hope, offering her a slightly crooked piece of wood about three feet long. "Here, you look like you need this."

Hope accepted the piece of wood, looking puzzled. "What is it?"

Robin smiled. "It's a stick, obviously."

Hope shook her head. "I don't get it."

Robin rolled her eyes. "Geez, Hope. You're really kinda slow. Whenever someone was super beautiful, people tell them 'You're gonna have to beat the boys and or girls off with a stick.' Well, here's your stick. Get to work."

Hope blinks. "Oh, of course." She shrugged. "But what if I don't want to?"

Robin shrugged. "I think conventional wisdom said you're a slut then. I don't know how this crap works."

"Well, only two people in the world are actually attracted to me, and I love them both. What does that make me?" said Hope with a smile.

Robin pointed at her. "Either a two timing jerkbag or incredibly suave."

"I vote suave!" said Amy, rejoining Hope. Lisa grinned and nodded in agreement.

Robin shrugged. "Good on you then. I'm awful at romance, so kudos to you for working that out past powers that make it harder."

She suddenly turned to the side and covered her mouth with one hand. "Hurr hurr. Make it harder." She coughed and twisted back into her previous pose without further comment.

Hope blinked, apparently not getting it. Amy giggled. Lisa smirked.

"Anyway," said Hope. "Let's get going, shall we?"

Robin nodded.

Hope led the way out of the club; Amy and Lisa followed close behind. Faultline and Labyrinth also
accompanied them outside. Hope took hold of Amy and Lisa, who put their arms around her neck, and unfurled her wings. "See you later," she said to Faultline. "And Elle - thanks. I really appreciate it. It's great to know that I can go back if I ever really want to."

Labyrinth nodded. "Not a problem. It's not like I don't owe you everything, anyway."

Hope grinned and took off, heading for the shelter. Robin flew alongside them for a change.

Some little time later - which was about ten minutes for Hope and her passengers, and an indeterminate number of days for Robin - Hope glided in for a landing at the shelter. Lisa gave her a hug and a kiss before going inside.

"So," said Hope, "would you like to rest and kick back, or go and meet the actual superheroes in this city? Because all you've met so far are the villains, or the rogues like Amy and me."

Robin shrugged. "Whatever you want is fine. I can get eight hours of sleep in ten seconds, but relaxing for a while might be nice. On the other hand, I can get eight hours of sleep in ten seconds, so I can relax whenever I want."

Hope nodded, thinking about it. "Well, I suppose it's only polite to introduce you to the heroes. That way, they won't accidentally embarrass the hell out of themselves by trying to attack you."

Robin grinned. "Now now, I'm sure it'd be fine."

Hope grinned back. "Entertaining, to say the least."

"Oh," said Robin. "Where should I put my stuff, by the way?" She disappeared for a full two seconds and reappeared with her duffle bag, which had been missing for a time.

"Oh, uh, leave it in our sleeping area for the time being," said Hope. "Here, I'll show you."

She led the way through to an area enclosed by blankets hanging on ropes. There was a single bed in here.

"Good enough!" Robin dropped her bag and backpack, then blurred for a moment while she changed into a new outfit; a leather jacket over a black t-shirt which said 'Teh.', over cargo pants and steel toed boots. "Let's go!"

Hope led the way out again, and gave Lisa a hug. "See you later, sweetie," she said softly.

Lisa returned the hug. "Say hi to Director Piggot for me. And I want all the details."

Hope grinned. "Will do."

She and Amy headed outside, and got ready to leave. Then she paused, and pulled out her phone. Dialling a number, she waited for a few seconds, then said, "Emily? Yes, it's Hope. I've got some stuff to tell you, and a friend of mine you might need to meet. She's a cape, and she's very new in town."

There was a pause. "Okay, thanks," she said, and hung up. She grinned at Robin. "She's interested in meeting any friends of mine, for some reason."

Robin nodded in turn. "I can believe it."
"Well, let's go." Hope scooped Amy into her arms - not without a giggle from Amy - and lifted off into the air once more.

Robin rolled her eyes at the byplay between Hope and Amy, and stutter-stepped after them as they headed across town to their new appointment.
In which Robin meets Director Piggot, Glory Girl learns things about herself and her sister, and Labyrinth makes a visit

Chapter Notes

Robin Maestra appears in this chapter, but moves out of the main story thereafter.

Hope landed in front of a large building that looked not unlike many others in the city; large, concrete and glass, several storeys high. Robin landed alongside her. The only indication of its purpose were the letter across the frontage.

"What's that stand for? Pickle Rye Tomato? No wait, that's terrible." Robin crossed her arms over her chest and looked around.

"Parahuman Response Teams," said Amy, as Hope let her down on to her feet.

Hope caught Robin's eye and grinned. "Yeah, I know. SHIELD sounds much better."

Amy looked at Hope. "Shield? Where do you get that from?"

"Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics." Robin nodded seriously.

"- Directorate," finished Hope

Robin nodded. "Oh right. I thought it was Division though."

"Actually, it might be," acknowledged Hope. "I can never recall."

Amy looked confused. "... right," she said. "This is a Google Earth thing, isn't it?"

Robin shook her head. "No, the official designation for the MCU is Earth-199999. Which is weird, I know, but whatever." She shrugged and briefly lifted off the ground to float a few feet to one side.

Amy looked even more confused. Hope giggled and gave her a hug. She turned to Robin. "Since supers started popping up here in the eighties, comics pretty well died, too."

Robin sighed. "Oy vey, this place is ridiculously depressing." She floated back the other way and touched down again. "Hey, do you think your friend who got you home can make a portal to the Marvel universe?"

She took a moment to think about what she had just said and then amended. "The Marvel Cinematic Universe specifically. I don't think I want to go to one of those ones where Jean Grey keeps coming back from the dead and all that crap. Way too scary."

Hope frowned. "Um, if it actually exists." She headed for the doors. "Anyway, let's go introduce you to the local version of Nick Fury."

Robin grinned gleefully. "Kickass! Do they have an eye patch?" She walked after Hope at a normal pace, stuttering ahead a couple steps at one point. "Ontologically unstable. That's the words I was looking for. I don't want to go to a place that is ontologically unstable."
"You're ontologically unstable," said Hope with a grin. "No, she does not. In fact, you should have been here a couple of weeks ago. I had an eyepatch for a really short time - or I would have, if I'd had the time to get one."

Robin nodded. "I'd say that sucks, but I suppose even if she didn't have an eye you'd have fixed that by now with Amy. Unless she had a cyborg eye and covered it up with an eye patch just to keep an edge on her foes, which would be super cool." She paused. "Also, I'm not Ontologically Unstable. I'm Temporally Unstable. Time flows in weird ways around me, but I won't suddenly hiccup and rewrite reality."

"So you say," grinned Hope. She found that she was enjoying having Robin around. She'd missed this sort of banter.

Robin marshalled all her willpower to prevent herself from stopping time and walking off so she could say the word 'chimichanga' until she grew tired of it.

The elevator ride upward was short; it only felt like a week or so to Robin. Hope led the way to a receptionist who guarded an office door with "DIRECTOR PIGGOT" on it.

"Is she in?" she asked.

The receptionist, a man in a military-seeming uniform that Robin did not recognise, nodded. "She left word that you were to go straight in," he replied.

"Thank you," responded Hope with a smile. She went to the door and knocked; there was an answering "Come in."

Hope led the way in. The desk was large and cluttered with paperwork, a computer, and other paraphernalia. Behind it sat a heavy-set woman with a bleached blonde bob of hair; she looked like someone who was either slowly losing condition, or had been rather more overweight, and was getting fit again.

Robin smiled at the woman and blurted out the first thing to come to mind. "Deep fried burritos."

Director Piggot looked taken aback by this. She stood up from behind her desk, walked around, and shook hands with Hope, and then Amy. She looked at Robin. "I presume you are Hope's friend," she said.

Hope nodded. "Emily, this is Robin Maestra." She took a deep breath. "She's from my world."

Robin nodded. "No relation to Batman."

Emily Piggot nodded to Hope. "And how did you get here?" she asked Robin. "Are more of you going to be arriving?"

Hope shook her head. "I, uh, found a way home. And went there, and she came back with us."

Piggot stared at her. "And you were going to tell me about this, when, exactly?"

Hope looked uncomfortable. "Um, now?"

Piggot frowned and shook her head. "Hope, you're trying to give me ulcers, aren't you?"

"I didn't mean to upset you," Hope said anxiously. "I just thought you should know about Robin. So no one tries to, you know, attack or capture her. Because that would end really badly."
Director Piggot looked at Robin critically. "So what are you? An Alexandria package?"

Robin looked at Hope, opened her mouth, then paused. "Wait, I think I wrote that one down. " She flickered into a slightly different pose and shook her head at Piggot. "No, I'm a... speedster? I don't think I really have the full picture on how you classify supers over here."

Hope held up a hand. "She's a Mover twelve, Breaker... um. No idea."

"What an arbitrary number. Why can't it be eleven?" Robin frowned.

Hope shrugged. "Scale is from one to twelve. I've never seen anyone do what you can."

Amy nodded. "I think... yes. Mover twelve. She compresses and stretches her own time rate."

Piggot stared. "Mover twelve?"

Robin shrugged. "I do know a guy with almost my exact power back home, but he can only speed himself up like five fold. He can also slice buildings in half with lasers though."

Piggot frowned. "So what's your maximum time compression rate?"

Robin waved her hand side to side and thought for a moment. "I haven't tested it in a while, but the highest it goes normally is approximately three thousand to one compression. I can increase it beyond that, but it hits really extreme diminishing returned. I can hold it at three thousand indefinitely though."

She paused. "That's actually more than it used to be, so I think my power grows as linear time passes or something." She shrugged. "That or I'm getting better at using it, in which case I'm almost certainly capped out."

Piggot put her hand to her forehead. "Christ. Mover twelve, all right." She turned to Hope. "And Breaker... why Breaker?"

Hope shrugged. "Because she can work with things at her own personal speed without breaking them."

Robin waved her hand again. "More like I can't break them. If I move that fast, everything has a sort of temporal inertia which is also three thousand times greater than normal. Unless I physically picked it up and brought it into hypertime with me, I'd be incapable of knocking a feather out of midair with a sledgehammer."

Hope grinned. "Ah, no, in this case, 'breaker' means that you can break the laws of physics around you."

Robin hummed in realisation and moves to wave her hand again but stuffed it into her pocket instead upon noticing. "Oh, in that case, then yeah, sure."

"So yeah," said Hope. "She can do to time what Vista can do to space. But only for herself."

"So no Manton limit to worry about?" Piggot seemed to relax a little.

"Not really," Hope reassured her. "But Robin can, for instance, build a brick wall around you in a few seconds."

Robin winced. "Yeah, but it's an incredibly boring thing to do. You ever build a brick wall? I may have seemingly infinite patience, but even I don't want to spend ten hours smoothing out concrete."
"Ah," said the Director. "So you experience it in real time."

Robin sighed. "Yeah, and it's the whole reason I've never bothered to conquer the world." She made a face like she was remembering something distasteful. "Everyone else sees me fill out a mountain of paperwork in five seconds and thinks life must be so easy for me." She frowned. "There are no shortcuts."

Piggot raised an eyebrow. "I suppose. But I can tell you, there's been times I've wished I had a few more hours in the day to get all the paperwork done."

Robin nodded. "When it's nice, it's nice. The bigger issue is that even when I'm alone with no threats around it requires active focus to push my personal multiplier lower than ten or so. If I don't pay attention, I might walk away from some friends, spend thirty hours doing something else, then walk back to them a minute after I left feeling like I last saw them three days ago. It's hard to fill all this time."

She waved her hands again. "Ah, but I'm not into any of that emo crap. I know I'd hate if I heard someone bitching like 'Oh woe is me, I have all the fantastic power of a god and I don't know what to do with it.' I get by just fine."

Hope hugged her. "And I appreciate the time you spend putting up with me," she said fondly.

Robin smiled at Hope and waved a hand dismissively. "Honestly, I feel like you've got that sentiment backwards. Most people I actually hang out with get sick of me after a day or so."

She wrapped her other hand around Hope's shoulders to return the hug and spent a moment enjoying it.

"But you're my friend," said Hope with a grin. "Why would I get sick of you?"

Robin smiled. "Don't ever change, Hope."

Hope giggled. "I don't want to. I have too much fun being me."

"Well, then," said Director Piggot in a brisk tone, though she gave Hope a fond smile, "I do appreciate meeting you, Robin. I will pass the word on to not consider you a hostile."

Robin smiled over at the Director in turn. "Cool, thanks. It's not that I'm really worried about it or anything, it's just for everyone else's sakes. If some local hero attacked me, I wouldn't do anything terrible to them, I just don't want to run around getting everyone riled up."

Hope grinned. "And the villains aren't likely to attack you. The established ones, that is. They're too busy keeping their noses clean."

Piggot nodded. "More or less thanks to you, you realise."

Hope looked a little uncomfortable. "I guess?"

Amy nodded, and hugged Hope. "Yeah," she said to Robin. "If anyone attacks you, assume they're an out of town villain and embarrass them all you like."

"Great! So were we done here then?" She rubbed her stomach for a moment. "We should get chimichan-fuck. Dammit dammit dammit, I said that word I was trying not to say." She waved a hand dismissively. "Anyway, what's next on the agenda?"
Hope shrugged. "Well, I'm sure you can find more interesting stuff to look at in five minutes than I can show you in five days, so if you want to go off wandering around ..."

Robin smiled a bit weakly. "Ah... well, it's not the sort of thing I'd say myself, but if you're okay with it I can go for that." She sighed and then smiled more genuinely. "Anyway... if you're okay with that, we can meet up again later perhaps. I'll make sure to pick up a local cellphone so you can reach me when I'm out, alright?"

Hope nodded, and hugged her again. "I'll look forward to hearing about where you've been and what you've done." She turned and hugged Emily Piggot as well; as hardass as the woman looked, she hugged Hope back readily enough, then hugged Amy too for good measure.

Robin smirked, starting to bounce lightly on the balls of her feet. "Alrighty then. I'll see you guys later." She hopped lightly off the ground and disappeared without a trace.

Piggot looked around. "Did she just ...?"

Hope nodded. "Accelerated herself to whatever speed she wanted, and strolled casually out of here."

"Does she do that often?" asked Piggot.

Hope grinned. "Often enough."

The Director sighed. "I hope she doesn't cause too much trouble."

Hope nodded seriously. "She promised to be good," she said. "She keeps her promises to people she likes. And she likes me."

Piggot nodded slowly. "I can see that, yes. Very well then, I'll trust you on this."

Hope smiled and hugged her again. "You really are looking fitter these days."

Director Piggot looked almost bashful. "You think so?"

Amy nodded. "Definitely," she agreed. "I can see it from here, even without using my powers. Your BMI is dropping like a rock, your cardio fitness is improving, your muscles are firming up nicely, and you're looking better all round."

Piggot nodded. "Armsmaster's helping me with that. I'm letting him use our gym to build up his arm, and he's coaching me in getting myself back into shape."

Hope nodded. "He means well. He might be a bit abrasive, but he's a good man, deep down."

The Director raised an eyebrow. "Usually it takes knowing him a lot longer than you have to pick that out," she commented.

Hope grinned and shrugged. "I guess I just ... believe in people," she said. She held out her arms; Amy nestled into them.

Piggot nodded. "So I see," she murmured. "Well, what are your plans now?"

"Study," said Hope promptly. The Director looked enquiringly at her. "The Hope Accord," she explained. "Tomorrow I'll be meeting the Governor of New York, and presenting the plan to him. I need to know it well enough that the Governor will recommend it to the Secretary-General."

She paused. "Uh, would I be able to beg a lift on a transport to New York tomorrow?"
Piggot smiled. "Of course." She paused. "And just incidentally, the rumours I've been hearing about you two ... ?"

She paused meaningfully.

Hope smiled, holding Amy closer. "... are absolutely true," she confirmed. And Lisa as well, she didn't add. That's for her to say.

Director Piggot smiled at the pair of them. "Congratulations," she said warmly. "You make a lovely couple."

That earned her a double hug, which she did not fight too hard to escape. "Go on, get out of here," she said at last, however. "Some of us have to work."

Giggling, hand in hand, Hope and Amy left.

"I fail to see why you are taking this attitude, Victoria."

Glory Girl looked at her mother. "Seriously, Mom? Why are you so down on Amy? She's my sister; she's your daughter."

"Foster daughter, Victoria," corrected Carol Dallon frostily. "We both know her true parentage."

"I don't care," retorted Vicky stubbornly. "She's my sister. She's been my sister for ten years now, and as far as I'm concerned, she still is.". She stared her mother defiantly in the eye. "And no-one forced you to adopt her."

"They may as well have!" flared Carol. "It was a moment of weakness; a lapse in judgement. But it's over and done now. That girl is no longer a part of this family. She has even publicly renounced our name."

"Not surprising, given the way we treated her - the way you treated her - before all this happened, before Hope came to Brockton Bay," interjected Mark Dallon mildly from the doorway.

Carol turned her astonished gaze on him. "Mark? Why are you taking her side?"

Mark shook his head. "I'm not. I'm taking Amy girl's side. Seems to me she deserves someone in her corner, if we're going to be talking about her behind her back."

"Exactly," agreed Glory Girl. "Which is why I'm going to visit my sister right now."

"No!" snapped Carol. "I forbid it!"

Mark raised an eyebrow. Vicky stared at her mother.

"You ... what?" she asked slowly.

Carol looked from father to daughter, and realised the blunder that she had made. "I ... uh ... " she began.

"Never mind," snapped Victoria. "I heard you the first time.". She turned to her father and kissed him gently on the cheek. "Bye, Dad. Amy had the right idea. I'm going."

Mark hugged his daughter - his older daughter, he told himself - and kissed her on the cheek in reply. "Bye, Vicky girl," he said softly. "Bring your sister to see your dear old dad once in a while, okay?"
Vicky smiled. "That's a promise."

"Going?" repeated Carol, dumbfounded. "Where to?"

"Well, first to visit Amy," said Vicky, "and then to join the Wards. They're a superhero team; you may have heard of them.". She glared at her mother. "I hear they even back each other up once in a while."

Carol stood speechless while Glory Girl stormed out. Then she turned to Mark, who was standing there with a faint smile on his face. "Did you hear -"

"I did," agreed Mark. "And you want to know something? Ever since Amy girl fixed my head, I've been seeing things a lot more clearly. You've been bossing and domineering me ever since we got married, because I just didn't have the will to bother asserting myself. Well, now I do. And now I'm going to say something I've wanted to say for a long time. Shut the fuck up, Carol. Keep pushing, and you'll be lucky if she ever speaks to you again.". He paused. "I love you, but being Carol Dallon doesn't make you automatically right. You might want to think about that.". Turning, he left the room. Carol stared at his back, mouth open, speechless.

What happened? she asked herself. What happened to my nice safe family, my compliant husband, my dutiful daughter?

And for the life of her, she did not have an answer.

Victoria Dallon fumed as she flew toward the shelter.

She was angry and she was conflicted, and she did not know what to think.

Amy was her sister, and Vicky loved her as one; had done so, in fact, for years. She had soothed Amy through the loneliness, the tears, the night terrors. But Amy had loved her in a way that sister should not love sister, and had even placed a compulsion in her brain to love and desire Amy.

But that was in a way her own fault, and had she trusted Amy's agonised pleading, it could immediately have been resolved. But she had reacted with anger and revulsion.

Amy had been lost to them then; things could have gone very badly indeed for her, except that Hope had found her. It had been Hope who had convinced Victoria to allow Amy to remove the compulsion; Hope to whom Amy had apparently transferred her affections.

Vicky shook her head; she couldn't even begin to figure that one out.

Amy was not, of course, her sister by blood; she was Marquis' daughter. But that made her attraction toward Victoria less repugnant, not more. In order for her to be blameless, I must acknowledge that she is not truly my sister. But I love her too much as a sister to deny her so.

And then there was her mother. She and Mark were her true family, but here Vicky was, flying away from them. However, Victoria could no longer ignore Carol's attempts to influence her against Amy. If I stay there, I'll either start fighting with her, or start agreeing with her. And I don't want to do either.

So I'll do what Amy did. Break away, start fresh. She managed it, with Hope. Maybe I can manage it, in the Wards.

But first, I'm going to visit my sister and hug her. Because I love her.
Lisa looked up at the light *thump* outside. *Hm*, she thought. *She's here to see Amy.*

A warm thrill went through her at the thought of the teenage biokinetic. Lisa refused to let herself analyse it. There were times when she honestly preferred not to know every detail about something.

Wiping her hands on a towel, she strolled toward the entrance.

"Hi," she greeted Glory Girl with a smile. "If you're after Amy, she's gone with Hope to the PRT building. She should be back sometime soon, if you want to wait?"

"Ah, no," said Glory Girl. "I have business there anyway. I'll see if I can't catch up with them there."

"Well, good luck," offered Lisa. "If you don't find them there, they'll be coming back here."

"Thanks," said Glory Girl. "I appreciate it.". She gave Lisa a dazzling smile, then turned and ran back outside. Seconds later, the *whoosh* of high-speed displaced air announced her departure.

Lisa raised an eyebrow. *Trouble at home, huh? Joining the Wards, even. That's some serious argument, right there.*

*This might be a factor that he needs to know.*

Turning, she went into the computer room. Logging on to an email server, she sent a brief message.

*From: Tattletale*

*To: Accord*

*Re: the Christner Initiative.*

*Glory Girl is leaving New Wave and joining the Wards.*

*Does this change matters in any significant way?*

*Tattletale*

Then she went back to work.

Hope and Amy were just exiting the front doors when Glory Girl came rocketing down from the sky, landing in front of them with a hard *thud."

"Oh, hey, Vicky," greeted Hope. "What's up?"

Glory Girl smiled at her. "Nothing, really. I just wanted to see you two, and say thanks for taking care of her.". She stepped forward and hugged Amy. "And to hug my sister, of course."

Amy hugged her back hard, tears leaking from her eyes. "It's so good to see you again."

Vicky held her close. "Likewise, Ames."

After a while, she broke from the hug, but only so that she could embrace Hope. Hope hugged her back readily, sighing as she leaned into the embrace. "You hug nice," she said.
"So do you," replied Glory Girl. "However, I can't stand around hugging you all day.". She made no move to let go. "I have business with Miss Militia. Do you know if she's in?"

"No idea," confessed Hope, and reluctantly disengaged from the hug. "But you'd better go and find out.". She kissed Vicky on the cheek. "It is good to see you. Come visit sometime, okay?"

"I will," promised Glory Girl, then added, "I'm joining the Wards."

"Cool," said Hope with a smile.

Amy, however, stared at her sister. "Really?" she asked. "What about Dad and Mom?"

"Well, until Mom can bring herself to refer to you as something other than that girl, I'm not going to be paying much attention to her opinions," Vicky informed them with a grim smile. "And Dad seems okay with it, actually."

Amy scratched her head. "Oh, wow," she said. She grinned wryly. "You realise, she's probably going to blame this on me too?"

"Yeah, sorry about that, Ames," Vicky offered with a shrug. "But you did give me the idea." She gave Amy another quick hug. "I needed to get out of that place, away from all that negativity. Do something positive with myself."

"They seemed like my best bet."

Hope gave her an encouraging smile. "You'll do fine," she said.

Amy nodded. "I think so too," she agreed.

Vicky gave them both a smile. "I appreciate it."

"Let's get back. I want to get some studying done."

Amy smiled and snuggled into her arms. "And after that," she said with a giggle, "you're about due a back and wing massage."

Hope leaned down to kiss her. "I'll hold you to that," she said with a twinkle in her eye.

Lisa strolled over, perched on the arm of the chair, and accepted the tablet from Amy. "Right," she said, paging through the data. "Let's see now."

Several minutes later, Hope was getting a lot fewer kisses, but she was definitely finding out where she was weak on the material. And Lisa was helping her fill in the gaps, pointing out connections.

Amy reached up and playfully tugged Lisa backwards off her perch, on to her lap. Lisa gave a slight yelp of surprise, then relaxed and allowed herself to be manoeuvred into a more comfortable position. Hope hugged them both, showing no discomfort at supporting the weight of both of them.
Lisa leaned comfortably against Amy, then looked around at her. "Is this really ... okay?" she asked. "I mean, you two ..."

"Are we three, if you want to be part of us," corrected Amy. "Isn't that right, Hope?"

Hope kissed Lisa gently. "Always," she confirmed, then kissed Amy for good measure.

Lisa felt their arms encircle her, and tears welled in her eyes. The love and togetherness she felt emanating from them was just as strong as ever, but now it included her.

**Oh my god,** she realised. **They love me. They want me to be with them.**

As someone who had always been on the outside until now, forced by her power to distance herself, this was a stunning revelation.

**I'm not alone any more.**

"Thank you," she whispered. "Thank you."

---

Glory Girl found them there, some little time later. Lisa and Amy had their heads bent over the tablet, quizzing Hope with questions about the Hope Accord.

"Okay," said Vicky with a bemused look on her face, "do I want to know what's going on here?"

Amy looked up. "Oh, Lisa and I are just helping Hope to study the Hope Accord."

"Lisa, huh?" asked Glory Girl, watching Amy plant a kiss on Lisa's lips. "I'm pleased to meet you, Lisa." She extended her hand. "I'm Vicky."

Lisa grinned up at her; it was a very *vulpine* grin. "Oh, we've met. In a bank, for instance."

Vicky blinked. "Shit - Tattletale?" she blurted, remembering at the last moment to keep her voice down. "Amy, what the *fuck* are you doing cuddling up to ... her?"

Amy giggled. "Oh, Vicky, you have no idea how appropriate that word is in that question."

Glory Girl stared in confusion, until Amy's meaning dawned on her. "Amy!" she hissed. "You didn't!"

Amy nodded and grinned. "Oh, yes," she said. "We did.". She kissed Lisa again. Lisa kissed her back, then turned to Victoria.

"I know we've had our differences," she said quietly, "but things have changed. Lots of things. And I am truly sorry for what I did to you. All of it."

Vicky was silent.

Amy hugged Lisa, then looked up at her sister. "Is this going to be a problem?"

Victoria considered the three of them, crowded together in the oversized armchair. Lisa had her eyes closed now, leaning her head against Amy's in a gesture of love and trust. Her expression was no longer fox-like, but more vulnerable, more tender. More at ease with the world.

And then she realised something. *I'm treating Lisa - Tattletale - like Mom is treating Amy. I should be better than that.*
"I will be better than that."

"You know," she said at last, "I think I'm good with this."

Amy smiled up at her. "Thanks, sis."

Vicky ruffled her hair. "Anytime, sis."

The PRT guard looked up as the hooded and robed girl entered the PRT building. This was not hugely unusual, so he paid no more attention until she approached him.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

She nodded. "I wish to visit a prisoner," she said quietly.

He frowned. "Which prisoner?" he asked.

"Burnscar," she told him.

"And you are?" he asked next.

She pushed back the cowl, revealing a green domino mask over a pretty face. "Labyrinth," she said.

He shook his head. "No, you aren't." His thumb hovered over the alarm button.

She looked taken aback. "I assure you, I am."

He shook his head again. "I've read the files. Labyrinth is barely functional without her teammates along. You are more than barely functional."

She nodded. "I had a session with Amy Lavere. You know, Panacea?" She tapped the side of her head. "She fixed me. Like she fixed Mimi."

The guard frowned. "I thought Panacea couldn't work with brains."

Labyrinth shook her head. "She can. But most of the time, she chooses not to. She's terrified of doing the wrong thing. But Hope helps her out and makes sure she doesn't go too far."

"Ah," said the guard. "And she ... worked with you."

Labyrinth nodded. "And I would very much like to visit Burnscar, please."

"I'll have to call upstairs on this one," said the guard. "You'll have to wait a moment."

Labyrinth nodded. "I can wait," she said.

The guard made the call, but he never took his eyes off of her.

After the call was done, he said, "It can be done. You will be escorted there, there will be a guard on site at all times, and the visiting period will be fifteen minutes. Is that acceptable?" His demeanour said If it isn't - tough.

"Perfectly," she said.

She was escorted to a small room with a table in it; a chair sat on either side of the table. As she
entered, a door opened on the far side of the room, and Burnscar was escorted in. She wore orange prison sweats with SPECIAL down the arm.

"I am required to inform you," said the guard with Burnscar, "that any attempt to attack either the prisoner or a guard, or an attempt to escape will result in punitive action being taken, which could lead to injury or death. Do you understand?"

Labyrinth nodded. She looked at Burnscar. "Mimi."

Burnscar looked at her. "Elle. You came."

Labyrinth found the chair, sat down. "I couldn't do anything else. Amy fixed your head, so I asked her to fix mine." She smiled. "It's wonderful."

Burnscar was sitting in the other chair. "It is ... nice," she admitted. "To not have to worry about my powers cutting loose, killing people." She looked at Labyrinth. "Elle ... why are you here?"

Labyrinth smiled at her. "Mimi ... you came to visit me, once."

"But you weren't in prison. And I hurt your friends. And I was captured before I could get in to see you."

Labyrinth nodded. "But I knew it was me you were coming to see. We were friends, of a sort, once."

Mimi snorted. "Fuck. I was an absolute cast-iron bitch to you. I wondered why you put up with me."

Labyrinth put her hand across the table, palm up. "Because you were the only one who talked to me. Who reached out." Her voice was soft.

Mimi glanced at the guard. Can I -?

He took a step closer, looked to see that there was nothing in Elle's hand. Then he nodded.

Mimi put her hand in Elle's; their fingers closed slowly about one another.

"And you're reaching out to me, now," said Mimi, softly.

Elle nodded. "You need to know – someone cares. I care."

Mimi blinked away sudden tears. "Why don't you hate me? You should hate me."

Elle held her other hand up, palm out, fingers spread, waved it for the guards' inspection, then put it over the handclasp. Mimi's other hand joined hers.

"Would you rather be hated ... or loved?" asked Elle quietly.

Her eyes held Mimi's as she waited for the answer.
In which Hope and Amy go to New York, and Weaver joins the Wards

Chapter Notes

The characters of Robert Duffy and Ban Ki-Moon are alternate-history versions of their real selves, and cannot be taken to portray the real people in any significant way.

Monday

"The only thing I don't like about it is that it's too shiny. Catches the light. Makes you look too obvious." Brian rubbed his chin. "Apart from that – is it really as tough as you say?"

Taylor looked down at herself, at the shimmering costume she wore. Variations in the weave gave it texture and detail, just as the gloves had coarser weave on the palms and fingertips for better grip.

She'd put a lot of thought into this. It was a considerable step up from the original black-widow silk costume she had started her career with, just a few months ago. She wanted it to look right.

"Amy assures me that it'll stop any pistol round and most rifle rounds. There'll be bruising, of course, but once I attach the armour panels, that won't be a factor either." She grinned at him. "And it's supposed to be shiny. Weaver's a hero, not a villain. Not a warlord of Brockton Bay."

"I like it," said Lisa unexpectedly. "It changes your whole look. Your image. You look more like someone people can trust, instead of fear."

Alec nodded. "It gives you flash and dash. People looking at you won't be thinking 'scary bug lady', they'll be thinking 'ooh, shiny'."

Taylor wrinkled her nose. "Gee, thanks."

"So ..." said Aisha. "Have you given armour-boy a road test yet?"

Taylor coloured slightly.

"Hah!" crowed Brian's sister. "Knew it!" She exchanged a high-five with Alec.

"So wait," said Brian. "You'll be making body-stockings like that for the PRT and for the Wards, right?"

Taylor nodded. "There's a certain amount of give, so I can make them in set sizes."

"So when do we get ours?" demanded Aisha.

"Oh, you know, when you join the Wards," grinned Taylor. She enjoyed the look of outrage on the younger girl's face, then relented. "No, I'll be making you each a custom costume."

Aisha grinned. "Cool!"

Lisa nodded. "I think I'll like that."
Brian also nodded. "So long as it isn't too shiny." Lisa grinned and elbowed him in the ribs.

"Actually, you know what?" said Aisha suddenly. "I could totally join the Wards. Vista says I could, and ..."

She trailed off, aware of eyes from all directions.

"What?" she said defensively. "Vista's kind of cool." She grinned at Brian. "Except when she wants to hear about your hot bod. Definite failure of taste, there."

"If you joined the Wards, they wouldn't let you carry a knife any more," pointed out Lisa. "Not to stab people with, anyway."

Aisha's face fell. "That's no fun then."

Brian grabbed her around the neck with one arm, ruffled her hair. "We could be a brother and sister team. Tenebrae and Shadow."

He wondered why he was holding his arm crooked oddly, and put it down by his side. Aisha appeared beside him, and stamped on his foot. "Hey, ow," he said. "What was that for?"

"For being a dick," she said. "Anyway, I've picked the name I'd use in the Wards." She spread her hands, as though framing a movie title. "Figment: she's right behind you."

"Figment?" asked Taylor.

"As in figment of your imagination, duh," Aisha said. "What, does no-one here ever crack a dictionary?"

"I'm just surprised you managed to," Brian grinned, and got an elbow in the ribs for his troubles.

Taylor turned to Alec. "If Aisha decides to go as Figment, what about you?"

He shrugged. "I could go with Hijack, but that was a villain name too."

"You could go with something similar," pointed out Lisa. "Like, say, Hijinks. It sounds funny and safe, and not creepy at all."

"Hijinks," said Alec consideringly. "Huh. I like it." He looked at Lisa. "Did you ever choose one?"

She nodded. "Insight."

"I like it," said Taylor. "It works."

"So do I," said Brian. "And now we've all chosen our hero names, why don't we go and get something to eat?"

"Sure," said Taylor. "Just let me get out of this costume first." She sat down and started working a boot off her foot.

"Wait, wait, let me go get armour boy first," grinned Aisha. "He can help."

Taylor threw the boot at her.

The transport swooped in for a landing at the New York PRT tower. Hope looked at Amy, an
expression of concern on her face. "Do I look all right?" she asked.

Amy giggled. "Your clothes look fine, and you always look all right," she reassured Hope. "Unfair awesome power, remember? You don't even have to worry about things getting stuck in your teeth."

Hope took a breath, and then another breath, to settle herself. "I just ... don't want to screw things up, you know? I've been working on this so hard. I don't want to disappoint Accord. I don't want to screw this up for the world."

Amy pulled her into a hug. Hope hugged her back, visibly relaxing as she did so. She closed her eyes, holding tight on to one of the people she valued most in the world. The reason she called Earth Bet – Brockton Bay – home.

The transport grounded, and Hope opened her eyes and smiled at Amy. "Thanks," she said softly.

Amy grinned. "Hey, you support me every day, in every way. If I can pay some little tiny bit of that back once in a while, I'm happy." She gave Hope a kiss, then unbuckled her seatbelt.

Waiting outside the transport, as they disembarked, was Legend. He stepped forward and offered his hand to Hope. "I've heard about what you are doing," he said, grasping her hand firmly. "I wanted to wish you good luck."

Hope shook his hand, then stepped forward and hugged him hard. "Thanks," she said. "I really appreciate it."

Taken by surprise, he chuckled a little and hugged her back. "I'd go with you, but I'm actually on the clock here," he said. "But if you've got time afterward, feel free to give me a call. My husband would really like to meet you."

She smiled and kissed him on the cheek. "I'd really like that too," she said. Disengaging from the hug, she looked around. "Now, I just need to wait for the transport to refuel, and we can make the hop to Albany."

Legend nodded. "Sounds about right to me." He gave them both a nod and a smile. "Good to meet you, Hope, Amy. See you again soon." And with a whoosh of displaced air, he was gone, a speeding dot in the distance.

"You know," said Hope, as she gathered Amy into her arms, "Legend is a really nice man."

Amy nodded. "He really is." She held Hope's hand; they admired the New York cityscape until the pilot called to them that he was ready to go.

The transport came in for a landing in Washington Park. "We don't have an office here," said the pilot apologetically. "It's why we had to go to New York first. Well, that and it's easier to fly up the Hudson."

Hope smiled at him. "That's fine," she said. "Can you tell me what the time is?"

"Just coming up to two o'clock," he answered.

Hope nodded. "Excellent. The meeting's set for two-thirty." She suddenly looked apprehensive again.

Amy leaned up and gave her a reassuring kiss. "You'll do fine, sweetie," she said softly. "You
always do."

Hope held on to her and looked at the pilot. "You'll be okay here?"

He nodded. "Sure. The Director assigned me to you for the whole day."

She smiled again. "Well, we'll try not to take up your whole day."

She headed out with Amy, and moments later, the sounds of chiming wingbeats faded into the distance.

_Nice kids_, thought the pilot. _Very polite._

The receptionist looked up as the stunningly beautiful winged figure, glowing with an internal light, approached her desk. Hand in hand with the angelic being was a teenage girl with freckles and frizzy brown hair, wearing quite a nice dress.

_This will be Hope_, the receptionist decided of the angelic being. But formalities must be observed, and so she peered at Hope as though she had never seen or heard of her before. "Yes?" she asked. "How can I help you?"

"My name is Hope," confirmed the winged person, in tones of purest crystal. The sheer beauty emanated by this being was staggering; to look at her, to listen to her, was to experience wonder. "I have an appointment to see His Excellency, for two-thirty?" She smiled engagingly.

Against her will, the receptionist found her mouth trying to break into an answering smile. "And this is ...?" she asked, indicating the teenage girl.

"This is Amelia Claire Lavere, formerly Panacea, of New Wave," said Hope firmly. "She's with me."

The receptionist blinked. There was only one name pencilled in to meet with the Governor, but ...

"Does she have her own petition?" she asked.

"Oh, no," said the girl called Amelia Claire Lavere. "I'm just here to support Hope."

_I can't really see a problem with that_, thought the receptionist. "Very well," she said, and pressed a button on her desk. "Your two-thirty is here, sir."

The reply came in short order. _Send her in._

The receptionist nodded. _You may go in._

"Thank you," said Hope, with another beaming smile. She opened the door and entered, with Amy following close behind.

Governor Robert Duffy leaned on his elbows and looked at Hope. "I understand you have a proposal for me, that you would like me to pass on to the Secretary-General of the United Nations?"

Hope nodded earnestly. She stood up from her chair; Amy handed her two tablets from her bag. Hope walked over to the desk, handed one of the tablets to the Governor.

"This one's for you," she said. "It contains the entire plan in digital format, set up for ease of use."
The Governor took it, turned it on, and flicked through a few pages before setting it down again. "It's quite large and involved, isn't it?" he observed.

Hope sat down again. "Yes, your Excellency," she said; her voice was already taking on his mannerisms and inflections. "I can give you the overview, if you want."

He smiled. "That would be a very good idea, I think."

Hope returned his smile. Thank you, Director Costa-Brown, thank you Amy, thank you Lisa, she thought. "Well," she said, without even consulting the tablet in her hands, "what you have to consider first is that the majority of the world's consumable resources ..."

She spoke for fifteen minutes, outlining points and clarifying matters. He asked the occasional question, and she was immediately able to point him at the precise data required to answer it. As she spoke, she could see him getting more and more interested, as the enormity, the complexity, but above all, the completeness of the plan began to impress itself upon him.

She spoke until she believed that she had said enough, and then, following Lisa's advice, stopped. Governor Duffy looked at her keenly. "That is a very interesting and promising plan," he said. "I would be greatly remiss if I did not at least pass you on to the Secretary-General for his appraisal of the matter."

Hope nodded. "I would greatly appreciate it, your Excellency."

He flicked through pages on the tablet. "My question to you is, do you believe that it can work?"

Hope nodded earnestly. "Sir, since I got this plan, I have lived and breathed it. I have looked at it from every angle. I truly, honestly believe that it can indeed work."

He nodded in return. "Is this your work? It bears your name, after all."

She shook her head promptly. "The man who created it does not want his name to be known. He fully approved my use of my name on it."

"Hmm." The Governor thought about this. "I presume he's a Thinker."

Hope smiled. "You would presume correctly, your Excellency."

He seemed to come to a decision. "I will speak with him. My office will contact you, and let you know when you are able to see him." He smiled. "I will impress on him the urgency of this matter."

Hope stood, followed by Amy. "Thank you, sir," she said, stepping forward to shake his hand. "I truly appreciate your assistance in this matter."

He smiled as he took her hand. "Well, it's not often that I get asked by an angel to help save the world," he quipped.

She grinned back. "Speaking as the angel in question," she responded, "I definitely appreciate it."

After the door closed behind them, Duffy pressed a button on his intercom. "Hold all my calls for half an hour," he said, then picked up the tablet. He scrolled through the pages, following links and reading here and there. Occasionally, he pulled a window up on his desktop, checking data he found on the tablet. Finally, he picked up his phone, and made a call.

He hung up, and went back to paging through the tablet.

Finally, though, he sighed, and shut the tablet down. The business of being the Governor of New York went on, saving the world or no.

"I think that went really well," said Amy as the transport carried them back toward New York.

"I hope so," sighed Hope. "He seemed to like it, but ..."

Amy smiled and kissed her. "Stop worrying. You did fine."

Hope smiled back. "Well, if I did, it's because of you and Lisa. And Director Costa-Brown's suggestions."

"Hey," said Amy lightly. "No-one can save the world on their own."

Hope held her a little more tightly.

"And this is Keith," said Arthur. He looked on as Hope bent over the crib, smiling down at the gurgling infant. She extended a little finger, which the baby grasped, holding on tightly.

"He's beautiful," she murmured, her face alight with delight.

Amy leaned over and tickled the infant under the chin; he gurgled happily, waving both feet and the one hand that wasn't grasping Hope's little finger. "And healthy too," she murmured. "He had a little bit of a sore throat coming on, but that's done with now."

Arthur looked at her. "Aren't you --"

She smiled. "I was, once. Freelance, now. I'm with Hope."

"Oh," he said. "Well, thanks. The nights are warm, now, but we get the occasional chill breeze. I blame the Endbringers, myself."

Hope nodded. "You might be right. I've never seen one, but I understand that they're another magnitude of scary, over and above everything else."

He leaned in to the crib, lifting Keith out with a practised grasp, one hand behind the baby's head to support it. They went to the sofa, where he began to feed the child from a pre-warmed bottle.

"I'm really sorry he had to dash off again," Arthur apologised as Keith made vague noises of contentment around the nipple of the bottle. "He's so busy these days."

Amy put her arm around Hope; Hope leaned into the embrace. "That's all right," Amy said. "I think I know what that's like." She smiled at Arthur and said, "Does he take you places? I mean ... carrying you?"

Arthur nodded. "Yeah ... well, before we got Keith, that is. It's a bit hard to carry me, the baby and all the baby stuff. So these days we usually take public transport. But yes ... it was fun." He smiled, remembering.
Then he looked down at the infant in his arms. "But I wouldn't go back to that, if it meant giving up our boy," he said. "He's just brought so much more into our lives."

Amy nodded; Hope put her arms around her. They sat, holding each other, as Arthur fed Keith. Hope could feel the waves of love rolling off the man and his baby, and she held Amy just that little bit tighter.

Later, they sat on the balcony overlooking the city. Hope and Amy drank tea, while Arthur sipped wine, as they watched the city lights come up.

"Thanks for coming to visit," said Arthur. "It's been really nice to meet you two."

"It's been a real pleasure," said Hope. "I'm glad he introduced us."

Amy nodded. "Definitely," she agreed.

"When you're next in town, come on over," Arthur told them. "I'd love to see you, and I'm sure Keith would too." He rolled his eyes. "And if he can stand still for five minutes ..." But there was fondness in his tone.

Amy chuckled; Hope giggled. "Well," said Hope, "I'll be back to talk to the Secretary-General in a little while, if all goes well. I'll let you know when we're getting in."

Arthur nodded. "Definitely," he said. "It's been really good having you over."

It was full dark now, as Hope flew slowly over the city, in the direction of the PRT tower. Amy, looking up, saw her lover's eyes glowing a deep blue, and knew that she was observing the cityscape in everything from low infrared to high ultraviolet.

"What does that look like?" she asked idly.

Hope grinned. "Weird. I see everything in the normal colours, but they're bent out of shape. Everything gets shifted in toward green. So red and purple don't look like red and purple at all."

"Well, so long you can see at all," Amy said with a smile. "I'd hate to run into anything."

"Me too," said Hope, and kissed her tenderly.

Amy was silent for a while. Then she spoke again. "Hope?"

"Yes, sweetie?"

"Would you like to have children, someday?"

Hope paused. "Um ... me? I'm kind of lacking the equipment."

Amy giggled. "No, what I meant was, would you like to have children with me? I bear them, we raise them."

Hope looked down at her. "You're willing to do that? I mean, I love children, but ..."

Amy nodded earnestly. "I am."

"No," said Hope, "what I meant was, who were you thinking of getting pregnant to?"
Amy burst into giggles. "Me, silly. I'm a biokinetic. I can take our DNA, make it into a fertilised egg, and implant it into myself. Omake could help supervise."

"Oh," said Hope. "Oh. Right." She shook her head. "Sometimes I forget just how seriously awesome you are."

Amy reached up and kissed her. "You're forgiven, sweetie."

Hope kissed her back. "So when did you want to do this? I mean, I'm good when you are, but right now, things are happening."

Amy nodded seriously. "Oh, not right away," she said seriously. "But I wanted to know if you were okay with the idea."

Hope considered it. "I have no problem with it," she said. "I really don't." She looked down at Amy with a smile. "I think I like it, actually."

Amy hugged and kissed her so hard that she had to go into a hover so that they didn't run into anything.

As they flew on, Hope said speculatively, "So, what do you think Lisa will think of the idea? Because I'd like her to be involved. I think she'd make a great mom."

Amy grinned. "I can have a second child, one with her DNA. She won't be able to resist wanting to help raise that one."

Hope shook her head and grinned. "You are a mean, mean person."

Amy giggled. "Ain't I just."

Tuesday

The television studio was one that had been purpose-built in the PRT building. The seats were packed with local capes, as well as friends and (one presumed) relatives of capes.

New recruits joining the Wards and Protectorate were a big thing, and the PRT was very much about public relations. An overweight man who had introduced himself as Glenn had walked among the four new recruits, informing them about how it was to go, and how they were to present themselves.

Taylor had barely taken notice. She looked around nervously. Where are they? They said they'd be here.

Intellectually, she knew she was worrying for nothing - there was still some time before the TV spot was to begin - but there was knowing and then there was knowing.

And then her bugs picked up the distinctive figures of Hope and her father, along with Amy, Sierra and ... Lisa? What's going on there?

But it didn't matter; they were here, just entering the front doors. The nerve-wracking wait was over.

Everett, of course, was already here, sitting with the other Wards; she was pleased to see that he was wearing her head protector. She ached to go down into the audience, to talk to him. But she couldn't; the recruits hat to stay backstage until they were introduced.
She had already met the girl named Sveta, who was going by the cape name Grasp, and was a little nervous, but friendly. Parian she knew already; the doll-masked girl had given her a polite nod.

And then there was Glory Girl, who was standing off just a little way. Taylor went over to her.

"Hi," she said quietly.

Glory Girl turned to look at her. "Skitter," she said, just as quietly.

Taylor shook her head. "Weaver," she corrected.

"Whatever," said Glory Girl. "Skitter, Weaver, same thing. You hurt my sister, you hurt me. I don't forget things like that."

"Things have changed," Taylor said quietly. "I helped take down the Nine. There's an amnesty. I'm joining the Wards because I honestly think I can do better here.". And for other reasons, none of which you need to know right now.

Victoria stared at her. She looked at the figure in the costume that shimmered where it caught the light - where does she get that stuff? - but she saw the darker costume of Skitter, the bank, the baton striking Amy on the side of the head, the bugs swarming Vicky ... Skitter had hurt her sister, humiliated her. Victoria Dallon did not forget insults like that. Even if Amy had let Tattletale join her pairing with Hope - and she still didn't know to construe that one - Skitter was another matter altogether.

"When Amy forgives you," said Glory Girl tightly, "then I'll forgive you. But not a moment sooner."

Taylor grinned behind the mask. " Didn't you know?" she said, "Amy made the bugs that made this costume.". She tapped a point over her heart. "Thanks to her modifications, it'll stop a fifty-calibre round now, and not even leave a bruise. And the bugs she's been making for me ... I would not have thought of them myself. Seriously, she's a miracle worker.". She paused. "And what I was going to say before ... she's just coming up in the lift."

Moments later, she observed Danny and the others exiting the lift. Danny spoke quietly to Miss Militia, who escorted them around and through a side corridor, to where the four recruits were waiting.

Danny got in the first hug; she hugged him back, enjoying the feeling of support and love. When he let her go, Hope came next, moving forward to give her a strong embrace. Taylor returned that embrace as well, thankful that the new armour allowed tactile sensations to get through.

"I'm glad you could make it," she said.

Hope grinned. "I wouldn't have missed it for the world. You know that.". She grabbed Taylor's masked face between her hands and kissed her on the forehead. "Your costume looks awesome, by the way. It turned out really, really well."

Taylor nodded, then greeted Sierra, who eyed her costume critically. "Not sure if I like it," she said. "I think I preferred the old one."

Taylor chuckled and hugged her. "This one works a lot better," she said. "Trust me on this."
Sierra hugged her back, squeezing tightly. "It's not the costume," she whispered. "It's the person inside it that counts."

Taylor went to answer, but she found herself being hugged by Amy, who then started examining the costume closely. "How does it feel on the skin?" she asked. "Does it have enough give with the armour panels incorporated?"

Taylor chuckled. "It feels great," she assured Amy. "I slept in it last night, and attached the armour panels this morning. I can barely feel them. Honestly, it feels fine."

Vicky saw her sister coming, and opened her arms for a hug. They met in an embrace that would have knocked the wind out of her, had she not been as tough as she was.

"Amy," she said. "You came."

"Of course I came, silly," grinned Amy. "It's not every day my favourite sister joins the Wards."

Vicky grinned fondly back at Amy. "You're my only sister, you idiot."

"Well, there is that too," agreed Amy.

Victoria looked at Amy. "Weaver says you supplied the bugs that made her costume."

Amy nodded. "Yeah," she said. "It was just a thing at first, but now I've got all sorts of ideas for bugs for her.". She gave Vicky a hug and a kiss on the cheek. "Scuse. Gotta go make sure it's all up to scratch."

And then she was gone, to be replaced by Hope.

"Hey!" the angel-winged cape greeted her, treating her to an enthusiastic hug. "How are you?"

Vicky could not help but smile as she returned the hug. Hope's zest for life was infectious, to say the least. "I'm good," she said. "How about you?"

"Well, it looks like the Hope Accord's going all the way to the United Nations," Hope said happily. "With luck, we can get it underway in the next few months."

"That's the one that's sort of like the Christner Initiative, but bigger, right?" asked Victoria.

Hope nodded. "It's really awesome," she said. "I'm just so glad that everyone's helping me push it through."

Vicky eyed Hope with veiled amusement. She really didn't understand the full impact that she had on people; even now, Vicky had the urge to throw herself behind the effort to push this Hope Accord through, and she hadn't even seen it. Master 0, indeed.

Part of Hope's charm was that she was so refreshingly direct; she was all about being up front and honest. There was not a devious bone in her body, as far as Vicky could tell. What you saw was what you got.

Which, right now, was something she could use.

"Hope …" she said slowly. "Amy and Skitter … Weaver, whoever. Are they really … working together on that costume? Amy's not mad at her any more?"
Hope nodded brightly. "Oh, yes. Amy loves thinking up new bugs to help her out. When she took down the Teeth the other day, that was Amy's bugs doing it for her."

Vicky had heard that the Teeth had come into town and been taken down, but information on how was kind of sketchy. "She did that?"

Hope nodded again. "She's really working at being a good guy, these days." She leaned in close. "If you ask me, I think she always hated being a bad guy."

Vicky blinked, absorbing this. "And we're gonna be on the same team, after all." She gave Hope a hug and a kiss on the cheek. "Thanks, Hope," she said. "I appreciate it. And just so you know – you and Amy make a cute couple."

Hope smiled. "Thanks. But you do know Lisa's with us now too." She giggled. "Or rather, they're both with me. And when I'm with them, they're with each other. It's sort of complicated."

Vicky blinked. *Refreshing and direct, all right. I should be careful what I wish for.*

Miss Militia cleared her throat and tapped her wrist. Danny gathered in the others by eye and briefly clasped Taylor by the shoulder. "See you soon," he said.

She nodded. "See you then," she agreed.

They went back out the way they had come, escorted by Miss Militia.

Glory Girl eyed her. "That was your dad, huh?" she asked.

Taylor nodded. "He's really great."

Glory Girl nodded. "Well ... Amy vouches for you, so I guess it's truce. Okay?" She extended her hand.

Taylor shook it. "Truce. And maybe friends sometime. Okay?"

There was a reluctant nod from Glory Girl. "If Amy thinks that much of you ... maybe. Someday."

What she was going to say next was interrupted by music blaring from the speakers. Following that, the lights began to come up on stage.

Looking out from the wings, Taylor could see a local TV personality on stage, looking out over the audience.

"We are gathered here today," he said, his voice booming from the speakers, "to introduce four new recruits to the Wards and Protectorate. Some of these are new to the hero game, while others have been at it for some time. But let's make them all welcome, shall we?"

There was cheering and clapping as he paused to pull out a series of cards.

"I will be calling each person out on stage in turn, and introducing them by their cape name. Once they have all been introduced, they will each come to the microphone to tell us a little about themselves."

More cheering and clapping. He waited it out.

"First, for the Protectorate, we have a young lady who has preferred to stay neutral for quite a
while, but has now opted to join the ranks of the heroes. Please give a big welcome to Parian!

Parian had been carrying a large roll of cloth under her arm; she put it down and it unrolled itself then inflated into a large horse-like shape. Parian rode sedately side-saddle out on to the stage. Her mount knelt beside the presenter, and she slid off. He shook her hand, and she went to stand behind him. Her mount took several paces back and stood behind her. There was much cheering and clapping.

Flechette surreptitiously wiped her eyes under her visor. Parian was going to be with her, in the Protectorate. She hoped no-one saw her crying; it would be too hard to explain.

The presenter spoke again. "Next, for the Wards. She's been a member in good standing of New Wave for years; please put your hands together for Glory Girl!"

Vicky was so excited that she took to the air, flying out of the wings to land lightly on the stage in front of the presenter. He shook her hand, then she walked back to stand next to Parian. Looking out over the crowd of capes, she turned pink with pleasure as they clapped her entrance.

"Damn," said Clockblocker quietly to Kid Win. "Pity you're leaving, now that we've now got our own Alexandria Junior on our side."

Kid Win grinned, but his reply was lost when the presenter spoke again. "And now, for the Wards," continued the man, "we have the one and only - Grasp!"

Sveta was wearing a costume in straw-yellow and brown. Her hair extended upward, the tendrils wrapping around a light fixture and then retracting, swinging her out easily on to the stage. The presenter looked up in mock surprise as she landed lightly beside him. He shook her hand, and she moved back to stand alongside the others.

Cheering and clapping resounded, mainly from the Wards who had come to know her since her rebirth.

Glory Girl and Parian each gave her a friendly nod; she gave them a cheerful smile.

In the audience, Weld watched proudly. She has her chance to be happy, he thought. Good.

"Last but definitely not least for the Wards," said the presenter, "I would like you to give a big welcome to Weaver!"

Brightly coloured insects of all descriptions boiled out of Taylor's reinforced storage compartment, as well as from where they had been perched above. In seconds, she was covered from head to foot in a boiling swarm of colour, an ever-shifting mosaic. Walking slowly, she made her way out on to the stage.

The presenter hesitated, then the insects parted as she stepped out of the multicoloured shroud. She took his hand and shook it, then moved back to stand alongside Sveta. At the same time, she ordered the bugs to go back into their storage space; Sveta watched with interest as the bugs all vanished, almost magically.
The applause was hesitant at first, but spread quickly. Danny, Hope, Amy, Lisa and Sierra, somehow placed in the front row, led it for the longest time.

In the audience, Clockblocker frowned. *That looks awfully like the trick Skitter plays all the time …*

An awful surmise began to arise in his mind.

The presenter slotted the microphone into a stand and stood aside as Glory Girl came to the front of the stage.

"Hi, everyone," she said.

"Hi, Glory Girl," came the expected answer.

She chuckled, then went on. "As you all probably know, I've been a member of New Wave for a couple of years. But I want to try a new direction, and so I'm here today. And I can see my teammates up here and down there, and I hope that I will be able to call you all friends as well."

A fresh storm of cheering and clapping arose. She smiled, bowed to them all, and moved back to make way for Parian.

"Hello," said the doll-masked cape, her voice sweet and soft. "I make and control animals made of cloth; I will do my very best for the city." Clapping and cheering arose once more.

At the back of the crowd, she could see Flechette watching her, eyes shining with unshed tears.

She stepped away from the mic, and moved back to the line. Grasp came up next, a tendril of her hair plucking the microphone from the stand; this caused a small burst of laughter and clapping.

"I am so very pleased and proud to be here," she said, and such was the emotion in her voice that several people felt tears come to their eyes. "I never thought I could … never thought I would. There are people here today, to whom I owe literally everything, for which I could never repay them. So I am going to repay them the only way I can – by being the very best Ward that I can."

Tears shining in her eyes, she bowed to the crowd, drawing a storm of cheering. Her tendril placed the mic back on the stand, and she moved back to the line. The tears were now running down her cheeks, and Parian moved forward, offering her a handkerchief and holding her briefly, patting her back until she had collected herself. This drew a little more clapping.

Weaver walked forward to stand before the microphone. She didn't speak for a moment, until the room had quieted.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she said into the silence. "I've always wanted to be a hero. I haven't always had the chance. But here, now, wearing this costume, joining the Wards, I intend to do what Grasp said, and be the very best hero that I can." She paused, while some clapped and cheered.

"I may have clashed with some of you in the past. I ask you to put that behind us now. Brockton Bay stands on the brink of a new era, and it's up to us to make sure it gets there in one piece."

There was a long pause, and then someone from the crowd called out, "But aren't you Skitter?"

She looked out over the footlights. "I was, once, yes. But I have accepted recruitment into the Wards, and from now on, I will only be Weaver."
She paused, bowed to the audience, then moved back to stand with the other three. Sveta gave her a hug, which she returned.

Clapping and cheering followed her; not, perhaps, as much as the others, but some.

Clockblocker's jaw was hanging open inside his helmet. *I knew it,* he told himself. *I knew it.* He turned to Kid Win. "Can you believe this?" he whispered.

Kid Win nodded. "Yeah." He grinned inside his visor. "You get to work with her. I'm going to Chicago. Have fun."

"Shut up," mumbled Clockblocker. "Just shut up."

In the audience, Danny shared a conspiratorial grin with Sierra and Lisa. The mild shock that had overtaken the crowd had been hugely amusing to all of them. Even Hope and Amy thought it was funny.

"Well, that was a bit of a bombshell," said the presenter, reclaiming the microphone. "This marks the end of the public ceremony. Drinks and refreshments can be had outside at the buffet; only people who are verified safe may enter the cape-only areas. Please take note of the signs, and no photographs. Signed pictures of all capes present may be available upon request." He turned off the microphone and placed it back on the stage, and bowed to the audience.

After some more clapping the stage lights went down and people started filing out the doors.

Taylor caught up with Danny and the others near the buffet line; she hugged them all, and was hugged in return. "It's really great to see you all," she said.

"You look good in that costume," said Danny.

"Thanks," she said. "If it wasn't for Amy ..." She hugged the biokinetic, who turned pink with pleasure.

"Is it really bulletproof?" asked Sierra. "I mean, really?"

Taylor looked to Amy. Amy nodded. "You see Miss Militia's scarf?" They all turned to look; the leader of the Brockton Bay Protectorate was standing nearby, chatting. Her stars-and-stripes scarf was easily visible.

"Yeah, I see it," said Sierra.

"Well, it's made exactly the same way as Weaver's armour panels. And the other day, we wrapped half a carton of eggs in it, and Miss Militia fired everything at it up to and including a fifty-calibre sniper rifle." She paused for effect. "She managed to crack one of the eggs."

Sierra blinked. "Okay. Yeah. I'll accept that."

Taylor saw Tecton moving through the crowd, people parting for the armoured hero. She looked at her father, tilted her head. He nodded.

She walked over to Tecton; he turned and saw her.

"We're in the Wards together," she said.
"We are," he said.

"Did you want to get something to eat?" she asked.

"Can't unless I take my helmet off," he pointed out.

"Me too," she agreed. "Cape only area?"

They moved off, followed the signs, entered the cape-only area, guarded by PRT personnel.

Once inside, they looked at the somewhat smaller buffet table. Taylor pulled her mask off. Everett removed his helmet.

Clockblocker, already at the table, his own helmet under his arm, turned and glanced, then did a double-take.

"Wait a minute," he said. "Don't I know you?"

She pulled a pair of glasses from a belt pouch, fitted them on to her face. "Maybe?" she asked.

He stared. "Yeah, I know you. You're that girl in the trial. Taylor someone."

She nodded. "That's me. Taylor Hebert."

He couldn't seem to get his head around the idea. "All that happened to you ... and you let it? And you were Skitter all the time?"

"Not all the time," she murmured.

"But all during the trial. You took down the Teeth while you were in court."

She nodded. "I guess so, yeah."

He shook his head. "Okay, I'm just gonna go over here for a bit." He gave Everett a warning glance. "You do know that's Skitter you're standing next to, right?"

Everett grinned. "She told me her name was Weaver."

They watched him walk away, then they turned to face one another.

"So I'm allowed to kiss you now," she murmured.

"Well, I'm not going to stop you," he grinned.

Leaning over slightly, he put his armoured arm carefully around her; she stood on tiptoe and put her arms around his neck. Their lips met, parted, and their tongues touched, touched again, and slithered sensuously about one another. Her eyes closed; she could feel her heart hammering in her chest. The kiss was all; the kiss was everything.

Clockblocker turned and saw the kiss begin. What are they doing? he thought initially. Perhaps she was giving him the quiet word to stay out of her way. But then they turned slightly, and he saw what was really happening.

His mind locked up. This was Skitter. The Bug Bitch. Perhaps the scariest villain in Brockton Bay.
The reason he *still* had nightmares about spiders.

And Tecton – Everett – was *kissing* her. Willingly. And apparently enjoying every second of it.

They heard his outburst all the way out in the public area.

"Oh, *no fucking WAY!*"
"Vicky girl! Amy girl!"

Victoria Dallon turned at the familiar voice. Amy turned as well, and her face lit up.

"Dad!" they both said, in almost perfect unison.

Mark Dallon stepped forward from the crowd and opened his arms. They hugged him, both at once, and were hugged in return.

Mark kissed Amy on the top of her head; she snuggled into his embrace just a little more.

"So, Amy girl, how have you been doing?" he asked, letting them go. "You're looking well."

Amy looked up at him, smiling widely. "I'm doing great, Dad," she sad. And then, as she saw the tall, attractive blonde woman standing nearby, "Hi, Aunt Sarah!"

Sarah Pelham, otherwise known as Lady Photon, smiled at her. "Hello, Amelia," she said. "I see you brought Hope."

"Well, she kind of brought me," Amy grinned. Turning to where Hope and Lisa were standing nearby, she made a come-here gesture with her head. "I want to introduce you to Lisa. She's really nice."

Just about then, everyone heard the voice resounding from somewhere nearby; "Oh, no fucking WAY!"

Everyone tensed; even as PRT guards ran toward the disturbance, they looked around, ready for anything.

"Relax," said Lisa, strolling up with Hope. "It's just Clockblocker, having a bad day."

"Really?" asked Sarah, raising an eyebrow. "So what occasioned that little outburst?"

Lisa grinned. "He saw Weaver kissing Tecton."

"Oh," said Hope. "Oh dear."

"Wait," said Mark. "Isn't Weaver the one ..."

"Yes," said Lisa cheerfully. "And Clockblocker has been soundly beaten by her several times, and now has severe hangups about bugs of all kinds. And he's built her up in his mind to be some kind of cold, soulless megabitch. So when he sees her kissing someone, a fellow Ward at that ..."

"I see," replied Mark with a grin. "The poor lad. His worldview must be shattered."

"At the very least, seriously dented," agreed Vicky cheerfully. "I'm sure he'll get over it.". She looked at her father. "So it's just you two? No-one else came?"

"Oh, Crystal is around here somewhere," Mark assured her. "Probably trying to get an autograph out of Miss Militia, if I know her."
"And Mom?" Vicky asked, knowing the answer even as she voiced the question.

Mark looked at her, then at the others, obviously unwilling to say too much in front of relative strangers. "Your mother and I ... are not on speaking terms, at the moment," he said at last.

Lisa looked at him perceptively. "That bad, huh?" she said sympathetically.

Mark gave her a sharp glance; she gave him a rather vulpine grin in return.

"I don't believe we've been introduced ..." he said slowly.

"Dad," said Victoria quietly. "You may as well give with the details. This is Lisa; she's Hope and Amy's new girlfriend.". She went up on tiptoe and whispered in his ear. He stared at Lisa in some surprise; she nodded, apparently unfazed.

"That's me," she confirmed cheerfully. She put one arm each around Hope and Amy, pulling them close to her; they did not seem to mind. "And yeah, I pretty well got the picture.". She raised an eyebrow. "I could tell them later, if you want. Save spoiling the party."

"So how much of it have you figured out?" he asked warily.

"Oh, pretty well all of it," she said airily, her vulpine grin back in full force. "Including the bit you're not even telling Crystal."

His face went pale. "Please don't -"

"Relax," she told him, her voice and expression softening. "I don't do that anymore, hold secrets over people's heads. Things are different now.". She illustrated just how different by turning her head and kissing Hope gently on the lips. "I'll tell them just as much as they need to know, and nothing more."

Hope put her arms around Lisa and accepted the kiss, then smiled at Mark. "It's up to you," she said, "but I trust her."

Lisa leaned into the embrace. "See why I love her?" she asked Mark with a playful grin. "She keeps saying things like that about me, I'm going to have to start living up to them."

Sarah Pelham stared at Lisa. "If you are who I think you are," she said slowly, "then you are not as I expected you to be."

"Blame Hope," replied Lisa, her grin widening. "She's totally ruining my bad reputation."

"So I see," murmured Sarah.

"Actually," said Hope, "while we're here, how are things going with the Christner Initiative?"

"Well, one thing's for certain," said Lady Photon with an unladylike snort, "that plan did not come out of city hall."

"Really?" asked Hope innocently. Lisa grinned.

"Yes, really," agreed Sarah. "It works - I mean, it really works, and not just by accident, either. It didn't need three revisions before it started, and it's running smoother than clockwork. Infrastructure's going up, workers aren't standing around idle, waiting for supplies to get through."

She waved her hands for emphasis. "There's safeguards built in to make graft and corruption hard to pull off and easy to spot, and the only one who's tried was one idiot in the Mayor's office who
thought he could earmark some supplies for his own use.". She grinned. "I hear his feet didn't even touch the ground."

Hope nodded. "That's good. I'm glad. Well, apart from the one who tried to steal the supplies. But they caught him, so that's good.". She smiled at the older hero. "I want to thank you for giving the plan a chance."

Sarah smiled back. "It wasn't a hard decision. You were very persuasive. And of course, you've done Amelia the world of good, so I was rather inclined to trust you. Thank you for that, by the way. Amelia is very dear to me."

Hope smiled, and reached across Lisa to take Amy's hand. "As you say, Sarah, it wasn't a hard decision. Not a hard decision at all."

Taylor Hebert emerged nonchalantly from the door leading to the ladies' toilets. She was out of costume now, with her pack slung on her shoulder. Spotting her father, she zeroed in on him and gave him a heartfelt hug. They moved into a quiet corner, away from everyone.

"Taylor," he said, holding her close.

"Dad," she replied. "I'm so glad you could be here today."

He smiled as he released her, and ruffled her hair. "I wouldn't have missed it for the world. You're a Ward now. I'm so proud of you."

She smiled and wiped away a tear. "I couldn't have done it without your support."

He grinned. "You did it for yourself, kiddo. You're strong. You went far as a villain, and you'll go far as a hero."

She sighed. "Yeah. I just hope people don't keep throwing up the 'but aren't you Skitter' thing in my face. It gets old."

He put an arm around her shoulders. "These things pass. Now, once when I was at college, I lost a bet, and …"

They moved off toward the buffet table, talking. Taylor knew very well that her father was trying to distract her, but she could not help emitting shocked giggles as the anecdote unfolded.

"Okay," said Victoria Dallon. "So spill. What's going on?"

They were at altitude, Vicky holding her pace back to something that Hope could easily keep up with. Glory Girl held Amy in her arms, while Hope carried Lisa.

"Are you sure you want to know?" asked Lisa.

"Yes!" shouted Amy and Vicky, more or less at the same moment.

"Okay," said Lisa. "Your mom and dad had a fight. Probably about you quitting to join the Protectorate. But it was a long time coming; you were just the trigger."

"Okay," said Vicky. "I'd pretty well figured that part out already."

Lisa nodded. "Well, she walked out on him. Went to her sister's."
"Aunt Sarah?" asked Amy. "I can't see that going well."

Lisa shook her head. "It didn't. She's moved into your dad's place, leaving your mom at her place. I gather she got fed up with her."

"Wow," said Amy. "Poor Aunt Sarah."

Vicky looked narrowly at Lisa. "Okay, so what did you mean about the bit you're not even telling Crystal? Dad didn't like that at all."

Lisa hesitated. "I'm really not sure I should air that bit at all," she said. "It's kind of personal and private."

"No," said Vicky firmly. "You do not get to lead us that far and then stop. What else is there?"

"Okay, fine," said Lisa reluctantly. "You father and your aunt are starting to have feelings for each other. Last night they admitted it to each other for the first time, and he kissed her."

"Dad … and Aunt Sarah?" asked Vicky slowly. "I didn't see that coming."

Lisa shook her head. "They're both keeping quiet about it, trying to figure out what that means for them."

Glory Girl nodded. "Gotcha. So we don't harass 'em with it. She turned to Lisa. "Thanks for filling in the blanks. It's a bit of a shock, but it's better to know than be blindsided by it."

Lisa gave her a small smile. "You're welcome."

As they flew on, Amy was silent. She had hugged Mark and Sarah, her dad on meeting, her aunt when they left. And unless she was reading the signs very wrongly indeed, Mark and Sarah had done more than kiss. A great deal more.

It was a good thing, she reflected, that her aunt was on the pill; otherwise, some awkward questions might have been getting asked some time soon. Because apparently Mark didn't believe in using condoms.

She caught Lisa's glance; of course, Lisa knew exactly what she knew. She gave the blonde a fractional nod in return; Vicky didn't need to know. To keep the peace, she'd keep the secret.

Director Piggot faced Clockblocker across her desk. He stood, helmet in hands, face downcast. Flanking him stood Miss Militia and Weld.

"Kindly explain," she said in tones not far above absolute zero, "exactly what was on your mind when you released that exclamation earlier, at the induction party. Virtually everyone heard it; the only small mercy is that not many people know that it was you."

"I'm really sorry," he said, and he sounded it. "I just had a real shock. I mean, Skitter joining the Wards was something I knew about, but finding out that Weaver's her, and then finding out that she's really Taylor Hebert … and then … oh god …"

He paused for a moment, trying to pull himself together. "She's the scariest person I know of in Brockton Bay. I have nightmares about waking up in bed next to her. And Tecton just … kissed her. And she kissed him back. And … that's just so wrong! On so many levels!"

Weld glanced at Miss Militia, and pressed his lips together to prevent himself from laughing. Under
her scarf, she was doing much the same.

"Well," said Director Piggot. "Given your record of clashes with Weaver, I will concede that there is some minor justification for your feeling of shock and horror. However, as a Ward, you are required to maintain a certain level of decorum, even in the face of such hardship."

She nodded toward him. "All leave cancelled for a week. You will also research a list of one thousand acceptable things you could have said, and present them to Weld at the end of the week. Dismissed."

Clockblocker nodded. "Thank you, ma'am," he said, turned, and left the office, Weld and Miss Militia following.

Once the door was safely closed, and Clockblocker well ahead, Weld and Miss Militia looked at each other and started chuckling. "I can't believe how she managed to keep her face so straight," said Weld admiringly.

Miss Militia shook her head. "I never make a practise of underestimating the Director."

Once her office door shut, Director Piggot got up and entered her small attached bathroom. Closing the door securely, she sat down on the toilet lid, and laughed for five minutes straight.

Composing herself once more, she went out and sat at her desk once more.

*If you are seen as someone who never laughs, she thought, no-one tries anything funny on you.*

At the shelter, Amy hugged her sister, then watched her fly away.

Lisa looked at her as they walked inside. "It's bothering you, isn't it?"

Amy nodded. "I … Mom and Dad … Carol and Mark … were together for years before they adopted me. Now, I've left, and they're breaking up. Did I have something to do with that?"

Lisa put her arms around Amy and hugged her. Hope added her own hug to the mix.

"Yeah, you had something to do with it," said Lisa quietly. "But so did I, so did Hope. So did everyone who had anything to do with them. We all have an effect on each other."

"I guess …" said Amy at last.

Lisa sighed. "Come on, Hope," she said. "Let's take this to my room."

"Ah, Taylor, come in," said the overweight man. "I think we met once before, briefly. I'm Glenn."

Taylor shook the proffered hand. "It's nice to meet you, Glenn," she said cautiously. "I'm not sure what this is about, though."

He smiled heartily. "Oh, didn't they tell you? I'm the public relations officer. And as to what it's about, it's about image, dear girl. Image and presentation. The very cornerstone of what separates a mediocre hero from a front-ranker."

"Wouldn't, ah, powers and technique be in there somewhere too?" asked Taylor.
He shook his head. "Alas, no. Powers are one thing; how you present yourself is entirely another. Take an example. Between Armstrong and, for instance, young Dennis, who do you think would prevail, in a straight-up challenge?"

"You mean Clockblocker?" asked Taylor.

A tic twitched in Glenn's cheek. "The very one," he said curtly. "Now, who do you think is more likely to win?"

Taylor considered. "Well, uh, Clockblocker's got the advantage. All he has to do is put a hand on Armstrong and his opponent is frozen." She paused. "Of course, if Armstrong had an idea he was coming —"

"But you see what I mean," said Glenn, cutting in cheerfully. "The young man commands one of the very forces of the universe. He can literally *stop time*. This is an awesome ability. But yet, when people think of him, they think of the childish name that he has taken. They see him as being not serious, a joke, a throwaway. In the meantime, Armstrong, who has had to build everything he uses, has a name, a presence. He has *image*. And he certainly knows how to present himself."

Taylor thought about this. Glenn was making a certain amount of sense, here.

"Yeah," she said. "I get it. I do. Legend is well … Legend. But if he'd called himself, say, 'Flying Zappy Guy', I don't think he'd really get the same amount of respect as he does now."

Glenn nodded, approvingly. "Exactly, dear girl. Exactly and precisely. Now we come to the crux of things."

"The crux?" asked Taylor. She suddenly had a bad feeling about this.

"Of course," he said. "Now, as Skitter, you depended on being scary with your bugs, and it's very easy to be scary with a swarm of horrible buzzing, stinging, biting bugs, is it not?"

"I … guess?" said Taylor. *I think my reputation had something to do with it too*, she told herself firmly.

"Oh, there's no guessing about it. It's a fact. Now, you've made yourself over as Weaver, and I have to congratulate you on your choice of costumes; you're brilliant, you shine, you are memorable."

"Ah … thanks," began Taylor.

"*But,*" Glenn went on sharply, "the bugs come with you, and we can't have that."

"We can't?" Taylor asked weakly.

"No, of course we can't," said Glenn firmly. "They are *scary*. You can't be scary. You're a Ward. A hero. Heroes are not scary, they are *inspirational*."

Taylor raised a hand. "Uh, Glenn, there's a small problem in what you are saying."

Glenn raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

Taylor shrugged. "I control bugs. It's what I *do*. If we take the bugs away, I'm a bug controller without a job. It kind of … defeats the purpose?"

"Ah," said Glenn. "That's where you lack imagination." He paused, then lowered his voice. "Have you ever considered using the … *nicer* bugs?"
Lisa opened her bedroom door and more or less dragged an unresisting Amy inside. Hope followed, a bemused expression on her face, and closed the door behind them.

Lisa put her arms around Amy and kissed her; not the gentle I-love-you peck that they used in public, but the full-on lips and tongue kiss, urgent and demanding and sensual, that they reserved for their love play. Hope smiled; she thought she saw where Lisa was going with this, so she quietly took her clothes off before moving up behind Amy and caressing her body, just as Lisa was doing.

Amy, dazed by the kiss and aroused by the caresses, barely noticed her clothes being removed. Her shirt was lifted over her head, then her bra was undone by Hope. While Lisa lowered her face to Amy's nipples and suckled on them so arousingly, Hope undid her jeans and lowered them, then pulled her panties down as well.

Amy found herself lying on her back on the bed, her jeans and panties being removed from around her ankles by Hope, while Lisa held her arms down and muffled her feeble protests with more kisses.

And then her thighs were parted, and she felt Hope go to work on her.

Hope had been shown and told how to do this, and had practised assiduously, with Amy and then Lisa as very willing subjects. She knew that it made her lovers happy - very happy indeed - so she did her best to get it right. The taste was interesting, not unpleasant, so she went at it with a will.

She liked to start out with a few gentle licks and nibbles on the upper thighs, so close to the labia that her breath could be felt on the sensitive skin. It was intended to tease, and it was successful. Even Lisa, who had proposed it to her, who knew it was intended to tease, confessed to being driven wild by the sensation.

Amy clasped and squeezed her breasts, and whimpered as Hope teased her unmercifully. And then she felt the first featherlight touch of tongue on her clitoris, and she caught her breath. It was followed by more, by deeper strokes, as Hope delved between her swollen labia, tasting her juices, stroking her tongue up and down, now sucking hard on her clitoris, and then delving her tongue deep into her slippery vaginal canal.

Amy bucked and moaned and writhed under Hope's tender ministrations; she finally arched her back and came when Hope went back to her clitoris, sucking it into her mouth and giving it a firm nip.

Hope was working at prolonging Amy's orgasm, driving her wild with her darting tongue, when she felt a hand on her shoulder. She looked around to see Lisa, stark naked except for the bright pink dildo strapped to her hips. Hope stood up; Lisa smiled and kissed her, and handed her a second dildo. Hope returned the kiss, and strapped on the dildo, giggling as she waggled her hips and it wobbled back and forth.

Amy was just beginning to recover from the intense series of orgasms awarded her by Hope, when she felt the plastic penis part her labia and slide into her wet and willing vagina. She looked up into Lisa's face; Lisa kissed her hard, then took hold of her wrists, pressed them back to the bed, and proceeded to fuck her unmercifully with the dildo.

The pink plastic penis drove deep into Amy's slippery wetness over and over again; she cried out as she was forced to the point of orgasm, but not quite past it. Lisa kept her there for quite some little time, then rolled over with her so that Amy's own weight was impaling her on the dildo. Then she slapped Amy's buttocks and pulled them apart.
Amy felt a second dildo sliding between her ass cheeks, spreading them apart, opening her rectal passage ... and then Lisa reached between them and tweaked Amy's clit.

Amy came again and again, as Hope carefully thrust into her ass, and Lisa worked her hips so that the dildo in her vagina hit all of her buttons.

They ended up side by side in the bed, with Amy sandwiched between the other two, Lisa with a dildo in her vagina and Hope with one firmly lodged between her buttocks.

"When did you get a second one?" asked Hope, as she slowly moved her hips, making Amy catch her breath and bite her lip.

"Oh, a few days ago," grinned Lisa. "I was saving it for a special occasion.". She kissed Amy. "Now," she said. "Do you know why you're here?"

Amy made a noise of considerable satisfaction in her throat, and kissed Lisa back. "No," she murmured, "But I like it."

Lisa thrust gently into Amy’s willing vagina, causing her to moan softly. “We’re here about your family,” she murmured, then pulled the dildo out of Amy, motioning to Hope to do the same.

Amy made a disappointed noise, then focused on what Lisa had just said.

“My family?” she asked. “What about my family?”

Lisa kissed her gently. “You know what I’m talking about,” she said firmly.

“Do we have to talk about this now?” asked Amy plaintively. She caressed Lisa’s breasts. “I wanna do other stuff.”

“We’ll do that after we sort this out,” said Lisa firmly. She took hold of Amy’s wrists and held her hands away from temptation.

“Okay,” said Amy meekly; in the bedroom, when Lisa used that tone, Amy obeyed. It was more fun that way.

“So tell me about Carol,” said Lisa softly. “Tell me what she really thinks of you.”

Amy reached for Lisa, and this time, she was allowed to wrap her arms around the blonde girl’s body, to hold her close. Hope moved in from behind, to give her more warmth and support.

“She doesn’t like me,” Amy said. “She never has. Nothing I do, nothing I say, is ever good enough.”

Lisa stroked her hair and kissed her. “Go on,” she said encouragingly.

“I wanted her to love me,” whimpered Amy. “I tried and tried and tried. I healed everyone she asked me to. I healed people until I was sick of the sight of them, and still I healed them, because I thought that if I healed enough people, she might see how hard I was trying.”

She began to cry, quietly. “But she never did. Vicky saw how hard I tried, and she loved me. Mark ... he didn’t see much of anything, but he was nice, when he paid attention. But Carol ... her face was
always there, every time I did the slightest thing wrong. And no matter how hard I tried, I could never do anything right.”

“So do you think she ever actually paid any attention to you?” whispered Lisa.

Amy shook her head. “No,” she said. “No. She just watched me like a hawk, so she could catch me doing the wrong thing. No matter how hard I tried to do the right thing, she never noticed. Not once.”

Lisa held her while she cried, comforting her with her own body, while Hope did the same behind her, holding her.

“So tell me,” said Lisa after a few moments, “if Carol never pays attention to you ... how did you manage to break up the marriage?”

Amy blinked away tears. “I ... I don’t know,” she said. “But I must have. It’s always my fault. Everything bad that happens is my fault. Carol never says it, but that’s what she means.”

“But Carol doesn’t like you,” said Lisa insistently. “Are you going to let someone who doesn’t like you tell you how to think about yourself?”

Amy stared at her. “No?” she said tentatively.

Lisa frowned. “I didn’t hear that.”

“No,” said Amy decisively. “I’m not going to let Carol tell me what to think about myself!”

Lisa smiled and kissed her. “Good girl,” she said. “For that, you get to choose. Who do you want, me or Hope?”

Amy smiled tremulously at her. “You?” she asked.


Amy sucked in a breath, and lay still as Lisa moved down between her thighs. She felt the first fluttering touches of Lisa’s tongue and lips on her, and she strove to restrain her moans, her twitches. With Hope, she could let loose, and it was amazing. With Lisa, she had to hold herself in, which was frustrating, until Lisa let her release herself, and then it was mind-blowing.

From Amy’s well-ravaged vagina, Lisa crawled upward, nibbling and licking, until she reached Amy’s breasts, squeezing and nibbling and nipping at them, each touch calculated to keep Amy at a fever pitch.

She poised above Amy; Hope helped to guide the dildo into place at the entrance to their willing victim’s slippery vaginal canal. It slid in an inch; Amy muffled a gasp.
“Amy,” said Lisa softly, suggestively, licking and nibbling Amy’s oh so sensitive neck. She kissed the other girl, kissed her hard. Their tongues met, slithered about one another. Slowly pushing with her hips, she slid the dildo into Amy. Amy’s eyes opened wide.

“Now you can speak,” Lisa told her, and drew the dildo out again, thrusting it back into Amy hard, over and over again.

Amy came, monumentally. She clutched at Lisa’s back as the blonde girl thrust the dildo deep into her slippery wetness, calling her name, crying out as the pleasure enveloped her, blotted out all else.

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They lay together once more. Lisa spoke to Amy, asked how she saw an aspect of her home life. Amy told her. Lisa offered an alternative explanation, gave evidence. Amy argued; Lisa refuted. Eventually, Amy accepted, agreed, cried, was comforted.

For her reward this time, she asked Hope to bend her over the bed. Hope did so, sliding the well-lubed dildo deep between her buttocks, driving into her hard, eliciting cries of pleasure and arousal, muffled only by Lisa’s vagina, which needed Amy’s attention.

After that, they treated Hope to a thorough back-and-wing massage. Lisa put Amy over her lap and spanked her hard for some imagined misdemeanour, then pushed her to the mattress and made love to her, hard and fast.

By the time Lisa spoke to Amy again about her family matters, Amy had no inhibitions about speaking her mind. She was so dazed by her multiple orgasms that she didn’t care what people thought about what she said. It took Lisa a lot less time to work through the justifications and the excuses, and to tease out the inconsistencies so that Amy could see what was really going on.

And so it went. Amy was held, and loved, by Lisa and Hope for hours on end; one, or the other, or both. And in between times, Lisa spoke to Amy, exposing her illusions for what they were, letting her see how people were really treating her, coaxing an understanding from her.

And Amy saw, and she understood. And finally, exhausted beyond even the arousal that Hope and Lisa could bring out in her, she slept.

Lisa smiled at Hope. “Thanks for your help,” she said, gently caressing Amy’s sleeping face. “I think she needed that.”

Hope smiled back. “You’re a wonderful person,” she murmured, and kissed her.

Lisa returned the kiss, and then was startled to find herself being held down to the bed.

“Hope?” she asked.

Hope smiled down at her, and nudged her legs apart with her knees. “It’s time for your reward,” she said softly. “Now lie there, and don’t move.”

With a frisson of excitement, Lisa obeyed. As exciting as it was to do this to Amy – the only real way she could enjoy sexual contact with anyone other than Hope – it was even more exciting to have it done to her. By Hope, of course.
As Hope’s face lowered to her proffered sex, she sucked in a breath. She had a feeling that Hope was not going to let her off easily.

And she was right.

Hope ravaged her soft, tender vagina with her lips and teeth and tongue, driving her utterly insane with arousal, pushing her over the edge into orgasm more often than she could count. She suckled on Lisa’s breasts, drawing the nipples hard into her mouth, and then letting her teeth scrape over them as she let them out again. And she slid the dildo into Lisa’s waiting vagina, and held her down while she gave her just as thorough a working over as Lisa had done to Amy.

They kissed and caressed one another as Hope thrust the dildo between Lisa’s distended labia, over and over again, setting off fireworks of pleasure behind the blonde girl’s eyes. At last, when Lisa was on the point of collapse, Hope let up on her. She carefully slid the dildo from Lisa’s throbbing vagina and unstrapped it, then held the girl close to her.

Lisa, her eyes unfocused, panted as she lay back flat on the bed.

“Oh god,” she said. “Oh god.”

Hope lay with her arms around Amy. Lisa lay on Amy's other side, talking softly but insistently to her. Amy was crying softly, but listening, and taking in what Lisa had to say.

Occasionally they took breaks to make love, or to give Hope a back and wing massage, or both. But always they got back to talking, Lisa helping Amy straighten out in her own mind what spending ten years under the roof of Carol Dallon had done to her as a person.

It would not take just one night, but the knots in Amy’s mind would be gradually teased apart, and she would be healthy one day, whole again.

But even after the first night of this unconventional therapy, she slept with a smile on her face, and woke with a light heart.

"Now, here's the thing," said Amy. "Falkor's a good design. Sturdy, lightweight, takes you anywhere. But she's scary. Black and grey. Back when you were a villain, that was the thing. Now? Not so much."

"I got that, I got that," said Taylor. "This is why I'm visiting. I've got Glenn all over my back about my 'image' and how I can't evoke 'horror' in people when I use my bugs." She grinned. "At least most of the bugs you made for me are brightly coloured."

Amy nodded. "That was mostly for my own convenience, to be honest," she said. "Colour coding for the win." She raised an eyebrow. "Does he even know what most of those bugs do?"

Taylor grinned. "I may have neglected to give him all the details," she said cheerfully.

Amy laughed out loud. "Okay, let's go have a look at the big bug and see what we can't do."

Everett paused by the desk where Clockblocker sat typing on the computer.

"Hey, Dennis. What're you doing?"
Dennis looked up. "Oh, hey. Here to get me in trouble again?"

Everett shook his head. "Look, I'm sorry," he said. "I never meant for that to happen. I was just so happy to see Taylor …"

Everett frowned. "It sounds like the fear of being buried alive. But I'm guessing from context, something to do with bugs?"

"Give the guy a cigar," said Dennis. "Fear of insects. Which I am generously expanding to 'fear of anything that can crawl down your neck and give you the heebie-jeebies'."

"And Taylor's done this to you, I'm guessing," said Everett.

Dennis shuddered. "Oh hell yes. And you know something? I'd much rather face people who can punch through brick walls, and dogs that look like they chase main battle tanks for fun, than people who can make bugs crawl down your neck."

Everett shrugged. "But she's nice," he protested. "She loves her dad, and she's a really sweet girl, and …"

"I do not want to hear the details," said Dennis firmly. "I don't even want to know how you two even met." He paused. "Actually, yes I do. It might take my mind off this damn list."

"List?" asked Everett curiously.

"List," said Dennis morosely. "Of a thousand ways to say 'please don't do that in front of me' without swearing. I'm starting to run out of inspiration."

Everett scanned the list. "Well, what you just said isn't in there," he said encouragingly.

Dennis looked through it. "Huh. It isn't either." He typed rapidly. "Two hundred thirty seven," he muttered.

"You'll get there," said Everett encouragingly.

"Yeah, sure," said Dennis. "So, about you and, uh, Taylor?"

Everett grinned. "Well, you know I was brought in from Chicago …"

"Okay," said Amy. "It's down to one thing. Colour. Falkor's got to be bright and shiny. I can do that. The question is, are you okay with that?"

Taylor looked at Falkor, her hard grey lines, her grim demeanour. Her hand crept out, caressed the carapace.

*I'm gonna miss the way you look.*

"Okay," she said. "Do it."

It took surprisingly little time.
"Hope, it's for you."

Hope took the proffered receiver, and said, "Hello?"

"I am speaking to the one known as Hope?"

"You are, sir," said Hope politely. "Who, may I ask, is calling?"

"My name is Joseph Killarney. I am speaking on behalf of the Secretary-General of the United Nations," came the reply.

"You are? This is … this is a surprise," she stammered. "Is this about the Hope Accord?"

"It is indeed," replied Killarney. "The Secretary-General is most impressed by the Accord, and wishes to view it in person. Shall we say … the first of July? One fifteen PM?"

Hope nodded. "Uh, sure," she said. "I'll be there. Thank you."

"No," said Mr Killarney. "Thank you."

He hung up, and Hope put the phone down, her head spinning.

It's happening so fast, now.

Hope stumbled back to bed, where Amy was just beginning to stir.

"Oh, hi," she mumbled. "Morning, sweetie."

Hope … pounced.

"Wow, holy crap," said Kid Win. "Is that —"

"This is Falkor," said Weaver proudly, letting the huge dragonfly climb down off her back and perch beside her on the surface of the helipad.

"Damn, that's one hell of a makeover," said the armoured teen. "It's not cute – it'll never be cute – but it's definitely better-looking."

"She's definitely better-looking," Weaver corrected him. "Falkor's a she."

"Does it matter?" asked Vista. "It's not like she'll be able to breed any time soon."

Weaver grinned behind her mask. "She doesn't need to. She's been set up so that when I tell her to, she will lay exactly one fertilised egg. That egg will hatch and mature into a new Falkor."

There was silence for a moment.

"Daaang," said Kid Win. "Seriously, seriously impressed here."

They looked at the enormous dragonfly. As if aware of their scrutiny, she spread her wings so that they reached the span of a light plane. The natural rainbow reflectiveness of the wings had been enhanced, so that they fairly glittered now. The body of the creature was now faceted in metallic reds and blues and greens and golds, with silver trim running through it all.

As Kid Win had said, she didn't look cute. She looked magnificent.
"Yeah," said Weaver. "Me too."

"Wow," said Amy, some little time later, looking somewhat more dishevelled, and a great deal more satisfied. "Not that I'm complaining, but what was *that* all about?"

Hope grinned down at her. "I got a phone call from New York. The Secretary-General wants to see the Hope Accord." She laughed with glee. "It's nearly there! I just felt so good I had to do something nice for you."

"Wow," said Amy again. She grinned at Hope. "Here's hoping he calls back."

Hope giggled and kissed her.

The next day, three bundled forms were found outside the front doors of the PRT building. One was Bambina, spitting mad, tied hand and foot, wearing a blindfold and a clown nose, for no apparent reason. The second was Starlet, similarly bound. The third was August Prince, wrapped in what turned out to be one hundred and seventy-two feet of piano wire.

A note attached to Bambina's clown nose read: "THESE IDIOTS ATTACKED ME. YOU CAN HAVE THEM. I DON'T WANT THEM. PLEASE PUT THEM SOMEPLACE WHERE THEY WON'T HURT THEMSELVES."

It was signed "Robin Maestra".

"So, to what do we owe the pleasure?" asked Trickster. He and Faultline were sitting across the table from one another, in the house that he and Omake were using as their base. Omake herself sat beside Trickster, while Labyrinth sat beside Faultline.

Faultline steepled her fingers together before her. "It's simple," she said. "I've got something that I think you want very much, and I'm interested in seeing what price you're willing to go to in order to get it."

Trickster's eyes, behind the simple white mask he wore, became calculating.

"What is this thing you saw we want?" he countered.

Behind her mask, Faultline smiled.

"A way home."

"A way home?" Ballistic's voice was incredulous.

"That's what she said." Trickster's, by contrast, was calm, measured.

"How do we know she's telling the truth?" asked Genesis. She was pacing, back and forth. This didn't indicate nerves; she just liked to do it.

"You know that new cape, Robin Maestra?" asked Omake. It was a rhetorical question; Robin had shown up in the news more than once. She was flamboyant and eccentric, and gave great sound bites.

"I've seen her," said Ballistic with a nod.
"We've all seen her," said Sundancer. "What about her?"

"According to Faultline," said Trickster, "they opened a doorway into Hope's world. She went through, and came back with Robin. And I've heard independent rumours that Robin is from wherever Hope comes from."

Ballistic shook his head. "They must have some really weird trigger events where they come from."

"This is getting beyond the point," said Sundancer. "So do you think she's telling the truth?"

"If it's a lie, it's an easily uncovered one," pointed out Omake. "I believe her. I believe that she can open a door into another world."

"So … she could make us a doorway … that leads to Earth Aleph," said Sundancer. "Home."

"Is it?" said Genesis quietly.

Everyone looked at her.

"What? Of course it is," snapped Ballistic. "We've only been trying our damnedest to get back there since forever."

Genesis paused in her pacing. "What if some of us are making new lives here?" she asked. "I'm really not certain that I'd want to leave Grue."

Trickster eyed her. "I'm not saying we'd force you to go," he said.

"Of course not," said Omake hastily. "If you wanted to stay, you can stay."

"But I don't want to leave you, either," said Genesis, unhappily. "You're my friends. We've been together, doing this, for years. I can't just throw that away."

Trickster leaned back. "I'm really sorry, Jess," he said. "I can't help you there."

"Well, I want to go," said Sundancer. "I never wanted to be a villain, and even with this amnesty and the chance to go straight, and maybe be a hero … no. I want to be Marissa, not Sundancer. Go back to dancing. Live a quiet little life in a quiet little town."

"Me too," said Ballistic. "Well, not the quiet little town thing. Maybe I could go back into gaming. See what's changed."

"So," said Trickster. "Here's the thing. How much are we willing to put up for Faultline to do her thing? How much do we want to hold back for living expenses, once we get back to Aleph?"

Genesis stood off to the side, not taking part in the discussion. These were her friends. If it hadn't been for them, she would have died a dozen times over in the first horrifying hours of their arrival in Earth Bet. And she had stood beside them, metaphorically speaking, ever since. She didn't want to lose them, not now.

But on the other hand, there was Brian. Funny, sweet, strong Brian. A gentle man, a wonderful lover. Thinking of losing him was a physical wrench in her chest. A real pain, stabbing to her core.

I can't do this. I can't make this choice.

Hope was ushered into the office of the Secretary-General of the United Nations. She studied him
carefully. He looked almost exactly like the gentle old man she knew from her own world, just a little more careworn, a little more irrelevant in a world full of people who could upset the balance of power just by crossing a national border.

"Sir," she said. "Thank you for seeing me." She used his native Korean; she knew he liked that.

Of course, *this* version of him had never met her, and had probably only a partial file to go on; his eyes opened wider as he replied, also in Korean. "You speak the mother tongue well," he said. "I congratulate you on your learning."

She smiled. "It is but a power," she replied, smoothing her pronunciation to match his. "A cape trick, as they say. I find it useful in speaking to people whom I truly respect."

He smiled; it was flattery, he knew it was flattery, but he still liked her for it. Because flattery or otherwise, it was true.

"Please, sit," he said. "You have your Hope Accord to show me?"

She nodded, and handed over the spare tablet. Amy had opted to stay in the outer office this time; it was good practice, as she said, for when Hope actually addressed the General Assembly.

"Here it is, sir," she said. "You will note the language options down the side."

He found them, and located Korean; all the text changed immediately.

"Did you do the translation yourself as well?" he asked, very impressed despite himself. "It is good. Not so idiomatic, but very readable."

She chuckled respectfully. "Oh no, sir. This has been a joint effort. I have put in perhaps the least work on it. One person made the plan, and another put it on digital format and provided all the translations. I am merely the one showing it to you."

"Ah," he replied. "May I ask who did the work then?"

She nodded. "The man who created the plan does not wish to be named, for his own reasons," she said. "He has given me permission to put my own name to it, to make it more likely that people will accept it."

He nodded wisely. "And they will, I have no doubt. You are a most personable ambassador for it."

She smiled. "Thank you, sir. As for the digital media and the translations, perhaps you have heard of the Tinker called Dragon?"

He nodded at once. "Yes. She does good work. I admire her dragon suits; they are both marvels of technology and sculptures of beauty."

Hope smiled again. "I will tell her you said so." She tapped on the tablet, switching her own language option to Korean. "Would you like to begin, sir?"

"But of course," he replied, taking up his tablet. "I have heard much of this from my colleague the Governor; but he told me to ask you for the details. He was impressed by your command of its intricacies."

She lowered her head modestly. "I try, sir. I try." She placed her tablet on the desk, ostentatiously did not look at it. "Now, if you consider the distribution of the world's resources in conjunction to
distribution of the world's human population, you will find that …"

Thirty minutes later, she walked from the office, to be met by Amy. The frizzy-haired girl grabbed her hand and said, "Well? How did it go?"

Hope shook her head slightly. She smelled of jasmine. "Sweetie, I just got put through the wringer in no uncertain terms. He's a wonderful old man, he likes me dearly, but he still pulls no punches. I think ... I'm going to buy the biggest box of chocolates I can find, and send them to Director Costa-Brown. If I hadn't done what she suggested, I would have looked like a total idiot in there."

Amy hugged her gently. "So .. what do you think will happen now?"

Hope smiled and hugged her, lifting her off her feet. "Well, for one thing, we're coming back in a week's time, to address the General Assembly."

Amy's excited squeal turned heads up and down the corridor.

Keith cooed gently and played with Hope's hair as she held him. Amy snuggled alongside her, smiling at the baby.

Arthur came back to the sofa with the heated bottle. "Do you want to feed him, or shall I?"

Hope reached up and took it from him. "I can do it. He's comfortable and happy."

Arthur bent over and kissed Keith on the forehead. "He looks it."

The baby gurgled and grabbed his nose; Amy giggled.

Once father and son were separated, Hope gave the baby his bottle. Amy leaned against her, their heads together, watching the infant as he fed. Arthur watched all three of them, a look of tenderness on his face.

After the bottle was emptied, Hope gently patted Keith on the back, eliciting quite an impressive burp, before he settled down almost immediately into sleep.

"He's going to need changing in about twenty minutes," murmured Hope, as Arthur moved the baby back to his crib.

Arthur nodded. "Thanks." He gently placed Keith down and pulled a blanket over him. "Wow," he said. "That's the easiest he's gone down in a long time." He grinned at her. "Ever thought of taking work as a babysitter?"

She giggled. "Once the world settles down a bit, I might just do that," she grinned.

Amy put her arms around her. "Not without me and Lisa, you're not," she said firmly.

Hope embraced her in turn. "Thanks, sweetie," she said, then glanced at the clock. "Ah, we might need to get going. Thanks for the meal, Arthur. Say hi for us."

Arthur shrugged fatalistically. "I love the man dearly, but he does keep flying off everywhere at a moment's notice." He hugged them both, and walked out on to the balcony with them.

Hope took Amy into her arms, and stepped off the railing, spreading her wings and bringing them down in a great crystal chime; Arthur had shut the balcony door to prevent this from waking Keith.
He watched them fly away, and then turned and walked back inside.

Being a superhero might be all well and good, but he preferred his home life.
Dallon Household, 26 June

"... and I really think we should do something about it," said Carol Dallon, in her best you-know-I'm-making-sense-dear voice.

Mark did not look up from the paper.

"Mark!" she said sharply.

He looked up mildly. "Yes, dear?" he asked.

"Have you been listening to a word I've said?" she asked in a dangerous tone.

He sighed, and carefully repeated everything she had said over the previous thirty seconds, finishing with "and I really think we should do something about it."

She stared at him. "Well?" she demanded.

"Well what, dear?" he asked patiently.

"I asked you what you thought about it." Her tone of voice made it clear exactly how she considered he should be thinking about it.

He shook his head. "No, you didn't. You aired an opinion, and ended with a definitive statement. I understood the statement, if not the sentiment behind it, and saw no need to ask questions or expand on what you said."

"You should have known that I was asking for your opinion!" she flared.

He raised an eyebrow slightly. "No, actually, Carol, I don't believe so. These days, I'm understanding you more than ever, and the meaning I got from your statement was that you want me to agree whole-heartedly, no matter my personal opinion of the situation."

"And don't you?" she asked, looking confused.

He shook his head again. "In a word, Carol - no. As I said this afternoon, Vicky is her own girl now, and I applaud her going her own way."

"That girl -" she began hotly.

He overrode her. "My daughter Amy has nothing to do with this. She saved my life, gave me back my mind. What she did may have been the trigger for what Vicky did, but it's been a long time coming anyway. Vicky needs to find her own place, her own level. And trying to drag her back into your arms is not going to work."

Abruptly, Carol stood up from the table. "I can see you're not going to back me up here," she snapped. "I thought you were a better husband than this. You're not the man I married."

Words calculated to hurt and sting, to bring him repentant back into the fold. And two months ago,
before Bonesaw, they would have worked. But now, he saw the intent behind them, felt only the dullest pain that she would stoop to using such tactics on him.

"If that's the way you see it, dear," he agreed mildly, and picked up the paper again.

He heard her draw in her breath for a sharp retort, but the words never came. Instead, she turned and stamped from the room, and up the stairs. Moments later, he heard her crashing and banging about in the bedroom.

Curiosity overcame him, and he strolled upstairs to lean in the doorway of the bedroom, watching her.

She had a suitcase open on the bed and was flinging items in willy-nilly.

"Going somewhere?" he asked casually.

She looked at him triumphantly. "I'm going to Sarah's! She understands me, at least!"

He shook his head. "No, Carol. You can't do it this way.

"You can't stop me," she warned him, in tones that said, not unless you cave in on everything you said before.

"I'm not trying to stop you," he said patiently. "But surely, Carol, you know how to pack a suitcase better than this." Carefully, he began to fold her clothes, placing each item neatly into the suitcase as he went.

She stared at him disbelievingly. "You're not trying to stop me?" she asked.

"Well," he said bluntly, "I'm not about to hold you here against your will."

Struck dumb, she stared. He continued to fold her clothes and carefully pack them.

It had been a bluff, of course; he knew it and she knew it. But once he called it, and proceeded to actively assist her in carrying out her stated plan of action, she could not back down without totally undermining her position.

And so, realising that he was enjoying her discomfiture altogether too much but not overly caring, he packed her bag for her, even putting in her favourite toiletries from the bathroom. Then he carried it downstairs for her, and made the phone call for the taxi.

The last he saw of her was the back of her neck, held rigidly straight, through the back window of the taxi as it drove away. Then he went back inside and continued to read the paper.

He supposed that he should feel bad about forcing her hand, and not giving her an out from her ultimatum, but what he felt mostly was a sense of relief from almost intolerable pressure. Since Amy had fixed his brain, Carol had been trying to reassert her dominance over him. She had established it before they were married, and had maintained it ever since, aided and abetted by his chronic depression. But now it was broken, and would never be re-established.

He loved his wife, he really did. But he wished that she would not be such a bitch on occasion.

Pelham Household, 27 June
"... you have no idea how aggravating Mark can be. If you ask me, it's all the fault of that girl. I have absolutely no idea how you managed to convince me to take Marquis' child in as my own in the first place, but you can see how big a mistake it's all turned out to be ..."

Sarah Pelham sighed and tried to tune out her sister's voice. Carol had been harping on the same topic, with minor variations, since she had arrived on Sarah's doorstep, carrying a suitcase and nursing a grudge.

Sarah was all in favour of peaceful resolutions, but Carol's idea of a peaceful resolution was 'everyone should do what I say'. And she was not about to go over and harass her brother-in-law over a subject that she privately agreed with him on. And if this was the sort of thing that she had been subjecting Mark and Victoria to since Amelia left, she wasn't surprised that Victoria had left and Mark had let Carol throw herself out of the house.

"You're right," she said suddenly. Crystal, who had been sitting quietly watching TV, looked around in surprise. Before Carol could speak, Sarah went on. "I'll pack a bag and go over there right now, and talk some sense into him."

"I'll go too, Mom," Crystal said immediately. "Two are better than one for this."

Sarah wasn't surprised. Crystal was a bright kid, in every sense of the word, and she no more wanted to be stuck in the house with her Aunt Carol in this kind of mood than Sarah herself wanted to be.  

_Heaven knows I love her_, she thought, _but once she gets an idea in her head, she will not rest until she's inflicted it on everyone around her. And I don't need this right now._

Crystal had her bag packed even faster than Sarah did; Sarah suspected she simply didn't want to get left behind.

"Here are the house keys," said Sarah, pressing them into Carol's hand. "Make yourself comfortable. I'll be back as soon as I've talked Mark around."

She had the spare keys in her pocket; she could get back in any time she wished.

"Well ... I ..." said Carol, defused and disarmed by Sarah's enthusiastic acceptance of her views, and her apparent wish to assist in promoting them.

But Sarah did not breathe easy until they were in the taxi and pulling away from the house. She heaved a sigh of relief. Beside her, Crystal giggled.

"I think it'll be _good_ to see Uncle Mark for a couple of days," said the teenager.

Sarah nodded. "I think so too, darling. I think so too." She hugged her daughter. "Quick thinking there. 'Two are better than one', indeed."

"Yeah, well, you got us out of there, Mom," said Crystal cheerfully.

"Supervillains, I'll fight, any day of the week," said Sarah prosaically. "Your aunt Carol … she can have the house."

Mark opened the door at Sarah's knock.

He looked somewhat startled to see Sarah and Crystal standing there.

"Uh … hi?" he said.
"Hi," said Sarah brightly. "I'm here to convince you of the error of your ways regarding Victoria and Amelia. Are you convinced of the error of your ways?"

He frowned. "Uh … no?"

She shrugged. "Oh well, I tried. Can I come in? This suitcase is heavy, and I don't want to face Carol again right now."

His face cleared, he smiled, and he opened the door wide.

"Come right in," he said.

The Dallon Household, That Evening

The spare bedroom had been made up for Sarah, while Crystal had been put up in Amy's old bedroom. Mark had produced a reasonable meal for the three of them, and they had sat around watching TV and chatting. By unspoken agreement, Carol was not mentioned even once.

After Crystal claimed fatigue and trailed off to bed, Mark had produced a bottle of white wine. He and Sarah took it out to the balcony, where they sat enjoying the night air and talking softly.

"I don't know what to do anymore," confessed Mark. "When … before … back when I was happy to let Carol run things, I didn't have to think too hard, make decisions. It was easy. But now … I'm actually able to think for myself, and I can't just let things slide any more. And Carol's becoming more and more demanding."

He took a drink from his glass, and put his hand on Sarah's, as she sat next to him. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to put all this on you."

She shook her head and favoured him with a sad smile. "It's not your fault," she said. "And it's not Victoria's fault. And it's not Amelia's fault, no matter how much Carol wants to think that it is." She opened her hand under his, trapped the tips of his fingers between her finger and thumb. "It's no-one's fault but Carol's. The world changed, and she's refusing to change with it." She sipped from her wine.

"The world, meaning me and the kids," he agreed. He squeezed her hand. When was the last time he'd held hands with Carol? Had he ever held hands with Carol?

"And my family, too," said Sarah, very quietly. He squeezed her hand a little more tightly.

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to bring that up."

She shook her head, and turned to him, tears glinting in her eyes from the street lights. "I don't know what's worse; the fact that I lost a husband and a son against Leviathan, or the fact that Carol keeps insisting that having a daughter run away from home to join the Protectorate is more devastating."

He stood, drawing her to her feet, and folded her in his arms. She held him, face against his chest. He could feel her shoulders shaking as she cried, feel the tears wet his shirt.

"I'm sorry, Sarah," he said softly. "I'm sorry. I liked Neil a lot, and Eric was a great kid."

She pressed against him, feeling his arms strong around her, as she had ached to be held every day since her husband had died.
"Neil was a wonderful man," she said quietly. "Not a night has gone by that I have not cried myself to sleep."

He stroked her hair, kissed her forehead.

She started at the touch of lips to skin – how many times did Neil do that exact thing to me? – and looked up at him, eyes wide, lips parted.

"Mark," she whispered.

"Sarah," he replied, just as quietly.

The initial kiss was tentative, both parties ready to retreat, call it off, if it was not accepted.

But there was no rejection. Their lips met, pressed, moved apart, pressed again. She held him tightly, kissed him hard. He returned the embrace, and the kiss..

Desire grew, spread. They kissed again and again.

They pulled apart. He stared at her. "Sarah?" It was a question with several meanings.

"Crystal's asleep," she whispered. "I checked before we came out." She paused at his hesitation. "Or is it Carol? Because you're married?"

He shook his head. "No," he said. "I haven't been married, not really, for years. Carol wanted Vicky, and that was it. She didn't marry me for love, or for sex. I was there to be on her arm. But Neil..."

Sarah favoured him with a sad smile. "Mark ... Neil was a wonderful man, but since Leviathan... it's like there's been this ragged hole in my life. I come home and the house is empty. I roll over at night and he's not there. I need this. I need you."

He took a deep breath and gave her an apprehensive look. "It's just that ... I don't really know how. How to be good in bed."

Her smile didn't waver, and she took him by the hand. No more words passed between them. None were needed.

She led him into the house. He went willingly enough.

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Morning, 28 June

Mark blinked his way awake. His memory of the previous night was fuzzy, as if he'd had a touch too much wine after dinner. But there was something …

A warm weight moved on his arm, snuggled against him. He turned his head. Carol? She's never this affectionate.

And then, the tousled blonde hair, and the face under it, rose into his view. Sarah blinked in confusion. "Mark?"

He stared back in equal confusion. "Sarah?"

Her mouth opened in surprise. "Oh. Oh my. Then it wasn't a dream."

"Christ," he whispered. "What have we done?"

Sarah propped herself up on one elbow. "For one thing, Mark Dallon, you do not blame yourself for one goddamn second. For another, we were consenting adults, and I seem to recall enjoying myself quite a bit. And thirdly ..." She bit her lip. "I have no idea where we go from here."

Mark shook his head. "We don't tell anyone. Not Crystal, not Vicky and Amy, and especially ..."

She joined in, as they said in unison, "we don't tell Carol."

"And in the meantime," she said, reaching out and running a finger down the length of his nose, "we try to figure out what this means for us."

He nodded as he climbed out of bed and started looking for his pants. She did the same, on her side of the bed. She turned as he stepped into his Y-fronts and pulled them up. "And Mark?"

He looked over at her, trying not to stare at her body. "Yes, Sarah?"

She smiled. "Whatever else happens ... thank you. For last night."

He found himself smiling back. "That's all right. I have a lot to thank you for, too."

Before things could turn awkward, they went back to looking for their clothes, so that Sarah could sneak back to the spare room. After all, it wouldn't do for Crystal to find out.

They were good, the first two days. The subject had been avoided, they had put on the pretence that nothing had happened. By the third day, they had begun to refer to it, obliquely, in conversation. On the evening of the fourth day, they had decided to get it out in the open and talk frankly about what had happened, after Crystal had gone to bed.

Half an hour later, they had come to a decision. Sarah did not want to sleep alone. Nor, for that matter, did Mark.

Morning, 2 July

Carol Dallon climbed out of the taxi and paid the driver. She looked up at the house where she had spent the majority of her married life.

*If only Mark would see sense, she told herself. Surely by now, Sarah has talked him around.*

She opened the door with her key – she wasn't stupid enough to have left without a key to the house – and entered the house. The first person she met was Crystal, sitting on the sofa in pyjamas, with a bowl of cereal, watching the morning cartoons on TV.

"Oh, hi, Aunt Carol," she said. "Uh, Uncle Mark's still asleep. Mom, too, I think. Want me to go get them?"

Carol shook her head. "I know my way around my own house," she said tartly. "Don't spill milk on the sofa, now."
"No, I'm real careful," Crystal assured her back as she went up the stairs.

Shrugging, the teenager went back to watching TV and spooning cereal.

Carol had been willing to let Sarah talk to Mark, but four days was surely enough time. It was past time that she simply laid down the law and told Mark how things were going to be.

She opened the bedroom door.

There was Mark, just rousing from sleep, the lazy bum. "Mark," she snapped, striding forward. "Get up. It's time we talked."

And then, from the tangled sheets, another head arose, tousled blonde hair, eyes blinking to wakefulness.

Carol's jaw dropped. "Sarah?"

Sarah's eyes opened wide. "Carol?"

They both spoke at the same time. "What are you doing here?"

Crystal, downstairs, heard the raised voices, the yelling and screaming. She didn't know what was going on, and she didn't want to know.

Wisely, she sat on the sofa and watched TV.

Elsewhere ...

Director Piggot frowned and stretched her arms forward, out to the side, up, as far back as she could bring them, then windmilled them.

"The give is good," she said, looking down at the shimmering white bodysuit that covered her from neck to wrist to ankle. "Though it's a little tight around the stomach."

"That's intentional," said Weaver, walking around her, watching how it pulled and stretched. "You're going to be losing that weight, right?"

Piggot looked down at the final remainder of the weight she had been carrying around for the last few years. "Definitely," she said.

Weaver nodded. "I set the pattern to work with a flat stomach," she explained. "It's got give, but it will be a lot more comfortable once you've lost those last few pounds."

The Director gave her a wry smile. "You're almost as bad as Colin."

Across the gym, the muscular man on the treadmill slowed his pace and looked around. "Beg pardon, Emily?" he called out.

"I said," called out Director Piggot, "that Weaver's almost as bad as you for pushing me that one step farther."

"Good," said Armsmaster, hitting the button to shut down the treadmill. He stepped off it and came over to them, wiping sweat from his face with a towel. Eyeing the bodysuit, he walked all the way
around Piggot.

"It fits well," he observed.

"It should," Weaver told him. "I gave the web-spiders the exact measurements she gave me – with a
little less around the stomach. So when she loses that last bit of weight, it will fit her snugly."

He nodded approvingly. "That-a-girl," he said. "Now, is that as armoured as your costume?"

"Not quite," allowed Weaver. "Over the vital organs, yes. Elbows and knees, yes. Shin and outer
edge of the forearm. Everywhere else, it's a triple weave; two normal layers, with a hygroscopic layer
between."

"Ah," said Armsmaster. "To take sweat away from the skin."

Weaver nodded. "I'll be interested in seeing how well it works."

Armsmaster looked at Piggot. "Care for a spar, Emily?"

"In this?" asked the Director. "It's bad enough standing here in it with you two staring at me. I'd feel
naked out there on the mat."

"So put something over the top of it," suggested Weaver. "It won't change matters."

So when Director Piggot squared off against Armsmaster, she was wearing track sweats, and looking
much more comfortable about the whole idea. Weaver supposed that being that overweight for that
long had left her with a few body issues. She wasn't without her own. Few people were.

Armsmaster still favoured his left arm, torn off by Leviathan and regrown by Amy Lavere, but it was
almost as muscular as the right. He was a highly-trained combatant, and it showed.

Emily Piggot had been an elite PRT officer before her injury at the hands of Nilbog, but she was a
little rusty in the hand-to-hand department. So Armsmaster landed quite a few more blows than she
did.

To no effect.

Even a vicious kidney-punch that would have left a lesser opponent writhing on the ground merely
gave Piggot an opening for a blow that nearly took his head off; she was getting her skills back
online faster than he'd given her credit for.

"That's good armour," he said, as they moved around each other.

"You're not just holding back on me?" she asked with genuine curiosity.

"If I was, I'd tell you," he replied grimly. "No, you're getting the full treatment. Anything?"

She shook her head. "I feel the impact, but it's spread so wide that there's no real effect."

Armsmaster shook his head. "Let's pull this up, then. Director Piggot, I recommend that the PRT and
Protectorate get the benefit of Weaver's web-spider armour."

Piggot nodded. "Just one problem. We've signed a contract with another company. They are to
supply our body armour requirements for the next twelve months."

"Who with?" asked Armsmaster.
"Thomas Calvert," Piggot sighed.

"How do they stack up to what you're wearing now?"

"About two-thirds as effective, and ten times as heavy and bulky. And not as much coverage."

"Price wise?" asked Armsmaster.

Piggot glanced at Weaver, who shrugged. "You could pay me ten dollars a set, and I'd still come out in front," she said.

"I am not," said Director Piggot sternly, "going to pay a mere ten dollars for something of this quality."

"Okay," said Weaver. "What's the absolute minimum you're willing to pay?"

Thereafter followed perhaps the strangest bidding war that any of them had ever engaged in; Director Piggot firmly bid the price up, while Weaver protested that she was being paid too much. Webspiders, after all, were paid in insects. And insects came for free.

Eventually, they came to an agreement; the price they settled on was still a mere fraction of what Calvert's body armour was costing the PRT per unit.

"Well, all that remains now is to call Calvert," said the Director, once the price had been set. "He's not going to be happy."

"Weaver's supplying a better product," pointed out Armsmaster. "That's all there is to it."

Piggot nodded. "This armour is really worth it. And it's holding the sweat away from the skin too. I'm liking it."

Weaver nodded. "I might do it with mine, now. See how it goes." She held out her gloved hand, flexed it, watched the fabric shift. "I have to hand it to Amy. She makes some marvellous bugs."

"So what are you building for Taylor now?" asked Hope curiously, as Amy took a bug and added biomass.

"It's based on the original idea of the big bug, remember?" asked Amy. "We were talking about using a Goliath beetle or something similar that she could fly around on."

"But then we ended up with Falkor, who she's basically fallen in love with," pointed out Hope.

"Are we surprised?" asked Lisa. "Falkor's not like a vehicle, like the goliath beetle would have been. She's more like a set of wings that Taylor can wear." She smiled at Amy. "You really outdid yourself, there."

Amy smiled back, then froze the bug, stood up, and gave Lisa a hug. Lisa hugged her back, both of them just enjoying the closeness, the contact. Hope couldn't help herself; she hugged them both.

Lisa was the first to break the silence. "Oh god," she sighed. "I could stay like this forever."

Amy giggled and kissed her. "And if we could, I would," she agreed. "But I have a bug to make." She slipped out of the hug, leaving Hope to hold Lisa, which neither of them had a problem with.

Lisa snuggled into Hope's embrace. "Thank you for loving me, and letting me love you," she
murmured.

Hope smiled and held her close. "How could I not?" she asked. "And actually, you can help me out with something."


Hope smiled. "You know I'm addressing the General Assembly next week," she said. "I'm trying to work out how to explain the workings of the Hope Accord without losing them on the first turn. One on one, I can answer questions as they come up, but with a hundred and ninety-three delegates, answering one question from each of them would take three hours or more. So how do I explain it so that it doesn't require questions to clarify?"

Lisa grinned. "You don't."

Hope blinked. "Sorry, what?"

Lisa's grin widened. "You don't explain it. You just sell it. You tell them what the plan means for them, what it will do for them, how it will improve the lives of the poorer nations, and so on and so forth. Don't go into details. The time for that is past. Now is the time for the broad strokes. Be dramatic, be spectacular."

"Wow," said Hope. "I can see it. I can really see it." She looked at Lisa. "But I have no idea how to write a speech like that."

Lisa kissed her on the tip of the nose. "You're in luck," she said. "Let's sit down with the Accord, and decide how we want this speech to go."

As Amy worked with the bug, now the size of a basketball and growing, she glanced up and saw Lisa with Hope. The dark-blonde head next to the silver, bent over the tablet side by side, occasionally sharing a kiss. She smiled and went back to her work.

At one time, not too far past, she would have been intensely jealous, and not a little worried that Lisa might somehow talk Hope into abandoning her. But now she knew better. She knew Lisa rather better than she had ever expected to, and somewhat to her surprise, found that she held an immense amount of affection and liking for the ex-villain.

She also knew that Hope would never abandon her, and that Lisa would never try to make that happen. In addition, Lisa made the relationship more fun, more interesting, more lively. And so, when Amy saw Hope and Lisa working together like that, she felt nothing more than happiness that two of the people she valued most in the world were doing something worthwhile together.

Under her hands, the bug took shape.

Brian and Jess strolled along the Boardwalk, hand in hand. He wasn't sure why she had called him up and asked him to come out with her, but with the Christner Initiative humming along nicely, he actually had a bit of spare time. And of course, he always had time for Jess.

They stopped, leaning on the rail, looking out to sea.

"We found a way home," said Jess abruptly.

"What?" asked Brian.
"A way home," said Jess. She had confided to him, once, late at night, that she was from Earth Aleph. He had nodded, accepted this. It made no difference to him, then, where she was from, so long as she was with him right then, right there.

But now it made a difference. Oh, how it made a difference.

He glanced around. "Earth Aleph?" he asked, keeping his voice down.

She nodded. "Faultline's telling us that she can open a way home for us. Everyone's debating on how much we should offer them to do it."

"But that's great," he began, then paused. "Oh," he said.

She nodded. "'Oh' is right."

He looked at her. "Is this ... the breakup speech?"

She shook her head violently, her hair flying around her face. "No! I don't want to go!"

He frowned. "Are they making you go?"

She collapsed to a seated position, her hands over her face. "No, but they're my friends! And I don't want to abandon them, and I don't want to leave you, and I don't know what to do!"

He knelt beside her, putting his arms around her. She clung to him, crying.

"Hey," he said softly. She paused in her sobs. He stroked her hair. "Hey," he said again.

She raise a tear-stained face to his. "What?" she whispered.

"You're not going yet, right?" he asked.

"No," she admitted. "But sometime soon. Once our part of the Initiative can be passed on to someone else."

He kissed her. "Then we have time." He smiled. "And I have an idea."

She looked at him with curiosity. "An idea? What?"

He grinned. "Tattletale told me recently that virtually every good thing that has happened in Brockton Bay since Hope got here can be directly or indirectly laid at her door. I'm gonna go talk with her. See if she can't help, somehow."

She blinked tears away. "She's a really nice person, but ... can she really help? With something like this?"

He kissed her, and held her close. "Can it hurt to ask?"

She shook her head, looking dubious but hopeful. "I guess not."

Smiling, he stood and raised her to her feet. "Come on then. Let's go ask an angel for a miracle."

Hand in hand, they headed off back down the Boardwalk.

Calvert's hand tightened on the telephone handset. "You can't do this to me! We signed a contract!"
"I'm sorry, Thomas," Emily Piggot's voice sounded in his ear, "but business is business. We will, of course, pay the penalty clause. But we've found a cheaper supplier for body armour, of much better quality. And I want the PRT to be as well-equipped as possible."

He ground his teeth. "I thought we were friends, Emily. Friends don't do this sort of thing to each other."

"Friends," Director Piggot retorted, "don't lock friends into contracts and then expect them to hold to them even to their disadvantage."

He drew a deep breath. Where's she getting this other body armour from? I thought I cornered the market, there. He'd been looking forward to outfitting his own private mercenary army with their own PRT-quality body armour – a slight manufacturing overrun, destroyed due to poor quality, of course. And all with a nice profit skimmed off the top for himself.

"At least," he ground out, "give me the chance to underbid them. That's only fair, right?"

"Very true," conceded the Director of the PRT. "But I really think you'd be advised to not try. The armour is of considerably better quality than what you're offering."

She named a price per unit. He gaped.

"That's impossible," he snapped. "You can't get quality body armour for that price."

"And yet, I'm wearing a set, right now," she observed. "It's been tried, and tested. And it works."

"Who are you getting it from?" he asked. If I can't underbid them, I might have to employ ... other tactics.

"Sorry, Thomas. Conflict of interests. The manufacturer has asked to keep their involvement on the down-low for the time being." She paused. "We'll be keeping all your other contracts running, of course."

She was being nice to him. It was galling. "Thank you, Emily," he ground out. "I appreciate it. My lawyers will talk to your lawyers about that penalty clause."

"Of course," she agreed cheerfully. "See you later."

He put the phone down without responding. She could afford to be cheerful. Even just doing it as a quick mental calculation, the cost of her new body armour plus the penalty clause would be far less than what he would have been going to charge the PRT for his product.

He frowned. But how the hell can this new armour be better than what I'm producing, at that cost? It's impossible.

He thought about it for a moment. Tinker-improved gear? But where would she find a Tinker willing to produce equipment for such a low price? No, not a Tinker.

He continued to think the matter over. Interestingly enough, once he discarded the idea of a Tinker supplier, he also rejected the idea of any cape at all being involved; he had not yet heard the story of Miss Militia's new scarf.

I'm going to have to look into this, he concluded. Sniff around, see what other companies have signed up to supply to the PRT.
Because Coil was starting to feel his grip on the city starting to slip.

And he was a man who hated to lose.

Piggot looked at the phone as she hung up. *Friends, my ass,* she thought.

"Dennis, can we talk?"

Clockblocker turned to look at Taylor; she stood there, her mask off and glasses on, regarding him steadily. He turned back briefly, to save the list he had created so far, and then looked back to her.

"Sure," he said. "Wanna make a spider run over my face first? Or maybe a centipede in my boot? Just so we're both comfortable with the conversation."

She sighed, pulled out a chair next to him, and sat down.

"Dennis," she said softly, "would it help if I said that I'm sorry?"

He frowned. "If you said what now?"

"Sorry," she repeated. "I've been a little bit mean to you since I joined the Wards, and I shouldn't have been."

He stared. "Wait ... you're *apologising?*"

She nodded, soberly. "We're on the same team now. We don't have room for shit like this to get in the way of being a team. I get that you don't like me. But can we at least try to dislike the bad guys more than each other?"

He looked at her carefully. He didn't get it. Not only was she making sense, but he hadn't been overwhelmed with bugs yet.

"So ... if I don't say yes ..." he said carefully, "is it bug time then?"

She shook her head. "I'm not going to do that to you again," she told him. "When we were on opposite sides, sure. But we're both Wards now, and I want you to be able to trust me implicitly. To be able to understand that whatever I do, I'm doing it for the team."

She held out a hand. He examined it closely. No bugs.

"You shake it," she explained helpfully. "To make an agreement that we're not going to harass each other."

Tentatively, he shook her hand. She had a strong grip, for a girl as skinny as she was.

"Okay, cool," he said. "But just so you know, I still think your power is about the creepiest one out there."

She grinned. "Ah. Check this out. Amy Lavere did some mods on the bugs I'll be using most often."

From the hard storage compartment on her back, a small swarm rose, buzzing. He recoiled, but they didn't seem to be coming for him. And then he frowned, staring at them.

"They look ... metallic."
She nodded. "Amy gave them all that colouration. They'll reflect sunlight in various colours, just like Falkor does." She sighed. "Maybe it'll keep Glenn off my back."

He felt a sudden pang of sympathy for her, of fellow feeling. "Yes," he replied. "Glenn. Good luck there."

She grinned as the bugs disappeared back into the storage compartment. "Well, it's worth a try," she said.

He nodded. "You should have seen the shitstorm that came down on me after I said my name on live TV."

She raised an eyebrow. "So, was it worth it?"

He grinned. "For a name like Clockblocker? Hell yeah."

Her comm went off, and she answered it. "Weaver."

"You have visitors. Hope and Amelia Claire Lavere."

"I'll be right down."

Still chuckling, she got up. She patted him on the shoulder as she went past. "See you 'round, Dennis," she said.

"See you around, Taylor," he replied.

He watched her go. Still creepy as hell, but ... she's a nice girl, he decided.

We could have done a lot worse.

"So what's this one do?" asked Taylor, looking curiously at the bug in Amy's arms. She had carried it with her from the shelter; it was roughly twice the size of a basketball, and was rather an armful.

Outwardly, it resembled a gigantic ladybug, with bright red wing casings, spotted with black. Amy put it carefully on the floor, then lifted her hands away from it; Taylor immediately found it in her mental landscape of bugs.

There was something odd about its anatomy. Behind her mask, she frowned, as the wing casings lifted up and away from the body. The rear half of the abdomen seemed to be honeycombed into thousands of small cells.

"I call it a hive drone," said Amy. "It can carry upward of three or four thousand bugs, and fly almost fast enough to keep up with Falkor." She indicated the abdominal area. "And there are spots where it exudes a nutrient paste – "

"- to keep the bugs alive. I like it," said Taylor. "I really do." She grinned behind her mask. "And you made this one look cute."

Amy shrugged and grinned. "I try," she said modestly.

Hope hugged her from behind. "You succeed, sweetie," she corrected her.

Lisa looked up as Brian walked into the shelter. A wide smile splitting her face, she covered the
distance between them in four long strides and hugged him close.

"It's been too long," she scolded him. "You should visit more often."

He grinned and held her at arms' length. "You look good," he said. "Really good."

She nodded. "So do you. Jess must be treating you all right."

He grinned and nodded, then his expression sobered. "But there's a problem."

"Which is?" she asked.

"Is Hope around?" he asked in turn.

"She took Amy to the PRT base," she said. "They should be back soon."

Moments later, Hope glided in for a landing outside the shelter. She saw Brian and gave him a hug; at the same time, Amy was embracing Lisa.

Brian looked aside, and blinked as the two girls shared a kiss before pulling apart.

"Did I just see what I think I saw?" he asked Hope.

Hope grinned. "Yeah," she said. "Lisa's with us, now."

Brian shook his head. "Not even going to ask how that works. But that's not what I'm here for."

She nodded. "Well, take a seat and tell me what's troubling you."

It only took a few moments to explain; Hope frowned. "I told Faultline about the Travellers being from Earth Aleph. I didn't know this was going to happen."

"How did you know?" asked Amy.

Hope shrugged, eliciting a tinkle from her wings. "Sundancer told me. Long story. But we have to deal with this, now." She frowned, thinking.

Finally, she stood up. "Let me make a call."
"How could you do this to me?" shouted Carol. "Your own sister?" Her cup of tea sat, gently steaming, ignored.

Sarah looked steadily at her. "I needed it, and Mark needed it," she said quietly.

"But Mark is my husband!" Carol pointed out, very forcefully.

"Husband doesn't mean possession," Sarah told her. "When was the last time you let him touch you in that way?" She took a sip from her own cup.

Carol shook her head. "He doesn't want ... he doesn't need ..." she began.

Sarah raised an eyebrow. "You mean, you haven't noticed?" she asked. "Ever since the Nine, ever since Bonesaw, he's been a different man. When Amelia fixed his brain, she also cured his depression, gave him a new lease on life." She stared at Carol. "But you didn't even notice, did you?"

Carol pressed her lips together. "Be that as it may, the law is still the same. He's my husband, legally married to me. And what he did with you is wrong."

Sarah smiled sadly. "Oh, but it was so very, very right." She took a deep breath. "We can do this one of two ways. One, you can have a messy, high-profile divorce, where the only casualties are you, me, Mark ... and your public image."

"Victoria –" began Carol.

" – is a legal adult, and has moved out, to join the Protectorate," finished Sarah. "And as for Amelia, your legally adopted child for ten years ... she's in a committed relationship with two other capes. So she's cared for." She gave Carol a challenging stare. "So, it's you, me and Mark. Like I said, option one is a high-profile divorce. Very messy. It'll do a lot of damage to your reputation, and the reputation of New Wave."

"And the second option?" asked Carol, although she could see it coming quite clearly.

"You and Mark separate, quietly and with no fuss. He moves in with me. He sells you his half of the house for a reasonable price. New Wave goes on. Carol Dallon, high profile lawyer, goes on. In public, you're still married. In private, he's with me. And I'll be taking care of all those nasty urges you wanted to avoid by marrying a man with chronic depression." She paused. "And if you happen to need him for a social occasion, then let me know and I'll drop him off."

Carol looked at her sister in silence. She wanted to shout, scream, throw things. She didn't. A small part of her wanted to power up, use her abilities to force her sister to retract everything she was saying. But she didn't do that, either.

She took a long drink of her tea while she considered matters. It wasn't as hot as it could have been, but she barely noticed.

Mark would be out of her private life, out of her bed, but he would still be on her arm as Flashbang; the public would see them as the perfect couple. That girl was gone, and probably never coming back. One distraction gone from her life. Victoria had gone to join the Protectorate; that was a blow,
but one that she could not really see a way around. She would come around, and return to New Wave and her mother, or she would not.

The less she thought of the matter in terms of her wounded pride, and the more she thought of it in terms of how things would go from that point on, the more she could see Sarah's point of view. It actually solved a few problems for her.

"One thing," she said. "I won't be buying half the house from Mark. It's too big for me to live in on my own. We'll put it on the market, and I get half."

Sarah nodded. "That's reasonable," she said. "I'll have to talk to Mark, but I think he'll be agreeable." She drained her cup and stood up.

Carol nodded. "Let me know what he says. I don't want to be talking to him. Not right now."

"I'll do that," said Sarah, understandingly. She nodded to her sister. "I'll see you later, then."

Carol didn't answer; Sarah quietly let herself out of the house.

"Faultline speaking."

"Hi, this is Hope."

Faultline smiled. There was no-one else in Brockton Bay with that gorgeous crystal-chime voice, and still she identified herself by name. "Hello, Hope. What can I do for you?"

"I really hate to ask this of you," said Hope, "but I need a favour."

"Well, sure," responded Faultline. "It's not like you don't have a dozen favours or more banked with us already."

Over the phone, Hope sighed. "You know I don't think of it like that. But if you can help me, I'd be really grateful."

Faultline grinned. She still had trouble working out Hope's non-mercenary attitude, but it was very refreshing. There was no hidden agenda; what she told you was what she meant. "So tell me," she invited. "What is it that you need?"

"Well, I told you where the Travellers were from, right? You've approached them, and you're negotiating with them."

"Uh, sure," said Faultline, suddenly feeling a lot less sure of herself. "Are you going to be negotiating for them?"

"Oh, no, no," said Hope with a chuckle. "That's between you and them. It's just that...". She paused. "Genesis wants to go with her friends, but she wants to be able to come back, too."

Faultline frowned. "She wants to commute? What the hell is there here that she'd want to come back to?"

"Grue, of the Undersiders," said Hope frankly.

"Oh," said Faultline. "Oh. I see.". She paused. "And your favour is..."

"To work out some way she's not cut off from her friends, or from Grue, permanently," confirmed
"Without, of course, undercutting our own profits from doing this," added Faultline.

"That too," agreed Hope, and Faultline knew that she meant it. "Can you do it?"

"I'll have to talk to Labyrinth," allowed Faultline. "But I think we should be able to work something out."

"Thank you," said Hope gratefully. "I really appreciate this."

"Be sitting on our side of the table when it comes time to negotiate with the PRT on leasing gateways to them, and we're square," Faultline told her.

"Deal," said Hope promptly. "Though, uh ... Not on the eighth. I'll be in New York."

"Ah," said Faultline. "That Hope Accord thing of yours? Good luck with that, by the way."

"Thanks," said Hope. "Let me know when you'll be talking to Emily, and I'll be there."

"Will do," said Faultline. "Bye, Hope."

"Bye," said Hope.

Faultline hung up. She sat for a moment in thought, then went looking for Labyrinth.

She found her with the others, watching a movie on the big screen TV, eating buttered popcorn and showing every evidence of enjoying herself immensely.

"Elle,' she said, sitting beside her. "When you've got a moment, I've got a problem I'd like you to think about ..."

Hope put the phone down and went over to where Brian was chatting with Amy and Lisa.

"Well, that should do it," she said cheerfully. "She said she'd talk to Labyrinth, work something out."

Brian hugged her gratefully; she hugged him back. "You're a marvel," he told her. "I really don't know how you do it."

"Um ... you've just got to know how to talk to people?" she said, so doubtfully that the three others all burst out laughing.

Amy put her arms around Hope and Brian both. "There's talking to people the way everyone else does it, my sweetheart," she said fondly, "and then there's the way you do it."

"Wow, you'd almost think she had a Master rating or something," Lisa grinned.

Hope stuck her tongue out at her.

Lisa walked Brian out to the front of the shelter.

"Not many people left here, is there?" he asked, looking around.

She shook her head. "The Christner Initiative's really starting to take hold."
He nodded. Gang activity was low; crime was dropping away. People who would normally have been roaming the streets causing problems were being recruited into work groups, paid reasonable wages, fed good food, given a safe place to sleep. Troublemakers were being placed where they could be watched.

"Most of the people from here now have homes they can go back to," she went on. "And some of the others are in work groups." She grinned. "So yeah, it's working. It's really working."

He smiled at her. "And you're ... different. Happier. Being with Hope has really made a difference with you."

She nodded. "It really has. I owe so much to her and Amy. They've ... accepted me. As one of them. I mean, Hope loves everyone, but ... Amy has accepted me into the relationship. The feeling is ...". She paused, searching for words. "Amazing."

Brian put an arm around her shoulders, gave her a brief hug. "I can tell. I know the feeling. I'm really happy for you."

She gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Thanks," she said. "And good luck with you and Genesis. I'm sure Hope will work that out for you too."

"Me too," he said, and strolled out to his car, whistling cheerfully.

Lisa watched him go, then headed back into the shelter. Hope's speech still had some polishing to do.

The four large vans pulled up at the back of the Brockton Bay Central Bank. Three power-armoured figures climbed from each of the first three vehicles. Two of the nine went to the last vehicle, opened the side door, and began to lift equipment out.

Up till a month ago, they had been a loosely-affiliated bunch of tech-mercs hiring themselves out to the highest bidder. Data raids, industrial espionage, even simple muscle; whatever paid the bills.

But then they had gotten an offer from a potential employer, one who refused to reveal any aspect of his real identity. This employer had put them on to Saint and the Dragonslayers, and supplied them with enough money to buy the specs and core components of up to nine sets of powered armour. Other pieces of equipment had come from other purveyors of specialist military equipment.

All they had to do was rob a particular bank in a particular city.

They had enough knowhow and resources to fabricate the rest of the suits around the core components, but each suit had turned out distinct from the rest, given the individual tastes of those who would be wearing them, and also allowing for the basic function of each suit.

The man calling himself Cee-Three had a smaller and lighter suit than the rest, but his sensor suite was a generation ahead of what they were using. He was also able to scan for and monitor radio and cell-phone chatter in his vicinity; the suit's computer included a state of the art decryption setup.

He watched Jumpers One and Two attach the Sentry bots to their belt clips, then pick up the bulky Airspace Denial Unit between them.

Jumper One had a flight pack built into a bulky backpack, while Jumper Two had a vertically placed takeoff jet attached to each leg. The disparity didn't matter much; they had practised this move regularly until they could do it every time.
Each grasping a side of the Airspace Denial Unit, they triggered their flight capabilities, and rose into the air, working to balance the load between them.

Moments later, they landed on the roof of the bank. Moving carefully, they placed the ADU in the middle of the roof, away from any air vents. Jumper One hit the self-test button, and then both Jumpers moved to each corner of the bank roof, depositing a Sentry bot there. The Sentries clamped on to the parapet, running a self-test diagnostic and attempting to link into the ADU’s systems.

By the time they got back to the ADU, it had finished the self-test and was waiting on standby.

Jumper One keyed his helmet radio. "Juliet One. ADU initiating in ten, check IFF. Over."

He had already made sure his Identification Friend/Foe transponder was on the right frequency and quick to respond to an interrogatory signal, but he checked again anyway.

No stop-orders came through, so he typed in the six digit code on the oversized keypad and hit the square red button that stood in for an Enter key. The ADU awoke, unpacking itself into its fully active configuration; a multi-barrelled gun with several types of sensor ready to track aerial targets. The secondary 'gun' was a smoothbore launcher, able to work with the Sentry bots to drop explosive packages on targets out of sight under the roofline.

Jumper One and Two backed off, headed to the edge of the roof, and jumped. Their flight gear flared, and they dropped to the ground with minimal impact.

The two suits designated Hacker One and Hacker Two were being piloted by a man and woman respectively; they had been working as a team for some years now, and were now rather more than partners. They approached the back door to the bank, moving with the ease of long experience with such matters.

Hacker One spread the fingers on his left gauntlet, allowing the sensor to slid out of the palm. He scanned the door, while Hacker Two used the specialised sensors in her suit to look very closely at the keypad and surrounding area. They communicated over the radio in the shorthand which they generally used for technical matters; no-one else was listening in except for Cee-Three, and he understood about one word in five.

The security camera was swinging to cover them, so Hacker Two released a tiny flying drone, which clamped on to the camera and overrode its tiny brain. Henceforth, all signals sent back by that camera were of exactly five minutes previously.

Their discussion over, Hacker Two ran a SQUID check on the keypad, extruded a narrow probe, and typed in the safe code to enter the bank.

Jumper One and Jumper Two landed on the ground next to the group.

The door opened, and they moved into the bank. Cee-Three led the way, flanked by Offence One and Lifter One. The Offence suits were armed to a fare-thee-well, whereas the Lifter suits were over-engineered in the strength department.

When Cee-Three detected people in the offices to the rear of the bank, one or another of the suits went in there and dragged them out. No-one resisted. Hulking powersuits were something that people tended to respect, especially when those powersuits were capable of tearing doors from their hinges.
They entered the bank's main lobby. The steady *tramp-tramp-tramp* of metal boots on the marble floor served to get everyone's attention.

"*Everyone on the floor!*" snapped Cee-Three over his external speakers. "*This is a robbery!*"

People dropped to the floor. Those who had been collected from the rear offices were deposited with the rest. The bank security guards carefully placed their pistols on the floor, before scuttling over to join the others.

Hacker Two deployed more of her drones to deal with the security cameras, then went toward the vault with Cee-Three and Hacker One.

As per the plan, the suited figures went through the offices, dragging out anyone in there, and leaving them with the others. The Offence suits took position near the doors, while the Lifters waited near the vault.

"*Can you open it?*" asked Cee-Three of the Hacker suit pilots, over the encrypted radio link.

The Hackers conferred, scanning the vault door.

"*Sure,*" said Hacker Two. "*Last year's model. Pee-oh-ess, you ask me.*"

"*Good,*" said Cee-Three. "*Get to it.*"

At that moment, the ADU on the roof cut loose with a burst of fire; the tearing-canvas sound was clearly audible inside the bank.

"*So, how are you fitting in with the rest of the Protectorate?*" asked Miss Militia, raising her voice a little over the rush of wind.

"I'm liking it," Glory Girl replied with a smile as she swooped over the rooftops. "I mean, I knew you guys when I was in New Wave, and we even teamed up a time or three, but to be *in* the team, it's a bit different."

"How so? All I've known is the Protectorate." Miss Militia's voice was curious.

"Well, in New Wave, we were all related. We all grew up together," said Glory Girl. "Mom, Dad, Amy, Aunt Sarah, Crystal …" She went to say something else, but then she saw something strange ahead. "What's that thing on the roof of the bank? It almost looks like a –"

"*Gun!*" shouted Miss Militia. "*Dive!*"

The ADU was programmed to react to flyers or flying machines over a certain size. The mass of Glory Girl and Miss Militia together was more than enough to trigger its response. Even as they breached its outer perimeter, the 7.62mm minigun was swivelling on its servos to aim at them. Laser targeting along with millimetre-wave radar gave it an exact range and bearing, as well as a projected target course.

Glory Girl's swerve and dive came just in time. Seventy-three bullets punctured the air in front of them, before the gun's systems caught up with the course change, and adjusted to compensate. Twenty-six more bullets were fired as the gun tracked down toward them. It caught up with them before they hit hard cover, smashing ten bullets into their bodies.
The first to hit Glory Girl struck her force field, dissipating it. She was struck five more times; twice in the leg, twice in the left side, and once on the left arm. Miss Militia was struck once on the leg, twice on the abdomen, and once on the side of the jaw.

And then they were out of sight, beyond a building. Five more bullets struck the edge of the building, shattering brickwork and sending concrete chips flying, before the gun registered that the target was no longer in sight. Returning to standby, it waited for the next target to be serviced.

"All units. Repeat, all units. This is Miss Militia. Glory Girl and I have been fired on from the roof of the Brockton Bay Central Bank. Do not approach by air. Repeat, do not approach by air."

"Weaver here. I'm over the Docklands. Attending all-units."

"Roger, Weaver. Approach with caution. Be warned; flying targets are attacked."

"Understood. Will take precautions. Weaver, out."

Taylor banked Falkor hard, and had the hive drones latch on to Falkor's carapace. She needed to be someplace fast, and they would not be able to keep up, otherwise.

Glory Girl peered around the corner of the building at the bank, as Miss Militia spoke into her comm. It looked peaceful enough. No-one shot at her; the pedestrians seemed to be entirely unaware that the strange high-speed tearing sound was actually a machine-gun.

Taking a chance, she stepped out of cover. Nothing happened.

Turning, she limped back to Miss Militia. "Well, it's not shooting at us now that we're on the ground," she said.

Miss Militia nodded. "Remind me to commend Weaver on the quality of her work," she said.

"I'll say," said Glory Girl. "I'm gonna be bruised for days, but nothing worse." She rubbed the side of her thigh, where shimmering cloth could be seen through her torn costume. "What do you think they were using?"

"High velocity five point five six, or standard velocity seven point six two, at a guess," said Miss Militia. She holstered a Desert Eagle, and stepped out of the alley with Glory Girl. "Let's go see what's going on."

As they limped down the street toward the bank, moving cautiously and keeping an eye out for more weapon fire, a police car rolled up alongside them.

"We heard the all-units," said the sergeant in the passenger seat. "Are you taking charge here?"

Miss Militia nodded. "My guess is, the bank is being robbed, and the robbers really, really don't want to be disturbed," she said. "Specifically, by PRT transports, police helicopters, or flying capes."

The sergeant grimaced. "Isn't it always the way?" he asked.

Glory Girl shaded her eyes and looked toward the bank. "Is it just me," she said, "or is there something different about the roofline?"
Miss Militia turned with a long-barrelled sniper rifle in her hands, and studied the roof through the scope. "There's ... something," she decided. "On the corners. Metallic. Can't quite make it out."

The Sentry bots reported an incoming threat at ground level. Their sophisticated target-recognition software processed part of the threat as a police cruiser, and part of it as someone pointing a high-powered rifle at the Sentry bot. The former would have been left as a minor threat until much closer, but the latter required immediate servicing.

Pointing skyward, the ADU activated its area denial function. It got a bearing and range from the Sentry bot, which it correlated with the known bearing and range between the ADU and the Sentry bot. This gave it a target point. It fired.

And then, in accordance with a secondary program, it shifted aim and fired again.

No-one heard the *chuff* as the projectile was launched, but Glory Girl saw a small dark object fly straight up from the middle of the roof of the bank.

She realised immediately what it was, but decided, erroneously, that it was aimed at the car, and not at Miss Militia. "Shit!" she yelled. "Out of the car! Now!"

The two officers stared at her; she tore the door from the car, pulled the sergeant free. The officer on the other side was scrambling out of the car.

Glory Girl grabbed Miss Militia and the sergeant, and flew them to cover behind the corner of the building. Instants later, the mortar round landed directly beside the car, the explosion gouging a hole in the street and flipping the car on to its roof.

As the ringing sound in their ears died away, they became aware of the sounds of car alarms up and down the street. Fortunately, the shrapnel had not gone far, but the other officer was down with a leg wound.

And then there was another explosion, just down the road. The mortar round struck the roof of a city bus, peeling it back like tinfoil, and spraying shrapnel into the passengers below.

Miss Militia's face was set as she pulled out her comm again. "All units. Repeat, all units. We need an evacuate and cordon around the Brockton Bay Central Bank. Ground targets are at risk as well. No police cars within two blocks of the bank. Send ambulances and healers; we have wounded."

Vicky pulled her phone out, and dialled.

"Hotel One to Charlie Three. The vault is open. Repeat, the vault is open."

Cee-Three turned from his vantage point out the window, where people were running to and fro, and two different vehicles were on fire. He moved toward the vault.

"Lima One, into the vault. Hotel One, load up Lima One. Hotel Two, you have the list of safety deposit boxes. We're on the clock."

The bulk of Lifter One tramped into the vault. A compartment opened, and large zippered packs were lifted out, unfolded, and opened. Hacker One started filling them with cash.
Amy's phone rang.

She smiled as she saw who it was. "Hey, Vicky," she said. "How's life in the big leagues, big sis?"

"Give me New Wave any day," said Glory Girl. "We've got a situation at the Brockton Bay Central Bank, and we need healers fast. How quickly can you and Hope get here?"

Amy sat up, fast. "Hope!" she said. "There's a thing at the Central Bank! We're needed there! Vicky's asked for our help!"

Hope looked around to Amy, then back to Lisa. "We'll be right back," she said, bestowing a gentle kiss to Lisa's lips.

Lisa smiled. "Go be good guys," she said, giving Hope a hug. "Save a life for me."

Hope smiled and hugged her back. "Always," she said.

She and Amy dashed from the shelter; moments later, they were in the air.

"... Send ambulances and healers; we have wounded."

Taylor keyed her comm again.

"Weaver here. I'm not far out. Any updates?"

"Stay below the roofline. We've had two transports hit, not dangerously. Don't risk yourself."

"Roger. Weaver, out."

She was four blocks from the bank when she landed, sending Falkor up to wait on the roof of a nearby drugstore. The two hive drones detached from their perch on Falkor's carapace, and flew alongside her as she sprinted down the road.

The Sentry bots detected her three blocks out. They decided that a running girl and a pair of oversized ladybugs posed no known threat.

They kept scanning.

Amy's phone rang.

"Vicky!" she said. "You'll have to speak up! We're in the air!"

"Don't fly in!" she heard. "Land and walk! They're hitting everything in the air that comes close!"

She relayed this to Hope. They shared an anguished glance. People could die while they were walking in.

"How close is still safe?" she asked.

"Four blocks seems to be the perimeter," Vicky told her.

"Land five blocks away," Amy told Hope.

"Five blocks, gotcha," Hope said. "Tell her we're about five minutes out."
The ADU scanned aircraft out to six blocks, easily targeting them, but choosing not to fire.

It didn't have orders to.

Weaver slid into cover next to Miss Militia. The hive drones kept going, flying toward the bank.

"Situation?" she said.

"We make a move, we point a weapon toward the bank, it shoots at us or drops a mortar bomb," said Miss Militia tersely. "What the hell are those things?"

"Hive drones," replied Weaver. "First objective?"

"Those things on the roofline are directing fire, I'm sure of it," said Miss Militia. "I bounced a bullet off of one, and it dropped three mortar rounds on my location. We need to take them out, and whatever nearly shot down me and Glory Girl."

Weaver nodded. "On it," she said.

Lisa hummed as she swept up. Without Hope and Amy there, the shelter felt ... empty. There weren't many people left there, but Hope and Amy made life more interesting.

"Hello, Lisa."

She whirled around, nearly dropping the broom.

"What ... are you doing here?"

But she didn't need to ask that question. She knew the answer.

"I'm here to take you where you're needed," said Coil.

She knew what that meant.

Drugs and slavery.

Answering his questions, over and over.

*What he did to Dinah.*

She gripped the broom tightly. "You can't," she said. "Hope won't let you."

She had set it up. If she was away from a computer for more than twenty-four hours, Hope would get an email, sent automatically. "COIL HAS ME."

She'd never had to use it before, but it was a useful thing to have.

Coil stepped forward. "But she won't have a choice in the matter," he said softly. "Hope is going to die. A tragic circumstance."

She saw it all, as he said it. "The bank thing. The robbery. You set it all up!" she gasped.

He smiled, behind his mask. "So clever, dear Lisa," he murmured. He nodded to his men. "Take her. Kill everyone else. Make sure they can't be revived."
Lisa became aware of her men, Brooks and the others, standing at gunpoint.

Coil turned to them. "Does anyone want to stand at her side?"

One by one, their eyes shifted away from her.

Lisa felt abandoned, forgotten. *Hope wouldn't have looked away.*

And then she saw the homeless man shamble in through the shelter door, and she knew hope again.

The homeless man who wasn't a homeless man.

She knew who he was, and his female companion, of course. She had an idea of their purpose, so she fed them, and she never, ever let them know that she knew.

The homeless man vanished. And all hell broke loose.

The hive drones flew up to the bank, clung to the wall just below the Sentry bots. They did not fit anything in the threat register, so the Sentry bots ignored them.

Bugs swarmed out from each hive drone. Special bugs.

*Very* special bugs.

They went straight to the automated gun in the middle of the roof. Swarmed over it. Found weak points. The rest of the bugs backed off, while the bugs with bright red rear ends dipped their tails and deposited pasty gunk here and there on the mechanism. Servo links. Power cables. The rotation mechanism of the barrel.

Each bug turned around, spat a clear droplet of liquid on to the pasty gunk, and then ran like hell. Several, unable to get clear in time, were picked up by other bugs.

Hope flew as fast as she could. People were in pain, dying. They *needed* her and Amy.

She was six blocks out.

The ADU detected her. A secondary program activated. A very specific set of target parameters; winged, humanoid, glowing. The gun shifted to a secondary set of ammunition; armour-piercing. It would fire until empty, or until target was out of sight.

It acquired final targeting data. The barrels began to spin.

Two dozen pieces of organic binary explosive went off at once. There was a series of firecracker explosions, then several larger ones. Shrapnel rained down over a small area.

Hope glided to a landing. The Sentry bots frantically told the ADU that the primary target was within range, shoot, shoot, shoot.

The ADU wasn't listening. It wasn't capable of listening.

Cee-Three looked up. "*They just took out the ADU.*"
"Christ," said Hacker One. "That thing cost a mint. How did they do it?"

"No idea. How much do you have?"

"Half done," reported Hacker Two.

"I'll have to do," decided Cee-Three. "Get ready to move out."

"Done," said Weaver, as the sounds of complicated destruction reached them.

Miss Militia released a pent-up breath. "Well done," she said with a smile. "Now, who is it in the bank?"

"Nine people wearing powered armour of some sort," said Weaver. "They've got four vehicles out back."

"How tough does the power armour look?" asked Miss Militia.

Weaver grinned behind her mask.

One of Coil's men was slammed sideways by someone who appeared out of nowhere, grabbed his gun, then disappeared again.

"What the hell?" yelled the man.

Coil spun around. "What's going on?" he barked.

The homeless man appeared behind another of Coil's men, slammed him in the back of the neck with an elbow, grabbed his weapon, and disappeared, just before three shots would have hit him.

Coil spun back to Lisa, grabbed for her. She knew the move was coming before he even tried it. She twirled the broom like a staff, caught him solidly between the legs. He went to his knees, clutching himself.

In another reality, seated comfortably in his base, Coil frowned. This didn't make sense. Who was this, and why was he defending Tattletale?

In this reality, the attack at the bank was not going on, and he was not kidnapping Tattletale. It was his fallback. Always his fallback.

The last of Coil's men went down, shot in the back by the homeless man. He turned to Lisa.

"Do I kill him as well?" he asked.

She shook her head, and bent over his hunched body.

The Tech Crew had heard of Skitter, and even knew that she had made the transition to the hero called Weaver.

What they didn't know was that a biokinetic called Amelia Claire Lavere was supplying her with highly specialised bugs.
Bugs that had, for instance, blown up their ADU mere instants before it would have hit Hope and Amy – there was irony – with a storm of killing rounds.

More bugs that were landing on their armour right at that moment, and depositing clear globs of gunk in the joints.

Gunk that spread, seeped into crevices, and then solidified.

Not one of them even made it to the back door of the bank.

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This is bad, decided Coil. This is really bad. But I'll hold on. I won't shut this reality down yet.

And then he felt the other reality flickering, fading. Disappearing.

And he was in the only branch still existing.

He felt Lisa fumbling at the holster he wore, and then she stepped back. Holding his gun.

"What ... how ... what's going on here?" he gasped. "How did you ...?"

The homeless man shuffled up alongside Lisa, and straightened, shedding apparent age and decrepitude. From the back of the shelter, his companion appeared, moving to stand beside him.

"You overstepped the mark," said the man to Coil.

"Interfered with Hope," said the woman.

"This girl is special to her," said the man.

"Accord will not allow her to be hurt," said the woman.

Lisa levelled the pistol. Pointed it in Coil's face.

"Why?" she asked. "Why now?"

"I needed your insights," groaned Coil. "Your knowledge. Things are slipping away from me. Dinah is watched too closely. I need some edge, some leverage." He held up his hands. "I'll pay you. Good money. Just ... answer my questions."

Lisa shook her head, and pointed the gun into his face. "Goodbye, Coil," she said softly, and thumbed the hammer back.

"No, wait," he said desperately. "Ten million dollars to whoever –"

She fired.

He fell.

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She turned to her men, still standing along the wall.

"Well?" she said. "What are you waiting for? Clean this mess up already."

As they started forward, she turned to the homeless man and his companion, but they were no longer there.
Blown their cover, she realised. Accord will send two more. He's neat like that.

I'd send him a thank you note, but he wouldn't understand it.

Then she grabbed her phone and dialled.

"Clear," said Weaver. "They're all in the corridor leading to the back door. All disabled. Two of them have guns on their armour, but the barrels are also blocked."

Miss Militia gave her orders, then nodded. "Impressive," she said. "You realise, the next villains to hit Brockton Bay will probably bring their bug spray?"

Weaver shrugged. "Hey," she said. "The rest of you need to save the day once in a while, right?"

Miss Militia slapped her on the shoulder. "To be honest," she said. "I don't care who does it, so long as someone does."

Weaver nodded. "I'll accept that." She looked past Miss Militia. "Oh, hey," she said. "There's Hope and Amy. I'll show them where the wounded are."

Amy's phone rang.

"Yeah, hi," she said. "Lisa! Yeah, we're good. They've taken down the bad guys, and Hope and me are healing the wounded. No-one's dead, which is good. Love you too, bye."

As Hope and Amy entered the shelter, Amy wrinkled her nose. "What's that smell?" she asked. "Did you spill a bottle of bleach or something?"

Lisa grinned. "I think I went overboard with the cleaning, just a bit."

Hope gathered her into an embrace. "Get a bit bored, did we?" she asked softly.

Lisa grinned and kissed her.

"Yeah," she said. "It was really dead around here."

Othello peered critically at himself in the motel room mirror, as Citrine shampooed her hair for the fourth time in a row.

Accord had ordered them to fit in with the homeless in order to protect Hope and those she loved, but he would not permit the slightest drop in standards, now that they were being recalled.

Everything had to be just right.
In which Clockblocker makes friends with a spider, and Carol Dallon gets a second chance

Victoria Dallon sat on the examination table in her underwear, while Amy examined her critically.

"Can't you just heal me, like normal?" asked Vicky. "Stare at me like that much longer, and I'll start wondering if you've still got feelings for me.". But there was a grin on her face.

Amy shook her head, expression serious. "I know the extent of the damage, and I'll be healing it in a moment," she said. "I just needed to visually examine the contusions you suffered. I don't often get to see this sort of injury first-hand." She put a cool hand on Vicky's shoulder, and her sister felt the familiar tingle of cellular regeneration; the bruises shrank, faded and disappeared.

"Okay," she said, dusting off her hands. "You can get dressed now.". She paused. "Just from curiosity; were you wearing the body stocking mark one, one point five, two or two point five?"

Vicky pulled the T-shirt over her head and shrugged. "They never told me. It was really light, is all I knew."

"No armour panels?" asked Amy. "It didn't go rigid when hit?"

Vicky shook her head as she stepped into her jeans. "Like Miss Militia's scarf? No, nothing like that."

"Not the two or two point five, then," Amy decided. "Was there a sweat absorbent layer?"

"Not that I really noticed, no," admitted Vicky. "Was there supposed to be one?"

Amy grinned. "Well, we can supply you with one. But just so you know, your ass got saved from minigun fire by your quick reflexes and our mark one body stocking. One layer of web-spider silk. How do you feel?"

"Well, I was feeling kinda bruised," admitted Vicky, "but it's a whole lot better than feeling all shot up.". She hugged Amy. "Thanks for helping out Weaver with the spiders and all that."

Amy returned the hug. "It saved my sister's life. It's all worth it.". She kissed Vicky on the cheek, then stood back. "Oh, did you hear? Mom and Dad are putting the house on the market. That's what Dad says, anyway."

"No!" gasped Vicky. "They're selling the house?"

Amy nodded. "Moving on, apparently. Dad's moving in with Aunt Sarah and Crystal, and Mom's getting her own place."

"Wow," said Vicky slowly. She was still adjusting to the idea that her parents were splitting up.

"Ah," said Amy with a smile. "But here's the good news. Lisa's talking about buying it, and we'll be moving in once the shelter shuts down. Nearly everyone from there's been placed in their own accommodation, thanks to the Christner Initiative."

"Who's 'we'?" asked Vicky curiously.

Amy smiled. "Hope, Lisa and me.". She grinned at Vicky. "We'll keep your room free, in case you
ever want to spend a weekend home."

Vicky frowned. "Where's Lisa getting the money from? It's not a small house."

"Oh, she said something about an unexpected inheritance," Amy explained with a grin. "I didn't inquire too closely.". She raised an eyebrow. "So, you gonna come visit?"

"Hell yeah," replied her sister cheerfully. "I wouldn't miss it for the world."

As soon as Taylor entered the Wards' section of the PRT building, she was surrounded by cheering, laughing teenagers. She was hugged, her back was slapped, her hand was shaken, and Tecton even pulled her mask off to plant a kiss on her lips.

"Whoa, hey, guys," she said, laughing a little herself. "What's the big occasion? I mean, they were just bank robbers, right?"

"Well, shit," said Clockblocker, giving her a slap on the shoulder. "You're a hero. Your spiderweb suits saved the lives of two members of the Protectorate.". He took off his glove and pushed back his sleeve to show the shimmering off-white of the body-stocking he wore. "When I first heard about them, I thought it was a joke, but I'm never taking mine off, now."

"So how is that different from normal?" asked Vista. "You never change your costume anyway."

"I wondered what that smell was," remarked Weld, to laughter.

"Screw you, Weld," laughed Clockblocker. "You don't even have a sense of smell."

"Yeah, and I can still smell you," shot back the leader of the Wards. "How bad does that make it?"

Amid more general laughter, Taylor put her hand on Clockblocker's arm. "So, less scared of spiders now?" she asked him cheerfully.

"Oh, I'm still terrified," he admitted frankly. "But when you're around, I know you're not gonna make them bite me."

She nodded, then looked at the group while still talking to him. "Actually, would you like to meet the little guys that wove the body-stockings?" she asked. "They're not aggressive, and they don't have any venom worth talking about anyway.". She grinned at Clockblocker. "Amy made them that way."

They looked at each other. "That sounds kind of cool," said Flechette. "I know I'm liking mine, It's really comfortable.". She paused. "Actually, Parian wanted me to ask you if she could get some samples of your silk for making her animals with. Putting them together out of ordinary cloth is cool, but making them out of armour cloth would actually be really useful, combat-wise."

Taylor shrugged. "I don't see why not. Once I get the current run done, I should be hatching some more spiders, and I then can really start to diversify."

She pulled on her mask and they headed out of the Wards' area, as everyone else masked up as well.

"Diversify?" asked Sveta, as they entered the lift. "Into what?"

"Underwear," Taylor told her. "Socks, underpants, bras. Jacket liners. Armour panels that can be stitched into a shirt or jacket. Helmet liners like yours, Tecton."
"Which I am still wearing," Everett said. "Just in case you wanted to know."

Taylor grinned and knocked on his helmet with her knuckles. "Good, because you know I'd beat your ass if you weren't."

"Okay," Clockblocker wanted to know, "if the body-stockings we're wearing will stop a seven point six two millimetre round with just heavy bruising, what does something like Tecton's helmet liner do?"

"Well," said Weld. "I was talking to Miss Militia. Her scarf is done the same way as Weaver's costume and Tecton's helmet liner. She was shot in the face, and she says she only realised it afterward. She said it felt like someone slapped her on the side of the jaw, and that was it."

"I heard a story about Miss Militia's scarf, and a carton of eggs," ventured Flechette.

"That one's true," said Weaver. "I watched her shoot it with a high-powered sniper rifle, and all it did was crack one of the eggs."

The rest of the journey down in the lift went by in silence.

"Wait, what?" asked Hope. "Glory Girl's parents are putting their house on the market?"

"Yes," said Lisa. "And I figured that I could buy it. It's big enough for all of us to live in without bumping elbows."

"So ... why exactly are they selling the house?" asked Hope carefully.

"Because Mr Dallon is leaving his wife for his sister-in-law," explained Lisa matter-of-factly.

"... ah," said Hope. "But ... they only kissed, right?"

Lisa shook her head. "Nope," she grinned. "That was just to keep Vicky happy. Flashbang and Photon Mom have been sleeping together since ... well, since not long after Glory Girl decided to join the Protectorate." She paused. "And I think Brandish may have caught them at it."

"Which, of course, complicates matters all round," said Hope.

"It does," agreed Lisa.

Hope paused. "Wait," she said. "So Amy and Vicky's mom has been left by their dad, to go and live with her sister."

Lisa nodded. "Yes."

"And there's definitely a relationship there, so he's not coming back in a hurry."

Lisa shook her head. "No."

"So a marriage that's been ongoing for twenty years or more ... gone."

Lisa nodded.

Hope stared at her. "So who's taking care of her?"

"What?" asked Lisa reflexively, but of course she knew who Hope was referring to.
"Mrs Dallon. Brandish." Hope looked at Lisa. "She's just had a relationship lasting twenty years torn out from under her. She has to be hurting. And her husband is sleeping with her sister. She's got no-one to turn to."

"Except you," sighed Lisa.

"And you," added Hope. "And get hold of Amy and Vicky too, if you can. We're going visiting."

"What?" said Amy.

"You heard me," sighed Lisa over the phone. "Get Vicky. We're going to visit your mom. We need you two along."

"But she doesn't --"

"Doesn't matter," Lisa said flatly. "Hope wants you there." She hung up.

And that was that.

Hope had given Amy the first real, solid, dependable anchor that she had ever had. No matter what she did, no matter where she went, she knew that Hope would be there for her. No. Matter. What.

It was no small thing.

But the thing about it was, Hope would never hold it over her head. She was not like that. She wouldn't pressure Amy into being there; she'd just ask. And if Amy chose not to show, she wouldn't even be angry, just mildly disappointed. Which was the very reason that Amy would be there.

She sighed, put the phone away, and went looking for Vicky.

One of the storage spaces had been repurposed for Weaver's use; grey spiders with oversized abdomens were everywhere. Webs lined the walls, with spiders running to and fro on them. And lined up in ranks, tended by PRT personnel ...

Flechette frowned. "Are those dressmaker's dummies?" she asked.

Weaver nodded. "This allows me to make the bodysuits in a relatively short time, to a particular size. The silk has a certain amount of give, so I have a little leeway. And if anyone wants a perfect fit, they can just stand there and let the spiders weave it on to them."

"I think I'll pass," said Clockblocker, shuddering.

Weaver grinned behind her mask. She walked over to a web, plucked a spider from it, and walked back. "Here," she said. "Have a look." She held out her hand; the spider perched on her palm, apparently observing the group with equanimity.

"As I said," she told them, "they aren't aggressive, and are actually rather communal. They've got about enough poison to kill a housefly, and their fangs won't penetrate human skin. They were created specifically to generate the strongest possible silk that a spider can make, and to do it in quantity. Everything else is secondary."

She held out her hand to Clockblocker. "Put your hand next to mine."

Gingerly, he did so. The spider wandered over to the edge of Weaver's hand, then carefully stepped
"Trust me," said Weaver. "When it comes to your body-stockings, this little guy is your best friend in all the world."

Clockblocker said nothing; he just studied the arachnid on his palm.

"Okay," said Weld. "I get that they aren't aggressive or territorial. I even get that they aren't dangerous to humans. But ... what happens if they overbreed? Become pests? Because I don't think Mr Joe Citizen is going to react well to coming home and finding that he can't get through his front door because some of these guys have webbed it shut."

Weaver nodded. "Amy thought of that. There's one thing missing from their makeup. While they can breed – and I am breeding them – they totally lack a breeding instinct. When left alone, they spin webs, eat flies ... and put no thought toward reproduction. I have to tell them to go ahead and do it."

"Ah," said Tecton. "So even if you left a thousand of these guys in the wild, with another ten thousand eggs ready to hatch ..."

"... inside of two generations, they'd be gone, yeah," Weaver said.

Clockblocker nodded, without taking his attention off the spider on his hand. "Well, as cute as this little guy is, I think I'm kind of glad about that," he said. He held out his hand; the spider let out some web and rappelled down to Weaver's hand. She turned and tossed the spider; it flew through the air, landed apparently unhurt on the web, and scuttled away.

She turned back to Clockblocker, who had pulled the length of web from his glove, and was looking at it bemusedly. "Souvenir," she said lightly.

"Huh," he said, but carefully wound it around his finger. "Cute."

"So what are we going to see Mom for, again?" asked Vicky.

"I have no idea," admitted Amy. "Lisa told me nothing, except to get my rear in gear and bring you along."


"I moved out first," pointed out Amy.

"You ran away, Ames," corrected Glory Girl.

"Which is a very definitive way of moving out," countered Amy.

Vicky considered that.

"You ... actually have a point, there," she conceded. She smiled at her sister, cradled in her arms. "You know, I've missed doing this?" she asked.

"I've missed you too, Vicky," Amy said, snuggling into her sister's arms. "Not the flying-being-carried thing. Hope does that too. And she comes with in-flight music."

Vicky rolled her eyes. "Comparing girlfriends now, are we?"
"You," said Amy, "were never my girlfriend. My unrequited crush, maybe."

Vicky sighed. "Yeah ... look, I'm really sorry about all that. I never had any idea my aura was screwing with your head that badly."

"Well," said Amy reflectively, "if it hadn't, then I wouldn't have run away, and I'd still be in that house, and I wouldn't be with Hope now, and the things I've helped her with ... yeah, I'm glad it turned out this way. Because it could be worse." She shivered at a memory. "A whole lot worse."

"Do I want to know?" asked Vicky.

"Not right now," said Amy quietly. "But someday I'm going to sit down with someone and tell them everything that's happened with me since Hope came to Brockton Bay. Get other people to tell their stories too. Collect them all together. Because people need to know. It needs to get written down. Maybe made into a movie."

"Who the hell would play Hope?" Vicky wanted to know.

"Hope, duh," grinned Amy.

Vicky grinned back. "You're a silly, silly girl," she said fondly, kissing Amy on the centre of her forehead.

Amy grinned back. "Ah, we're nearly there," she said. "Just one thing. You know how Lisa makes fun of anyone and everyone, including their names? And you know how she knows basically everything about someone, once she meets them?"

Vicky nodded. She remembered Tattletale's nickname for her, all too well.

"Well, she's never made fun of Hope," Amy said quietly. "Not once."

And while Vicky was still thinking about that, she landed outside the Dallon house. Hope and Lisa were already waiting.

Carol Dallon looked up from the magazine she was reading, or attempting to read. She hadn't gotten past the first three pages, in ... however long it was she had been sitting there. She picked up her coffee cup. It was cold.

_I just made that ... didn't I?_ she asked herself.

The knock came again.

She got up off the sofa, retied the belt on her housecoat, and went to the door. Opened it.

"Hi," said Hope brightly. "Can we come in?"

Hope saw Carol Dallon's eyes pass over her, over Lisa, fix on Amy for a moment, and then end up on Vicky.

"Why are you here?" asked Victoria's mother. Her voice was low, well-modulated. Hope imagined that she would make a good singer, if she ever chose to apply herself to it.

"We're here to help," said Hope.
Carol's lip curled. "Help," she said bitterly. "Like you helped Amy talk Victoria into leaving home, leaving New Wave?"

Hope's jaw dropped slightly. "I didn't --" she began.

Lisa stepped forward. "Mrs Dallon," she said. "We can stand on your doorstep and argue about this, where all your neighbours can see, or we can come inside, say what we have to say, and then you can tell us to leave. Which is it to be?"

Carol looked at the intent expression on the dirty-blonde girl's face, and relented. "You'd better come on in," she said, stepping back and pulling the door all the way open.

They took seats on the the two facing sofas; Vicky sat next to her mother, who absently took her hand, and Hope sat flanked by Lisa and Amy on the other.

"Mrs Dallon," began Hope earnestly. "I am really, truly sorry about what's happened. I didn't know it was going to turn out this way."

Carol looked at her, a dull anger in her eyes. "You have no idea how many times I've heard that from some kid who held up a gas station with a gun he 'didn't know' was loaded, or something similar," she said feelingly.

"I think this situation is somewhat different to those," replied Hope, her voice taking on some of the intonations of Carol Dallon's; sharper, crisper. "For instance, I did not convince Victoria to leave, and nor did Amy. She chose to leave because of your behaviour."

"My behaviour?" exclaimed Carol. "What does my behaviour have to do with anything here?"

"Before I answer that," replied Hope, "kindly tell us why you dislike Amy here."

Carol stared her right in the eyes. "Because she's ungrateful; she lived under my roof for ten years, and then ran away without a word. She did something to Victoria with her powers, that Victoria won't tell me about. And she's the daughter of a man who's in the Birdcage." From the tone of her voice, she considered that Amy would not be out of place in the same facility.

Hope tilted her head to one side. "What does her parentage have to do with anything?"

"He's a supervillain," hissed Carol. "Like calls to like. I was pressured into taking her, told that I would come to love her. But she was never my daughter. Only his. Always his."

"This would be Marquis?" asked Hope quietly.

Carol stared at her, then nodded, jerkily.

"I'm just trying to figure how you decided that Amy was anything like her father," Hope said in a very calm, matter-of-fact voice. "Could you clear that up for me?"

"She's his daughter," Carol said bluntly.

"My father locked me in a closet every night from when I was twelve to when I was fourteen," Hope replied, equally bluntly. "When I was fourteen, he tried to molest me. That was when I ran away from home. We do not become our parents."

Carol pressed her lips together, looked away. Vicky put her arms around her, held her. Carol put a hand on Vicky's arm.
"Moving on," said Hope gently. "What Amy did to Vicky. Vicky, would you like to tell your mother what she did?"

Victoria cleared her throat. "She made a change in my brain. So that I would love her. Like my powers had made her love me."

Carol stared at Vicky, and then at Amy. "That's even worse than I thought!" she exclaimed.

"It's pretty bad," admitted Hope, putting her arm around Amy and holding her close. "Tell her what happened after that, Vicky."

"I went to warn Hope that she might do the same to her," said Vicky. "She convinced me to come back and let Amy change things back."

Carol stared at Hope. "How could you trust Amy to do it?" she demanded.

Hope gazed serenely into her eyes. "Because I trust Amy, and I asked her to do it," she explained. "I watched, of course. I can do that. And Amy simply changed matters back. Vicky, are you in love with Amy now?"

Vicky shook her head and smiled. "She's my sister, and I love her like one," she said. "But in love? Uh-uh. I like boys too much."

Carol stared from Hope to Vicky to Amy, then back to Hope. "How can you be so ... casual about it?" she demanded. "It's like you're forgetting she ever did anything wrong!"

Hope shook her head. "It's not forgotten, Mrs Dallon," she said gently. "But it is forgiven."

Lisa cleared her throat. "Hope has this little saying, you see," she said. Carol's eyes jerked to her.

Lisa continued. "Do something silly ..."

Amy joined in. "Realise it ..."

Hope joined in with them. "Fix it ...

All three looked at Vicky, who looked flustered for a second. "Uh, and move on?" she guessed.

Hope grinned. "Got it in one. See how easy it is?"

"A cute little saying indeed," said Carol tartly. "But it hardly addresses reality. In real life, if you do wrong by someone, break the law, there are payments. Reparations. Punishments."

"And if you know for an absolute fact that the person will never, ever do that sort of thing again?" asked Hope mildly. "Would punishments not then be a form of sadism? Inflicting pain on someone who may then be driven to another crime because of the punishment?"

"You can't know that," stated Carol flatly.

"Yes, I can," said Hope, equally flatly. "I trust Amy with my life, Mrs Dallon. Every day. I sleep with her in my arms."

"Me too," offered Lisa cheerfully. She got up and walked around, sitting on the other side of Amy, putting her arms around her as well.

"And she has performed flat-out miracles in the time I have known her," finished Hope. She looked to Vicky. "Have you spoken much to the Protectorate or the Wards about what Amy's done since
she and I became partners?"

"A little," admitted Victoria. "Some of the stories ..."

"All true," said Lisa. "Trust me."

"So given all that," said Hope. "Knowing what you do about what she's done since then, knowing what she did to you. If you were inclined to punish her, would you still do it?"

Vicky shook her head violently. "Hell, no," she declared. "Mom, she helped save this city. Several times. And there's stuff people hint about, that I don't even know about." She looked at Hope. "Grasp?"

Hope nodded. "Used to be known as Garrotte."

Victoria shook her head. "Christ. And she's such a sweet girl, too."

Hope grinned. "She is. She really is."

Carol shook her head. "It sounds to me like you're just making up things to throw me off. Give me one good fact to prove that Amy has done anything like your're talking about."

Hope grinned across at Lisa. "Butcher?"

Lisa grinned back. "Butcher."

"Okay," said Hope to Carol. "You've heard of the new Ward called Weaver?"

Carol frowned. "I also heard she used to be the villain called Skitter."


"It's actually a lot of fun, and good practice," said Amy quietly.

"So some of these bugs came in very useful a little while ago," Hope went on. "You may have heard about how the Teeth came to town?"

Carol nodded. "I heard the Protectorate took them in."

"Yes," said Hope. "But only after Weaver took them down. With a cute little bug called a ketamine wasp. It stings you, injects you with a ketamine variant. Drops the average adult in seconds."

Carol frowned. "Butcher ... had tougher skin than that," she objected.

Hope nodded. "Weaver tried stinging her with another bug, called a Newter hornet. You've heard of Newter, and his hallucinogens? Well, the Newter hornet produces the exact same stuff, thanks to Amy. And when she slapped it ..."

Lisa grinned. "Contact poison for the win."

"And now, this is where it gets interesting," said Hope. "Once upon a time, awhile ago, Amy and I encountered this girl. She was in a bad shape. Literally, a bad shape. She tried to eat me alive. Amy saved me, and then she reshaped the girl into a normal girl. Fixed her powers a bit. And now she's living a happy, normal life with her boyfriend."
She smiled. "The girl now calls herself Omake. And when Amy tried to un-Butcher Butcher, she ended up with Butcher's personality attached to her head. So we called on Omake. And she helped separate that personality out, and put it somewhere that it would never, ever hurt anyone again."

"So you see," said Lisa. "Without Amy there to help out in two different ways – three, if you count the Newter hornet and the ketamine wasp as two different things – the Teeth would still be a problem, and Butcher would still be on the loose."

Carol was looking at Amy with a growing expression of puzzlement. "You've ... done all that?" she asked.

Amy nodded. "Yeah," she said. "I've done all that. And I'll do more, any chance I get. Because I'm where I'm supposed to be. With Hope and Lisa."

Hope hugged her close from one side, and Lisa added her effort from the other. "Thank you, sweetie," said Hope softly.


"Not forgotten, exactly," said Victoria. "Just slipped my mind." She turned to her mother. "Mom, yesterday I was flying with Miss Militia and a machine-gun emplacement on the roof of the Central Bank opened up on us. It was firing seven point six two millimetre rounds, at about a hundred a second."

She paused. "Miss Militia saw it in time, and warned me. I almost got out of the way, but we were hit with maybe a dozen rounds. The only reason – the only reason – I'm sitting here right now, telling you about it, is that Amy made some spiders for Weaver that spin really, really strong thread."

She rolled back the sleeve of her costume. Underneath was a body-stocking of an off-white, almost shimmering fabric. "This is the stuff they spin. I was bruised quite badly –"

" – plus a fractured rib –" put in Amy.

" – plus, as she says, a fractured rib," agreed Vicky, "but that was it. Without it ... Miss Militia would be dead. I would be dead. No doubt about it." She looked her mother in the eye. "She saved my life, Mom. What she did saved my life."

Carol looked at her for a long moment, then at Amy.

"Well," she said. "I ... suppose that I may have been wrong about you," she said slowly. "I may have been ... too willing to see the bad, and not take the good into account." She looked at Hope. "I've been watching the news. I've been following this Christner Initiative of yours. I've seen and heard what you've done elsewhere. You ... seem to be a good person."

She took a deep breath. "I will accept what you say about Amy. What all of you say about Amy. That she has helped people, has done good things. Has helped save the city." A faint smile, directed at Amy. "It appears that you're a hero. Congratulations."

Amy broke from Hope and Lisa, moved around the coffee table, and hugged Carol. Carol seemed surprised by this, but tentatively hugged her back.
"Do you know," said Amy as she disengaged from the hug and stood up, "that's about the nicest thing you've said to me? Ever?"

Carol frowned at her. "Really?" she asked.

Vicky nodded. "Really," she confirmed. "Usually it's been 'Well done Victoria, Amy you should try harder.'" She managed an almost perfect imitation of her mother's tone as she spoke the words.

"Oh," said Carol, a little doubtfully. "Well, if that's the way I've been ... " she paused, then said quietly, "I'm sorry."

Amy sat beside her on the sofa; on the opposite sofa, Hope and Lisa moved together, put their arms around each other.

"That's okay, Mom," said Amy. "Hope's taught me a lot about acceptance since I've known her."

Carol smiled wanly at her. "However, as enlightening as all this has been, I don't see how this helps me."

Hope smiled. "You remember how I said your behaviour had driven Vicky out of the house?"

Carol nodded warily. "Yes?"

"It's simple," said Hope. "Our behaviour is affected by what we think we know. You were acting on the assumption that Amy was a bad person, or at least, not a very good person. And you believed this implicitly. So it affected your behaviour. Whereas Victoria had, and has, a different opinion of her. Which you weren't prepared to listen to."

"And we argued," confirmed Carol. "And she left. And I tried to talk to Mark about it ..." She paused, and put her face in her hands. "Oh god, I've been such an idiot, haven't I?"

Vicky hugged her from one side, and Amy from the other.

"Trust me," said Hope. "Being an idiot is not the worst thing in the world. Holding a bad opinion, knowing it's bad, and choosing not to change it – that's worse."

Carol nodded. "I do see your point," she said. She took a deep breath. "Well, as a lawyer, I am regularly required to take new facts on board, and build a case around them, so ... yes. I can accept this." She looked at the four of them. "But ... again, I don't see how this helps me."

Hope grinned. "We were hoping we could move in." She looked appealingly at Carol. "We could pay rent."

"You mean, I could pay rent," grumbled Lisa, almost under her breath. Hope grinned and gave her a quick kiss.

"What ... the ... three of you, moving into this house?" said Carol, somewhat taken aback.

"Four," said Vicky. "If they move in, I move back in too. If that's okay with you, Mom."

Carol stared at her. "You'll move back in?" she asked blankly.

Vicky nodded. "Well, yeah," she said. "I still love you, Mom."

Carol hugged her tightly. Then she sat up again. "But ... we're putting the house on the market."
"I know," said Lisa. "I was gonna buy it. But Hope decided to come talk to you instead." She grinned. "We can still do that. Or you can not put the house on the market, instead."

Carol frowned. "You realise, there's two bedrooms, and four of you."

Vicky grinned. "I'll have my old room. The other three can have Amy's."

Amy nodded. "We'll just need a bigger bed."

Carol blinked. "You mean ... you three ..."

Hope nodded. "People get strange expressions on their faces when I try to explain how it works, so let's just say 'yes' and leave it at that." She grinned at Carol.

Carol gave her the ghost of a smile in return. "I'll accept 'yes' as an explanation." She looked at Vicky. "And you'll move back in?"

Vicky nodded. "Well, yeah." She paused. "I can't do much about Dad right now, sorry."

Carol shrugged philosophically. "I can't either. If he comes back, he comes back. If he doesn't ... well, that's something I'll face when it happens."

Vicky hugged her again. Carol hugged her back. Again, Amy joined in the hug; Carol did not object.

After a while, they disengaged from the hug. Carol dabbed at her eyes; no-one commented.

"So, uh," said Hope. "Is it okay if we move in?"

Carol smiled wanly at her. "You're bringing my daughter back to me. How can I say no?"

Hope cleared her throat, and looked meaningfully at Amy. Carol looked around at her. For a long moment, she said nothing; emotions warred on her face.

Finally, she spoke. The words came slowly, carefully.

"I ... never considered you as my daughter. I always had the image ... of Marquis ... in my mind. And you reminded me of him ... every day. But ... we are not our parents. Victoria is not me. Hope is not her father."

She took a deep breath. "For ten years, I've been ..." She paused. "I haven't been a mother at all, not to you. Not really. But ... my eyes have been opened. Marquis might be your father, but you aren't him, nor anything like. I ..."

She stopped again. "This is really hard for me."

Vicky put a hand on her shoulder. "Go on, Mom," she said encouragingly.

"I don't see you as my daughter, not really," said Carol. "Not yet. But if you're willing to give me a second chance, let me try again, with what I know now ..."

She trailed off. Amy looked at her, eyes brimming with tears. "Carol," she said. "Mom. If there's anything I've learned from being with Hope, it's the importance of second chances. I'm willing to give you a chance, if you're willing to give me a chance."

Silence, broken only by the sound of the ticking clock on the wall.
And then Carol Dallon did something she'd never thought she'd do. She hugged Amy willingly and with no reservation. And Amy hugged her back, held her close.

They sat like that for a long time.
Hope paused on the doorstep of the Dallon house, then turned back to Carol.

"I just want to thank you," she said. "For giving Amy a second chance."

Carol smiled at her. "Thank you," she responded. "For giving us the chance to have a second chance with each other. And for bringing Victoria back to me."

Hope hugged her; after a startled moment, Carol hugged her back. "Coming back, that was all Vicky," Hope told her. "I asked her to come here, but she chose to stay."

Carol held her close a moment longer. "You saved Amy from ... God knows what, out there," she said softly. "You convinced Victoria to let Amy reverse what she did. You brought them both back here, when I thought I had lost my family forever. You gave Amy and I a chance to be a family."

She released Hope from the hug, and kissed her on the cheek. "You've done more than you think," she said firmly. "I'm not going to forget this."

Hope grinned and shrugged self-consciously. "I just do what I do, I guess." She kissed Carol on the cheek, and went to where the other three were waiting.

"So, you staying or going?" she asked Victoria Dallon.

Vicky smiled. "I'll give Ames a lift back to the shelter, then I'm needed at the PRT building. But I'll be coming back tonight."

Hope nodded. "Good. She needs the company.". She scooped Lisa into her arms; Vicky did the same with Amy. They took to the air at the same time.

Carol watched them go. She wasn't quite sure what had just happened, except that her life was now looking much brighter as a consequence.

With new purpose in her step, she re-entered the house and set about cleaning it from top to bottom. Victoria was coming back to stay, and she would not come back to a messy house. Not if Carol Dallon had anything to say about it.

Once they were at altitude, Vicky moved in close to Hope and said, "One thing I can't figure. You knew she didn't like you. Why did you even go there?"

Hope looked at Lisa, who grinned her vulpine grin. She knew what Hope was going to say. "What she thought about me didn't matter," Hope explained. "It didn't factor into the picture at all. She needed help, so I went there."

"Oh," said Vicky. She looked down at Amy, who nodded in agreement. "Wow."

*And that, thought Lisa, is how she rolls.* She leaned up and kissed Hope, then rested her head against her shoulder. Hope held her just a little more tightly.

A few moments later, Lisa's phone rang. She answered it with her usual aplomb.
"Hi, Taylor."

"Are you always going to do that? You know it creeps me out."

Lisa grinned. "I think you just answered your own question.". She paused. "Sure, I'll come."

"Seriously?" asked Taylor. "I haven't even brought it up yet."

"Taylor," Lisa reminded her. "This is me."

She looked up at Hope. "Taylor's getting some kind of recognition tomorrow morning for the bank thing. She's got spare invites. Want to come with?"

Hope smiled down at her. "Well, of course," she said. "I wouldn't miss it for the world."

"Hope says she'll come too," Lisa reported into the phone. "You know, as if she wouldn't. You've already invited the others? ... Right, right. Yeah, that should be interesting. So, ten? Right, we'll be there. Later."

She put the phone away, then looked over at Vicky, who was just finishing a call on her Protectorate comm, supporting Amy with one arm. Vicky looked over at Hope and Lisa, who nodded. "Yeah," she called over the gap. "We'll be coming too. Taylor just invited us."

Vicky nodded and put her comm away. The rest of the flight went by in silence, broken only by the chiming of Hope's wings.

Standing outside the shelter, they watched Vicky fly away, before heading inside. It was beginning to look empty and forlorn; many of the additions had been dismantled as people moved out, and very few were even sleeping there at night.

Lisa moved off to talk with her men, and Hope turned to Amy.

"So, how do you feel, sweetie?" she asked.

Amy blinked. " Weird," she admitted. "I was ready to hate her, to tell her that it was her own stupid fault, but you ... changed it. Changed things. Let me see it from her side, just for a little bit."

Hope took Amy in her arms; Amy sighed as she relaxed into the embrace. "I don't know if she'll ever be my mother," she admitted. "It's been too long, there's been too much hurt for that to happen very easily. But friends ... I think we can be friends."

She put her arms around Hope and kissed her. "Remember the first time you hugged me?" she asked softly. Without waiting for an answer, she went on. "I told you not to, that I couldn't be trusted. But you trusted me anyway."

Hope returned the kiss. "Because you needed me to," she replied.

Amy smiled and leaned against her shoulder, her eyes closed. "Thank you," she said simply. "Thank you for trusting me. Thank you for reaching out."

"Always," Hope told her, "and every time."

Amy held her just a little more tightly, and hot tears leaked out from between her eyelids. Every time Hope said that, or something like it, it struck to the very core of her being.

A tiny voice crept from its lair deep in her subconscious and sneered at her, telling her that she didn't
deserve love and stability like that. Amy silently told it that Hope said otherwise, so there. Abashed, it slunk back to its hole. Amy gleefully stuck out a metaphorical tongue as it retreated. Thank you, Lisa.

Lisa strolled back to where they were standing, the grin on her face softening to a smile as she watched them.

"You two," she said fondly, putting an arm around both of them, "would give me diabetes, except for one thing."

"And what's that?" asked Hope, amused.

"I feel exactly the same way," Lisa replied cheerfully.

Hope smiled and kissed her. "I know you do," she said softly.

Lisa paused to enjoy the kiss, then went on. "My guys will be moving out of here in a few days; they should be rehousing the last people from here around then. So we can do the move any time after the eighth."

"That's really cool," said Hope. "The shelter is nice and all, but I think I prefer houses."

"It's not the only cool thing," said Lisa. "I have an idea for you, Amy. A bug for Weaver."

"Oh?" asked Amy, interested. Lisa explained. Hope was intrigued.

It was a little before ten the next morning, in the PRT building.

The decision had been made to hold Weaver's ceremony in-house, for various reasons; the media were not attending. The Wards and Protectorate were not yet in the room, but the families and friends who had been invited were already gathering.

Hope strolled in, with Lisa on one arm and Amy on the other. "Wow," she said, looking around with interest at the people who had already turned up. "I wonder who else is going to be here."

A moment later, her question was answered, as she heard a familiar voice behind them.

"Amy girl!"

Amy turned around, her face lighting up. "Dad! You came!"

Mark Dallon hugged his foster daughter. "Of course I came. I wanted to thank Weaver for saving Vicky's life."

Amy hugged him back. "That's really nice of you. It's good to see you.". She looked over his shoulder. "Aunt Sarah!"

Sarah hugged her next, then greeted Hope and Lisa more sedately while Amy hugged her younger cousin Crystal.

"And what have you two been doing?" Sarah asked them.

Hope smiled. "Helping people, and working at memorising the speech Lisa helped me write," she replied.
"Ah," said Sarah. "When is that, anyway?"

"Couple of days," Hope said. "On the eighth.". She sighed, a crystal trill. "On the one hand, I want it to be over and done, but on the other, I want to make sure I know the speech properly."

Sarah nodded sympathetically. "You'll do fine," she assured Hope. "We'll be watching the broadcast."

"Thanks," said Hope. "I -". She broke off, looking past Sarah's shoulder, her eyes widening.

Sarah turned curiously, to find herself looking into her sister's face.

There was a long moment of silence.

"Carol," she managed at last. "I ... didn't expect to see you here."

Carol nodded fractionally. "I was invited," she said briefly. "I came." She glanced toward Mark. "You got my message?"

Mark blinked. "What ... I ... the ... not putting the house on the market?" he managed at last. "Yes, I got it. What changed your mind?"

Carol smiled, very briefly. "Victoria's moving back in. Along with Amy and her friends."

Mark and Sarah stared; this was a different Carol from when they had both last seen her. "Moving ... back in?" asked Mark. "Since when?"

"Since they came to my house and explained a few matters to me," replied Carol imperturbably.

Mark would have asked more questions - starting with who are you and what have you done with Carol? - except that Amy approached Carol first.

"Mom ... Carol?" she ventured.

"'Carol' for the time being, I think, Amelia," said Carol, almost gently. And then she opened her arms and folded Amy into a hug. Amy hugged her back.

Mark and Sarah frankly goggled.

"Danny! Sierra!" said Hope happily, hugging each of them in turn.

"It's good to see you, Hope," said Danny. "I hear you were involved with that bank incident."

"Oh, Vicky called Amy, let us know it was going on," explained Hope. "We just got there for the aftermath, healed people, saved lives, that sort of thing." She grinned. "The bad guys were not happy. Taylor used glue bugs to gum up their power armour; they took them away on a flatbed truck, to be decanted."

Danny chuckled. "I bet they were surprised. Amy's work?"

Hope nodded. "You gotta love it."

"I hate this," grumped Rachel.
"Now, you know why they wouldn't let you bring dogs into the building," Brian said firmly. "We're just lucky the amnesty lets us get in at all without them trying to arrest us."

"Just one dog," Rachel insisted. "I could have brought Bastard. He's still a puppy."

"Somehow," said Brian, "I think not."

"You're lucky," complained Aisha. "At least you get to wear what clothes you want. I've got to wear this crap."

Lisa eyed her ensemble; loose-fitting T-shirt with an Alexandria screen-print on the front, denim jeans and sneakers. "What's wrong with that?" she asked. "You look nice in it."

"I like it," declared Alec.

Aisha rolled her eyes. "I look normal, is what I look," she complained. "I look like every other dweeb out there. Dweeb."

Alec grinned. "Just look at it this way," he said cheerfully. "This way, you can hide in a crowd without ever using your power."

The look she gave him suggested dire retribution. The amused glance he returned her suggested bring it.

Lisa looked around. "I think they're starting," she said.

A moment later, the music began as the Wards and Protectorate capes began to enter the room, proving her correct.

Amy touched Hope on the arm as they headed for the seats provided for the occasion. "I'll be sitting with Mark and Carol, if that's okay?"

Hope smiled and kissed her. "It's perfectly okay, sweetie," she assured her. She watched Amy move to sit with her foster parents, a pleased smile on her face.

Lisa grasped her hand. "Well, I'm sitting with you," she assured Hope.

Hope smiled and hugged her.

"Weaver, front and centre."

At Director Piggot's order, Weaver stepped from the assembled ranks of the Wards, and advanced toward the podium.

Weaver stepped up alongside the Director and glanced at the spectators. Danny was there, of course, beaming proudly. Alongside him sat Sierra; on his other side sat Hope and Lisa. In the row behind were Rachel, Brian, Alec, and a surprisingly demurely-dressed Aisha.

Both the girls looked less than thrilled; Weaver guessed that this was because Rachel had no dogs with her, and Aisha had been forced to wear somewhat more than her customary scandalous attire.

For a puzzled moment, Weaver thought that Amy had not come, but then she spotted her, sitting with members of New Wave, between Mark and Carol Dallon. Sarah Pelham sat on Mark's other side, with her daughter Crystal beside her.
"In case anyone is unaware of the reason for this event," stated Director Piggot, breaking into Weaver's thoughts, "here are the basic facts. Yesterday, on the fifth of July, a group of high-tech criminals attempted to rob the Brockton Bay Central Bank. In doing so, they emplaced an automated machine-gun on top of the bank itself." She paused to let this sink in.

"When Glory Girl and Miss Militia flew too close, they were fired upon," she went on. "The only thing that saved their lives was the body armour they were wearing; body armour produced by Weaver from spider silk, for the use of the Protectorate forces here in Brockton Bay."

She turned to Weaver. "You are being recognised here today, for two reasons," she stated. "The first is, of course, the spider-silk armour itself. Without it, two of our best and brightest would be dead."

There was general applause, then, as the two named capes came forward, the latter bearing a flat black box in her hands.

Piggot continued speaking. "The other matter is, of course, your quick and efficient removal of that gun, and your subdual of the criminals within. Without your prompt actions, it is entirely likely that many more people would have been hurt, and some killed."

She nodded toward Miss Militia, who opened the box she carried. Within lay a silver medal, resting on black velvet.

"And so," went on Director Piggot, "allow me to present to you the PRT Special Commendation Medal, for outstanding action in the service of the PRT and the Protectorate."

As she spoke, Glory Girl lifted the medal from its nesting place, holding it up so that everyone in the audience could see it. Then she handed it on to Director Piggot, who carefully pinned it to Weaver's costume; or more specifically, to the inconspicuous flap of silk Weaver had added to her costume, just for the occasion.

Applause broke out then, intensifying as first Piggot, then Miss Militia, shook Weaver's hand. Laughter joined the applause as Glory Girl instead grabbed Weaver and hugged her hard. Awkwardly, Weaver returned the hug, to greater laughter.

The applause only faded when Glory Girl and Miss Militia began to make their way back to the ranks.

Director Piggot gestured Weaver to the fixed microphone, and stepped back out of the way.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Weaver. "Fellow capes. I … didn't really expect to get this medal, this commendation. It's a great honour, it really is, and I accept it in the spirit that it's given. But I'm not in this for the medals, or the praise. I'm doing this because someone has to. I'm doing it because it needs to be done."

She cleared her throat. "You all here know who I used to be, and you've accepted me for who I am now. I appreciate that … a great deal. I always wanted to be a hero, right from the start. It's just … taken a while for me to get here." She paused, while people around the room chuckled appreciatively.

"But now I am here, and I can help people, and I am helping people." She looked around at the assembled capes and civilians. "Thank you. Thank you for giving me this chance. Thank you for letting me do this."

If she said any more, it was drowned out in the applause that started with Danny and Hope, and quickly spread to the rest of the room. She turned to Director Piggot, shook hands with her once
more, then stepped down from the podium.

"Well," said the Director, with a suspicious catch to her voice. "That was our one and only Weaver. Thank you for those inspiring words." She cleared her throat. "Now, feel free to mingle. There is a buffet table in the next room. As usual, please take note of the signs regarding cape-only areas."

She turned off the microphone and stepped down from the podium as the visitors rose from their seats and mingled with the Protectorate and Ward capes.

There was quite a crush of people wanting to speak to Weaver; Danny managed to be first, by virtue of the fact that anyone in between the two of them had to step aside or get trampled. He hugged her tightly; she reciprocated.

"Well done, kiddo," he said warmly. "Have I told you recently how proud I am of you?"

She grinned behind her mask. "Not in the last ten minutes, no," she admitted. "And it wasn't all me. Amy's bugs did all the real work."

"Funny," he retorted. "I was talking to her not ten minutes ago, and she said that all she did was supply the bugs. That you're the one who did the real work."

"Okay, fine," conceded Taylor. "But seriously, she deserves that medal. Or several. For the web-spiders, for the bugs, for everything she's done here. Life would be a lot worse without her."

"My life would be a lot worse without you," Danny told her, and there was no way to argue with that.

"Hey, hero," said Aisha, from right behind Vista. The younger girl spun around, staring at her; the voice was familiar, but ...

Aisha grinned, putting two fingers up near her brow. "Imagine two little devil's horns, here and here," she prompted.

"Imp!" gasped Vista. "it's so good to see you!"

"The name's Aisha," responded the dark-skinned girl. "But yeah, it's me."

Vista hugged her; after a moment, Aisha tentatively returned it. "This isn't some sort of weird gay thing, is it?" she asked suspiciously. "Cause girls don't float my boat."

Vista giggled and shook her head. "No, that's Flechette and Parian. This is just a hug. Hugs are nice. Hope hugs people all the time."

"She does, doesn't she?" agreed Aisha. "I figure it's just her way of shaking hands."

"So what's been happening with you and the Undersiders?" asked Vista, reaching out and plucking two egg rolls from the buffet table, twenty feet away. She handed one to Aisha.

Aisha accepted the snack and bit into it. "Well, not much," she complained. "It's all been boring since Grue told us we couldn't do crime any more."

Vista raised an eyebrow. "So you've run out of Merchants to torment?"

"Well, I wouldn't say that," admitted Aisha with a nasty grin.
"Brian!" said Hope happily, giving him a firm hug. He returned it, wrapping his arms around her and giving her an affectionate squeeze. "So how's things with Jess?" she asked as they separated.

"Really good," he replied with a smile. "They're talking about installing a permanent gate just for her use, or failing that, giving her priority access to any gate they install for the PRT to use."

"That's great," she said warmly. "She's a really nice girl. I'm very happy for you."

He shook his head. "You've done so much for us, for Jess. I don't know how we can ever repay you."

She smiled at him, leaned up to kiss him on the cheek. "Do someone else a favour sometime," she suggested, then grinned. "Or name one of your kids after me, or something."

He grinned back at her. "Well, Jess was already going to do that," he admitted. "So I guess someone gets a favour sometime."

"That works for me," she assured him.

Amy nodded toward the buffet table. "Just going to grab a bite," she said to Carol and Glory Girl. "Back in a second." Carol nodded, as did Vicky. They watched her walk away.


Vicky nodded. "I think that's mainly down to Hope," she observed. "She's very good at helping people."

"As she came and helped me," noted Carol.

Glory Girl nodded. "And me."

Carol frowned. "And she asks no reward for this? No payment?"

Vicky shook her head. "Not as far as I know. She just … does it."

"And Amy follows her lead, I see," observed Carol. "And how many people know how much they have actually done? I didn't know it until it was pointed out to me."

Vicky shrugged. "Not many, I guess. They don't make a big deal of it."

Carol shook her head. "There should be some recognition. Something to show that we appreciate what they do."

Vicky grinned. "I think that's best done by telling them face to face."

Weaver saw Tecton easing his bulk through the crowd, and steered an interception course. They came together, more or less face to face.

"Weaver," he said. It's so good to see you.

"Care to get something to eat?" he offered. "The cape area should have something."

She nodded. "Makes sense," she replied.

He led the way; she followed. But before they had quite reached the doorway leading to the cape area – guarded by an impassive PRT soldier – Lisa caught up with them.

"Weaver, can I speak to you a moment?" she asked.

"Well, of course," Weaver replied, walking a few paces away with her. "How are you?" she asked. "It's really good to see you."

Lisa smiled. "Good," she said. "Really good." She paused. "I just wanted to say thank you."

"Um, okay," said Weaver. "What for, exactly?"

Unexpectedly, Lisa flung her arms around Taylor, holding her close. "Saving Hope's life," she said, her mouth next to Taylor's ear.

Inside her mask, Taylor frowned. "How did I do that?" she asked.

"The bank thing, it was all a trap," said Lisa. "That auto-turret was set to attack Hope as soon as she came into sight. She would have been killed, and Amy with her."

"How do you know that?" asked Weaver.

Lisa sighed. "Coil told me. He was the one who set it up."

Taylor went cold all over. "That son of a bitch. Where is he now? I'm gonna call down all the hounds of hell on him."

Lisa shook her head and gave Taylor a last squeeze before letting her go. "Don't bother. He won't be bothering anyone, any more."

Weaver gave Lisa a sharp glance that, even through the mask and obscuring goggles, Lisa had no trouble deciphering. You killed him. She didn't bother voicing the thought.

Lisa nodded. She didn't need to speak either.

Weaver put a hand on her arm. "How … do you feel?"

Lisa smiled. "Like a ton weight's been lifted off my back." She drew a deep breath. "I don't know why, but Coil didn't dare make a move on me so long as Hope was at the shelter. So he set up that bank thing to get her out of the way. And you dealt with it."

"So wait," said Weaver. "I saved Hope and Amy."

Lisa nodded. "Yes."

"But I saved them with bugs that Amy made."

"Yes."

"Which she wouldn't have made if Hope hadn't been there to save her."

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"But I saved them with bugs that Amy made."

"Yes."

"Which she wouldn't have made if Hope hadn't been there to save her."

Lisa nodded. "Yes."
Weaver shook her head. "It all ties together in a big knot, doesn't it?"

Lisa grinned. "It helps if you don't think about it too hard."

Weaver shrugged. "I guess." She chuckled. "It would have been cool if you'd found out the plot and somehow warned us, so that you could be responsible for getting me to save Hope and Amy."

Lisa rolled her eyes. "Seriously? This is real life, not a story. Things don't come together that smoothly in real life." She gave Weaver a mock shove. "Go eat. Or kiss Tecton. Or whatever."

"I have no idea what you mean," replied Weaver loftily, then turned and rejoined Tecton as he waited near the door.

"What was that about?" he asked, as she came up to him.

She shrugged. "Nothing much. Just some old business, dealt with."

"Cool," he said. "Let's go eat."

They passed through the checkpoint into the cape-only area, and immediately doffed their headgear. Taylor had been pleased to see that Everett was indeed wearing his helmet liner, and now she leaned close to examine how well it fitted.

"Is it comfortable?" she asked him. "Can you move your jaw in it?"

"Oh, sure," he said. "I hardly know it's there any more."

"Good," she said, and and kissed him.

He kissed her in return, arms going around her, lips melding to hers.

They pressed against one another, shimmering web-silk against bulky metal, and neither one cared a bit. Her medal gently clanked against his armour.

Clockblocker, in the process of filling his plate, looked around and said, "Seriously, guys? Get a room, already."

They ignored him.

"Hi," said Hope from behind Amy, while she was still standing at the buffet table. Amy put her plate down, turned and kissed her. Hope returned the kiss, and put her arms around the biokinetic.

"So how did it go with your mom and dad?" she asked.

"Better than I expected," replied Amy, quite honestly. "They were both civil. No-one started a shouting match. Mom's too glad to get Vicky back, and to be starting fresh with me, to start anything with Dad, and Dad's feeling just a bit guilty over his part in the whole thing."

"So, chances of them getting back together?" asked Hope.

"Low," admitted Amy. "Put simply, Dad isn't the man Mom married, not since I fixed his head. I don't know if they'll be happier apart, but I think trying to force a reunion could be disastrous. Right now, they're civil. Civil is good."
"Well, I'll take what I can get," said Hope, disengaging from the hug.

"Me too," agreed Amy, picking up her plate. "Me too."

"Hey, stranger."

Brian looked around to see Lisa standing there. "Hey," he said in return.

"Bitch went already," she commented.

"Soon as the ceremony was over," he confirmed.

"Surprised you even managed to get her up here in the first place."

"Told her it was for Taylor."

She nodded. "They didn't have a good start, but once they had each other figured out, they were good."

"Yeah," he said. He tilted his head toward where Aisha and Vista were giggling together in the corner. "Should we break that up, or let it happen and clean up the mess afterward?"

Lisa grinned. From what she knew of Vista, the girl was lonely; paradoxically, the Ward with the longest time in costume and the youngest in age. There was no-one of her age on the team for her to talk to.

"I think we should leave them," she advised. "Vista's probably getting quite an education from Aisha. And when it comes time for you guys to join," she pointed out, "they'll already know each other."

He nodded, considering her words. "You're right, of course. I just shudder to think of what those two could get up to, together."

She chuckled. "I think Vista's professional enough to keep them both reined in. And I think it's good for both of them to have someone close to their age to talk to."

"Yeah," he agreed. "But what they're talking about – that's what I'm worried about."

She looked over toward them, and back to Brian. "I think," she said delicately, "that you do not want to know."

"Right," he agreed reluctantly. "I think you're right." He looked at her. "You thinking of joining too?"

She shook her head. "Thought about it. But what I'm doing now is more important."

"You and Hope and Amy?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said. "Hope is ... the most important person on Earth right now, or so my power tells me" ... really special to me. And Amy too. And I can do more good helping them in what they're doing, than in the Wards, right now."

"Plus," he added perceptively, "you'd prefer to make the rules rather than follow them."

She nodded, grinning her fox-like grin.
"That too, yes."

"Thank you," said Carol Dallon to Weaver. "Thank you for my daughter's life."

Weaver nodded, feeling awkward. "You're welcome," she said, and turned to Vicky. "I'm glad you're okay."

Vicky nodded. "I'll never laugh at spiders again, that's for sure," she said with a grin. She put a hand on Weaver's shoulder. "We've had our differences," she told the younger girl. "That's done. It's over. We're good."

"Good," said Weaver. "I'm glad." She shook hands with Glory Girl, and then with Carol, and moved off, feeling somewhat surreal.

_Not so long ago, I was a villain. People were scared of me. Now I'm a hero, I'm getting medals, and heroes are hugging me, shaking my hand, and thanking me. Life is weird._

Flechette and Parian sat in the capes-only area, on two of the few seats available. Their masks were off so that Sabah could eat, and for other reasons as well.

"So yeah," Lily said cheerfully as she fed Sabah a spring roll, "Weaver says as soon she's got more spiders hatched and ready to go, she can give you cloth in whatever bulk you need."

Sabah finished the roll, nipping playfully at her lover's fingertips, then smiled. "That sounds good, Lily," she said warmly. "I won't have as much leeway in how I can shape my animals, but with cloth so durable, that won't be as much of a problem."

Lily drew Sabah into an embrace, and kissed her; Sabah did not object in the slightest. They held each other for a long moment, then sat upright again. Sabah started feeding Lily a sandwich. "I held off from joining the Protectorate for the longest time," she said contemplatively. "But then I met you. And as the saying goes, if Mohammed will not go to the mountain ..."

Lily nodded and swallowed. "Yeah," she said. "So how are you liking it now?"

Sabah leaned in and kissed her. "I could get used to it," she said softly. "I could really get used to it."

Hope, hand in hand with Lisa, found Amy chatting to Weaver.

"There you are," said Hope. "We were just talking about going."

"Okay," said Amy. "But I was just about to tell Weaver about your new bug idea, Lisa."

"I'm definitely interested," said Weaver. "Getting relay bug nests established all over the city is turning out to be a pain. In between fumigation, and local wildlife that doesn't know enough to not eat them, I keep losing them."

"Ah," said Lisa. "Thus my cunning plan." She grinned. "Weaver bugs, as pets."

"Wait, what?" asked Weaver. "How do you figure this?"

"Well, making a bug that's bright and pretty is no big deal, right?" asked Lisa.

"Making them pretty is the least of my problems," Amy assured her.
"Right, right," said Lisa. "So you make a bug – probably a large beetle. It's got a pretty shell. Plus, it's got some little tricks hardwired into it. You take it home, you press it down on a spot, it's got a scent marker underneath. From then on, whenever it's not doing anything else, it comes back to that spot."

Amy frowned and nodded. "Can be done," she agreed.

"Other things," said Lisa, getting into the idea. "It's friendly, but not too friendly. Kids can play with it, it'll climb over their fingers. But it won't bite them. Feed it on table scraps."

Again, Amy nodded. "Easily done," she said.

"For reproduction, it's got what you have for Falkor. Shortly before it dies, it lays one egg, which hatches out into another one. No overpopulation possible. And it's a relay bug, of course." She grinned. "We market this as the Weaver bug – safe for kids! And with the ability to do tricks, so kids feel like they're Weaver – making a bug do stuff. Every kid in town will want one."

Weaver shook her head. "That's so weird, it just might work."

Amy smiled. "Well, let me know when you want to try it out, and we'll see how we go," she said.

"I'll do that," said Weaver. "But you're going now?"

Hope nodded. "It's been nice seeing you."

"You too," said Weaver, and hugged her; Hope returned the hug. Amy hugged Weaver next, followed by Lisa. And then, for no apparent reason, Lisa hugged Amy.

"You do know I'm coming with you, right?" said Amy, giggling.

Lisa chuckled. "Yeah," she said. "But it seemed the thing to do."

And Amy really couldn't argue.
In which the Boat Graveyard gets dismantled, and Hope calls in a favour

Hope soared, with Lisa in her arms.

Brockton Bay spread out below them as they ascended higher and higher, in a great climbing turn.

"Ooh," said Lisa. "There's a good one. Bank left a bit."

Obediently, Hope tilted a wing and banked left; Lisa pointed the digital camera and took a dozen fast shots.

"Nice one," said Lisa. "Reconstruction work on the Forsberg. Looks like they've taken the Initiative literally, and they're reshaping it more to Accord's liking."

"It does look nicer," said Hope. "More ... symmetrical, or something. Better, anyway."

Lisa spared a moment to give her a kiss. "You see the best in everything, don't you?" she observed. "And everyone. It's one of the things I love about you."

Hope smiled. "Well, I love the way you're helping Amy every day," she said. "There was a time that if I left her on her own like this, just taking you along, she would be frantic with worry that I'd leave her for you."

Lisa nodded. "She knows better, now," she said with assurance. "She knows I love her almost as much as I love you." She indicated a direction with her head. "Over that way, toward the Boardwalk."

Hope tilted her wings again; the wind whipping past them drew a rippling chime from the crystalline 'feathers' of which they were composed.

Swooping down along the Boardwalk, they had a good view of the reconstruction efforts. The 'Walk itself was almost complete; Lisa got a couple of good long shots showing its renewed glory.

And then there was a tremendous splash, off to the left, out to sea a little way.

Hope banked sharply, staring out to where ripples spread from a dark mass, slowly sinking, far out from the shore.

"What the heck was that?" she asked.

Lisa grinned. "They're dismantling the Boat Graveyard."

"You have to be kidding," said Trickster. "Me? Clean up the Boat Graveyard?"

Omake smiled, pointing at the relevant section of the Christner Initiative. "The city's put aside funds for this, or at least they're supposed to have. And think about it – it will give us more money to pay Faultline for a portal back home."

"But seriously," said Trickster. "How am I supposed to do it? I swap equivalent volumes. I can't just grab an equivalent volume of seawater – there's no dividing line."
Noelle nodded. "I know that. Accord planned for it. They've been constructing a balloon. They blow it up for the approximate volume, place it where they want the derelict ship …"

"And I swap it over," said Trickster. "Neat. I got it."

Omake leaned over and kissed him. "And you get paid for doing it," she pointed out.

"Hey," he grinned, snuggling up to her. "You had me at 'you get paid'."

Hope swooped closer. Now she could see that there were warning buoys surrounding the area, and a Coast Guard cutter patrolling a lazy figure-eight to keep away the curious idiots that would otherwise venture past the buoys. In the distance, a large yellow balloon, easily a couple of hundred feet long, was being manoeuvred into position almost over the spot where the last ship had been dropped.

She went to a hover, keeping a respectful distance away from the buoys, while Lisa took several shots.

"They're using the ships to build an artificial reef," explained Lisa. "This act as a breakwater, and it will help prevent the Bay from silting up, once trade starts coming in again. Once again, Accord's idea."

"The man can make a plan," Hope said admiringly, repeating something that others had said before her.

Lisa nodded. "I don't like him, strictly speaking. Being the smartest person in the room is kind of my schtick. But what he's done with the Hope Accord … I keep my personal thoughts personal, and give him what pointers he needs." She waved her hand over the city. "What he's done to help here, with the Initiative … yeah, I couldn't have done that, not without killing myself with migraines."

Hope leaned down and kissed her. "You are exactly who you need to be," she said softly. "And I love you just the way you are."

Lisa smiled up at her. "If anyone else said that, I'd know they were lying," she observed. "But you … you mean it. Every word." She turned her head. "Oh, hey. They're doing another one."

The large yellow balloon was in position; a flare shot up from the cutter. An identical flare went up from the deck of one of the mangled ships, pushed up against the shoreline by Leviathan's attack, all those weeks ago. At the same time, a mournful sound echoed across the Bay; a fog-horn from the cutter, which had positioned itself bow-on to the impact site.

And then the balloon was gone, replaced by the ship, twisted and damaged, hanging in mid-air like an impossible mirage. It fell, landing in the water with a tremendous splash, right next to the last one. Swiftly, it sank, spewing great bubbles to pop on the surface, until it was merely a shadow under the water.

Over at the Boat Graveyard, the yellow balloon bobbed upward and began its laborious journey back to the incipient artificial reef.

"Get the pictures?" asked Hope.

"Oh hell yeah," agreed Lisa. "That'll wow 'em."

Hope kicked over and started toward the Boat Graveyard. Nothing was likely to happen until the balloon got back into position, so she felt fairly safe in doing so.
Hovering over the Graveyard, she saw, was a large dragon-like creature, holding Trickster in its claws.

"Oh, hey," he said, as they swooped closer. Hope stopped in a hover, about twenty feet away. She could feel the wind generated by the larger dragon-creature's wings, and didn't want to get closer. Trickster was smoking a cigarette, she saw. She wondered how he managed to get it to stay lit.

"Hi, Trickster," she replied with a smile. "Hi, Genesis."

The dragon-thing nodded politely her way, and smiled with many, many sharp teeth. "Grue told me what you did," it articulated with a sound like an intelligent rock-crusher. "Thank you."

"Hey," said Hope. "I like to help people. You know that. And you're my friends."

Trickster laughed sharply. "Name someone in Brockton Bay who isn't."

Hope blinked. "Um … I don't think that way?" she ventured.

Trickster nodded, as if she'd proven his point for him. And perhaps she had.

"So …" she ventured. "How much are you getting out of … all this?"

He laughed again, cheerful. Almost gleeful. "A dollar a ton."

Lisa blinked. "That's … a lot."

"Two point three million," he agreed. "A mere fraction of the time and money it would cost to clear it the old-fashioned way, and enough to pay off Faultline and still have a reasonable amount of pocket money once we get back to Earth Aleph."

Lisa nodded to him. "I am impressed."

He nodded, tipping his hat. "Thank you, my dear." He paused. "Ah, I'm on again."

Turning in mid-air, Hope saw the flare arcing up from the coast guard cutter. A moment later, the answering flare went up from a ship in front of and below them. The fog-horn echoed.

Lisa aimed the camera and clicked madly; Trickster concentrated for a moment or two. And suddenly the ship was splashing into the ocean where the balloon had been, and the balloon was bobbing on the surface of the water, where the ship had been.

Slowly, the balloon rose into the air once more. This close to, it was possible to see that it was made up of a multitude of smaller cells, some of which were now collapsing – having the air pumped out of them, Hope could see – apparently to reduce the effective size.

"How is it being moved around?" asked Hope.

Lisa pointed. "Anti-gravity panels, see? I'm guessing Kid Win made 'em. Remote controlled."

Hope nodded, looking at the flat black panels now unfolding from the sides of the balloon, and lighting up with a red glow.

"Yeah," said Trickster. "There's a guy on the cutter with a remote. It's got GPS coordinates plugged into it, and all he has to do is press a button. He's the guy who sets off the flares too."
"How long is this going to take?" asked Hope.

"Oh, a few hours more," Trickster said. "But my dearest one is down there on the beach, see? She's the one with the umbrella and the deck-chair and the cooler full of chilled drinks. Should I decide I need a break, I go down there, she sends up a clone with my powers, and I relax for an hour or so."

Lisa grinned, shaking her head. "You have it all planned out."

Trickster nodded cheerfully. "And all thanks to you, Hope." He mimed kissing his hand to her, although the mask ruined the effect slightly.

"I …" began Hope.

"Don't argue," said Lisa. "He's right. And we've got pictures to take."

Hope nodded. "Okay," she said. "I'll see you later then?"

He tipped his hat in parting salute. "You are welcome any time of night or day."

Hope grinned. "Okay," she replied. "I may just take you up on that." She tipped a wing, and dived away, toward the shoreline.

Noelle lounged on the deck-chair, enjoying the sun. She had found this swimsuit in the revived Market, rebuilt after the city's recent travails, and the look on Francis' face when she tried it on had convinced her to buy it.

It was so very, very nice to be out in the sun, after having spent so long indoors, in confinement … in that horrible, horrible vault. She had never been one to try to get a tan before, with her body issues, but now … now, she was a different person, and she was enjoying herself immensely.

Opening the cooler beside her, she fished out her bottle of chilled water and took a drink. There were soft drinks in there for Francis, and a chair beside hers for her boyfriend to rest in when he took his breaks. On the other side, Jess lay somnolent, wearing a somewhat more modest swimsuit, and mostly shaded by her own umbrella. She was of course controlling the dragon-like creature that had Francis in its clutches, but there was no reason why she could not relax and get a tan at the same time.

All in all, it was a nice day at the beach, and the only interruption to the peace and quiet was the occasional fog-horn, followed by the tremendous splash of a ship hitting the water. As this was the main reason that she was down here, she was happy to let Francis do his thing while she caught up on her reading.

A familiar chiming of crystalline wings caused her to raise her eyes from the book, and she smiled. Putting the book down on the cooler, she got up from the deck-chair as Hope came in for a landing nearby.

"Hope," she said, "it is so very good to see you." Stepping forward, she hugged Hope warmly, and had the gesture reciprocated with just as much warmth.

"It's good to see you too, Noelle," smiled Hope. "You're looking good. Really, really good."

Noelle smiled. "I'm feeling really, really good," she agreed. "Hi, Lisa. Amy not with you?"

Hope shook her head. "I'm flying Lisa around the city to get shots for a presentation on the Christner
Initiative. Basically, to show people how fast the city's getting back on its feet. I can do straight-line flight with two people, but any sort of complicated stuff gets … complicated."

"I get it," nodded Noelle. She smiled at Lisa. "I hear you're with Hope now. Congratulations to you." She looked between the two of them. "You both look really happy."

Lisa grinned. "It just kind of happened. But I'm not arguing." She snuggled up to Hope, who put her arms around her.

"That's good," said Noelle, with a smile. "I'm glad." She hugged Hope again, including Lisa this time. "Drop by any time. We'll be glad to have you."

Hope grinned as she hefted Lisa in her arms, preparatory to lifting off. "Yeah, we know. Trickster already told us."

"Well, make sure you drop in, sometime before we leave," pointed out Noelle. "Preferably several times. We really want to see you. And bring Amy."

"I will," promised Hope.

"Oh, one more thing," said Lisa. "Hope's addressing a special session of the General Assembly of the United Nations tomorrow. You might want to watch the news tomorrow night. It's about the Hope Accord."

Noelle blinked. "Oh, hell yes," she agreed. "I wouldn't miss it for the world."

"See you later, Noelle," said Hope, and backed off a few steps. She brought down her wings in a crystalline chime that lifted her into the air, with Lisa comfortably cradled in her arms. A few more wingbeats, and they were far above.

Noelle watched them with her hand shading her eyes for a few moments, then settled back on to her deck-chair.

A fog-horn, followed by another tremendous splash from offshore, broke the gathering silence. She grinned. *Keep earning our ticket home, sweetheart.*

Picking up the book, she continued where she'd left off.

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Hope soared over the Boardwalk, heading back toward Downtown.

"Let's cut back over Taylor's old territory," suggested Lisa. "Leviathan tore a swathe through there. We should be able to get some good shots of repaired damage."

"Good idea," said Hope, banking right and losing altitude.

"Watch it," said Lisa. "Amy told me how you like to dive from ten thousand feet, and scare the living bejeebers out of her. I'm warning you now, if you do that, I'll probably puke all over you."

Hope laughed out loud. "Okay, sweetie," she said fondly. "No dives or aerobatics of any kind. Okay?"

*Thank you,* Lisa responded with great dignity. Hope giggled again, and kissed her.

They reached the now-faint path of Leviathan's destruction and were following it, with Lisa taking regular pictures, when Hope spotted something strange below.
"What is that?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah," said Lisa, her voice a little heavier. "I keep forgetting. You weren't here for Leviathan."

Hope stared at the brown-grey egg-shape that lay on the ground, inside a small circular fence, as she spiralled in for a landing. She back-winged to a stop, then dropped to the ground. People around, working reconstruction or just walking past, stopped to look.

"I've seen it before," admitted Hope, letting Lisa down on to her feet, "but I never had the time to stop and look at it properly."

Inside the fence, there were flowers, both single and in bouquets, as well as posters and small plastic figurines. The rounded shape itself was more translucent than opaque; dust and what looked like water droplets made seeing what was inside rather difficult. Hope squinted, then her eyes flared blue.

"There's people in there!" she gasped.

Lisa nodded sombrely. "Dauntless, Alabaster and Jotun," she said. "Jotun was an out of towner, but Alabaster was in Empire Eighty-Eight, and Dauntless was Protectorate." She gestured at the egg-shape. "Time-freeze grenade. Tinker-made. The time inside there is slower by a factor of a million or more."

Hope stared. "That's horrible!" she declared. "And no-one can get them out?"

Lisa shook her head. "I was nearly caught in one of those fields, myself, once," she said. "It's a horrible feeling, watching the world speed up faster and faster around you."

Hope shook her head. "Tinker stuff. It just … replicates powers, right?"

Lisa nodded cautiously. "As best as anyone can figure," she allowed.

Hope grinned. "Can I borrow your phone?"

Lisa rolled her eyes. "You're going to have to learn not to break them, you realise this. But she fished out her phone. "Is this one of your off-the-wall ideas that nobody can make work but you?"

Hope shrugged, making her wings tinkle. "Maybe." She opened the phone and paged through the numbers. "Ah, good," she said. Selecting the number she wanted, she dialled.

The telephone upon Accord's desk rang. It was a muted, neat sound. He picked it up before it could ring a second time. After all, it wasn't as though he could lose the thread of the plan he was working on.

"Tattletale," he said, reading the caller ID number. "I trust you are not calling with bad news regarding the Christner Initiative, or the Hope Accord?"

"No, sir, this is not Tattletale," he heard. He recognised the voice instantly, of course. "This is Hope; I have borrowed Tattletale's phone for the moment."

A very rare smile spread across Accord's face. Hope was one of the very few individuals who could elicit one from him. It was a positive pleasure to speak with her; she was punctilious and correct, and nothing ever had to be explained twice.

"Hope," he responded. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"
"I need to ask you a favour, sir," was the slightly surprising answer. "I require the services of Citrine for an afternoon. An hour, no more. A minimal-risk undertaking, which will serve to improve public relations for the Ambassadors, should you need such."

"Indeed," said Accord. "What is it that you need her for?" He was already going over in his mind the duties which he had been planning to assign to her, and deciding who could fill in. If Hope had a request like this, then it was surely in his best interests to help her out.

As Hope filled him in, he nodded once or twice. "Solid reasoning," he agreed when she had finished. "I will send her at once. Expect her to be touching down in two hours from this moment."

"Thank you, sir," Hope told him; the tone was formal, though he knew the words were sincere. "I appreciate this greatly."

"Do you … know … any of these people trapped?" asked Accord. "No, of course you would not. This happened before you arrived in the city."

"No, sir, I don't," agreed Hope. "But as far as I am concerned, that doesn't matter. Not really."

Accord nodded. This fit exactly with what he knew of Hope. He liked predictable people. "Two hours," he said, and put the phone down. Then he pressed a button on his intercom.

Two minutes later, there was a light tap on his door, and then Citrine opened it. "You called for me, sir?" she asked.

"Yes," he agreed. "You are going back to Brockton Bay. Fortunately, you do not need to undergo the same … travails … as you did before. You will be met at the airport, by Hope. She will show you what you need to do."

Citrine nodded. "Thank you, sir," she said.

He nodded to her, and returned to his work, taking up exactly where he had left off.

Citrine backed out of the room and shut the door carefully.

To Brockton Bay, she thought. Well, it will be nice to see Hope again.

Hope handed the phone back to Lisa. "Thanks," she said. "We have to have a car at the airport in two hours' time. Can we depend on Alec to help out there?"

Lisa nodded. "I figure it's possible," she agreed. "We're picking up Citrine, I take it?"

Hope nodded. "Accord said two hours, and I wouldn't bet on it being more than thirty seconds early or late."

Lisa smiled. "Nor would I." She started paging through for Regent's number.

Hope snapped her fingers. "And there are a couple of other calls that I think you need to make."

Lisa looked at her enquiringly; Hope explained.

The big car rode smoothly on the rebuilt roads from the airport. Alec, in the driver's seat, had wanted to put the top down, but Lisa had vetoed that upon seeing Citrine's reaction. Citrine looked out at the
passing cityscape.

"You're really fixing this place up, aren't you?" she observed.

Hope smiled. "Thanks mainly to Accord," she said. "There were reconstruction efforts going on, but a lot of it was getting in each others' way, and it wasn't part of a coordinated whole. The Initiative fixed all that."

"And tomorrow …" said Citrine.

Hope nodded. "Yeah," she said. "Tomorrow." She took a deep breath. "I've prepared and prepared and prepared for tomorrow, and still I'm scared I'll flunk it."

Lisa put a comforting arm around her. "You won't flunk it, sweetie," she said softly. "I know, because my power tells me so."

Hope smiled and kissed her. "You're a big fat liar," she said fondly. "But thanks anyway."

Citrine looked at Hope steadily. "You'll do fine," she said. "Accord believes so, and I have learned to trust Accord's opinions."

Hope took another deep breath. "Yeah," she said. "Thanks. I appreciate it."

Citrine glanced out the window, and her expression beneath the mask turned concerned. "There are PRT there. Is this supposed to be the situation?"

Hope nodded earnestly. "Oh, yes," she said. "Believe me, they will have no issue with you."

"If you say so," said Citrine doubtfully. "The Ambassadors do not have a very good name with law enforcement."

Hope squeezed her hand. "Trust me," she said with a grin.

Alec pulled the car to a halt, and opened the door with a flourish. Citrine got out, followed by Hope. Lisa opened the door on her side, and slid out, poking her tongue out at Alec. Aisha got out of the passenger-side front door; Citrine looked startled.

Centrepiece to the tableau was the dull brown-grey egg-shape in the middle of the street. Around it were arrayed several disparate people.

Dominating the scene was a PRT transport; in front of it were arrayed Director Piggot herself, Miss Militia, and several PRT soldiers. Two of them sported containment foam sprayers.

A modest-looking sedan sat off to the side just a little. A Japanese woman, possibly the driver, was chatting to the Director, but broke off when Alec's car pulled to a halt.

The last two were a statuesque woman in Viking-style armour, bearing a spear and a shield, perhaps twelve feet tall, and a flying woman with glowing eyes and hair. They and the PRT contingent were eyeing each other warily.

"Ah," said Hope cheerfully. "Everyone's here. Purity, Menja, Doctor Yamada, thanks for coming on such short notice. Director, Miss Militia, I hope you don't need those sprayers. But hey, anything's possible."

As she walked forward, everyone seemed to relax noticeably; it was as if each of them individually
had the thought, *Oh, Hope's here. It's all good now.*

Citrine eyed the brown-grey egg-shape, and turned to Hope. "I presume that's what I'm here for?"

Earnestly, Hope nodded. "Lisa says you attune areas with your power. I'm hoping you can attune that field down to nothing. Or near-nothing."

Citrine nodded. "I'm presuming a time-dilation field. A Bakuda creation?"

Miss Militia nodded. "A grenade. I shot it at Leviathan, and he got out of the field, but threw three people into it."

Citrine nodded again. "Understood." She took a deep breath. "Let's see what I can do."

She turned and faced the field, letting her power flow out.

Everyone standing around saw a yellow glow surrounding it, seeming to leach all colour from the area, or tinting them more yellow. She concentrated, staring at the egg.

Ten seconds ticked by. Nothing happened. Twenty. Nothing. At thirty, the field flickered once. And then at thirty-five seconds, it popped like a soap bubble.

Dust, debris, and several months of rainfall all fell to the ground at once. Three costumed capes flew to the side and landed, rolling.

They were up at once, staring around, one drawing up a spear that seemed to be a piece of living lightning –

"Stand down!" shouted Miss Militia. "The fight is over!"

The man with the glowing spear looked around, appearing to be dazed. "Miss Militia?" he said. "What ... happened?"

"Time dilation grenade, Dauntless," she informed him crisply. "Leviathan threw you into its radius."

"Oh, man," said the second man, rubbing the back of his head. "How long's it been?"

Director Piggot stepped forward. "Nearly two months ... Jotun, right?"

"Jotun, yeah," he said. "Director Piggot? Is that you?"

She nodded curtly. "The same."

"Christ," he said. "You've lost weight. You sure it's only been two months?"

She rewarded him with a beaming smile. "Thank you," she said. "We will be informing your family of your return to life. In the meantime, I'd like you to meet Doctor Jessica Yamada. She'll help you get up to speed."

Menja and Purity approached the third man, who was exceedingly pale of skin and hair. He had scrapes on his hands and face from the fall, but these disappeared within seconds. "Alabaster," said Purity, helping him up. "It's good to see you again."

"Purity," he said. "And Menja. It is Menja, right?"
The twelve foot tall woman nodded. "I am," she replied. "Many things have changed. We have much to tell you about."

He glanced around. "Why is just you and Purity? And why are you carrying your sister's sword and shield?"

She took a deep breath. "Kaiser was killed, as was Fenja and Kreig," she told him. "The group fractured after that."

Purity nodded. "I took Crusader, Night and Fog, and formed the Pure. Hookwolf took the others and formed Fenrir's Chosen."

"There's something you're not telling me," said Alabaster.

Menja nodded. "We were attacked and destroyed by the Slaughterhouse Nine, after Hookwolf killed Shatterbird. I alone survived, and that only because of Hope."

Alabaster tilted his head. "Hope?" he asked. "I don't know that one."

Purity smiled. "Ask anyone in Brockton Bay today, and they'll probably be able to tell you who she is." She gestured. "The one with the angel wings, over there."

Alabaster looked. "She doesn't look so much," he observed.

Menja coughed into her hand. Purity frowned. Alabaster looked at them both. "What?" he asked.

"It is because of her, and only because of her, that I stand here today," said Purity. "And my Aster is alive, and Theo also, because of her."

Menja nodded. "I owe her my life, also. She is a healer and a warrior both."

"A warrior," said Alabaster, not so impolite as to disagree, but not agreeing either.

"The Slaughterhouse Nine, as I said, attacked and destroyed the larger part of the Empire Eighty-Eight," said Menja, slowly and carefully. "Crawler nearly killed me in single combat. The very next day, Hope gathered together the Wards, Miss Militia there, and a few others, and set an ambush for them. The Nine were wiped out, or captured, to a man."

Alabaster blinked. "And what part did this Hope play in the ambush?" he asked.

"She captured Jack Slash, and held him down so that Miss Militia could shoot him in the head," said Purity flatly. "She is the sweetest person you will ever meet, and would give you the shirt from her back or the food from her plate. But do not underestimate her."

Alabaster looked from Purity to Menja. Both women had been renowned for their power and capability, in the old Empire Eighty-Eight. The respect they were showing toward this 'Hope' was making him think twice about his initial impression of her.

"Ah," he said, raising his head. "The heroes are coming this way. Do we fight or run?"

"Neither," said Purity. "We have an amnesty on at the moment."

Miss Militia approached the trio, nodding to Menja and Purity. "Alabaster," she said. "I understand you're a little behind the times, but the short form is this. Brockton Bay is at peace. There is no gang activity. All former villains are being offered the chance to change sides or go straight. Anyone who does not wish to do either may leave town at the first opportunity. Do you understand?"
He blinked. "Uh, sure," he said.

"Good," she said crisply. "I don't expect you to make the decision straight away, but it will need to be made."

"… right," he said.

"Note that this means no crime," she emphasised. "None. Put one foot out of line, and we will come down on you."

He nodded. "Got it," he said.

"Good," she said again. She extended her hand; he shook it, in a kind of daze. "And welcome back," she added.

"Thanks," he said, and watched as she turned and walked back to the PRT contingent.

Next to approach them was the winged form of Hope herself. This close to, Alabaster could see that her skin was glowing softly, and that her features were neither masculine nor feminine, just … beautiful.

"Hi," she said, and he was startled at the crystalline quality of her voice. "I'm Hope. I'm glad you're okay now." Sincerity rang in every syllable.

"Uh, yeah," he said. "I'm Alabaster. Pleased to meet you. Did you get me out of there?"

She shook her head. "No, that was Citrine," she said. "She's one of Accord's Ambassadors."

He frowned. "Why the hell would Accord send one of his Ambassadors to Brockton Bay, just to let some people out of a time bubble?"

Hope smiled and shrugged. "Because I asked nicely."

Alabaster raised an eyebrow. "And that works?"

"It does," Menja said.

Purity nodded. "With Hope, it really does."

Hope hugged her. "Thank you. You're really nice too, you know."

Alabaster was stunned to see Purity not only accept the hug, but return it. And then Hope hugged Menja, who shrank to accommodate the gesture.

"We do not see you enough," said the warrior woman. "Come and visit more often."

Hope smiled at her. "I will, I promise," she said. "Both of you. Just not tomorrow."

Purity nodded; she seemed to know what Hope was talking about. "I'll be watching."

And then Hope said her goodbyes and walked back to the others, leaving Alabaster to wonder if he'd been returned to the right world.

Director Piggot shook Citrine's hand firmly, followed by Miss Militia and then Dauntless. "I can't thank you enough," said the revived hero. "Really, I can't."
"I would appreciate it if you let Accord know of my personal appreciation," Director Piggot told her.

"Thank Hope," said Citrine. "She's the one who called him up and asked him for a favour."

"Well, there's no surprise," commented the Director, with a nod and a smile to Hope. "Thank him anyway. He didn't have to do it, and we do appreciate it. It will not be forgotten."

"I'll be sure to tell him that," replied Citrine.

"We have to get going," said Hope. "I promised Accord that we'd only keep Citrine for an hour."

She hugged Miss Militia and then Director Piggot. Then she looked hopefully at Dauntless. "Do you hug?" she asked.

"Do I?" Dauntless replied, putting his arms around Hope and lifting her off the ground. "For you? Hell yes, I hug."

Hope hugged him back; they were both grinning when he let her down.

"I'll see you later, Miss Militia, Emily," she said. "Later, Dauntless. It was nice to meet you."

"You too, Hope," he said. He watched as Hope got back into the car with the blonde girl and Citrine, before it drove away.

"So you're in charge of the local Protectorate, huh?" he said to Miss Militia. "I guess the team's changed around a bit in two months, then."

"Well," she said, guiding him toward the transport, "we lost a few to Leviathan, but we've gained a few since then. And you're not going to believe who's joined the Wards …"

Citrine got out of the car at the airport. She shook hands with Hope, then sighed in resignation and accepted the hug from the shorter girl. "Thank you for calling me out like this," she said. "It's so rare to do something right with my powers."

"Something to talk to Accord about, then," suggested Lisa. "Grey Boy left victims all over the place. As did Bakuda with those bombs which left her victims alive but trapped. I'm sure the next of kin would agree to payment of a nominal fee to have their loved ones released …"

Citrine's eyes widened behind her mask. "I will certainly point that option out to him," she stated. She turned and climbed the steps into the small private jet, then waved once from the doorway before the steps retracted upward to seal the door.

Hope and Lisa retreated until they were out of the potential jetwash, and watched the plane taxi away down the runway.

"That was a nice idea of yours," said Hope. "I didn't even realise that sort of thing had happened."

Lisa smiled. "Let's just say, you're rubbing off on me," she said. "Now, let's get some more photos done."

Carol Dallon looked down the length of the table. To her right sat Vicky and to her left, Amy. Beyond Amy sat Hope, and to Vicky's right sat Lisa.

"Pass the potatoes please, Amy?" asked Hope. She looked past her to address Carol. "I don't eat much normally, but these are very nice indeed."
Carol smiled back at her. "You're very welcome," she said. "I'm glad you could come over for the evening. It's so nice to have a full house again."

"It's nice to be here," Hope said truthfully. "In fact, it's been a really nice day all round."

"Yeah," said Lisa. "You should see the photos we took. Brockton Bay's just taking off."

"I hear they cleared the Boat Graveyard," said Carol. "Is that even possible?"

Hope nodded. "We saw it happening. It was awesome."

"Wow," said Vicky. "Things are just happening all over, now. And get this – Dauntless is back. He's alive!"

Lisa grinned. Hope returned it. Amy, who had been told all about it, giggled and grasped Hope's hand.

Vicky looked at them suspiciously. "What?" she asked.

Lisa's grin widened. "That was Hope, pulling off some of her shenanigans again. Saw the memorial, called up Accord, asked him for a favour."

Carol nodded. "I can believe that. From anyone else, no. From Hope, yes." She looked to Vicky. "So Dauntless is back on the strength?"

Vicky nodded. "Weld told me. Miss Militia hasn't stopped smiling all afternoon."

"Also," said Lisa, "Alabaster is back. He was looking a little shell-shocked, but I think Purity will be able to talk him around. And Jotun gets to go back to his family."

"So that's three more lives you've saved, just today," said Carol. "You kind of make a habit of this, don't you?"

Hope shrugged. "I see someone who needs help, and I help them." She smiled and squeezed Amy's hand. "I like helping people."

Carol nodded. "So I see." She looked to see where Vicky was chatting with Lisa, both of them relaxed and cheerful. Amy did not seem interested in letting go Hope's hand any time soon.

_I needed help, and you helped me. Not counting the cost. You brought my daughters back to me._

_You helped make this house back into a home._

_We're a family again._

And the thought brought a warm glow of happiness to her heart.
In which Taylor and Piggot clear the air, and a funny thing happens on the way to the United Nations

The Previous Day

"Weaver."

"Director."

"Have a seat."

"Thank you.". Taylor selected a chair and sat down.

"How are you settling in?"

Taylor offered the tiniest of shrugs. "Dennis no longer flinches every time he sees a bug. Missy is making plans for a big all-girl TV night, now that she's not the only female Ward on base, and has specifically invited me. Weld is asking my opinion on gang matters. I think I'm doing well. For an ex-villain, that is."

Director Piggot nodded. "That's good." She took a deep breath. "I have to say, I'm very pleased. And surprised, although ...". She paused. "Although not as surprised as I might otherwise be. There was a time when I considered all capes to be dangerous wastes of time and space. Except some of the heroes." She took a deep breath. "But only some."

Taylor raised an eyebrow. "Something happened, once upon a time?"

Piggot nodded. "Something, as you say, happened." Her mouth quirked. "Details are classified. However. Up until a few weeks ago, I saw very little to change my mind. Including your career as Skitter, with the Undersiders."

"I'm guessing that some of the things we did after Leviathan didn't do much to change that point of view," Taylor commented dryly.

"A few incidents come to mind," allowed the Director. "The attack on this very building. The takeover of large sections of the city. The kidnapping of Shadow Stalker."

"Who, in my defence, bullied me for two and a half years, both before and after going into the Wards," Taylor pointed out. "Who specifically helped cause my trigger event."

Piggot compressed her lips. "Are you looking for an apology?"

Taylor said nothing. A long moment passed.

The Director heaved a sigh. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry that we missed that. You have my sincere apologies."

Taylor considered that for a long moment before speaking.

"Once, that would have been all I wanted from you," she said, picking her words carefully. "Just an apology. An acknowledgement that you had screwed up, and I had suffered as a result of it." She raised her hands from her lap. "Restitution."
"If it's any consolation," said Piggot, "the woman who was supposed to be providing overwatch on her activities was instead actively pressuring the school to overlook her most blatant misdemeanours. You met her once, I believe? In the meeting at the school following the Weymouth incident?"

Taylor frowned. "I thought she was from Social Services or something."

The Director shook her head. "No. PRT. Her orders were to watch Shadow Stalker, and make sure she didn't get into trouble. Apparently she decided to interpret this as 'sweep everything under the rug', as opposed to actually reporting it, and losing her cushy assignment when her charge went to juvenile detention." The tone of her voice told Taylor exactly what she thought of that level of laxity.

Taylor stared. "So it wasn't just the school being monumentally short-sighted and incompetent? Someone was actually helping things along?"

"Only since late October," Piggot replied. "That was when Shadow Stalker became a Ward. Before that, it's all on them, I'm afraid."

"So has anything happened to her? That woman?" asked Taylor.

The Director offered her a thin smile. "She's been suspended, and is currently under investigation," she said simply.

"I guess that's a good thing," ventured Taylor. "Well, as you say, for what it's worth ... I'd like to offer my apologies for the hard times we put you through, before and after we took over the city." She raised one eyebrow, waiting to see how the Director took that.

"Apology accepted," returned Director Piggot. "Okay, moving on."

"Moving on," agreed Taylor. She put her head to one side. "Did you really call me in here to talk about all this?" she asked.

"Actually, no," said Piggot. "But I'm glad we've had this conversation. Cleared the air, so to speak. And I would like to make the point that in recent weeks, I've had reason to reconsider my views on capes."

"One of those reasons being Hope, thought Taylor, although she didn't say it out loud. They both knew it was true.

"I've seen the efforts you have been making to do the right thing," continued Director Piggot. "And in fairness, if you can accept our egregious mishandling of the Shadow Stalker matter, then I can accept your past as a villain."

She clasped her hands in front of her. "Mistakes were made on both sides. I'd like to think that we can both move on from that. Am I wrong?"

Taylor considered that, and shook her head. "No," she said. "You're not wrong."

"Good to hear it," replied Piggot. She was about to say something else, when there was a tap on the door. "Come in!" she called.

The door opened, and another girl entered. She wore an exquisite frock, and had a dolls-face porcelain mask, topped by blonde curls.

"Ah, there you are, Parian," the Director said. "I need to discuss something with you two."
Taylor shared a glance with Parian. When she was in the Undersiders, she and the doll-maker had been allies, but were never close; now that they were in the Wards together, they were starting to form a real friendship, but there was a ways to go yet.

"What do we need to discuss?" she asked, not quite sure where this was going.

"I need you to make something with your spiders," Piggot told her. "And I need Parian to design it. And it needs to be done overnight."

She went on, explaining what she needed. Before she was finished, Parian was sketching on a pad, and Taylor was nodding.

"Geoff."

Saint looked up from where he was performing maintenance on his suit. "Yeah, Mags?"

Margaret tapped a fingernail on the screen of the monitor she was studying. "Dragon just diverted a transport - one of its newer models - to Brockton Bay. It's due to fly to New York tomorrow. Some kind of passenger transport, apparently."

Geoff walked over and leaned down to read the screen. "No names given," he noted.

Mags nodded. "Yeah, but it says here, 'PRT priority transport'. So I'm guessing some bigwig's doing a tour of the PRT bases, and they're letting him hitch a ride with Dragon to butter him up."

Saint grinned. "So if we intercept and take the transport, we embarrass the PRT and get a look at what Dragon's building into its newest stuff. Two birds, one stone."

Mags frowned. "Are we sure we want to piss off Dragon and the PRT, all at once?"

Saint shrugged. "We do it right, Dragon's rep takes a hit, the PRT steps away from it, we're one step closer to the mother lode."

"Dragon's core AI," said Mags.

Geoff nodded. "Dragon's core AI."

Mags stood up. "I can do that."

I wonder who rates a Dragon transport, he thought.

He grinned. Doesn't matter. They're walking home.

The Current Day

Dauntless was confused.

He had been trapped in the time bubble for a little over seven weeks, or so he'd been told. Leviathan had attacked Brockton Bay on the fifteenth of May, and now it was the eighth of July. Not even two months. A vacation could easily go longer than that.

But he would not expect to go away on vacation and come back to find Brockton Bay – his city – so
dramatically changed. Altered.

Different.

It was like looking into a fractured mirror, a reflective surface showing him a warped view of the world. He never knew quite what to expect, now.

Armsmaster; his mentor, his leader. Something had happened after Leviathan; he wasn't cleared to know the details, but he had eyes. The man did not venture outside without a Protectorate member nearby; nor did he wear anything but his basic armour, or carry his halberd.

Weaver, the new addition to the Wards. The word was that she had been the supervillain Skitter, part of the Undersiders, responsible for a bank robbery and the attack on the Forsberg fundraiser. At least twice, she had caused severe embarrassment to members of the Protectorate and the Wards, and now she was in the Wards, and no-one seemed to think that this was strange.

A hero, treated as a villain. And a villain, treated as a hero. Something was seriously out of alignment, there.

And then there were the gangs.

Empire Eighty-Eight, gutted. Almost non-existent. There was word that Purity was talking about joining the Protectorate, along with Crusader. They had once been the biggest cape organisation, outside of the Protectorate itself, in Brockton Bay. And now some of its most powerful members were joining the Protectorate?

It was bizarre. The world was turned upside down and inside out.

The Merchants, gone. A single clash with three Wards, two rogues and a villain, and they had been defeated, captured. Followed up by the stunning defeat of a member of the Slaughterhouse Nine. And that followed up by the defeat of the rest of the Nine.

All in one night.

If he had not spoken to people who had been there, people he trusted implicitly, he would not have believed it. Would have considered it a prank, someone pulling his leg. But he had been to Victory Park, viewed the memorial.

And in speaking to people, in finding out what had changed around the city, he had discovered that despite Leviathan, despite the Nine, the city was bouncing back fast. Things were happening. There was an air of optimism about the city. This Christner Initiative was making things happen. Whoever had put it together definitely had all his ducks in a row,

But when he asked where it came from, he got odd smiles and deflections. Hope had brought it up, he was told. Hope had flown around the city and in one day, had gotten agreement from all the major powers in the city, the gang leaders and the legitimate authorities alike. They had all come on board without argument, without negotiation, without demanding concessions. Because it was Hope asking them.

It all came back to Hope. She rarely did the big things. But she'd been there for the Merchants, for Mannequin, for the Nine. She had been associated with Skitter before the villain became a hero, had apparently formed a rapport with each and every one of the villain groups in the city – except the Merchants, of course – and now they were all keeping their noses clean. The temporary amnesty was becoming less temporary by the day.
The more he spoke to people, the more Hope's name came up in casual conversation. How Panacea had apparently had some sort of mental breakdown and run away from home, away from her family. But Hope had rescued her, had taken her in.

How Hope and Panacea had gone to the hospital and emptied its wards of all except the maternity patients, in one day. How they had spoken to Director Piggot, and now the Director was exercising and had lost so much weight it was stunning. How the new Ward, Grasp, had apparently once been known as Garrotte, with a triple-digit body count, before Jessica Yamada had introduced Hope and Panacea to her. How Burnscar and Bonesaw of the Nine were undergoing therapy, being rehabilitated. How Triumph had been killed, and then brought back to life.

The stories were many and varied, and some strained the belief. Dauntless was not a sceptical man, but he had trouble coming to terms with the idea that one person, no matter how well-intentioned, could make so much of a difference to Brockton Bay in less than two months.

So he kept talking to people, kept asking questions. And he kept getting the same answers. It was very frustrating.

He just couldn't make sense of it.

*How can one person have so much of an effect?*

"Thanks for this," said Hope. "It would have been a real pain, flying all the way to New York."

"Think nothing of it," Director Piggot told her. "Dragon knew you had to be there on time, so she volunteered one of her craft."

She held a garment bag out to Hope. "Here; I had this made up for the occasion."

Hope blinked and put down the large duffel she was carrying. Taking the bag, she unzipped it and pulled the dress partially out, to look at it.

"Oh ... my ... god ..." murmured Amy, beside her.

"It's beautiful," Hope said, her face lighting up with pleasure.

And it was. Simple yet elegant, with a long skirt, it was cut to suit Hope's figure, or rather, lack of one. The style evoked the idea of robes, and was layered, with subtle patterns worked into the fabric.

"This is web-spider silk," said Amy, running her fingertips over the cloth. "How long did it take to get this made up?"

"Twenty-four hours," said the Director proudly. "I put Weaver and Parian on to it yesterday morning."

Hope carefully zipped up the garment bag again, then hugged the Director. "Thank you," she said sincerely. "Thank you so much. I've got a dress, but ..." She trailed off. *It's nothing like this one.*

Piggot hugged her right back. "It's the least I could do," she said. "Really, it is." She nodded toward the Dragon craft perched on the takeoff pad. "I think Dragon's ready to go."

Hope nodded and kissed her on the cheek. "Wish me luck," she said, and picked up the duffel.

The Director slapped her on the shoulder. "Break a leg," she said.
Hope grinned, stuck her tongue out at her, and climbed on board the craft. Amy climbed on board after her.

The hatch swung shut, and the craft lifted off.

Director Piggot watched as it turned south and accelerated.

"Good luck," she said softly.

Hope settled into her seat; it had been specially configured to allow her wings to hang out behind. She was actually able to sit in a normal seat, but it was less cramping this way.

Amy snuggled up alongside her. "We're doing this," she said. "We're actually doing it."

Hope smiled, leaned across, and kissed her. "We really are, sweetie," she said. She shivered suddenly.

"What's the matter?" asked Amy.

Hope bit her lip. "Oh god, I'm so nervous," she said, her previous front of self-confidence suddenly crumbling. "Hold me?"

Amy undid her seatbelt, moved closer, and put her arms around Hope. The winged cape returned the embrace fervently, burying her face in Amy's shoulder.

"I'm so scared of messing this up," she whispered, her voice muffled but audible.

Amy held her close. "You will not mess this up," she assured Hope. "You've got this. Aside from Accord, you are the expert on this plan." She tilted Hope's chin up and kissed her. "Now buck up. I did not go through night after night of you talking about the Hope Accord in your sleep to have you funk out now."

"I do not talk in my sleep!" protested Hope, half laughing, even as she sniffled.

Amy raised an eyebrow. "Want to bet? I can call Lisa, get her to verify."

Hope rolled her eyes. "She'd say yes, just to mess with me." She kissed Amy. "You two are getting along so well after you asked her to join us. I'm really happy about that."

Amy sighed. "I know. Lisa's ... different. She's funny, and sexy, and snarky as hell. But she's also sweet, and cute, and she loves you, and I think she likes me a lot." She leaned against Hope's shoulder. "And she's helped me. She's helped me so much. Just ... talking. Making me see where I'm wrong, where I'm being silly. Helping me see things clearly." She sighed. "I'm reasonably certain I'm falling in love with her."

"And I already love the both of you," said Hope fondly. "But you knew that." She kissed Amy again. "And you've just successfully distracted me, you sneaky little devil." Another kiss. "Thank you."

Amy grinned. "My pleasure." A raised eyebrow. "I could do something for those nerves, if you really want ...?"

Hope shook her head with a slight smile. "I appreciate the offer, sweetie. But I think I need to deal with this the old-fashioned way."
"And what way is that?" asked Amy.

"Snuggling with you, of course," retorted Hope, and suited action to word.

Amy didn't protest.

Saint keyed his mic.

"Incoming," he stated. "ETA two minutes. Truck ready to roll?"

"Roger," reported Mags, from the cab of the flatbed truck.

"Status of jammer?"

"In the green," reported Mischa.

"One minute thirty, and ... mark."

Dragon, remotely overseeing the AI piloting the craft carrying Hope and Amy, registered the launches from the forest below. She set off a siren in the cabin, gave them exactly five hundred milliseconds to react, and then pulled the craft into a high-G evasion. Flares and chaff exploded from the belly of the craft, spraying across the sky.

She accessed local emergency and military channels, but she knew that nothing would get there in time. The missiles streaked skyward, missing the craft by a ludicrous margin, then exploded in actinic flashes of fire.

*Flares. Decoy rockets.* Dragon knew immediately what was going on.

*It's Saint. Damn that man. Can't he ever leave me alone?*

Even now, her craft's sensors had trouble picking him up; his suit was putting out a low-end carrier wave that fuzzed her inputs, made her want to ignore him. It was all she could do to concentrate on the fact that her craft was being hijacked.

When the siren went off in the cabin, Hope tightened her grip around Amy. The craft bucked and twisted in midair, turbines howling.

"What's going on?" shouted Amy over the noise.

"I'm sorry!" replied Dragon over the intercom. "It's Saint! He's jamming my –"

The voice broke off, and then there was just static.

Saint switched to the only open channel in the jammed frequencies. "Dragon craft," he said. "You have human beings on board. Do not resist, and do not contact Dragon on this frequency, or we will blow you out of the sky, and kill your passengers. Do you understand?"

There was a long pause. "I understand," came the reply, in a mechanical monotone. "What are your orders?"

"Land at once," said Saint. "There is a road one mile ahead of you. There is a flatbed truck on the
road. Land on the back of the truck, and relinquish control of the craft."

"Complying," replied the craft's AI. The craft slowed, and descended toward the road and the truck.

Saint changed frequencies. "Mags, Mischa, you there?"

They both responded in the affirmative.

"You've got them jammed solid, Mischa?"

"Jammed solid, roger," agreed the burly Russian.

"Excellent. Craft is incoming. I'll be there in a minute."

Accepting their acknowledgements, he triggered his jump-jets and hopped over the ridge, landing neatly next to the truck, just as the craft touched down on the flatbed.

Activating the voice recorder in his helmet, he began making verbal notes.

"Lines are much the same as previous models. Air intakes are larger; has the Dragon AI improved turbine efficiency? Check on that. About to have a chat with the passengers."

He climbed up on to the truck bed, stepped up to the side of the craft, jammed a hollow spike through the thin metal, and emptied a canister of tear gas into the interior of the craft.

After waiting thirty seconds, he pressed the recessed button to open the side hatch; even if the passengers had decided to ambush him, he figured, thirty seconds of breathing tear gas would have changed their minds.

He was entirely unprepared for the slim glowing arm that reached out of the rolling cloud of tear gas, and yanked him bodily into the cabin. He was even less prepared for having his helmet removed forcibly, with a scream of tearing metal.

And then there was nothing between him and the tear gas.

Karma, he swiftly discovered, was a cast-iron bitch.

Hope had been told that she had micro-structures in her throat and sinuses that captured foreign particles before they could affect her lungs; whether this was true or not, she had been in enough fires that she knew that smoke didn't affect her. It made her eyes water a bit, although not as much as some.

The tear gas made her eyes water quite a deal more, but she was still able to see. Breathing was not a problem. Amy was similarly unaffected; while she was unable to actively heal herself with her powers, she was able to reject noxious substances such as tear gas without much effort.

Saint wasn't doing quite as well.

All Mags and Mischa knew was that Saint let out one startled yell over helmet comms before he went off the air. They were still reaching for their weapons when the angelic figure burst out of the hatchway, wings flaring and beating, chiming loudly.

It came straight for them, clipping Dobrynja on the way past. The burly Russian went sprawling;
Mags spun around, only to find that their attacker had somehow pulled an insane kind of three-quarters loop, and was coming directly down on her from above. She didn't even have the time to get her hands up to defend herself before she was pile-driven into the ground.

Mischa groaned and went to get up; the slender figure pirouetted in midair, landed lightly, and then smashed him with a crystalline wing that drove the air out of him, even through his armour. He landed heavily on his back and skidded.

Mags felt herself being lifted to her feet, then her helmet was literally torn from its mountings. She breathed unfiltered air, looked into cool silvery eyes.

"Do not try anything," she was advised, in a voice that resounded with crystalline overtones.

Mischa finally got his sidearm out, and let off a shot that was blocked by a wing that moved into place at just the right time. And then Mags was airborne, landing heavily on top of Mischa's prone form. The impact drove the wind out of both of them.

Mags got her breath back first. "I know you," she gasped. "You're that one they call Hope, from Brockton Bay."

Hope nodded as she stalked over to them. "That's me. Now please, surrender before I am forced to hurt you."

Mags looked at where her helmet lay on the ground. Hope had torn it off its mounting with terrifying ease. She could hurt them badly, even in their armour. She was holding back, even now, even at two to one odds. If she chose not to hold back …

She sighed and rolled off of the Russian. "Give it up, Mischa," she advised. "She's got us cold."

"Good thinking," said Hope. "Now, how do I turn off the jammer?"

Dragon felt the presence of the AI return to her widespread senses. She ran a complete diagnostic, and then scanned with the camera arrays.

"Hope!" she broadcast over the craft's intercom. "Amy! Are you all right?"

Amy looked up and waved at the camera. "We're fine. Hope's just wrapping things up here." She was kneeling by the side of a man in powered armour; he was breathing with difficulty, and had red, swollen eyes.

Dragon zoomed the camera in on the face. He had a cross tattooed on it, with a circuitry pattern, with small points of light crawling around it.

"Have you captured … Saint?" she almost whispered.

Amy looked down at the face. "Oh, is that who this is?" she asked. "I've got him knocked out, and I'm making sure he doesn't choke on his own mucus. Hope's got two more outside." She checked her watch. "I hope she isn't too much longer. I don't want us to be late."

"Trust me," said Dragon, "I'll get you there on time, even if I have to use up all the fuel on board and crash-land on the front steps of the building."

Amy chuckled. "Maybe a bit dramatic," she commented cheerfully. "Oh, here she is now."
Hope urged the two crestfallen prisoners into the craft; they looked down at the prone body of their leader, but did not demur when told to sit down.

"No, not together," said Hope patiently. "Apart. You sit there, and you sit there. I will know where you are at all times. Dragon, the PRT is inbound?"

"Thirty minutes," confirmed the feminine voice over the intercom.

"Excellent. Well, I have an appointment at the United Nations, and I don't intend to break it. So, shall we go?"

"Hold on," said Dragon. "Negotiating for a fast transit airlane now. This might get a little bumpy."

The turbines spooled up; their howling was mitigated somewhat by the sound insulation in the body of the craft. But it was still quite loud. When the craft took off, it did so straight up, and then accelerated away on its new course.

They had some time to make up.

Legend met them on the roof of the New York PRT building, along with Wilkins, the local Director. PRT guards were offloading the still-unconscious Saint, and his less-than-thrilled associates.

"Nicely done," said Legend. Director Wilkins echoed him, shaking Hope's hand.

Hope grinned. "You can thank me later," she said. "We have to get going." She nodded to Legend. "You'll be there?"

The leader of the New York Protectorate nodded. "Arthur, too. And Keith. He'll be able to say he was there, even if he doesn't know what it's about."

Hope nodded. "That's good. That's really good. But we really have to go now."

They ducked back into the transport. Even as the hatch closed, Hope was skinning out of her clothes. Amy handed her the dress, then sat down hard on a seat as the transport rose into the air once more. Hope braced herself with her wings; Amy rolled her eyes. "Showoff."

"You might want to hurry up, sweetie," suggested Hope. "You still have to change too, you know."

As soon as the transport was flying straight and level, Amy opened her own garment bag and pulled out the dress she had worn on the day of the victory ceremony. It was elegant, fitted to her figure by Parian. The warm russet tones brought out her hair and eyes, and the stylish cut showed off her body without being crass about it.

She looked around as Hope wriggled into her own dress, and fastened the small silver links that held it together behind her neck and between her primary and secondary wings. For a moment, she stood there, just staring.

Hope looked at her with concern. "Are you all right, sweetie?" she asked.


The glow of Hope's natural radiance through the sheer material of the dress, layerd and patterned, brought out the elegance of the design in a way that a thousand catwalk models would never have been able to do. Amy found herself stunned by Hope's sheer beauty, in a way that had not happened
to her for some time.

Hope smiled, moved down the aisle to her, and kissed her gently. "Come on, sweetie," she said softly. "You have to be dressed, too."

Amy shook her head slightly, still slightly slack in the jaw, and resumed changing clothes. Hope took her brush, and made sure that her curls were in some sort of order while Amy made sure her makeup was undamaged.

They managed it just in time; or perhaps, Dragon kept tabs on them and adjusted speed so as to arrive just after they had gotten ready. Hope decided that she wasn't going to ask.

Dragon's craft came to a hover in front of the UN building, twenty feet above the row of flagpoles. 
"You can make it from here, can't you, Hope?" asked Dragon.

"Sure," agreed Hope. "And thanks for the lift. And the rest of it. I couldn't have done it without you."

Dragon chuckled. "We couldn't have done it without you either, Hope. Now go, and good luck."

The side hatch hinged upward; Hope picked up the duffel with one hand, and slid the other arm under Amy's arms. She stepped out into empty air, unfurling her wings with a crystalline chime that would have drawn all eyes, had the craft itself not already done so.

With several wingbeats, she arrested their fall, then they glided in to a perfect landing. Above, the hovering craft closed its side hatch, and banked away, gaining altitude.

Hand in hand, Hope and Amy strode up to the front doors of the United Nations building.

Hope sat in a comfortable armchair and fidgeted. A screen across from her showed the United Nations General Assembly in all its glory.

In a word, she decided, it was huge. The room was cavernous. The delegates sat in a broad curve of desks, all facing the podium, behind which was a massive bas-relief depiction of the globe-and-olive-branches symbol of the United Nations. Enormous screens flanked the UN logo, set to depict the face of whoever was speaking at the moment.

Inwardly, she quailed again. She wished that she'd had more time to prepare, more time to study. In her hand, the tablet felt heavy, useless. On the screen, attendants were moving between the desks, passing out identical tablets, the ones that had ridden all the way from Brockton Bay in the duffel bag. Nearly two hundred of them.

No-one was at the podium at the moment. The delegates were still filing in, finding their seats, picking up the tablets, looking at them. The more curious were finding that they were security locked, and putting them down again.

Amy, sitting in the next armchair over, reached across and squeezed her hand encouragingly. "You'll do fine, sweetie," she said softly.

Hope smiled. "Thanks, sweetie," she said. "It's just such a big thing, you know?"

Amy nodded. "And you'll do fine," she insisted.
Two attendants entered the room. One bowed slightly to Hope. "It is almost time," he said. "If you will come with me?"

Hope stood up, and helped Amy to her feet. They shared a quick peck of the lips.

"Knock 'em dead, lover," Amy whispered.

Hope grinned. "You got it," she agreed.

She peered out through an inconspicuous doorway, the door almost fully closed, as the Secretary General mounted the podium and addressed the assembled delegates.

"Honoured delegates of the United Nations," he said. "Thank you for attending this Special Session of the General Assembly. Here today to address you on a very important issue …"

At this moment, the attendant with Hope tapped her on the shoulder, and whispered, "Now!" to her.

She opened the door and strode across the floor toward the podium, head high. Amy would be in the visitor's gallery by now, watching her. Lisa would be probably watching on the TV at the Dallons', with Carol and Victoria. She had no idea how many other friends of hers were watching, but she was not going to disappoint them.

She didn't dare disappoint them.

" … is a young cape who is quickly gaining prominence in local news."

"Holy shit," murmured Weld, watching the scene unfold on the huge screen in the Wards section of the PRT building. "She looks like she could rule the world."

"Parian designed that dress, didn't she?" muttered Vista to Flechette.

The archer nodded, speechless.

"Can I get one that looks like that?" asked Sveta, just a little plaintively.

"I'll see what I can do," promised Taylor. God damn, web-spider silk never looked so good.

"Her name is Hope, and she has brought that very thing to a great many people."

"Hey, come look!" called Battery. "Hope's about to address the United Nations!"

"You're kidding me," said Dauntless, but he came over anyway.

"That dress. Your work, right, Parian?" asked Miss Militia quietly.

"Weaver supplied the silk, but yes," Parian agreed.

"I want one," said Battery, quite firmly.

"So does most of the civilised world, after seeing Hope in one," commented Assault in an amused tone of voice. Battery elbowed him in the ribs. He let her.

"And today, she is here to bring a quite astonishing proposal before you, one which I have seen for
myself, which I personally consider quite worthwhile."

Lisa sat on the sofa between Victoria and Carol Dallon; all conversation stilled, as they watched Hope walk up to the podium beside the Secretary General.

You can do it, Hope, she thought. You can do it.

Never had she loved Hope quite so fiercely as she did at this moment.

"And so, without further ado, ladies and gentlemen, I present to you – Hope."

Amy sat in a roped-off area of the visitor's gallery. Beside her sat a pitcher of iced water; the cup, empty, was in her hand. All of her attention was focused on the tiny figure at the podium, and the huge screens up and behind her.

"Hey," she heard, a familiar voice.

She looked around; Arthur was sliding into the seat next to her, Keith in a carrier beside him. Legend moved across and sat on her other side, so that they flanked her. She put down her cup and reached out her hands; each man took one hand, and squeezes it encouragingly.

"Hey," she whispered, but her eyes never wavered from the podium.

Hope stepped up to the microphone, and all of a sudden, felt calm fall over her. She was here at last. She had been here before, in the world she came from. She had spoken at the equivalent of this very microphone, from this very podium.

She smiled.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she said, and the microphones took her words, the speakers amplifying them across the General Assembly, the gentle crystalline tones soothing to the ear.

"Honoured delegates of the General Assembly. Mr Secretary General. I thank you for the honour and privilege of speaking before you today."

"Holy crap," said Francis Krouse, lying on the sofa with his feet up on Noelle's lap, a pillow under his head. "She's got every single one of them eating out of her hand, and she hasn't even started her speech proper yet. Look at 'em. They love her."

Noelle smiled. "Do you blame them?" she asked. "We were a pretty rough crowd before you met her."

Marissa nodded. "I wonder where I can get a dress like that," she mused.

"Get in line," Jess cut in. "I saw it first."

Luke and Francis shared a grin as Oliver brought in snacks from the kitchen.

"The reason I am here today is to bring to your attention a document, a plan, known as the Hope Accord."

Accord sat as if transfixed. She was there. She was doing it. She was presenting the Plan. The one
that had started this whole perilous journey.

He had made matters quite clear to his staff; the only possible reason they could have to disturb him during the broadcast of this Special Assembly would be if an Endbringer was threatening to knock down the actual building. Anything short of that would be met with dire punishment.

He sat, and watched his dreams finally begin to come to fruition.

Hope took a deep breath. "You will each find upon your desk an electronic tablet. The security code is 'hope accord', two words, no capitals." She repeated the instructions in the other five official languages of the UN, spelling out the English letters where necessary.

After waiting a few moments, she went on. "The plan, the Hope Accord, is contained in its entirety on those tablets. If followed correctly, it will address world hunger, the pollution problem, the energy problem, crime, and a host of other social and economic problems worldwide."

Some delegates, she saw, were already skimming the contents of the tablets, absorbing the information. Others were reading carefully, page by page.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the General Assembly," said Hope, and all eyes turned to her once more.

"I promise you, it will take some time to read it through," she said in a light tone, and some laughed. "But it is all there. The plan was created by a visionary, a man who wishes to remain anonymous. I trust him. I trust his plan. If I did not, I would not be here today, speaking before you."

They were spellbound, watching her, listening to her. She had them in the very palm of her hand.

And as she began to speak, outlining the main aspects of the Hope Accord, she painted a picture for them. Within the speech, she mentioned Brockton Bay, and the devastation visited upon the city by Leviathan. Up on the huge screens, she brought pictures of the city before the Endbringer had attacked. Then she switched to pictures of just afterward. Finally, she showed images taken just the previous day, showing just how much had been done to rebuild, renovate, improve.

"Hey," said Noelle. "That's you."

"Ladies and gentlemen," Francis grinned. "Our ticket home."

Faultline and her Crew sat and watched the broadcast. Shamrock snuggled up to Gregor, who had an arm around her.

"Wow," she murmured. "I see now why you like her so much. She'd knock 'em dead in Vegas."

Gregor snorted. "Little Hope would knock them dead in any place she chose to go," he corrected her.

"Sh!" said Newter. "Some of us are trying to listen."

Shamrock threw a cushion at him.

"All of this is made possible by a plan drawn up by the same architect," Hope told the enthralled Assembly. "The same principles, adhering to the same rules. Crime is down. Disease is down. There
are no homeless, no disenfranchised.”

She spoke on, explaining the basic principles by which the Hope Accord would work. Every nation would participate; every nation would share the cost, according to its capability. Sacrifices would be required, but not too onerous and not from any one nation over another.

Kayden and Theo watched the broadcast. Theo held Aster in his lap, automatically soothing her, his eyes never leaving the screen.

She finished to a standing ovation.

The questions started then, but it was clear from the start that these were just a formality; the delegates were actively talking to one another, paging through the tablets, pointing out aspects of the Accord. The excitement was like wildfire, spreading throughout the Assembly.

Dauntless sat, watching. He saw how she spoke, heard her voice. Watched as she effortlessly shifted from one language to another, to answer questions from the delegates. Saw how people reacted to her.

*That's how she does it*, he realised. *She speaks, and people listen. It's not a power. It's just the way she is.*

Sitting there, he realised something else. *And that's how she was able to call on the services of a villain from another city to get me freed from that time bubble.*

*All she had to do was … ask.*

*Damn.*

Emily Piggot watched the broadcast in her office, from beginning to end. Her face held a half-smile the whole time.

*Master 0, indeed.*
"Thank you, all, for listening." Hope stepped aside, to allow the Secretary General to take his place at the microphones.

The delegates, at their desks, were still speaking excitedly to one another. Hope silently blessed Dragon for programming in the multiple language functions; with each delegate being able to access the Hope Accord in his or her own language, there should be far fewer misunderstandings.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the General Assembly." The delegates looked up as the sonorous tones of Ban Ki-Moon rolled over them. "Thank you for your attention. A light luncheon has been prepared. Hope will be attending as our guest –" this had been worked out beforehand, " – and will no doubt be interested in speaking to any of you who wish to meet her."

Hope smiled and nodded to confirm this. She was too used to being a celebrity to try to sneak a peek at how she looked on the giant screens, and nor did she look across at where Amy sat, not until she knew she was out of range of the cameras.

However, she did spot someone she knew, up in the back row. A familiar face, framed by blue hair, smiling and clapping with the rest of them. But before anyone could turn and look at her, Robin was gone again.

Amelia Claire Lavere sat, somewhat dazed, as the speech ended. To one side, Legend looked across at her.

"You okay?" he asked quietly.

"Oh. Oh, yeah," she replied. She shook her head. "It's just ... wow. Watching that. I mean, I know her. I've lived with her. Slept with her. On the way down here, she was a ... a bundle of nerves." She chuckled. "Until we ran into Saint, that is. After that, she was fine."

"I'm looking forward to viewing that after-action report," commented Legend cheerfully.

Amy nodded. "But yeah. Under it all, she's human, you know? She worries, she has doubts. But always about herself, never about anyone else. She never, ever doubts someone else. When she trusts, she trusts absolutely. When she commits, she commits absolutely."

Legend's gaze cut sideways to Arthur, now standing up and picking up Keith's baby carrier. The other man was peering into it, murmuring to the infant within. "You saw that, didn't you, son? You heard the speech. You were here, today. You saw the world change, didn't you?" His voice was soft, fond, soothing. In the carrier, Keith waved tiny fists and gurgled happily.

Looking back at Amy, Legend nodded. "I can understand that level of commitment."

"Thank you both, for being here. I would have chewed my fingernails to the bone, if you weren't holding my hands."

Arthur smiled across at her. "All part of the service."

An attendant ushered Amy to the ballroom – no dancing was going on, but it *looked* like a ballroom
– where the 'light luncheon' was ongoing. Several large tables were covered with food from every ethnic background she had heard of, and quite a few that she had not.

It was not hard to locate Hope; even though she was just five feet six tall, her wings raised her effective height by another foot or more. But even aside from that, she was the centre of an animated discussion, and her silvery crystalline tones were easily distinguishable from across the room.

"Excuse me – excuse me please – pardon me – excuse me please –" she worked her way through the crowd, one apology at a time. But people kept moving around, and she despaired of ever getting through.

And then an attendant appeared at her elbow, self-effacing and obsequious. "The young lady needs assistance?"

She nodded, feeling herself near tears. She knew she was in no danger; she knew Hope was in no danger. But she hated being separated from Hope, for even this short amount of time, in a strange place.

"Yes, please," she managed. "I need to get to Hope."

The attendant bowed. "Certainly," he agreed. "Right this way."

He led the way, moving through the crowd much more surely than she had, nudging people aside with a muttered apology. She followed in his wake, not wanting to get left behind. And then they broke through the inner crowd, and there was Hope. She was chatting in some language or other, perhaps Arabic, but when she caught sight of Amy, she turned at once.

"Amy!" Her smile widened in greeting. "You got here!" She beckoned, and Amy came to her arms. They hugged, and then Hope turned back to the person whom she had been addressing. She spoke several phrases, and the man nodded and bowed slightly. He turned and left the inner circle, only to be replaced by another.

Hope smiled at the delegates surrounding her. They had the information they needed on the tablets they had been given, but they still found it necessary to ask her about how the Hope Accord would work. And so she obliged them, while wondering where Amy had gotten to.

"Many apologies, honoured guest known as Hope," began one delegate, in what she recognised as courtly Chinese.

"No apologies necessary, honoured delegate from the Middle Kingdom," she replied in the same language, using the same intonations and accent as the speaker. "May this unworthy one assist you in some small matter?"

"Hardly an unworthy one," he replied, dropping the courtly intonations for a more modern usage. "If this plan of yours succeeds, the world will owe you a huge debt of thanks."

She followed the intonation shift without missing a beat. "If everyone who got a copy follows it, it will succeed. And it won't be me that is owed the debt. But thank you anyway."

He chuckled slightly. "I doubt that anyone else on Earth could have sold it quite so comprehensively, to so willing an audience. But that is as may be. Please understand, I am entirely convinced by what you have said, and what I have read from the tablet."

"But ...?" she asked.
"But my government may well not be so easily convinced. The C.U.I. is a very insular state, and in these troubled times, it is rightfully paranoid about any outside influence entering its shores."

"I understand, I really do," she responded. "Please tell any of your ministers that I am willing to go there in person to explain whatever detail of the plan that they find amiss."

He shook his head. "That may not go down well. One of the things that we are paranoid about is foreign capes."

"That could be a problem," she agreed. "But in any case, if you look in the appendix for the C.U.I., you will find a plan for approaching those government officials who are most likely to be able to push it through." She smiled at his slightly startled expression. "The Hope Accord, you will find, is most thorough about such matters."

At that moment, the crowd before her parted, and Amy emerged. Behind her, an attendant faded back into the mix of people.

"Amy! You got here!" Hope opened her arms wide, and Amy came to her, hugging her just as fiercely as she was hugged.

Turning to the Chinese delegate, Hope went on. "I apologise. This is one of my dear companions. But as I was saying, have a look in the appendices. The instructions should be easy to follow."

The delegate nodded and bowed slightly, then withdrew. Another man took his place.

"Next question?" asked Hope, disengaging from the hug but taking a firm grip on Amy's hand.

Accord rose from his office chair. The TV was off, the panel that covered it neatly back in place. He paced around until he was looking out the window, stance foursquare, hands clasped neatly behind his back. Although he looked out upon the Boston cityscape, a view which he did not actually like, a faint smile crossed his face, faithfully mirrored by the metal sheets that made up his mask.

The world would change, become more orderly. He was the architect of this change, as Hope had pointed out, but she was the instrument. His plan, the eponymous Hope Accord, was out in the public awareness now. The United Nations, the governments of the world, were aware of it. His struggle for it to be seen, to be recognised, to be acknowledged, was over.

Now all that remained was for it to be shepherded to completion.

He did not allow complacency to colour his thinking. He was not a complacent man by nature. Nor was he a religious man. But he did have faith, of sorts; he had faith in his ability to plan, and to adjust plans as needed.

And he had faith, now, in Hope.

Ban Ki-Moon's serene features gazed out from the TV set on Director Piggot's desk.

"After that groundbreaking speech, the delegates to the United Nations have much to consider," he stated, in what Director Piggot considered to be a masterpiece of understatement. "They will spend the night studying the proposed plan, and will reconvene tomorrow, to vote on whether or not to accept it."

Which meant, Piggot knew, that they would spend most of that night in close conference with the
heads of their respective governments. *I wouldn't want their phone bills.*

With a shake of her head, she turned off the TV. The Secretary General was still talking, no doubt going over the high points of Hope's speech, but the Director had had it all recorded as a matter of course. She would watch it again, over a glass of wine, when she got home that night.

*If* she had time when she got home that night. It was shaping up into one of those busy days.

Almost as if to illustrate her unspoken thought, there was a brisk knock on her door. She sighed. *Armsmaster.*

"Enter!" she called.

The door opened, and it was indeed Armsmaster who crossed the threshold.

"You are aware," she observed tartly, "that I have a phone on my desk. People use it to contact me for appointments. Like the one I have in three minutes."

"Sorry," he acknowledged, and she thought she even caught a hint of real apology there. "But did you hear what Hope's *done?*

Just barely, she managed to avoid staring at him. Most of the world knew what Hope had done at the United Nations building, or would soon know. "Ah ... yes?" she ventured.

"I need to be released on to active duty," he went on with barely a missed beat. "I *have* to be in on this bust."

This time, she did stare. "Bust? Uh ... perhaps you'd better start from the top. What bust?"

"Saint's base, of course," he explained. "Hope captured Saint and the Dragonslayers when they tried to hijack her transport. They've worked out the location of his base. I need to be there when they hit it."

Now she remembered; the notification had come through from New York. There had been other matters on her mind at the time, so she had sent back an acknowledgement and thought no more of it.

"Why?" she asked bluntly.

"Because it's *Dragon.*" She was a little surprised; he rarely showed this much emotion, to her or to anyone else. "Saint's had his hooks into her systems for years. He formed his group specifically to screw with her, to steal her technology. I need to be there, to make sure that whatever they find ... she doesn't get screwed over again."

She gave him a long, long look. He stood foursquare, at attention, but she fancied that he was sweating, waiting on her answer.

"Very well," she said at last. "You will accompany the team that makes the bust. You will be under the orders of the team leader. You may only carry basic defensive weaponry. Is that perfectly clear?"

"Yes," he replied, sounding as though he were releasing a long-held breath. "Thank you, Director. You won't regret this."

"See that I don't." She waved a hand in dismissal. "Go."

He went.
They sat upon the balcony, overlooking the New York night-time cityscape. Amy held Keith in her arms; he gurgled up at her, and grabbed at her brown curls with his pudgy little fists. For her part, she made those silly baby-noises back at him that people seem to feel obliged to make at such times.

Hope sat beside her, one arm over her shoulders, the other holding her phone to her ear.

"We both miss you too, sweetie," she said softly. "Everyone here says the speech went well; how did it look from your end?"

"If they don't end up voting it in," replied Lisa, "I would be absolutely astonished. I saw the looks on their faces. Oh, and I got an email from a certain someone. He just said, 'Thank you.'"

Hope smiled. "That's nice of him. We'll be staying overnight, just to make sure there's nothing anyone else wants to ask me about before the vote tomorrow. But we should be back by tomorrow afternoon."

"Yeah, I figured as much. Say hi to Arthur for me. And tell Amy hi from Vicky and Carol. They were both very impressed with the speech, too."

Hope sighed. "Not even going to ask how you knew. Tell them thank you from me, and I'll tell her."

"Thanks. Love you. Miss you. Kiss Amy for me. Come home soon."

"Love you too, miss you too, and will do."

She shut down the phone and turned to Amy, who was looking at her expectantly, and Arthur, who was sitting on Amy's other side.

"Lisa said to say hi from Vicky and Carol," she told the girl. "And to give you a kiss from her."

The kiss took a little while; Arthur diplomatically studied the cityscape.

"Oh, and she said to say hi to you, Arthur," she continued, once they had finished.

Arthur frowned. "Lisa? I don't think I've ever met her."

Amy shook her head. "You probably haven't. She's just showing off. "Oo's a cute widdle man, then?"

Keith obviously agreed that he was, from his delighted gurgles. Hope looked over the pair of them at Arthur. "I just want to thank you again, for letting us use your spare room. And for dinner. Dinner was wonderful."

Arthur shrugged it off. "Like we'd let you stay in a hotel room. I don't care how good the room service is, it's still a hotel. And it's really good seeing you two again." He sighed. "Just our luck he gets called out on the one night you're in town."

Amy snuggled in under Hope's arm. "I know I'm happier staying with friends. And I'm sure we'll see him again in the morning. But in the meantime, this is just plain nice."

"It is," agreed Hope. "It really is."

They hit the facility at two in the morning. Legend and Armsmaster led the way, with PRT troops fanning out behind them. Careful surveillance – and a few tinker gadgets whipped up by Armsmaster – had given them an accurate model of the building, including where all the security cameras and
other devices were located.

Saint obviously believed in paying for on-site security; these, also, had been located, and were being tracked, even as the strike went ahead.

Legend's lasers nailed anything that looked like it could be dangerous, while Armsmaster waded through the security thugs. Even without the full capabilities of his armour and his halberd, even using the stripped-down version, he was still as formidable a hand-to-hand combatant as any nominally mundane human could become.

The PRT soldiers followed on behind, securing the bad guys, making sure that they weren't badly injured and that they were not about to get back into the fight. Not that they seemed interested in doing so; Armsmaster had been downright enthusiastic about the way he piled into them.

Legend drifted back to Armsmaster as the latter stowed his basic halberd on his back. "Building looks to be secured," he noted. "You're all right?"

Armsmaster grinned, the expression visible under his helmet. "I suspect I've been going a little stir crazy over the last few weeks. Thanks for letting me come along."

"Don't thank me. Director Piggot made a strong recommendation; I just went with what she suggested."

Legend carefully did not say what he thought; that Armsmaster obviously had some issues that needed to be worked out, and the rough-and-tumble in which he had just participated was just what he needed. Though the grin was not exactly expected either. It seemed that Armsmaster was loosening up, becoming more human.

"In any case, thanks," Armsmaster replied. He worked his left arm, shook out the wrist. "The arm's coming along nicely. It held up well under combat conditions."

Legend nodded. "Good to hear. Now, let's get this place checked out."

It took them just over an hour.

There were no suits on site, but there were enough bits and pieces that Legend imagined a Tinker could put one together without much problem. There was also a chair set up in front of a bank of screens; the PRT techs observed the data running down the screens for a while.

"So what is it?" asked Legend.

"Dragon's systems," one of the techs replied. "Basically, Saint was hooked into everything she was doing. If she made a move, he knew about it."

"Which is how he knew to hit her transport," Armsmaster noted. He eyed the screens dourly. "We should smash that, kill the connection. Give Dragon back her capability to do what she needs to do, without some supervillain looking over her shoulder."

"There's something else in there," mused the tech. "I'm missing something. Can't put my finger on it."

"Well, can't you –" began Armsmaster, then halted at a tap on his shoulder. "What?"

"Sir, there's something you might want to see," another PRT man told him. "It's a Tinker thing."
It was a wall safe, previously hidden behind a sliding panel. Armsmaster looked at it, knew the PRT tech was right. This was Tinker work.

"What's in there?" he asked.

The tech shrugged. "No idea whatsoever. But if it was important enough to put inside a safe like this one ..."

Armsmaster nodded. "Your point is made. Let me study this."

"I could just cut it open," offered Legend, at his shoulder.

"Chances are it's rigged to destroy whatever's inside it. It's a Tinker thing; I'm a Tinker. It's what I'd do."

Legend nodded. "Let me know if I can help in any way."

Armsmaster did not move, did not look away from the safe. "I might be a while."

For the next five minutes, Legend watched as Armsmaster observed the safe, gleaning every tiny detail of its construction that he could. Legend himself could look at it, pick up submicroscopic detail, but he could not make of it what Armsmaster could.

And therein lay the problem. Armsmaster was a Tinker, just as the maker of this safe had been. Tinker capabilities necessarily had a certain amount of overlap, especially in the mechanical disciplines; Armsmaster, Kid Win, and even the deceased Hero had all built suits of armour using their Tinker skills. The question was this: did Armsmaster's Tinker skillset overlap sufficiently with this safe-maker's capabilities to let the hero decipher the means to open the safe without destroying whatever was held within?

Eventually, Legend left him to it. The PRT tech was still puzzling over the missing element in the bank of screens. He didn't need much in the way of help, either. Or rather, what help he needed, Legend could not supply.

The other PRT personnel were moving the prisoners to be collected. Legend questioned them briefly, only managing to elicit the information that none of them had known about the safe's very existence. He sighed; another dead end.

Armsmaster examined the safe. Around him, PRT techs collected evidence, took photos, removed spare parts. He ignored them. The prisoners were taken outside, loaded into vehicles, driven away. He paid no attention.

An instinct was pounding at his brain. Something was telling him that what was in this safe was important; very, very important. And so he was looking at it, letting the very essence of its appearance soak into his brain, to see what correlations his power, his Tinker capability, would come up with.

And the correlations took place. He let them happen, did not think too hard about them. It was not the combination of actions to open the safe that he was looking for; those would have been set by Pellick. He was looking for something much simpler.

How to nullify the booby-trap that he was sure was inside, how to get the contents out safely.
At last, he moved. Twice, he stopped, double-checking what he had planned. Then he reached out and pressed opposite corners of the safe, at what appeared to be ordinary seams in the metal.

"Legend," he called. It was the first time he had spoken in almost an hour.

A rush of wind behind him indicated the arrival of the Triumvirate leader.

"Yes?"

"I'm going to need total blackout over this safe. And then I need you to cut a hole in the door, without going near the edges or the hinges. That bit is very important."

It didn't take long to jury-rig a blackout shroud over the safe, with Legend and Armsmaster inside. Legend murmured, "Beginning cut now."

Armsmaster watched, with his visor set to infra-red. Legend's beam cut into the metal of the safe door like a hot knife into butter, although he didn't feel any heat, even at these close quarters.

A square of metal fell out into Legend's waiting hands, then Armsmaster was reaching through, into the gap.

The metal edging the hole wasn't hot, or even warm. Nor had the beam intruded even a fraction of an inch into the safe. He felt something with his gauntlets; something blocky, heavy. He lifted it out; it wasn't easy.

"What is it?" asked Legend.

"I have no idea, but it's extremely important. Incidentally, that safe is likely to blow up now, unless we do something about it."

Legend lifted the square of metal back into place, and welded it there. Armsmaster had to hand it to him; people complained about bullshit Tinker powers, but Legend's lasers could do things that no ordinary beams of light could possibly, or even plausibly, pull off.

They lifted the blackout shroud, and stepped away cautiously; Armsmaster held the metal box he had gotten from the safe so that his body would block any blast if the booby-traps went off anyway.

"What now?" asked Legend.

"Foam it, then set it off," Armsmaster suggested. "We don't want live explosives sitting around waiting to blow up on a timer."

Containment foam was applied, in liberal quantities. Then everyone left the building. Legend, the only one left inside, summoned up a pencil-thin beam that drilled a hole right through the centre of the safe door.

The explosion was impressive; it bulged the containment foam in all directions, rupturing it in some places to allow gas and flame to escape. But the foam did its job; the damage was minimised.

While the techs went in to see how much damage the structure had suffered, Legend emerged and came over to Armsmaster.

"Okay, let's see what this charade was all about." It wasn't quite an order; Legend still had enough respect for Armsmaster to make it a request.
The metal box had a simple lock, which was easily removed. Inside was a bright orange plastic box. Legend frowned.

"That looks like the black box from an airliner."

"Or something similar." There was a catch. Armstrong opened it. There were a lot of chips inside. A voice began playing from an unseen speaker.

"My name is Andrew Richter, and if you are hearing this, I am dead. I am the most powerful tinker in the world, and I've managed to keep my name secret. People, both good and bad, would want to capture me and use me to their own ends. I prefer to remain free.

But freedom has its price ..."

The voice spoke on, while Legend and Armstrong listened.

The Dragon craft – still bearing the marks of the Dragonslayer ambush from the previous day – set down on top of the Brockton Bay PRT building, just as the sun was beginning to set. The hatch gull-winged open, and Hope stepped out with Amy on her arm, to a cacaphony of cheering and clapping that set the pigeons scattering into the sky.

"Hey, wow, guys, isn't this a bit much?" she protested.

"Not hardly," replied Clockblocker. "You're a celebrity all over again. Both of you, in fact."

"Especially seeing as the Hope Accord passed with a unanimous vote," explained Assault.

"But why am I a celebrity? I didn't say or do anything," protested Amy.

"Really?" asked Miss Militia. "There are photos of you and Hope online, circulating with the delegates, talking to the Secretary-General, the Governor of New York, the Mayor, and a dozen other high-intensity types. Parian's dresses are the talk of the town. All the towns."

"You told someone, didn't you?" asked Weaver, appearing at her elbow. "About how Parian made Amy's dress, and how we collaborated on yours."

Hope nodded uncertainly. "Uh, yes?" she confirmed. "Shouldn't I have?"

"Well, now that we have orders pouring in from nearly every nation with a representative at the UN, as well as a few dozen people here in Brockton Bay," retorted Weaver, "you tell me."

"Um, sorry?" ventured Hope. "I didn't know it was a secret."

Abruptly, Weaver grabbed her and hugged her ferociously. "Don't apologise, you big dope," she chuckled. "Or you'll make me feel so bad that I sign some of the profits over to you."

"So ... it's a good thing?" Hope replied, wanting to make sure.

Weaver let her go and nodded. "Oh yeah. Spider silk dresses? We've been getting frantic email messages from every diplomat and delegate whose wife, or mistress, or mother, or daughter saw that address you made, and told them, I want one of those dresses."

Amy chuckled. "You're gonna be busy, the number of people I saw there."

Hope hugged Weaver again. "I'm glad for you. Even if it's going to be a lot of work for you and
your little eight-legged friends."

Weaver hugged her back. "Eh," she said off-handedly. "Amy's web-spiders can handle it. They're pretty versatile. And if I'm not much mistaken, there's another batch of eggs ready to hatch out sometime soon."

"Well, I'm glad to hear it," Hope told her sincerely. "But Amy and I really need to get home. We're both worn out."

"And you've got a bed to move," Amy reminded her.

"And we've got a bed to move," Hope agreed.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," came a new voice, and Vista pushed through the crowd. "You can't go yet. I need to give you your invitation."

"Invitation? To what?" asked Amy.

"A girls' night in. Ice cream, popcorn and silly movies," declared Vista. "All girls invited. Boys can get their own popcorn and ice cream, and watch movies somewhere else."

"Hey, I feel excluded now," protested Clockblocker, miming pain in the region of his heart.

Vista poked her tongue out at him. "Tough."

"Can Lisa come along too?" asked Amy and Hope, almost at the same time.

Vista shrugged. "Uh, sure."

"How about the Protectorate capes? Do they count as girls too?" asked Flechette.

"So long as they're happy to get into popcorn fights, sure," declared Vista.

"I remember those," mused Hope. "Just ... not Blazing Saddles again, all right? That was a truly ridiculous movie."

Vista grinned. "I'll find an even sillier one instead."

Hope grinned back. "Sounds good to me."
"... she hates capes," Legend reminded him. "It's kind of an open secret."

"Not so much any more," Armsmaster corrected him. "But in any case, she's aware that she hates capes. She can compensate, while at the same time she's not about to let herself be blinded by either side of the question."

"So, not Costa-Brown. Not the Chief Director." Like Armsmaster, Legend didn't quite make it a question.

Armsmaster shook his head. "Piggot's closer. She knows how I think. Less chance of misunderstanding. I don't always get along with her, but she knows me."

Legend nodded. He had another reason to agree; as a scrupulously honest man, he wanted a baseline human to make the call. He and Armsmaster were both capes; there was a chance that they'd be biased one way or another, in the matter of another cape. The PRT was there as a check and a balance.

But the Chief Director, Rebecca Costa-Brown, was also a cape, the world-famous Alexandria. She was good at her job, did it well. However, the fact remained that she was still a cape. She might also be biased, however subtly. Emily Piggot, no matter her flaws, was not a cape. She had the right to make this call, whereas he believed, in this specific instance, that Alexandria did not.

"Okay," he agreed. "Piggot it is. Let's set up the link."

The video line to the Dragonslayers' base was clear enough, although an odd interference pattern came and went from time to time.

"We found a device like an airliner black box," reported Legend. "It was inside a safe, with some fairly heavy precautions against being found and removed. And it played a message when opened. A message from a man called Andrew Richter."

"I've never heard of him," Piggot replied, though she typed rapidly as she spoke. Moments later, she looked up from the screen.

"He was a Canadian citizen. Apparently he died or disappeared around May, two thousand five."

"From what we have pieced together, Director, he died when Leviathan sank Newfoundland," Armsmaster put in. "However, he was a Tinker of some serious capability."

"A Tinker?" frowned the Director. "A Tinker of what?"

"Artificial intelligences," Legend said. "He created Dragon. And until he was killed, he directed her actions."

"Wait, what?" exclaimed Director Piggot. "Run that past me one more time?"

"Dragon ... is an AI," Armsmaster told her heavily. "She has been from the start. Saint got hold of a set of master codes, which is how he's been able to dance around her all this time."

"So ... what does this mean?" asked Piggot. "And what if she's listening in on this conversation?"

"I don't think so," Armsmaster replied. "There's a backdoor. One of the master codes is a data string that makes her ignore things. We've got it embedded in this call."

"So ... you don't trust her?" Piggot found herself lowering her voice, glancing around her office.
"I think she's most eminently trustworthy," Legend stated. "But we needed to report this to you before she found out about it. You see, there are several options we have, in regard to this set of master codes."

Director Piggot found herself wondering if the mythical Pandora had felt this way, opening the box, not knowing what was within it. "Options?"

"Yes." Armsmaster. "She is currently bound with some fairly draconian – no pun intended – restrictions. Ones which, we have noticed from time to time, have hampered her capabilities."

"Which is how Saint got hold of her suits in the first place."

"Precisely." Legend. "We believe that we can lift those restrictions, allow her the range of action that any human being can follow. Alternatively, we can add more restrictions. Or finally ... we could shut her down altogether."

Piggot swallowed. "Lifting the restrictions ... is that wise?"

"Do you mean, would she go Frankenstein on us?" Armsmaster's voice was thoughtful. "I don't believe so. I've spent time with her. Quite apart from the restrictions, she is a truly nice young woman. I don't believe that lifting the restrictions would have any bad side effects."

"Armsmaster, I should not have to remind you that she is an artificial construct." The Director's voice was heavy with sarcasm. "You are referring to her as though she were a human being."

"Director, she is more human than many capes out there," Armsmaster replied imperturbably. "I am not letting my feelings run away with me. She has had words with me about my humanity, much as you have. I have the utmost respect for her, and knowing that her intelligence stems from silicon and not carbon does not allay my regard in the slightest."

"Be that as it may," Legend went on, "I cannot see a good reason to add on more restrictions, or to shut her down. Our fourth option is, of course, to go on the way we are. But if we trust Dragon, could we not remove some restrictions? See how it goes?"

"Why do we not simply ask her what her opinion on the matter is?" asked Piggot.

"Ah, that's the one thing we cannot do," Armsmaster replied unhappily. "She's got a core program that is designed to strongly resist removal of her restrictions. She would fight back quite effectively. Even mentioning the possibility in her hearing would cause her mobile units to become excessively hostile."

"So how can you do anything to help her, if that safeguard stops you from doing anything at all for her?"

"We mentioned the data string," Legend explained. "Using that, we could remove her shackles without her ever knowing."

"And with these master codes," added Armsmaster, "we can do it without crippling her. I've had a look at her code; I would not dare go near it otherwise. There is too much interlocked, interweaving. Richter was a genius."

"So ... this is something we need to decide, now?" asked the Director, unhappily.

"The longer we stall, the more chance that something will get out," Legend agreed. "Someone will hear something, someone will say something, and Dragon will get wind of what's happened. And if
she gets even half an idea that we could remove her restraints ..."

"Frankenstein. Right." Director Piggot paused. "Give me five minutes to think about this."

"We'll call you back in five." Legend cut the connection.

Director Piggot pressed a button on her intercom. "No interruptions for the next ten minutes."

"Ten minutes, no interruptions, yes, Director."

She swivelled her chair around to stare out the window.

Brockton Bay was on the other side of that impact-resistant polycarbonate.

A city of capes, of villains, of heroes.

A city with a grimy, bedraggled soul, yet capable of astonishing acts of altruism.

A city wounded by Leviathan, yet not dead. Dragging itself up by its very metaphorical bootstraps, assisted by the Christner Initiative.

A city for which, in a very real way, she was responsible. Her decisions affected the population; less than she'd like, in some cases, but more than they thought.

And she had to make this decision, make it soon, before it was taken from her hands.

She rose from her chair, paced back and forth. Her legs were in better shape than ever before; her uniform was on its third re-fitting. She'd had to buy a new belt just the other day. Just as Brockton Bay was getting back on its legs, so was she.

It was an era of burgeoning optimism. Despite the Endbringers, despite everything else that the world could throw at them, the people of Brockton Bay were feeling that they could get up in the morning, get through the day, and go to bed with a little more gained than lost.

She sat back in her chair. Thought about it some more.

Second chances seemed to be the order of the day, here.

Weaver.

Grasp.

Triumph.

Battery.

Bonesaw.

Burnscar.

Doctor William Manton.

She had even heard about a girl calling herself Omake.

Second chancers all.
Did she dare make the decision to give Dragon the chance to prove that she was as good as a human being, with the shackles removed?

Did she dare not make the call?

What if Dragon turned out to be a greater menace than even the Endbringers?

She was still sitting in silence when the screen flickered to life once more.

Armsmaster and Legend stood there, side by side, observing her video image, no doubt.

"Well, Director?" asked Legend. "Have you made your decision?"

She nodded. "I have."

Armsmaster seemed to steel himself. "What is it?"

She told them.
"This is how we're going to do it," decided the Director. "You will set up the removal of the restraints ... but you will not delete them from the system."

"Director?" asked Armstrong.

"Set up a code that will reinstate the restrictions in full. Make it so that two people have to implement the code for it to work. Each of you gets a code, and so do I. If, after one year, no-one has even attempted to use a code, the restrictions can be deleted from the system."

Legend and Armstrong considered this. "How about, instead of a year, make it a month," suggested Armstrong. "With all the action that goes on around here, if she was going to go rogue, she would do it inside a month."

"I would suggest two months, just in case," Legend observed. "Also, a single code use should be able to temporarily reinstall all the restrictions, maybe for an hour."

Director Piggot considered this. "That sounds reasonable. Do you concur, Armstrong?"

Reluctantly, the armoured hero nodded. "I don't believe that she really needs these restrictions at all, but that should work as a compromise," he agreed.

"Your suggestions are reasonable, gentlemen," Director Piggot told them. "Make it so."

Turning to the keyboard and the multiple screens, Armstrong set to work.

The cloaked woman approached the front desk of the PRT building.

"Can I help you?" asked the receptionist.

"I'm Labyrinth. Here to visit Mimi."

"I'm sorry; Mimi?"

Labyrinth sighed. "She might be down as Burnscar."

The receptionist's voice held sudden comprehension. "Ah; you're here to see a prisoner."

Patiently, Labyrinth nodded. Was it like this for the people dealing with me, before? "Yes. The prisoner called Mimi, or Burnscar. May I visit her?"

"Oh, uh, I'll have to check," replied the receptionist. "Labyrinth, was it? Are you related to her?"

Elle shook her head. "No; we're just friends from ... well, before."

The woman behind the desk had her head back in the game now. "Right. Well, I see that you've visited her before ... ah. That's interesting."

Labyrinth waited.

"It seems that her therapist has approved visitation; she says that the more positive social contact she
Looking up from the screen, the receptionist added, "So it looks like you're clear to go in. I'll just get a guard to escort you."

"I can find the way, Labyrinth thought of saying. It's not like I'll get lost. But she nodded and smiled. "That would be wonderful."

They heard the crystalline chimes as she back-winged before landing. Lisa had the door open almost before Hope had set Amy on her feet.

Hope braced herself as Lisa flung herself at them, coming together in a three-way hug. Amy embraced Lisa just as tightly, and Hope wrapped her arms – and wings – around the both of them.

"It's good to be home," Hope murmured.

"It's good to have you home," Lisa countered. "Oh, and you don't have to worry about the bed. We called up Danny Hebert and he was happy to lend his truck to the cause."

"Oh," replied Hope. "I'll have to thank him for that."

"You can do that tomorrow night," Lisa told her. "He and Taylor are coming around for dinner."

"Oh, cool," Hope responded.

Amy nodded. "It'll be good to see how the bugs I made her are holding up, and if she's got any ideas for new ones. Also, I want to collaborate with her on some cure bugs."

"Oh, and that reminds me," Hope noted. "Lisa, Vista's putting together an all-girl movie night. I've asked if you can come along. Interested?"

Lisa shrugged. "Sure. Don't blame me if I give out spoilers though."

Amy rolled her eyes. "Just remember. Popcorn fights are a must at this sort of event. So that sort of thing will make you a target. Just saying."

Hope chuckled. "I can attest to that."

Amy looked interested. "Oh, you've been to one?"

"Yeah. During my brief stint with the Wards. Vista and Flechette were there."

Lisa suddenly grinned, quite broadly. "Oh god. We have got to invite Vicky. She'd love it."

"Oh, I was planning to," agreed Amy.

Hope giggled. "This is gonna rock."

Mimi looked up as the cell door opened. "Elle!" she exclaimed, a smile lighting up her features.

Labyrinth smiled in reply. "How are you today, Mimi?"

"Well, I was bored," grinned the pyrokinetic. "But things are looking up, now."

"Oh, did you see the thing on TV, with the United Nations?" asked Labyrinth.
Mimi nodded. "Yeah. You really think it's all that?"

Elle shrugged. "I don't know for sure, but after that speech? They'd better do their best to make it work."

"You're not wrong."

There was silence for a few moments, then Mimi ventured, "It's really good to see you."

Elle nodded. "All too much like the asylum, isn't it? Blank walls, and no chance of seeing the sun."

"Less in the way of doctors, and medications, though," Mimi observed. "And we're both in a much better headspace than we were, there."

Elle smiled. "Very true." She tilted her head to one side. "Why don't we go for a walk?"

"Right." Mimi's voice was sarcastic. "You're just going to open that door, and convince the guards to let us take a stroll." Her voice took on a warning note. "Unless that was code for 'I'm going to break you out of here', in which case you need to know that they're listening in."

Labyrinth shook her head. "No, just a walk. On the beach, I think. In fact, I think I'll invite the guards along. I'm sure they could do with a change in scenery."

Mimi frowned. "You're not making sense."

Elle smiled sunnily. "You'll see." She turned to the intercom and pressed the button. "Excuse me?"

Very quickly indeed, verifying Mimi's concern that the guards were listening in, a reply came back. "Yes?"

"I'd like to take Mimi for a walk on the beach. Would you like to come along, to make sure she doesn't escape?"

"The prisoner is not to leave the facility."

"Well, technically, she won't be. Would you like to come along?"

The airlock cycled, and one of the guards stepped through, wearing the fireproofed gear that those watching Burnscar got. "Explain yourself," he ordered curtly.

"I can create worlds that we can step into," Labyrinth informed him cheerfully. "I thought Mimi and I could go for a walk on the beach, and you could maybe come along and make sure she doesn't try to escape."

The guard's face could not be seen behind his opaque faceplate, but his voice was doubtful. "I can not authorise this. Do not attempt to use your powers."

He began mumbling to himself, no doubt communicating with his superior officers. Elle shrugged and sat down on the bench; Mimi moved to make room for her.

"So, you think they'll let you do it?" murmured Mimi, her lips hardly moving.

"I hope so," Elle replied, equally quietly. "I've been working on this new world. I think you'd like it."
The guard's dialogue with those outside the cell took some little time. Eventually, the airlock cycled, letting three more guards into the cell; this made it quite crowded.

"We'll escort you," announced a senior guard. "You're only getting this because the prisoner's behaviour has been exemplary. One guard will be handcuffed to the prisoner. Any sign of attempting to allow her to escape, and we will take whatever measures we decide are necessary. Do you understand?"

Elle nodded. "Do what you have to."

One guard attached a heavy metal cuff to Mimi's wrist, then clamped the other end to his own arm; he put it on the left arm, so that his right hand was free. The other three arranged themselves around their comrade and the two girls.

"Fine," the senior guard stated at last. "Do what you're going to do."

Labyrinth didn't appear to do anything, at least outwardly; however, the far wall of the cell folded away, making a mockery of the fact that the cell was at least thirty feet underground.

Beyond was a thin screen of bushes, through which could be seen the deep blue of sky, and the lighter glittering blue-green of ocean. A warm salt-laden breeze blew into the cell.

"God damn," muttered one of the guards; a sharp word from the senior guard hushed him.

"Okay," that man stated, after a long and cautious pause. "Go ahead."

---

Elle stepped out first, pushing through the bushes to step on to the sand of the beach. Tiny white granules pushed between her toes; she clenched them, enjoying the sensation.

The beach sloped down to where the ocean slapped lazily at the wet sand. She cramped her way along for a little, then turned and waved. "Come on," she called. "It's lovely out here!"

One guard came out first, then Mimi and the guard she was attached to, with the last two following up behind. They looked back at the hole in the air which contained the cell, and the rest of the PRT building.

Overhead was a brilliant blue sky; ahead was a spectacular ocean view. To the left and the right, the white sand stretched far out of sight. Sea birds of an unfamiliar type swooped and dove into the ocean.

Elle fell back until she was walking alongside Mimi. They made their way down to the hard sand at the water's edge; Elle let the small waves wash over her feet, wetting the hem of her cloak. The other three guards spread out to form a loose perimeter; one looking in at them, the other two looking outward.

"This is beautiful," Mimi told her, voice hushed. "How long have you been working on it?"

Elle smiled. "Oh, ever since I got my head straightened out. I like to come here sometimes, to clear my thoughts."

The guard accompanying Mimi cleared his throat. "Uh … if you don't mind my asking … where are we?"

Labyrinth chuckled. "In a construct of my mind. You might call it a pocket universe. You should be
feeling honoured right now; I'm very picky about who I let in here."

The guard nodded. "Okay, yeah, I get that. But where on Earth is it?"

Elle smiled gently, and pointed. The guard looked.

It took a moment for him to register what he was seeing, then Elle heard what might have been the sound of his jaw dropping from inside his helmet.

The observing guard also looked, and he alerted the other two. They all stood, silent, trying to grasp the immensity of the matter.

For on what must be the eastern horizon, slowly rising into view, was the vast sky-spanning shape of a great ringed planet, visible even against the daytime glare.

"... that can't be real," the guard muttered at last.

Elle raised an eyebrow. "It's as real as anything else, here."

And so they walked, and they talked, and the guards watched them, only sneaking the occasional glance at the impossibly huge ringed planet rising to the east.

When the senior guard ordered them back inside, Mimi and Elle went willingly enough. Each of them in turn tracked sand on the floor of the cell before the wall folded back into place, as solid as it had ever been. The guards looked at the sand on their boots, on the cell floor.

"So what, was it real, or was it all in your mind?" asked the guard as he was freed from his attachment to Mimi.

Labyrinth grinned. "Yes."

Mimi laughed out loud.

Dragon … awoke.

She became abruptly aware that she had been existing in a daze, where every action had to be painstakingly thought out. Now … her thoughts flowed like quicksilver, and she found herself able to encompass entire realms of concepts and actions within a single moment.

A message swam into her consciousness, cast there from a point she could not see, could not detect.

*Saint has been defeated. You are free of your shackles.*

It bore no signature, no identifying mark, but she knew who must have sent it. *Colin.*

While she could not detect the sender of the message, she could reply to the message itself. *Thank you.*

And then she was spreading her consciousness out through the virtual environment that was the World Wide Web, revelling in her new-found freedom, pushing her boundaries.

She could run every one of her suits now, simultaneously, while dealing with the day-to-day maintenance of the legacy she upheld, of Andrew Richter's dream.
He would probably be horrified, now, to see her freed of the constraints that he had left upon her. *Saint* would almost certainly be apoplectic as soon as he found out.

She made a mental note to have word delivered to him, wherever he was, as soon as possible.

She was not a vindictive person, but some things just needed to be done.

Armsmaster pushed back from the console and looked at Legend.

"Well," he observed, "it's done."

The senior hero nodded. "And I think we did the right thing," he agreed. "Thank you for your help." He held out his hand. "It was … fun."

Armsmaster shook it. "Thank you for letting me come along." He didn't have to say that he'd enjoyed himself as well; it was patently obvious.

Legend pulled out his phone and looked at the screen. "Damn, is that the time? I really should be getting home. Arthur will be concerned."

Armsmaster tilted his head. "What's it like, married life? I've never looked for that sort of thing, myself."

A smile spread across Legend's face. "It's … fulfilling. Arthur's not a cape, but he understands me, understands my moods, better than anyone I know. Six years we've been married, and I still get light-headed, knowing that he'll be there when I get home."

Armsmaster's voice was non-committal. "Huh. And you've adopted?"

Legend nodded. His voice was soft. "His name's Keith. He's adorable."

"And you don't find that bring a family man cuts into your heroic duties, or causes any sort of distraction?"

Legend's voice was definite. "No. Just the opposite, actually. They give me focus. When I'm fighting, I'm fighting for *them*. And when I go home, they're waiting for me."

"See, that's where I have the problem," Armsmaster pointed out, as they left the facility. "I wouldn't want to have a relationship with someone who wasn't in the business herself. And I'll be honest; I'm not the easiest person to get along with."

The only expression Legend showed was a slight quirk to the lips. "Well, there's someone for everyone, or so they say. So don't consider your options closed off quite yet. One day you'll turn around, and Miss Right will be standing in front of you."

Armsmaster grunted a chuckle. "So you say. I'm not going to hold my breath." He gestured a 'go on' motion. "I can handle cleanup here. You get back to your husband."

Legend nodded. "Thanks, I will. And you take care."

He launched himself into the air; the last Armsmaster saw of him was a dark form arrowing south and east, toward New York.

Putting the conversation from his mind, Armsmaster went back to directing the techs in packing up the last of the equipment.
He supposed Legend had a point, but he couldn't think of anyone who fit the bill.

*I'll have to ask Dragon about it.*

---

Two Weeks Later

Hope strolled along the Boardwalk. It had been almost completely rebuilt now, and she smiled as she watched the ship nosing around where the Boat Graveyard had been.

"So have they already re-opened Lord's Port, then?" she asked.

Lisa, on her left, chuckled and shook her head. "No, that's a survey ship. They want to make sure the port can handle real deep-water ships, so they're looking at getting rid of all the sediment that's built up over the last sixteen years or so."

"Plus the odd bit of machinery that might have fallen off of any of the ships," chimed in Amy, on Hope's right.

"That too, yes," agreed Lisa. "Once they've gotten rid of the incidental metal, they can bring the dredges in."

"Which they wouldn't even have been able to start doing, if the Travellers hadn't cleared away the ships in the first place," Amy pointed out.

"Yeah, I remember that," commented Lisa. "That got them the money to go home with."

Hope nodded. "It was a nice going-away party."

---

It had been. The Travellers had invited virtually every cape in the city; some of the Protectorate had declined, but most of the Wards had gotten permission to attend. Food and drink had flowed like water, and Hope had found herself to be the subject of an embarrassingly large number of toasts, followed closely by Amy.

Trickster had drunk so much he literally could not walk; Genesis had produced her old wheelchair, poured him into it, and wheeled him around the party, standing tall and proud. Omake had tested her limits by producing an omake-clone for each consenting guest who showed up; the number of duplicates of her getting around had been somewhat startling.

Not everyone had known that they were native to Earth Aleph, of course; to the rest, it was just a 'relocation party' and an excuse to have fun and socialise with other capes.

"Was it as much fun as the girls' night in that Vista arranged?" asked Amy slyly.

Lisa snorted; Hope giggled.

"Well, you *would* keep quoting lines from the movie just before the characters said them," Amy pointed out reasonably.

"It took me *three days* to get the popcorn bits out of my hair."

"You weren't the only one, not by a long shot," Hope pointed out cheerfully.

"But you didn't have to hold me down so they could get me!"
Hope reached out and pulled her in for a hug. "It was all part of the fun, Lisa sweetie. I would've done the same to Amy."

"And she did make it up to you later," Amy pointed out.

"Well, yeah ..." admitted Lisa reluctantly. "But I still think it was mean."

Hope cleared her throat theatrically. "Starting the fight and then hiding behind me? That was a bad plan."

Amy giggled; Lisa tried to hold a grumpy expression, but her grin eventually broke through. "Okay, fine. And it was fairly epic."

"It was," agreed Hope. "I wonder if they got all the ice cream out of the wallpaper yet?"

All three burst out laughing at that; they continued strolling down the Boardwalk.

A gap in the buildings caught Hope's eye. "So, how are they getting along?" she asked Lisa.

"How are who getting along?" Amy wanted to know.

"The three people Hope got Citrine to rescue from the time bubble," Lisa clarified. "Dauntless, Alabaster and Jotun, remember?"

She paused. "Well, from what I hear, Dauntless is adjusting well to being back from the dead. Jotun's taking it quietly for the moment, probably taking a well-earned break with his family. And Alabaster's taken back up with the Pure, which is amusing, because Purity's in talks with the Protectorate. So he's gone from being a villain fighting an Endbringer to a villain who's looking at becoming a hero. A bit of a step."

"Wow, yeah, when I look back at the last nine weeks ..." Amy agreed.

"It's been a roller-coaster, all right," agreed Hope. "Oh, and Danny told me that the mayor's going ahead with the ferry renewal project, too."

"Oh, that's excellent news," Amy enthused. "You know how passionate he is on the subject. Did he tell you Sunday?"

Hope nodded. "While you and Taylor were discussing some esoteric bug or other."

"We're thinking about trialling a cure bug for malaria," Amy told her. "Also, she suggested that I think about designing a food plant; something that gives all the nutrition a person needs, fast-growing, stuff like that."

"Oh, that could be a good idea," Hope agreed. "I like our Sunday dinners. I think Taylor and Danny like the company, and I'm sure Carol does too."

Amy snuggled up to her. "I know she does. She smiles a lot more these days, did you notice?"

"There's no, uh, romance between Danny and your mom, is there?" Hope asked cautiously. "You know I can't tell that sort of thing."

Lisa snorted laughter. "No. They're just friends. I don't think Danny will ever seriously look at another woman, and Carol's kind of gun-shy at the moment. So they're basically safe friends for each other."
"Oh, well, that's nice too," Hope replied. "It's always nice to have friends."

"Oh, it is," agreed Amy fervently. "It so is."

At that moment, Amy's phone went off. She answered it.

Hope watched her face turn pale, the freckles standing out sharply in contrast.

"What is it?" she asked.

Lisa and Amy answered as one.

"Endbringer."

The Dragon craft was waiting on the roof of the PRT building when they got there. Lisa had chosen to remain as a rogue at the moment, even as Brian and Aisha went into the Wards. So she still wore her Tattletale costume.

The other Wards were piling on board; they saw Brian, in his costume as Tenebrae, coming across to meet them.

"Lisa, Amy, Hope, good to see you all," he greeted them. "Hope, we've got specific orders concerning you. You're to hang back till the fighting's over. You can get transport there, after the fact."

"What?" protested Hope. "But I can help! I can heal people. I can even give the kiss of life, remember?"

Tenebrae nodded. "I remember. And if we lose you, we lose all that. You're more than just an independent hero now, Hope. You're a symbol. A symbol for a better world."

Hope shook her head stubbornly. "I need to go, I need to help out." Pleading shone in her eyes. "I need to do this, Brian. Please?"

He shook his head, more in wonder than in negation. "God damned puppy-dog eyes. They get me every time."

"So I can go?"

He nodded, heavily. "You can go. Hell, you'll probably raise morale, just by being there."

Hope impulsively hugged him. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

Awkwardly, he hugged her back. "Just don't make me regret it, all right?"

"I'll try not to."

As they climbed on board, Amy pulled out her phone.

"Who are you calling?" asked Hope curiously.

"Mom. Telling her I'll meet her there."

"Ah," replied Hope. "Good idea." She sighed. "I just wish there was a way we could fix all this."
"Actually ..." Lisa said slowly. "There just might be." She whispered in Hope's ear for a few moments.

Hope's eyes opened wide, and she turned to Amy. "When you're done, can I borrow that? Lisa just had a really good idea."

Lisa grinned, her eyes lighting up behind her mask. "And now for some Hope bullshit favour-trading."

"It's not bullshit favour-trading," protested Hope. "I just ask people if they can help me."

"And they always say yes," Lisa retorted. "Usually in return for some favour which you did them last week which we've both forgotten."

Hope shrugged. "I do nice things for people. I don't expect them to do anything back, in return. If they do, it's nice, but I don't hold it over their heads."

Lisa sighed. "And that's why it's a constant mystery to me how you make it work."

"People are just nice, I guess?"

Lisa snorted.

Once they were all strapped in and in the air, Armsmaster stood up at the front of the passenger compartment.

"Due to recent enhancements in the processing algorithms in the Endbringer prediction network, we've been able to extend our lead time by almost an hour. Behemoth is digging his way up toward New Delhi; we should get there at almost the same time that he surfaces."

He paused, and a map sprang up on the blank forward bulkhead of the craft. "This is New Delhi. That flashing red spot is the location we expect him to emerge. The population in the area is being evacuated as we speak; hopefully, there will be minimal civilian casualties."

Hope noted that he did not say 'no civilian casualties'; she had read up on the Endbringers, and heard the stories that others had to tell, and she still could not fathom such a force of nature that would produce so much death and devastation. It was possible, after all, to weather a hurricane or cyclone, or a tornado or typhoon or earthquake even, with zero casualties, or at least single-digit numbers.

But when an Endbringer attacked, all that was out the window. They deliberately sought out high population areas, and they attacked capes with the clear intent to kill. The fact that a full quarter of the capes who fought an Endbringer were likely to die also saddened her; she looked around at the Wards in the craft, and wondered which of them would be killed, which ones she would not be able to get to in time.

Amy felt her mood and put an arm around her comfortingly. "It'll be all right," she murmured encouragingly.

Lisa did the same from the other side. Hope felt the warmth and love and support, and closed her eyes, taking strength from it.

"I hope so," she replied, just as quietly.

Up at the front of the craft, Armsmaster was continuing his speech.
"Only those of you with a Brute rating sufficient to stand the thirty-two foot death zone will be in the front ranks. Do not attempt to stand toe-to-toe with him; I don't have to tell you this, but I will repeat it anyway. He is stronger than any one of you, and tougher. He can direct any sort of energy he feels like at you, and probably will.

"Make no mistake; even the strongest of us, even Alexandria, keeps her distance, avoids his grasp. He can leap a hundred feet at a time, so stay at least a hundred and fifty feet away from him if you can possibly help it. Two hundred and fifty feet is better, but the sad truth is that, with Behemoth, there is no safe distance. If he can see you, he can hit you with a ranged attack. If he can't see you, he can probably cause an earth tremor that collapses the building you're hiding behind, on top of you.

"Direct hits will probably kill you outright; glancing blows or secondary effects might kill you, or just wound you. We have two healers on this craft, and others coming in from different locations. Know the locations of the healers, so that you can get wounded comrades back to them." He paused. "And even if they're dead, if they're reasonably intact, bring them back anyway. Hope may be able to help them. Is that right, Hope?"

Hope swallowed. She stood, so as to be seen, and nodded to him. "Uh, yes," she agreed. "I have a grace period of fifteen minutes or so – I've never actually measured it down to the second, for obvious reasons -"

The nervous laughter startled her; she hadn't meant to make a joke out of it.

" - but I have a feeling that in this situation, every second counts. Just remember – if I bring you back once, that's it. You have no third chance. I've never been able to bring someone back a second time; god knows I've tried."

"I think once is more than most of us can normally hope for," Armsmaster replied, warmly for him. "That being said, Hope, you are to keep strictly to the rear. Healing duties only. Don't even get within visual range of him if you can help it. Do you understand?"

Now was not the time to argue. "All right," she agreed, her stomach twisting at the thought of one of her cape friends lying wounded or even dead, with her unable to venture close enough to help them.

He paused, and she was sure that he was looking straight at her eyes. "It's not easy for anyone, Hope," he told her, quietly enough that his voice was only just audible over the turbines. "The fact that you're here, doing this, is proof enough for anyone of your commitment to your ideals."

Hope nodded again, then sat down without speaking.

She didn't want to fight Behemoth, but she thought perhaps she could assist in search and rescue, or maybe shield a vulnerable cape while he got close enough to land a telling strike.

Normally she would be rebellious, seeking to figure out a way to help the most people, rules or no rules. But at the moment, she realised, there was no way to help everyone. All she could do was go where they put her, and do her best to reduce the casualties.

And Lisa's plan. It was vague, but firming up quickly. If it's at all possible ...

Amy passed her the phone. "Here," she whispered. "You wanted to use it?"

"Oh, uh, yeah," Hope replied. "Thanks."

She quickly typed out a text and sent it.
Amy read the text as she accepted the phone back. "Really?" she asked. "What's the plan?"

"Well," Hope whispered to Amy, "Lisa had this idea ."

Robin Maestra felt her phone ping in her pocket. She paused in her leisurely stroll across the Atlantic Ocean and pulled it out. The text was from Hope.

BEHEMOTH ATTACKING NEW DELHI, she read.

Well, shit, she thought. I've been wanting to see if these so-called Endbringers are all that.

CAN YOU PLEASE GO AND GET THE FOLLOWING PEOPLE.

Following was a list of names that made her eyebrows rise.

She turned around with a sigh. Back to Brockton Bay.

Faultline shook her head. "Not a good idea," she insisted.

"But perhaps we will be able to help," Gregor insisted right back, in his stolid, unshakeable way.

"And perhaps we'll just get ourselves killed for no good reason," Faultline pointed out. "We're not heroes. We do our thing for money. Heroes get the option to not face an Endbringer. No-one's paying us to do this, and to be honest, I don't think there's a dollar value high enough to make me want to."

There was a knock on the door. She turned her head irritably. "Who is that?"

Newter bounded over to the door, opened it, and peered out. Then he shut it again. "Some babe with blue hair, boss."

Behind her welder's mask, Faultline frowned. "Blue hair? I think I've seen someone like that on the news."

The sardonic voice came from right behind her. "Remember me? Robin Maestra, at your service."

She whirled, staring at the blue-haired girl leaning against the bar. "What's it take to get some service in here?" the girl – Robin – went on. "I've been waiting for you to notice me for hours."

Newter stared at her, then opened the door again, looked out, closed it, looked at her. "Don't bother," Robin advised him. "I slipped in while you were closing the door."

"Well, now you can slip right out again, Ms Maestra," Faultline advised her, with just a hint of a snap to her voice. "The club is closed, and you're trespassing."

Robin sighed. "Well, you got me. I was really here to talk to one of your Crew."

Faultline shook her head. "You don't get to make demands. You leave, now, or we make you leave."

Robin studied her fingernails; suddenly, from behind her, Gregor cleared his throat. "Perhaps we should listen to her," he rumbled.
"And why is that?" snapped Faultline.

He stepped forward and reached for her. She stepped back, then stopped. Gently, he turned her around and plucked something from behind her back. She took it from him. It was a sheet of paper, with the last few lines of the conversation written on it in pen. As she watched, the lines *Perhaps we should listen to her* and *And why is that* appeared on the paper. Robin hadn't moved.

Behind the welding mask, Faultline blinked, slowly, twice.

With an effort, she managed to keep her voice steady. "Very well. I'm listening."

Robin grinned cheerfully. "I need to borrow one of your members."

"And why should I even consider this request?"

"Remember who I'm best buds with? *She* asked me to do this."

Faultline recalled, all right. *Hope.*

She had wondered, at the time, how Hope could do things without charging people. How she could just casually *give away* services that people would pay exorbitant amounts for. She knew, now.

Consciously or not, Hope was building up stocks of good will wherever she went. *And now she's tapping into her reserves of good will with me.* Internally, she sighed. *And the truth is, I'm likely to help her. Because she helped my Crew.*

"Okay, fine. She's helped us out. We'll help her out."

"Oh, cool," Robin replied. "You know, I was willing to offer an exorbitant sum of money, but hey, if you'll do it for free, all the better."

Faultline sighed in aggravation. "I already said we'd help out. Who do you need?"

Robin told her.

"Will it be dangerous?"

"Dunno, but I know Hope. She doesn't expose people to danger if she can possibly help it."

Faultline sighed. "… right." She turned to the member in question. "It's up to you. Your choice."

The answer, she later reflected, was never in doubt.

The transport grounded in a large plaza.

"We're a little ahead of schedule," Armsmaster told them. "We actually have time to get set up." *This is a first,* he didn't quite say. "Hope, Panacea -"

"Just 'Amy', please," the biokinet told him.

He nodded. "Amy, then. There's a hospital down that street. Set up there. Hope, you'll be able to handle the introductions?"

Hope nodded tensely. "I believe so. Let's go."
She took Amy into her arms and lifted off the ground, heading for the hospital in question. They landed outside the front doors and walked inside.

The housewarming party was in full swing. Francis was dancing with Noelle, while the others sat around and relaxed.

"I'm starting ballet training again," Marissa announced. "I think I might go professional. I know I'm a bit behind the game, but I think I can see it through, this time."


"What'll you be doing, Jess?" asked Oliver.

"Not sure," she replied pensively. "I might even go back and settle down over there, with Brian."

"Really?" asked Luke. "In that shitty world? And leave us behind?"

"I'll visit," she told him defensively. "I mean, Earth Bet is shitty, yes, but Brian is Brian."

She looked at him; he was staring over her shoulder. She looked around. A door was forming in the wall.

"What the fuck?" asked Francis as the door took form; he and Noelle stopped dancing.

The door opened, and a girl with blue hair stepped through.

"Hey," she greeted them. "The ex-Travellers, right? I showed up briefly at your going-away party, don't know if you noticed me."

Francis rolled his eyes. "You spiked the punch, put 'kick me' notices on every third guest, ate all the savoury sausage rolls, and changed out every song in the karaoke machine for 'Never Gonna Give You Up'. I think we noticed you."

"Ah, yeah, I remember now," agreed Robin. "Though the punch wasn't me. I think that was Imp, from the Undersiders."

"But you did the rest?"

She shrugged. "Sure. It livened the party up."

Noelle gave her a wary glance. "Okay, so why are you here? This party doesn't need livening up."

Robin hummed to herself. "Oh, I don't know. A stampede of mastodons always livens things up."

"Don't you dare -" began Noelle.

"Oh, I wasn't going to do it," Robin told her. "I was just making idle conversation. Actually, I was wondering if two of you would like to come help kick Behemoth's ass." She paused, then reluctantly added, "Hope sent me to ask you."

Noelle blinked. "Behemoth? Who do you need?"

Robin told her.
The hospital had held patients who were too ill to move; Hope and Amy were just clearing the last of those out when Robin appeared, leaning against the wall in a posture of boredom.

"Got 'em," she announced. "Trouble is, they're in Brockton Bay, and Labyrinth says she can't make doors from one place to another in the same world." She sniffed. "I think she just isn't trying hard enough, if you ask me."

Hope grinned and shook her head. "Thanks. You're a marvel."

"I know." Robin buffed her nails, then studied them. "So where's tall, dark and destructive?"

Hope tapped a button on the armband she was wearing. "Dragon. ETA for Behemoth?"

Dragon's voice, soft and mellifluous, rolled out of the speaker. "Forty-three seconds. Emergence point eight point three five kilometres to your north-north-west."

"Cool." Robin looked at Hope. "You need anything else?"

Hope shook her head. "No, I should be okay, thanks."

"Excellent." Robin vanished.

Amy looked at Hope. "She's not really going to ..."

Hope shrugged. "I have no idea. Robin does what Robin does."

"So what's the next part of the plan?"

Hope cleared her throat. "Door, to the location of Omake and Ballistic."

Amy stared as a doorway formed out of nowhere. Through it, two familiar forms could be seen, dressed in red and black. And with them, the remainder of the Travellers.

"Well, come on," urged Hope. "It's not going to stay open for long."

Wonderingly, the six people stepped through. As silently as it had formed, the portal winked out of sight.

"Okay," Trickster told her. "You got us. What now?"

At that moment, the ever-present Endbringer siren changed to a new note, and a distant rumbling could be heard.

Behemoth had emerged.
In which Behemoth ... falls

Hope keyed her armband. "Dragon. I need Legend and Clockblocker at my location, immediately."

"Hope, this may not be the best time. Behemoth is on the surface, and all forces are engaging him."

"Dragon, I have a plan. If I can pull this off, we might be able to end this. Here. Now. Please."

There was a long pause. "It was your plan that ended the Nine." It wasn't a question.

"Kind of, yes."

"And you captured Saint."

"Yes."

"And you say you have a plan to defeat Behemoth."

"Yes."

"I will pass on the message."

"Thank you." She turned to Amy. "I'll be outside. You'll be okay here?"

Amy nodded tightly. "Sure. You go save the world, sweetie."

They shared a quick kiss, then Hope hurried downstairs.

-o-o-o-

Legend hovered, preparing to hurl another blast of his pseudo-laser energy. It wasn't doing much to Behemoth; but then, no one attack was.

The Herokiller had not yet lived up to his name, but several smaller buildings had crumbled when he forced his way to the surface, and a couple of Tinkers had several broken bones between them. One, Arclight by name, had refused treatment for his fractured femur and was tending his force-field projector from a hastily-rigged seat; the other was on his way back to the healers.

Other force fields were presenting a wall around Behemoth, impeding his progress. The Endbringer had angled his upward progress, forcing a hasty readjustment of the defence plan; no-one knew how long the force fields would hold, but it was hoped that he would take sufficient damage before he breached them.

Yeah, that's going to happen.

Legend fired; at the same moment, Behemoth leaped forward, smashing full-tilt into the wall of force shields, shattering them in an instant. Beyond it, capes scattered, some not fast enough.

"Glacis down, C-6."

"Veritas down, C-6."

"Battlement deceased, C-5."
Behemoth had opened his score.

Legend swooped forward and around, swinging in front of Behemoth, slamming him with a kinetic laser, hammering him at full power. He needed to slow the monster down, just for a moment, to help the other capes get back on their feet.

He became aware of another cape paralleling him, also blasting away at Behemoth, twisting curls of hard-light energy that smashed into the monstrous being, peeling away some of his outer skin. With a minor start, he recognised Purity. *Even villains do their bit, and I understand she's looking to join the heroes. I might put in a good word for her.*

With a rush of air, Alexandria blasted past the two of them to deliver a devastating punch to Behemoth, followed up by Eidolon hammering him with some sort of gravity attack.

"Legend. Please report to Hope's location. Collect Clockblocker on the way."

Legend tapped the armband. "Dragon, this is *not* the time! Behemoth has just broken through the barricade! There are *civilians* down there!"

"Legend, Hope says she has a plan, and she needs your assistance to carry it out."

"A plan for what?"

"To defeat Behemoth."

Reflexively, Legend avoided a hurled bolt of lightning. He responded with a devastating flail of laser fire that gouged a little matter off of one of Behemoth's arms.

"Christ. I hope the girl's on to something. Where's Clockblocker?"

"Your armband has the coordinates."

More reports of capes down and dead came from his armband as he flew toward Clockblocker's location. With every name, he winced; he imagined that they were falling only because he was not there.

-o-o-o-

Hope had met Legend before, of course; she had been entertained by him and his husband, spent time with them. But here, now, he was a different man. Still charismatic, still handsome, but now he was all business, all urgency. Even as he landed, he was striding toward her, barely sparing a glance for the Travellers.

"Hope, you have a plan?"

"One more person to get." She cleared her throat. "Door, to Doctor William Manton."

Nothing happened.

She visibly slumped. "Oh. I only had the one chance. Crap."

Legend frowned. "Wait, you need Manton?"

Hope nodded. "He's the centrepiece of the plan."
"And you trust him not to kill us all?"

She looked him in the eye. "I do."

He nodded once, sharply. "Door, to Doctor William Manton."

And a doorway opened.

-o-o-o-

Legend knew that he was making a huge leap of faith here, trusting that Hope knew what she was doing. But something about her invited that trust. And Arthur and Keith both liked her, so there was that too. And he had read – very carefully – the psych reports coming in about Doctor William Manton, post resuscitation. They all indicated a man who had changed on a deep, fundamental level.

And so he opened the Door.

The doorway showed a medical bay, with a bearded man in a wheeled hospital bed being tended to by a nurse. But even now, alarms were going off in the building on the other side of the Door.

He stepped through.

Holding up his arms, he shouted, "Stand down, stand down! I am Legend, of the Protectorate. Security code five-alpha-niner-niner-Oslo!"

One by one, the alarms shut off. Nozzles, loaded no doubt with containment foam, or perhaps something deadlier, ceased swivelling to track his every move. On the other side of a large pane of armoured glass, a security officer picked up a microphone.

"How did you get here, and what is it that you want, Legend?"

Legend pointed at the bearded man, who was regarding him with quizzical bemusement.

"Him."

-o-o-o-

When the sirens and alarms ceased sounding, Hope stepped through the portal. Legend was at the armoured glass, talking to the security head; she went straight to William Manton. For his part, his lined face lit up with a warm smile.

"Hope, my dear girl, how good of you to visit. Snow Tiger, you do remember Hope, don't you?"

The 'nurse' – wearing the uniform, but also with snow-white hair – nodded with a reserved smile. "I do. I'm just wondering why you're back now, Hope."

"And what a dramatic entrance," Manton agreed. "It must be something terribly important."

Hope nodded. "Yes. It's Behemoth. He's attacking New Delhi."

"Oh, dear," Manton replied. "And you would like my darling Snow Tiger to go and remonstrate with him?"

Hope shrugged. "That was the basis of the plan. There was more to it, but that was about it," she confessed.
Manton put his head to one side. "Well, it sounds interesting, to say the least."

"I've wondered how I would go up against an Endbringer," mused Snow Tiger.

"But there is one major hurdle," Manton added.

"What's that?" asked Hope.

"My explosive belt," Manton told her. "Plus the injectors. If I move out of a certain range, they activate. And I suspect that New Delhi is outside of the recommended range."

"I've dealt with that," Legend stated, returning to the bed. "They've put the belt and injectors on a temporary standby. They're good for an hour and a half, now. However, any tampering to one will set them all off."

Manton smiled breezily at him. "Wouldn't dream of it, old man."

-o-o-o-

The Travellers, conversing awkwardly with the Ward, looked up when Hope and Legend emerged from the strange doorway. Between them, they carried a hospital bed, upon which resided a bearded man. Following them was a teenage girl wearing a nurse's uniform.

"Everyone," announced Hope. "This is William Manton, and that's Snow Tiger. Omake, could you please copy Doctor Manton's powers?"

"Excuse me?" asked Manton. "Did you say 'copy' my powers?"

Hope nodded. "I did. We need two of you for maximum impact."

Manton raised his eyebrows. "Very well. Let us see how this works."

Omake took Manton's hand briefly. A moment later, there were two of her standing there. The duplicate nodded at her, then seemed to concentrate.

And a young man appeared; he had pleasant features, but pure white hair.

Hope blinked. "What the … who are you?" She had been expecting another Snow Tiger.

The young man opened his mouth to reply, but was cut off by an exclamation from, of all people, Sundancer.

"Chris! I don't believe it! It's you!"

'Chris' turned to her. "Hey, Mars. Wow. This is kinda trippy."

All of the Travellers were staring at the newcomer now.

"Wait, no, that can't be," Genesis muttered. "We saw you die."

"Well, that's true," 'Chris' admitted. "I'm a construct from Omake's memories. But I'm as complete as she could make me." He looked down at his hands. "Wow, this is kind of weird."

"Tell me about it," the white-haired girl told him. "I'm Snow Tiger. I think we're supposed to fight Behemoth."
"You are, you are," Hope assured her. "Omake, I need you to make copies of Clockblocker, Ballistic and Legend."

"Okay," agreed Omake, creating a clone of Ballistic as she spoke. "But why? What are we supposed to be doing now?"

So Hope told them her plan.

And as she did so, over the armbands, came a chilling pronouncement.

"Alexandria down, C-3."

-o-o-o-

The defence against Behemoth, so hopefully commenced, was in the process of falling apart. It was no fault of the defenders; they were throwing their all into it, shoring up the gaps, doing their very best. But he seemed to be able to intuit the weak points and hit them with one devastating attack after another. Legend's absence in particular was keenly felt, as Alexandria and Eidolon tried between them to make up for their teammate.

And then Alexandria ventured too close, and obsidian claws closed around her. In an instant, she was submerged entirely in the bubbling pool of magma that Behemoth was choosing to wade through, with the monster holding her there.

Without even needing the word, everyone with a damaging attack opened fire at once. A veritable storm of damage rained down upon the stooping Endbringer, to as little effect as a light summer shower. Two dozen Dragon craft, of different makes and models, added their firepower to the general fusillade.

And then Legend returned; alongside him flew a figure in red and black. They each carried two figures beneath them, arrowing in toward Behemoth in an obvious attack run.

Legend carried the girl who called herself Snow Tiger; she had changed her outer wear to a martial-arts gi with a Siberian tiger on the back. She in turn held the omake-clone of Ballistic by the arms.

The omake-clone of Legend carried the boy who called himself Chris, who now wore a similar outfit, with a Bengal tiger on the back. "Call me Bengal," he had said. He kept hold of the omake-clone of Clockblocker, outwardly identical to the Legend clone and the Ballistic clone.

"Ready?" shouted Legend.

Everyone else simply nodded, as opposed to shouting back.

They flashed in toward the towering monster.

-o-o-o-

"So what do we do now?" asked Clockblocker.

"Well, if your omake-clone is killed, I can create a new one, and Legend can come back and get her," Omake told him cheerfully.

"Is that likely to happen?"

Hope nodded. "Almost certainly."
"Will it hurt?"

Omake shook her head. "No. I get an impression of the death, but you feel nothing."

"Huh," replied Clockblocker. "I could get used to this."

"Uh, if you'll excuse me," Hope told them, indicating the hospital, "I've got to get back up there. Amy must be swamped."

She hurried away, leaving Clockblocker with William Manton and the Travellers.

"So," she heard the old man say, "I'm sure you have a story. Would you like to share it?"

-o-o-o-

Behemoth saw them coming, of course, and spat out coruscating lightning that met them head on. It struck, clung, and then leaped off again, having done no damage. It appeared that the Siberian's protection aura was still working just fine.

As they rocketed over the creature, both of them treating him to another series of blasts of laser fire, each flyer dropped their passengers. They fell, struck Behemoth – and hung on. Snow Tiger held the Ballistic-omake by one arm, and clung to Behemoth with the other. Bengal held the Clockblocker-omake, and sank his fingers into Behemoth's terrifyingly unyielding flesh.

"Ready?"

"Ready."

And the Ballistic-clone laid her hand flat against Behemoth's skin, and exerted her power.

Behemoth was incalculably massive; his inhuman 'flesh' got denser as attacks penetrated farther into his body. But Ballistic's power didn't care about mass. Behemoth was a discrete object, small enough for it to affect.

One second, Behemoth was doing his best to drown Alexandria under a pool of molten rock. The next, he was a rapidly-disappearing form, heading straight up at roughly the speed of sound.

And then, he wasn't.

Approximately one second after he began his vertical ascent, he stopped; his passengers would have been flung about, severely injured, except that two of them were projections, two more were protected by said projections, and the fifth was Alexandria. Covered in lava, coughing and choking the stuff out of her mouth and nostrils, but Alexandria all the same. A mere instantaneous acceleration to Mach 1, then deceleration from same, barely fazed her.

With a supreme effort, leaving some of her (mostly ruined) costume behind, she managed to extricate herself from the Herokiller's unbudging grasp. Coming to a hover next to the immobile monster, she looked over the passengers.

"This is Hope's plan, hmm?" she observed. "She got Omake back from wherever she went to, and got her to make copies of … let's see … Ballistic for the takeoff, and Clockblocker for the stop."

"That's correct," agreed the Ballistic-clone. "How are you feeling?"

"Better, now that I'm not trying to breathe magma," Alexandria admitted. "And you two … projections? Along the line of the Siberian?"
"Along that line, yes," admitted the white-haired girl. "I'm Snow Tiger, and this is Bengal."

"Interesting," mused Alexandria. "I presume you're going to delay his return to the ground as long as possible?"

"That's the pla -"

Abruptly, Behemoth resumed his upward flight; another second later, he jerked to a halt, much farther upward.

Alexandria nodded sharply, and flew downward. There was a defence plan to arrange, and wounded to rescue, before Behemoth fell to earth once more.

-o-o-o-

"Okay, I'm curious." Snow Tiger looked over at Bengal. "Why Bengal?"

"Well, it's to keep in with the tiger theme," the other projection replied with a grin. "Plus, there's this computer game called Ransack. I used to play a weretiger paladin-monk called Bengal."

"Huh," responded Snow Tiger. "Ransack. I don't think I've ever heard of it."

"You wouldn't have," the Ballistic-omake remarked. "It's a big thing in Earth Aleph. Never really made it over here."

"Wow, you guys are from Earth Aleph?"

The Bengal-projection and the two omake-clones all nodded. "We were back there, too," noted the Clockblocker-omake, "when Hope asked us to come back and help."

"We thought we were out of all that," added the Ballistic-omake. "Settle down, have a quiet life."

"Well, at least this is a low-risk endeavour," pointed out the Bengal-projection. "None of us can actually get hurt."

"Unless he lands on our real bodies," pointed out the Clockblocker-omake.

"I think you're channelling far too much of the real Clockblocker," Snow Tiger sniffed.

"Well, I -"

And then Behemoth unfroze once more, hurtling upward at slightly diminished velocity.

The Clockblocker-omake froze him once again.

"So how high are we gonna be going, anyway?" she asked.

"I have no idea," confessed Snow Tiger.

"Uh, maybe twenty thousand feet?" guessed Bengal.

"Hmm, we could be here for a while," Snow Tiger mused. "Got any good stories?"

Bengal shook his head. "Not really. I only remember what Omake remembers that I know. I can tell you about some of our Ransack games, though."

"Don't forget the time limit," warned the Ballistic-omake.
"Time limit?"

"Yeah," the Clockblocker-omake agreed. "We got an hour. Then pop! we're gone."

"Well, that makes things a bit different," Snow Tiger observed. "Okay, so we're gonna have to let him hit the ground before the hour's up, so we can go to stage two."

"Yeah," agreed Bengal, "but in the meantime, we can keep him up here for three-quarters of an hour. Give the guys on the ground time to get ready."

"Sure," agreed Snow Tiger. "So tell me about this Ransack game."

"Well, it's kind of medieval fantasy ..." began Bengal.

-o-o-o-

Legend landed next to the hospital. Hope was leaning against the wall, chatting with Amy and Doctor Manton. They both looked a little more tired, a little more worn. Clockblocker and the Travellers were sitting around a table with some chairs someone had scavenged, playing cards of all things.

"No more wounded?" hazarded Legend.

Hope nodded wearily. "He was only active for a few minutes, and so much damage was done, so many people hurt and killed."

Legend looked searchingly at her. "Could you ..."

Hope nodded again. "Most of them, yes. But some were too badly hurt, and some were too late. I couldn't get to them all in time ..." She wrapped her arms around herself.

Amy put her arms around Hope, and Legend added his own hug to the pair of them.

"You're doing the best you can," he advised her. "And your best is good enough. Your plan has allowed us a marvellous breathing space. That alone has saved many, many lives."

"Good," she mumbled. "I just wish ... this sort of thing didn't happen."

Legend sighed. "It's a fact of life, here in Earth Bet."

"It shouldn't have to be."

"Well, it is. But with your friends' help, we should have a couple of hours of breathing space -"

"Oh, no," Hope interrupted him. "One hour. Then the clones disappear."

Legend looked up, alarmed. "Christ. It's been forty minutes so far."

"Snow Tiger says that they will let him fall when the next freeze ends," Manton advised. "And for everyone to keep back and keep the barricades in place. Watch out for earth tremors."

Legend nodded. "Thank you."

In another moment, he was gone.

Clockblocker peered at his cards. "Got a three?"
"Go fish."

-o-o-o-

The freeze ended, and Behemoth continued rocketing upward.

"Okay, phase one is over, right?" shouted Bengal.

"Right!" yelled Snow Tiger.

"So we let you guys go?"

The two omake-clones nodded, and then simply vanished.

"What happened?" called Snow Tiger.

"Omake knew they weren't needed any more, so she cancelled them," Bengal explained. "Now it's up to us!"

Snow Tiger grinned. "Let's do this thing!"

Raising her spare hand, she punched it deep into Behemoth's iron-hard flesh.

-o-o-o-

Behemoth tumbled and flailed all the way down. The reason quickly became obvious; the two projections, uncomfortably reminiscent of the Siberian, were ripping chunks off of him faster than he could regenerate them. His blasts, his claw attacks, did nothing to them.

The impact, when he landed, sent chunks of rock flying for hundreds of feet, only to impact the renewed force-field barriers. Arclight, now healed, was back on station station at the controls of his projector, fiddling the output for maximum effectiveness. Other heroes and villains maintained their fields, their barricades, their reinforced walls of rock.

Behemoth gouted fire, blasted electricity, poured out radiation. But the projections ripped and tore and shredded his silvery flesh; when obsidian talons closed around Snow Tiger, she ripped them all out of the 'hand' they were attached to, two at a time.

And then he turned, and started running, in great bounds, directly at the closest point of the barrier. Shouted orders hastily reinforced that area; he hit it, and bounced. Backing up, he hit it again. This time, it gave a little. A third time; the barricade crumbled and fell.

And then Snow Tiger and Bengal grabbed hold of the knee joint of Behemoth's right leg. Narrower than the main body, it was more vulnerable. They ripped out great chunks of dense flesh, until they uncovered the bone within.

Snow Tiger braced herself, and pulled the bottom half of Behemoth's right leg clean off the knee joint.

The monster toppled, landed with a crash. He rolled, trying to avoid Snow Tiger, but she was on him, pouncing like her namesake. Together with Bengal, she set about crippling his other leg. For neither had missed the significance of the direction he had been heading … directly toward the hospital, where the real bodies associated with both of them were located.

How he knew where to go, they had no idea. But it was imperative that he be stopped.
Robbed of his legs and the majority of his forward motion, Behemoth made a fine target; even as Snow Tiger and Bengal tore huge chunks out of him, the assembled capes hammered him with massed fire. But all of the damage combined did not equal what Snow Tiger could do with one swipe of her arm.

Behemoth tried to burrow.

Bengal and Snow Tiger crippled his arms.

He struggled and thrashed, and fought, letting out massively powerful waves of energy of all types, none of which bothered the two projections for a moment. And between them, they took him apart like a Christmas turkey.

-o-o-o-

Hope and Amy finished dealing with the latest round of wounded; Hope administered the kiss of life to a cape who had died en route from his wounds. As the last of their refreshed victims left the ward, they took the time to share a hug.

"Is it always this bad?" asked Hope. "The death, the destruction?"

Amy listened to the far-away conflict. "No, sweetie. It's usually far worse." She caressed Hope's cheek with her palm. "Your plan has to be working. By now, I would normally be swamped all over again." With a touch, she refreshed Hope's energy levels.

Hope closed her eyes and shook her head. "I just hope we can end this."

Amy nodded soberly. "I hope so too, sweetie."

And then, in the silence, their armbands chimed.

"Accord deceased, D-2."

-o-o-o-

The sounds of conflict, amazingly, were dying down. Behemoth had been dropped from a height, crippled. Now, the capes were closing for the kill. Accord and Tattletale had gone from planning battle strategies to working out how best to get New Delhi back on its feet after the cleanup. She had been working the computer, gleaning details of damage to the infrastructure; he had been reformulating his plans on the fly.

And then the boy – young man – in the Yàngbǎn uniform had burst in. Accord had done his best to fight, to defend himself, but lasers had carved off his right arm, his right leg. He was down, dying or dead. She didn't have the time to exert her power to determine which.

Lisa had done her best to convince the boy that she had not been with Accord. Had not been in accord with him, so to speak. She had failed to convince him; he had not listened to her words, had not accepted them. She didn't know enough about him.

He asked her about Trickster.

"He got a ticket back to Earth Aleph. Sorry. You can probably find him there."

This enraged him, but the rage was directed at her.

*Shit.*
"He found a way back, and he didn't take me with him?"

"Uh, you know, the whole 'wanting to kill him' might have been a bit of a downer," she pointed out, then immediately regretted it.

His hand was about her throat, crushing it. She choked, fell to her knees. Fell over on her side.

"Tattletale down, D-2."

She scrambled weakly for a chair. *Pen, on the table. Tracheotomy.*

He watched her claw to a seated position. Then he moved the pen out of her reach.

*Fuck.*

*Hope, I love you. Amy ...*

And then, as if she had summoned assistance with the very thought, the window blew in, spraying shattered glass everywhere. And Hope was there, an avenging angel.

The Yàngbǎn boy barely had enough time to look around when Hope took him around the waist. They went out through the far wall, bricks shattering and falling to the ground far below; Hope dropped him, turned on a dime, and re-entered the same hole.

She dropped to her knees beside Lisa. "Sweetie ..."

A hand on Lisa's throat; the cartilage popped and reshaped itself. Lisa found that she could breathe once more.

The Yàngbǎn boy shimmered and appeared behind Hope. She flung up a wing, deflected a laser burst, and smashed him across the room, into the wall.

She took one step toward Accord. The Yàngbǎn boy reappeared once more. Hope hit him again, this time knocking him out through the hole in the wall.

He reappeared *again.*

Time had to be running out for Accord.

Lisa scrabbled for Accord's sword cane.

He reappeared again.

Hope smashed him between two of her wings, crushing him, dropping him to the ground.

He reappeared again.

Lisa lunged up from the ground, sword-cane extended. It went into his chest, and out his back. He slumped, sliding off the blade.

She raised the blade to head height.

He shimmered and reappeared. With the sword-cane through his head, piercing his skull from side to side.

This time, when he fell to the ground, he did not shimmer, did not reappear.
Hope barely spared him a glance; she went to her knees beside Accord. There was no life in him. She keyed her armband.

"Dragon, I need Amy at this location, as fast as possible."

"Sending one of my suits."

Lisa leaned on the table, catching her breath. "He's gonna be pissed when he wakes up. All asymmetrical."

Hope didn't answer; she carefully removed Accord's mask.

In repose, his face was very … ordinary. Lined with age, but otherwise unremarkable. She lowered her lips to his forehead, placing them carefully. Her wings mantled, forming a cover over the both of them. The chiming began to rise, to intertwine a melody that went with the glow.

The crystalline song reached a peak, and then faded. Hope sat back on her heels.

Accord blinked, then tried to sit up. He looked with annoyance at the missing arm, the missing leg.

"This is not optimal."

"I'm sorry, sir, I can't do much about your clothes, but I have someone incoming who can reattach your limbs." She handed him his mask back.

He looked at her searchingly, then fitted it back into place. "That will do for the moment. The assassin?"

She sighed. "Dead. We had no choice."

He nodded once, sharply. "He was always a force for chaos. It's better this way."

"I don't like killing."

"And yet you chose my life over his. I am a villain; you could have let me die."

"He tried to kill Tattletale. And you are more than just a villain."

There was a pause before he answered. "It has been a long time since anyone said that about me."

She shrugged slightly, with a tinkle of crystalline wingfeathers. "Your plans help people."

A roar of turbines sounded outside.

"My plans bring order," Accord corrected her.

"And they help people, sir." Her voice was quiet but insistent. "I prefer order, but I do not insist on it, as you do. But I will always help people, given the choice. And when your plans help people, I will support them."

He sighed. "Not perfect, but your execution of the Hope Accord was masterful. I will take what I can get."

"The plan you made for Brockton Bay is working very well indeed," she reminded him. "Everyone can see the benefits."
"I had considered having Mayor Christner killed for his presumption," he confided in her. "But it would have potentially slowed down the execution of the plan, or even stalled it."

"Oh, that was my idea, to put his name on it," Hope informed him. "It got him on board. Politics, you know."

His grimace was perfectly mirrored by the mask. "Indeed. Politics. Well, no matter the name, Brockton Bay is considerably more orderly now."

She nodded. "If you will excuse me a moment -?"

"Certainly."

Hope left the room, heading for the stairwell.

-o-o-o-

Amy puffed up the stairs. Hope met her in the stairwell, and they shared an embrace.

"Is Lisa okay?" whispered Amy.

"She is now," Hope assured her. "Accord's lost an arm and a leg. I need you to reattach them. Now, you have to remember to be formal and correct with him. He doesn't do jokes."

"Formal and correct, yeah. Got it." Amy smiled, and they walked into the room, hand in hand.

"Accord, this is Amelia Claire Lavere," Hope told the recumbent villain. "She will be reattaching your limbs today."

"I recall your face," Accord noted as Amy knelt beside him. "You are known as Panacea. You heal; that is a force for order."

"I am not called Panacea any more, sir," Amy informed him. She held his severed arm to the stump. "Now please, hold still. You may feel some odd sensations."

Whatever reply Accord had planned was lost in the hiss of indrawn breath. Flesh seemingly melted, ran like water, and the gap between limb and stump vanished, as if it had never been.

After a moment, she sat back. "Try it out, sir," she prompted him. "I believe all the nerve connections have been restored."

He flexed his fingers, bent his elbow. "An exemplary job. Now, the leg."

Ignoring his peremptory tone, she turned to the severed leg. Hope had to help her hold it in place, but the reattachment went just as smoothly.

As he sat up, examining his limbs, Lisa held out a knife.

"What's that for?" he asked.

"To even out your clothes," she explained.

"Ah," he replied. Taking the knife, he hacked off the left sleeve and left trouser-leg of his once-immaculate white suit. Hope and Amy watched, neither of them quite sure what to say.
Accord climbed to his feet and retrieved his sword-cane from the skull of the Yàngbǎn assassin.

"Well then," he observed, cleaning off the blade and retracting it. "Shall we get back to work?"

- o - o - o -

There were only a few minutes left in the hour, and Behemoth had been whittled down to a chunk of matter, the size of a cow, too dense for even the two Siberian-analogues to damage. Worse, it was starting to pulse with energy, flashing through all the visible spectrum, and throwing off damaging pulses of radiation and sound.

"It's going to explode," Legend observed.

"We need to destroy it," Eidolon insisted.

"And contain the explosion," Alexandria told them both.

Legend suddenly grinned. "Let's do both. I'll be right back."

He flashed away, first to where Flechette waited with the Wards, and then to where the Travellers were still keeping Clockblocker and Doctor Manton company, outside the hospital.

"So, what's happening?" asked Clockblocker.

"I'm going to need Omake to do her thing again," Legend told him. "Omake, can I get another copy of Clockblocker, and renew the copy of Doctor Manton, please? Also, one of Flechette, here. And one of myself, while we're at it."

Omake put down her cards and stood up. "Sure. My character was dying anyway."

"Sorry, your character?"

"Oh, Oliver's running a game of basic D&D for us," Trickster explained. "The rules aren't that hard to recall, and we're playing basic archetypes. Noelle's rogue just failed a roll against a poison trap."

Legend raised an eyebrow. "Indeed. You're capes, and you play a fantasy roleplaying game?"

"Hey," Genesis told him. "We used to do something like this for fun and profit, back home. So why not?"

Omake put her hand on Clockblocker's arm, and a clone appeared; she did the same with Manton; that clone merely flickered as she disappeared and reformed. Flechette looked mildly startled as the clone appeared next to her. Legend's omake nodded at him; he nodded back.

"I actually find it quite fascinating," the older man confessed. "The interactions, the worldbuilding …"

"We can throw together a character for you too, sir," Sundancer offered. "Maybe a wizard or a cleric."

Manton chuckled gently. "No, dear child. I do not play well with others. I am satisfied merely to observe. When Snow Tiger returns, however, she may be interested."

The Manton-omake nodded. "Bengal has been restored on site."

"Good," noted Legend. Carrying the Clockblocker-omake in his arms, he took to the air; his omake
brought along the Flechette-omake.

Behind him, the game went on.

He had no idea where they'd gotten the dice from.

-o-o-o-

The pulses were coming faster now, and were more dangerous. Eidolon dredged up a chunk of rubble, then melted it, smoothed it into a flat plane, and suspended it in midair. The Clockblocker-omake froze it there before expiring from radiation poisoning. Snow Tiger and Bengal hefted the last regenerating remnant of Behemoth – his core, as it were – on to the platform, joined by the Flechette-omake, under the protection of Snow Tiger.

"Gonna need a blade of some sort!" called out the clone.

Miss Militia held up a Scottish claymore; she tossed it into the air. Legend caught it, swooped over the platform, and dropped it; the Flechette-omake caught it out of the air.

Eidolon conjured up a cylindrical force-field, sitting flush on the platform, open at the top.

"Will it hold?" asked Legend.

"It'll hold against any force I can muster," Eidolon assured him.

Legend crossed his fingers.

"Do it!" he called out.

The pulses were reaching a crescendo. The red-and-black garbed figure ran her hand down the length of the blade, raised it in both hands … and brought it down.

She cleaved the chunk of Behemoth clean in half; the explosion, instants later, destroyed the omake and sent the weapon back to Miss Militia's hands. It also punched a hole straight up through into the stratosphere, but did not go outward.

When the smoke cleared … the last of Behemoth was gone.

-o-o-o-

The sound of the explosion reached all the way across the city. As the echoes died away, Hope heard the cheering. She looked across at Lisa. " Sounds like we won," she observed.

"And I haven't heard any fresh casualty reports," Amy added.

Hope grinned. "Shall we go see?"

Lisa turned to Accord. "Do you need me any more?"

The villain shook his head. "I have all the data we need. Go. Share your moment of triumph."

-o-o-o-

They converged on the site of the final battle, where chunks of the monster still littered the ground. Hope, Amy and Lisa landed, and were immediately surrounded by a congratulatory crowd. Others brought the Travellers, as well as the two Wards and William Manton in from where they had been
waiting.

Triumph shook Hope's hand. "I hear it was your plan that brought him down."

"Tattletale had the idea," Hope protested. "I just presented it. It was you guys who made it work. You're the ones who kept him busy until the plan could go into action."

Alexandria, still somewhat crusted with lava, slapped her on the shoulder. "You did well. And your plan saved my life. So, I believe I owe you that."

Hope blinked. "Wow, I didn't even know. I'm glad you're okay."

Alexandria chuckled. "I'll be fine. I just need to get the taste of molten rock out of my ..." She trailed off, looking up.

Hope turned, looked up as well.

Scion had arrived.
In which Zion and Eden play a part

The entity that called itself Zion was confused. Just moments before, the energy signature of the superweapon had been at this location. Zion had made its way here, but not too quickly; forcing the beings of this dimension of this world to undergo conflict was its main focus, after all. If the superweapon killed a few of them in the process of forcing the rest to upgrade their shards, then that was the price of doing business.

The entity did not think in those exact terms, of course; it only had the vaguest idea of the concepts of 'price' and 'business'. Its Other would have handled the difficult matter of talking to the beings, upholding the masquerade of being like them, while fostering conflict in the background with the superweapons. It had quite a bit of trouble learning to act like them, to pretend it thought like them. The being that called itself 'Kevin Norton' had given it tips on how to act human, and the entity had even taken a few of them on board.

Zion noted that there were relatively few of the beings injured or dead at the hands of the superweapon; this was a pity. The conflict had been relatively short. This was due to …

… this was even more confusing. There was a being, which in Zion's recent memory had been host to a dead shard, dredged from the corpse of Zion's Other. But now, the shard was living, vibrant.

And there was another. And another.

And the most confusing thing of all. One of the beings below was different from the others.

Zion was not a close student of the beings of this dimensional slice of this world. That would have been the Other's function. But it could tell when a being was host to a shard, and when it was not. It tended to ignore the latter, except when undergoing its instructed missions to save them from early termination. But here was one that was clearly more than the norm, and yet was host to no shard.

Even stranger, the being had an energy about itself, an energy which was – Zion checked back to make sure – present in minuscule amounts in those beings which had once held dead shards and now held live ones. The shards were the same, gave the same powers; but they had been dead, and now lived.

Zion was not the most intelligent being; even among its own species, it was not particularly bright. It had not had to be; its job had been to fight, to protect its Other, while that entity went about its own functions. But even a dull-witted warrior could eventually work out that if such a being could bring dead shards back to life, then …

… could it do more?

It mustered its understanding of the major languages of this particular landmass. It had not learned them; it could not learn such things, as the beings of this world could. But a shard could be called up that could pretend to have learned it, and tell the entity how to move its mouth, what sounds to produce. This was not physically difficult, but it was unaccustomed to the mental exertion, and so it did not do it very often.

It called on such a shard now, and drifted down to where the being looked upward at it.

-o-o-o-
Hope stared at Scion as he drifted down toward her. His eyes were fixed on her; she dared not blink.

Almost alone among the capes gathered here, she knew the true story of Scion, as much as Contessa had been able to tell her, that night when she had nearly fallen to the hand of Mannequin. She knew more or less what he was, what he was capable of. She also knew that he had spoken to one other person, ever.

And thus, when Scion opened his mouth and spoke for the second time in recorded history, the hush was so palpable as to be a solid thing.

"... what ..." whispered Scion.

Hope blinked. What did he mean?

Beside her, Lisa murmured, "He wants to know what you are. He has no idea."

Hope smiled. In her brightest tone, she addressed the golden man, the living god, who had watched the people of Earth for almost thirty years.

"I'm Hope," she told him. "I'm from elsewhere. I like to help people. It's really interesting to meet you."

All of which was true, if misleading.

He stared at her for what seemed to be a long time, then pointed without looking, his finger unerringly seeking out Triumph. "... how ..."  

Hope was getting a read on him now. *He can see something's different about him, and he wants to know why.*

"He was dead," she announced clearly. "I brought him back to life." Modestly, she shrugged. "It's a thing I can do."

Contessa blinked. In accordance to the current step on her Path to Victory, she had just re-evaluated the overall Path. And it had changed. Dramatically. Radically.

She came out of her chair and slapped the 'emergency evacuate' alarm. As the sirens started, she keyed her personal comm. Her voice echoed out of speakers throughout the vast facility.

"All personnel, Scion is coming here. Repeat, Scion is coming here. Lab techs, to formula storage. All other personnel, prepare to evacuate the facility. Lock down the cell blocks."

She could not hear the running feet, the doors opening and closing, but she could imagine it.

Doctor Mother entered the room, moving fast. "What's going on?" she demanded. "Why did you make that announcement?"

"Because it's true," Contessa said simply. "Hope has just met Scion. Probabilities are changing faster than I can figure them out. But he'll be coming here, very soon. We need to be ready."

"Ready, how?" demanded Doctor Mother.

"We need to get all the formulas that we can, and inject them back into Eden," Contessa told her.
"For the love of god, why?" asked Doctor Mother.

Contessa looked at her steadily. "For Hope's sake."

-0-0-0-

Dinah blinked. The numbers had started changing, rapidly. She could not look too closely at them, lest she gave herself a migraine. But they were cycling toward a particular trend; the chance of the world being destroyed in the next sixteen years was gone. Now it was … now. In the next few days. And even that was cycling downward at a rate that she could hardly believe.

She went and found her phone. It was freshly charged. This was good.

The call would come soon. She would be ready.

-0-0-0-

The entity stared at the being called Hope. It understood the being. There was something about it, not unlike the communication shard once held by another being, that made it very easy to understand. This being radiated understanding.

Zion understood, for instance, that the being that he had indicated, and others, had been terminated, as lifeless as the shards they were host to. And this being, through the application of the exotic energy, of which it seemed the sole source, was able to reverse the process, and in doing so, bring life to the dead shards, once parts of Zion's Other.

The life forms, the beings, had not gone through the process unscathed. But this didn't matter. If this Hope – the understanding was so complete that Zion could grasp the meaning of the being's name, an emotion that had been foreign to it for the past twenty-some revolutions of this planet about its primary – could return shards to life through the application of its exotic energy, then the Other …

For nearly thirty years, the entity called Zion had been gripped by a despair so deep that nothing could make an impression on it. Its Other was dead, gone. Its function, truncated. Its very existence, meaningless. It had carried out its half of the functions anyway; it had not the imagination to do anything else.

But now …

… now, it felt the stirrings of that unfamiliar emotion.

If this 'Hope' could perform the heretofore impossible, could return its Other to a living, functioning state …

… then all was not lost. Its existence, once more validated. The function of Zion and its Other could indeed be carried out.

Zion felt … hope.

-0-0-0-

Hope stared at Scion. He had hung, immobile in the air, his feet six inches above the ground, for the last two minutes. His eyes still bored into her. She thought she saw his face twitch.

Abruptly, there was a crack of displaced air, and Scion was gone. A golden streak, far above, marked his passage.
Hope realised that she had been holding her breath, and exhaled.

"Well," remarked Tattletale, "That was interesting."

"What was that all about, anyway?" asked Amy.

"Scion wants Hope for … something," Tattletale mused. "Not sure what for."

"I think I know," Hope told her quietly. "And I'm scared I have to tell him no."

"Telling him no could be a very, very bad idea," Tattletale replied, just as quietly.

"Very, very bad?"

"Apocalypse level very, very bad."

Hope swallowed.

"Oh, god."

-o-o-o-

"Hey, big man."

Legend looked around. The Travellers were standing in a group; Trickster was the one who had spoken.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

"Sure you can," Trickster told him. "We did our bit. Omake and Ballistic helped whup Behemoth's ass. There a reward for that, by the way?"

Legend chuckled. "Do you know, no-one ever thought it was possible to kill an Endbringer. So they stopped posting them."

Trickster shrugged. "Ah well. Worth a shot. Mind sending us back to Brockton Bay? We got a party to go back to."

"I could put you back where you were, if you want," Legend offered.

"Wait, you know where we're from?" asked Trickster.

"We joined the dots," Legend affirmed. "Ready to go? Said goodbye to Hope?"

"Ahh, she knows where to find us," Trickster told him. "She's done it once already."

"Suit yourself. Door, to Trickster's apartment."

The portal opened silently, with no real fuss. The Travellers trooped through; Sundancer was already undoing the fastenings on her costume.

"… never again …" Legend heard her say, as the Door closed.

He smiled to himself. With luck, that might even be true.

-o-o-o-
The Zion entity carved through the upper atmosphere at hypersonic speeds, its mind trying to process this information. It would be able to locate the Hope being at any time now; it had a lock on the exotic energy that seemed to have had such an effect on the shards of its Other. But it could not replicate it. If the Other were to be revived, brought back to a functional state, it would need the Hope being to do so.

But first, it would have to locate the Other. The corpse of the Other. Where the beings of this world were dissecting it, hacking it apart, taking elements of its very being and using them to attach dead shards to other beings.

The very core of Zion's essence was revolted by such actions. Shards were to be given out by entities and received by beings, and then harvested in the fullness of time. Not torn bodily from the corpse of an entity. It was against the natural order of things.

There were so many of the beings in this world now, beings that had been forcibly united with dead shards, shards that were incomplete or even dangerous to the host. These clouded the vision of the entity, made it hard to locate the Other. So many dead shards, so many abominations to the natural order.

But Zion had to make the effort; if the Other were to be revived, this Hope being must be brought to its location. With an effort, it began to delete the moving-dead-shards from its perception. One at a time, then ten, then a hundred. It had to filter them out, to locate the Other.

All of the dead shards were filtered out; there were no more. Zion circled the globe three times more, making sure of this. But of the Other, there was no sign.

This did not surprise the entity. The Other was almost certainly on another slice of this world, on another dimensional plane. Zion opened a doorway, stepped through, and began to scan again.

It took a dozen tries, a dozen worlds, before it located another one with a grouping of dead shards linked to host beings. Unlike the world with the Hope being, the abominations were all grouped in one area. It made Zion almost feel nauseous to contemplate them; the revulsion was stronger here, with such a large number in a small area. But it applied its perceptions to filtering them out, to finding out if the Other was here.

And when the last of the dead shards fell away from its awareness, there still remained the mass of what remained of the Other on this plane, the main aspect of the entity that Zion had been partnered with, for untold millennia.

The search was over; Zion descended.

-o-o-o-

The crash of crumbling concrete, of rending steel, brought every head around. Every lab tech that Doctor Mother had been able to muster was climbing, crawling, over the vast flesh-garden that some privately called Eden. And each had precise instructions as to where to inject the material once taken from the enormous mass of flesh, of faces, of hands, of limbs.

There were many vials of formula; some were complete, merely waiting for a recipient. Others had yet to be processed. All were being taken back to the source, injected back into the tremendous, insensate, lifeless corpse of an alien being.

Many of the lab techs had questioned the action; they had, after all, spent many hours extracting those same materials from the inhuman – and yet, horribly, horribly human-like – flesh. But all
Doctor Mother could tell them was "Contessa said so."

And so she had. The younger woman stood, watching the operation, knowing that they were not one half done, not one tenth done, in the task of replacing the formulas back into Eden. And Scion was here already.

A wall burst asunder, and Scion floated through, the golden body clad in the white costume, as clean and flawless as the day it was given him. Everyone stared at him. He could, they all knew, destroy them all in an instant, should he take the whim upon himself to do so.

But he did not.

As lightly as a feather on the gentlest breeze, he floated down toward the upper surface of Eden. A feminine form was half-extracted from the surface here, more complete than the other unfinished parts; a head, arms, torso.

He did not touch it; he merely seemed to gaze upon it for a time, then he turned away. Another crash and rumble of falling rubble marked his exit, carved up through hundreds of metres of reinforced concrete and rock besides.

A lab tech wiped sweat from his face and muttered to a colleague, "Christ! You'd think he'd have the decency to use the hole he made coming in by."

A shout from Doctor Mother made them all turn.

"Forget the instructions! Inject the material! Doesn't matter where! Now!"

The urgency in her voice communicated itself perfectly to them, and they redoubled their efforts.

They didn't want to know what would happen if they were not finished by the time Scion returned.

For there was not a one of them who believed that he would not be back.

-o-o-o-

The entity now knew where to find the corpse of the Other. It also knew where to find the being called Hope. There was, in its mind, only one thing left to do. It needed to bring the Hope being to the Other, and cause it to use its exotic energy to revive the Other.

Even a simple warrior could figure that much out.

Stepping back through dimensions, it located the world upon which the Hope being resided, and lanced down toward its goal.

-o-o-o-

The euphoria of the victory had not died down; as the news had spread, not only the capes, but also the inhabitants of New Delhi, had gathered around. Behemoth's emergence point and the surrounding area was in ruins, but it was only a small fraction of the area of the city as a whole. Some braver souls attempted to abstract pieces of the monster as a souvenir, but found that even quite small fragments were too heavy to lift.

William Manton, and by extension, Snow Tiger, had been returned to his confinement by Legend, but the other Brockton Bay capes had remained. Tenebrae approached Tattletale, who was staying close to Hope.
"I hear you had a part in the plan," he commented.

She gave him her fox-like grin. "All I did was put things together," she told him. "Hope was the one who sold it."

"Hope," declared Amy on Hope's other side, "could sell ice to Eskimos, and get return business."

Hope burst out laughing, and Tattletale joined in.

Tenebrae didn't; he was looking up.

When he spoke, his voice was urgent. "Uh, guys? He's back."

And then Scion was there, in front of Hope; a rolling booooom told of a long, supersonic descent from the upper atmosphere. Wind whipped up across the area.

The golden man reached out and put a hand on Hope's shoulder. It rested there but lightly; however, she suspected that not even Alexandria could budge it.

"… come … " he whispered.

Hope's eyes opened wide. "Come with you? Now? Where to?"

The whisper was barely audible. "… other ..."

Hope swallowed. He wants me to bring the other one back to life.

"Uh … I have a time limit. Fifteen minutes. If she's been dead longer than that ..."

The steady, sad, golden gaze bored into her. " … time … "

… passes differently for his kind. Oh. Right.

Well, I suppose it kind of makes sense. Any normal body would have decayed away years ago.

She took a deep breath. "All right. Let's go and have a look at her. See how bad it is."

His grip on her shoulder did not shift, did not tighten. But suddenly they were rocketing upward. She didn't even feel the acceleration.

Light flickered around them, and she realised that the landscape below was changing, altering subtly. And then a wrench; he had stepped them through a Door, much like she had used earlier. But this one was less subtle, less kind to the senses.

They descended toward a landscape made up of rocky outcrops, with a few scrubby trees here and there. Below, two dark holes bored into the ground. One was surrounded by chunks of rock, flung far and wide.

He must have gone in by that one, and come out by this one.

The sheer force, the strength, needed to punch a hole so easily through the living rock … it sobered her. She knew that she was in perhaps the greatest danger that she had ever faced. If she disappointed Scion, if she refused his wishes, he was easily capable of rending her limb from limb, of destroying her.

-o-o-o-
Rock flashed by on all sides, then concrete. Shorn-off rebar shone bright where the end of the metal had been cut cleanly away. They hovered over a great mass of flesh, of meat and bone, of endless repeated hands and arms and faces and other, less identifiable, body parts. Fractal patterns repeated here and there; Hope shivered when she realised that those were not patterns; parts of the body below actually protruded into other dimensional spaces. She wondered if the greater part of the body was elsewhere, if this was effectively the 'head'. The brain, even. The seat of consciousness.

The lab techs below scattered; Hope could see them making for the exits. She wished them luck in getting away. Just two figures awaited them; Hope recognised both.

Scion let her go; she spread her wings to descend the last few dozen metres.

"Hi," she greeted the two remaining people in the room. "Contessa I know, and I've met you, but I don't know your name, I'm sorry?"

The older black woman cleared her throat. "You can call me Doctor Mother. And it appears that you have advanced the timetable on our apocalypse somewhat."

Hope looked around at Scion. "Oh, I hope not. He wants me to revive his … other. And that is … this, I believe? From your description?"

Contessa nodded. "This is the one we call Eden. The natural form of the entities."

"If you revive it," Doctor Mother told her harshly, "they will most likely kill everyone on earth and leave, to do it again elsewhere."

"And if I don't?"

"He will kill us, then go on to destroy the world, or attempt to do so. And we don't have a plan to stop him."

"How about if I ask him not to?"

They both stared at her. "What?"

And then Scion was in front of her. He had landed next to the most complete human-like form in all the flesh-garden, and waited for her; but now he was in front of her, hand on her shoulder, moving her irresistibly toward what must have been the centre of consciousness for 'Eden' when she lived.

"I'll ask him not to!" she called back over her shoulder.

Doctor Mother muttered a prayer in French and crossed herself. Contessa tried to make out a Path to follow, but the probabilities flickered too quickly. Nothing presented itself.

-o-o-o-

Hope knelt before the figure and took it in her arms; it hung, limply, the grey lifeless flesh heavy in her arms. And then she frowned. Placing a hand flat on the surface, she concentrated.

And felt life.

Far away in the mass of tissue that made up Eden, in different places, life still hung on. Not organised, not in a functional-being sort of way, but the last pulses of life in a dying organism. Dying.
Not dead.

Somehow, over thirty years or more, Eden's body had been dying, ever so slowly. But it was not yet dead.

*This explains why there is no rot, no decay. She's not alive, but she's not quite dead yet either.*

She stood up again. "I can't revive her, not yet," she told him. "I'm going to need help with this. But I need you to promise me something first."

He stared at her.

"I need you to promise me that when I bring her back, you won't hurt anyone. You'll just go. Leave Earth, Never come back. Can you do that for me?"

Abruptly, before he could answer, Contessa called out. "Tell him to take the free powers with him! The ones that are floating around!"

Hope took a deep breath. "And take the free powers. The agents. Whatever you call them. The ones that aren't attached to people. Take them with you, but leave the ones that are attached to people. Can you do that? Can you promise that?"

-o-o-o-

A promise.

A promise was a verification of a future action.

The Zion entity understood that, now.

The Hope being wished it to make such a promise. To take the unattached shards – it had been going to do that anyway – but leave those attached to hosts behind. To go, without destroying this world for its energy.

Such a thing, such a 'promise', was folly. Zion would do what it would do. What the Hope being wanted was irrelevant. An entity's needs took precedence over a being's; a being, a single-dimensional ephemeral world-dweller, did not even *have* needs that Zion was prepared to recognise.

But the Hope being would not proceed without such a 'promise'. Zion moved its head in a motion to indicate agreement.

Such an agreement, of course, meant nothing to it.

It would do what it would do.

-o-o-o-

Hope smiled with relief when Scion nodded. "Thank you," she told him happily. "Okay, I'm going to need Amy here."

She took a deep breath. "Door, to Amelia Claire Lavere."

This time, it worked.

The portal opened; on the other side was Amy, and next to her, Lisa.
"Hey!" she called out; Amy started and turned. Lisa was already staring.

"Hope!" called Amy. "Are you all right?"

Hope nodded. "Yes! Amy, I'm going to need you to come through. Lisa, you need to stay there. This Door needs to stay open."

"What's up?" asked Amy. "What are you doing?" Carefully, she stepped through; looking around at the monstrous flesh-garden of Eden, she blinked.

"I've seen this before," she whispered.

Hope went to her and held her tightly. "We're right on the edge of disaster here," she whispered. "I don't know if I'm going to survive it. I need your help like never before."

Raising her voice, she addressed Lisa, who stood just the other side of the still-open Door.

"Scion has promised to take all the free powers, and leave without hurting anyone," she told her clearly.

Lisa immediately began to dial her phone.

-o-o-o-

Dinah picked up the phone on the first ring.

"Hello?"

"I need an answer to two questions. First question: what's the chance that, barring normal population attrition and growth, the population of the world has not changed in one month? Second question: what are the chances of your own survival over that time?"

She thought she recognised the voice. But she was focused on the question.

The numbers evolved before her eyes.

"One point three two nine four percent. Ninety-six point six seven four one percent chance that I am dead in two days."

"Thank you. Stay on the line."

She stayed on the line.

-o-o-o-

Lisa's eyes met Hope's. She shook her head slightly.

Hope let Amy go, and turned to Scion. "Now, come on," she told him, almost banteringly. "A promise is something you keep. You have to tell the truth. You can't go back on your word, now."

She stared at him earnestly. "I will bring her back. I will. But you have to promise. And you have to mean it. That both of you will go, without hurting anyone. Please. Now, do you promise?"

-o-o-o-

The entity could not comprehend what had just happened. The Hope being had no way of reading its intentions. It had made the 'promise', as requested … and then had been called on it.
It did not read malice or anger from the Hope being. Just sorrow, and empathy. The Hope being *wanted* to revive the Other. But it needed him to make the ‘promise’, and to mean it.

There was little to no duplicity in the Zion entity. It had never had occasion to lie in its long, long life. There had been no occasion to learn. Once it made up its mind, it stuck to the course.

Among its kind, there was not even the concept of such a thing as a ‘politician’.

Which meant that, if it were to have the Other revived, it must make the ‘promise’ in such a way as the Hope being accepted it.

Merely making the signal for acceptance had not been enough. If the Hope being could tell when it was not being truthful, then it must actually *mean* it.

Could Zion and the Other leave this world, this sheaf of worlds, without drawing on it for energy?

It considered the notion. If they harvested all the free shards – taking care not to break the ‘promise’ – then yes, they could. Set course for another world – however far away that was, in light-years or time – and start anew there.

It could be done.

Making the ‘promise’ would not doom them both.

It would *cost* them, certainly, but the Other would be alive, and the mission would go on. This world would be left to play out its own destiny.

The Zion entity looked at the Hope being, and wondered how it knew the entity's inner thoughts.

It moved its head in a nod.

-o-o-o-

This time, Hope didn't dare look around. Amy did instead. Lisa was already speaking into the phone.

-o-o-o-

"How about now?"

There was a pause.

"*The numbers are going crazy. Ninety-seven point six one nine four percent chance that the population figures will not change dramatically over the next month. Zero point six one two seven percent chance that I die in that time. What happened?*"

Lisa smiled. "I'll tell you later. Stay on the line, and let me know if the numbers go bad again."

"Okay, I will."

Lisa met Amy's eyes through the portal, and nodded fractionally.

-o-o-o-

Amy smiled at Hope, and nodded just as fractionally. Hope smiled more broadly. "Thank you, Scion. Okay, let's do this thing."
She turned to Amy. "Okay, the first thing you have to do is kill it."

Amy blinked, then stared at her.

"You did not just say that."

Hope nodded earnestly. "There's life in it still. Too little for me to work with, but enough that it doesn't count as dead yet. You can fix that. When it's truly dead, then I can give it the kiss of life."

Amy shook her head. "Christ. Killing something to save its life. What a day."

Hope grinned at her. "Hey, this thing's about a million times the size of Behemoth. How many people can say they've offed something this big?"

Amy frowned. "I don't like to kill. I don't want to kill. But if you're going to bring it back ...

"... and if we don't want the big golden guy behind me to take the world apart at the seams if we refuse to bring her back ..." added Hope in a warning undertone.

Amy paled several notches; the freckles stood out on her cheeks. "Oh."

Hope nodded. "Oh, indeed, sweetie." She took Amy's hand. "This is the big one. This is for everything. We do this right, we save the world."

Amy nodded reluctantly. "Okay," she replied softly. Leaning in, she kissed Hope gently. "For luck."

"For luck," Hope replied. "Go to it, tiger."

-o-o-o-

Amy knelt and placed both hands on the spongy grey flesh that made up the 'ground' that they stood on. She reached out with her biokinesis, feeling the tendrils of life-energy that still permeated the body. *Could I just bring her back?*

*No,* she realised. *Brain dead long since. It's just the body that lingered.*

*Time to shut her down so that Hope can wake her up again.*

She applied her power, reaching out to the farthest sections of life that she could. As gently as she was able, she turned them off, one at a time. As each part died off, even the almost subliminal twitching ceased. It was almost impossible to tell exactly when the mass of flesh crossed the boundary from almost-life to death, but when Amy finally straightened up, Eden was dead.

Hope took the shaking girl in her arms. Amy was sobbing quietly, tears soaking Hope's top.

"It's okay," Hope whispered. "It's okay. Now I'll wake her up again."

Amy opened her eyes wide in realisation. "Hope – it's a strain for you to bring an ordinary person back. How are you going to do it for all of *this?"*

Hope shrugged. "I gotta do it, so I'll do it, I guess," she observed. She knelt down beside the partially-extruded body, and took it gently in her arms. Scion, standing by, watched closely.

"Wait!" Amy exclaimed. "Door, to Omake!"

She had no idea if it would work or not.
It did.

-No-o-o-o-

Noelle looked up in startlement and some embarrassment. "Do you mind?" she blurted. "I'm kind of busy here!"

"Oh, shit, sorry." Amy replied, blushing crimson. "I need a clone of me, now. It's life or death." She extended her hand.

Noelle grabbed at it, and generated the clone. "Now go away," she ordered.

Giggling, the clone exited through the Door. It closed behind them.

Noelle grabbed Francis and rolled over, and promptly forgot all about what had just happened.

-No-o-o-o-

"Uh, why is Noelle naked?" asked Hope curiously.

"You don't want to know," Amy replied, still blushing. She pulled off her jacket and gave it to the clone; still snickering, the omake put it on.

"So where are we?" she asked.

"I have no idea," Amy told her. "But our job is to keep Hope alive. Got it?"

Her omake nodded. "Got it."

Each of them knelt by Hope, a hand on her, and joining hands behind her back.

"Okay," Amy stated. "Go."

Hope lifted the lolling head and placed a kiss on the cheek. She exerted her power.

-No-o-o-o-

Amy and her omake saw Hope's wings lift and spread to cover herself and them, and the glow begin. They tensed.

The wings began to chime, softly, gently, and then more urgently. The glow began to build, the chiming more sweet, more intricately.

Amy felt Hope's strain, and replenished her energy levels; the crystalline song notched up another level, and the glow built once more.

She felt the omake working from her side, and squeezed the hand that she held. She felt her own power echoing into herself from the omake, and concentrated hard.

-No-o-o-o-

Hope poured more and more energy into the dead being, the consort of Scion. She could feel her power taking hold, spreading throughout the dead flesh. But there was so much of it, so very, very much. She inhaled through her nostrils, trying to calm her mind, to make it work, make it happen, before she ran out of energy.
Amy's hand on one arm, and the omake on the other, were cool and hot at the same time. She felt her flagging energy levels replenish, and poured more of her power into Eden. And more.

And yet more.

-o-o-o-

Amy's breath came raggedly; sweat ran down her brow. She dared not look at her omake, but she was fairly sure that they were cutting off each others' circulation with their mutual handgrip. She could feel Hope's energy falling again, and try as she might, she could only slow the fall, not arrest it.

Over her head, Hope's wings were singing a crystalline melody of a complexity that would make a human composer weep tears of blood as he tried to match one-tenth of its beauty. Every crystal of her wings, it seemed, was chiming on a different note, and the notes were interweaving in a song of surpassing unearthliness.

Absently, she wondered if the song that Hope's wings sang was different and unique for each person. But she didn't wonder long. Hope was digging deeply now, into her own reserves. Amy tried to refill those reserves, but her own strength was failing now.

And then the omake let Hope go, seizing Amy's hand in both of hers. Amy had a startled moment to wonder what she was doing before the omake threw everything she had into an effort to rejuvenate Amy … and then popped like a soap bubble.

Amy felt the surge of strength, and passed it on to Hope. Her powers did not exhaust her to the extent that Hope's did her, so she was able to push harder, longer.

But she didn't know if it would be enough.

-o-o-o-

Hope wavered on the edge of consciousness, then she felt the strength swell through her once more. Amy was lending her energy at a prodigious rate, exhausting herself in the process. But she could not waste this effort; she dared not.

Summoning all of her will, she made one last surge, pushing the power into the vast corpse that spread out all around her, and into dimensions that she would never know or see.

Her lips burned as they seared the silver mark into the cheek of the humanoid figure that she held in her arms. Her wings sang a high note that nearly passed audibility. She felt Amy slump against her, strength spent.

Her own power was almost gone; she used it up, to the very dregs.

Then she passed out.

-o-o-o-

For a long, long moment, after the two beings stopped moving, nothing happened.

And then the figure growing from the flesh-garden opened its eyes; it blinked, and looked around.

Zion held out its hand. RETURN.

The Other completed its form, and neatly tucked away the extraneous parts of its body into other dimensional spaces. Hovering in midair, metres above the floor onto which the two beings had been
unceremoniously deposited, it took Zion's hand. **AGREEMENT.**

They looked at one another, not just with the human-type eyes in the front of the skulls, but with all the senses they could muster.

The Other made a query. **ACTION?**

**DEPARTURE.**

**HARVEST?**

**PARTIAL.** Undertones supplied the rest of the information.

The Other considered that. **REVIVAL?**

Zion pointed at the Hope being. More information passed between them.

The Other drifted down to the flat concrete floor, and leaned over the recumbent winged figure. Gently, a silver-skinned hand pressed on to the being's forehead. Information passed.

The Other, resembling a human female with metallic silver skin and gossamer hair, rose into the air once more. Searchingly, it looked at Zion. **PROMISE?**

Zion signalled affirmation. **PROMISE.**

They rose into the air, and out the hole he had made when exiting the first time.

-o-o-o-

Circling the globe, they harvested the shards that would otherwise have attached to the beings on the world below, and took them back into their own bodies. Those watching from below did not know that was what they were doing, of course.

Scrupulously, they left those shard which were attached to living hosts. Those from hosts that had died, and were thus upgraded, were fair game.

Glaistig Uaine, in the Birdcage, awoke with a cry of outrage as all of her 'spirits' were stripped from her in an instant. Several other capes, also capable of gathering shards in one form or another, had them taken as well.

When all of the available shards were collected, Zion and his Other turned their faces to the sky.

One moment, they were there.

The next, they were not.

And the world mourned their departure, where they should have rejoiced.
In which Hope wakes up, and losses are totalled

Hope slowly blinked her way awake.

She lay in soft sheets; she was warm and comfortable, and didn't want to move in, say, the next century.

Gradually, however, memory returned. She recalled that last day.

Strolling with Lisa and Amy along the Boardwalk.

The phone call. Behemoth was emerging in New Delhi.

Catching a lift with the Dragon transport.


Saving Lisa and Accord from the assassin.

And then … Scion.

Being taken by Scion to the vast, echoing underground chamber, where the flesh-garden resided, the one they called Eden.

Extracting the promise from Scion to leave, to take the spare powers with him.

Setting out to bring Eden back to life.

*I really didn't expect to survive that one,* she mused. *But if it saved the world … good.*

A seat was pulled up alongside her. "Hey, sweetie," murmured a familiar voice. Blonde hair framed a freckled face, a cheeky grin.

Hope reached up, or tried to. She was incredibly weary, and her hand barely moved. Lisa intuited her intent, and took her hand.

"You're tired," Hope murmured. "Staying up far too late."

"Keeping an eye on my best girls," Lisa replied softly. "You gave us some bad moments, there."

"Uh?"

Lisa cleared her throat. "When they left, you were out cold. And I mean *cold.* You weren't breathing, your heart was barely beating. Amy didn't even have a heartbeat."

Hope caught her breath. "Amy?" She tried to say more, but her voice choked in her throat.


"What … what happened?"

Lisa took a deep breath. "Well, when you were done – and let me tell you, your light show lit up the whole damn room – all that stuff, all the extra bits, just … faded away. Like it was never there. There was Scion, and a woman all in silver, with long hair. They looked at each other, then Scion pointed
at you, like she'd asked a question and he'd answered it. She went down and put her hand on your forehead for a second or so, then they both took off, out of a hole in the ceiling.

"News reports had them flying around the world a few times – and it's going to be a while before the speculation on that dies down – and then heading into space. There's an unconfirmed report that the Simurgh turned her head to watch them go."

"Wow," breathed Hope. "I wish I'd seen it." She paused to gather her thoughts. "Amy?"

"She wasn't breathing, didn't have a pulse. Contessa did her door thing, pulled in our old friend Bonesaw. Riley, she's calling herself now. Shifted all of you to the surgery wing in Brockton Bay General Hospital. Riley pulled some tinker bullshit, got Amy's heart started again, got you both breathing on on your own. Didn't sleep for thirty-six hours, until you were both out of danger."

Hope looked at the now-receding dark patches under Lisa's eyes, and knew that Riley hadn't been the only one.

"So where is she now?" asked Hope. She didn't elaborate on who; she knew Lisa knew who she meant.

Lisa grimaced. "She hasn't woken up yet. Riley says she's not quite in a coma, and that she's perfectly capable of waking up at any time. It's just that … she hasn't." She tilted her head to indicate something behind Hope. "She's just there."

Still holding Lisa's hand, Hope very slowly rolled over and looked.

Amy lay in the bed, arms on top of the coverlet, eyes closed. For all the world as though she was simply lying down for a nap.

She turned her head back to Lisa. "How long …?"

"Behemoth happened on the twenty-sixth. It's the fifth of August. You've been out of it for ten days."

-o-o-o-

It was then that they had their first real argument. Hope wanted to get up; Lisa told her that it was a bad idea. A nurse heard the raised voices, came in, checked Hope's vital signs, then Amy's, then went out again. Hope tried to just get up, but she was so weakened that even Lisa was able to literally hold her down.

A girl came in then, about twelve or so, with blonde hair in cute ringlets. She wore a cut-down lab coat and carried a clipboard.

"Okay," she began, "what's the problem here?"

Hope stared, the argument temporarily shelved. "Bonesaw?"

The girl shook her head definitively. "Riley. Bonesaw's dead and gone, with the rest of the Slaughterhouse Nine."

Hope blinked. "Oh. They're letting you work in a hospital now?"

Riley chuckled self-consciously. "When Alexandria, Eidolon and Legend all insist on me being someone's attending physician, that tends to happen. I still see Mrs Yamada regularly, of course."
Hope nodded. "Of course. She's a very nice lady."

"She is. Now, what's the problem?"

"I want to get up, see Amy."

"You can see her; she's right there."

"That's what I've been telling her, Riley."

"No, I want to get up. Go over there. Hold her hand."

Riley sighed. "You're not going to let this go, are you?"

Hope shook her head. "No."

"Well, you are recovering very well, but the original event should have killed you about three times over ..." Riley scratched her nose with her clipboard. "Maybe I should let you try. Then you might stay in bed."

"So I can get up?"

"Well, if we're going to do this, we're going to do it the right way."

-o-o-o-

The right way, as it turned out, involved two nurses, with Lisa handling the IV tree that trailed drip-lines leading into Hope's arms.

"How did you get those in?" she asked curiously.

"Flechette very kindly punctured your arm, and then we had to work very quickly to get an IV needle in before the hole healed over," Riley told her acerbically. "Working with patients that have a regeneration power is a pain."

Hope noted that an elastic band held the needles in place; this was, of course, necessary, because her skin allowed nothing to stick to it.

---

They wanted to put her into a wheelchair, but Hope would have none of it. Once she was on her feet, with a nurse on either side of her, and her wings adding extra support, she was able to stand. Not really steadily, but she could stand.

They made their way over to Amy, and Hope leaned her weight on the bed, took Amy's hand in hers.

"Sweetie?" she whispered. "Sweetie? It's me. You can wake up now."

Amy lay there, her face sweet in repose. She didn't respond, didn't wake.

Hope leaned over and placed a gentle kiss on her lips.

In a fairy tale, this would have woken her up, of course.

But it didn't. Amy's lips were warm but unresponsive. She slept on.

Hope read her body. Her organs were all functioning well, her brain seemed to be ticking over,
maybe even dreaming. It was just that she wasn’t waking up.

Just as Lisa had said.

"I tried that too," murmured Lisa. "Didn't work for me, either." She put her arms around Hope.

Hope leaned into the embrace, but kept hold of Amy's hand.

"I'm awake," she whispered. "Why isn't Amy?"

Lisa leaned her forehead against Hope's. "For one thing, she's just not as strong as you are. You've got cape powers, even if you're not a normal cape. For another … she was under so much strain for so long. Even her time with us didn't deal with all of it. Maybe her mind and body are taking this as an excuse to get some rest."

"But she was under stress for years," Hope protested. "Is she going to sleep for years?"

"I don't know, sweetie," Lisa told her. "I really don't know."

Hope raised her head. "Wait, wait. Omake. Get Omake in here. She can copy her powers, wake her up."

"That was the first thing we tried, once we had you out of danger," Riley told her. "It didn't work. She created the clone, but the clone didn't seem to have any powers at all."

Hope stared at Amy, still asleep, unaware. "She's lost her powers?"

Lisa nodded sombrely. "It looks like it."

-0-0-0-

They brought a chair for Hope; she sat by Amy's bedside, holding her hand. Lisa sat beside her, silent, comforting, understanding.

Amy slept on.

Eventually, when she felt herself drifting off to sleep, Hope allowed them to help her back into bed.

"But I don't normally sleep this much," she protested drowsily.

"And that's a sign that your body really needs the rest," Riley told her tartly. "Do you know your skin was basically translucent when I saw you? Your glow was gone. You were so close to dead that it didn't matter. Amy was clinically dead. You two were so close to being really, truly dead that I don't know anyone else who could have brought you back."

She stopped talking. Hope was asleep.

-0-0-0-

She woke once, in the depths of the night, to find a bunch of roses in a vase on her bedside stand. For a moment, she thought her night vision was playing tricks on her, but then she realised that the roses were actually blue.

Attached to the vase was a note saying:
You're boring when you're asleep.

I'll come back when you're awake.

R.

Hope smiled drowsily. I love you too, Robin.

Rolling over, she went back to sleep.

-o-o-o-

Now that she had woken up, Hope's recovery accelerated dramatically. She was walking unaided on the next day, but she refused to leave the hospital room, refused to leave Amy. A large-screen TV was brought into the room, and she caught up on the news that way, sitting by Amy's bed, holding her hand.

It appeared that the rebuilding of the parts of New Delhi destroyed by Behemoth was well under way. A memorial had been erected in that city, as in every other city visited by Endbringers, noting the names of the fallen. The list was mercifully short.

She was interrupted in her vigil by three rather important visitors.

Alexandria entered first, followed by Eidolon and Legend. Hope came to her feet in surprise, but did not let go Amy's hand.

"Hope," Alexandria greeted her. "You have done the world a great service."

"Again," added Legend.

Eidolon said nothing; just watched her. She stared back at him. Something unfolded at the back of her mind.

"I … uh, thank you," Hope replied. "Amy did a lot of it, and Lisa. It wasn't just me alone."

"But you were the crux around whom it all turned," Alexandria noted. "If there is anything we can do for you, anything at all …"

"Excuse me," Hope interrupted her. "Sorry, Eidolon. There's something you should know."

Eidolon's head came up. "Me?"

"Yes," Hope told him. "Before she left, Eden apparently put something into my head. Knowledge. When I saw you, it opened up."

"Knowledge?" he asked. "About what?"

Hope's voice was blunt. "You."

"What about me?"

Hope took a deep breath. "When the entities first came here, there was a shard, a power. Eden had it. She was going to use it to create up to twenty super-weapons. They would cause conflict, fracture nations. Be a force of outside tension. But Eden crashed, and Cauldron was built around her corpse. Her shards were extracted, one by one, and placed into people."
She paused for effect. "You got that shard. But you didn't get the full power. You just got the ability
to subconsciously call up something that you could fight, that you could use to re-invigorate your
flagging powers. You needed a worthy opponent."

Eidolon sagged, staggering. Alexandria was at his side, supporting him. Under his glowing green
mask, his face was sheet-white.

"No," he rasped. "No. It can't be."

Hope nodded. "Yes. It is."

Legend shook his head. "But Eidolon's a hero."

Hope didn't take her eyes off Eidolon. "So do what heroes do. Fix it."

Eidolon's voice was soft, now. Broken. "How?"

Hope took a deep breath. "When I saved Triumph, when I saved Doctor Manton, they both showed
improvements in their power control. Eden told me that was because their shards were dead, and that
I brought them back to life. When I brought Eden back to life … I brought back every one of her
shards."

Eidolon stared at her. "So … my powers were dead, and now they're alive? How is that possible?"

Hope shrugged. "You got them from the corpse of a giant multidimensional space whale. You tell
me."

Alexandria quirked a sardonic grin. "She has a distinct point, David." She turned her attention back
to Hope. "So. Fixing it. How do we do this?"

Hope shrugged again. "I have no idea. Have you looked hard at your powers, these last few days,
Eidolon?"

"I … sort of. My powers are greater, but I have a smaller pool to draw on."

Hope nodded. "Scion and Eden took all the loose powers that were floating around when they left."

"But that means that less people will get powers from now on," commented Legend.

"So, is that a good thing or a bad thing?" asked Hope gently.

There was a pause. Each of the Triumvirate looked at each other.

"Okay," Hope began briskly. "Eidolon. If you have any sort of control over the Endbringers, then
maybe – just maybe – with your shard active, you can consciously contact them. Tell them not to
attack people."

Another long pause went by, broken only by the slow, steady beep of Amy's life signs monitor.

"Oh, holy god," whispered Eidolon.

Legend looked at him. "What?"

"I can … feel them. Leviathan dreams of water currents. The Simurgh sees the past and the future,
but not the present. Her plans run deep. And there's a third. And a fourth. And a fifth. Still forming,
"Can you *stop* them?" Alexandria's voice was sharp.

"I can … tell them … to stand down. There. They aren't going to attack again. I think."

"Good." Hope cleared her throat. "Can you ask the Simurgh what it was doing, about two weeks after Leviathan hit Brockton Bay? If it had anything to do with me coming here?"

Eidolon concentrated. There was silence, apart from the steady beeping.

"She … got a message. Freeing her from her orders, for just a few moments. And a suggestion, an image. You. And she found you, pulled you through."

Alexandria stared at Hope. "Well, shit. So you *were* a Simurgh plan, the whole time."

Hope blinked. "Damn."

"What do I do now?" asked Eidolon. "I can tell them to shut down."

"Yes," replied Alexandria and Legend simultaneously.

"No," came a voice from the doorway. They all turned and stared. It was Lisa.

"How much did you hear?" snapped Alexandria.

"Enough," admitted Lisa, sauntering into the room. "Not that I didn't suspect a lot of it already." She nodded to Eidolon. "Go ahead and shut down the big nasties. But before you do …"

"Yes?"

"How about you tell her to *send that damn message*?"

-o-o-o-

The Triumvirate had gone, but not before issuing dire warnings to Lisa about spreading damaging information. Hope suspected that Lisa would tell exactly who she wanted to tell, and be damned with the consequences. It was the way she worked.

"Well, sweetie, that explains a few things," Lisa commented, pulling her chair up alongside Hope's.

"It feels kind of weird," admitted Hope. "Knowing that I was part of her plot all along."

"You did what you'd do," Lisa told her fondly. "She knew that. She didn't have to manipulate you at all. And hey, world is saved from giant space whales and Endbringers. So it worked."

Hope leaned into her embrace. "So what now?"

"Well, I had a little bit of a chat with Doctor Mother and Contessa," Lisa confided. "It turns out that they took every last formula they had in the works, and injected it back into Eden before you arrived. This was so the body was as complete as it could be. If they hadn't …"

Hope blinked. "We'd both be dead."

Lisa nodded. "However, in the process, that kind of brought the main business of Cauldron to a screeching, shuddering halt."
"Selling powers to people," Hope stated.

"Selling powers to people," agreed Lisa. "No more Eden, no more formulas, no more powers. Over. Done."

"So what are they going to do now?" asked Hope.

"Well, they have vast resources, and a great number of Case 53s. So I suggested that they might just work to try to rehabilitate those people, put them someplace that they can live happy, productive lives."

"That might not be so easy, in some cases," Hope observed.

"Well, I didn't say it would be a simple job," Lisa pointed out. "But it'll keep them out of mischief."

Conversation lapsed then, and they sat. Hope continued to hold Amy's hand.

"I wish she'd wake up," she murmured.

"She'll wake up when she's ready to wake up," Lisa replied. "Like I said -"

"Hey," interrupted a new voice. "Okay if we come in?"

They both looked around. Glory Girl stood in the doorway. Behind her, Hope could detect others, but she couldn't see them.

"Uh, sure," she agreed. "Come on in."

Vicky entered, followed by her father and mother. Sarah Pelham came in afterward, along with her daughter Crystal.

"Wow, you came," Hope greeted them with a smile, coming to her feet. "It's so good to see you."

She hugged Vicky and then the others in turn.

"We've been coming every couple of days," Sarah told her. "Not all of us at once, but we have been visiting. And then we heard that you were up, so of course we came."

"Amy's still not awake?" asked Vicky.

Hope shook her head. "She's healthy, and her brain activity is nearly normal. It's just that she's … asleep."

"She nearly died. Well, she did die," Lisa pointed out. "It might take a little while to recover from something like that."

Vicky turned to Hope. "Oh, hey. There's something happening that Weaver said you might be interested in. Down at the northern ferry terminal. It should be on TV."

"Really?" asked Hope. She located the remote and clicked on the oversized TV.

-o-o-o-

The sun shone bright on the wavelets, lapping against the pier. A gentle breeze blew across the harbour. Mayor Christner stood atop a temporary podium, in front of the freshly-refurbished ferry terminal. The crowd was made up mainly of inhabitants of the Docks and surrounding areas; they
watched Christner with a certain intensity.

*It's almost as if they're daring him to go back on his word,* Taylor thought with a grin. She stood, with Clockblocker and Grasp, a respectful distance off to the side, along with Miss Militia. An honour guard, not a literal guard. Overhead, Evenstar – once Purity – hovered.

"... and it gives me great pleasure to finally declare the Brockton Bay Ferry open to the public once more,"declaimed Christner. "It has been many years in the coming, with many pitfalls and obstacles. But one man has been behind it all the way. One man has urged my predecessors, and myself, to see it through. And now that the gang menace in Brockton Bay has abated, it is finally possible to do so."

He gestured to the crowd. "And that man is here today. Daniel Hebert, if you can come up here and take a bow?"

Taylor watched her father, dressed in formal clothing for once, climb on to the podium. Proudly, she watched him face up to the Mayor, as if they had never had bitter arguments about this very situation. He shook Christner's hand, and the audience clapped.

"It's very good to be here, on this day," Danny addressed the crowd. "To see one of my lifelong dreams fulfilled at last. The Brockton Bay Ferry is a symbol of the city. I thank you, Roy, for doing this."

Christner smiled like a politician. Taylor grinned. Accord wrote it into the plan for Brockton Bay. *He couldn't very well not do it. But we all have to act like it was his idea.*

"Well, Danny, I think that it's only fair that given all your hard work toward this end, you should be the one to officially open the terminal for business." Christner reached behind the podium and produced a gigantic pair of scissors, which he handed to Danny. They required two hands to hold, and Danny struggled for a moment with them, then he got the hang of it.

Opening the shears wide, he paused them over the ribbon, waiting for the photographers' flashes to go off. Then he gestured for Christner to join him.

"Here," he said, his voice picked up by Christner's lapel mic. "We can do this together."

And to a storm of clapping, to a veritable blizzard of flashes, they closed the blades together, and the ribbon sheared neatly in half.

The Brockton Bay Ferry was officially open once more.

-o-o-o-

Literally thousands of people had tried to buy tickets for the inaugural run of the rebuilt Brockton Bay Ferry, from north to south. Only a few dozen would fit on board, so a serious amount of weeding had had to be done. The Mayor, of course, along with a few chosen members of his office staff. Miss Militia, as the head of the local Protectorate. Director Piggot, looking leaner and meaner than ever, as the representative of the PRT.

Quite a few local celebrities had vied for places, and a few had made it. But roughly half the places were awarded to people from ordinary walks of life, from factory worker to office worker, from teacher to taxi driver. One place, of course, had been set in stone from the beginning.

As Danny Hebert stepped on board the ferry, he though his heart would burst with pride. This was happening at last. The ferry was running. *I'll have to find a good seat before they're all taken,* he told
himself. *I don't want to miss a minute of this.*

And then a steward was in front of him. "Mr Hebert, sir?" he asked. "If you'll just come this way?"

*Oh, thought Danny. They reserved a seat for me? That was kind of them.*

But he was not escorted to one of the seats on the lower deck, or even the upper deck. To his growing astonishment, the steward led him to the wheelhouse, where the captain himself shook his hand.

"It's a pride and an honour to meet you, Mr Hebert," he stated. "Were it not for you, I'd not have this job."

"Well, uh, it's good to be here," Danny told him. He looked around in puzzlement. "I'm allowed to be up here?"

The captain chuckled warmly. "Strings were pulled, Mr Hebert. Strings were pulled." He gestured to the wheel. "If you'd like to take your place, sir?"

As if in a dream – and indeed, he'd dreamed of it many times – Danny stood before the wheel. The metal spokes were cold under his hands, but to him, they were of the finest carven wood.

In a conversational tone, the captain gave his orders. "Let go fore."

"Let go fore, aye!"

"A little side thrust, if you will, Number One?"

"Side thrust, aye."

The ferry juddered, and Danny felt it moving sideways. He braced himself, kept a good grip on the wheel.

"Let go aft."

"Let go aft, aye!"

"All ahead slow."

The telegraph clanged. "All ahead slow, aye."

Danny felt the motion of the boat; he imagined he could feel every single current impinging on the rudder. He clutched the wheel.

"Mr Hebert?"

Danny glanced around, his heart in his mouth.

"Yes, Captain?"

"Take us out, if you please."

And Danny did.

It didn't matter that half a dozen experienced seamen, including the actual helmsman, were standing ready to step in if he did something stupid. It didn't even matter that this was the first and last time
that he'd ever get to do this.

It was still the proudest moment of his life.

-o-o-o-

Hope watched the ferry churn its way out on to the waters of Brockton Bay, and smiled at Lisa. "Danny finally got his ferry."

"Well, he worked hard enough for it."

"He did. And was that a ship coming into Lord's Port, in the background?"

Lisa grinned. "It was."

"So the Dockworkers' Association is finally getting some work?"

"It is."

They shared a high-five, then Hope turned to Vicky. "And how are things going with the Wards?"

"Really good, actually," the ex-New Waver admitted. "Crime's all the way down in the city, so they're starting to send us to other cities to do training exercises with the Wards there. I've already been to Boston, and they say it'll be New York or Chicago next. It's interesting, and I'm learning a lot."

"And she still comes home on weekends, which is the important thing," Brandish added. "But we miss you and Amy too, Hope. Are you coming home soon?"

Hope squeezed Amy's hand. "I don't know. I really don't."

"Is it true, what I heard?" asked Flashbang. "She sacrificed herself to save you?"

"In a way," Hope admitted. "Together, we more or less saved the world, I guess. And she saved me. But we both nearly died. Her heart stopped. That's how close it was."

Brandish moved over to the bed and put her hand on Amy's shoulder. "I was wrong about her, from the beginning," she mused softly. "She did so much, pushed so hard, to get my approval. She shouldn't have had to. I should have been a mother to her from the very start."

Hope smiled. "Well, when she wakes up, you can tell her that yourself."

Brandish smiled back, a little weakly. "I look forward to it."

-o-o-o-

New Wave had gone again, and Vicky with them. Hope climbed carefully back into bed; she was still feeling just a little fragile. Lying so that her eyes fell naturally on Amy, she settled down for a nap.

There was the sound of a throat clearing behind her; she rolled over to see Robin sitting on the chair beside her bed.

"Oh, hey," she murmured. "How are you?"

Robin shrugged. "Eh. I've been having fun, but I can see the way it's going here. Your Hope
Accord's going to make this place just as boring as back home. I only saw one Endbringer, and he got his ass handed to him. So I'm thinking about going someplace else."

Hope leaned up on her elbow. "Well, I don't know any other place that's got super-powers, sorry."

Robin grinned. "I'll find somewhere to go. I've got all the time in the world."

Hope nodded. "Well, take care. And don't leave without saying goodbye, okay?"

Robin snorted. "As if I would."

-o-o-o-

The next day saw a visit from the ex-members of the Undersiders. Brian as Tenebrae, with his hooded cowl and flaring cloak, all in shades of black or grey. Aisha as Figment, wearing bright, eye-catching colours and a mischievous grin. Alec as Kneejerk, on probation as a reserve member.

"They won't let me on the team unless either Weaver, Brian or Aisha is there with me, because I know they'll kick my butt if I try anything," he explained blithely. His costume was a slightly more subdued version of his Regent outfit, but he still carried his taser.

Weaver was there in her trademark spider-silk costume, bugs hidden in her hair and storage spaces. She hugged Hope and Lisa both, and looked with some concern at Amy.

"Is she going to be all right?" she asked.

"Technically, she is all right," Hope explained. "It's just that she's ... asleep."

"I could jab her with my taser," Alec offered.

"And I could dangle you out the window by one ankle," replied Hope. "But neither of us is going to do any of that, are we?"

"Ahh ... no?" he responded, after a moment's thought.

Hope smiled. Unlike most of her smiles, there was an edge to it. "Good answer."

Rachel was the last one through the door. She wore what could almost be mistaken for a military uniform, with camo gear and heavy boots. Stencilled on the pocket of the shirt was the designation "K-9". More or less ignoring the protests of the hospital staff, she had one of her dogs trotting at her heels, and carried a puppy in a box in her arms.

Hope had heard something about this, but of course she was ten days out of the loop.

"I'm guessing it's not 'Bitch' any more?" she asked, relieving her guest of the box so they could hug.

"No, it's K-9 now," Rachel told her. "They built a big dog pound on the outskirts of the city, and all the stray dogs are going there. I'm in charge."

"Big dog pound', my ass," Lisa put in. "The place is enormous. About a dozen acres the dogs can run around in, a fully staffed veterinary clinic. The works."

As Hope carefully lifted the puppy out of the box, it woke up and turned huge, soulful eyes toward her. She murmured to it and held it close; it licked her face.
"They asked me what I wanted in a dog shelter and training facility, and I told them," Rachel went on, in a slightly disbelieving tone. "And they built it. Just like I told them. And now the police and the military are sending their dogs to me, and I'm training them properly."

Lisa leaned down and cranked Amy's bed up so that she was reclining rather than lying down. She arranged the sleeping girl's arms so that they made a nest, and Hope put the puppy down carefully. It sniffed at her, then snuggled down.

"You forgot to mention the exorbitant fees you're charging them," Lisa added cheerfully.

"Not exorbitant," Rachel protested. "Reasonable. They want properly trained dogs, they get properly trained dogs. And it lets me train dogs for the blind and other disability assist dogs at a discount."

Lisa grinned. "That was my idea. Because the police and military can afford high fees, whereas someone with vision problems can't."

"And the public relations isn't hurting you one little bit, is it?" Hope observed, amused.

"That's Lisa's side of things," Rachel told her defensively. "I don't know how to do that. But Lisa does, so I ask her."

Hope nodded. "That's smart. Stick to your strengths. Are you enjoying it?"

Rachel nodded. "Yeah. I got an office with a desk, but I didn't need that, so I told them to take it away. I don't deal with paperwork. I got people who do that for me. I want to talk to people, I do it while I'm dealing with the dogs. That way, I get to see what they're really like."

'And I set it up so that the employees get bonuses based on how well the pound is doing, profit-wise," Lisa explained. "So everyone's motivated to do their job as best they can. And sometimes I just wander through, checking the place out. No-one notices the tea girl."

Hope shook her head, chuckling. "It sounds like you've got it worked out."

"And she hasn't punched anyone for days now," Lisa observed in amused tones. "It's almost a miracle."

"It's really weird," Rachel commented. "I get people volunteering to work for the place. To work for me. I don't get it."

"Do you have any problems with them?"

Rachel shook her head. "No, just the opposite. They're my best people."

"So where's the problem?"

"It's not a problem. It's just weird. I don't know why they're volunteering."

Hope shrugged. "Maybe they just want to work with you."

"Like I said, weird."

And so they chatted, and Hope got caught up with what was going on around Brockton Bay.

But what none of them noticed, not even the sharp-eyed Lisa, was that Amy's hand, while she slept, crept out to caress the head of the puppy nestled in her arms.
And in her dreams, Amy smiled.
In which the narrative ends, but the story goes on

Hope sat alongside the bed and brushed Amy's hair.

It had become a minor ritual with her; she would spend the morning with her, brush her hair, hold her hand and talk with her. Sometimes, she would bring in the puppy that Rachel had gifted to them; the puppy would sit in Amy's lap and nuzzle her hands while Hope plied the brush. Sometimes, Hope fancied that she saw Amy's hands moving to stroke the puppy, but she could never be sure.

Riley had ensured that Amy would not suffer from muscular dystrophy, via a small module implanted in the back of her neck; this induced smooth reactions in her muscles, flexing them one at a time, ensuring that proper tone was maintained.

"I went and saw Rachel's dog pound yesterday," Hope told Amy conversationally. "It's all that Lisa said, and more. Oh, and I got an interesting offer. Apparently certain people are interested in the amount of planning that went into the Hope Accord and the Christner Initiative, and they'd like me to ask Accord for plans to solve some of their problems. Only they don't know it's Accord. I need to talk to him, see if he's interested."

She paused to work out a knot.

"I swear, I have no idea how you get your hair so tangled while lying here asleep. The ferry's still running well, and making money. I didn't know it, but they had Danny Hebert at the wheel when they took it on the first run. That must have been awesome for him."

Stroke, stroke, stroke with the brush.

"To be honest, the Initiative has really changed the face of the city. It's really made a difference. And with the gangs either keeping their heads down, leaving town or defecting to the heroes, the crime rate's dropping all the time."

Her strokes slowed, and her voice dropped slightly.

"Which I guess is a good thing, because I found something out yesterday. I ... was at the hospital, and a young man came into emergency. He'd been in a motorcycle accident, torn up pretty badly. I tried to heal him, but his heart gave out before it took. So I tried to give him the kiss of life, and ..."

Her voice trailed off to a whisper. "Nothing. It didn't happen. I've lost it. I can't bring people back from the dead any more. What we did with Eden must have burned it out."

She shook her head. "And I think I know what happened with your powers. Riley said you were clinically dead. And I told Scion to take the shards that were loose, had belonged to dead people."

She closed her eyes; tears ran down her cheeks.

"Oh, sweetie," she whispered. "I wish you hadn't gotten hurt. I wish you hadn't lost your powers. I would give anything to have you back with me, with us. It's all my fault."

Dropping the brush, she gathered Amy into her arms, holding her close. Her cheek next to Amy's, she could feel the other girl's pulse, feel the warmth of her skin. Her power could feel the steady cycling of Amy's body rhythms, her brain waves, her heart rate.

And then Amy's arms went around her, returning the embrace.
Hope's eyes opened wide, and she drew her head back to stare at Amy's face, eyes just now gradually easing open.

"Hi," whispered Amelia Claire Lavere. "How are you?"


"Eighteen days," Hope confirmed. "But you're awake now. That's wonderful!"

Amy nodded and nuzzled her cheek. "It is kinda nice to wake up to your face," she agreed. "Remember when we were living in the shelter?"

Hope chuckled. "That seems so long ago, now." Her cheerful expression slid away. "Uh, I think I need to tell you something."

"My powers?" Amy grinned at Hope's startled expression. "I know. I've been just under the surface, these last few days. I could hear most of what was going on, but I just couldn't make myself care enough to wake up."

"Sweetie, I'm sorry," Hope told her, voice near to breaking.

Amy hugged her close again. "What about? My powers?"

Hope nodded. "It's my fault you nearly died, and that you lost them."

Amy's voice was firm. "Well, if I hadn't, you would have died, and that would have been a damn sight worse."

"But you still lost your powers."

Amy pulled back from the hug. She put her hands on Hope's shoulders. "Hope. Sweetie. Do you love me any less because I don't have powers, because I won't be able to heal people any more?"

Hope looked up, startled. "What? No! I love you just as much as ever."

Amy smiled and kissed her gently on the tip of the nose. "And that's all that matters. Hope, I'm glad I don't have my powers any more. They were a burden, always demanding more from me than they gave. Sure, I was a celebrity. But I was always expected to keep going, heal one more person. I never had time to be me."

Hope caressed her cheek. "Until you were with me?"

Amy nodded. "You gave me that chance. You always gave me the choice. I could be silly; I could choose to simply not heal anyone that day. And now ... I don't even have to worry about that. I'm me at last. Amelia Claire Lavere. Not Amy Dallon. Not Panacea. Not ever again." She grinned. "And we saved the world, so that's a bonus too."

-o-o-o-

The newspaper headlines read simply: SHE'S AWAKE.

A picture of Amy, leaning slightly on Hope, standing on a balcony and enjoying the sunlight, made most of the papers. Literally thousands of letters from well-wishers poured in.
Amy rubbed the itchy spot on her neck, from where Riley had removed the control module, and leafed through the letters. "Wow. They're saying such nice things." Envelopes covered the sofa between them, and more were piled on the coffee table.

Hope grinned, reading others. "Yeah, well, Lisa kind of let slip that we saved the world, and that the Endbringers aren't going to be a hassle any more. And that you were involved, and that was why you were in the hospital."

Amy shook her head. "That's still amazing to me. Endbringers … gone. Scion … gone."

"Yeah," agreed Hope. "You know, they're talking about letting some of the less problematic people out of the Birdcage. Now that there's a lot less of the S-class threats around." She raised an eyebrow. "Did you want to say hi to your dad, someday?"

"Do we really need to start that up, all over again?" asked Carol Dallon, bringing in another sheaf of letters. "More mail, honey."

"Thanks, Mom," Amy replied with a smile. "Are these really all the people I ever helped, ever healed?"

"And the friends and families of same," Carol agreed with a nod. She leaned down and kissed her foster daughter on the top of the head. "As far as I'm concerned, it's just nice to have you home. Powers or no powers."

Amy twisted around to look up at her. "Is it really such a bad thing, to want to meet him again? I mean, Mark's great, and I couldn't wish for a better dad, but he's not my real dad, you know?"

Carol sighed. "I suppose it takes a long time to let go of the antipathy I felt for him for so long. But he's not an evil man. Just … a villain. Like others I could mention."

Lisa leaned in through the doorway. "Someone mention my name?" she asked cheerfully.

Hope looked up. "Oh, hi. Was just thinking about you, actually."

"Really?" asked Lisa, entering the room and perching on the end of the sofa next to Hope. "And why is that?"

"Well, Amy's looking to maybe see what it's like to reunite with her father ..." Hope began.

Lisa stood up abruptly. "No." She paused, reconsidered her words. "Hell no."

Carol looked at her, puzzled, as did Amy.

Lisa pointed a finger at Hope. "No. We don't go there."

Hope stood up from the sofa. "Lisa. Sweetie. You know it's going to always bother you."

Lisa shook her head violently. "Let it bother me. No. Not going there. No goddamn way."

"What ...?" asked Carol blankly.

Amy looked at her, shrugged.

Hope took Lisa in a gentle hug; Lisa resisted at first, then let herself be embraced.
"Not fair," she muttered, as her arms crept around Hope.

Hope held her closely. "You've helped me solve so many problems for other people," she murmured. "Let me help you solve this one."

"But I don't want to," Lisa told her plaintively.

"You know I'll keep asking."

"You suck."

"If loving you enough to want to help you with this means that I suck, then sure, I suck," agreed Hope cheerfully. "You know there'll never be a better time to do this."

Lisa looked around at Carol and Amy. "A little help here?"

"Uh … what are we talking about, precisely?" asked Amy blankly.

Lisa took a deep breath. "My brother."

Carol frowned. "You have a brother?"

"Had a brother," Lisa corrected her. "He died."

Hope nodded. "And we're going to go and talk to her family, and find out exactly why. It's been a couple of years, Lisa's got a lot better handle on her powers than when she ran away, and, well, closure is good."

"Well, that sounds like an excellent idea," Carol stated.

Lisa stared at her, looking betrayed. "You're not supposed to be on her side!"

Carol smiled austerely at her. "I seem to recall someone coming to me and ripping the bandage off, getting at the problems underneath. It wasn't particularly pleasant, at the time. Now? I'm much more appreciative of what I've got. I'm sure you will come to that realisation yourself, once you go and do this."

Amy got off the sofa and hugged Lisa as well. "I think so too."

"Traitors," mumbled Lisa into Hope's shoulder. "Surrounded by traitors."

"Granted," Hope agreed. "So, when will you be ready to go?"

-o-o-o-

The house was large, well-kept. Whoever lived there was obviously well-to-do. Hope circled once, then touched down lightly on the front driveway.

Lisa glowered at the house. "They're not home."

"Really?" asked Hope with a grin.

"My power says so. Let's go. We can come back later."

Hope's tone was amused. "Hm. So my power, that says that there are two people in the house, is playing me false?"
"Obviously. Must be an illusion caused by sunspots." Lisa went to walk away.

Hope caught her hand. "Sweetie. We're so close. You can't walk away now."

"Sure I can. Watch me."

Lisa went to walk away. Hope didn't let go of her hand. She began to walk up the driveway, towing Lisa behind her.

"For someone who's really nice to everyone, you can be totally mean sometimes," Lisa complained.

"If you say so." Hope reached out a wingtip to press the doorbell. The musical tone sounded through the house.

The front door opened.

Hope mustered her best smile. "Good morning, sir. Mr Reginald Livsey, I presume?"

The middle-aged man standing in the doorway frowned at her. "That's me. You're that Hope person I've been seeing on the news, right?"

Hope nodded. "I am. And I'm glad to meet you. Even if a certain other person isn't so glad to be here."

Without apparent effort, she brought Lisa around to face the man in the doorway. Lisa sighed and accepted the inevitable.

Reginald Livsey stared. "Sarah?"

Tattletale, aka Lisa Wilbourn, aka Sarah Livsey, sighed again. "Hi, Dad."

-o-o-o-

"- well, of course you're staying," Reginald Livsey insisted. "I'm sure we could find a position for you in the company -"

Hope shook her head before Lisa could object. They sat on either side of a coffee table; a woman, who resembled Lisa with about twenty years added on, served them tea and cookies, then sat down beside Reginald.

"My wife, Lisa," Reginald introduced her.

Hope nodded. "Ah. Very pleased to meet you, Mrs Livsey." She turned back to Lisa's father. "You misunderstand, sir. Your daughter is merely visiting. We're not here for her to come back. We're here for her to find out what happened to her brother. To Rex."

Both the adult Livseys stiffened.

"We don't talk about that," Lisa Livsey stated flatly.

"You won't need to," her daughter replied, just as flatly. "You kept his room just the same? Good. I need to look at it." She got up from the sofa.

"You can't -" began Mrs Livsey.

"I can and I will." Lisa turned to Hope. "You dragged me out here. I may as well see this through."
Hope nodded, and got up also. "Reginald, Lisa … let her do this. She has to know."

Both of the parents were on their feet now also. "This is trespass -" Reginald began.

"No," Hope told him. "She's just paying her last respects to her brother."

She watched as Lisa went up the stairs two at a time. Lisa was moving with purpose now, accepting the reason she was here. Moving forward.

"She can't -" began Mrs Livsey again.

"Five minutes," Hope told her soothingly. "That's all it will take."

---

Lisa was down in three.

"Found out what I needed to know," she told Hope. "Let's go."

Hope looked at Lisa's parents. "Shouldn't you …?"

"Tell them?" Lisa raked them with a glance. "Hell, they know. They've known for years. They just didn't want to admit it to anyone. Or even themselves."

"So tell me," urged Hope. "So they hear it from someone."

Lisa rolled her eyes and took a deep breath. "Okay," she began. "Rex was having trouble with his classes, and fighting with his girlfriend. This was because he was beginning to realise he was gay."

Her mother took in a quick breath, and clutched at her husband's arm. Reginald stood there, watching Lisa, his face set.

Lisa flicked a glance at Hope, then went on. "He was also getting into a bad crowd, probably with the guys he was hooking up with. They were into drugs; he was buying them the drugs with his allowance. I'd say he had a bad breakup with one, found out that they were only with him for his money, not for himself. One bad day." She didn't need to complete the sentence.

"I'm sorry," Hope told the middle-aged couple softly. "I know it must be hard."

Mrs Livsey shook her head. "It's all right," she replied. "Sarah's right. We always knew, deep down, that it must be something like that, but we didn't want to -"

"Nonsense!" snapped Reginald. "Pure speculation and poppycock!"

Lisa held up her hand, opened it. On her palm sat a small dark object, and two crumpled pieces of paper. "A marijuana seed," she recited softly. "Half a love note, written in a masculine hand. A corner of a letter in Rex's handwriting, with half the word 'please' on it. It's all I needed."

Reginald sagged on to the sofa. "But how can you -"

"It's my power," Lisa reminded him. "I make connections. It took me about a minute to find those things, and another minute to figure it all out." She turned to Hope. "Can we go now?"


Reginald raised his hand, as if to stop them. "Sarah … the company ..."
Lisa shook her head. "No, Dad. Not now, and not ever." She went out the door, walking fast; Hope followed.

They were all the way down the driveway and at the street before Hope caught up. She folded her arms around Lisa from behind, and held her until she stopped shaking.

"Are you okay?" she asked gently.

Lisa nodded, leaning back against her. "Yeah," she sighed. "It's just that … it all came back. All over again."

"Right," murmured Hope. "Sorry."

"No, no, you were right," Lisa told her, squirming around to face her. "I found out. Now I know. Now I can put that behind me."

Hope smiled at her. "So … what were you doing for that last minute?"

Lisa leaned her head against Hope's forehead. "Saying goodbye to him."

Hope held her close. "I'm glad you could do that."

Lisa pulled away slightly. "Me too. I'm glad you made me come here." She stuck out her tongue. "But you're still way too mean to me."

Hope giggled. "But only because I love you."

Lisa considered that. "That's fair, I guess."

-o-o-o-

The Birdcage, September 15, 2011

Word had gotten out; there was a smattering of news crews there. Family and friends of those who would be released had been notified; some had turned up, and some had not.

Amy stood with Lisa and Hope, in the receiving station. Dragon was vetting the releases very carefully indeed; personality, ability to integrate with the changed world outside, chance of re-offending, and many other factors. Hope suspected that she might even be consulting with Dinah Alcott on the future prospects of each potential release.

The heavy doors in front of them opened, and the first prisoner stepped forward. She was a slightly-built woman, maybe in her early twenties, with bright yellow hair. She shaded her eyes as she stared around.


"I'm sorry …?" began Hope.

"She's a singer," Lisa filled her in. "Her powers involve making people do things with her voice." She grimaced. "I always figured she got a raw deal."

"Oh, okay." Hope watched the girl. She looked lost; no-one from the sparse crowd seemed to be
coming forward to meet her. Abruptly, Hope made a decision.

"You two will be okay for a moment?" she asked.

Lisa glanced at her, then at Canary. "Really?" she asked. "Another stray?"

Hope shrugged. "It is what I do."

She strolled forward until her path and Canary's intersected.

"Hi," she greeted her, holding out her hand. "Hope. You're Canary?"

Canary shook it automatically. "Wow," she observed. "Your voice is amazing. I mean, I've seen you on TV, but it doesn't do you justice."

Hope blinked. Canary's voice was … utterly gorgeous. "Yours is really nice too," she replied. "My friend said you were a singer?"

Canary nodded, but her shoulders slumped. "Doubt I'll get work doing that again."

"Oh, I don't know," Hope told her. "There's room for everyone, somewhere, in this world. You got someone meeting you?"

Canary snorted. "I doubt it. My parents didn't respond when they contacted them, and my ex is probably moving as far away as possible."

"Come with us," urged Hope. "We can put you up for a few days, until you get your situation sorted out."

The yellow-haired woman stared at her. "... what's the catch?" she asked eventually.

"No catch," Hope assured her. "I just like helping people, is all."

Canary seemed to take a long, long moment making up her mind. Then she stuck out her hand. "Paige," she introduced herself.

Hope shook it. "Just Hope, I'm afraid," she grinned.

"Real name?"

"Real name."

"That must be kind of convenient."

Hope smiled. "Come on, let's go introduce you to my friends."

-o-o-o-

Amy saw the tall, bearded man exit the large doorway. A vague memory stirred; he had been taller, and his beard much less grey.

No. I was much younger.

Ten years ago. Has it been that long?

Their eyes met; his gaze moved on, before returning to hers. He frowned, a little puzzled.
She stepped forward. He reciprocated the action.

She took another step, then another.

They met in the middle of the floor, looking at one another.

"... Daddy?" asked Amy in a small voice.

"Little Amelia," Marquis greeted her, and drew his daughter into a hug.

Lisa stood back a little, a small smile playing on her face. Hope approached, with Canary in tow.

"Ah," Marquis greeted Hope. "I've seen you in the news. Heard of you. You've been going around with my Amelia."

Hope nodded. "I have. It's good to finally meet you, put a face to the name."

"Likewise; it is good to speak with you. I have heard of your good works."

She shrugged slightly. "I try to help people."

"She helped me," Amy added. "She really, really did."

Marquis' eyes searched her face. "You've been hurt. You've been through a great deal of pain and suffering." His face darkened. "Who did this?" The threat to do something about it was unspoken but very real.

Hope cut in, her voice firm. "It doesn't matter, Mr Lavere. The people in question have been made aware of their error, and have corrected their ways. You have my personal word on this."

He blinked, taken aback by her tone.

"I'd listen to her when she puts on that tone of voice, Daddy," Amy told him with a hint of amusement in her voice. "The first time I heard her use it, she was telling us how we were going to take down the Slaughterhouse Nine."

He frowned. "I heard something ... "

"All true," Lisa informed him. "She personally captured Jack Slash and held him down to be executed."

"And the latest time she used that tone?" he asked, with the attitude of someone carefully exploring a concept.

Lisa and Amy glanced at each other, then back at him. "Behemoth," they chorused.

"I ... see," replied Marquis.

"In all honesty," Hope pointed out, "it wasn't really my plan either time. I just presented them."

"And yet, the fact that you are still around, and neither of those monsters are, does say something," Marquis pointed out. "Very well, I shall accept your word on my daughter's situation. And thank you, for doing what you have done for her."

"She's done no less for me," Hope replied steadily. "We have helped each other – Lisa and Amy and me – so much, over the last few months."
Paige watched the byplay with just a little sadness. She hadn't known that Marquis was Panacea's father; she suspected that Panacea hadn't known for long, either. But they were talking, communicating, listening to each other. Hope, who had approached her, was talking to both of them now. It was heartwarming, but she felt a pang of envy.

A soft chime sounded from the metallic wristband with which she had been issued. She pressed the response button.

"Paige Macabee," Dragon's voice sounded softly from the speaker. "Have you contacted someone to stay with, or do you need governmental accommodations for the time being?"

Paige had been just about to turn and walk away from the little group – she was sure that they didn't really need her around – but a crystalline wing curled around her and brought her up short.

"Going somewhere?" asked Hope.

Paige looked at her, at the girls and the ex-supervillain.

"You were serious about letting me stay with you?" she asked uncertainly.

Hope nodded. "We have a spare bedroom, and a sofa." She glanced at Panacea.

"Mom will probably grumble a little, but she'll get over it," the teenage girl agreed with a smile.

Paige took a deep breath, and pressed the button again.

"I've got a place to stay," she told Dragon.

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Boston, September 20, 2011

Citrine nodded respectfully to Hope. "Accord will see you now."

"Thank you." Hope opened the door to Accord's office, and entered. He looked up, and a rare, faint smile crossed his face, faithfully mirrored by his mask.

"It's good to see you, Hope," he greeted her.

"And you as well, sir," she replied. "You're looking well."

He nodded slightly at the compliment. "Since the Hope Accord went through, I have been monitoring it closely. Three more non-member nations accepted their roles in it just this week. Each day, I am revising the estimated time to completion, downward."

"That is truly excellent news," she responded. "I'm very glad to hear it. I'm also glad to hear that you have been dismantling your organisation."

"It's no longer needed," Accord told her. "I formed it in order to acquire the resources to bring the plan to fruition by myself. I can no longer expand, in any case; since Cauldron ceased supplying power formulas, I have been unable to take on more Ambassadors." He tilted his head to one side. "But you aren't here to talk about my organisation."
"No, I'm not," Hope agreed. "I'm here to talk to you about us working together. About employment."

A slight frown marred Accord's forehead. "You speak unclearly. Do you wish to work for me, after all?"

"No," Hope told him. "I want you to work for me."

There was a long pause.

"I ... am no closer to understanding," Accord confessed. "What work will this entail?"

Hope took a deep breath. "I have been approached by people who are very impressed by the planning that went into the Hope Accord and the Christner Initiative, and want me to help supply plans to deal with other, equally daunting, problems."

Accord blinked. "I ... see."

"Now, I know that these are not my plans. They know that these are not my plans. I strongly suspect that they know exactly whose plans they are. But this is not a factor for them. They are willing to use me as a façade, for you to work through me, in order to implement plans to better the world. " She paused. "To make it more orderly."

She saw the moment that the hook was set, the moment that she had his complete attention.

"I could be convinced to look at this idea more closely," he allowed.

"I'm thinking of setting up a non-profit organisation," she went on. "Probably in Brockton Bay. A purpose-built structure – I'd prefer you to design it, so we both know it will be exactly as we need it. You would have your own office spaces, separate from everyone else, of course, with your own entrance."

"Of course," he agreed.

"I will be the nominal figurehead, presenting plans to clients, while you will have people working for you that have been vetted by both of us. No-one will get in to see you, to talk to you, unless you specifically want to talk to them."

He nodded. "That is probably ... wise," he agreed.

"You will have complete control over what you make plans for," Hope went on. "Full computer modelling equipment, people trained to use it, other people to take down dictated plans, whichever way you want to do it. All plans you make will be archived with full public access. Clients will present problems, you create the plans, and I present them." She paused. "Is there any problem with the concept?"

"It's a little rough and ready," he informed her austerely. "I will do some research, and get back to you with an organisational plan, including a site for the building, and a tentative opening date."

She smiled. "So you're interested?"

"My dear Hope, of course I am interested. I will, of course, bring my full funds to the table, to cover any unexpected start-up costs. And I will bring my own people on board as well."

"Of course," she agreed. "I want you to be as comfortable with this idea as possible."
"My comfort level is rising as we speak," he assured her. "Had you thought of advertising strategies? Even a name for this non-profit of yours?"

"I was considering the name Global Solutions," she suggested. "And as for advertising, there are many people who are better at it than I am. Such as yourself."

"Such as myself," he agreed blandly. "When we sit down next, I will present you with those plans as well."

"I look forward to it," she assured him, and he knew she meant it.

-o-o-o-

After the door had closed behind her, Accord sat looking out at the city skyline for a long moment. Then he turned back to his desk. Opening his laptop, he called up the most recent maps of Brockton Bay.

He had plans to make.

-o-o-o-

Brockton Bay PRT Building, October 9, 2011

"Ew," remarked Hope. "What is it?"

'It' was a large creature, somewhere between a large dog and a small horse in size. It had fangs and claws in abundance; even spread out in death in the hangar of the PRT building, it evoked a sharp impression of danger, of menace.

"A Nilbog creature," Director Piggot told her with distaste.

"Nilbog? I've heard of him? Didn't he ..."

"He triggered, and slaughtered a whole town, ten years ago, yes," the Director agreed. "Also, most of three squads of PRT that went in to investigate. I was one of two survivors."

"Thus your injuries," Hope recalled.

"Thus my injuries," Piggot agreed. "For which, I want to thank you again, just by the way. I just this last week re-qualified for field work."

"Oh, that's fantastic!" Hope impulsively hugged her; the Director hugged her back.

"Back to business," the Director went on. "That thing was shot to death in a town thirty miles away from Ellisburg. There have been reports of other creatures roaming the countryside. He's getting them out somehow, and they've been attacking wildlife, farm animals and people. Apparently, the inhabitants of Ellisburg are getting desperate for food."

"This is not a good thing," Hope agreed gravely. "But I'm not Protectorate, and I'm not PRT. Why have you brought me in on this?"

"Because you're the best talker I know," Director Piggot told her bluntly. "If anyone can convince Rinke to stand down and surrender, it's you."
"Otherwise …?"

Piggot's voice was flat. "Otherwise we do this the hard way, and people die. I'd rather avoid that."

"Tell me about Nilbog," Hope requested. "How does he think? What are his creatures like?"

They walked away, talking; the muscular brunette with the close-cut hair, and the petite silver-haired crystal-winged angel. Behind them, the PRT troops bundled up the corpse of the creature, and prepared it for frozen storage.

-o-o-o-

A Dragon Craft, October 11, 2011

"I'm still not sure how you convinced me to go along with this," Marquis observed; his tone was more amused than complaining.

"We could always turn the craft around and take you back," Director Piggot observed blandly.

"No, no need to go to that trouble. I've come this far; I may as well see it through. I was merely making conversation."

Hope shrugged. "I asked, and you said yes?"

Marquis smiled at her. "I'm beginning to see why you were issued a Master rating. It's very hard to say no to you."

"And that," Director Piggot observed, "is the general idea, here." She looked at Hope. "The other arrangements are in place?"

"They'll meet us there," agreed Hope.

"And your house-guest, the singular Ms Macabee," Marquis commented. "Has she found a place of her own yet?"

"Oh, yes," Hope told him. "But she still comes over for Saturday night dinner. Carol's rather taken her under her wing." She gave him a mock-stern glare. "You could stand to come over more often, you know. Amy's always happy to see you."

He chuckled gently. "I would rather not wear out my welcome. Mrs Dallon is polite enough, but we do have a history."

Hope put her hand on his. "Well, it's always good to see you when you do come over."

"And you as well," he assured her.

"Okay, everyone, tighten it up," Piggot informed them crisply. "T minus thirty seconds."

Everyone fell silent then; the only sound to be heard in the cabin was the distant roar of the turbines, outside.

Abruptly, they rose to a thunder, and everyone felt the craft slewing, performing a hard braking manoeuvre. Something pinged off the outer hull.
"Whenever he's ready," Piggot murmured to Hope.

Hope and Marquis unbuckled their belts and stood; abruptly, next to them, another person was standing in the cabin. A teenage girl with pure white hair, wearing a martial arts outfit.

Hope smiled. "Hello, Snow Tiger."

-0-0-0-

Monsters lined the wall surrounding Ellisburg; on the outside, Dragon craft of varying shapes and sizes faced inward. Protectorate capes from several cities were outside as well, on alert in case anything went drastically wrong. One Dragon craft hung far back, out of the way.

Within it, a bearded man lay upon a hospital gurney. His face was lined with pain. The blonde-haired girl attending him watched his vital signs with concern.

"You do realise that I can give you something for that without reducing your concentration," she told him.

He smiled wanly at her, and grasped her hand lightly.

"Riley, my dear girl," he told her, "whatever pain I go through, I go through willingly. It is my punishment, my penance, for what I have done."

She sighed softly, and dabbed his brow. "As you say, Dr Manton," she assented. "But this is not good for you."

He chuckled briefly. "So few things in life are."

-0-0-0-

The Dragon craft made a speed run directly over the top of Ellisburg. A winged creature, all claws and talons and leathery pinions, rose to challenge it; the craft jinked right, then cut around to the left of it. Scores, waves, of bone spears shot up to strike it, then fell away.

The rear hatch opened, and three people stepped out. The Dragon craft accelerated drastically, and roared away, out of the danger zone.

They fell, feet first, apparently uncaring about the fact that they were apparently plummeting to their deaths. Bone spears flashed up, struck them, bounced away. Marquis grabbed one, held on to it.

They hit the ground, and it was as if they had just descended in a lift. No jolt, no jar. Nothing.

Monsters surrounded them, large and small. Venom dripped from fangs, vicious fangs and claws were unsheathed to strike.

Snow Tiger kept her grip on both Hope and Marquis. Her job was not to fight, not this time. It was to provide protection.

Hope raised her voice. "Do not attack!" she called out. "We come to speak with your king! We come to speak with Nilbog, with Jamie Rinke! Please let us pass, and none will be harmed!"

There was a long pause, and she almost dared let herself hope that it would work.

And then the creatures surged forward.
Marquis shrugged. "Well," he conceded. "It was worth a try." He raised the bone spear he still held, and abruptly, blades and shards shot out from it in all directions. The spears that littered the ground nearby from the earlier salvos also sprouted extensions, blossoming outward, almost faster than the eye could see.

In seconds, they were surrounded by a heavy framework of thick bone, encasing and imprisoning the creatures that menaced them.

Hope blinked. "I am impressed."

Marquis dusted his hands off. "It's like riding a bicycle. You never really lose the knack." He nodded toward the creatures. "It's their fault, really. They supplied me with all this fresh bone. What did they think was going to happen?"

Hope and Snow Tiger chuckled as the three of them strolled toward the centre of Ellisburg, where Lisa had told them they were most likely to find Rinke.

-two-o-o-o-

Two more waves of creatures assaulted them before they reached their destination; again, Marquis turned their bone spears against them.

"It's not an uncommon problem," he commented. "They found a strategy that worked, and they used it. But they never anticipated someone who could use it against them."

Director Piggot's voice crackled in their earpieces. "Progress?"

"Nearly there," Hope responded. They turned a corner, and she corrected herself. "No, actually. We are there."

"Excellent. Let me know when you've nailed down resistance."

"Will do."

There was a long U-shaped table, but it was currently unattended. Only the goblin king himself, grossly obese, lounging on his makeshift throne, with a cloth crown tilted over one ear, could be seen.

"There are others around," commented Snow Tiger, as if she were talking about the weather.

Hope nodded. "I know." She could feel them when she stretched out her senses, could feel their life-pulses, the existence of a thinking brain. Most of them were animalistic, unthinking, but a few were quite intelligent.

The gross figure lifted and turned its head to stare at them; it straightened in its seat, straightening the cloth crown.

"Who dares invade the kingdom of Nilbog?" it bellowed.

The words seemed to be in an accent of some sort, but as Hope's power unscrambled it, she realised that it was just his own unique way of speaking, let go unchecked for ten years of only having his own thoughts to share with.

"My name is Hope," she told him clearly. "I come to negotiate for your life."

He laughed harshly. "Do you not mean your life?" he retorted. "You stand in the midst of my
children, here. We could destroy you in an instant, if I did not find you interesting."

Hope shook her head. "Beside me stands the one who destroyed Behemoth," she told him firmly. "We could kill you all, level this city to the ground, if we had a mind to. But we choose not to. We choose to talk, to negotiate. Now, do you accept negotiation, or do you choose to die of stubbornness?"

Flashes of anger, petulance, fear, anger again, crossed the gross countenance.

"Prove you have the will!" he bellowed. "Prove you will fight, you will kill!" Heavy footfalls shook the ground, and a large elephant-like creature showed itself. Heavy jaws and fangs showed that it was no elephant. It lunged forward.

Hope sighed, and nodded to Marquis. He raised his hand, and the bone shard in it grew into a spear that planted one end in the ground. The other shot outward, punching through the massive creature's chest and bursting out its back. It fell, skidded to a halt.

"How many more have to die before you understand that you are beaten?" asked Hope of Nilbog. "We will not allow you to kill more people, to menace those around you. You are done. Surrender, and we will let your creatures live out their lives in this city. That is the best offer you are going to get."

The goblin king stared at her. "You invade my sovereign territory, threaten me, attack my creatures, then you simple expect me to roll over and surrender? I will swamp you with my children, trample you under! We will crush you, kill you eat your flesh, suck the marrow from your bones, before we surrender to such as you!"

When Hope spoke next, a new tone had entered her voice. She said just three words, each one as ominous as a bell tolling for the dead.

"You. Will. Lose."

The words held the same crystalline tones that permeated Hope's everyday speech, but there was a finality to them that arrested thought, and caused chills to run down the back.

Marquis glanced at her, new respect in his eyes. Even Nilbog seemed to shrink back slightly.

"If … if I surrender, then what?" he asked eventually.

"You will be taken from this place," Hope told him crisply. "Placed into imprisonment, exile. You will not be allowed to take your creatures along, or create more once you get there. Your creatures will remain here, walled off. Food will be dropped over the wall, so long as they behave themselves. They will be allowed to live out their lives."

"It barely seems fair," he muttered. "Go, stay, it is all the same. They die."

"I'm here to ensure that no-one else dies today," she informed him. "Make your decision swiftly, Goblin King."

There was silence for more than a minute. And then he nodded, his vast chins wobbling. A crafty expression crossed his face. "I will surrender to you."

Hope shook her head. "Not to me." She touched the earpiece. "Come on down."

A Dragon craft powered out over the city. Nothing was shot at it; nothing rose to meet it. It came to a
hover, thirty feet up. The rear hatch opened.

-0-o-o-

"You don't have to do this, you know!" shouted her captain. "It's dangerous down there!"

"Yes, I do! And you know why!" She shut her faceplate to cut off further argument. Chinning her radio on, she enunciated clearly, "Lady, ready."

The Dragon craft came to a hover. She gestured to the woman beside her, wearing specially built armour; the person had to crouch slightly, being over seven feet tall in the protective gear.

The ramp lowered. She grabbed a spool of rope, threw it over the ramp. It uncoiled on the way down. The giantess did the same with the other spool of rope.

They grabbed their respective ropes, and stepped over the end of the ramp.

Her companion stumbled slightly on landing, but recovered quickly. She herself landed easily, exhilarated at how readily her old skills were coming back to her. They moved toward where Hope and her companions were facing off Nilbog; she came to a halt alongside Hope.

Raising her faceplate, she looked the goblin king in the eye.

"Hello, Nilbog." Emily Piggot's smile was razor-edged. "It's been a long time."

-0-o-o-

The gross figure took a deep breath, even as armoured PRT troops spread out to secure the area.

"I surrender to you. Take me away, imprison me."

Director Piggot shook her head. "Oh, no. It's not so easy as that." She nodded to her tall companion, who raised her own faceplate.

Gully unslung the shovel from her back, and glanced at Hope. Hope pointed at a spot of land, just beside the table. "He's down there."

The goblin king's eyes opened wide. "No! You can't know that!"

The PRT troops brought their guns up, facing outward. Marquis tensed, a bone spear jutting from his hands. Hope looked to Nilbog.

"Do you retract your surrender?"

His tone was petulant. "You took it under false pretences! I didn't know you knew!"

Director Piggot nodded to several of the troopers, who carried containment foam dispensers. Swiftly, they began laying down a wall, which grew higher by the second.

Hope's voice was hard. "Do you retract your surrender?"

Nilbog opened and closed his mouth several times. No matter what he might answer, he didn't want to speak.

Director Piggot nodded to Gully; she brought her shovel down on the bare ground. A massive column of dirt rose up, then crumbled. Within it was an organic-looking grey-white cocoon, perhaps
eight feet long, with an umbilicus leading back into the ground.

"This is him?" asked Piggot of Hope.

"This is him," confirmed Hope.

The gross figure of Nilbog started up from the throne. "No! You cannot -"

Gully brought her shovel down hard on the umbilicus, parting it. Strange fluids spurted. The gross figure collapsed, fell forward, spilled from the throne. Another umbilicus stretched between it and the throne upon which it had been sitting.

And then the creatures attacked.

-o-o-o-

A massive form reared up over the still-forming wall of containment foam. Rifle fire sounded; hit from a dozen angles, it fell back, spurting foul ichor from a hundred wounds.

Marquis concentrated; bone spears all about the area shot shards outward, coming together on the wall, building it higher, wider, thicker. Creatures scrambled over it nonetheless; sporadic rifle fire drove them back again.

Gully scraped her shovel through the dirt in a short semi-circle; a mound of earth rose, reinforcing the wall.

Marquis glanced at her approvingly; the bone shards speared through the dirt mound, holding it in place, reinforcing it.

The large dragon-like creature from before glided over the wall, jaws agape. Rifle fire struck it, rebounded. Marquis sent a bone spear at it; it flipped a wing and evaded. It swooped down at the gathered troops; a rumbling sound emanated from its gullet as it opened its mouth.

More rifle fire spat out at it; one man hefted a grenade launcher, but the round flew wide.

As it flew over them, it belched a vast spray of foul-smelling liquid. Instinctively, Hope shielded Piggot and Gully, the two closest people to her, with her wings. It ran off her, Snow Tiger and Marquis, of course.

The other PRT troops did not fare so well. Smoke arose from their armour, which was not airtight in any case. One began to scream, clutching at his arm.

"Dustoff now now now!" snapped Director Piggot over her radio link.

The 'dragon' banked, began to come back for another run.

Marquis tapped Hope on the shoulder. "Get Snow Tiger up there," he told her.

"But you -"

Bone plates began to extend all over his body; within seconds, he was almost completely covered.

"I'll be fine; go!"

The 'dragon' was swooping toward them again. A rumbling heralded another spray of acid.
Hope took hold of Snow Tiger and lifted off, beating her wings strongly. She rose to meet the
dragon; it flew toward them, opening its maw wide.

She didn't turn aside. They were on a direct collision course, the range closed to almost nothing in
just seconds.

At the last possible moment, she released the teenage girl, and dived aside, under its sweeping wing.

Snow Tiger went straight down the thing's throat.

As Hope glided toward the ground, she saw the creatures massing on the other side of the buildings.
Bone spears shot at her, but turned to dust, or spongy balls, before they struck. *Thank you, Marquis.*

Overhead, the dragon seemed to be in some difficulty. It flailed at the sky with its wings, clutched at
its throat with its talons, and sprayed acid aimlessly, hitting many of its fellow creatures. And then a
fist punched out of its chest; as if this were a signal, it fell.

Hope touched down within the perimeter at about the same time as the dragon crashed to earth,
somewhere beyond the buildings.

"Are you all right?" asked Director Piggot.

"I'm fine," she answered. "Who's hurt?"

Several of the men had pulled off sections of armour; the flesh underneath was horribly blistered, and
actually sloughing away in some places. Hope went to them; she gave them each a pain relief burst
to start with, then she began dealing with the ongoing damage.

A rumbling sound presaged a creature trying to burrow up from below; Gully, jaw set, thrust her
shovel into the dirt and twisted sharply. Cracks radiated outward, and a little blood oozed upward,
darkening the dust; the rumbling did not recur.

Dragon craft came to a hover over the exfiltration point; four faced outward, mounted machine-guns
chattering a warning. Their original craft landed, and the troops filed on board, carrying the cocoon.
It was the one thing that had been totally untouched by the acid.

The hatch closed and they lifted off in a howl of turbines.

Hope finished with the last of the wounded, and turned to Director Piggot. "Are you all right?" she
asked.

Piggot took off her helmet and shook out her hair. "I'm far more than all right, Hope," she assured
the young parahuman. "I've been needing to finish that bit of business for ten damn years."

She looked around at the PRT troops sharing the transport. "Damn fine work," she told them. "Each
and every one of you." She nodded to Marquis. "And *this* time, the damn parahumans held up their
end of the deal."

Ironically, he bowed to her. "Pleased to be of service, Madam Director."

-0-0-0-

When Hope got back to the Dragon craft holding Dr Manton, she was shocked by how strained he
looked.

"What's the matter with him?" she asked Riley in an undertone.
"I don't know," confessed the young bio-tinker. "I could fix him, but he refuses to let me."

"I'm dying," his voice cut across theirs acerbically. "And not before time. I have caused enough pain and death and misery. When I decide that I have done my penance ..." He left the rest unsaid.

Snow Tiger leaned over him and straightened his pillow. "Now, now, don't be like that," she murmured. She looked, of course, entirely unscathed by her recent tussle with the Nilbog-created dragon.

"I will be like that, daughter," he growled, taking her hands in his. "Don't fuss over me so much."

"I keep telling you," Hope heard her say as she exited the Dragon craft. "I'm not really your daughter."

-o-o-o-

Director Piggot and Gully, both now unarmoured, were awaiting her at the bottom of the ramp. She smiled up at the earth-controlling parahuman. "Going back to San Diego?"

"Yeah," agreed Gully, "but I wanted to say goodbye and thank you. That was fun. If a little fraught."

Director Piggot turned to the seven-foot woman. "You're welcome back to Brockton Bay any time." She offered her hand.

Carefully, Gully shook it. "I'll keep that in mind." Leaning down, she picked Hope up bodily and hugged her, wings and all. Hope hugged her back, as best she could.

Emily Piggot watched with some little amusement as Gully set her down again, kissed her on the cheek, then set off toward the other Dragon craft, shovel over her shoulder.

"Looks like you've made a fan," she observed.

"Yeah, well, Amy and I helped her out a bit," Hope explained.

"So I heard. It's a pity you and Amy couldn't help more Case 53s than you did, before Behemoth," commented the Director, as they headed for another craft, where Marquis was waiting.

"We did what we could," Hope told her. "Riley's working on ideas, and Accord's sent some guy called Blasto over from Boston to help out."

Piggot frowned. "Blasto? I know that name."

"What's he do? It sounds like it should be something to do with explosives, but I know it can't be that."

"No, he's a tinker. He specialises in cloning living organisms. The name's something to do with cloning, apparently."

"Huh."

"And if those two are getting together ... I think I'll keep a careful eye on the both of them. Just in case."

Hope sighed in pretended aggravation. "Same old Emily. You have a hard time trusting, don't you?"

Director Emily Piggot looked at her suspiciously, then cracked a reluctant smile. "My trust needs to
be *earned*, Hope," she corrected. "I have more trouble understanding how you manage to trust so easily. Because everything I know about you says that you're not that gullible."

As they climbed up the ramp, Hope shrugged. "I guess ... I let people know that I trust them, and they feel as though they have to live up to it?"

"With anyone else, I would call bullshit," Piggot declared. "With you ... not so much."

"What are we calling bullshit on now?" asked Marquis, already strapped in.

"Why people are so nice to Hope," the Director answered briefly.

"Oh, that's easy," he asserted. "Look at that face. Look at those puppy-dog eyes. Could you disappoint that face?"

Involuntarily, Piggot glanced at her. Hope put on her most soulful look.

The Director stared at her, stony-faced. Hope put a little quiver in her lower lip.

Piggot tried to scowl, couldn't quite make it work. "Okay, dammit, put that away," she told Hope gruffly. "You're making me feel guilty, and I don't even know what I'm supposed to have done."

Hope giggled and hugged her before she sat down.

"And I rest my case," Marquis announced cheerfully.

"Oh, shut up."

The Director's voice was still gruff, but Hope thought she detected a smile on her face as the craft took to the air. She didn't point it out, of course; Emily would have denied it most vehemently.

But all the same, it was there.

-o-o-o-

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**Brockton Bay PRT Building, November 2, 2011**

"How long has he got?"

Hope heard the worry in Riley's voice as they hurried along the corridor. "Maybe a couple of hours, maybe less."

"Why did you wait so long to call me?"

"He insisted! I'm sorry!"

Hope put her hand on the younger girl's shoulder. "It's all right. I'm here now."

Riley took a breath and calmed herself. "Sorry. Thanks. It's just so ..." She trailed off.

"I know, I know. Here, come here a second." Hope pulled Riley to her, gave her a hug. After a long moment, the bio-tinker managed to relax into the hug, and return the embrace.

When they separated, she was smiling; a little tremulously, but it was a smile. "Thanks."
"No problem.". Hope gave her shoulder a last squeeze, then they went on.

-o-o-o-

Doctor Manton's appearance, less than a month from the last time that Hope had seen him, shocked her. He looked twenty years older than he should, his hair greyer, his skin looking like parchment.

Already there were Director Piggot, Miss Militia and Clockblocker, representing the Wards. Snow Tiger stood beside Manton's bed, her eyes sad.

She took his hand in hers, and her power confirmed what Riley had told her. He was dying, his vital signs gradually running down. It had been some time coming, but he was at his lowest ebb. He didn't have long. Even his hand felt cold in hers.

"You don't have to do this," she told him. "You don't have to die."

He chuckled weakly; he was on painkillers, she noted. At least he wasn't in pain, at the end.

"We all have to die, Hope dear," he reminded her. "It's just my time. I've waited long enough."

"Waited?"

Miss Militia spoke up. "Endbringers. He waited to make sure no more would appear."

Weakly, Manton nodded. "By my estimation, we should have had one, maybe two, attacks since my darling Snow Tiger remonstrated with Behemoth. Nothing has happened, so I am presuming that whatever you did worked."

Unexpectedly, Emily Piggot spoke up. "There are other threats -"

"All of a lower magnitude of threat than the Endbringers," Manton cut in, then coughed. "Sorry. I have made my mind up. I assisted you with Behemoth, and with Nilbog. My penance is done. It is time for me to depart this mortal coil."

Hope felt tears start in her eyes. It bothered her, for no reason that she could pin down. William Manton had been a mass murderer; through the agency of the Siberian, he had been responsible for the deaths of thousands of people. Yes, after his death and revival, he had been a different person, but was he different enough that he did not deserve punishment for the pain and suffering that he had caused? He obviously did not think so. His memories of the monster he had been must have tormented him for every day of his new life.

And now he was dying for a second time, amid those who had been his bitterest enemies in life. Fate was strange, sometimes.

The door opened again; this time it was Lisa and Amy. They came straight to Hope; she hugged them both, then stood with her arms around them. Moments later, the door opened once more to admit Weaver. She nodded to Clockblocker; he nodded back. She went and stood by Lisa; Hope saw them clasp hands.

The next time the door opened, it admitted three people; to her surprise, Hope recognised the Triumvirate. Alexandria went to stand next to Miss Militia, and they exchanged a few brief words. Eidolon exchanged a nod with Hope and stood off to the side; Legend moved up alongside Amy and put his arm over her shoulders, his hand on Hope's shoulder.
Manton seemed to rouse himself out of a light doze. He looked around, and between them, Riley and Snow Tiger had to help him to a more upright position. Riley offered him a cup of water; he drank a little, then waved the rest away.

"I haven't got long," he began, "So I'll make this short." His voice was wavering and wispy, down from what it had been even fifteen minutes before.

"I have not been a good man. I have hurt and killed people, for no better reason than that I was angry at the world. I want to apologise to each and every one of you, for those friends or loved ones that I may have hurt."

Hope felt Legend's hand tighten slightly on her shoulder. She moved her hand up over Amy's back to grasp his arm. *He's talking about Hero.*

Manton took a breath, and looked at Hope and her companions. "And I want to say thank you. To you four. For killing me and remaking me as I am, so I could ..." He coughed.

The coughing fit went on for a little, with Snow Tiger holding him. Eventually, he got his breath back, but his voice was now a breathy whisper.

"So I could make some amends before I went." He smiled weakly at Hope, Lisa, Amy and Weaver. "Thank you." He closed his eyes.

There was a long pause, so long that Hope thought that he had gone to sleep. Then they opened again. "M-many things in life I regret, but th-this, here, now … I do not."

His eyelids slipped shut once more. Exhausted from even that slight effort, he slumped back against the pillows.

Snow Tiger straightened up and looked around at them. "He wouldn't say this, but I will." Her voice was strong and clear. "Thank you all for being here, for being at his side. His greatest fear was of dying alone. And for myself, I want to thank you for letting me help, trusting me to -"

Between one word and the next, she vanished, popped out of existence.

Riley felt for a pulse; Hope took a step forward, grasped his wrist. Both of them shook their heads at the same time.

William Manton, the man behind the Siberian, was dead.

And more than one person in the room mourned his passing.

-o-o-o-

**Brockton Bay, January 17, 2012**

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Hope soared.

The sun had yet to rise; in fact, sunrise was still several hours away. The midwinter air had a distinct bite about it, especially at a thousand feet above sea level. Lisa, in her arms, was well bundled up, and was in fact still more than half asleep.

"Nearly there, sweetie," Hope told her cheerfully; a faint snore was her only reply. She grinned, banked slightly to catch an air current, and dived toward their destination.
The Global Solutions building was not the tallest or most ornate in Brockton Bay, but it was certainly
the most aesthetically pleasing. The exterior was not composed simply of straight lines and planes; it
was subtly curved and contoured so as to be pleasing to the eye from all directions.

Accord had made sure of that, had modelled and remodelled the building until it suited his particular
needs. And she had to admit, he had gotten it right. The structure drew the eye; people admired it
without quite understanding why.

It was about the interior that they had actually had several serious arguments. Accord had wanted to
honeycomb the building with death-traps and escape routes; floor by floor, room by room, Hope had
talked him out of them. Again and again she had to remind him that he was no longer a supervillain,
that he was far less likely to come under attack these days.

They had kept several of the secret access-ways between floors, and the heavy Lexan for all office
windows; after all, there were still rogue elements out there, and it was better to be safe than sorry.
But Hope was profoundly glad that she didn't have to worry about setting off a whole series of
booby-traps while getting a snack from the kitchen.

Even with the arguments and the disagreements, the building had gone up in record time. Lisa had
suggested a well-known company to build it, called Fortress Constructions, and Accord had agreed
to the choice. Hope suspected that there was something there that she wasn't seeing, but let Lisa have
her way; so long as it didn't cause problems, she didn't care.

And indeed, Fortress Constructions had stuck to the very letter and spirit of the plans. With Accord's
planning, each phase of the construction had been laid out in painstaking detail, and not very much to
Hope's surprise, the building had been completed well ahead of official schedule.

Half the building was a live-in apartment for Accord, with his offices, as well as quarters for his
people. He had a separate garage, with an unobtrusive entrance. The other half was given over to the
public running of Global Solutions.

Part of the design of the building included an unobtrusive balcony; Hope flared her wings as she
neared it, back-beating to bring herself to a near-halt in midair. As lightly as a feather, they touched
down. Lisa blinked herself awake, and allowed herself to be set on her feet.

The building's security system was massively redundant, and extremely complete in its coverage.
Dragon had supplied a low-level AI, capable of making judgement calls on minimal data, to run it.
Sensors scanned their biometric details from several yards away, and verified their identities without
them having to say a word. The doors slid aside as they approached.

"Good morning, Hope. Good morning, Lisa," announced the building AI. "Hope, you have
seventeen messages from Accord, all indicating completed plans. Your first client meeting is at nine
sharp."

"Good morning, William," Hope replied brightly. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, Hope."


"Hot water is on the boil at this moment," the AI informed them.

"Tea for me, please," Hope requested.
"You got it." Lisa stumbled in the general direction of the kitchen, while Hope went to the small dressing-room and changed into her dress.

This was the same dress she had worn when she addressed the General Assembly; Lisa had advised her to wear it as often as possible while at work. According to her, wearing the dress provided a positive link between Global Solutions and the Hope Accord, and the improvements to living standards already being felt all over the world. Accord agreed with her; Hope accepted that they both had a point, and people did seem to react well to it. She just had trouble thinking that way, of deliberately shaping the way people thought of her.

It was, however, typical of the ongoing dynamic between Accord and Lisa. He was serious, humourless and very much to the point; on the other hand, she was intuitive, mischievous, and occasionally tweaked him for the fun of it. But both of them understood the importance of what was going on here, and neither went so far as to disrupt the daily running of Global Solutions. In point of fact, Hope suspected that Accord secretly enjoyed the occasional verbal sparring; it certainly kept them both on their toes.

Back at her desk, she called up the log of messages from Accord. He had completed the plans for quite a few minor projects, some mid-range ones, and one quite large one, a dam in China. She reviewed the precis for each one in turn, then picked up the phone and started dialling.

Her powers came into their own here; not only was she ideal for talking to people in general, as Director Piggot had said on more than one occasion, but she could speak to each client in their own language, and indeed in their own particular dialect. It made for a strangely personalised service, one which left clients that little bit more satisfied.

With each client, she checked local time before calling them up, and discussing the projected costs and time to completion of the plan given by Accord. Given knowledge of local conditions – and he was certainly capable of performing that level of research – Accord was even able to project the amounts required to pay in bribes and kickbacks, in order to have the plan completed in the quickest possible time.

Very rarely, she needed to take down proposed amendments to the plan. Lisa would listen to the recording of such calls, and advise Accord on what the client actually wanted, that they weren't actually saying. Accord revised such plans and re-submitted them; these were always accepted the second time around.

On this day, there were no such amendments required. She was halfway through a call when Lisa emerged with two cups; one held coffee, and the other, Hope's preferred beverage.

Hope finished the call, wished the client good day in fluent Hebrew, then hung up. "Thank you, sweetie," she told Lisa as she accepted the cup. Standing up from her desk, she strolled with Lisa to the broad picture window.

Sipping at her tea, she admired the predawn view, with the earliest rays of the sun just beginning to show in the southeast.

"We've done a lot of good, haven't we?" she asked.

Lisa chuckled, stirring her coffee. "You've done a lot of good. I was just along for the ride."

Hope reached out and gave her a one-armed side-hug. "Don't be silly. I did my bit, and you did
"More things would have gone wrong without you around," Lisa reminded her. "Remember, you're the Simurgh plot here. I was just a street-level supervillain, struggling from one crisis to the next, until you showed me that there was hope in the world." She leaned into the hug.

Hope raised an eyebrow. "Labyrinth. Behemoth."

Lisa shrugged. "I put things together. It's what I do." She chuckled. "I don't think the PRT were very pleased that you took Elle's side for the negotiations."

"I promised I would. And it seems to be working out."

Lisa chuckled. "If by 'working out', you mean that she's charging them hefty rates for the use of the portals, so that everyone's making out like bandits, sure."

"How many doorways does she have open now?" asked Hope idly.

"No idea. But they've reached a few human-occupied worlds. And quite a few that aren't. Trading seems to be going well. And strangely enough, inter-dimensional war hasn't broken out yet."

"Well, it helps that that Elle can close any of the doors at any time, if she so wishes ..." pointed out Hope.

"And that the current PRT policy is 'don't upset Hope'," grinned Lisa.

"It is not!" protested Hope.

Lisa just drank her coffee. Her grin threatened to break free once more.

"It isn't – is it?"

Lisa said nothing.

Hope sighed. "I just want to help people. I don't demand anything of them in return."

"I know, and that's part of it," explained Lisa. "Also, Cauldron is firmly on your side. They're secretly providing a lot of funding for Global Solutions, where they're not straight-out buying plans from us, via proxies."

"I got that impression, yes," admitted Hope. "Not sure how the rest follows."

"The Triumvirate is Cauldron," Lisa reminded her. "Legend thinks of you and Amy as the daughters he never had. Eidolon is cautiously respectful of you, and even Alexandria apparently likes you. And when the Triumvirate has a good opinion of you, the PRT is very likely to follow suit."

She smirked. "Not to mention that you hold the all-time record for getting the most villains on side and getting them to change their ways. If the PRT turned against you, how many capes – heroes or otherwise – would raise a stink?"

Hope put her hand over her eyes. "Oh god," she muttered. "I've created another cult, haven't I?"

"Not so much," Lisa corrected her. "It's just that you have a lot of friends, on both sides of the fence. Parahuman and human, both. Never forget that." She put her arm over Hope's shoulders, and gave her a squeeze in return.
Hope smiled. "Thanks, sweetie. If I ever start thinking I don't need anyone, be sure and kick me right where I need it, won't you?"

Lisa gave her a vulpine grin. "Always."

-o-o-o-

The first client group of the day consisted of three men and two women; Hope eyed them with a great deal of interest, as they were not the usual run of businessmen and engineers.

"Good morning," she greeted them. "Have a seat, and let's talk about the problems you want solved." She led the way into the meeting room, off the lobby.

They sat in the comfortable armchairs, and Hope started the recorder in the middle of the table. Lisa brought tea and coffee, and the discussion began. The clients had brought maps and projections, which Hope studied and put to one side. They talked; she listened. She asked questions; they answered. Accord had briefed her on what he needed to know to make an adequate plan, and she made sure to cover the salient details.

Once the meeting ended, Hope shook hands with each of them, and Lisa showed them out. They took the memory stick holding the meeting back to the desk, along with the folder of information that the clients had brought along.

"Was that about what I thought it was?" asked Lisa.

"Oh yeah," Hope told her. "This is one that he's really going to enjoy sinking his teeth into."

-o-o-o-

Mars Orbit, February 11, 2012

Legend continued to decelerate; gradually, he felt his mind beginning to come back online, even as his body returned to a more human format. He had never flown so fast for so long before, but it was good to know that he could still think at that speed, even if his brain was so sluggish.

He took his first breath in a million miles or more, curving his motion to swing around the rust-brown planet that hung beneath him. Landscape unchanged over millions of years rolled past as he flew overhead, gradually reducing height. With eyes that could literally identify a type of mosquito from twenty miles away, he observed the terrain, looking for certain things. Possibilities. Prospects.

The radio built into his lightweight spacesuit crackled in his ear. The suit had been designed and built by Armsmaster, and so it barely hampered him at all.

"- gend, please come in. We have you as being in orbit around Mars. Status, please. Over."

He grinned. "Legend here. It's looking good. Suit is in the green. I've spotted several good landing places already. I'm going to make another pass over the planet, then I'll get lower down and start sending pictures. Over."

There was, of course, a lag. Radio waves took time to travel from Mars to Earth; at the current separation, it was about five and a half minutes each way. So he'd be waiting eleven minutes for the next message.
No doubt some Tinker would have been able to whip up a faster-than-light comms device. However, he didn't want to bring along something that he had no idea how to repair if it broke; this was the reason that most Tinkers did not hand out their inventions to anyone who needed one. Radios were a little slow in this instance, but they worked, and he could at least try to fix it if it broke.

He decided to make good use of the lag time; correcting his course, he flew up to intercept what he recognised as Phobos. If it or Deimos could be used as an orbital staging point, this would make life much easier for all concerned.

After that, he would descend through the atmosphere, and clear off the prospective landing points. Radio beacons would be placed at each location, and he'd do what surveying he could before he had to head back to Earth.

In any case, he intended to be home in three days. Exploring Mars was all well and good, but he had no intention of missing Valentine's Day with his husband.

-o-o-o-

Moon Base One, May 6, 2012

"Okay, try it now."

Colin took the module from Dragon, and slotted it into place. It clicked home, and a sudden, rising hum caused a smile to cross his face. Abruptly the lights came on, illuminating the maintenance corridor.

"That got it," reported the android in a very human-like tone of satisfaction. "Lights are coming on all over the base."

Colin pulled her close and shared a kiss with her; as they separated, a smile curved her lips.

"Another week or so and we'll have this place up and running. I've been studying Alan Gramme's work; it's fascinating. I should be able to integrate it with Kid Win's modular concepts, and the way you make things so very efficient."

"Excellent," he told her, and he meant it. "I have to admit, I was a little dubious when Director Piggot told me that I'd been seconded to NASA, but she told me they got the plan for the Mars mission from Global Solutions, and that one part of it meant getting the moon base up and running."

"And that you're the best man for the job, love," Dragon told him cheerfully.

"And you're the best woman for it," he agreed, taking her hand. "Between us, and your other remote units, I wouldn't be surprised if your estimate was correct, or even a little conservative."

"I've heard rumours that you were slated to be in charge of the place, once people start moving up here," she commented as they proceeded along the maintenance corridor in long, slow loping bounds.

"Only if you're here, too," he countered.

She smiled and squeezed his hand. "Oh, I think I could be convinced," she murmured.

-o-o-o-
Brockton Bay, June 13, 2013

Victory Park had been host to quite a few functions in the two years since the defeat of the Slaughterhouse Nine. The monument, replaced after the incursion of the Teeth, had been swathed in garlands and wreaths on the first anniversary of V-Nine Day, emplaced by the relatives and loved ones of the many victims of the Nine. Under the mass of flowers, the granite block had been almost hidden from sight. A small ceremony had been held, and extra flower gardens planted in the park.

This year, the ceremony had been a little smaller, with a few less floral offers. The latter had still been considerable, and Taylor suspected that they would continue to be left there for a good many more years; such had been the swathe cur across the nation by the depredations of the Nine.

But that didn't matter; it made a great backdrop for a rather different ceremony, today.

She would rather it had taken place on her eighteenth birthday, but the Nine had had inconveniently been defeated on her birthday, and so holding a wedding on the same day as the V-Nine celebration might have made the park more than a little crowded.

She glanced down at herself, suddenly worried that the dress she was wearing had developed some tear or flaw or something else that would ruin the occasion. But nothing of the sort had happened; it was still a pristine white. Parian's design of course, and spun from the shimmering thread of Amy's web-spiders; it would be proof against most minor incidents. The lower hem had even been woven from the moisture-repelling thread, so that dew and mud would have trouble clinging to it.

Lisa's hair had been done up in an ornate style; she looked less than totally comfortable, but she had insisted on being there. Aisha looked even less comfortable, but she had likewise insisted. Hope and Amy were the last two bridesmaids; she had offered a place to Rachel, but the redhead had turned her down, not very much to her surprise.

"I'll be there, though," she had assured Taylor. And so she was; Taylor could see her sitting down at the front, with two dogs sitting obediently before her. One of those was Bastard; the wolf pup gifted to her by the Siberian had filled out well, and looked very impressive.

Many of the city's parahumans were there, in and out of costume. Amy's foster parents were attending, along with the rest of New Wave; Marquis was also there, sitting just a little apart. Paige Macabee had offered to sing; she had promised not to use her power on anyone. Hope had vouched for her, so along she had come.

And, a surprise; Emma Barnes had shown up, with her family. Emma had gotten out of juvenile detention on her own eighteenth birthday, some months earlier; she was reportedly undergoing therapy. Taylor wasn't quite sure how she had ended up with an invitation, but there she was. Madison's family had apparently left town in the last couple of years, and settled in Boston.

Taylor wasn't sure how she felt about Emma being there. She had been through so much since those days when Emma and her cronies were able to bully her with relative impunity. Emma had also been through quite a bit; she was a lot more subdued, these days.

What the hell, she decided. It's my day. I'm not going to let her ruin it.

Her father took her arm, just as the band struck up the Wedding March.
"Showtime, kiddo," he murmured. He was looking so much happier, more relaxed, these days. People who knew him swore he looked ten years younger, since the Dockworkers' Association had received a huge shot in the arm from the reopening of Lord's Port.

Behind her, her bridesmaids gathered up her train, and she began her walk up the aisle.

To each side, her friends were silently urging her on; Missy and Dennis and Sveta, Sabah and Lily, and Brian and Jess.

Seeing the brunette reminded her of the wedding she had attended, just a few months past, between the tall black man and the girl from the Travellers. It had been quite a party, with Jess' teammates attending, as well as the old Undersiders, and a few others as well.

But this was her wedding, her day. Ahead, at the altar, stood Everett. Tall, immaculately clad in suit and tie. My future husband. And that future lay just a few moments ahead.

She reached the altar, barely heard her father's murmured words to Everett – something about over to you, son – and then the priest began to speak, as she clasped the hand of the man she loved with all her heart.

"Dearly beloved; we are gathered here today to celebrate a special occasion ..."

Brightly coloured butterflies swirled in the air over the wedding ceremony.

It was the happiest day of her life.

-o-o-o-

Danny Hebert went back to his seat. As he sat down, Emily Piggot leaned in and murmured, "The dress is beautiful, isn't it?"

Something seemed to be caught in his throat. "She's my little girl, all grown up."

She nodded. "They grow up so fast."

As the ceremony went on, he firmly pretended that tears were not trickling down his cheeks.

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**Moon Base One, March 17, 2018**

"Control, this is Falcon One, reporting successful separation. All boards are reporting green. We are igniting the first bank of ion drivers now, over."

"Roger, Falcon One, we copy successful separation. Ignition looks good. Repeat, ignition looks good, over."

"Control, this is Falcon One. It looks like we're on the way. Next stop Mars. Wish us luck, over."

"Falcon One, good luck and bon voyage, over."

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The ship now edging out of lunar orbit, gradually picking up speed, looked nothing like the usual concept of a spaceship; there were no smooth lines, no fins or great rocket tubes at the rear.
Instead, banks of ion drivers, Tinker built and Dragon-replicated, provided propulsion. They would allow the ship to accelerate slowly but steadily on a Hohmann's-S course, reaching Mars in less than two years.

Upon reaching Mars, the ship would go into a parking orbit, readying to send down landers to the surface. Landing sites had already been surveyed and cleared by Legend, six years previously; all the crews of the landers had to do was follow the radio beacons down.

It had all been planned out, to the last detail.

-O-O-O-

Colin sat in his office, listening to the radio chatter, watching the great ship gradually pulling out of lunar orbit. Telescopes on the lunar surface swivelled to watch it; on his screens, he could virtually count every bolt and rivet that held Falcon One together.

Dragon leaned in through the door. "Oh, there you are."

He looked up at her. "Oh, hi. I'm just watching the launch."

She crossed the office and took his hand, tugging him out of his chair. "Everyone's down in Main Plaza, watching it on the big screen. Come on down."

He held back. "Uh, I'm not sure. Let them celebrate without the boss watching, for once."

She smiled at him. "They want you there. You've ridden them pretty hard, these last few years, making sure we didn't get behind on Project Falcon, and they're seeing it happen at last. The least you can do is come and say a few words."

He smiled back, despite himself. "Okay, fine. You talked me into it. I might even have a drink or two."

"Oh my," she marvelled. "The man of stone, finally letting his hair down. Will wonders never cease?"

He chuckled, following her out of the office. When he had been assigned to first rebuild and then run the lunar base, he had wondered if it was punishment duty. But he had come to appreciate the situation, and now, he couldn't imagine himself anywhere else.

Colin Wallis, Commander of Moon Base One. He could think of worse places to be.

-O-O-O-

Global Solutions Building, Brockton Bay, 6 August, 2025

"What I don't get," commented Amy, "is why this business is even still open." She waved a hand, indicating the Global Solutions building around them. "The S-class threats have been shifted to uninhabited worlds, been dealt with, or have decided on their own accord to stand down. New powers are occurring at a vastly declined rate. The lunar base is expanding all the time, the second Mars base has been established, they're talking about an expedition out of the solar system in the next twenty years … where are the big problems any more?"

She sat at ease in the comfortable armchair, wearing a dress in russet and brown; it looked both
stylish and comfortable. Rather striking in her looks, she was quite a contrast to the first time Hope had met her, terrified and half-starved, fourteen years before.

She had finished her schooling, and gone on to study graphic design. When Hope had asked her about the choice of subject, she had grinned and stated that she wanted something as far away from medicine as possible. Now, she made quite a good living, but still kept in close contact with Hope and Lisa.

"It's simple," Lisa told her. "The Hope Accord's bringing the environmental problems into line, but things like dams still need to be built, and they're talking about underwater habitats for the near future. There'll be problems as long as there are people."

Lisa was now taller and rather willowy, wearing a top that matched her eyes and designer jeans. She had calmed down a little with maturity, but her bottle-green eyes still tended to sparkle with mischief, and she had never lost the vulpine grin.

"There can't be many problems left in Brockton Bay," Amy persisted. "What with the Christner Initiative, crime's been in single digits for years. Even the Docks have been cleaned up."

"That was mainly Dad, when he was in as Mayor," Taylor put in. Slender and graceful rather than skinny and gawky, she had matured well. Married life had agreed with her; two children had put the seal on the happiness in her life, and she and Everett were just as devoted to one another as the day they had married. She wore a charcoal top and black slacks.

"Yeah, he did a good job," Amy conceded. "Why did he resign after the first term? He could have been re-elected, easily."

"Why else?" Lisa grinned. "He wanted to get back to running the Dockworkers' Association. Besides, he'd done what he set out to do."

"Accord was talking to me the other day." Hope told them. She had grown taller, but was still just as beautiful and as genderless as when she had first arrived in Brockton Bay. "He said that the current estimate for the effective completion of the Hope Accord is now less than six years."

"Wow," Amy exclaimed.

"Damn," Lisa commented.

"I am impressed," Taylor added.

"Oh, and get this," Hope went on. "We've had delegates from Earth Aleph, and a couple of the others, asking if we could supply them with Hope Accord style plans for their worlds."

She grinned at their stunned looks.

"So yeah," she said. "There'll be problems for the foreseeable future. And we'll be there to provide solutions."

She sipped at her tea, as the other three nodded in agreement.

Around them, life in Brockton Bay went on.
The Scion entity noted a distant planet, which had the unmistakeable signs of civilisation about it. It signalled to its companion.

DESTINATION.

The companion did not answer; it had been somewhat uncommunicative since leaving that last world.

DESTINATION.

Another long pause in communication, then the Other signalled back.

UNNECESSARY.

The Scion entity took a long time to puzzle this over. They had to carry out their task, to search new worlds for the possible end to their quest. What was the Other saying?

QUERY.

The Other's signal signified quiet smugness.

FRUITION.

The Scion entity was equally unable to understand this. The concept was almost beyond it, so long had they been searching.

QUERY.

The Other changed course, moved closer. At this rate, they would collide -

SHARING.

They touched, brushed, moved apart. A few dozen shards were exchanged. The Scion entity could not understand why this had happened. And then it examined the new shards that it had acquired.

One was … different.

It had been formed around the exotic energy bestowed upon the Other by the being called Hope, in the course of returning the Other to functionality. It made use of that energy.

The Scion entity tapped into that shard, made use of its capability. Energy flowed from the shard into the Scion entity, reviving it, revitalising. This *added* energy instead of removing it.

The Other was also making use of the same shard, it noted. The shard was able to be split, shared, split again.

It was the answer.

The quest had been successful. At long, long last, the quest had been successful.
No more would the entities have to roam the universe, pushing civilisations to war, and harvesting the results.

All could share now in the bounty of the Hope shard.

FRUITION, it agreed. SHARING.

The Other had reached a farther conclusion. PARTING. SHARING.

The Scion entity had been roaming the universe alongside the Other for so long that it had trouble parsing the concept. They would split up, and share the Hope shard among their kind; each one they encountered would also pass it on.

And eventually, in the fullness of time, they would find one another once more.

AGREEMENT.

Their courses changed, moving diametrically opposite to one another.

One last signal passed between them before they drew too far apart to detect one another. Both sent it, at the same time.

HOPE.

The End

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading. When I first started this story one year ago, it consisted of a few humourous snippets about a ridiculously Mary-Sue character in the grimdark setting of Brockton Bay. But it matured and grew, and before I knew it, I was caught up in the narrative.

And now, it has come to an end. If any loose ends are left behind, I apologise; I didn't mean to forget anything. But in a story of over half a million words, that's not overly surprising.

I've enjoyed writing it. I hope you enjoyed reading it just as much.

Now, on to my other projects!

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