Constellations

by UnwelcomeStorm

Summary

The sun rises over Brockton Bay.
Chapter 1

The first year that Taylor went to summer camp, she was only eight years old. Old enough to be curious about the woods, and not old enough to be afraid of them, or of what was in them. So when she wandered off from the scout leader, chasing after a grasshopper, she didn't start to cry or freeze up when the sun finally set behind the trees and night fell all around her. Instead she ooh'd at the riot of color the sunset sparked among the canopy, and grinned at the cicadas, and tried to catch a firefly or two.

Of course, as twilight deepened into the kind of inky black that never happens in cities, Taylor couldn't help but get a little worried. It had been after lunch when she'd stepped off the trail, and now it was after dinner, and she couldn't remember where the camp was from here. But Taylor was a smart girl, everyone said so, and smart girls knew to stay in one place if they ever got lost. So she found a fallen log, gave it a cursory brush off to clear any fallen leaves, and sat down to wait. And wait. And wait.

It got later and later. If possible, it even got darker. And it got colder. Taylor pressed her hands over her mouth; smart girls don't cry. They don't.

Smart girls knew better than to get lost in the woods. Taylor Hebert cried, until her face was blotchy and hot and her head hurt and the leaves crunched behind her with something's footsteps.

The something walked around the fallen log and sat down in front of Taylor. It cocked its head, then whined until Taylor looked up and scrubbed tears away from her cheeks. There was a great big canine sitting in front of her, its fur white all over and so bright it glowed, even in the pitch black of the pre-dawn woods. Taylor sniffled, and blinked a few times before asking, "Doggy?"

The white wolf sneezed in her face. Taylor wiped off her face. "Yuck!"

The wolf gave a great doggy grin, and started licking Taylor's face, until the little girl laughed and tried to push the sloppy kisses away. She took the wolf's big blocky head in her hands and pressed a much more reasonable kiss to the wolf's forehead. The wolf chuffed, pleased.

Daybreak found Taylor waking up on a bed of leaves, with the great wolf curled around her to ward away the chill. Taylor stretched, and frowned at the grumbling of her stomach, but remembered to give the wolf a pet on the head, right between the curves of the red markings now visible in the sunlight. She rubbed the wolf's ears for good measure, too. "G'morning."

The wolf yawned, giving Taylor a close view of its very impressive teeth, and then licked her face before the girl could pull away. Taylor snorted and wiped drool off her nose. The wolf chuffed again, a sound like laughter, before it stood up and shook out its coat, sending bits of fallen leaves flying. Taylor made an 'ack!' noise and flailed, trying to keep the leaf-bits out of her own hair, and the wolf took advantage of her distraction to grasp her in its teeth by her overalls and toss the little girl up onto its back. Then they were off, the wolf's paws barely seeming to touch the ground as they ran, faster and faster, until Taylor could hear the distant voices and noises of the camp she was supposed to be at. The wolf stopped just before the treeline, and waiting for Taylor to slide down off its back, breathless and grinning.
The wolf grinned its doggy grin, and gave the girl a light headbutt, prodding her towards the camp. But Taylor dug in her heels, and dug through her pockets, instead. The wolf sat down again, and watched until Taylor withdrew a colorful strand of plastic beads and held the trinket out, triumphant. The wolf cocked its head.

"Here, doggy! We made friendship bracelets. An' we're friends now! So, take it!" After a pause, the wolf thumped its tail on the ground, and gently took the bracelet in its teeth. Taylor grinned. The beams of sunlight breaking through the tree canopy brightened.

"Yeah! Friends forever!"

* * *

As time went by, Taylor decorated her room with drawings. Cheery scribbles at first, eventually making way for coherent lines and recognizable forms. Taylor's mom bought her a pair of How-To books for drawing and painting, and a brand-new set of watercolors. Talents are to be nurtured, after all. Taylor read the books eagerly, but kept the paints untouched out of a sense of reverence. They were to be savored, not used on careless doodles.

The next week, Taylor's mom went out one day and didn't come home.

The week after that, when the silence in the house became too deafening, Taylor packed the paints, her sketchbook, her Alexandria doll, and a few clothes into a backpack, alongside a sandwich carefully sealed in a baggie. The back door wasn't locked, and her dad was asleep on the couch, one hand still loosely clasped around a bottle. Taylor closed the door behind her as hard as she could, but he didn't wake up. The night air was warm and still. Taylor walked.

There was a playground not too far away. She'd gone there a lot when she was little, her and Emma, and it was a little overgrown now but the swings still worked, and that was what's important, right? Taylor walked until she reached the park, then she set her backpack down and climbed into one of the swings. She kicked her feet, listless.

She should just go see Emma again. Emma's mom would probably be making pancakes tomorrow morning, and they could watch a movie or watch Zoe play one of her games, or...

Taylor didn't want to go see Emma. She didn't want pancakes, or bright lights and noise and Mrs. Barnes' pitying gaze. She wanted her mom.

A cold, wet noise touched her wrist. Taylor gave a startled shriek and toppled off the swing. The white wolf padded into her view from where she lay on the ground. It cocked its head and made a 'hrrng?' sound.

"Wh-- hey! You're-- I remember you!" Taylor smiled, and sat up so she could reach the wolf's head and ears. The wolf's tongue flopped out in a happy grin as she rubbed the wolf's ears. And it--she, actually-- was a wolf, not a dog, like in her memory. She'd studied pictures of dogs and canines for her sketches. Her best one was taped above her bed. Taylor told the wolf so, and she licked the girl's hand in response. "Hehehe. Good to see you, Doggy. What are you doing out of the woods?"

The wolf thumped her tail on the ground, then padded over to the weed-strewn play area. Taylor watched the wolf climb up the wide-set stairs up into the plastic playground, then crawl on her belly into the slide tunnel. The tunnel produced a great echoing Woowoo~! as the wolf slid down it and
shot out the opening at the bottom. Taylor goggled, and the wolf happily ran up the stairs to do it again. Another Wooo~!, and a flying canine. The wolf circled back to the stairs, then turned her head and barked.

Taylor grinned, and wiped at her eyes, and ran over to play too.

Hours later, dawn was painting the sky in rose and gold and purple, and Taylor dug out her sandwich. She tore it in half, and offered some to the wolf, who wagged her tail and--well--wolfed it down. Taylor giggled.

"...thanks, Doggy. I-- I needed that." The wolf cocked her head, and made a curious noise. Taylor's smile faded. "My mom... she died. Last week. Dad doesn't talk anymore, and I-- I don't know what to do."

The wolf made a sort of 'hmnn' noise. After a few moments, she started snuffling at Taylor's backpack, and kept it up after Taylor protested that she didn't have any more sandwiches. The wolf tugged at the drawstring, then pawed at the pink canvas until the bag tipped over and spilled its contents. She pawed at the box of watercolors.

"What? C'mon, don't do that-- I was saving those!" The wolf cocked her head, and whined. "Well... not really for anything specific, no. But... that's the last thing Mom got me. I don't want to waste it."

The wolf sneezed.

"What? You think I should use them anyway?" A happy grin. Taylor wasn't quite convinced. She eyed the long box of colors, then her sketchbook. Mom had bought those so she would use them... so maybe not using them was the real waste. Mom wouldn't want that. Mom wouldn't want a lot of things that were happening, right now. But even so, this would be the first time they were used-- it had to be more than a doodle. Taylor's fingers crept over the box, and found the catch. "I don't think it'll be a good painting, Doggy."

The wolf chuffed, and nudged her hand closer to the paints.

* * *

Daniel Hebert woke up late, his head pounding, and his mouth scuzzy. He hauled himself off the couch and trudged to the kitchen, filling a glass of water with mindless, habitual proficiency. He turned to the freezer above the fridge for an ice cube. Before he reached it, cold drenched his skin and prickled along the hairs on his arms. He scrubbed sleep from his eyes.

On the fridge was a sheet of thick paper, taped to the appliance and so new it was still damp. Simple, minimalist even, just a few broad lines and cloudy expanses of color. Peach-colored skin, a halo of black curls, two circles for glasses... Daniel groped for a chair, missed, and fell to the floor instead. The watercolor portrait of his wife stared back at him, when his head cleared again.

He thought there'd been--

He shook his head. It didn't matter right now. Daniel Hebert stood up.
"Hey, what's this?" Emma asked, picking up the small pewter model from the desk. It looked like a tiny person, holding a staff and wearing a cape. "Myrddin?"

"Ha, no. I guess that's an elf sorcerer? One of the little models from Dad's game he plays. I said I wanted to try painting them, so he got me a few to practice with. I'm not allowed to paint his characters until I get better, I think." Taylor gestured at the supply-strewn top of her dresser. Bottles of glue, small tubs of paint, more tiny statuettes, an aerosol can of painting primer... Emma shook her head.

"More art stuff? Seriously, Taylor. You're in here, like, every day doing this. Isn't your dad out almost every night with this game stuff, too? I'm surprised you'd want anything to do with it."

"Well, yeah..." Taylor admitted. It would be nice if Dad was home more often, but... "It's better than him moping around the house, right?"

"You mean like what you're doing?"

"I am not moping!"

"Sure you're not." Emma tsked, and set the tiny model aside.

"I'm not, and don't be a jerk about it!" Taylor frowned, and Emma gave a slight grimace and a muttered apology. Taylor tugged a hand through her hair, blowing a sigh through her nose. "S'fine. And I really am not moping. You know I'm going to that art camp next week, I want to make sure none of my skills are rusty."

"Like you even need to practice," Emma said with a grin. "But yeah, I get it. I know you'll do fine. Just don't forget to call me! I wanna hear about all your nerdy crap!"

Taylor's hand snapped out and ruffled Emma's hair, prompting a startled squawk from the girl. "Nerdy crap? I'll show you nerdy!" Emma squeaked and tried to escape, but Taylor had long arms and a long reach, and she knew all of her friend's ticklish spots.

Taylor smiled; it got a little easier every day.

* * *

Taylor smiled, because she couldn't quite get her face to express properly, it felt like. Her brow furrowed in confusion, like it was supposed to, but the rest of her?

"Taylor, I mean it. We're through. Get lost, I don't ever want to see you again."

Maybe she smiled because she couldn't begin to describe what else she was feeling. Taylor pulled herself up off the pavement, winced at the scrape on her knee, and stared at Emma and the dark-
skinned girl behind her. Taylor walked.

The house was empty when she got back, of course. Dad had gone to work as soon as they’d gotten back from the camp drop-off grounds. She trudged up the newly-painted front steps and unlocked the front door, and wandered inside to go clean up. When she finished putting a band-aid on the scrapes and washing the traces of salt off her face, she wandered back out into the silent living room and sat down on the couch. The remote was nearby, but too much an effort to reach for. She picked at the band-aid.

Something flickered in the corner of her vision. Taylor looked around-- the house was still and empty. She started to go back to fretting at her bandage when the flicker came again, and on the third time she caught sight of it for real. Outside the window, a white head bounded up, just into view, before falling back down to the grass outside. The wolf jumped again, peeking through the window before falling prey to gravity, then repeated. Taylor stared, and after a few more jumps she got up and opened the window. The wolf jumped a bit higher, and scrambled inside.

"Hey, Sunny! Welcome back." She reached down and rubbed the wolf's ears, traced a finger along the red marking on the canine brow. Sunshine, or Sunny as Taylor had taken to calling her (after being sneezed on one too many times for addressing the wolf as 'Doggy,') was an infrequent visitor, but always a welcome one. The wolf never appeared when Dad or Emma was around, and for the first time Taylor was glad of it. Sharing this animal's friendship with Emma seemed unthinkable, now. Sunshine gave a happy bark, and then a meaningful glance at the kitchen. Taylor sighed.

"No, I... don't really feel up to cooking right now. Sorry." Sunshine cocked her head, and made a confused noise.

"I was gonna tell you about art camp, next time I saw you, but... it hasn't been a good day. I'll tell you if you don't mind listening." Sunshine wuffed, which was probably a yes. She followed Taylor over to the couch, and this time Taylor summoned the energy to reach for the end table. In the drawer was a short stack of take-out menus. Sunshine saw, and thumped her tail on the cushions even as she laid her head on Taylor's thigh, looking up at the girl with the best puppy gaze in the world.

"Heh. Alright... is Chinese okay? I know you like rice." Taylor smiled.

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Sunny came around more often, as summer faded into color and wind. Sometimes the wolf showed up on Taylor's doorstep, but more often she'd simply step out of a hedge as Taylor walked home from school. Taylor was glad for the company; there was no happiness at Winslow for her, most days. The art class was her sole reprieve from the attentions of her fr-- her classmates--since neither Emma nor Sophia had any interest in creation. That was all the incentive they needed to target her work, it seemed. A clay pot she'd intended for her father was smashed. A watercolor was splashed with pickled brine. Her pot of India ink was drained into a sink. Nothing was ever done in front of her, there was never anything so direct, but an aura of malice had taken root in every hallway, and she never felt unwatched.

Taylor's days darkened with the slow retreat of the sun.

* * *

Life was a holding pattern for many months, until the end of the school year approached. Wake up,
make breakfast, go to school. Endure.

Walk home with Sunny. Paint with Sunny, or draw, or try a new recipe and let the wolf undertake the grave task of sampling every attempt. Feel a bit better.

Until They decided that the upcoming summer break deserved a little celebration. And what celebration is complete without a sacrifice?

Taylor took the ruined flute with her to the old park, the instrument still in the box she'd received it in. She had a few vague thoughts about giving the flute a decent burial, since she couldn't give it a decent life. But when she got to the park, she set the box aside and instead sat down in one of the swings, and kicked her feet listlessly. Heh-- memories. A cold nose touched her wrist, and this time she didn't jump.

"Hey, Sunny..." The wolf whined, and sat down next to her. "...I got my flute back today. Mom's flute." Taylor fell silent. There was no need to describe what had happened-- Sunshine already knew. Instead, she took a shuddering breath and released it slow. Strong girls don't cry.

"What's-- what's even the point? Nothing I do helps. I can't tell Dad, Alan's like his best friend." She swallowed. It was a bitter comparison. "I just-- I don't know anymore, Sunshine. What if they just... keep going? What if they don't stop? I-- I don't think I can handle it, you know?"

Sunny whined, and pawed at the box a bit, staring at the defiled thing within. The wolf's expression was uncommonly dark. After a moment she turned and started to sniffle at Taylor's backpack, discarded a few feet away, in the manner she always did when she wanted something. Taylor sighed.

"What? I don't have any food-- oh. You want to know what it looked like?" Sunny barked. Taylor shook her head, but got up and started digging through her things anyway. She had a sketch somewhere, in one of these notebooks... ah, there. Taylor pulled out the pencil drawing, this one on plain lined paper, and laid it flat on the ground.

"There, see? It... Mom loved that flute. She used to play it, every Thursday. God, I was so stupid, taking it to school. I should have known They'd want to take it." Taylor reached over and rubbed Sunshine's ears, grasping what comfort she could, but for once the wolf wasn't invested in it. She was staring at the crude sketch, one paw holding the paper down to the ground. After a long moment, the wolf huffed, then padded over to the box.

"Sunny, you're freaking me out. Let it go, it's too late, and--" Taylor rose, going over to the box with the intention of pulling the canine away from it, but a glance down at the object of the wolf's attention sapped the strength from her legs. She fell, one arm clutched onto Sunshine for dear life. Inside the box, the defiled and broken flute was whole. The metal was smooth, unscratched, and clean. The holes were clear of filth. The memories were fresh and stinging and alive.

Sunny sat down, tongue lolling out with a pleased grin. Taylor brushed her fingers against her mother's flute. She gripped the wolf tighter, and buried her face into the furry shoulder.

"Thank you."
Sunny licked her cheek, and Taylor rubbed her ears in return. She brushed her fingers against the red markings, now spread to single, elegant lines below the wolf’s eyes. Taylor wiped at her own, and kept her voice low. Reverence is a quiet thing.

"You're... really something special, aren't you?" Sunshine just grinned.

Taylor bit down on her lip. Her eyes drifted to the pristine flute, then back to the white wolf. "Do... do you think I could be something special too, someday?"

Amaterasu smiled.
Summer bloomed bright and lively. Weather forecasters remarked often that it was the warmest season Brockton Bay had experienced in a while. Tourism picked up, and the open-air markets dotted throughout the city stayed awake from dawn to nearly midnight. All the shopkeepers and people on the streets made things a little safer, it felt like, made even Taylor a little more willing to go out and skirt the edges of public spaces. Sunshine had every intention of taking advantage of that fact.

Every morning she arrived with the dawn and herded Taylor out onto the sidewalks and the infrequent bike trails, running ahead and barking at everything. Always just far enough ahead that Taylor had to jog to keep up, or walk when her breath was too short. The pair would meander around the streets and through yards and dodge mail deliverers for nearly an hour, then they would return home. By then the neighborhood was always waking up, and Taylor made sure to wave to her elderly neighbor next door when she saw her-- Old Mrs. Henrick was pottering about more often lately, her flowerbeds were doing very well this year.

Most days, Taylor stayed inside for the heat of the afternoon, and read or drew. Sunny would often leave, trotting down the sidewalk and vanishing in the haze. On Monday, Daniel Hebert had the day off from work, and they'd order pizza and make an attempt at catching up with each other:

"Looks like you're getting a tan there, sweetheart."
"Yeah, I started running in the morning. Don't worry, I stick to safe areas." It was easy to expand your viable jogging territory in a residential area if you didn't care about things like private property or fences.

"Anything you want at the store this week, Taylor?"
"Uhh... are peaches in season yet?" Sunny seemed to have a particular fondness for the fruit.

"Where'd that big hole in the yard come from?"
"I guess a... stray dog?" Taylor talked her dad around to filling the hole with a sapling, rather than dirt.

"Was that a flute I heard?"
"Yeah, I started practicing again. Every Thursday, you know?" He was happy for her-- he was-- but a flute only ever sounded sad to him.

"You want pepperoni or sausage tonight?"
"Erm..." Taylor fidgeted, picking at the placemat on the dinner table. Danny looked up from the phone book, where the pizza parlor's delivery number was circled in marker. "Dad, I don't really want pizza. What about-- I dunno, meatloaf? Or lasagna?"

A brief cloud of guilt passed over her father's face. "Ah-- sorry, honey. I didn't really buy the stuff for any of that. I could order Thai instead?"

"No, that's not--"
"Or there's an Italian place that opened up, I think they deliver. Hang on, I've got a menu somewhere."

"You and Mom used to take turns cooking." Taylor's hand reached her mouth, too late. There was a moment of silence.

Danny was the one fidgeting now. "Honey, that... was a different time, you know that. I'm sorry I don't cook much anymore, but you know when I'm here at night I'm tired from work."

"You were tired then, too, but you still made time for it." Taylor pushed her chair back and stood. "Nevermind. I'm not really hungry. Just... save me a plate of something, whatever you end up getting."

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There was a tupperware container for her in the fridge when she looked the next morning, after her and Sunny's run. Taylor pushed a sweat-damp hank of hair away from her face. She closed the fridge door with the offering still inside.

"Hey, Sunny?"

'Hmmr?'

"I'm sick of take-out. Let me take a shower and we'll make something, instead."

When Taylor finished with her shower, she returned to her room to find that Sunshine had been busy. On the bed were the clothes she'd laid out earlier, now covered in muddy paw-prints, and laid atop that was an also-muddy cookbook. At the foot of the bed was Sunshine, looking as pleased as could be. Taylor frowned.

"Did you... bury a cookbook in the back yard?" Bark!

"I see. And was my tee-shirt and jeans not appropriate garments for breakfast?" Bark bark!

"Not cool, Sunny. Not cool." Taylor glared at the wolf, but the smug canine just grinned. Her reprimand ineffective, Taylor instead picked up the dirt-smeared book from the bed. her brows furrowed as she looked over the contents. "...I don't think sushi is a breakfast food, Sunny."

Whine...

"And I don't have the stuff for this anyway. I've never made sushi."

Whiiiiine...

"AND you ruined my clothes. Why do you get a reward? ...no, don't give me that look--- ugh, fine." Taylor sighed. "We'll have to go shopping, I guess... need to find sticky rice and a hangiri? Whatever that is. Can I trust you to grab me something to wear that you won't get mud on?" Sunny's dog-smile was absolutely beatific. Taylor grumbled and left to brush out her hair.

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"I should have known. 'Never trust a smiling dog.'" Sunny just smiled wider. Taylor relented and
rubbed the wolf's ears. The canine had dug into the very depths of Taylor's closet until she found a long red skirt, buried in a plastic tote and forgotten, and then a loose white blouse to cover it. Taylor hadn't willingly worn bright colors in a year or more, let alone bright red or white. It was too eye-catching, and honestly too loose on her, but her attempts to switch the blouse for a different tee or even a hoodie had been met with lowered ears and a dirt-strewn paw, raised in warning.

The pair took the bus to the informally-acknowledged Asian district. Sunshine kept close to Taylor's skirts, and Taylor kept one hand on the wolf's shoulder, which was nearly level with her waist. With such a pair, Taylor had expected there to be a bit more commotion, but people moved around them in an unbroken stream. After a while, Taylor relaxed her hold on Sunny, who grinned up at her.

"I don't think I've ever really come out here... and Dad did leave some extra allowance as an apology. What do you think, Sunny? Should we do some exploring?"

A few hours later, after they'd sampled some of the local street vendors (it's not really takeout, and this whole venture was turning into a day trip, anyway), and browsed the local wares ("Ooh, is that a calligraphy set? I think I'll-- Sunny why do we need that much ink?"), they stopped to rest at a small tea-shop. Taylor tried green tea for the first time, and gave Sunshine an affectionate ear-rub as she sipped at it.

"Okay, I was skeptical, but-- this was a good idea, Sunny. I'm glad we came. Honestly, I'm not sure why I never really came out here before, this place is pretty--"

There was a sudden BOOM from outside, followed by shouts and screams. Sunny's head whipped up, and Taylor heard her growl. The wolf tugged on Taylor's skirts, herding her to leave the shop as the sounds of violence intensified. Right-- she never came out here because it was too close to the ABB/E88 border. Taylor needed no further urging. She picked up her purchases in one hand and her skirts in the other, and ran.

"Sunny, go left, we can get back onto 58th, and-- Sunny? Sunny?!" The wolf was nowhere in sight. Taylor reversed direction-- back towards the sounds of gunfire. Her friend was here, she had to be, she must have gotten turned around or frightened or please let her be okay please please please.

Taylor pushed around the remains of the crowd, abruptly stumbling into an open stretch of street, and directly into the path of someone else. He wasn't tall, but he was solid, and Taylor rebounded off the stranger and fell to the pavement. The man turned: a crimson mask with green stripes leered down at her, the tusked face of a demon. Taylor felt all the air vanish from her lungs. She stared up at the cape, silenced. The cape stared back.

"Miko?" Came a rough voice, rusty and sullen with disuse. Oni Lee's hand rose, the motion almost hesitant. "...Sumimasen."

He vanished in a sprinkling of ash. Taylor sat there a little longer, until Sunny trotted up and licked her cheek in apology.
There were exactly twenty-three and one half ceiling tiles in this room. Oni Lee knew, because he'd counted them many times. Twenty-three and one half.

This was one of the safehouses that was used more regularly than others. Nowhere particularly special, there weren't any notable businesses nearby or a greater distribution of ABB tags than normal, and that completely unassuming nature made it an unlikely target for their enemies. It helped that it was pretty centrally located to their territory; this was one of the places where the ABB's lieutenants met each week to report in to Lung. Earnings reports from different business ventures, front and otherwise, cartographic reports on the ever-shifting lines that separated the gangs in Brockton Bay, recruitment reports and disciplinary reports... all the details involved in owning and running one of the major powers in the city. Lung would check in on each representative of his forces during the week, but these gatherings kept everyone up-to-date and continually reminded of why they obeyed. That is to say, because Lung told them to.

"Good. Disperse." Lung grunted, keeping to as few words as necessary. He waited until the assembled men had left for their cars before pulling a cigarette from his back pocket and lighting it with a quick flick of a finger. "A typical week. Few surprises, save for the end. Lee-- report."

Oni Lee obeyed. "A drive-by, perpetrated by the Empire or its sympathizers: the cars were unmarked, no license plates. Two of ours slain, all eight of theirs. The fighting attracted a Protectorate patrol. Dauntless and Chessman were spotted; I did not engage."

"Tch," Lung made a disgusted noise in his throat. "That was no crime of opportunity, then, the Empire knew the Protectorate kept to the edges of our territory only. They are trying to turn the Protectorate's attentions on us through retribution. Good that you did not take the bait. Now, I want you to--"

"I saw a shrine maiden."

Lung rocked back on his heels, head turning to face Oni Lee. Were he a lesser man, Lung might have been surprised. Oni Lee had interrupted him. Oni Lee never interrupted him. Oni Lee obeyed; that was how it had always been. "What was that?"

The teleporter was silent for a moment. "...among the peasants, near the battle. I saw a shrine maiden."

Lung rolled his cigarette between his fingers, then inmolated the remains with a thought and a bare flex of will. "Your eyes play tricks on you. There are no shrines here, no maidens." Oni Lee did not dispute Lung. The dragon stared out through his mask. "You are tired. Go, for tonight. Find a drink, or a woman to fuck. Then come see me tomorrow, and we will plan."

Oni Lee obeyed.

* * *
The beer was bitter. It always was. Oni Lee drank it anyway. When he found the bottom of the bottle, he left the bar and walked off into the night. His current residence was not far, but when he reached his intended turn, he... kept walking. He kept walking, and his feet found a cracked sidewalk to follow. There were fewer streetlights here, but the dark did not bother him. His feet seemed to know the way, so he did not object. They led him deeper into the ABB territory, and something... bothered him, about it.

Along a disused road, between a pair of storefronts that had since been abandoned and looted, a roughly-carved wooden archway straddled a cobblestone path, the stones barely visible between the rampant overgrowth of weeds and discarded cans. Oni Lee stepped under the arch of the torii, but no further. Lung was not *wrong*, there were no shrines in Brockton Bay, but... there had been, years ago, when the refugee migration was fresh and the comforts of home were still clung to.

Oni Lee stood under the arch, and peered through the gloom at the crumbling komainu statues, at the distant shadow of the shrine building itself. He'd... walked here. Why?

... Nothing. Nothing came to him.

Oni Lee turned and left, to return to his residence and wait for tomorrow.

* * *

The abandoned shrine was not on any patrol route. Oni Lee passed by it anyway, the next day. It was the same, the day after that. The nebulous thing that bothered him waned.

The third day he passed by, the torii had been repainted a bright and lustrous red.

Oni Lee stopped, and stood under the arch. A vine had curled up to try and strangle one of the stone dogs; he took a few moments from his patrol to cut the vine away, and brush a few speckles of moss from the statue. He had no reason to, that he could see.

He just... wanted to.
"Good morning, Mrs. Henrick!"

"Oh, good morning, Taylor." The old woman looked up from her flowerbeds with a wrinkled smile. Taylor returned it, disheveled and panting from her run as she was. "Bright eyed and bushy tailed again today, I see."

"Heh, I guess. Got a bit of a routine going. Don't you? I see you out here like, three times a week."

"Got to keep on top of these weeds or they'll run rampant, dear. Haven't you ever gardened before?" She asked, even as she dug up a stubborn dandelion.

"Mhm." Taylor shook her head. "Until recently, most of my hobbies have been inside things."

"Oh, now that's a shame. Young girls should be out and about in the fresh air. Keeps you young!" Old Mrs. Henrick turned her gnarled fingers on a few shoots of Creeping Charlie trying to stage an insurgency. "I remember when my parents got me my first bicycle, long ago. Fell in love and never looked back! I met my George that way. He used to service the things, had a little garage he took over from his papa."

"Huh! I never knew. That's pretty cool." Taylor watched Sunshine's tail flick once before the canine vanished around the far side of the Henricks' fence as she left to do... whatever it was when she wasn't hanging out with Taylor. The sight of the peeling paint and aging wood sparked an idea, which quickly tickled at her brain until she voiced it.

"Hey, does Mr. Henrick still fix bikes?"

"Oh? Well, we're both too old for that sort of thing, now. He's still just as good with his hands as he ever was, though." Old Mrs. Henrick smiled. Taylor quickly pressed on.

"D'ya think maybe he could fix mine? It's not broken or anything, it's just been sitting too long and I don't know how to take care of it. I could repaint your fence for you in trade?" Taylor gestured at the previously-white pickets.

"Oh?" Old Mrs. Henrick eyed the fence as well. "Well... that sounds a fair trade to me, young lady. George has been meaning to paint that darn thing for years, never gets around to it."

"Okay, sounds like a deal!"

The task ate up the rest of the day and even stretched into the evening, late enough that when Danny Hebert came home he found Taylor still outside, now sitting on the front steps of the Henricks' porch. The older couple were sharing the padded loveseat swing, while Old Mrs. Henrick recounted some fond story of her youth. The fireflies were out in force, too, several of them weaving in and out of the spokes of the bicycle sitting propped near the mailbox. From here it kind of looked like Taylor's, but that old thing had sat in the garage for years now, and this one had a pair of sturdy courier's baskets bolted to the sides.
Danny grabbed the mail from his own box, and paused at the sound of quiet shared laughter. It was only 9-something, maybe he should--

He shook his head. He needed to be at the Rig early tomorrow. He rattled his keys a bit, and called out, "Hey sweetie!"

"Hi Dad!"

"Did you eat already?"

"Mhm!"

"Alright. Don't stay out too late-- and goodnight, Mr. Henrick, Mrs. Henrick."

* * *

Sunshine seemed to approve of the bike. The baskets were big enough to hold a couple of paint cans each, which the wolf proved by loading up with the remaining white paint from the Henricks' fence and a dusty can of red from the Heberts' own garage. Having wheels meant their morning run could cover a lot further distance, too-- even into the heart of ABB territory. Taylor started packing a lunch for her and Sunny before heading out in the morning.

"Sunny, I'm not really sure about this..." Taylor said, even as she popped the kickstand and walked the laden bicycle under the archway of the old shrine. "It's not all that safe around here, you know that. I don't understand why you're so insistent."

Sunshine made a plaintive whine, and cast sad doggy eyes at the overgrown path and darkened buildings.

"Yeah, I know it looks pretty bad. This place is wrecked. Nobody's taken care of it, it's pretty clear it's not wanted." Taylor frowned. "And the building back there looked like something smashed it, even. Why would you even want to--" Sunny was looking at her, gaze patient, but her furry body completely still. A complete arrest of motion. Taylor's complaint caught in her throat and refused to complete itself. The last time Sunny had been that still was when...

"Oh..." Mom's flute. Taylor remembered the sight of the crusted filth and smashed keys. She looked at the arch again, a bit closer, and brushed her fingers along one of the slight grooves that ran along the poles. "...this thing's handmade, huh? Someone loved it, once."

Sunny's tail gave a single slow wag. Taylor bit her lip, feeling a flicker of shame heat her cheeks. "I'm not gonna have much time for stuff like this once school starts back up, you know." Sunny's tail wagged a bit faster. "...but I've still got a month or so of vacation. No idea what to do about the building, but-- I guess start from the outside, and we'll work our way in?"

Sunshine's tail whipped the ground, pleased. Taylor smiled.

* * *

Sunny found a ladder somewhere and with it, Taylor repainted the arch. She felt it best not to ask how the canine managed to run with a ladder balanced on her furry back-- some things are better off just being accepted.
The next day, Taylor brought a rake and started clearing the path. Sunny helped by digging up all the flower beds.

The day after, Taylor found two bags of potting soil and a pile of seed packets sitting next to the upturned beds. Sunny sniffed at them, and barked. Taylor was baffled.

"Where'd these even come from?" She asked, sifting through the little paper packets. There were vegetable seeds, flower seeds, perennial and annual... "None of these even match. It's like someone just grabbed one of everything." Sunny made a shrugging motion. Impressive, for a dog. "Well, whatever. I guess I'll just... sort them by type?" She did, and with a bit of help got them all planted. Taylor wasn't sure how quickly such things were supposed to grow, but they seemed to be sprouting just fine by the end of the week.

The pattern continued: Taylor would start on an area of the shrine, and the next day there would be something waiting nearby for her to use. She scrubbed layers of grime from an old fountain, and found a coil of hose leading off past a hedge, connected by extensions to some far-off property. She applied sandpaper to the worn steps, and found a can of varnish waiting. She cleared away fallen boards and cracked roof tiles, and found a box of nails and a pile of fresh tiles stacked neatly nearby. That job required some coaxing and another ladder from Sunny to attempt.

It wasn't just supplies, either: after a few weeks, other items started appearing. Small things, mostly, and most often a type of food. A warm loaf of bread, one day, which Sunny graciously split with Taylor and a small coterie of nearby sparrows and mice. A bowl of rice, a small basket of fruits, a pile of little rice cakes. The shrine slowly shaped up, regained color and warmth, and Taylor started noticing light footprints in the dirt and grass when she arrived in the mornings.

And so it went. Taylor and Sunshine would ride out in the morning, do some work around the shrine, then eat lunch in the shade of a large, rope-circled tree before going home. One day, near the end of summer, lunch was interrupted.

A man appeared out of thin air, just outside the torii arch, then walked inside a few steps and stopped on the freshly-swept cobblestones. The tusked demon mask turned this way and that, looking over the flower beds and the water basin and the quiet sun-speckled grass. Then the mask turned towards the tree, and caught sight of Taylor sitting at its base, in her white painter's pants and red work apron, her fork still paused in her mouth. Oni Lee paused, then walked towards her. Taylor swallowed.

"...good morning." Well, what else could she say?

"Good morning," Oni Lee responded, after a long moment. "You are the... keeper here? Miko?" There was a hint of skepticism under the resonance of the mask.

"Um. I'm Taylor." Any moment that Oni Lee is not killing you is a good moment. Taylor continued speaking. "I've been fixing the place up a bit, if that's what you mean?" Oni Lee nodded, and turned his head slightly. Taylor took a careful glance in the same direction, but saw only the same things as earlier. Water fountain, flower beds... a bead of sweat tickled Taylor's neck. The idea was crazy, but... "Have you been leaving things here?"

The cape nodded again. "Uh, thank you. It's been very helpful." Another nod. The tension stretched. Taylor licked her lips, looking for something--anything--to keep things from escalating. She settled on her lunch.
"Want some... egg?" She held out the little box of rolled omelette-things. Her attempts at working through the cookbook Sunny had unburied were still a work in progress. Oni Lee paused, rocking slightly with an aborted motion, but after a moment he continued it and stepped over to the tree. The assassin settled down on the grass next to her, plucked a morsel from the proffered meal, and slipped it under his mask. Taylor watched the motion of his throat as he chewed in a sort of horrified fascination.

"Is... is it good?"

Oni Lee swallowed. "No."

"...oh. Um. Sorry."

"Needs mirin. Sweet rice wine, for cooking," he explained.

"Oh. I'll... look for some. Thank you." The silence stretched. Taylor ran nervous hands over her smock. "You must come here a lot."

"...yes," Oni Lee said. "I... had forgotten it was here."

"O-oh. Um. Did you used to come here, then?"

Oni Lee shook his head. "No." He paused. "My sister came here. She sold charms." Strange... there was a sort of wondering quality to his voice, now.

"Did she?" What, like, charm bracelets?

Oni Lee nodded, first slow, then more firmly. Taylor's ears picked up on the steady click-click of Sunny's paws on the stone path. Finally. The wolf's ears perked up as she caught sight of the two sitting under the tree, and she trotted over and sat down in front of them. Oni Lee stared, then hedged, "...your dog?"

Um. "She likes her ears rubbed," Taylor offered instead.

Oni Lee was still for another long moment, before he stretched out one hand and set it atop Sunshine's head. The wolf's tail wagged in a vaguely circular motion, and the cape took a sharp breath. His hand moved, and rubbed at Sunny's ears, and the wolf gave an appreciative whine. Oni Lee pet Sunny for a moment more, then retracted his hand. Sunshine wagged her tail more freely.

"What else do you need? ...for the shrine."

"Oh. Um." Taylor bit her lip, equally afraid of her answer and of lying. "Well... I'm about at the limit of what I can do. The inside needs a lot of repair and I don't know how to fix it. And school's starting soon, I won't have much time to learn."

"Then... I will send men to fix it. With your permission," he added.

"Oh! Uh, sure, that'd-- that'd be great. Thanks." Oni Lee nodded, then finally stood, took a step, and vanished in a puff of ash. Taylor felt all the strength leave her bones. "Well, that... happened." Sunshine just grinned.

* * *

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"You, send a message to the store's owner. He needs to know the rules of owning a business in our territory. You, go with him. And you, take inventory of your group's weaponry. Fix any discrepancies before I do." Lung's mask turned to regard each lieutenant in turn. He grunted, satisfied. "Good. Lee, anything to report?"

Oni Lee paused. "I pet a dog today."

Heads turned, including Lung's. Under his mask, Oni Lee felt his mouth twitch in an unfamiliar upward motion.
Summer waned, and the shadow of Winslow loomed larger in Taylor's sight. Her nerves ratcheted higher, and Danny asked her what was bothering her. She answered honestly: she was nervous about returning to school. Her father frowned, but let the matter drop. Taylor spent almost all her time outdoors for the last week of vacation, trying to burn off stress. Her sketchwork improved, and she spent a lot of time at the shrine, even in the afternoons, trying to finish up what she could before her free time was killed off by homework.

Just in case the gang cape had been serious, Taylor first consulted Old Mrs. Henrick on courtesies regarding yard work, and the aging matron taught her how to make a suitably quenching lemonade from scratch. Taylor started carting a couple pitchers of the stuff on her bike, and was glad for it when Oni Lee kept his word. She had finished weeding the flower beds and settled down near the torii to sketch the crumbling dog statues when a troupe of sullen youths marched down the street, then into the shrine. A few of them stared, but none of them spoke to her-- though speaking about her looked likely. They filed in, put on work gloves and hats, and set about examining the haiden's interior. Before long, the busy sounds of construction filled the air.

After about an hour, Taylor retrieved the pitchers from her bike, added the ice from a cooler to chill it, and set the drinks and a handful of plastic cups on the shrine's steps. She caught a couple of the boys watching her, but-- they hadn't spoken to her, so she didn't see much reason to speak to them and risk inciting the wrath of a gang member. Instead she nodded, and returned to her sketches. The sun turned over in the sky.

"Hey."

Taylor looked up from her paper and charcoals-- she was nearly finished with the second of the komainu statues-- and blinked a bit. Oh right, the probable-gang members sent to do work for her by a bloodchilling assassin. She'd forgotten. The one looming above her was a young man about her age, maybe a little older. He had a mostly-empty cup of lemonade in one hand. "Hey," she returned.

"What're you doing?"

"Drawing these." She gestured at the dog statues.
"Why?"

"Well, so I know what they're supposed to be." She'd had to look up what they were at the library. Lion-dogs, expressing A and Un, inhale and exhale. Maybe she should get more into sculpture...

"Uh... okay then." The boy fidgeted a bit, then jerked his thumb towards the group slowly packing up in the shrine behind him. "We're takin' off."

"Yeah, I should get going too. Thanks for your work." Taylor glanced up at the sky, and idly wished for a watch. Dad was probably still out, but Sunny might have finished her wanderings by now. Ugh, and she needed to shower and pack her school things... Taylor packed up her project, then cleaned up the lemonade peace offering before heading home. Her predictions were spot-on: Sunshine was waiting on the front porch, and a note from Dad was pinned to the fridge via magnet. Sunshine waited for her to let the both of them inside, then immediately started pawing and tugging at Taylor's backpack, making that snuffling noise she did whenever she wanted something.

"Wh-- yeah, I got it finished. Let me sit down first, jeeze..." She did, and took a moment to roll her shoulders and work out a muscle kink or two. Sunny waited by her leg patiently. When she was satisfied Taylor unzipped her bag and dug out her sketchbook, then withdrew the pair of pages she'd been working on. Sunny took the statue drawings in her mouth and 'wuffed' in thanks.

"Y'welcome. What'd you want them for, anyway?" Sunny just grinned around the pages, wagged her tail, and escaped back out into the night. "Well alright then."

* * *

"Pa! I'm home!" Yuuta let the door slam behind him, then caught sight of his grandmother's glower all the way from her rocking chair in the other room and added, "Tadaima."

"Okaerinasai," the old woman returned. Yuuta heard his father chuckle from the kitchen. He kicked off his shoes and followed the sound of cleaning dishes.

"Well, look at you, all sweaty. What've you been up to, Yuuta?" The teen grunted, and retrieved a glass for some water.

"Helping fix up that busted shrine." There was a clink as his father set down the plate he was drying.
Yuuta nabbed a couple icecubes from the freezer, dropped them into his drink, then turned to see his father staring at him. He couldn't see around the corner, but he'd bet his grandmother was doing the same. "What?"

"Forgive me for saying, that doesn't really sound like you. Who put you up to that?"

Yuuta scowled. "Nobody. Paul decided to do it and he roped me an' a couple other guys into helping." Not entirely untrue. Paul and two of the other guys said they'd been singled out by Oni Lee and told to go fix the old wreck, and anyone else they grabbed would be seen as 'favorable' for recruitment later. Few hours of labor for a good word with the Oni? Worth it.

"Well, good for you, Yuuta." His grandmother clomped into the kitchen on her cane. A smile was tugging at the corners of her mouth. Yuuta stared at the unfamiliar expression. "Glad to hear it. Better you're off doing something like that than running around being a hooligan." Ah, there was the scowl again. All was right with the world. "Honoka-chan told me the shrine was looking better... you left an offering, didn't you?"

"I left sawdust and a few curses for hammering my thumb." The old woman's expression darkened like a thundercloud.

"Hmph! Figures. Well, you walked here just fine, you can walk back and still be home in time for dinner." Grandmother clomped past Yuuta's father and started reaching into cupboards. She came back with some rice cakes, wrapped in a cheesecloth.

"You take this, and you leave it at the shrine like you should've. And none of your lip!"

Yuuta shot a pleading look at his father, who just raised his hands in surrender and backed up a step. "Sorry Yuuta. You know I'll bat for you on most things, but when it comes to Baachan you're on your own." Yuuta sighed, took the rice cakes, and left to go get his shoes back on.

It was advancing into evening by the time he arrived, stomping through the torii and up the cobblestone path. A few fireflies were already rising, their glowing bodies illuminating the cracked and crumbling statues near the entrance. That called to mind the only really strange part of the day: sure, the ABB deciding to go build some walls was a bit out of the ordinary, but the newer members got put to all sorts of errands and junk, so some grunt work being filtered down to the hopefuls happened now and then. But being explicitly told not to bother the white girl? Weird. She'd looked kind of familiar though. Decent lemonade, too.
Yuuta reached the back of the shrine, deemed it close enough, and tossed the bundle of mochi onto
the wood planks. He was halfway to the entrance when he heard a sound in the dark. A small gust of
wind produced a whispery noise, the *aaaahhh* of something drawing in a breath. Yuuta’s hand
reached for the switchblade in his back pocket. Nothing jumped out at him, but when he reached the
arch again, he felt himself jump a little inside his skin.

One of the komainu statues was different. A firefly glided across it, illuminating the smooth,
unblemished stone, free of cracks and moss and missing pieces. Yuuta stopped, even put his hand
out and touched it, just to see if it was real. The lion-dog's open mouth and rolling eyes seem to stare
down at him. Yuuta felt the hairs over his arms and neck prickle.

A brief swirl of wind passed him, its passage producing a half-imaged *uhhh* exhalation. Yuuta
swallowed hard, and turned around.

The second komainu was behind him on its pedestal, closed mouth and wide eyes as perfectly
formed as the day it had been made. Yuuta couldn't help but think back to the afternoon, looking
over that girl's shoulder as she drew the statues-- not as they were, but how they *should have been*,
pristine and grand. There was a brief rustle towards the back of the shrine, like small quick footsteps,
and Yuuta whipped around, knife in hand. Just visible through the dusk was the white cheesecloth
on the shrine's steps, now unfolded, and the rice cakes missing.

Yuuta could not run fast enough.

* * *

No peacetime lasts forever, but it still felt too soon that Winslow's doors reopened, like the gaping
maw of a beast. Taylor brushed her hair, shouldered her backpack, and put on a brave face. Maybe
They'd leave her alone. They had to have forgotten her over the long drowsy summer.

They hadn't.

* * *

By Friday Taylor felt ready to burst. When the last bell rang she pushed her way through the fleeing
crowd of students and to the bike racks, and raced home to her empty house. She opened a window
in the living room, then headed upstairs and shucked off her glue-smeared jeans and marker-
scribbled tee before jumping into the shower. The hot water drained her immediate anger and
washed it away with the soap. When she was dried off and dressed, she found Sunshine had scrambled in through the window and settled down on the couch to wait for her. Taylor sat down, and Sunny laid her furry head on Taylor's lap.

"...I hate this." Sunny made a mournful sound.

"No, I do. There's-- what do I even do? They didn't stop, I have no reason to think that they will, either." Taylor sighed, rubbed Sunny's ears with one hand and pinched the bridge of her nose with the other. "At least it's the weekend..."

Sunny's ears perked suddenly, and she lifted her head. The wolf rolled off the couch and click-clicked her way into the kitchen, then came back with something in her jaws. Taylor took it, brow drawing together in confusion.

"Today's ads?" Wuff! "Oh, paint sale... Sorry, Sunny, these are outdoor-type paints. Like for the Henrick's fence." A more insistent wuff followed. Taylor frowned. "And this coupon is only good through today. We'd have to go, like, right now. ...you are going to stare at me until I get up, aren't you?" Wuff!

Taylor sighed, and went to go find her shoes.

* * *

The DIY-Supply store was quite a ways away. It was already getting dark by the time Taylor finished picking out several cans of paint, a selection of brushes, and some other supplies, and then loading those onto her bike.

"You know, Sunny, sometimes I find it hard to believe that I had initially planned to spend most of my allowance on books this summer." Taylor grumbled. "And I don't think Dad will let us repaint the house, so I'm not sure what you think-- did you smuggle my apron into my baskets?" Bark!

"Sunny, please, I am not in the mood for this to turn into A Thing." The wolf just grinned, and trotted off. After some distance she looked back to make sure Taylor was following. She was.

Sunshine led the way into the Docks, her bright fur a beacon when the streetlights failed. She stopped near an abandoned warehouse, and waited for Taylor to wheel up and park her bike. When
she had, Sunshine wagged her tail, snuffled at the unopened paint cans, then bounded over to the brick wall of the building and rose up to tap her paws against it excitedly. Taylor scratched her head.

"Uh... Sunny, what?" The wolf repeated her loop between the paint and the wall. "Pretty sure that'd be vandalism, Sunny." Whiiiine. Taylor threw up her hands, the day's frustrations bubbling back up in the face of the evening's waste.

"Sunny, no, I can't. I can paint on a canvas, not on everything else. It's against the law, I'd get in trouble!" Sunny huffed, then sat down. She didn't have that still, patient look to her, but... Taylor hissed a breath through her teeth. She should have just stayed home if she'd wanted to paint. No, instead they were outside, at night, in one of the least safe areas of the city. There were gang tags and slurs spray painted all over everything out here already, it was honestly pretty disgusting.

... Taylor looked at Sunny, then at the bike laden with paint cans and brushes. She could go home-- she really doubted Sunshine would judge her for it. And it really was vandalism. Though... Taylor looked at the wall. It was pretty vandalized already. And... heat churned in Taylor's throat as she completed the thought. She could get in trouble-- but why was it okay for her to get in trouble for defacing this, but fine for Them to ruin her books, her homework? It wasn't fair. Was it fine for the gangs and rougher teens to smear everything with hate, but not her for a bit of color?

Taylor tied back her hair and put on her red apron, while Sunny's tail gave a slow, hopeful wag. She cracked open the paint cans one by one, tossed a brush into each. She made a face at the fumes, then dug into the rest of her purchases for a painter's mask. She picked up the dripping brush of red, faced the wall, and flung out her arm in a wide swipe. It left a bright smear of color on the brick. Taylor felt a little of her frustration drip down the brickwork with the paint. She swiped the brush again, then changed colors. Red and yellow swirled together in an orange whorl.

Sunny stood and barked.

* * *

They'd looped her bicycle chain around the handlebars, to better pull the bike behind them quickly as they ran. Up and down streets, over warehouses and normal houses-- green streaks were dotted with rough blotches of yellow and red and blue and everything in between for flowers. Broad swipes of white became clouds, golden swirls for the sun, blue-grey mountains and green trees and anything and everything that the slums of Brockton Bay were not. Sunny ran along, alternately helping to pull the bike and dashing back and forth along Taylor's canvas, barking and jumping up and down like a
fool. Lights turned on in nearby houses as people peeked out at the commotion-- Taylor laughed and swiped another tree onto brick.

"Hey! HEY! Bitch! The fuck you doing?!" Taylor whipped around to find a very angry teenager had emerged from the house she was painting... and also that she and Sunny had wandered into an occupied neighborhood after all. A streetlight was enough to tell he was Asian, but not enough to really discern any more than that. "That's my house, bitch! You're gonna be lucky if you got any teeth left by morn--ing..." Taylor grimaced behind her paint-speckled mask. That looked like one of the older teens who'd been at the shrine-- and therefore, probably one of the ABB. She was going to die.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry, I didn't know, I lost track and-- and I shouldn't have changed anything and-- I'm so sorry!"

The older teen looked distracted. She saw him go from scowling at her, to looking at the decorations she'd added to his home. He blinked, mouth opening for a second. Taylor gripped her paintbrush so tight she wondered what would break first: the brush, or her fingers?

The teen looked at her for a second, then back to her crime. "Hey, it's-- you know what, nevermind. It's cool. You... do whatever you do." Taylor stared. The teen gave her an awkward wave and headed back inside, shutting the door with a solid click. Taylor waited for retribution, but none came. She turned to Sunshine, sitting by her bike.

"We are never doing this again." Sunny just smiled.

* * *

Armsmaster's motorcycle emitted a low rumble as it rolled through the Docks. The machine was capable of running almost completely silently, Armsmaster had tested it extensively, but the sound aided the visible show of a Protectorate hero on patrol. The tinker grit his teeth a little and resisted the impulse to gun the engine faster-- as relatively useless as it was to patrol out here, between the very rundown Docks and the only slightly-less rundown neighborhoods that bordered it, where few who witnessed a crime would report it-- it still had to be done. Best to just bear it, until he was finished and could get back to his workshop.

He turned a corner and headed towards the streetlight that marked the end of his route in this district, but a brief glimpse of color made him slow, then bring the machine to a stop. Armsmaster peered at the row of houses opposite him, and after a moment, he got off his bike and approached for a closer look. The third house from the end here was decorated in swirls and splotches of paint, forming
crude drawings of natural objects and plants. Actual paint, too, and not spraypaint-- more than a little unusual. The tinker backed up a bit, and glanced down the street in each direction. On his right, nothing out of the ordinary. On his left, an unbroken train of colorful defacement. He frowned, and brought up a crime report form in his HUD with a few well-placed flicks of his vision.

He was halfway back to his motorcycle, and halfway through the BBPD form, when he stopped, something nagging at him. Armsmaster turned around, eyed the street again, recounted the details. After nearly a minute, his eyes widened-- the police report was dismissed from his visor.

On the right, nothing out of the ordinary-- for a bad neighborhood in Brockton Bay. Gang tags littered the sides of houses and other buildings, broken windows were covered by plastic or cheap plywood. But on the left, an unbroken chain of household paint, layered onto clean bricks and siding. No spraypaint, no broken windows, no sagging roofs. The effect halted after the third house from the end, the last house covered with drawings.

Armsmaster activated his Protectorate radio, and called it in.
Lunchtime. Yuuta felt two hands clasp his shoulders, then release as Haru walked around him into view. The other sophomore had his lunch brought from home in a brown paper bag, and he frowned at Yuuta's school tray of ambiguous meatloaf and canned veggies. Haru jerked his head towards the entrance of the Winslow cafeteria.

"Dump it, we'll share mine. Souta wants us on the roof."

Yuuta frowned, but popped the substandard cookie dessert in his mouth and left the rest of the tray atop a trash can as he followed Haru to the staircase. The old metal door at the top of the school was supposed to be kept locked, but it had been broken open and the padlocks stolen so many times that the maintenance staff had ceased to care. As promised, Souta was on the roof already, sitting on the low concrete divider that the tall chain fence surrounding the building's peak was anchored into. The upperclassman was smoking a joint, but when he spotted the other two teens approaching, he pinched the end and stowed the remainder into his jacket. It was a bit rude not to share, but Souta had been in the ABB's ranks for about a year already; he was allowed to be rude.

"Yuuta. Tell me again what you said about the shrine."

Yuuta took a sandwich from Haru, then complied. The guys had already made fun of him for getting spooked, so there was no sense in denying things now. It was a worrisome topic, though. Had Souta reported his cowardice to the Oni, and now he was going to be banned from the gang forever? The upperclassman just listened in silence, his expression dark. He was silent for a bit after Yuuta finished.

"Hey. This stays here, get me? No telling anyone until I do, yeah?" Yuuta and Haru both nodded. Souta exhaled through his teeth. "I saw the miko chick over the weekend. Friday night. I think she's a cape."

Haru choked on his soda, narrowly avoiding spraying Souta's boots with his surprise. "W-what?"

"Yeah. Caught her painting my house, just-- throwing paint everywhere. All over the neighborhood. Trees an' flowers all over everything. Get this-- everything she touched? Is like brand new." Yuuta's eyes widened. Souta saw, and nodded. "Yeah. Even the roof don't leak any more. But now the PRT's sniffin' around."

"But... she wasn't at the shrine when the statues got fixed. I looked. And there's no paint on them, either."

"She still did it. What else would?"

"Uh... guys?" Haru waved his hands a bit for attention. "That girl? From the shrine? Beanpole, black hair, little bit of a butterface?" There was a chorus of nods. "I know that chick. She goes to this school."
"Huh. Cool, I guess."

"No. No, you don't get it," Haru stressed, "I saw her last year, too. There's like, a bunch of people always on her ass. Stealing her books and shit."

"...so? She's a cape, let her handle it."

"Uhuh, right. And what's the Oni gonna do if he finds out we all just watched while his pet got hassled?"

A long pause stretched. Souta retrieved his joint and re-lit it. Yuuta felt a tiny bubble of hysteria escape his throat as a laugh. "Closed-casket funerals come to mind."

"Okay. Okay, here's what's gonna happen." Souta fanned away the smoke, and leaned in. Yuuta and Haru mirrored him, closing the circle. "You two gonna spread word, anyone with the colors-- the miko chick belongs to the Oni, so we're protecting his property, got it? Not a word on her bein' a cape. I'll tell the Oni that when I go downtown in a few days." Souta took a final drag of the joint, then tossed the roach away and put his hand out, palm down. Haru and Yuuta put their palms on top of his. "Right. This'll be easy."

"For Haru, you mean. You have to tell the Oni." Yuuta said. "And if I get murdered, my Baachan's gonna be pissed."

"Dude, you really gotta stop living under her thumb."

"It is a very strong thumb, okay?!"

* * *

Taylor decided to spend her free period outside, away from Them so she could read in peace. Her plan derailed as soon as she got out the school's doors, when she spotted the conspicuous gap in the bicycle racks where her own had been parked, just that morning. Her bike chain and half-size lock were discarded on the ground, sheared by bolt cutters. She walked closer and stood over the empty space, feeling like a mirror to it. Her eyes welled up and stung, and she dashed the tears away on her wrist. When her vision cleared she turned away from the latest expression of Their hate and spotted another teen just down the racks, a slightly heavyset Asian boy, packing an empty lunch bag onto his own bike. He was looking at her with wide dark eyes. Taylor scowled.

"What are you staring at!" She yelled at him, and the boy jumped, then turned and fled. Taylor just wiped at her face again, and trudged back inside.

The rest of the day was spend in a thunderous cloud of resentment. They were quick to capitalize on her mood, not even bothering to hide the satisfied smiles. Taylor hunkered down and endured. When Mr. Quinlan had to step into the hall to break up a fight between some E88 kids and their ABB counterparts, several spitballs found their way into her hair and backpack. Taylor hid inside her hoodie, and listened to the lecture, the whispered comments, the upperclassmen being berated in the hall as they were marched out of school. Taylor endured.

Taylor's bike was back in the rack at the last bell, complete with a new chain and padlock, with the key still set into the lock. Despite such an open invitation, nobody else had claimed the vehicle. Taylor rode it home, cheeks wet, but stretched into a smile.
The living room window was already open. Her father's computer was on, and Sunny was sitting in her father's office chair. As Taylor watched, her backpack slipping from suddenly-loose fingers, the wolf clicked the computer mouse a few times, tongue lolling. Sunny tilted her head towards Taylor, still grinning. Taylor did not endure.

"YOU ARE A DOG!"

* * *

"Taylor, honey..." Danny pushed Taylor's door open a crack after giving a courtesy knock. Taylor looked up from her bed, where she was stretched out, reading another book Sunny had unearthed from the yard. Danny saw the mud and frowned even further.

"Taylor... you know you can tell me anything, right?"

"Sure, dad."

"I wouldn't be angry, you know."

"Uh... okay?"

"Just... just so you know." He closed the door behind him. Taylor's brow furrowed. What had brought that on?

The half-dozen large packages that appeared on the doorstep at the end of the week might have had something to do with it. Taylor dug out an iconic Little Red Wagon from the cobweb-strewn depths of the garage in order to smuggle the Express Shipping boxes into the shrine before her dad could see. Taylor glared at Sunny the whole way.
Taylor's intentions to avoid the shrine on weekdays did not last long under the piteous gaze of Sunny. She started bringing her homework with her, and sometimes didn't return home until after the sun was dipping to meet the horizon. It wasn't always for work, either; for being in such a dangerous place, the shrine was quickly becoming a small oasis of peace. Nobody bothered her there, and though the occasional visitor to the shrine might stare at her for a few minutes as she gardened, or painted, or practiced with her calligraphy, no one told her to stop, either. Sunny was there most days, rolling in the grass, napping under the tree, or chasing butterflies until she inevitably got dizzy and knocked herself over. It was... nice.

That said, Sunshine had certainly found a project for her.

She was finishing up re-potting the saplings into burlap bags that could be planted directly when she heard grumbling and footsteps enter under the torii. A familiar teen marched up towards the haiden, pulled back his arm to toss a white bundle, then caught sight of Taylor watching and immediately changed his mind. He kneeled and set the offering on the steps instead. When he was done, the boy had a moment of obvious hesitation before he approached Taylor, who had begun picking up the heavy earthen bundles and started loading them onto her Little Red Wagon.

"Uh... hey."

"Hi." Taylor replied, not stopping her work.

"What's... all this?"

"Trees. I was going to go plant them."

"That's a lot of trees for one shrine."

"I'm not planting them here. I mean out there," Taylor said, and waved her hand vaguely at the Asian district beyond. She hoped she didn't need a license for public landscaping. The boy next to her glanced at the exit of the shrine, then back at the huge pile of saplings. It was going to take a lot of trips.

"Miko, why are you--"

"Taylor," she corrected.

"R-right! Taylor. Uh, I'm Yuuta, by the way."

"Nice to meet you, Yuuta. Thank you again for helping fix the place."

"You remembered me?" She nodded. "That's-- cool. So, Taylor, why are you planting trees?"

At that, Taylor bit on her lip and hid behind her hair. Between the book Sunshine had gotten her and
the packages she'd ordered, she had a good idea, but it sounded... a little silly, even to her. And maybe a little offensive. But not answering would be worse. "...there's no cherry trees here. For the flower festival." Yuuta gaped at her, and Taylor flushed. "And I know it's around March or something, but I didn't know if the seasons were reversed because we're not in Japan, and now I've already got the saplings grown, and--"

"I don't-- I don't think the dates change around the world? I'd have to ask my Baachan. But I don't think they'd even grow out here. How long have you been planning for this?"

"Since... last week, maybe?" Taylor hedged. "I just got these around Wednesday."

Yuuta hissed through his teeth. "Seriously?! Don't saplings cost, like, fifty bucks each? Or more?" He cast wide eyes at the hoard. Taylor winced.

"I hope not. I just got a bunch of the seeds. And some imported soil," she added, expression a little darker.

"...when did you plant the seeds?"

"Thursday, mostly." Yuuta stared at her, his chest barely moving to breathe. After a moment he turned his head to look at the pile of saplings. Taylor fidgeted. They were already about two feet high each-- a year's worth of growth in a few days. But if he wasn't going to say anything, she wasn't going to say anything. She heard him swallow, hard. Taylor decided the best course of action was to simply finish piling what she could on her wagon, then walk out. She had a lot of holes to dig.

* * *

It was hard work. Taylor wished that Sunshine was here to help, today. The canine loved digging holes, it should have been an obvious choice. Instead, it was just Taylor, with her spade and stubborn refusal to quit. After an hour her hands were getting quite sore, so it was almost a relief when the ABB finally decided to interrupt. Taylor looked up when a pair of boots came to a stop near her, and up further when she saw the interloper wasn't a teen, but several. Six or seven adolescents, male and female, formed a loose circle around her. Taylor sat back on her heels, and tried not to toy with her spade too much.

The leader looked down at her, nearly a man grown, with a bandanna wrapped over his head in the gang's colors. "...you want some help?"

Taylor stared. There was a gun on the man's hip, she was technically digging up public property, and the first thing anyone says to her is that? "You'll want a shovel," she said.

The man nodded, then gestured to a few of the people behind him, who split off to go find gardening equipment. Taylor felt something quite like mortal terror churning in her stomach and trying to rise into her throat. It was almost hilarious-- she smiled, not sure for which reason. "There's more saplings at the shrine, I couldn't get them all in one trip." Her mouth ran itself some more.

"'Kay. Where you want them?"

"Anywhere there's dirt, and space." Right now she was sitting on an earth-filled divider for a busy street, the soil dry and cracked and with more cigarette butts than earthworms. She had two in this strip already, and was working on the third, and the plants didn't seem too unhappy, even with their new home. This one even had a few pale pink pearls budding on it. Taylor brushed one with her
finger, then finished scooping in the sullen dirt over the burlap sack containing the tree's roots.

It was hard work, but it went a lot faster with many hands. The full load of over two hundred saplings all found new homes in the scarce earth of Brockton Bay, and as the heat of the day wore on mothers, and wives, and younger siblings started appearing with snacks, or drinks for those working under the sun. Some particularly enterprising cooks and shopkeepers started setting up mobile carts, hawking colorful wares and freshly-fried tofu, and all sorts of things. Traffic was stalled and diverted around some of the larger squares, and people began to gather, lured outside by the sights and sounds and smells. By evening, the work was all finished and the block party had only grown.

Taylor missed her chance to retreat to the shrine. A few of the younger crowd, though no one she recognized, spotted her and all but dragged her back to the impromptu festivities. She found that she didn't mind that much.

By morning, every one of the saplings was spotted with the pale pink buds, far out of season.

* * *

Oni Lee was not at the festivities. He wasn't even at his work, either.

Oni Lee was outside the building he slept at, where a plant had grown up through a crack in the sidewalk. A tall, simple green stalk, crowned by a bright red flower with wide-set petals. It hadn't been there yesterday. He recognized it, too, which prompted a faint flicker of surprise to pass him by, like a single eddy in an otherwise still pond. It was a spider lily, a beautiful flower that bloomed in early autumn. They were often planted around rice paddies and rivers, to repel pests-- the bulbs of the plant were poisonous, but the flower itself was still loved. It was a funeral flower.

And it was growing out of the sidewalk in front of the abandoned building he lived in. Oni Lee stared at it, as though it would reveal its secrets if only he watched it long enough. Was it a message-- a threat? It didn't seem to ring true. He stepped closer. A click-click-click of paws on pavement drew his attention before he could pluck the plant from its roots.

Ahead was the dog he'd seen--

Oni Lee blinked. Was it a dog? The head seemed too angular, the proportions of the limbs too smooth. Not a dog, then, but a wolf. The animal was so white it nearly glowed, and when it stopped walking it turned its head back to stare at him. After a moment, it resumed its travel-- and Oni Lee saw a red flower grow in its wake, the shoot curling up through a tiny crack in the pavement. The spirit walked, and Oni Lee followed.

The wolf-spirit led him away from the busier streets, away even from the shrine, into the only sort of place that even in Brockton Bay went untouched and silent. They passed under the iron gate of the cemetery, spider lilies creeping along behind them. The flowers picked up speed, curling ahead and marking out a path until the new shoots and blossoms ringed a broken headstone. There was nothing to distinguish the grave from the others around it, but the spirit walked over on silent paws and sat down next to the marker. Oni Lee knelt in front of it, and pushed away a fold of moss. Much of the gravestone was worn or cracked-- weather and neglect had aged it before its time-- but a few characters were still just able to be made out. Kiyoko.

There had been a girl once, with this name. She'd had a family. She'd sold charms at the local shrine, once they'd abandoned their homes and moved to this desolate place, on the other side of the world.
She'd had a brother.

It wasn't much, this memory, this girl. He still had no face or name of his own. But it was there. It was proof, proof of a truth that he'd long since swept aside: there had been a man, before there had been Oni Lee.

_Kiyoko._

The wolf spirit was patient. It gazed at him with eyes too deep and knowing for an animal. Oni Lee put out his hand, and touched the white fur of its brow.

"Thank you."
"Hey, Mr. Henrick!"

"Hm?" The old man shuffled his feet until he turned in Taylor's direction. She waved at him from over the white picket fence, and he gave a slight wave and a smile back in return. "Good morning, young lady. On your way to school?"

Taylor winced, just a little, but nodded, and let at least some of a smile slip back onto her face. "In a minute. Wanted to ask you something first."

"Go on."

"Okay, this is kinda outta the blue, but do you do any woodworking, Mr. Henrick?"

"Well, I've put together a few things in the past. Did you break a chair, or something?"

"No, nothing like that." Taylor frowned, then dug into her backpack. She withdrew a piece of paper torn from one of her sketchbooks, then held it up. Old Mr. Henrick squinted and pushed his glasses a bit further up his nose. The paper had a drawing of a curio cubby-- or maybe a curio box, there was a small scribble that looked like hinges. The whole thing was a large rectangle with 13 differently-sized sections. Odd choice, but cleverly planned to make everything fit. Old Mr. Henrick shuffled forward a bit and took the paper for a closer look.

"Could do with some sizing, but it doesn't look too tough. You wanting a jewelry box?"

"I don't... think so?" Taylor shrugged. "Not actually sure what's going in it yet. A friend wanted it."

"You should," he grunted. "Boys'll be giving you calf eyes an' gifts soon enough. You'll see." He grinned at Taylor's embarrassed flush and rapid protestations. "I think I can handle this, if you want."

"That'd be great, Mr. Henrick! Thank you!" Taylor's smile came back. "Want me to mow your lawn or something later?"

"Well, that'd be mighty helpful of you, Taylor. it's a deal."

* * *

Their group was splintered, today, without focus or drive to hound Taylor. Easy enough to see why, as half of the core was missing: Sophia Hess had called out sick today. It was a welcome reprieve. Taylor ate lunch in the cafeteria at the mostly-barren table of exiles. There was time left in the period still after she finished her sandwich wrap and apple (the cookie was not worth the name), so she pulled out some thicker sheets of paper, a brush, and an inkpot, and set to practice.

Calligraphy was hard, with so much precision needing to be balanced with the somewhat chaotic nature of raw ink. This book was a little easier, in Taylor's opinion. Instead of having the characters
flow together, here they were arranged neatly atop each other on simple white slips of paper. Some of the advanced ones had twining swirls and artistic flair, but these required concentration enough. Taylor didn't even notice her inkpot had moved until she reached over to dip her brush.

"Hey Tayyyyy-lor. What'cha doing? Are you dwawing again?" Emma crooned, pursing her lips as she reduced Taylor's effort to babtalk. She held up the inkpot in one hand, smirking.

"Give it back, Emma." Taylor scowled, but her heart wasn't in it. This was a doomed cause and she knew it. And what was more, Emma knew that she knew. The other girl rolled the inkpot between her fingers, smiling wider. She opened her mouth for another volley, then suddenly froze, eyes widening as she looked at the papers in front of Taylor. Abruptly, her face twisted with hate, so much so Taylor leaned back away from her.

"And what the hell is this?!!" Emma swiped a hand at the table, knocking away the brush and sending paper slips scattering. Around the cafeteria, heads were turning. "What, are you ABB now? Don't make me laugh! They wouldn't take you. Nobody would take you, Taylor. Not even if you whored yourself to them!" Emma had a flush riding high on pale cheeks, her eyes wide and almost rolling. She was yelling, too-- Emma never yelled. She whispered, murmured, crooned. She didn't raise her voice so others could hear.

"You're not even worth--"

"Then why are you here?" Taylor interrupted. "You're always saying that. I'm not worth the time, I'm not worth attention, I'm not worth the air I breathe. So why are you over here to tell me?" Taylor took an uneven breath, watched a muscle near Emma's eye twitch. "Just give me back my ink, and leave me alone."

"Oh, you want it back? Of course, how rude of me." Emma didn't smile-- she showed her teeth. Then she snapped her wrist and splashed the ink over Taylor's face.

Taylor jolted back so hard she slipped from the table bench and fell, giving her head a sharp crack on the linoleum as she landed. It seemed a very loud sound in the silent room. Taylor groped for her bag, found the strap, and lurched to her feet. The floor and walls were swimming-- was there ink in her eyes? No, just tears. Taylor fled into the hall and kept away from the walls, all shifting and dark as they were.

Still at the table, Emma watched Taylor flee with her metaphorical tail between her legs-- just like always. She gave the empty inkpot a quick glance to judge its solidity, then hurled the object to the floor. It splintered to pieces. "Stupid bitch. Who does she think she is?"

"That's what I'd like to know." Emma's gaze whipped up. Just behind her was one of the upperclassmen, a well-built Asian boy with a red and green wristband and a jacket that smelled like smoke. Behind him were a few other students-- and behind them, Emma spotted dark-haired heads all turned her way.

Souta didn't smile-- he showed his teeth.

* * *

Taylor jumped off her bike when she reached her yard, not bothering to park it neatly. The vehicle clattered to the grass as Taylor stumbled up the steps and unlocked her front door. Mr. Henrick was
out on his porch, saw her disheveled state, and called out-- "Taylor? Young lady, you okay? Taylor!"

Taylor shut the door and locked it behind her. She didn't answer when the doorbell rang, a few minutes later. What she did do was put her head under a running faucet, until she felt Sunshine bump against her legs and whine. Taylor didn't say anything. She just slid down the cabinets to the floor and buried her wet face in the wolf's fur. Sunny turned her head to cover Taylor's neck and hold her closer. She gave a single low, mournful howl, then settled into a comforting silence.

"...Sunny?" Taylor asked, some time later as sunset turned the kitchen window to stained glass.

'Mrrmrr?'

"Let's go paint the town again."

* * *

The motorcycle purred to a stop. Armsmaster dismounted quickly and took two long strides to the sidewalk, where a rough mural had been added to the dividing wall between the street and the houses up the hill. This was on the other side of the docks from the last stretch of parahuman vandalism he'd encountered, closer to the Trainyards and the Merchants this time. Armsmaster leaned closer for a second, then strode quickly back to his bike and opened the small storage compartments. He came back with two pieces of paper, stuck one against the wall a few meters to his left, and the other a few meters to his right. The one on his right came away with more paint. The tinker opened his radio connection as he straddled the bike again and kicked it off.

"Armsmaster reporting, I've picked up the trail of our painter. Still fresh, I'm going to follow it."

"Roger that Armsmaster. Keep in contact."

Sounded like Chessman was on console tonight. That was fine with Armsmaster-- the other hero had a natural knack for organizing and coordinating that his power had only built upon. Armsmaster could respect that. He turned up the speed and followed the trail of paint and restored buildings. It wasn't long before a figure appeared in his headlight-- tall, long hair pulled back, wearing loose white clothes and a red apron. They were currently splattering paint across the trunk of a dying oak tree in a wide, spotted arc, like a shooting star. They jumped when the headlight illuminated the area, cast a quick look over their shoulder--wearing a mask--then dropped the paintbrush and bolted into the night.

Armsmaster, already half off his bike to make an attempt at a friendly approach, cursed and started running as well. He disengaged the magnetic lock on his halberd and gripped the weapon, just in case. "Halt! This is the Protectorate!"

The fleeing painter did not halt. Why did they never halt when he told them to? A slight brush of his chin inside his helmet activated the comms again. "Got them in my sights, they're fleeing. On pursuit."

Miss Militia's voice joined the channel. "You're not running after someone with a weapon drawn, are you?"

The halberd clicked back into the magnetic lock. "Of course not." The painter was closer-- Armsmaster was picking up speed, hitting his stride, while the parahuman (teenager, most likely) was starting to flag. They turned a quick corner onto another street, out of his sight. "Almost got them, I just need to--"
Chessman frowned at the console. Beside him, Miss Militia moved a bit closer, eying the suddenly silent radio with suspicion. Her hand drifted to her power, a knife at her hip. Chessman pushed the CALL button and said, "Say again, Armsmaster, you cut out. ...Armsmaster? Armsmaster!"

Another worryingly quiet moment, the two heroes already grabbing gear and sending an alert for backup, when the tinker's radio hissed back to life.

"I am petting this dog," Armsmaster said.

"Wh... what was that, Armsmaster?"

"It is a good dog."

"Alert the Master/Stranger containment team," Miss Militia said. "He's been compromised."

* * *

Sunny met up with Taylor again when she was halfway back home, pedaling harder than she'd thought possible. The wolf ran alongside easily, tongue lolling happily. "Oh man, Sunny, why did we do that it was such a bad idea why."

'Woooo~!'

"Don't woo at me we ran from Armsmaster!"

'WOOOOOOO~!

"This had better not come back to bite me in the ass, Sunny!"

* * *

Taylor parked her bike neatly this time. She headed up the steps, then stopped to pick up the bundle sitting in front of the door. A casserole dish, with a savory-smelling quiche, just faintly warm. A note was taped to the lid, from Mr. and Mrs. Henrick. Taylor read it, then folded it neatly and tucked it in her pocket to keep. Damp eyes made it hard to see the door's lock, but she managed.

Taylor--

It looked like you had a bad day. You can always come over and talk to us if you need, sweetie.

Here's some dinner, in case your papa works late again.

--George and Martha

Taylor warmed it in the microwave, then split the egg dish with Sunny.

It was a good quiche.
Chapter 10

Haru stopped by the shrine over the weekend, with a small jug of rice wine in hand and a ball of anxiety resting behind his ribs. He hadn't stood up for the confrontation in the cafeteria, but he'd been there to see it. Souta hadn't done more than have some *words* with the redhead, but the girl had started shrieking at the top of her lungs, which brought down the teachers. Souta was probably going to get suspended again; Haru hoped he hadn't had enough strikes to get expelled. Then again, Souta probably wasn't worried about that.

Either way, there wasn't much Haru could do about it now, but a quick offering for good luck wouldn't hurt.

He rang the bell like he was supposed to, then put the sake next to someone else's offering that was already there. When he turned to leave, he spotted Taylor in the grassy area next to the unused kaguraden. His footsteps slowed— even from here, he could see the dark stain on her face from the ink. He turned and headed towards her instead of the exit.

"Uh, hello?"

"Oh, hi." She looked up, gave the briefest of nods, then hid behind her hair again, her fingers running along the edges of the open book in her lap.

"Sorry... should I not? Uh, be here, I mean."

"It's fine."

Well this was going swimmingly. Haru scratched the back of his neck. They'd never spoken in school that he could remember, though he'd had a few classes with her. Friday hadn't been the first time he'd seen the redhead go after her, not by a long shot, and she wasn't the only one. Haru had even laughed along sometimes, when the skinny girl got riled up or someone pulled a fast one on her when the teachers weren't looking, spitballs and passed notes and knocking her books and things around. Harmless fun, as far as he'd been concerned. As far as anyone had been concerned. After all, it was only Taylor.

Which, looking back, now that she had a name and a face and a very scary patron, had been pretty shitty of him. That it took the threat of angering Oni Lee to actually make him look at her, and *see* what happened instead of merely *watching*... well, that was pretty shitty too.

"I'm sorry."

"For what?" She didn't look up.

"Uh... everything, I guess?" That got her attention. "We've, uh, had classes together since last year. And I never, y'know, said anything. About those girls. And that's really not cool of me, so... I'm sorry, for what it's worth." He shrugged, and looked down at his shoes.
"...thanks. For what it's worth." What was it about girls being able to say 'fuck you' in the most innocuous of words?

"Uh-- yeah. Well, I figured you should know, um... we're gonna all try and make sure that doesn't happen anymore." Oh. Wait, was he supposed to say that? The sudden intensity of her gaze on him did nothing to quell his nerves.

"And what does that mean?" It was no wonder the Oni was fond of her. There was probably iron running through this girl's blood. "Why don't you sit down. I'll make tea."

Haru talked.

* * *

When the boy had left, Taylor returned to the little office building near the edge of the shrine's grounds, to rinse out her tea set and to find an actual chair to sit in, so she could think. It didn't come as a surprise that people might associate her with the ABB, exactly, but it wasn't a fact that Taylor liked to dwell upon. She hadn't started coming to the shrine with any thought for the gang in mind outside of a healthy touch of fear; certainly not with any designs on joining, if that were even possible. She just... wanted to keep the shrine from being neglected again. As she'd realized the first time Sunshine had led her here: someone had loved this place, and the work to build it couldn't have been easy, if her repairs were any indication. Someone had loved it, and whether they were still here or not surely it was painful to see something like that fall to ruin. Did it really have to be more complicated than that?

Taylor sighed, feeling a headache building. Maybe if it was just the ABB, as they had been for the past couple of months--helpful at times, but mostly just keeping their distance--she could have handled it. And now even that fragile peace was in danger of being Emma'd. Hopefully it wouldn't come to that. Maybe it would even get better? Maybe people would back off if they saw other kids standing up for her-- literally, apparently. She just had to make sure it didn't get back to her dad somehow.

Taylor couldn't deny it felt nice to know that someone at school had her back, even a little. And saving her bike had been beyond their call of duty, as far as she could see-- she'd told the Haru boy as much. She'd given him some paintings she'd done over the summer, in thanks, with instructions to hand one over each to the other two teens he'd been acting with.

There was a slight clattering sound outside, and Taylor reluctantly left the shade of the office to go look. Sunshine had made her way back to the shrine, and was now going over the day's offerings. Specifically, she was fumbling with the cap on the sake, and as soon as she got it off the wolf grabbed the neck of the small jug in her teeth and tilted her head skyward. Taylor could hear the guzzling sounds from here.

"Really, Sunny? It's not even five o'clock." The wolf just 'wuffed' at her, then padded over to the rope-circled tree and flopped down onto the grass. Taylor followed, and settled down nearby. At an unsatisfactory distance, as it turned out, because Sunny wagged her tail and wriggled on her back until the motion inched her close enough for Taylor to rub her tummy. "Busy day, I take it?"

'Wuff.'

Sunny contented herself with Taylor's attentions for a bit, then rolled back onto her stomach and laid down, muzzle on her paws. Taylor scooted a bit closer and laid down in the grass with her, head
pillowed on the wolf's flank, and the pair of them settled into silence to watch the clouds go by. At least this wasn't complicated.

* * *

"Ōkami. Miko."

Taylor blinked out of her nap, then jolted rather more awake when she registered the scowling mask of Oni Lee looking down at her. Beside her, Sunny yawned.

"I bring news." The assassin paused, in that way he always seemed to between sentences, as though he had to process the thought first. "May we speak?" He asked. Asked, as if Taylor could possibly say no. She nodded, and sat up. Oni Lee sat down in front of her.

"Okay. What's going on?"

"Lung has asked about you. He has asked about the trees, and the shrine, among other things." Sunny's ears perked to listen a little more intently. Taylor put one hand back behind her, to grip the wolf's fur as an anchor. "He will meet with you."

Said in the same tone as 'the sky is blue.' Lung's will was like gravity: a law of the universe, not to be denied. "What should I do?"

"I am... still thinking about that."

"Can I just... not show up?" Ever again, most likely.

"No. You are not ABB, you are not under his authority; you are here. He must come to you, and already that angers him. To refuse him would be worse." Taylor buried her face in her hands. Sunny whined, and licked at her knuckles. After a moment, Oni Lee continued, almost hesitant. "I... will try to find a solution It-- it is difficult for me."

"Because he's your boss."

"No," the assassin said. Taylor looked at him. "I am... diminished, Miko. Much of me is lost. The Ōkami has aided me in ways I cannot express. I owe a debt that cannot be repaid. If I can aid you, I will."

Behind Taylor, Sunshine got to her feet, and padded over to the masked cape. Oni Lee held very still as Sunny leaned close enough to leave a nose-print on his mask, then turned and lowered her head to his side. She nipped at something, then stood back a step. Taylor saw Oni Lee's mask tilt towards her a little, hoping for a translation.

"I think she wants those things?" Taylor pointed at the cape's belt. After a moment, Oni Lee untied the short, beaded cord that helped fasten his short sword to his waist. Ojime were usually meant to hold small containers of other objects, but a blade was all Oni Lee ever needed. He held the beads out on his palm and Sunny took them gently in her teeth, with a 'wuff' of thanks. The wolf immediately turned and trotted over to the main body of the shrine. Taylor frowned, and got up to follow. She heard Oni Lee get to his feet behind her, and do the same.

Sunshine walked into the unlit interior of the shrine, her fur helping to keep things visible. On the floor was the box Old Mr. Henrick had made. It lacked hinges, but other than that it was a faithful
reproduction, and Taylor had spent a few hours on Saturday painting the lines and characters over
the lid as the drawing had directed. Sunny pushed the lid away with her nose, then carefully
deposited the ojime into one of the cubbies. The wolf nosed at the lid until she managed to put it
more or less back in place, then stared down at the box with contented eyes.

"Okay. I... guess it really was a jewelry box. Huh." Taylor pushed a hand through her hair. "I copied
the characters like she wanted, but I don't really know what they mean... but if I had to guess,
something about sparkles."

Oni Lee stared at her for a moment, then turned back to the box. "No. Those characters represent
animals. It is the Chinese zodiac, with the addition of the cat."

"...oh."

"The box is redrawn on the lid, to show which characters go where. It does not seem to be in any
order." The assassin helpfully clarified.

"That... probably makes more sense. Somehow." Taylor sighed. If she understood everything
Sunshine did, she'd probably drink before five o'clock, too. "Which one did she put your beads in?"

"Nezumi, the rat."
"Yes, I understand. We'll head over soon, and get this cleared up... yes. Goodbye."

Danny Hebert hung up the kitchen phone, a heavy weight settling in his stomach. With only a slight tremor in his fingers, he started going through his work duffel bag and found the black cell issued to him, then sent off a couple of texts, explaining that he was going to be late getting in today. He could hear Taylor moving around upstairs as she got ready for the day, and he slipped the phone back into the black bag before she could come down the stairs and see it. That done, he set about finding some granola bars she could eat on the way.

Winslow had just called.

Danny didn't believe for a second that his Taylor had set thugs on Emma Barnes, the two were thick as thieves... or, they had been. Emma hadn't come around for quite some time now, and Taylor never mentioned her. But even if the girls had drifted apart, that didn't mean Taylor would do something like this. Taylor was a good girl. Taylor was a smart girl.

...but.

But. That small seed of doubt was a loathsome thing, and Danny hated it. He'd tried to pluck at its roots, but for everything he brushed aside there was something else to take its place. Taylor never mentioning friends at school, Taylor being out and about at all hours of the day, Taylor putting clothes in the laundry hamper full of mud and odd stains. Maybe she'd lost touch with Emma. Maybe she'd developed a taste for movies, or walking along the Boardwalk. Maybe she'd taken up a sport--a rough one, like soccer. Maybe sometime soon she'd bring up the three-hundred-and-some-change charge on his credit card, and there'd be a reasonable explanation for that, too.

Or maybe she'd made some friends who weren't entirely on the straight and narrow. Maybe she was getting into something over her head. Danny sighed. None of this would have happened if Annette were still alive.

Danny tapped his fingers on the countertop, and waited. Shouldn't Taylor have come downstairs by now, to make some cereal or something? He glanced at the clock-- 7:13. The seed twined its roots a little deeper; Danny himself always left at 7:15, on the dot. He glanced at the stairs, then at the clock again. Danny grabbed his keys and walked out the front door, started his car, then left the engine running and closed the door with enough force to be heard. Then he walked back inside, opening the front door as quietly as he could.

Taylor came down the stairs, wearing a red skirt and white blouse, and with her backpack nowhere in sight. She spotted him in the kitchen and froze, eyes wide. The seed grew deeper.

"Taylor," he said, keeping his voice carefully even. "I'm driving you to school today. No buts."

* * *
It was a cold and silent ride. Even the weather was gloomy, a grey cover of clouds with no rain in sight.

When they arrived at the school, Taylor's father did not drop her off. Instead, he exited the vehicle first, then came around to the passenger side to escort her into the building himself. They didn't stop there: Danny marched beside her as they passed her classroom and headed down the long hallways towards the Principal's Office. Taylor spotted Yuuta on the way, trying to attract her attention. Behind him, Haru saw the thunderous look on her dad's face and pulled the other teen into a different hallway. Danny and Taylor kept walking, and her heart beat twice or more for every step.

Emma and Mr. Barnes were already sitting with Blackwell, of course. Of course they would arrive early, to express how awful the situation was, and how terrible it must be for Emma to... whatever this was about. Friday's altercation, most likely. The redhead looked unusually frazzled, but her eyes when she looked at Taylor were as snakelike shrewd as ever. Danny moved to shake Mr. Barnes' hand-- Alan refused.

"Gentlemen, please, take a seat. I've got another meeting coming along shortly and I'd like to get this taken care of quickly." Blackwell steepled her fingers together, and looked between Taylor and Emma. "Now, Miss Barnes is alleging that Taylor incited a number of students suspected to be involved in gang activities against her. There was an incident last Friday, wherein the cafeteria staff heard raised voices and came to find Miss Barnes being confronted by several known troublemakers. Miss Hebert, were you present for this?"

"She ran off and all her little gang friends decided to--"

"I ran off because you threw ink in my face!"

"Ms. Blackwell, do you have any records that might support such an accusation?" Alan interrupted. The principal glowered, but allowed it. Danny Hebert was silent, save for the creak of wooden armrests beneath his fingers.

"There was nothing reported to the school nurse, or to any other staff, no." Blackwell pinched the bridge of her nose. "Although, over the past year Miss Hebert has complained frequently of aggression from Miss Barnes, as well as a few other students."

"...Taylor, you haven't mentioned anything like this to me."

"And those complaints were unfounded, I'm sure." Alan Barnes nodded. "It's sounding to me like Taylor's been trying to get Emma into trouble for some reason. Perhaps a grudge. Does that sound possible to you, Ms. Blackwell?"

The principal hedged a bit, saying, "I'm not sure that's the first explanation I'd come to, but..."

"And it's awfully convenient that Taylor could have a reason to be seen leaving, right before some unsavory students threatened the girl she's had her attentions on for a year or more."

"Alan, this isn't a courtroom." Danny hissed. The lawyer waved a hand in dismissal.

"The same logic applies, Danny. You need evidence-- anything else is just slander. Defamation of character. Emma has witnesses to this incident, all Taylor has is pointed fingers. If you keep pressing the point, it will go to court, and we both know who can last longer in that ring." Taylor's father gaped at the man. "I take Emma's well-being very seriously, Danny. Maybe you haven't been
watching your girl as well as you should have."

Taylor saw her dad stiffen beside her, but when he didn't say anything further, the fragile hold Taylor had on her own version of the Hebert Family Temper snapped.

"Why the hell aren't you saying anything?!" She exploded, rising from her chair so quickly it knocked the furniture over with a loud clatter. Blackwell tried to speak over her, but Taylor was louder. "You think I poured ink on my own face? This is why I haven't mentioned anything to you! Because you don't listen to me, you listen to anyone but me! You talk to anyone but me! You spend time with anyone BUT ME!"

"Taylor, sit down! You've been acting strange all summer, and now--"

"You don't listen, the teachers don't listen-- nobody does!" Taylor fist ed her hands in her hair, her breath coming in hitches and gasps. "Nobody listens to me except--!" The door slammed open.

"What in blazes is going on in here?!" The voice was familiar, but the tone was so far out of expectation that Taylor couldn't help staring. Old Mr. Henrick was standing in the doorway, a middle-aged man in a suit behind him. Mrs. Blackwell stood up, looking like she'd just swallowed a lemon.

"Ah, Mr. Henrick, Mr. Stevenson-- my apologies, but I'm going to be a bit delayed. Why don't you continue your tour while I deal with this?"

"Like hell I will. Susan Blackwell, what is this all about?"

Both Danny and Alan's faces were red with anger, but it was the lawyer who spoke. "This is a private matter, and you have no business being in here!"

Ms. Blackwell coughed. "Mr. Barnes, this is Mr. George Henrick and Mr. Clive Stevenson, the former and current superintendents of this district. They have every right to be here." Mr. Barnes' face didn't seem to know if it wanted to blanch or flush further.

"Still not answering me, Blackwell. Taylor-- what's going on?"

Taylor blinked, then hastily wiped at her face. "Emma stole my inkpot on Friday, then splashed it in my face. Some other kids finally stood up for me, so now Emma's saying I sicced gang members on her."

"Uh huh. I remember you runnin' home in tears that day." Old Mr. Henrick's eyes were shrewd. "I've had my suspicions-- has she been giving you a hard time for a while now?" At her nod, Old Mr. Henrick hissed a breath through his teeth.

"Blackwell, I hope for your sake you've been addressing this. I've watched Taylor Hebert come home in tears more times than I care to count."

"Look-- Mr. Henrick--" Alan Barnes gestured, drawing attention away from Taylor and back onto him. "You have to understand, I don't know what's between my daughter and his, but there's been witness accounts with some pretty bad implications, here. Taylor's been seen talking with suspected gang members, levering accusations against upstanding students-- I even hear her own grades took a pretty sharp drop, when before she was such a clever girl. Danny, have you thought about having her tested for drugs?"
"Mr. Barnes, is it?" Old Mr. Henrick interrupted. "Your voice carries, you know. Good for a courtroom. Not so good when you're threatening lawsuits with intent to bankrupt the other party. Do the words 'moral turpitude' mean anything to you?" Mr. Barnes' mouth snapped shut with a click. "And as for implying that Taylor here's not an upstanding student-- I have no idea what her grades are like. But I know what she's like. She does chores and yard work for the missus and I. She's out walking her dog, every day, rain or shine. She's out gardening an' planting trees in poorer sections of town, just because she can and because they need a bit of color." Old Mr. Henrick snorted. "You want to bluster and yell about slander and character defamation, you should get your own ducks in a row, first."

And that was that.

* * *

Danny got to the Rig a good two hours late, his brain feeling as numb as his fingers as he slipped on his mask. He was still numb when he got to the closest thing the Protectorate had to an employee breakroom for its powered employees, and he found a mug and poured himself some coffee from the tinkertech brewer on reflex. Velocity was picking over the snack basket, grumbling in dissatisfaction. Danny pulled the granola bars out of his pocket and tossed them onto the countertop. Velocity snatched them as only a speedster could.

"Awesome, thanks Chessman. Aren't you running late today, though?"

"Had a fight with my daughter. I think."

"Eesh. Teenager? Yeah, that happens. Want some good news?"

"Please." Danny added creamer, then sugar. Then more sugar. He needed something sweet.

Velocity nodded, then spoke around a mouthful of oats and raisins. "We caught a cape vigilante a few days back. Shadow Stalker-- heard of her? She was going to trial, but word is she might join the Wards instead. Probationary, but still."

Danny thought. The name sounded familiar. "I think so. Wasn't she violent, though?"

"Yeah, and it's making a few people nervous, but she had a character witness and all. She was rough with criminals, but she saved people too. A Mr. Barnes testified before a judge and everything."

Danny put his mug down with a careful click. If it was still in his hand, it was going to shatter.

"Barnes, you said?"

"Mhm. Some lawyer. Guess it's always good to have one on call, huh?"

"Alan Barnes?"

"Uh... yes?" Danny turned to face Velocity, and the speedster actually took a step back. "You... know him?"

"I know that less than an hour ago, he was accusing my daughter of being a drug-addicted gang member while covering for his own daughter's attacks on mine, then threatened to sue me into poverty when I protested. He only stopped when he was threatened with disbarment for dishonest
Velocity stopped chewing his granola bar. He swallowed, carefully. "...maybe we should go see Armsmaster. And the Director. They're going to want to hear this."

Danny did not smile-- he showed his teeth. "Gladly."
Chapter 12

Oni Lee was silent. This was not unusual. What was unusual was the tone of his silence, expressed in the slight movements of his fingers, in the less than perfect rhythm of his breath. Sitting on the opposite edge of the car's backseat, Oni Lee sat as a person would: imperfect and alive, and aware that he waited in close quarters with a dragon. It was... interesting. And for the moment, irrelevant.

Lung breathed out smoke, and watched it slip away through the open crack of the car's window. "Lee. Tell me again what powers this cape brings to bear."

Oni Lee answered, as he had before. "I do not know."

"And why do you not know?"

"I have never witnessed her acting as a parahuman does." The same answer, each time Lung asked. The same uncharacteristic evasion, from one who never lied or hid truth from him. This cape had crawled under his subordinate's skin somehow, and Lung would know the details. Just as he would know what designs this cape had upon his territory. Planting trees and renovating buildings-- a more obvious message would be difficult to create. She was putting down roots, establishing a hold, and she had chosen a poor place to do it. All that remained was to know what exactly drove her.

If she was merely ignorant, then she would be subsumed or driven out. If she was a scavenger, come to chew at his demesne, then she would not be given the option of walking away.

They pressed on in silence, the driver, the dragon, and the demon.

Lung had never been to this shrine, but when the car pulled to a stop across the street from it, he had to admit it looked similar to the few that he had visited in the past. The sun was starting to peek from behind the clouds, and it illuminated the red torii fiercely. Lung stepped out of the car and rolled his bare shoulders, then began to walk. Oni Lee, no matter his hesitations, followed. Lung passed through the gate; to meet the cape at their chosen place was an insult to him, but one he could return by simply disregarding. He walked through as if he was the owner, and her 'territory' meant nothing to him. Her seat of power, less than nothing. The cape was at the end of the path, sitting on the ground before the shrine, and as she heard his footsteps she rose to her feet. She'd been reading a book, and she placed it carefully on the steps before she turned around. Lung squinted in his mask--a book of fables. Useless.

The cape took a few steps forward to meet him. A slip of a girl, she was dressed in a poor approximation of a miko's garb, and even with the long skirts and sleeves, Lung could see her trembling. Perhaps she was not entirely stupid. She stopped within arm's length of him, took a breath, and lifted her chin to look him in the eyes. "Hello."
"You do not welcome me?"

"I'm not entirely sure you're welcome here," she said. "This isn't a place for violence." Lung rumbled, deep in his chest. He could appreciate some spine, before he broke it.

"And yet you welcome yourself into my territory, without my leave. This was a mistake."

The cape had no refusal. Instead, she had a proposal. "Lung. May I ask you a few questions, and have you answer them?"

"You are in a poor position to demand anything from me."

"I will give you answers in return. I'll answer what you ask, honestly. Just do the same."

A Thinker, then, or perhaps a Master? That would go a ways towards explaining Oni Lee's behavior as of late. She shook visibly-- perhaps this was her gambit, or perhaps she was stalling for time. He could afford to find out. "Agreed, until I tire of you. I ask-- who are you?"

"My name is Taylor." ...hm. Not 'I am Taylor', but 'my name is Taylor.' The former would be a mask, a taken identity, but the latter rang more true.

"Um. My turn... what are you?"

"I am Lung," he said, and knew his voice was deepened by his mask, turning his answer from mere words to a thing intoned. "I am the dragon. Why have you come here, intruded upon my territory?"

"I saw the shrine was all busted up. It looked sad, so I did some work to fix it. Then I stuck around, because it would be sad if the shrine was neglected again." The girl took a breath, trying to inhale courage. "My question. Lung, what waterfall did you climb?"

"What?"

She repeated the question. He knew the legend, of course-- a carp that climbs the waterfall and passes through the Dragon Gate becomes a dragon itself. It was a tale of hardship and effort, leading to great success and reward. Perhaps this was part of her game, but it was insulting that she should have to ask.

"I am the dragon of Kyushu. I drove off Leviathan, alone against the monster."

"That made your name," she interjected, "But it did not make you. Lung, what waterfall did you climb?" What made him? He was Lung! He was-- Inside his mask, his eyes widened.

No. She could not...

Lung was the Dragon of Kyushu, a name to be feared and obeyed. But what had made Lung?

Lung had been made by Kenta, face-down in his death at the hands of the woman in the suit. A birth through defeat, not triumph. Through resentment, not elation. That was what the cape was driving towards, hard eyes masked by a quivering frame. She seized his bare moment of weakness, and pounced upon it.

"You can't answer me, and that is why you have no claim here. This shrine does not belong to you, it belongs to the people of this city. And this city does not belong to you, because you do not belong to it. You take, but never give." The sunlight was strong now, glaring off her simple shirt and tresses, circling in her glasses to make them twin bright orbs that managed to reflect his mask. Lung stared
back at himself.

The back of Lung's hand met the girl's cheek which a resounding crack, the force enough to send her skinny body tumbling to the grass, where she lay still save for her breaths. Beside him, Oni Lee flinched.

"This insult... will not be borne." Lung seethed. "Lee. Dispose of her. Let everyone know that such trespass shall not go unnoticed."

"I think..." Oni Lee said, his voice suddenly very quiet inside his mask, "That it has been noticed." He was not looking to Lung. His mask was tilted up; Lung followed his gaze.

The moody clouds that had covered the city since morning had been swept aside— but only in a single circle, perhaps only a few miles wide, directly above the ABB territory. The rest of the city was covered still, faint shadows of rain raising mist over the skyscrapers downtown. But above the shrine, the blue vault of the heavens stared down like the eye of an angry god. A single spark, high above, was all the warning Lung received.

Lightning crashed down, a single bolt from a cloudless sky. It struck Lung's metal mask with a burst of light and sound, crackled its electric teeth over his spine and down his limbs, and tossed him from the cobblestone path. Not a single blade of grass was singed. Lung rolled to a stop, heart stuttering and pounding as if by overdose. The bright flash of plasma had blinded him, his ears were numbed by ringing, and for a moment he was face down in his death.

The moment passed. Bright spots danced in his vision, and he still could not hear, but he felt Oni Lee's hands at his neck to feel his pulse, then at his arms to lift him up.

He allowed it.
Taylor woke up on an unfamiliar couch, with a bag of frozen peas lying on her face. The first thing she did was to swat them off, letting the slowly-melting vegetables tumble to a stop on her chest, instead.

The second thing she did was to turn her head and empty her stomach. Someone next to her exclaimed in disgust, but she was too busy coughing on the acid to apologize.

"Yuuta, boy, stop flailing and go clean yourself up. Souta, get a washcloth and help."

"This isn't my house."

"Souta."

"...yes ma'am."

Warm fingers gripped at Taylor's shoulder and tugged, and she sat up to follow their direction. In the next moment a glass of water was pressed into one hand, and a damp paper towel into the other. Taylor made use of them, and finally wiped at her face enough to let her squint more clearly. She was in someone's apartment, now sitting on their couch with Sunny taking up the bulk of it. A stooped old woman with a cane stood in front of her, giving her a visible once-over. The woman clicked her tongue, then stomped away towards the kitchen. Taylor looked for her glasses, found them in Sunny's mouth, and retrieved them. A quick tug on the wolf's fur and Sunshine wriggled into Taylor's lap for a hug.

An upperclassman she vaguely recognized was nearby, cleaning the rug and grumbling about it. Souta, she supposed, and the teen returning to the room with a fresh shirt was Yuuta. "Uh... hey." He offered. "Sooo... you're awake now?"

"Stop stating the obvious, Yuuta." The old woman called.

Yuuta glowered, but didn't speak against the old woman. Instead, he turned back to Taylor. "I saw you in school earlier, but uh... you looked busy. I wanted to return your ofuda that bitch slapped around."

Taylor shook her head, ignoring the woman in the background ('Yuuta, language!'). "Keep them." She mumbled.

Souta finished cleaning her mess, tossed the rag into the garbage, then came back to give her a steady look. "The Oni called, had me pick you up. Didn't say to give you a ride home, but you want one?" On her lap, Sunny sneezed, and Taylor shook her head in response. Souta grunted. "Okay."

"Going home, Miko?" The old woman clomped back into view. "I give you some melon bread to take home. Yes, Souta, I have some for you too. Don't beg." Souta gave the tiniest fistpump. Taylor heard Yuuta snort and cover his mouth with a hand. The old woman came back with a large ziplock
bag, filled with bread rolls with a cross-hatched crust. Sunny was gracious enough to take the bag in her teeth, tail already wagging at the faint smell of sugar. The canine hopped off the couch, stretched, then leaned into Taylor until she agreed to swing one leg over and settle atop the wolf's back. Souta opened the door for them as the wolf carried the girl out of the apartment.

Yuuta watched them go, accepted a bread roll from his baachan, then asked, "Did we just watch a shrine maiden ride off on a wolf the size of a donkey?" ('Yuuta, what did I tell you about speaking the obvious?') Souta grunted. "Is... nobody else bothered by this?"

Souta gave the younger teen a sideways glance. "How long you lived in the Bay?"

* * *

They took the elevator down, then exited the apartment building and started down a sidewalk, Sunshine keeping to a fast, easy gait. Heads turned, but no one barred their path. When Sunny turned down a familiar street, heading towards the shrine, Taylor grabbed the wolf's ruff and tugged.

"No. Take me home." Whiiine.

"No, Sunny. Take me home!" Taylor gritted her teeth, felt her mouth pull down in a grimace. "I just- - I want to go home."

Sunny slowed, then stopped, her tail lowering from its jaunty wave. She turned her head as far as she could, looking back, but Taylor looked down and hid behind her hair. Sunshine whined, just once, then turned around and started back down the street, towards the edges of ABB territory.

The sun was setting by the time Sunny turned the corner of the Hebert's street, then sidled behind the house to the back door. Taylor slipped off the wolf's back, fumbled for her key, and unlocked the door. The bread rolls were tossed onto a counter in the kitchen, and a fresh bag of frozen vegetables was taken from the freezer and pressed into service for Taylor's bruise. Taylor took her ice and her silence and sat down with them on the much more familiar Hebert couch. Sunshine sat in front of her, and waited.

"Sunny, I..." A tremor worked through Taylor's shoulders. "I don't want this."

The wolf cocked her head. Taylor swallowed, and continued. "I don't-- I know you were right there in the shrine, and-- and you wouldn't have let him really hurt me, but... Sunny, I know I said I wanted to be something special someday, but if this is what it takes I don't think I'm cut out for it."

Sunny whined, ears folding back and brows drawing together. Taylor wiped her nose on her sleeve. "I just... I just want to hang out with my friend. Is that okay?"

Sunny made a low noise, then leaned in forward and licked at Taylor's unmarked cheek, covering her face with the slobber of sorrowful apology. Taylor squeezed her eyes shut, but grabbed Sunny's ears and rubbed them. She traced the red markings along the wolf's brow and cheeks. Forgiveness.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm sorry, but I'm scared." Sunny hopped up onto the couch and put her head in Taylor's lap. They sat like that, together, for the rest of the daylight.

Danny Hebert came home after dark, every muscle and tendon taut as a bowstring. He found his daughter asleep on the couch, salt and a darkening stain on her cheek. Danny walked out of the room, curled one hand into a fist, and bit on it until he broke the skin.
Then he returned, and picked his daughter up, to carry her upstairs and put her to bed.

* * *

Taylor was at school the next day. She rebuffed all questions: the teachers (‘what, you're concerned now?’) and the students (‘it's fine’). She answered only one: Yuuta wanted to know if she'd liked the melon bread. She had. It was a family recipe, apparently.

The students who recognized her asked each other, and their friends, and their families instead. There weren't any answers, only more questions, but the ripples began to spread.

Lung had gone to the shrine. Lung had been there, and the shy girl was still alive. Not unmarked. But unburned, and unbowed. Mostly.

Even better, Sunny was waiting by Taylor's bike when the last bell rang. She'd found a Frisbee, and the wolf was more than happy to find an open field to toss it around in. The canine was quite good at it, surging into somersaulting leaps and tossing the disc into the air. Then Taylor would run, and try to catch the toy.

About a half hour into the game Taylor stopped and held her hands in a T. "Wait, wait, stop! Are we doing this backwards?"

Sunshine chuffed.

* * *

Danny was at work the next day, despite his reservations. Dragon had sent out an alert yesterday, when satellites picked up a sudden change in weather patterns over the city of Brockton Bay. It had lasted for only five minutes or so, but that was enough to have the Protectorate on edge. Weather-like powers weren't unheard of among parahumans. Aerokinesis, hydrokinesis-- even forming small, localized storm clouds had been reported. But to change the cloud formations, wind direction, and humidity over an entire city? Capes could be powerful, even obscenely so, but they weren't forces of nature.

(Not to say that there weren't powered forces of nature... but those didn't bear thinking about. Chessman had never participated in an Endbringer battle, and he had no intentions of starting. Not while Taylor was still in school, at least.)

It was worry enough to get Armsmaster to stop going over his helmet cam of his encounter with the dog and get back on the street, taking Chessman with him as they followed Dragon's derived GPS of the weather disturbance's center. They had to pass into the ABB's territory, which did not lessen the worry. Anything that was trying to poke at Lung was cause enough for concern, though likely more for the collateral damage than anything else.

"You know... I don't remember all these trees being here." Chessman remarked, looking out the passenger window of the unmarked PRT transport. Saplings, covered in pale pink buds, about five feet tall on average.

"Neither do I. I'll grab a sample from a few before we leave, just to be sure. And make sure Blasto is still in one place."
Dragon’s directions led them to a quiet back street. About halfway down, a red painted arch stood proudly at the entrance to a large lot, the only one well-kept in sight. A cobblestone path led to a medium-sized building with an uncommon design. Armstmaster and Chessman approached, taking note of the lot’s appearance and structures. There were some items left near the opening of the recessed building, and Chessman took a quick look through them. An odd selection, and to just leave them here? Something was missing.

"There’s some significance to this, but I don’t recognize it offhand. What about you, Armstmaster?"

"I’ll get it photographed and confirmed later. Right now, I recognize this."

Chessman walked back out of the lot, to where Armstmaster was examining the fence and the neighboring properties. The fences for all of them had been painted, and recently by the bright hues. It was more carefully done, but the color selection was a match to the rogue painter Armstmaster had encountered. It was difficult to tell under the coating of vines and fallen leaves, but the buildings bordering the shrine looked more intact than they had any expectation to be. Armstmaster ‘hmmed’ and started eyeing the closest power lines and poles.

"I’ve got a few motion-sensor camera setups. Legal, though technically for deer. Get some of your pawns ready and we’ll get this place wired."
Chapter 14

Time moves slowly in autumn, with the world still clinging to the memory of summer. The leaves changed their colors with a quiet sort of dignity.

Even with the world slowing down, there were never quite enough hours in the day, it seemed. Sunny’s naps grew infrequent, and the wolf would often reappear with her fur littered with bits of leaves, or streaks of dirt and concrete dust. Taylor bought a brush, and began a habit of grooming her friend every afternoon, once school was done. It didn’t help that the wolf was shedding like mad-- Taylor joked about making another wolf from the hair. Sunny snorted, and Taylor admitted there wasn’t nearly enough fluff. The wolf helped her pick out the longer, coarser hair shed from her tail instead, and Taylor borrowed a library book to learn how to make her own brushes.

Winslow began to change with the turning of the leaves. Only a week or so since her encounter with Lung, and already Taylor couldn’t believe the difference. Sophia had never returned to class, and Emma had grown distraught. Her hair was less finely kept, her nails less polished. The redhead’s resentment simmered like a visible heat haze, and her attacks grew bolder-- but they were more commonly interrupted by a much more vigilant faculty, or by the watchful eyes of other students. For the first time in nearly a year, Taylor could turn in homework without fear of sabotage, or enjoy her lunch in the school’s cafeteria unmolested.

It was during lunch that Haru caught up with her, as she idly drew in the margins of some scrap paper. The boy set his tray down next to hers, mumbled a greeting, and opened his carton of milk with careful motions. Once he’d dropped a straw in, he glanced Taylor’s way, then spoke.

“Hey-- Miko?”

“It’s Taylor, like I said.”

“Right, sorry. Taylor, are you gonna be at the shrine today? I’ve been trying to catch you, but I haven’t seen you there after class.”

“I… kinda wanted to let You-Know-Who cool down a bit.”

Haru winced. The bruise had faded quickly, but the memory had not. “Right, yeah, I can see why that might be a thing. You could probably ask Souta if he’s heard anything.”

“I might do that, thanks. Why were you looking for me?” It had been a week… Taylor hoped the flowerbeds weren’t overrun. Old Mrs. Henrick’s lessons had been clear on the importance of keeping ahead of rogue plants.

“Well, uh, Yuuta said you made ofuda… I was wondering if you’d make charms, too. If I could buy one off of you.”

“I can’t say that I have,” Taylor said, “But if it’s something I can draw… if you show me what you need, it shouldn’t be a problem.” She peeked into her bag, then rifled around for some of the books
Sunny had unearthed for her. She set them on the Table, then returned to her lunch as Haru flipped through them.

“Uh… oh! Here, this one.” He spun the book back towards her. Taylor eyed the characters, then nodded and started digging for her calligraphy set.

“Is that on paper?”

“They’re usually on bags, or bits of wood. I’ll take what I can get, though.”

Taylor exchanged her white paper slips for some tagboard paper left over from art class. A few quick cuts, and she copied the rough shape of the charm displayed. She eyed the page, then selected the thickest of her new brushes and got to work. “Hey, can I ask something?”

“Sure?”

“Thanksgiving is coming up next month. Is there an equivalent I should prep the shrine for?”

Haru sipped at his milk. “Not that I know of. I know most places have a harvest festival of some kind, but if there’s a specific one, I don’t know it. Mom’s been complaining about not being able to travel for Chuseok this year.” He caught her confused glance, and elaborated. “Mom’s family is from Korea. Dad’s Japanese-American.”

“Huh. Okay.” Taylor traced a few more lines with care. “It’s just… I kinda had an idea for something. You ever make popcorn strings for Christmas?”

“In kindergarten.”

Taylor flushed a bit. “Uh, yeah. It’s silly, I know. But I thought about doing something similar for the shrine. Only not for Christmas. And… not with popcorn. I guess it’s not that similar, when I think about it.” A silly tradition, yes, but a missed one. Annette Hebert had corralled her daughter into making the strings every year, one at the start of each week in December. Taylor didn’t want to continue the habit without her, but an idea had taken root lately, and Taylor thought her mother would approve of it.

Taylor finished the charm and blew on it gently to help dry it. Haru offered her a few dollars to pay for it. She told him to keep his money, but maybe bring something for the shrine, if he got what he wanted.

After school, Taylor rode home with Sunny, then told the wolf her idea as she brushed out her long fur. Sunshine tilted her head back and smiled at her in response.

* * *

When Haru got home, he ran upstairs to his room first thing, and pulled the makeshift talisman from its nest of kleenex in his schoolbag. It was the second thing Taylor had given him, and he set it carefully into the frame of the first-- the oil painting she’d handed off to him, in thanks for his and the other boys’ actions. Since he’d been the de-facto delivery boy, he’d gotten first pick of the three paintings, and while they were all roughly similar, he’d liked this one the best. It was a simple thing, an image of a lilypad on water. It brought a much-needed spot of color to his room, and it brought Haru a smile to pick out details he hadn’t noticed on first inspection: a small bee nestled in the lilypad flower, a few minnows hiding in the shadow of the plant, a frog swimming near the edge of the
frame. He ended up doodling that frog into the margins of his math homework, the image tickling at him for days.

When he’d brought it home, he’d lied to his parents and said he’d picked it up on a whim from Lord’s Market, rather than go through all the knowing looks and smiles that would have followed if he’d admitted he’d gotten the gift from a girl. To be fair, he had gotten the frame from the market, so it wasn’t a total dishonesty.

Haru fell asleep still looking at the Success talisman sitting in the corner of the frame. The next morning, he shoved a towel and his swim trunks into his already-packed bag, and signed his name onto the swim team tryouts notice, just before the deadline.

There were jeers and rolled eyes when he showed up, as he’d known there would be. Haru wasn’t an athlete, anyone could tell you that just by looking at him. He ignored them, focusing instead on that frog, and the Success charm it swam towards.

Haru didn’t take first place. He didn’t even take third. He changed in the corner of the locker room, head bowed and silent. The coach stopped him on the way out, giving the boy a critical eye.

“You’re not shaking, Haru.”

“...huh?”

The coach tapped at his shoulder. “Most guys shake like leaves. Swimming’s a tough workout. You caught your breath pretty quick too, I saw.”

“So?” He didn’t need this. Didn’t need to be singled out any more.

The coach ignored his mulish glare. “This was the speed trials, you know.”

“Yeah, and I sucked at it. I know.”

Coach snorted. “Distance trials are tomorrow. I want to see you there. Don’t be late.”

He wasn’t. Haru didn’t take first place, but he did make the team. When he told his parents, his mom made his favorite gochujeon, with extra peppers. Haru wrapped up the leftovers and took them to the shrine, still feeling like he was walking on air the whole way.

He found a measuring stick planted upright, about halfway down the cobblestone path. On it was hanging a wooden placard, which he eventually identified as an ema, though an unusually large one. The wish was written in English, in familiar black ink:

*I want to decorate the shrine with beads. If you have something you are grateful for, consider leaving some beads at the shrine, and I will string them together, so we can all be reminded of how many blessings we have known. I have much to be thankful for, and I hope that everyone else does too.*
It really was a long week.

Armsmaster started it as he did every week, at exactly 12:01 AM, still in his lab, absorbed with his various tinkertech endeavors. Dragon had her avatar displayed on a nearby screen, the Canadian tinker as unconcerned with regular sleep schedules as her friend, and in between bouts of using a host of micro-sized tools to create, tweak, and expand fields of nanocircuitry, they carried on a quiet conversation.

In an hour, Armsmaster would bid Dragon good-night, then retire to the cot folded into a wall panel and sleep for three hours. Then the schedule dictated a workout, followed by shower, breakfast while reviewing his email or a recent tinker-published article (it was always the latter, if he could get it). Then the rest of the day would proceed, interspersed by three to five twenty-minute naps. Polyphasic sleep cycles were a perfectly acceptable means of maintaining health, without losing nearly as much time to idleness. It was also far more adaptable in case of crisis; sometimes Dauntless would return to the Rig after a hard night at his civilian job with the city’s fire departments, because not every fire in Brockton was set by Lung, and the younger hero would yawn the rest of the day. A little bit of schadenfreude was also perfectly acceptable.

It wasn’t an easy schedule that Armsmaster had given himself, certainly. But it was something he was content with.

It was quite unfortunately disrupted one morning, when he had to look over the photographs collected from the shrine instead of catching up on company emails or new research. Armsmaster strode through the Protectorate cafeteria, idly tapping at the tablet he’d downloaded the cameras’ memory onto. He passed by Triumph and Battery sitting at one of the tables; Triumph waved. He collected a selection of easily-transportable foodstuffs to take back to his lab, then resumed flipping through the saved photographs, a frown starting on his face. The cameras weren’t supposed to be quite this sensitive, he’d have to check them later to rule out the possibility of a surveillance-immune parahuman. The photos were uniformly innocuous: old lady, several old ladies, falling leaf, tree branch, bird, more old ladies, teenager, another bird, a woman accompanied by children, more leaves-- **DOG**.

Armsmaster stopped, right in the middle of the cafeteria, and hissed at his discovery. It was that canine, the same one, he was sure of it. It matched the feed from his helmet display-- all white, no signs of albinism, physical structure of the head ruling out most domestic species. The wolf was staring into one of the cameras, eyes nearly crossed to focus on the close lens. The photo after that-- every photo after that-- was smeared to illegibility by a prominent nose print.

"Dog," he hissed again, fingers tightening on the tablet. He heard a chair squeak against the linoleum, just before Triumph moved closer to peer over the tinker's shoulder.

"Is that the same one? Looks cute."
"It is not cute. It is most likely a master projection and it is very dangerous."

"Sir, I know you're upset about what happened, but I think it's a bit of a leap to assume it's a parahuman effect."

Armsmaster turned his head to glower at Triumph. "That camera is at the top of a telephone pole." And now also compromised. He'd have to grab Chessman and go remove the devices.

Triumph paused. "...oh."

"Indeed. Investigation is now ongoing." The tinker stalked away. Triumph raked a hand through his hair, then sat back down opposite Battery. The heroine chewed on a piece of toast, watching Armsmaster leave.

"I know a probable new Master in town is a big deal, but I'm kind of having trouble moving past the fact that Armsmaster has a canine nemesis."

Triumph's lips twitched. "Maybe Armsmaster's the nemesis. We'll turn around one day and he'll be ruling Latveria."

* * *

Sunshine had decided to go shopping, and thus Taylor was inevitably pressed into service as courier. Lord's Market was an interesting change of pace, at least, and Taylor was happy enough to ride down the street, Sunny trotting alongside her. They browsed, picking up a few needs and looking at wants. Some more fine paper for calligraphy, a small knife to carefully sharpen her charcoals with, some comfy-looking mats that Sunny licked, thereby claiming as her own. Lots of birdseed, but no feeders-- Taylor gave the canine a Look, but the resulting Puppy Stare was far too powerful. Another red skirt, also claimed by Rite of Lick, and while Taylor relented she warned the wolf to stop pushing her luck. Sunny lowered her ears, chastised-- and then immediately perked back up and barked, running over to a food vendor. Taylor sighed.

Sunny snuffled excitedly at the ice cream cart, and dodged the owners attempts at shooing her away until Taylor caught up. The girl was honestly a little surprised to find the vendor here. They usually vanished as autumn settled in, and Brockton's brief summer faded, but the year had been unseasonably warm and bright so far. Flowers were still blooming in the roadside pots, and Old Mrs. Henrick was still plodding happily through her garden every morning. Maybe it wasn't so unreasonable for cold-treat carts to still be around. Taylor checked her wallet, hummed, then nodded.

"Yeah, okay. Two vanilla cones, please? Sunny, find us a place to sit maybe?" The wolf snapped to attention, barked once, then dashed off to claim a bench. Taylor ignored the vendor's expression and paid for the cones, then carefully wheeled her purchase-laden bike after the canine.

She reached the bench and, with some finagling, propped the bike against the back of the seat and sat down. Sunny vacated the rest of the bench and sat down beside her. She was about to hand one of the cones over--or lower it within tongue range, at least--when a noise started up close by. Sunny's ears perked, and she turned her head. A woman was pushing a stroller down the sidewalk, and the baby had started to cry. The mother shushed and cooed at the infant, to no avail-- the poor woman looked harried, like she was about to cry. Taylor bit on her lip, then called out.

"Hey-- come sit down!"
The woman looked up, startled, then after a moment of hesitation, she wheeled the stroller over and sank onto the bench. She was shorter than Taylor, with unremarkable brown hair, but her nails were well-kept and the stroller looked new. "Ah-- thank you. Sorry, it's been a long day, and-- and she's being so fussy, I don't--"

"Hey, no worries... wow, she's tiny. How old is she?"

"Just a couple months. Her name's Aster." The woman smiled, and it lifted some of the strain from her features. "Like the flower." She seemed about to say more, but a sudden giggle drew both their attentions. Sunny was crouched in front of the stroller, and every few moments she'd pop her head up to look at the baby, then crouch down again, out of sight. Aster, for her part, was fascinated. Sunny popped up again, and the baby blew a spitbubble at her. Sunny chuffed.

"Is... your dog playing peek-a-boo?"

Taylor considered the question. "She is a very smart dog."

"I... guess so." The woman pushed back a lock of hair, and watched Aster stare at Sunny. Taylor watched as well, for a moment, then eyed the woman, and the stress lines around her brow and mouth. She held out the second cone, which was starting to drip a little. "Wh-- goodness, aren't you waiting for someone?"

Taylor shook her head. "Nah, it's just me and Sunny. Go ahead."

The young mother hesitated, then took the icecream with a sigh and a slight smile. "Well, thank you. I'm Kayden."

Taylor and Kayden exchanged numbers, after a pleasant time sitting in the sunlight and chatting. Aster had a bottle and then a nap, with Sunny resting her head on the stroller's rim and watching the baby with clear adoration. The wolf's attitude enamored her to Kayden, who even Taylor could see was completely devoted to her newborn. Then as soon as the baby was asleep, Sunny turned her big pleading eyes on Taylor, who dutifully surrendered the second half of the icecream cone. Kayden had laughed until she had to wipe away a tear.

* * *

A few days later, Sunny started making meaningful looks at the corner of the garage where Taylor stashed her paint cans. Taylor shook her head. Sunny whined. Taylor put her foot down, and cited homework. Sunny wuffed, then laid down on Taylor's bed and put her muzzle on her paws. Taylor savored her victory, and pulled out her World Studies assignment.

Twenty minutes later, Taylor was loading the half-empty cans onto her bike. Homework sucked.

Thirty minutes after that, Taylor rode down a street, Sunny dashing ahead and then circling back, while Taylor looked for bare patches of buildings to vandalize. She was beginning to think she'd made a mistake-- not so much the vandalism, because that ship had sailed when she ran from the Protectorate, so she may as well just keep going-- but in choices of neighborhoods to visit. This area of Brockton was pretty clearly upper-class, a suburb protected from all the miscreants and general humanity that couldn't afford to live in gated communities. Taylor was accepting the fact she'd have to move on and look elsewhere when Sunny started barking, and the girl pedaled a bit harder to catch up.
Sunny had not found a good place to start painting. She'd found a box, a sturdy cardboard thing with high sides, and a sound coming from inside that gripped at Taylor's heartstrings and plucked at them insistently. On the side of the box, scrawled in marker, were the words 'Free Kittens.'

"Oh man..." Taylor parked her bike, and peered down into the box. Inside were three-- no, four-- kittens, all different colors and clambering over each other in a mix of excitement and desperation. The fluffballs looked old enough to be weaned, probably, but they were so tiny! With big eyes and poofy little tails and little jellybean toes. They squeaked and cried, pawing at the sides of the box. Sunny whined and looked up at Taylor.

"Yeah, we're not leaving them here. I hope they haven't been out here long... there's a supermarket not far, let's grab them something to eat and then figure out what to do with them." Sunny's tail wagged. Taylor balanced the box on the rear rack of her bike, and started walking. "Jeeze, Sunny... I don't think we can take them home with us, I'm pretty sure Dad is allergic." Whiiitine. "Look, we'll think of something, okay? One step at a time."

They reached the supermarket--which didn't have bikes racks, Taylor was annoyed to notice-- and a clerk pushing chains of shopping carts stopped to investigate the mewls coming from Taylor's cargo. It was good fortune for both of them that the clerk liked cats. She took some of Taylor's money, went inside, then came back out with some pouches of wet cat food and a three-pack of dishrags, which they worked together to open and array inside the box for the kittens. The clerk's shift ended in 10 minutes-- and she had room for a pet in her life.

Just after 6 pm, they parted ways-- the clerk with one of the kittens and a bright smile on her face, and Taylor with three more refugees, and a plan.

Sunny led the way back to the gated district. It was a high-class neighborhood, all big houses and little car traffic, and fenced yards-- the perfect sort of place for people with pets, and the means to care for them. Taylor started knocking on doors.

An hour later, the second and third kitten had both found homes, and the fourth and last was sitting huddled in the corner of the box, looking even smaller and alone without its siblings. Taylor eyed the darkening sky, but continued walking her bike along the sidewalk. Sunny walked in front, and the canine turned at the mailbox of the last house on the row. Taylor gave it a cursory glance as she followed on her way to the door-- the mailbox had fancy lettering that spelled out 'Dallon.'

Taylor knocked, waited, then knocked again. The door of the house opened and Taylor managed to resist the urge to take a step back. The woman who answered the door was blonde, with stern but handsome features and a three-piece suit. She narrowed her eyes at Taylor and the scuffed box in her hands. "Yes?"

"Uh, hi. Sorry to bother you, but-- I found these kittens, and they need homes. Do you think you could care for a pet?" She held the box out a bit more, then added, "There's just the one left."

"Look, I'm really not..." The woman trailed off, her eyes on the box. The last kitten, curled very small in the corner of the box, looked up. It gave a small, pleading cry. The woman-- presumably, Mrs. Dallon-- stared, transfixed.

"I..." She started, then swallowed. Her hands reached for the box, and she lifted out the kitten with shaking fingers. The kitten mewed, then licked at her polished nails. "...sure. I'll take it."

Taylor beamed. "Thank you! Please take good care of it." Mrs Dallon nodded, and almost
automatically cupped the vulnerable creature a little more securely. Taylor waved, then wheeled her bike back out of the Dallon’s lawn, and started off down the street. Sunny ran alongside her, tongue lolling in a happy grin.

"I hope they're happy, Sunny. Wanna still go find someplace to paint?" Bark!
Danny Hebert was a man who was used to hardship. It had been a companion growing up, it had been a more distant frenemy during the years of his marriage, only to come around again and crash on his couch in the years after. It was a colleague now, adapting smoothly from struggling against the rising tide of poverty and obsolescence in the Union to the Sisyphean push against crime and parahuman villainy. Danny was used to hardship, and to making the most of his abilities in the face of it.

So why, he wondered, staring into his refrigerator at 6:00 AM, was such a simple thing as talking to his daughter so unconquerably hard?

On the wire shelf next to the milk was a pair of boxes-- fine-set wicker ones, of all things. They were attractive boxes, he'd give them that, painted and lacquered red with a few white flowers for contrast. Danny took a moment to listen for sounds of Taylor rising with the sun, and then took a peek inside the boxes.

It was more boxes. Well, okay, it wasn't a nesting doll situation, but it looked like the stackable wicker boxes were more to hold and decorate a pair of plastic tupperware containers. These were divided up into compartments, separating an array of food that had Danny scratching his head in no time. There was rice, sprinkled with some sort of herb, and a section filled with vegetables. There was a neatly-arranged fruit salad. There were-- were those octopi?!

No, he concluded, after a moment. They were hot dogs, cut to have little tentacles, and with small holes poked in the ends for a face. The other box had a cup of yogurt, a slightly-flattened bread roll, and a bunch of little rolled-up egg things. Danny packed the lunches back up, and shut the fridge. Okay. So the selection and presentation was a little odd, but-- cooking! She liked cooking. That was a thing they could talk about, a nice safe topic. With a satisfied nod, Danny started on brewing a pot of coffee, and set a kettle of water on the stove to heat up for tea.

Taylor came down a bit later, with her backpack slung over one shoulder, and wearing trim white overalls over a red shirt. She'd been wearing those colors a lot lately... maybe they could repaint her room sometime, redecorate to her taste? Yes, that was another good plan. She dropped her bag near the table and moved for the cereal, and Danny saw her smile when she spotted the steaming kettle. Progress. Okay Danny, deep breath, time to make this work.

"Good morning, Taylor," he started. "I've got the kettle on. So, uh, how's..."
How are your studies? Is school going any better for you? Do you have a favorite class? Do you need any help with homework? Did you need anything from the store to make your lunches? What's with the boxes? Is there a reason you want to eat marine animals? Are hot dogs more delicious that way? Where'd you get the idea for that? Maybe you could show me how to pack lunches sometime? We could do it together, would you like that?

"...how'd you sleep?" Damn it.

"Fine." She poured herself a bowl of cereal, then switched to getting a cup of tea ready. Danny silently poured himself a cup of coffee, and steeled himself for a second attempt.

"Any plans for today?" There, yes, good!

"Just the usual, I guess." Taylor shrugged, and didn't elaborate further. Danny felt defeat settle over his shoulders and give him a mocking pat on the back. Soon enough, Taylor was out the door and on her bike headed to Winslow, and Danny was left alone in the house, to face the rest of the day. He finished his coffee, then walked around and shut the blinds on the windows before dragging out his work bag and rifling through it a bit. He pulled out a pair of well-articulated wind-up toy dolls, then set them on the kitchen floor. A quick mental push, and the two dolls grew to life size while Danny finished his toast. He put the dish in the sink and cracked his knuckles, once.

"All right. Vacuum's in the closet, duster is under the sink. Let's get to work."

An hour later the house was clean, the dolls were returned to inanimacy and packed away, and Danny was out of things to do. This was why he’d rather be at work, when possible. There was always something he could turn his attention to, something he could accomplish. Not an option today, Emily had warned him if he even tried to clock in on his day off she’d have him thrown into M/S Confinement out of spite. He had no doubt she’d do it, too. Director Piggot had a never-ending well of spite.

Danny sighed, and headed out the front door, instead. Maybe he could check the mail again. Or… weed the sidewalk. Something. It was that or surrender to the fact he’d be spending the rest of the day reading rule books, or watching cat videos, or something as similarly brain-draining.

He pulled open the mailbox--empty, what a surprise--then turned and started towards the back yard,
instead. Maybe he could check on that tree Taylor planted, make sure it was doing okay. The sapling was certainly growing quickly enough, Danny rather doubted there was anything it needed from him. Of course it wouldn’t. Before he got there, he caught sight of Mrs. Henrick weeding her flower beds, and Mr. Henrick on the front porch, rocking slightly in the loveseat swing. Danny abandoned the tree and went to go lean on the white picket fence, instead.

“Morning George, Martha.”

“Good morning, Danny! Nice to see you, are you taking the day off from work?” Mrs. Henrick smiled up at him, her face a portrait of wrinkles. Mr. Henrick simply watched from the porch. Danny nodded, and made an affirmative noise in his throat.

“Sure am… hey, can I ask you two a question?”

“Of course, Danny, what do you need?”

“Christmas is coming up, y’know. I was wondering if you two had any ideas of what Taylor might want. I don’t want to ask her and ruin the surprise, eheh…” Mr. Henrick raised a single brow, his face making it clear he saw the excuse for what it was. Shame seeped through Danny and joined the vast groundwater reserves of itself.

“Oh, well, let me think…” Mrs. Henrick grabbed for her cane and pulled herself up. “She does a lot of drawing and painting, of course, she’s always looking for sales and bringing home buckets of the stuff.” Danny nodded… wait, buckets? How much paint could she need?

“She helps me garden a bit sometimes, and she’s usually got a project or two downtown to work on. She’s asked me for help with cooking a fair few times, too! I think there’s a boy she fances,” she added in a stage whisper. Danny’s brain screeched to a halt.

“Oh, leave the poor girl alone on that, Martha. Wait for her to come around on her own before you try and foist your cherry cakes onto her.” Mr. Henrick grumbled. “Danny, that goes for you too. If you’re looking for gift ideas, I’d say take her craft shopping, or maybe get her some things for her dog.”

“Ohuh,” Danny replied, his thoughts far away. He mentally calculated how many shovels he might need to get the point across. Or maybe he could get a toy bulldozer, a mini-cement truck… “Thanks, you two. I’ll be sure and do that, that’s… helpful. Yes.”
He made absent-minded small talk for another minute or two, before excusing himself and heading inside. Danny sat down on the couch to let things settle. He was overreacting, and he knew it. Taylor was a smart, down-to-earth girl, she wouldn’t get into anything crazy. Not like he and Annette had, he reflected. And anyway, she was fifteen, she didn’t need him poking his nose into her business. Just— deep breaths. Taylor hadn’t said anything, but that was normal for girls her age. He was overreacting.

He found a pad of paper and a pencil, and jotted down a few notes on what the Henricks had told him. Craft stores, and cooking supplies… She’d been a creative girl since she was young. Maybe he could extend that offer to paint minis together again. Yes, good plan. He could even ask her today, after she got back from school. In fact…

Danny set the pad of paper aside, then headed into the kitchen. He checked the fridge and jotted a few items on the grocery list, taped to the front of the appliance, then rummaged into the cupboards a little. Maybe one of the old cookbooks had survived the Great Basement Migration. And if not, maybe Taylor could pick one out? Danny’s hand found a red-checkered binder, then pulled away as though it burned. He’d save the handwritten recipes inside for another time. Better to find something new, something without memories already attached.

Danny went back to the couch, eyed the clock, then laid down. Time enough for a nap, get rid of a few hours and maybe some of the weight in his chest. Danny closed his eyes, and counted sheep, until he settled into that hazy half-asleep state, where thoughts flow together and blur. A couple of thoughts, half-memory, bumped together and stuck. Danny jolted himself awake, sat up, and blinked. The thought was still there. He scrambled off the couch and ran for his work bag.

In her office, Director Emily Piggot tap-tap-tapped away at her keyboard, sending emails and writing memos and just generally putting out fires. Or more helpfully, smothering them before they could start. In Brockton Bay, it was an unending battle. A ring pulled her attention away from the computer monitor, and Emily had half-reached for her desk phone before she realized it was her own cell that was ringing, not the inter-PRT phone. She pulled out the device, checked the caller ID, and frowned.

“Chessman. It’s Monday, what seems to be the probl--”

“I don’t have a dog!”

“Try the city pound.”
"No! No you don't understand, I don't have a dog!"

"Okay, Chessman. Could you hold for a moment?" Director Piggot sighed, set down her cell, and reached for the desk phone after all. She had entirely too many reasons for having M/S Containment on speed-dial.
“Battery to Console, I have the target in sight. Settling in to observe, over.”

“Roger that, Puppy. Keep a safe distance. Over.”

“Don’t call me Puppy over the radio, this is serious.”

“You and I both know it isn’t. Bet you ten bucks this is just Chessman’s way of finding out who his kid’s dating.”

“A possible Master/Stranger situation is always serious, overprotective father syndrome or not.”

“Bet you fifty bucks.”

“He’s gonna hear you. And then you’re going to wake up with a bunch of Army Men setting tiny traps all over your side of the bed. And I’m going to laugh.” Battery shook her head and peered through the binoculars again. She was parked in an unmarked car a good distance away from the restored shrine. The target, officially designated Brushstroke after Chessman had taken a look at Armsmaster’s helmet cam and promptly buried his face in his hands, had emerged from Winslow High School and taken a more or less direct path here. No sign of Good Dog yet, but the fact that Brushstroke had come here was worrisome enough. Gang territory aside, this was where Dragon had pinpointed that odd weather phenomenon.

Battery watched the teenager tie her hair back in a scarf, then set about doing a number of mundane chores around the property. She raked leaves, and swept the path and the wooden steps of the buildings, and checked on a basket laced to a small wooden signpost near the front entrance. She seemed pleased with it, because she unhooked the basket and went over to the shrine to sit down. Some digging into her schoolbag later, and she had a spool of… fishing line? Fishing line. She started unwinding the line and using it to string together small bunches of something too small to identify from here.

Battery sighed. Not that she’d ever admit it to Assault, but this was a little ridiculous. She sipped at a now-cold cup of coffee, watched Brushstroke, and waited. When she caught sight of someone
visiting the shrine, she focused her lenses on them, then carefully set the coffee cup in its holster.

“Console, is Velocity around?”

“Yes’m.” Velocity’s voice took over for Assault.

“Steal Assault’s wallet for me before he can welch on that bet, would you? Oni Lee just showed up.”

“On it.”

“Wha-- HEY!”

“Thanks. Continuing observation, over.” Battery carefully opened the car door, her charge already well-stored and ready. If she had to swoop in and intercept the ABB assassin, she wouldn’t have a second try at it. It… didn’t seem necessary, to her surprise. She watched Oni Lee making a few gestures as they conversed, then he sat down next to Brushstroke as she rummaged into her bag again.

“Puppy? What’s going on?”

“Brushstroke and Oni Lee are… eating lunch.” She double-checked the lenses, just in case. “Yeah, that’s… happening. I can’t tell what they’re talking about, though. Brushstroke doesn’t look very happy about it.” She dearly wished she’d parked a bit closer, or that maybe Armsmaster had bugged the shrine better. As she watched, Oni Lee handed over a book to the teenager, who was looking rather distressed, even from here. Movement behind her made Battery refocus.

“Console, Good Dog sighted.”

“As I thought.” Armsmaster’s voice interrupted. How many of them were listening in, anyway? “What’s it doing?”

“It just walked out of the shrine and sat down. And-- yes. Console, Oni Lee is petting the dog. I
repeat, Oni Lee is petting Good Dog.”

“Damnit. It’s more powerful than we thought.”

“Boss, you keep saying shit like that you’re going back in containment, you know.” Battery tried to tune out Armsmaster admonishing Velocity, and tried harder not to imagine him shaking his fist to the sky. She was going to spend all of that bet money on booze, every last dollar.

* * *

“Sumimasen, Miko. It is the best I can think of.”

“No, I appreciate it.” Taylor took a bite of her red bean roll and looked down at the book she’d been handed. It was a primer on tea ceremony, and also a herald of bad news. Lung was coming back. Not now, but soon. Sunny headbumped her shoulder, and she gave the wolf a quick scratch.

“The Ōkami has chastised him for his disrespect once. I do not think he will repeat it, but maintaining traditional courtesy will help.”

“Okay. It’s… something. I can give it a try.” She flipped open the book, and winced. Oh, that looked formal. “…Oni Lee, I need help. I can’t read this and I need to practice it.”

The assassin paused, as he tended to, and ate another rolled omelette in the interim. She’d added the sweet wine this time, and he’d complimented her efforts. It was not a situation she’d ever really imagined herself in, but, that was just how her life seemed to be rolling these days. “I will find aid for you.”

“Thank you. Do… you want some non-fancy tea, while you’re here? I think I need a cup.”

“Thank you for the offer, but I must return to my work.” He returned her spare chopsticks to her, then collapsed into dust. Taylor swore-- she’d just swept. Sunny chuffed at her as she grumbled and fetched the broom again.
“There’s no way out of this, is there, Sunny?” The wolf gave a sigh and a sad whine. “Yeah, didn’t think so… Sunny? I…” She didn’t have to say it. Sunshine sat down near her and she wrapped the canine in a hug.

“You know what you’re doing, right?” The wolf gave a single, solemn nod. Taylor took a breath and let it out slow. “Okay. Okay, I trust you, just-- it’s hard, you know?” Sunny licked her cheek, and Taylor didn’t feel quite as bad about the admission. She gave the wolf a pat, and sat back down to finish her snacks. Sunshine was more than willing to assist in this matter.

Later, as they headed home, Taylor reflected on what little she knew about tea ceremonies. It wasn’t much-- just that they were very formal, supposedly long, and probably as complicated and precise as interpretive dance. This was going to suck. She shared her thoughts with Sunny, who gave a woof of agreement.

“...you know, Sunny, I don’t think I have any tests for a while at school.” The wolf made a questioning noise. Taylor felt a grin sneaking its way onto her face. “I’m just saying. This is going to be really stressful, right? Isn’t there a saying about work hard, play hard?” The wolf’s eyes widened. Her tail began a furious wag.

“Let’s go paint shopping.”

* * *

Souta felt his cell buzz against his butt while he was busy mucking about with his car’s innards. It was a junker, a cheap piece of shit with mismatched doors, but it was his and he could make it get from Point A to Point B. He set down his tools and found a rag to wipe his hands on, before pulling the phone out and checking it. One eyebrow quirked up. A text from the Oni-- something that had gotten far more common than he’d anticipated. It was cool, though. The Oni usually had errands and other grunt work for him, which meant the teen could collect his pay and not worry about having to fight for it. He wouldn’t have minded a bit more action, but the safer work made his mom happy, so Souta wasn’t going to complain. Plus it meant more time to work on his car, and that was always a good thing.

The message was brief. ‘Require service for miko. Tea @ 1530. Be present and translate’

Souta eyed the message, then shrugged and sent back a simple ‘yes.’ Probably not the weirdest thing he’d done for the ABB. After a moment, Souta pulled his phone back out, and tapped at the screen.
‘Formal?’

‘Street is fine’

‘No, for miko’

There was a longer pause. The Oni sent back a single question mark. Souta tapped at his phone again.

‘Miko wears street stuff. I know a guy who knows a guy’

Another pause, and then: ‘Ok. Do well for bonus’

Awesome. One step closer to that new paint job. Souta closed the messages and dialed a number, instead. It picked up on the fourth ring, the lazy bastard.

“Hai, Souta. What’s up?”

“Yuuta,” he grunted. “Give the phone to your baachan for a sec.”
Chapter 18

Constellations 18

Taylor ducked out of school early. Nobody really cared, since she’d managed to finagle her study period as the last one of the day, so it had become a habit that had so far lasted most of the school year. She loaded up her bike, unlocked it from the rack, and started off. Sunny joined her mid-way to the shrine, darting out of an alley and falling in step beside her.

“Hey, Sunn-- augh, you’re all muddy again! Seriously, do I have to give you a bath?” The canine stumbled, missing a step at the sound of the dreaded B-word. She whined. “Well, it’s your own fault. Either rinse yourself off or I will, because you’re not jumping on me or going inside anywhere until you’re clean.” The wolf whined again and hung her head, absolutely forlorn.

They reached the shrine and Taylor set about starting her routine, getting her bike settled and putting her bento in the office’s minifridge. She suspected it was another addition Oni Lee had ‘donated,’ though for her or for Sunny was up for debate. Taylor had claim to the top shelf, and everything below was reserved for the bottles of sake that kept appearing. The fact that her wolf friend was possibly an alcoholic didn’t bother Taylor so much as wondering who would sell alcohol to a wolf.

A very loud slosh sound drew her attention back out into the shrine, and Taylor sighed before she went to investigate. Hopefully Sunny hadn’t jumped into the fountain feeding the chozubachi. Again.

Sunny was not in the fountain, thankfully, but she and everything around it were drenched. The wolf shook herself vigorously, then lolled her tongue at Taylor once her fur was sufficiently poofy. Taylor stared, then shook her head and went to retrieve her apron and dog brush.

“I don’t know what that was, but I know what it means.” She sat on a dry section of grass and gestured. Sunshine trotted over and sat down to be brushed. “It means we’re definitely hitting a water park next summer. I think it’ll be hilarious.” Sunny chuffed, then barked in agreement.

The two settled into an easy silence, Taylor brushing out the wolf’s thick fur so it could dry, and Sunny enjoying the contact. As soon as she was mostly dry, Sunny made a sleepy murr sound, and settled down to rest with her large head on Taylor’s lap. Taylor rubbed the wolf’s ears for a bit, feeling a little of the tension and worry drain away from her.

“I’m… still not sure about this, Sunny. I know you say it’ll be okay, but I can’t help it. Lung… Lung is scary, for a lot of reasons. And I’m worried that if he knows I’m scared, he’ll…” Sunny lifted her head and pushed against Taylor’s hand, interrupting her thought. The girl smiled, just a little, and scratched at the red markings that had spread over the wolf’s neck.

“Yeah, I know. We’ll just have to have a plan, right? I gotta admit, it’d be easier to make one if I knew what you wanted to get out of this.”

At that Sunshine lifted her head more fully, getting her paws underneath her properly. The wolf snorted, then shoved her face at Taylor, putting a cold nose-print on the girl’s neck. Taylor grinned and shoved the wolf’s muzzle away, but Sunny did it again.
“What,” she laughed, as Sunny went in for a third boop. “What? ...are you asking what I want out of this?” Sunny thumped her tail on the grass. “I’m guessing other than not hosting a tea party for a gang leader? Hm…”

Sunny wagged her tail a bit more, a smile stretching her lips, and Taylor resumed her scratches and pets. “What would I want… let me think about it a bit? A couple days, okay?” Bark!

A distant vrrrrrrrrr dispelled the atmosphere of easy head-scratching, and as Taylor and Sunny looked up the sound grew louder. At the entrance to the shrine, Taylor recognized the upperclassman Souta as he walked under the torii. He was followed by Yuuta, and then-- as the VRRRRRRRR grew even louder-- a procession of little old ladies. On segways. Sunny’s jaw dropped open. The wolf looked up at Taylor, eyes wide.

“I am not buying you one. Don’t even think about it.” Whiiiiine.

* * *

Dragon queued up her camera access to Armsmaster’s lab, but didn’t connect to the speakers just yet. Instead, she took a moment to just watch. Colin had his helmet off, now that his lab was securely closed off from the rest of the Rig, and the wrappers of almost a half-dozen cheap meal bars were sitting in the wastepaper basket at the edge of his desk. The tinker was bowed over his work, finishing up the nanocircuitry necessary for their ongoing project on predictive combat algorithms. The bank of computer monitors carpeting the wall in front of him were all displaying rows and pages of numbers, the compiling data being processed and rendered down to more useful lines of code that would form the bulk of the Leviathan algorithms.

Dragon eyed her friend for a moment more, then brought up her copy of his schedule and compared it to her internal clock. She spun off a few lines of code from her emotion complex to simulate a frown before she pulled her avatar onto a spare screen in Colin’s lab.

“Skipping leg day, Colin?”

The tinker shot her a quick glare before returning to his nano-soldering. “Need to make up for lost time. It’s not a habit.”

“I didn’t think it would be,” she assured him. “It’s just unusual. What disrupted you, the Good Dog case?” He nodded. “Hm. I’ve been wondering about that, actually. Why hasn’t Chessman or anyone simply brought in Brushstroke for M/S screening?”

“Chessman said he wasn’t confident enough in his knowledge of her psychology to provide an accurate litmus test to compare her to.” Dragon spent a few microseconds running code for a wince. Colin caught the slight motion of her avatar out of the corner of his eye and nodded, expression grim. “Yeah, that’s about right.”

“I suppose I don’t understand how that could happen. He’s got days off, vacation time, don’t they go anywhere?”

“He doesn’t really touch his PTO, just lets it bank up. Then any rollover for the year gets paid into his personal budget for combat miniatures. I think he’s even imported a few things from Aleph, for a rainy day. It’s not cheap.”
“Hmm.” Dragon let the conversation lapse, and busied herself with a quick systems-check, a review of her maintenance reports, and opening a text file to write a quick list or six. It seemed like it might be useful to check on Chessman’s personnel files and compare them to published psychological data. Actually, that reminded her:

“Colin, can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Would you mind describing Good Dog’s master effect?” She saw him stiffen. “I’ve read the reports, I was hoping for a first-hand account. I wanted to compare it to other known human-affecting Masters, see if I could spot any patterns in power behavior.” She wasn’t allowed to lie, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t find reasons to support inquiries. Her friend focusing on one cape was unusual, when it was his policy to be ready for as many as he could name. Dragon wanted to know why.

Colin tapped his fingers on his nano-soldering tool, but nodded. “It was… surprisingly subtle, considering how it turned out. I was in pursuit of Brushstroke, and when I turned a corner, I caught sight of something white in my peripheral vision and turned to look.” He frowned. “Even now I keep thinking of it as a dog, when photographic evidence proves otherwise.”

“Noteworthy, but also a very common error in human memory trials. Please continue.”

“So, I saw what I thought was a dog, and then-- just stopped to pet it.” He made a frustrated noise. “There wasn’t memory loss-- I hadn’t forgotten about Brushstroke--and what I felt wasn’t a euphoric effect. Just this-- this certainty, that I could afford to stop and pet this dog. That it was okay.”

Colin had ceased working on his project, and his fingers worried at the tool in his hands. His gaze was distant, and his voice very quiet. “I just felt like… it was okay. Everything was going to be okay.”

Dragon waited, but Colin didn’t say anything more. Instead he took a deep breath, exhaled slowly, and got back to work.
Chapter 19

There was no escaping them. Every day for the next week, Taylor would show up at the shrine, have
enough time to brush Sunny and maybe steel her resolve, and then the Vrrrrrrr would approach from
down the street. Souta and Yuuta would show up in front, Souta as carefree as ever and Yuuta with
an implied apology writ large upon his face. And then?

Baachan. They were all baachan, they explained, at least until Taylor either memorized or felt
comfortable using their actual names. But until then--or however long she wished, apparently--they
were baachan, grandmother. And as frightening as the thought of being under the steely gaze of a
half-dozen grannies was, there was also something kind of magical about it. Taylor’s own Gran had
never been particularly close, considering the blood feud she seemed to have with Danny Hebert, so
being alternately commanded and fussed over by a cadre of old women was a very novel experience.

The whole process began as something extremely tense. Taylor gave the collected grandmothers a
tour of the shrine, and listened to their increased tsks and clucking of tongues in worry. Through
some ritual of seniority that Taylor feared she would one day understand, Yuuta’s grandmother was
elected the spokeswoman of the group. When the tour was done, Baachan shook her head and
turned to Taylor.

“Miko, you do good work for this shrine, but this is not a tea house. There is not enough room in the
office or haidan for such a thing.”

Taylor bit her lip. “Is it possible to hold it outside? The weather’s still warm, and there’s a lot of
room.”

“No date? Yes, that could work. It will be difficult.”

“I think that goes without saying,” Taylor replied. “But if you can teach me what I need to do and
what I need to do it with, then we’ll have a plan, right?”

“Mm. You have good spirit, miko. Yes, we can do this. Between us, we can find the tatami mats and
tea utensils. There is still the flowers and the artwork to find, but--”

Sunny wuffed, and gave a proud toss of her head. Taylor jerked a thumb at the wolf, ignoring the
stares of the less-hardened baachans of the group. “Sunny’s got that covered, I think.”

Taylor’s confidence in the wolf was met with doubt, at least until the necessity of a flower vase and
the shrine’s lack of a hat rack were mentioned. Sunny pulled Souta out of the shrine for an errand,
and they came back with a few decorative bonsai pots of bamboo and a receipt for them, which
Souta handed off to Taylor. Sunny buried the bamboo pots, and the next day, the thick shoots had
sprouted and twined themselves into living shelves and spiraling decorations.
There was considerably less skepticism and considerably more whispers, after that.

So it began. Every day, at least one or two of them would bring food with them (which put them firmly in Sunny’s good books, of course) and the rest would come armed with tape measures, or pins and large folds of silk, or books, and different utensils and bowls that Taylor was struggling to learn the names and uses of. A sketchbook was repurposed for taking notes with the instructions she was given in English, and after only a little prompting, the romaji translations.

After Tuesday, she started calling herself in sick to school. Not pissing off Lung was slightly more important than algebra. Haru was summarily recruited to bring her homework to the shrine. To Taylor’s surprise, he also brought her class notes, and not just the ones from the periods she shared with the boy.

“There are some of our other friends,” Haru explained, making a gesture at himself and at Yuuta, who was being a packmule for his Baachan and carrying in some tatami mats. “It’s kinda… not exactly a secret that you’re here? I mean, at least among the guys wearing the colors, and any of their siblings. So I asked around, and got the kids with the best notes to make copies for you.”

“That’s-- really helpful, actually. Thanks, Haru.” Taylor glanced up from finishing her work on Sunny’s fur, and saw the boy giving furtive looks towards the Grandmother Collective. “Something you need?”

“Well-- I mean, not need, but--”

Sunny huffed in amusement. Taylor tweaked the wolf’s ear and said, “Just say it, Haru.”

“I was hoping you could make another charm… I was gonna ask you at school, but-- well, you know.”

“Sure, that shouldn’t take much time. Grab my bag for me, I’ll do it before Baachan catches me. You’ve got a picture, right? Is it the same one as last time?”

“Oh! Uh, not quite. It’s close, but that was for success in endeavors, basically. This one is for academics.” He dragged over her school bag, and Taylor handed him the book of ofuda to flip through while she picked out her ink and one of her special brushes. “It’s actually for my cousin. Finals are coming up, and she’s always stressing about every test she takes.”

“Sure, I’ve met a few like that. She go to Winslow?”

Haru shook his head. “Nah, she’s in college. Graduated high school early and went up to Cornell.” He grinned suddenly, then laughed. “She’s not really the mystic type, being an engineer and all, but even if the charm does nothing to help it’ll at least give her something new to call my mom and complain about.”

“Win-win situation, then. Here-- let this dry and it’ll be good to go.”

“Thanks, Miko!”

“It’s Ta-- oh, never mind. You’re welcome.”
Friday crept up steadily, and the tatami mats settled in permanently in their bamboo pseudogazeebo. Oni Lee stopped by to check on her, and was treated to the trial run of the tea ceremony. It was less than an ideal showing. The chabana flower arrangement was still growing in its vase, the wagashi sweets weren’t to be brought until tomorrow by Baachan (Yuuta’s specifically; she claimed she knew a good recipe and would prepare them that very night) and the hanging scroll had yet to be hung. The assassin didn’t know the proper procedure for being a guest, so Taylor did her best to direct him, but it wasn’t long before the ritualized conversation collapsed into informality.

“I thought it looked hard enough, but it’s so much worse.” Taylor chewed on her lip, and tried to remember if she was supposed to be using her right hand or her left to handle the fukin cloth as she wiped clean the tea bowl.

“Tea ceremony is meant to take years to learn, Miko. You have had one week.”

“I know, but there’s a lot riding on this… um. Probably. I still don’t understand what Lung even wants.”

“I… do not fully understand him either, Miko. Or, I cannot fully express it. Lung will not care about the tea-- he will demand much more than he expects from you-- but it will provide a-- a space, for conversation.” Oni Lee made vague gestures with a hand as he spoke, trying to convey his meaning. “So that you may answer his questions with less fear.”

“But-- that’s just it! What does he want to ask me? Why is he so interested in the first place?”

“He must know why you are here. You are in his territory, and though I have tried to explain your presence, he cannot allow a cape to operate near him without his permission.”

“He thinks I’m a parahuman?” Taylor asked, mouth agape. “That-- I guess that would explain it, but I’m not! Why would he even think that?”

Oni Lee didn’t answer directly. Instead he turned his head once to look at the shrine, its fixtures and form like new, then turned his head the other way to stare at the bamboo that was growing around them, forming shapes and structure like a bonsai with years of careful tending.

“…okay, I guess there’s that.” Taylor admitted. “I know it’s probably strange to everyone else, but that’s all Sunny’s doing.”

“The Ōkami has displayed much power, yes. Whatever god she serves must be great indeed.” The assassin fell silent for a time, while Taylor cleaned the utensils and let her own thoughts work furiously. “Hm. Miko?”

“Yes?”

“Whom does this shrine belong to?”

“Everyone.”

“Ah-- I meant, which kami is enshrined here?” He clarified. Taylor bit on her lip again, and looked towards the haidan.

“You know, I don’t actually know? I looked up what I could, trying to find where that’d be referenced, but any markings for the kami’s name have been worn away. There’s a… there’s a word for this-- shintai! There’s a shintai in the honden.”

“Oh?”
“Yeah, it’s a round mirror set into a big bronze disc. The honden is about the only place here Sunny tends to shoo me away from, but she likes to lie near the mirror sometimes when I’m busy cleaning or doing homework.”

“I see.”

They settled into an easy quiet, a fact that admittedly left Taylor a bit stumped. It was hard to reconcile the quiet man who liked omelettes with the cold-blooded killer that she knew he was—she’d seen him mentioned on the evening news more than once, over the summer. Perhaps his own words were the best at explaining it: the shrine, and the rituals and history associated with it, created a sort of space unlike the streets of Brockton Bay.

A place where old women walked to without fear of being mugged. A place where the rough teens she’d avoided at school respected her. A place where gang members set aside their weapons for a while, to pray or talk or plant trees. A place where she could work and see results from it, unlike the faceless drudgery of high school. A place where nobody spit her, or laughed at her, or completely passed her over.

A place where she could sit with her friend, and watch the clouds go by.

Oni Lee thanked her for the tea and left. Sunny wandered over as she cleaned up and put away the utensils she would be using again tomorrow, and she gave the wolf a quick pat between tasks.

“I know what I want.” She told the wolf, who thumped her tail against the tatami mats. “You’ll be right here, right? So I can ask Lung directly.” The wolf nodded, and she reached over to grip the canine’s fur in gratitude.

The sun was setting as she packed up her bicycle, and wheeled it under the red gate. The evening light cast ripples over the hand-carved wooden poles, and the tiny imperfections that gave them character. Someone had loved this place.

Someone did love this place, and her name was Taylor.

“…Sunny, you don’t think anyone else mistakes me for a cape, do you?” Taylor asked, as she pedaled and the wolf trotted alongside. Sunny snorted, once.

“Yeah, I didn’t think so. That’d be silly.”
Chapter 20

Lung was angry.

There could be no other term for the quiet, persistent seethe that had overtaken him, simmering under every scale and pulling every nerve and tendon tight. And unlike the torrential rage he was feared for, that sent him crashing against his foes with unassailable might, this lasted. It grew with the rain-scent of every thunderstorm, burrowed deeper with every disturbed sleep. The anger was not empowering, it did not stoke his fire. It was unusual, and this angered Lung.

Ridiculous, that a single question could cut so deep.

The cape’s impertinence at making her home could have been forgiven, with proper obeisance. Even her rebuke could be set aside, with proper chastisement. But what had happened after Lee had picked him up, carried him from his failure, and settled him to rest with a bottle of whiskey and unnecessary bandages.

“Drink this, to numb the pain. Your mask has melted, I will cut it from you.”

“Fuck the pain, it is nothing! Where is that bitch, I will--”

“Kenta, please.”

“...what did you say?”

“You mask has melted. I will cut it from you.”

“No. Lee, you-- you remembered my name?”

That could not be swept aside.

Unthinkable, that a single question could feel so raw. More were needed.

* * *

“Lee. What is my name?”

“You are Lung. Your name is Kenta.”

* * *

“Lee. What is your name?”

“Oni Lee.”
“Your name, Lee.”
“...I do not remember.”

* * *

“Lee. How did we meet?”
“You came, and crushed any who stood against you. You killed any who would not bow. I did.”

* * *

“Lee. Where did you live, before here?”
“...Fukuoka. It was Fukuoka.”

* * *

“Lee. Why do you serve me?”
“You are the strongest.”

* * *

“Lee. Why do you serve me?”
“You took control of the area. I am in the area.”

* * *

“Lee. Why do you serve me?”
“I… I asked to. Yes-- I asked you to keep me in your service. To give me direction.”

* * *

Every day, he asked a question, and the answers changed, little by little. Every day, Lung went about his business as usual, and watched from a distance the shrine and the increasing draw it had on his territory. Every night, his sleep was restless, and his dreams were deep. He dreamt of something breathing behind his neck, and its breath was ozone. He dreamt of rain, rain so heavy and relentless he could have swum in the air. He tried to strike at it, split the drops on his claws, but no one could fight the rain. He dreamt of drowning.

The days were easy, he could set aside his questions for actions. He visited his holdings, arranged for a push against the Empire, stomped angrily out to meet Coil’s mercenaries when they dared encroach on what was his, and sent them scattering like mice.

The nights were hard. In the night, despite the women and the liquor, there was time to think. To wonder.

“Lee. Arrange a meeting with the shrine cape.”

Just thinking wasn’t going to set things to right. He needed to act.

* * *

Taylor darted out the door of her home as soon as she’d finished breakfast and said a quick goodbye
to her dad, and headed to the shrine as quick as her bike could carry her. Sunny ran alongside, her bright doggy grin a mocking contrast to the clenching butterflies in Taylor’s stomach. Saturday already-- why couldn’t she have had more time? Every possible scenario that could go wrong played itself out in her thoughts until they arrived at the shrine, and then Baachan refused her any more space to brood. She was cleaned up, and dressed, and given careful instructions, and watched like a hawk as she set out the utensils and the charcoal and the bowls where she would need them.

And despite all her preparations, all the work put in by the baachans, it was still going to fail because--

A car horn honked, just before eleven, drawing stares and judgemental tongue-clicking from the flock. Souta got out of the beat-up vehicle’s driver seat, then headed around to the trunk and withdrew a flat, heavy-looking wooden box. The older teen marched the box up to the shrine, looking disgruntled.

“Miko! Some guy dropped this off at my house for you.”

“Huh? Who? And why, I mean I didn’t order anything, and if I did then I’d--” Taylor paused. She hadn’t ordered anything, but… she turned to look at Sunny, who was wagging her tail so fiercely the motion was propelling her butt across the ground.

“Sunny, I swear to god if you used my dad’s credit card again…!”

The wolf ignored her, and ran over to Souta and generally got underfoot. The teen set the crate down as gently as he was inclined to, and when Sunny pawed and whined at it, he rolled his eyes and withdrew a switchblade to help pry the container open. Taylor caught sight of a misshapen, lumpy mass within before Sunny stuck her head into the crate and huffed, going still.

Baachan gave the wolf a cursory glance, then settled for interrogating Souta instead-- that had a better chance of getting her answers. “Souta, who brought this to you?”

“Dunno. Some guy.”

“Souta, what I tell you about being helpful?”

He frowned. “Some foreign guy.”

“Well, better than nothing… Miko, you have any idea what this is about?”

There were too many possible guesses for what Sunny could send away for, and none of them she would admit in front of Baachan. Taylor instead waited for Sunny to finish up what she was doing and back away from the crate-- or try to, as the wolf promptly got her head stuck. Taylor dutifully rescued her, then peered at the contents of the delivery. After her flute, she couldn’t say she was surprised.

“It looks like a wall scroll. We do need one, after all. Thanks, Sunshine.” She rubbed the wolf’s ears, and the canine practically radiated smug. Quick work was made of unboxing the scroll, and Taylor assisted in hanging it up. As she brought it out into the light, one of the baachans cleaned her glasses for a closer look. Her wrinkled hand flew over her mouth, and she began speaking rapidly in Japanese. Taylor noticed tears at the old woman’s eyes.

Taylor turned to Baachan and spoke quietly, as some of the other grandmothers comforted the distressed one of their collective. “What’s wrong? Is… is it a bad painting?”

Baachan pursed her lips, and straightened the scroll on its bamboo hanging. “…no, Miko, it is a good
painting. Very good. Just one we did not expect to see again.” She did something then that Taylor had never witnessed-- she sighed, and closed her eyes. Sunny trotted forward and pushed her furry head under the old woman’s hand, and stayed until the grandmother smiled and gave the wolf a quick pat.

“Lung will ask about it-- he is expected to. Here, let me tell you about what your friend has brought you, so you can answer him.”

* * *

When they arrived at the shrine, Lung sent the driver away, and instead instructed Lee to remain outside and be on his guard. The assassin bowed, and took up position at the entrance to the shrine’s cobblestone path. Lung walked inside, alone.

A tea ceremony, of all things. Trust capes to clutter business with unnecessary ritual. He had a few memories of them from his youth, when his mother had requested his participation a few times a year, always as a guest. Propriety suggested he arrive in a well-made hakama, or maybe a suit. A proper ceremony was a black-tie affair, or the equivalent of one.

Lung passed under the torii wearing black pants, a bare chest, and his mask. Fuck propriety, he was the dragon.

The cape met him at the entrance to… some sort of skeletal structure, formed of bamboo poles. Perhaps it was meant to take the place of a building, or simply frame the tatami mats to make them seem more than simply a fancy picnic blanket. The cape was dressed properly, in a red and white kimono with embroidery of blossoms and leaves, and she’d had her hair pulled up into decorative combs. She caught sight of his minimal clothing and bare feet, and her brow twitched together in irritation. Hah.

“Welcome, honored guest.” She made an attempt at smoothing her voice. “If it pleases you, I would like to continue in English. I fear my pronunciation of Japanese is still lacking.”

“It does not please me, but it will offend me less than hearing you butcher my tongue.” Lung watched that slight twitch again, pleased. Rattling her was a petty act, but one he enjoyed. His power was quiescent still, not stirring in the least despite his memory of their last encounter, as though she were completely and utterly not a threat to him. It was annoying, that his fire would not obey him when he knew better.

“Then, please follow me, and we will begin.” She turned and walked carefully into the bamboo structure, clearly unused to wearing the sandals and kimono. More effort had gone to this than he had expected, but a farce was still a farce. He considered tossing away what remained of the ritual and instead getting straight to the point. He took a single step forward, then paused when something white caught in his vision. Lung turned to look towards the shrine proper.

Cold adrenaline shot through his stomach, making his power turn over in surprise. Oni Lee had mentioned what he thought was a wolf spirit, but Lung had not expected to see anything of the sort. Nor had he expected the illusion to be so big. The beast was enormous, a wolf with fur so white it nearly glowed, and it was sitting on the steps to the haidan and staring directly at him. It met his eyes, even, as wild animals were not wont to do.

Lung’s eyes flicked upwards, checking the sky despite himself. The sparse clouds hung, light and slow. When he looked back, the wolf stared at him still, unblinking and intense. A discreet inhalation, and he caught wind of its fur, the heat of its breath. He saw its ribs expand as it breathed. If it was some sort of trick and not a beast, it was a very convincing one. He looked away.
Lung followed the cape towards the tatami mats. He bowed, entered, and folded himself into a seat on the mats. He watched the cape as she busied herself, but instead of reaching for the charcoal, she... opened up a warmer box? The scents of finely-prepared food met his nose. Lung wracked his brain, trying to remember what his mother had taught him.

“What ceremony is this?” He gave up, and asked.

She was hesitant, perhaps a bit thrown by his interruption. “It is October now, so we are saying goodbye to summer. This is the Nagori-no-chaji.”

A chaji? The formal ceremony? He was going to have to sit in seiza for four hours? Whose bright idea was-- Lee, you inhumanly-patient fucker. Lung bit down on the sigh and started detaching the lower half of his mask. At least he’d get lunch out of this. And at least the wolf couldn’t stare at him the whole time. No animal, no matter how well-trained, could stay still as a statue for long.

(It did. Fucking wolf must have been carved from stone.)

The wolf (it was not a spirit) wasn’t even the strangest thing that was at the shrine. An experimental tug at the bamboo poles would not dislodge them, and when the cape’s back was turned Lung tore a stray leaf from the pole, and it oozed sap. The chabana arrangement was not in a vase, but in a basket of intertwined stalks as living as the rest. Lung didn’t know much about flower arrangement, and he did not care to, but he recognized the golden chrysanthemum readily enough. Impertinent? Surely. Not quite as unsettling as the bed of four-leafed clovers the arrangement sprouted from. An actual bed of them, all growing.

Still, it was within the bounds of a cape’s influence. The scroll was... less so, if for a second he dared to believe it.

He’d examined the artwork, as expected of him, and it was interesting to look at, at least. His mother had always hung calligraphy, while this was a landscape painting. A small figure by a riverside, under the drooping branches of a large tree. It... seemed familiar, actually. As though he’d seen it before. Not in person, he’d never been the type, but he was certain he’d seen a picture of it somewhere.

“This scroll is interesting. What is it called?”

The cape visibly steeled herself for mangling his language, and gave a go at it. “It is called, Zhou Maoshu Appreciating Lotuses.”

Huh. That sounded familiar wait a minute. He reached out a hand-- it certainly felt real, beneath his fingers. It could not be. It was a forgery. It had to be. Lung kept his eyes away from it for the rest of the ceremony.

By the time the cape was serving him the thin tea, Lung was just done. It had been a very fine meal, but if not for his power his legs would surely have fallen off long ago, and he still had no answers.
Watching the cape told him nothing of her powers or intentions, just that she was naturally clumsy but painfully earnest in her efforts. Lung had been patient long enough.

“Cape. I have questions that you will answer.” That slight twitch again, as he interrupted her careful actions. “And do not play games with me. Who are you?”

“I told you before, my name is Taylor.” She set down the tea bowl, careful not to spill. “And I’m not a cape.”

Lies.

“And I’m not here to take territory from you, or whatever it is you think I’m up to. I’m just here for the shrine. Running it makes me happy, that’s why I’m here.”

“Is that so. And what did you do to Oni Lee?”

“What? I haven’t done anything to him. He comes here because he wants to, and he’s peaceful and helpful so he’s welcome to.”

That twitch had become permanent. Lung felt his lips pull around his teeth. “You are angry at me.”

“Of course I am!” She snapped, surprising him. “You hit me! And you’re a gang leader! And you didn’t even dress up for tea!”

The wolf was still staring at him. Lung reigned in his temper, for now. “And yet, you welcome Lee? My right hand?”

She pursed her lips. “Lee’s not the same as you. He’s a criminal and a killer, and that’s terrible. But you choose the most painful ways to do things.”

“And what is that supposed to mean?”

“Everything,” she said, then sighed and took a moment to organize her thoughts. “You don’t just command people, you rule them by fear. You don’t just run businesses, you run them crooked, or collect protection rackets, or force people to pay in ways they’d rather not.”

“You are naive. This is how the world works. I run this gang, I fight against the Empire’s constant aggression. These things take precedent, and they take money. You do not like how I do things? Tough.”

The cape started tapping one finger against the tatami, clearly upset. “You’re suggesting… that you’re competing with the other gangs? Drugs, weapons, whatever? Not just over territory?” She waited for his nod, then scowled. “Then you’ve already lost, and to the Merchants.”

What. “Explain yourself, before I grow angry.”

“Capitalism. You said running a gang takes money, so you sell drugs, weapons, prostitutes, all that. Except the Merchants will win that race, because they’ll always be cheaper, more desperate. You can’t just go for quantity, because they’ll always have more.”

“You tread dangerous ground. Think carefully, cape. What would you suggest, if you think my means so wrong?”

No hesitation, not even a little. “Unionize.”

“...what?”
“Offer better care and compensation, receive better services. Quality over quantity.”

“Stupid girl. Such ideas fail because they are expensive, and unnecessary. The guns, the supplies for fighting the Nazis? They are not cheap. Or perhaps you wouldn’t mind if they came and burned down your shrine, hm?” Shit. Wrong thing to say. The cape didn’t seize upon the slip of his tongue--instead her gaze turned shrewd.

“In other words… if you didn’t have to fight the Empire, you could afford to do things better?”

“A simplistic reduction, but yes.”

“Hm.” She fell silent, and resumed what little there was of the ceremony, for which Lung was thankful. This place had too many oddities, he was ready to leave it. Living plants where they could not have grown, a long-destroyed painting, a wolf too still and judging to be real… and white as any Inari fox, a traitorous part of his memory insisted. An Ōkami, Lee had insisted, as humorless and patient as ever he had been. A servant and messenger of some greater god, with the girl as its servant.

It was foolishness. The gods were dead, if they had ever been alive. Lung was more than ready to leave this grave of theirs behind.

The cape walked with him, out of the bamboo enclosure, but instead of any formal parting she instead took a quicker step forward and turned to face him. Lung stared down at her, and waited.

“...I will thank you for coming, but you have been most disrespectful.”

His eyes narrowed within his mask. “And what do you expect me to do about it?”

(Was that ozone he smelled? No-- there was nothing.)

“You will leave the shrine alone, since it’s not yours to begin with. This is a safe place-- no violence, no gang business.” She took a steadying breath, and gripped the ruff of the wolf at her side-- and Lung’s stomach turned over in a sudden queasy motion. He’d neither seen nor heard the beast move, but there in the grass behind it were fresh footprints, the grass still bending back into place.

“To apologize for your disrespect, I want two sidewalks.”

...he had to turn that one over in his head a minute. “Excuse me?”

“Sidewalks. Extensions of the shrine’s neutrality-- safe paths for people to come here without fear of being shot or stomped on by a ragebeast. I’ll mark them out clearly.” She nodded to herself, once, then looked up at him again. “Was there anything else you needed, Honored Guest?”

“What did you do to Oni Lee?”

“...I made him omelettes with mirin, like he likes them.”

When Lung stepped out of the shrine, Oni Lee was where he’d left him, loyal and implacable. The assassin sent off a quick text--likely to the driver--and then offered Lung a cigarette from somewhere
in his jacket. Lung’s preferred brand, as Oni Lee didn’t smoke.

The action was unbidden, and thoughtful-- so unlike the Oni Lee he’d come to accept in recent years.

He took it, then lit the end with a quick flick of his power. As long as she caused him no trouble, then… perhaps sidewalks were an easy enough trade.
“To apologize for your disrespect, I want two sidewalks.”

“Excuse me?”

“Sidewalks. Extensions of the shrine’s neutrality-- safe paths for people to come here without fear of being shot or stomped on by a ragebeast. I’ll mark them out clearly.”

The only sound in the way of hearing a pin drop was the steady split-splat stream of soda spilling from Triumph’s can of cola, frozen in mid-drink. He and Dauntless were on Console duty that weekend, splitting their attention between directing and supporting Protectorate actions and continuing observation on the Brushstroke/Good Dog situation, courtesy of a few microphones in the abandoned properties next door. The two capes listened to Brushstroke say goodbye to her guest, and to the resounding lack of a no from the leader of the ABB.

Dauntless summed it up. “Well, shit.”

* * *

Sunday

It was truly a perfect storm. A wondrous, cosmically rare event, like the alignment of planets or a lunar eclipse. It was a blessing of serenity, received in love:

Sunny let her sleep in.

It was almost 9 o’clock when Taylor finally got out of bed, stretched luxuriously, then finally got her day started and came downstairs. She was surprised to find her dad still in the house, sitting at the kitchen table with a newspaper and a cooling mug of coffee. It was usually Mondays that he had off, wasn’t it? Every other day he was out the door at 7:15. Maybe it was a holiday or something, she’d have to check. Taylor gave him a friendly wave in greeting before diving into the fridge in search of breakfast. Yogurt, wonderful-- the baachan-supplied meals of rice and natto and fried fish were a nice change of pace, but to Taylor there would always be a clear separation between breakfast foods and everything else.
Taylor hunted down a spoon from the drawers, then snagged a banana and sat down at the table to enjoy them. Danny looked up over his newspaper at her. “Good morning, Taylor…” He started, then after a pause finished with a stilted, “Sleep in?”

“Mhm,” she nodded, mumbling around her food. “Long week, I was really tired.” She heard what sounded like ‘I see’ from behind the newspaper. “What about you? Aren’t you supposed to be at work today?”

“Ah-- I’m… working from home today, is all.”

“Yeah? I didn’t think the PRT did that kinda stuff. I mean, I know it’s mostly personnel stuff, filing and indexing and the like, but aren’t you handling, like, classified papers?”

That got a small chuckle out of him. “I’m not living in a spy movie, Taylor. What about you?”

“Huh? I’m not in a spy movie either.”

“No, I meant, what are you doing today?”

“Oh, the usual. Gonna take a bike ride, maybe find something to paint.”

“Mm.” He nodded, and idly turned a page in his paper. It didn’t seem like he’d been on it long enough to read… maybe it was the editorials, he hated those. “Any idea when you’ll be home?”

“Not really. Probably late-ish, wanna make the most of the weekend.”

“Got it. Well, stay safe…” He glanced to the side, over by the clock, then continued. “I might run some errands if I finish up early, so if I don’t answer the phone, don’t worry. Anything you need at the store, if I’m out?”

“Not that I can think of, thanks.” Taylor finished her breakfast, washed her hands, then detoured briefly upstairs to grab her Going To The Shrine bag, a somewhat beat-up duffle bag she’d liberated from the attic to hold her larger brushes and supplies, a spare apron, Sunny’s favorite squeak toy, that sort of thing. Then it was time to load up her bike with paint buckets and set off, the wolf meeting her near the mailbox to travel alongside her.

“Hey, Sunshine?” Taylor called out, catching the wolf’s attention as they traveled. “I think it’d be good to let Lung settle for a couple of days before we mark out the sidewalks… and uh, we kinda have to decide which ones to paint, anyway. So, I had an idea about that.” She braked at a crosswalk and pushed the button for the lights, then settled to wait. Sunny sat down alongside her, and they both took a moment to watch traffic eddy around a Protectorate patrol vehicle.

“Remember what I said about ‘work hard, play hard?’ I kinda just want to take it easy and have some fun this week. And if we go explore around the city, we can decide which routes to claim. Sound good?”

Sunny barked, tail wagging happily, and Taylor smiled back at her. “Great! I wanna stop at the corner store before getting to the shrine, grab a soda and a chocolate bar. I do need to finish up some homework before I can really relax…” Sunny’s ears flicked back once, then forward as the canine considered her plan. She wuffled, and trotted alongside as Taylor crossed the street as the lights turned.

“Oh, gonna wander for a bit while I do work, huh? Okay. It shouldn’t take me more than a couple hours, so you wanna meet back up for lunch?” Bark!
“Sounds good, I’ll see you then, Sunny. Stay out of trouble!”

* * *

“Okay, here’s something: looks like they’re splitting up. Brushstroke looks to still be on the path to the ABB territories, but Good Dog is heading off in another direction. Which should I follow?”

“Better keep with the dog. Brushstroke at least has a predictable routine most days. Besides, our Thinkers are still up in the air on whether or not it’s a projection. If it vanishes when it gets too far from her, we’ll know.”

“Got it,” Assault said, and hit the turn signals to change lanes. Good Dog was trotting along a sidewalk, its size and coloration making it easier to keep track of even at a distance. “Goddamn, that thing is huge. Looks almost big enough to ride on, and nobody’s batting an eye.”

“Definite Stranger power. From the sound of it, we’re thinking it only works if you’re not actively looking for it. Better than some of the alternatives, right?” Dauntless’ voice came over his headset. “Hey, you heard what happened to Chessman?”

“No, what happened? He let his little yellow ‘bots into the cafeteria again?”

“Haha, man, never going to live that down is he? Nah, the Director took him off duty. Heard she walked into his workshop and literally flipped over his table, then told him to gee-tee-eff-oh.”

“Awesome. I’d pay good money to see-- shit.”

“What happened?”

“I lost track of the dog.”

“Did it just vanish, or…?”

“No, just turned a corner, I’m sure it’s somewhere close byyyyyEEUGHOOHGOD!”

Despite vanishing behind a building a half block away, the second Assault looked up Good Dog was standing on the hood of the Protectorate transport, staring through the windshield at him with its huge mouth open in a doggy grin. Adrenaline spiked and reflexes kicked in before he could stop them: Assault floored the gas pedal.

The vehicle surged forwards and Good Dog lurched in surprise, then turned around and sat on the glass pane separating it from Assault, replacing the cape’s view of the road with fluffbutt. The wolf joined the cape’s panicked yells with a chorus of excited barking. A sudden gust of wind shoved into the transport from the side, and Assault turned the wheel to compensate. It happened again and he turned harder, the part of his brain that had sailed straight through panic and out the other side noting that he’d turned the vehicle around the same building Good Dog had momentarily vanished behind, and that somehow they were still on the road and not on the sidewalk.

A few more gusts of wind sent the transport spinning into a donut, tires screeching and filling the morning with the scent of burning rubber. Good Dog leapt off the hood, sailed a good ten meters through the air, then landed on the sidewalk next to a corner stand. Time seemed to slow as the car
spun, and Assault watched through the passenger window as Good Dog opened her mouth very, very wide and--

CHOMP

--bit down squarely on a very large man’s butt. The civilian bellowed, the cigarettes he’d been buying dropping from his hands as metal blades shot out of his skin and started folding around him. Good Dog tensed, then reared back and flung Hookwolf into the street. The Empire cape landed fairly well, his metal blades digging into the asphalt and grounding him before he could skid across the pavement. The car completed another revolution, and as the nose of the vehicle lined up with Hookwolf, Assault did two things. First, he unbuckled his seatbelt.

Then he stepped on the gas.

* * *

Monday

Miss Militia’s evening patrol was set to carry her on a meandering path through the Bay, keeping to the edges of Empire territory for the most part. After Hookwolf’s arrest, tensions were high and the expectation of a push back from the Empire was at the forefront of nearly everyone’s mind. The gun-toting heroine was no exception, and before her patrol could really get started, she decided to take a quick detour into one of the convenience stores near the start of her route.

Miss Militia left her bike running idle and headed inside. It was a common enough occurrence that the clerk didn’t make a fuss at her appearance, instead giving her a friendly wave, which Miss Militia returned as she perused the various wrapped snacks on display. All jokes aside, donuts were a surprisingly perfect food for law enforcement officials on the go. They were cheap, didn’t spoil at room temperature, were easily stored in even the cramped spaces of a squad car or motorcycle storage compartment, and they were composed of a mix of sugar and carbohydrates to wake you up and keep you going just that little bit longer.

Plus, some of them were filled with pudding.

Miss Militia selected one, then exchanged a few quick pleasantries with the clerk as she paid for it. She was soon out the door and working to loosen her bandana just enough to not make a mess, when something lurched out of the darkness nearby. She had her power in her hand in an instant, but there wasn’t an attacker. Or even a person.

Good Dog stumbled out of the alley to the side of the shop, walked almost sideways for two or three steps, then spotted Miss Militia’s motorcycle. The canine’s tongue lolled in a grin, and the heroine could smell the beast’s breath from here. She felt her thoughts arrest themselves for a moment, because is that dog drunk? was not a thought she’d ever expected to have.

Good Dog’s stagger vanished long enough for the animal to jump into the seat of her bike, then slap its paws down on the handlebars, gunning gas into the engine and starting the bike moving. Miss Militia recovered, but it was too late. Good Dog accelerated the motorcycle and tossed its head back,
letting out a happy *Wooooo~!* as it stole government property.

“Oh my god. Oh my god, Console, *Good Dog is drunk driving my bike!!*”

“...what.”

Miss Militia ran after the fleeing canine, yelling, “Hey! Stop! That is a Protectorate vehicle-- stop, Good Dog! Wait, no-- Bad dog! *Bad dog!* *Irresponsible dog!*”

*WOOOOOOOO~!*  

Miss Militia chased after Good Dog, who howled and kept the bike upright and moving with more skill than she’d have ever credited a drunk animal, the canine gunning the engine just enough to keep Miss Militia from catching up. It wobbled around corners, sped on straightaways, and at one point slapped its paws against the dash and turned on the radio. Cheerful music interspersed with angry yelling sounded through the night.

Miss Militia felt like she was reaching her limit for sprinting when the chase finally changed. She almost thought she was seeing things, as Good Dog rode the bike into a cracked parking lot, then sped up as the pavement started lifting into the air, tilting noticeably to one side and forming a ramp. A short figure in a red and black robe dove out of the way of the oncoming DUI.

“Hey! HEY! What the fuck, get off my ground, you-- you-- *what the fuck is that.* Miss Militia’s rapid footsteps made Rune turn to watch the panting heroine running after the motorcycle. “The hell, is that your dog? What is the PRT even doing these--”

“NO TIME FOR YOU!” Miss Militia snapped out one arm, her fist cold-clocking the teenage villain and releasing her telekinetic control of the section of pavement that Good Dog was using as a stunt prop. The bike drove off the edge of the elevated asphalt before it could crash back to earth. With a mighty *woooooo~!* Good Dog sailed over three parked cars and a stray shopping cart before gravity re-assumed control, and the wolf abandoned ship before the motorcycle crashed into the ground and began a long, ear-screecching skid.

Miss Militia slowed to a stop, hands on her knees as she caught her breath, and watched the very tail end of Good Dog escape down a dark sidewalk. The heroine finally pressed a finger against her ear mic, silencing the worried squawking from the other end of the line.

“Console, I need a lift, a set of restraints for Rune, and a Master/Stranger cell because *that did not just fucking happen to me.*”

“R...roger that, Miss Militia.”
A little yellow note, taped to the front of the refrigerator. Eggs, milk, hamburger. A green pepper. Cheese. Regret. He’d written it days ago and still hadn’t gone, because it is easy to find reasons to avoid what’s painful. Dauntless wants to go check out this new movie, can you cover a few hours of his shift? The Merchants attacked a medical supply depot, can you get some pawns moving and help with cleanup? A politician’s been shot and he wants extra security during his hospital stay, can you put in some overtime? It’s just this once, honest.

Danny sat at his kitchen table, with his unread newspaper and his untasted coffee, and stared at the little yellow note. He’d known what he was doing when he wrote it, but he still hadn’t gone through with it. And with no work to be done, no colleagues in need of a favor, no crisis outside the home to take care of to distract himself with…

If he didn’t do this now, he was never going to.

“Leap before you look, Danny…” he told himself, and grabbed his car keys.

It was a short list, and the grocery store wasn’t that far away. He was done and back in his unlived-in kitchen and could scarcely recall the time spent away from it. Numb, he set out a mixing bowl, and a knife, and opened the cupboard above the stove. Inside was a red-and-white cookbook, its pages yellowed from time and well-worn from use. He took it out and laid it on the countertop. What he needed was on page 37, he remembered that. He flipped to it, and what remained of his nerve crumbled. Danny sat back down at the table.

God, what was he doing? What right did he have to destroy this? To take this more perfect memory and replace it with his own bumbling, too-little-too-late efforts? Danny ran imaginary fingers along the invisible strings of his power, feeling them stretch back to what pawns he had available at home. A quick tug was all it would take, to get them started. Then he’d have some helpers for this, extra hands he could direct to chop and mix and stir. It’d get done much quicker that way.

And it also wouldn’t be Danny Hebert doing it, it’d be Chessman. Chessman wouldn’t replace the memory of Annette, wouldn’t screw it up like Danny Hebert would. There’d be the same results, but with less lost. Everyone would win. Danny Hebert could be at the wheel next time, once he’d proven to himself that he could handle this. It’s just this once, honest.
Danny stood back up and moved to preheat the oven. Just because he didn’t stop them, didn’t mean he couldn’t recognize the lies he told himself. He set a fridge magnet onto the cookbook, to serve as a paperweight between the bunches of handwritten notes and revisions.

Page 37: Meatloaf.

* * *

Tuesday

Sunny wasn’t terribly enthused about Taylor’s choice of color for the sidewalks, but it was what she had available and, Taylor reasoned, the black would stand out nicely against the different shades of grey that cement tended to come in. So, off they went, with Taylor’s bike laden down with buckets and Sunny laden with resignation.

“C’mon, don’t mope. I’ve got some nail polish remover, that’ll help it wash out. Besides-- if we changed colors a bunch, we’d have to stop between every one of them to clean you up. And I know you wouldn’t want that.”

Wooo… Sunny sighed, then dipped her paws, one after the other, into the painter’s tray that Taylor held out for her. The wolf daintily shook off the extra drops, careful not to splatter them, then began her march along the sidewalk, leaving a trail of black pawprints behind her. Along the Boardwalk, heads turned as the colorful young woman in the painter’s mask walked her… dog, occasionally stopping to let the wolf re-dip her paws before the paint would exhaust itself on the pavement. They were both probably going to have sore feet by the end of this, but it was going to be worth it, even if they needed to space the job out over several days.

Convenient that Lung never asked how long those sidewalks were going to be.

A little over an hour into their work, Sunny whined and started to fidget. Taylor glanced down, confused. “Eh-- hey, if you need to do your business, you don’t need my permission. Let’s wear out this set of prints so you won’t leave paws all over the bushes, though.” Sunny’s ears perked and the wolf sped up, quickly covering a few more meters and exhausting the paint on her feet.
“’Kay, I’ll wait here. And don’t piddle on anyone’s mailbox again! I swear, I can’t take you anywhere, some days…” *Bark!*

Taylor settled with her back against the brick sides of a building to wait, and just peoplewatch for a while. Wow, it seemed like everyone had a cell phone these days. She wondered what the appeal was.

* * *

Victor squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, resting them, then he peered through the scope once more. If the rumors filtering up through the lower ranks were true—which was doubtful, but still warranted investigation—the colorful girl out walking her dog was a new cape being sheltered by the ABB. She certainly didn’t look like much, but there were enough rumors and now video of her dog that apparently the PRT was taking it seriously, if the patrol down the street was any indication. It was almost cute, how they were trying to follow her discreetly. Too bad for them, Victor had a bird-eye vantage. He refocused the lens view on the girl, checking her position, then back to the patrol. They’d caught of the cape’s little ‘art project,’ it seemed.

If she cared she was attracting attention, she wasn’t showing it. Victor watched the girl stop her bike and lean against a building, as the dog projection headed off in a dash. It headed over to the hero’s field of view, staying on the other side of the street, then began to move off towards the sidewalks. The patrol split in two, half of the group moving to tail the projection while the other agents kept their eyes on the girl. Maybe she wasn’t as oblivious as she seemed, if she was trying to distract them away from her.

She didn’t move away from her position, though. Perhaps she had to stay still to direct her minion when it was away from her? She’d need to be watched to know more, but it might not be necessary. Victor eyed the approaching half-patrol and calculated the risks. Without a flying cape, it was unlikely they’d be able to track his position from the shot in time to catch him before he got back to Othala, waiting in the car behind the bookstore he’d set his sniper nest on. Victor widened the scope again to double-check where the other half of the patrol was, just in case. Damn, they’d left the street and view. Maybe he should just--

His view vanished with a splash of yellow and a rank odor. Victor’s head jerked away from the gun’s scope to find that the dog had somehow gotten on top of the building with him, and was now standing on the concrete lip he was using as cover, one leg hiked up as it defiled his rifle.

Slowly, the dog turned its head to face him, never stopping its stream. The animal had the most disapproving expression he’d ever seen.
Victor abandoned the rifle and rolled away, getting some distance was the first priority. The projection had to have a Brute rating to throw Hookwolf around, and Mover as well to have gotten up here-- direct confrontation was inadvisable. Victor surged to his feet and ran towards the fire escape.

_Thwip! _Every one of the laces on his right boot broke at once. The suddenly-loose footwear tripped the Empire cape up, and he stumbled.

_Thwip! _His belt snapped in two and tumbled to the roof. _Thwip-thwip-thwip _and his pants came apart, tangling up his legs before Victor could get his balance back. He lurched forward as a sudden, gale-strength wind knocked him over, sending him rolling and scraping on the building’s roof. He managed to get a handhold before he fell from the roof entirely, but only just, and Victor dangled above the alleyway by his fingers. He kicked, trying to climb back up, and succeeded in dislodging his boot entirely.

“Where’d it go? I know I saw it come down this w-- hey!” The boot clattered to the ground in front of the half-strength patrol, who looked up at the pantstless man in boxers and half an E88 uniform. Victor heard a foam sprayer being cocked.

The dog moseyed up to the edge, just past his fingers, and gave a slow, exaggerated look between the open air above the alley, and the clenching fingers keeping Victor from being welcomed by gravity. It pressed one paw against his left hand. It pressed its weight against his fingers, pushing.

“...you bitch. Don’t you dare. Don’t you fucking dare.”

It dared.

**Wednesday**

“Quiet day so far. Nice change of pace.”
“Tell me about it. I keep expecting to run into Stormtiger or someone any minute.”

“Don’t jinx it, please.” Aegis grumbled to his companion. Kid Win shrugged, unapologetic, and started his hoverboard on a gentle rise-fall pattern in the air. “With three of theirs in custody the Empire will stage a breakout, you know that. It’s going to be bad enough without tempting fate.”

“Fair enough, but--”


The pair of Wards immediately halted their slow flight, Aegis rising to cover Kid Win’s back as they both scanned the surrounding area. The noise halted immediately, which didn’t actually help to alleviate the tension. The afternoon streets were empty on this side of town, the immediate surroundings dominated by a self-storage complex, and beyond that a street blocked off for construction. It was the very midpoint of their patrol today, the furthest possible they’d get from the safety of HQ-- not a good place to be for an ambush, in other words.

...shhf. Shhhhhf.

“I don’t see anything. You?” Kid murmured.

“Nothing. Not even any stray soda cans, there’s just that box over there.”

“What box?”

Shhhhf. Shhf. Shhf.

An overturned cardboard box shuffled closer to the pair, creeping towards the shadow cast by Kid Win’s hoverboard. A wet, black nose and a few traces of white fur were poking out of the handle-grip hole near the bottom. Aegis stared.

“That is not what I think it is.”
Kid Win went for a more practical approach, taking a rolled length of cord from his utility belt and tying one end of it to half of a gun-holstering clip, swiftly unsnapped from its place on the other side of his belt. He lowered the impromptu fishing line down to the box, snagged the handle-grip hole on the other side, and flipped the box over.

Good Dog froze where it was for a moment as its cover was blown, before quickly sitting up and wrapping its tail around its paws, putting on a serene and unaffected air.

“...really?”

“Really.” Kid Win grinned. Clock was going to flip with envy, no matter how this turned out. “So—hey there, Good Dog! What… were you doing hiding under a box?”

“It has a Stranger power, why--”

Good Dog looked at Kid Win, then slowly turned an unmistakably greedy gaze to the tinker’s hoverboard. The alleged dog slowly looked back at Kid Win, who gripped a hand around the edge of his board more tightly.

“Nu-uh. No way.” The dog’s ears lowered sadly. “You couldn’t even use it if you tried, Tinkertech’s not like normal machinery.”

“Aegis to Console, we have encountered Good Dog. Kid is engaging it in conversation, please advise.”

Good Dog heaved a mighty sigh, and stared longingly at the hoverboard, a quiet whine sounding in its throat. Wow, he’d heard the possible-projection was expressive, but that was some major dejection… hm.

“You know,” Kid Win started, keeping his voice light and airy, “I might be able to give you a ride, if you wanted…”

Good Dog’s ears immediately perked, and the canine put its full attention on the Tinker. Kid Win grinned. “But I can’t just interrupt my patrol for it. Now, if we had to wait around for awhile for something, like say… waiting for backup transport for some downed villain, that’d be a different
“...Kid, no. Kid, stop. Good Dog don’t listen to him, he’s not seriou-- it’s already gone.” Good Dog had wagged its tail once, then surged to its feet and gone off like a shot, freaking double-jumping up the fence enclosing the storage shed compound and quickly vanishing. Aegis clenched one hand into a fist and turned to glare at his companion.

“Kid, you are in so much shit, you know that, right? You can’t bribe another cape into trying to fight a villain!”

“Well why not? Look, either Good Dog doesn’t Master us and we get away clean, or it bites the ass of another villain and we get to bring them in, while making a good impression on the latest thorn in the PRT’s side. It’s Win-Win.”

“It’s dangerous and irresponsible, and don’t think I didn’t notice that pun. Piggot is going to have both our asses if--”

Bark! BARK BARK BARK! BARKBARKBARKBARK--BOOOOM! (Fweee crackle crackle!)

“...sonuvabitch!” Aegis even swore, as both Wards took off towards the sudden mixture of yells and frenzied barking. A sudden gust of wind almost knocked Kid off his board, and a bright plume of fire and smoke, though quickly extinguished, had Aegis hammering on his emergency response beacon. They cleared the tops of the storage sheds and came down a street or two away, to the sight of clearing smoke, scattering confetti, and several skinheads moaning on the pavement next to an overturned cement truck.

The truck had a large scorch mark on its barrel, and had spilled a load of its contents when it fell. The puddle of liquid cement was slowly creeping towards the opened door of the nearest storage unit, (eventually) threatening the integrity of the stacks of cases of munitions and guns inside. Nearest the truck, however, the largest glob of construction material had apparently been flash-dried by air and heat, the cement solidifying in an uneven lump and trapping the legs and one hand of a very, very angry albino. Alabaster cursed, tugging at one leg and only managing to tear his pants, which 4.3 seconds later reverted to pristine, trapped condition. Good Dog was sitting just out of arm’s reach of the Empire cape, thumping its tail against the ground and looking very pleased with itself.

“Why...” groaned one of the Empire recruits, clutching one arm to his stomach. “Why… does a dog… know C-Q...C...”
Aegis took a deep breath, exhaled, and turned his radio back on to call it in.

* * *

Coil switched his monitor to display footage from the Security Bro’s Storage Complex, after receiving a notice that an altercation had occurred at one of the E88-held storage cubes he’d had bugged. The feed showed PRT troops gathering up zip-tied henchmen into a transport van, and the approaching Kid Win on his hoverboard, flying in wide circles with-- was that a dog? The Ward’s mouth was moving. Coil turned up the speakers.

“Snaaaaaake Eaaaaateeeeeeer!” Woooooo~!

What.
“Max, I asked you not to call me.”

“I know, Kayden. But this is important. We need you.”

Kayden tucked the phone into the crook of her shoulder to free up her hands. Was Max using the royal we, or was he referring to the Empire as a whole? It could honestly have been both. Kayden tried to clear the irritation from her voice. “I’m going to assume this has something to do with the Empire losing four capes in as many days?”

Max’s voice gained the slightest edge in warning. “Just so. The Protectorate is being aided by the ABB in this attempt to drive us out.”

That gave Kayden pause. She hadn’t heard anything about the ABB getting a new cape, but with the type of people they attracted, more capes on their side would only mean bad things for everyone else. For their own people too, for that matter. Lung and his ilk were a cancer.

“The asians picked up a new cape,” Max continued, confirming Kayden’s fears before she could voice them. “Rumor paints them as a neutral rogue, but they’ve been arranging ‘accidents’ to disable our own so the Protectorate can snap them up easily. I’m sure you don’t need me to tell you what will happen if the Empire loses ground to the ABB.”

Well. Even if he was a snake, that much was true. He didn’t need to detail the aftermath, if the ABB became the dominant force in Brockton Bay instead of being in stalemate with the Empire.

“Listen. The Protectorate is doing a prisoner transfer on Thursday-- one convoy is taking Hookwolf to a Birdcage transport, the other is transferring Victor, Rune, and Alabaster to a high-security prison outside the city.”

“What? They love their Rig, why would they remove their prisoners from Brockton?”


“*To ensure that they cannot be broken out of containment on their watch. The PRT is trying to avoid losing face when we inevitably retrieve our forces.*”

Kayden did a quick tally in her head. “With the recent losses, it’s an even 8 - 8 split for capes, Max. And that’s not counting the Wards.”

“*Just so, but that’s where you come in.*”

“I haven’t agreed to anything.”

“I know, dear Kayden. And I know that this would make you uncomfortable, so all I need from you is a distraction.” Max’s voice was warm, confident. “The heroes will have to split their forces to guard the convoys, as will we to attack them. But not all of their capes are as useful in battle as we are, and if you start a ruckus elsewhere in the city, a few will have to peel away to intercept you. But you’ll be done and gone before they arrive*.”

Kayden’s fingers started to worry at her necklace, the woman already cursing herself, and Max, and herself again.

“Don’t worry, Kayden. I wouldn’t want to put the mother of my child at risk. But I fear if we do not do this, this city will never be a fit place to raise a child.”

“...”

* * *

Thursday

As Krieg had told her, it wasn’t difficult to find her target. The bright red arch was clearly visible, especially from a bird's-eye view like Purity had. She’d dampened her corona to a soft white shell, and her unclouded shape against the high, pale blue skies was more difficult to spot from below than most people would believe. As much as she was compared to Legend, at least Purity didn’t leave a glowing tail of colors behind her.
Just a quick diversion, she’d been promised, with no real damage or casualties. The properties all around the weird little building were abandoned, their owners long since driven out by the squalor and hatred that the ABB fostered. If the cape was there, they wouldn’t be able to reach her, and the display would serve as a potent warning against the treachery inherent in siding with Lung. Purity gathered the sunlight to her and began to descend.

Before she’d dropped to tree height, the sound of music fluttered up through the air to greet her. A flute, by the sound of it. It seemed so out of place, too. Where was the twangy, plucking-sound thing? The notes formed a pattern as she listened, until Purity recognized the tune; Greensleeves, if she wasn’t mistaken. Dammit, Krieg had said the place would be empty, she was a fool to--

The flute’s player stuck out like a sore thumb on the gently-yellowing grass down below. A white girl, with black hair and dressed in red and white clothes. She was standing facing a cheap metal sheet stand, which presumably held the musical notes she was practicing. Only a foot or two away was a large white dog, watching the girl with rapturous attention. Recognition slammed Purity so hard she dropped a couple feet out of the air, and the dog perked up her ears as if there’d been a physical impact. Sunny turned to look at her, hovering over the little building, and barked happily.

Taylor stopped playing her flute, and looked up at the glowing shape of Purity above her. Sunny wagged her tail and barked again, and in response Purity saw Taylor give a slightly awkward smile, and wave to her. Purity drifted lower, like a slowly-deflating balloon. There wasn’t supposed to be anyone here, except maybe the new ABB cape. There definitely shouldn’t have been the smiling girl she’d met at the market.

“Hello.” Taylor called up at her.

“Ah-- hello.” Purity responded, almost on reflex. She was grateful for the slight distortion of her voice, but the wagging tail of Sunny made her nervous. Police used dogs all the time, it was very possible the canine recognised her by scent.

“You’re Purity, right? What brings you here?” Taylor asked, her voice guileless, if a bit tense. Purity wondered if the girl knew how close she was to death. “Ah-- I don’t mean to pry, just curious.”

“I… heard a flute? Greensleeves.” Purity floundered a bit. Only a dozen feet below her now, Taylor’s face brightened a little.

“Oh, yeah. It’s Thursday, I practice every Thursday.” She held up the metal flute, the girl’s pride for the instrument clear as day.
“It’s a lovely flute.”

“Thank you. It was my mother’s.”

“Was?” Purity tried to glance around the area. She didn’t see any ABB, or Lung lying in wait for her, or… anyone, really. Just Taylor and her dog.

“Yeah. She died in a car crash.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Purity said, and she meant it. It would be hard not to, now that she had a child of her own. Kayden would lie awake at night, some days, with terrible things gnawing at her mind. Imagining what would happen to Aster, if she went out as Purity and never came back.

“Uhm…” Taylor drew Purity’s attention back to her. “Would you… like some tea? I’ve got green tea, and black teas, and… I think there’s some hibiscus tea left.”

Purity saw Sunny look up at her, doggy face set in a hopeful smile. She remembered keenly the smile on Aster’s face, watching the dog play with her. She imagined, for a moment, if she had blasted down the red arch and the little buildings, and then flying down to find the nice girl and her dog crushed in the rubble.

“Tea would be lovely, thank you.”

* * *

The Protectorate convoy trundled along, the roads already cleared in advance to facilitate a swift exodus from the city. A smart move, under normal circumstances, but it made plotting out the Protectorate’s course laughably easy. Kaiser, the twins, and Crusader set up an ambush point for the convoy carrying Victor and the rest, while Krieg, Othala, Stormtiger, and Cricket set a trap for the trucks moving Hookwolf, almost on the other side of the city.

Kaiser waited for the convoy to approach, then sent a quick text to Purity, as her signal to begin her diversion. The metal of his gauntlets folded back over his fingers, and the phone was swallowed up by his armor. Flanking him, the twins began their growth. The convoy didn’t slow, perhaps thinking
they could simply evade or run roughshod over them. It was folly.

Kaiser raised one hand, and metal spikes shot through the pavement and speared the trucks, punching through the wheels and halting the vehicles. The metal blades sliced through four inches of the transports’ shells before the screech of steel on steel was heard. No...

At his whim, the blades turned, and sheared sideways. Plastic resin split and fell away, the disguise breaking apart to show the armored side of Chessman’s vehicles beneath the painted exterior. No.

A decoy. The entire convoy was a decoy. The Protectorate hadn’t split their forces at all.

Crusader sent out his phantoms, spreading them out to find the Master cape, but the disguised tanks were already beginning to groan and shrink. An engine started below the highway bypass, then revved as a light transport tore away from the scene. It was insulting; Chessman didn’t even intend to fight them, just leave them to uselessly smash his sacrificed Pawns.

Max got back to his office late, his power roiling under his iron will as he seethed and stomped. He’d been tricked. Tricked! And there had been no word of Purity’s strike on the chinks’ shrine cape. She had failed, and at this juncture, failure was the same as betrayal. She wasn’t answering her phone, either, and if she didn’t have a very good excuse for ignoring him he was going to sue for custody of his daughter once and for all, and let her face down the idea of curtailed visitation rights. Maybe then she’d finally understand what was at stake for her.

Max thumbed through his phone to the contacts list, quickly scrolling to Kayden’s personal number. He pressed the Call icon on the touchscreen and waited, turning to look out over his city through his office’s floor-to-ceiling windows as he did.

The phone rang, unanswered and unnoticed even by Max. The phone slowly drifted with his hand, away from his ear, as he stared at the dog outside his window. Outside his twentieth story window.

The canine matched the rough descriptions given by his underlings-- white and fluffy-- but it was a good deal larger than rumor had mentioned. It was also standing on the reinforced glass, as though gravity was just a word that applied to people. The dog looked at him and cocked its head, staring back. Several things went through Max Anders’ head at that moment.

The dog had singled out Hookwolf in his civilian identity. It had come out of nowhere, and had played a role in capturing a third of the Empire’s powered forces on some inscrutable whim. It had
an uncanny ability to appear anywhere, even where it could not possibly be. And it was outside his
office— it knew who he was.

Max took a breath and canceled the phone call. He could put an iron spike through the wall and the
window, if need be, but if the dog’s pattern held there would be a Protectorate response somewhere
every close by, just waiting for him to out himself by using his powers.

A fly started buzzing around the window, looking for a way out and doomed to never finding one. It
cought the dog’s attention and the canine followed the insect with its eyes, then made a quick lunge
for the pest. Its teeth and tongue bumped against the glass, leaving a wet nose print and a smear of
slobber. The fly, unharmed, bumbled on. The dog lunged again, to much the same effect.

Othala, Stormtiger, and Cricket had been beaten and seized by the combined might of the
Protectorate. That made seven capes caught in less than a week. Max could read the writing on the
wall. It would look away from him if he didn’t provoke it, and right now, securing his assets and
finding a means to rebuild his Empire were more important than revenge.

The dog lunged for its prey again, then lost its supposed footing and plummeted away from Max’s
office. Max didn’t feel the need to check on it, and see if it really had fallen or was just waiting a
story below. Instead, he calmly sat at his desk, turned on his computer, and prepared for a very long
night.

* * *

Taylor hummed behind her painter’s mask as she carefully dabbed paint against the concrete. A tree
here, a few flowers there… yes, it was technically wrong to be painting the side of the Medhall
building, but she was using watercolors today so it would wash off easily, so that made it less wrong,
right? Right.

Besides, she needed the relief painting brought her. Having Purity stop by the shrine had been a
tense experience, even if the woman had only asked a few questions. She hadn’t even mentioned
capes or the Empire at all, which at least put her above Lung for courtesy.

Taylor eyed her work and considered what to paint next. Maybe another cat? It would be a nice
bookend for the one she’d started with.

Scrabbling claws caught her attention as she painted the outline and a couple of stripes, and Sunny
hopped off the wall and trotted back over to her. Taylor stared--so that’s where she’d gone-- but then shook her head with a smile.

“There you are, Sunny. Didn’t start any trouble, right?”

The wolf sneezed, and Taylor reached over to rub her ears for a moment. “Yeah, I knew you’d be good.”

Friday

“...the Protectorate is calling it the greatest victory in recent memory, with the capture of a total of seven villains aligned with the Empire Eighty-Eight. Armsgmaster was present today to answer a few questions on the villains’ capture, as well as speculation on what this will mean for the city and the local gang activity...”

Ashes pittered down from the end of Lung’s cigarette, having burned itself out as the man stared at the television in his living room with dawning horror. Oni Lee, standing behind the couch and watching as well, said nothing. Lung’s hand twitched, then pawed for the remote, and he cut off the newscaster before she could spell his fate any further.

“Well, shit.”
Business is very simple, if you’re willing or able to cut out all the needless pomp and frippery that so many insist upon.

If someone has something you need and is on equal standing, or will continue to have what you need in the future, you match payment and respect as necessary. Tit for tat.

If someone has what you want, but is lesser or weaker than you, or their usefulness ends after the transaction—then simply take what you desire from them. Their continued existence is their payment, assuming they don’t make the mistake of demanding more and losing even that concession.

This is the manner in which debts are settled, no matter the good, service, or currency. A matter or debt of honor is a different beast entirely, however, because honor demands to be obeyed by the spirit rather than the letter. Matters of honor are personal, and unshakeable, and tricky to fulfill without loss, and should therefore be avoided at all costs. The only good news is that matters of honor can be avoided relatively easily if you simply do not go looking for them. Make your own space and keep to it, and honor can go fuck itself outside somewhere where you don’t have to listen to it.

Unless, of course, honor finds a way to come looking for you, and refuses to be put down or ignored. But the chances of that are nigh-nonexistent.

Mostly.

Lung leaned his head into one hand and sighed, already feeling the headache this whole mess was going to graciously provide him with. Stupid dog.

“Lee,” he asked. “What are the chances I can simply dismiss this as coincidence?”

The assassin moved from behind the couch and stood to the side, where Lung could see him better. After a moment’s consideration, he responded. “Low.”
“That’s what I thought.” Lung huffed. He was going to need to kidnap an accountant or something, he just knew it. Except then he’d be expected to pay them, too. Maybe even an annual tithe to the kami of the shrine… which reminded him of something.

“Lee. You know more about this than I. You believe the miko to be authentic? Or at least, the wolf?”

“Yes.”

“Which kami do they claim to serve?” The assassin fidgeted, a motion that made the hair on Lung’s neck prickle. “Lee. Tell me.”

He did.

Lung exhaled through his teeth in a long, drawn out “Fffffffhhhuuuuuuuhhhhhhh…” sound, ending with a click of his teeth on the ‘ck!’ There went any hope of fulfilling his unlooked-for bargain to the letter only. If he did not handle this carefully, any perceived shortcoming would be an excuse to demand more of him, thus extending this entire troublesome affair. His best option was to turn the table upon his opponent, offer more than he owed, and thereby put the miko in debt to him instead. Or at least forestall any further requests.

Lung pinched the bridge of his nose, thinking. He had access to a few sources of legal currency—meaning he had a few ways of laundering money convincingly— but he was going to need to funnel more through them and contact an agent or two to make the necessary purchases. Seized goods would be cheaper by far, but they carried enough risk that he sincerely doubted the miko cape could handle the legal aspects. And if anything came back to bite her, her kami would have cause to come looking for Lung again. That meant he had to do this clean, on top of needing to reorganize the peasants enough to satisfy the agreement.

Goddamn it. This was going to be expensive. Perhaps he could delay things a bit, with needing to capture more territory and arrange new sources of income.

“Alright. Lee, here is what is going to happen…”

* * *

“Alright. Let me get this straight.” Director Piggot sighed, leaning back in her chair as far as her aching body would allow her. “Two-thirds of the Empire wiped out in a single week, thanks to a series of increasingly ridiculous coincidences apparently orchestrated by a dog. A dog which may or
may not be a very confused Case 53, or a changer cape, or a projection created by a second-gen child of one of our own. Said second-gen, when combined with said dog, has access to a selection of powers that our Thinkers are still trying to unravel the rules to. So much so that today they sent Armsmaster and myself an updated profile that simply labeled her as Shaker: Yes.”

The aforementioned Tinker bit down on a frustrated huff. “We cannot assign accurate threat ratings to the pair until we understand more about their separate capabilities.”

“A task that is looking increasingly unlikely, as analysis of the past week suggests either some fairly daunting combinations of Thinker powers, or straight-up precognition. And I refuse to consider the idea of a fortune-telling dog.”

Assault chose to chime in, grinning. “So we’re not renaming it ‘Nostradogmus,’ then?” Battery delivered a quick smack upside the head, before Director Piggot could request it.

“Actually, has anyone seen Good Dog since Wednesday?” Triumph interjected. “I half expected to come back from the transport on Thursday to find Skidmark or someone taped to the flag pole outside.”

“It’s stuck to the shrine and Brushstroke the past couple of days.” Dauntless answered, then added, “But it might not have broken its villain-catching streak, exactly.”

“Elaborate, if you would.”

“I caught up on the recordings today. Purity dropped by on Thursday, while we were moving Hookwolf.”

“That’s more than just suspiciously timed. No shots fired, I assume, since you’re only mentioning this now?” Armsmaster queried. Dauntless flushed slightly at the implied rebuke.

“None. Instead, they had tea. And I didn’t hear a recruitment speech, either. Purity seemed kinda flustered, from what I could hear.”

“If Purity had opened fire in the ABB territories, Lung would have responded almost immediately.” Piggot hissed through her teeth. “There’s a very real chance we would have had to abandon Hookwolf to to deal with Lung’s rampage.”
“But instead, Purity gets distracted by a dog, and Brushstroke invites her for tea. Master effect or not, that’s a hell of a good trick.” Assault added.

“Well, at least Brushstroke is on our side.” Miss Militia spoke next. “Poor role model behavior aside, I’m a little surprised she hasn’t asked to join the Wards. Or why she’d spend so much time fostering peaceful relations with the ABB when her father is a hero. If this is teenage rebellion, it’s an odd one.”

“Well, that would require her to know that her father is Chessman.”

Chessman shifted uncomfortably in his seat as a few sets of eyes turned to him. “Don’t look at me like that. I didn’t want to worry her, or get her involved in any of this.”

“Except now she’s involved herself.” Armsmaster said. “And with this latest display, we really can’t continue to leave her be. Not without knowing her intentions.”

“Speaking of-- Armsmaster, didn’t you say you were sending someone to check out the shrine directly, and ask around about Brushstroke?”

“I did, yes.” Armsmaster nodded. “However, the results were....”

* * *

“Oh, it’s so good to see the younger generations taking such interest in the old culture.”

“Yes, yes. And so polite, too! So rare for young men to have learned any manners, these days.”

“Would you like some more dango, Velocity-kun?”

The speedster beamed. “Arigato, Obaasan!”
“...inconclusive.” He finished. Velocity sank a little lower in his seat. “There has been useful information gained more indirectly. Kid Win proved that Good Dog is indeed sentient, as it understands both language and the concept of bribery. Velocity gathered that the community opinion of Brushstroke is rather high, though only a few mentioned the existence of Good Dog.”

“Implies that whatever their relationship, Brushstroke is definitely the ‘face’ of things. Seems consistent, Brushstroke hasn’t shown any desire for aggressive action, and instead Good Dog goes and acts on her behalf.” Miss Militia mused. “Did we ever get any limitations on distance between them?”

Armsmaster shook his head. “None. That and the intelligence would support the idea of Good Dog being a changer or a Case 53, which casts some unfortunate implications on its proximity to Brushstroke.” Chessman winced. “Still, Chessman’s range for controlled minions is quite large, so a projection isn’t entirely out of the question. I did some tech trades and have developed a multi-frequency spectrogram device. If I can get close enough to Good Dog, I should be able to scan it and get some more accurate information. There is plenty of cover on the borders of the shrine, and—”

“Armsmaster, you are not creeping around in the bushes trying to take pictures of my daughter.”

“...The pair also frequent a public park off the corner of 25th and Rime street.”

“Armsmaster you are not creeping around in the bushes of a children’s park trying to take pictures of my daughter!”

“I have to sneak up on Good Dog somewhere, Chessman!”

Director Piggot slammed one hand down on the table, silencing the pair before they could continue. “Enough! Armsmaster, you will get your opportunity to scan Good Dog, because I have a solution to this whole mess. Here is what is going to happen.”

Chessman settled, but shot Armsmaster a warning glance. The tinker simply grit his teeth a bit harder. “Which is, Director?”

“First, you are going to draw up the forms for both a Ward, and for a registered parahuman Rogue,
and then you are going to put an ampersand in between Brushstroke and Good Dog. Separating them doesn’t seem to be an option, so for the time being we are simply going to legally consider them one entity. Got it?”

“The Rogue forms are for if she refuses recruitment, yes?” Militia clarified. "I... would have thought this would be something we should insist upon."

"Normally, I would. But for once, I actually don't want to." Director Piggot's voice was laced with disbelief. "I would be completely fine with more capes wanting to just settle down and drink tea all day long. And if she continues to be a moderating force on Oni Lee, even better. But between her poorly-understood powers and her existing connection to the Protectorate, we don't have a choice in the matter. We have to approach her. We have to poke the bear that scolded Lung and got away with it." The director huffed, and shifted forward in her seat again.

“So-- the forms. Armsmaster, once that’s done, you are going to take a small team and go to the shrine, and you are going to employ the one solution we haven’t tried and offer her a place with the Wards. It’s a bit unorthodox, but I have high hopes for it.”

“Which is?”

“It’s called,” Director Piggot said, spreading her hands back out in a dramatic pause. “Talking.”
Chapter 25

Taylor tugged her gloves a bit closer to her wrists. “Eesh. Getting chilly, isn’t it Sunny? Gonna have to find a space heater or something soon.” She glanced at the wolf, who was laying on the offering steps of the shrine. “Or more likely two, since I suspect one will be moved to beside your pile of rugs and never stray from that spot.”

Sunny chuffed and thwapped her tail on the wooden steps a couple of times. Taylor grinned at her. “Let’s rake the leaves into a pile before we get rid of them. Wanna get a head start, I’ll put on a kettle for some tea?” Bark!

Taylor ducked into the office as swirls of an unusually-strong breeze started to toss curtains of red and gold leaves around the shrine’s grounds, following by an enthusiastic Sunshine barking her head off and trying to catch a few of the leaves in her teeth. The little office building had gotten really homey, between the minifridge and Sunny’s Nap Spot and some scrounged furniture. Taylor had long since started leaving some of her art supplies and projects here, first as a test of their safety, and finally as an extension of trust. Despite frequent visitors to the shrine itself (and that was starting to pick up momentum as well-- Taylor even saw small groups of school students following the pawprint sidewalks and looking in at the shrine with naked curiosity) to Taylor’s knowledge, no one had come into the little side office without permission.

It’s a heady feeling, to have a space that truly feels like your own, to use and decorate as you see fit. That it came with responsibilities didn’t bother Taylor at all, really. The work for maintaining the shrine was easy now that it was fixed up, and with winter coming gardening slipped off the chores list. She was going to have to figure out how to handle the donations box sooner rather than later, though. Increased traffic meant the shrine was starting to collect offerings that even Sunny couldn’t eat, and using the money herself was completely out of the question. Maybe Oni Lee would have some ideas on what else the shrine might need.

It was a little strange, Taylor mused as she set out a few mugs and Sunny’s tea bowl, that asking the chief enforcer of the ABB for his opinion on what amounted to interior decorating was even an option. That was Brockton Bay for you, she supposed. Speaking of…

Taylor glanced out the office window and caught sight of Oni Lee bending down to give Sunny a quick pet. Taylor made a quick detour to grab the jar of honey for the tea tray, then carried the arrangement outside with her to the bamboo gazebo. She gave the assassin a quick nod as she approached, and he took it as his cue to sit down on the tatami mats that had apparently become a permanent fixture. He greeted her calmly as she poured hot water into the teapot-- no formal
ceremonies for her, not for a while. Probably not until Baachan forced the issue. Taylor liked having her legs, thank you.

“Good afternoon, Oni Lee. Baachan brought by some mochi, if you’d like some. I think she’s practicing for when the cherry trees get their leaves.” No real need to specify which baachan, the capital was easy enough to hear.

“That might be wise, Miko.”

“Okay, let me just-- wait, what do you mean by wise?” Taylor blinked at him. Before he could answer, the sound of voices near the torii caught Taylor’s attention. “Ah-- excuse me just a moment.”

Taylor stood and quickly strode over to the entryway path, her skirts swishing around her legs. Sunny seemed to have made herself scarce for the moment, but finishing with the leaves was going to have to wait anyway. Standing just inside the red gate were--

Taylor missed a step, near-tripping herself on the cobblestone path. Standing just under the gate were three Protectorate heroes, Assault, Battery, and--eeee!--Armsmaster himself. Assault was looking curiously around the shrine and pointing at the rope-circled old oak tree, while Battery kept glancing over her shoulder back at the street outside, and Armsmaster visibly scanned the area until his eyes landed on Taylor. The famous Tinker smiled, and god help her but his beard was immaculate. Taylor hurried closer, already wondering if she could get the heroes to sign one of her sketchbooks.

“Um-- hello! Welcome to, uh… the shrine.” Every bit of poise she possessed chose that moment to go on strike as Taylor suddenly remembered that if the shrine had a name, she’d never learned it. Welp.

“Good afternoon,” Armsmaster replied. “You are Taylor Hebert, yes?”

“Ah, yes! Yes I am.” Armsmaster knew her name! “And you’re Armsmaster! Uh-- I mean-- you know that…” Where was Sunny to interrupt her when she needed it the most?

“It’s nice to meet you, Taylor.” Battery chimed in, gently guiding the conversation back onto recognizable rails instead of letting it sink into the swamp of eternal regret. “We were hoping you had some time to talk.”
“Oh, of course! What would you like to talk about…” The memory of paint being splattered onto an old tree as headlights turned on her flashed through Taylor’s mind. She was not going to get any autographs today. Today, she was going to jail. “Actually I just set out tea, would you care to join me?”

Baachan’s teachings helpfully took over for her brain. Tea time is courtesy time, after all, and as long as you are courteous, everything will be fine. Or you are Lung.

“That would be acceptable. Thank you.” Armsmaster said, and Taylor heard a more wordless agreement from Assault and Battery. She made sure she had a smile in place, then asked the heroes to follow her and set off towards the tatami mats in the pseudogazebo. She nearly missed another step when she heard the sharp intake of breath behind her, because-- oh yeah-- she’d been in the middle of hosting Oni Lee. The assassin’s demonic mask was staring at their approach with a frightening intensity. But tea time is courtesy time, so Taylor simply kept walking.

When she got closer to the mats, she turned halfway so that she could look between the heroes and the ABB enforcer. Her hands balled up and migrated to her hips as she asked, “Can I go get some refreshments, and come back to find everyone still in one piece?”

The moment stretched, near vibrating with tension, before Oni Lee decided to back down. Figuratively, at least, since he hadn’t quite risen from the tatami mats. “Of course, Miko.”

Taylor nodded, then turned more fully towards the heroes. “Please, make yourselves comfortable. I will return shortly.” She gestured at the mats, and tried her very best to copy Baachan’s stern gaze. Though visibly reluctant, the Protectorate heroes started to move closer to the mats, and Taylor quickly retreated towards the office and its minifridge. She could grab another kettle of water and the warmer, while she was here, because suddenly chamomile sounded so much better than caffeine.

Taylor piled the plate of mochi onto her largest serving tray, then added some melon bread Yuuta had dropped off as well. On a whim, she ducked back into the minifridge and grabbed one of Sunny’s sake bottles. The wolf had more than enough, and she may as well add serving alcohol without a license to her rap sheet.

Taylor brought the goods back to the tatami mats, to find Assault and Battery engaged in a fierce staring match with Oni Lee, who for his part was completely ignoring them. Armsmaster was looking around the shrine again, though he stopped when she reached the mats and began laying out the snacks and second teapot. “Eheh… I’ll admit I was a little worried about walking away, even so.” She said, taking her own seat at the end of the mat, between the heroes and the villain.
“...spilling blood would be a defilement of the shrine.” Oni Lee spoke up, his voice calm as ever despite the circumstances. Battery stared at him with wide eyes. “I am careful to clean all of my tools before entering, as well.”

Taylor remembered reading about that, in one of the books Sunny had dug up for her. “That’s good to hear,” she said, before the full implications hit her and neatly dropped her stomach to somewhere around her feet. There was a reason she never asked the ABB cape about his ‘work.’ “Really, I’d prefer if there just wasn’t any violence here at all, bloody or otherwise.”

“We’d heard something to that effect,” Assault said. He flashed her a smile, though the corners of his mouth looked tight. “Your sidewalks are attracting a bit of attention.” Sidewalks technically belonged to the city, right? Taylor mentally added ‘defacing public property’ to her list.

“Good attention, I hope.” She replied, because it was really too late for apologies. “Ah— speaking of attention, kinda. The Protectorate’s capture of the E88 capes was in the newspaper headlines all week. You must have been working very hard. Congratulations!”

She could feel the full force of Armsmaster's stare on her. Assault started making a wheezing noise. “Um… is he okay?”

Battery clapped one hand on Assault’s shoulder, perhaps a bit harder than necessary. “Asthma. He’s fine.”

“Y-yeah,” Assault wheezed, quickly bringing his teacup up to his mouth. Perhaps the steam would help his lungs. “It’s all this f-fall pollen. Gets me every year.”

Armsmaster took a careful breath, drawing Taylor’s attention back towards him. “Thank you,” he said through his teeth, “But that’s actually what we came to talk to you about.”

That seemed… a bit out of the blue. Taylor couldn’t think of any reason for her and the Empire to be spoken of in the same breath. Unless maybe Purity dropping by was way more attention-grabbing than she’d thought? And come to think of it, why would the Protectorate know about her sidewalks? From what Assault had said, it sounded like more than simple acknowledgement of the paw prints. And while spreading word in the ABB territories was one thing, Taylor really couldn’t imagine Lung sending a postcard or something to the Rig to clue them in.

“Oh?” Taylor asked, while she started pouring tea into cups. Perhaps if she just went with it, answers
“Two things, really.” Battery spoke up, and set a couple of manila folders down on the mats. “Firstly, we need you to sign off on a couple of things so you can collect your share of the bounty on Hookwolf and the capture bonuses for the rest.”

Taylor blinked. “Eh… excuse me?”

“We can set you up with a new bank account for your alias now, or we can get you a cash card with the amount stored on it, though the former is quite a bit safer…” Battery trailed off, eyeing the doubtlessly dumbfounded look on Taylor’s face. “We weren’t sure how else to deal with you and your partner, so we were going to simply count you as an organization, rather than an individual cape.”

Taylor set down her tea. “I think there’s been a mistake. I didn’t have anything to do with the E88 captures, and I’m not a cape.”

There was a moment of silence. Assault made a noise in his throat, somewhere between a laugh and a cough. “You’re kidding, right? Look, if you want to stay anonymous we can help with that.”

Taylor shook her head. “I don’t need to be anonymous. I’m not a cape.”

“Analysis of your activities would state otherwise, Miss Hebert.” Armsmaster spoke up, gaze still fixed on her from somewhere past that visor. “Have you perhaps noticed strange things happening around you? Odd weather, things suddenly being repaired, plants growing in an unusual fashion?” The living gazebo around them didn’t offer comment, but it continued to exist.

“...maybe a few things.”

“Parahuman powers come in a staggeringly large range of possibilities. There--”

Taylor shook her head again. “No, you misunderstand. I know that… things happen, which are hard to explain. But it’s not me doing it. Sunny’s got all the weirdness covered.”

“Sunny?” Battery questioned. Taylor noted the heroine kept keeping an eye on Oni Lee, who was
“Sunny?” Battery questioned. Taylor noted the heroine kept an eye on Oni Lee, who was calmly eating a piece of mochi.

“Yeah, Sunshine. Sunny for short. She’s my best friend.” Taylor smiled. “Maybe you’ve seen her around? She’s a white, uh… canine.”

“By any chance is she ever not a canine?” Assault asked. When Taylor shook her head again, the hero made a hmm noise. “Well, different question-- can I ask how you and Sunny met?”

“Sure, I guess.” Taylor replied. She recounted her first meeting with the wolf, lost in the woods all those years ago. “I don’t think the camp counselors ever told my parents, since they probably didn’t want to get into trouble for losing track of me. And I didn’t want to get in trouble for losing track of me either, so I kinda… never mentioned it.”

“Sounds like a pretty scary thing, for an eight-year-old.” Assault remarked. “She’s been around since then?”

“Sorta. Sunny went away for a while, until my mom died. She found me again and stayed with me when I was sad. Then I started having problems in school, and… well, I needed a friend pretty badly. Sunny’s been with me ever since.”

“Yeah, I gotcha.” Assault nodded. Then he grinned. “But that just leads back to our first topic. Maaaaybe you haven’t been online much, but your friend has been pretty active lately, making the E88 regret everything.”

“...oh dear.”

“And, um… since dogs can’t really open bank accounts, we started registering you two as a team.” Battery repeated her earlier statements, and opened one of the manila folders. “And you were kinda out in public wearing a mask and painting, if you recall.”

Taylor flushed and tried not to hunch into herself. “I-- I’m really sorry, about that.”

“Er-- what?”
“Um… I sorta-kinda… ran from Armsmaster.”

The Tinker looked stern. “I remember. That’s not exactly a good way to make a first impression.”

Taylor winced. “Sorry… you ever, um, get introduced to someone, and then you see them again sometime, and you know them but you can’t remember their name, and it’s way too awkward to ask at that point?”

The stern set of Armsmaster’s mouth faltered a bit, thrown by the sudden shift in conversation. “…yes?”

“It turns out that running from law enforcement is a lot like that, only way worse.” Taylor studied her teacup and ignored the slight wheezing from Assault. “I got spooked when your bike pulled up, and by the time I realized it was you I was already running, y’know?” Wait, maybe she wasn’t supposed to implicate herself? Well, too late now.

“…I see.” He finally said. “For now, it would be best for you to finish your registration so we can get your account set up.”

“R-right, okay.” Taylor pulled the first folder over to her, and looked through it. It seemed simple enough-- it was a form for registering a parahuman alias, just to take the name out of the available pool and allow the alias to be used legally. It looked like it had already been partly filled in.

“Brushstroke and Good Dog?”

“Names we started using to refer to you within the PRT. If you have another alias you prefer, we can change it now.” Battery offered.

Taylor considered. It seemed okay. She glanced over at her other guest and took a moment to refill his cup before he could drain it. The assassin gave her a slight nod in thanks. “Any opinions on the names, Oni Lee?”

She could almost feel the heroes tense up, but Oni Lee just paused to think it over. “Suitable for paperwork,” he concluded after a few moments. “But I think you will continue to be addressed by your title instead, Miko.”
“Fair enough,” Taylor said, and carefully signed the forms. She heard Battery ask the assassin about her ‘title.’ From her tone, she must have thought it was her position in the ABB. Taylor felt a small sting of resentment over that.

But the ABB cape shook his head. “A miko is… a shrine maiden. There is not a good word in English to explain. Perhaps ‘priestess’ is closest. The miko cares for the shrine and serves the kami.”

“...Brushstroke and Good Dog are religious figures to you?” Taylor couldn’t tell if Assault was grinning or scandalized. Quite possibly it was both.

“Community figures,” Oni Lee corrected, before he returned to his tea and silence.

“...right. Well with that cleared up, here’s the other thing we wanted to talk to you about, Brushstroke.” Battery took up the reins again, and opened the second folder she had brought. “We wanted to--”

A car door shut outside the shrine, the sound surprisingly loud. The footsteps that followed were heavy and purposeful. Taylor frowned, and stood up slowly.

“...Excuse me for a moment, please. I think I need to go greet another guest.” The heroes stirred, but Taylor turned her back on them and marched quickly over to the torii. Sure enough, the person she least wanted to see was waiting there for her. Lung had stopped just inside the gate, metal mask glaring down at her and his arms crossed imperiously over his chest, which-- Taylor couldn’t stop the frown that formed on her face. He still refused to wear a shirt.

“Miko,” he grunted.

“Lung.” She returned.

“Your… service has not gone unnoticed. As per our agreement, I have begun to reorganize the ABB.” He what? Oh geeze, how much attention could Sunny have possibly attracted in a single week? ...Taylor felt the edges of her vision turn grey. That was not a question she wanted to answer. Set to automatic, her mouth took over before her brain could catch up.

“I was just serving tea. Would you care to join me as a guest?” Curse your teachings, Baachan!
Lung grunted. “Lee is here, yes? Very well.” *Oh no.*

“...please follow me.” Taylor said, her voice absolutely wooden. She led the gang leader back to the tatami mats. Tea time is courtesy time, tea time is courtesy time...

The moment the two groups were in sight of each other, the protectorate heroes jumped to their feet and behind her, Lung’s chest rumbled in a growl. Oni Lee calmly chewed some melon bread. That man’s composure deserved a medal.

Taylor simply took her seat again, saying, “Guests, please be comfortable. And I will ask again, please no violence here.” After a moment, Lung moved around her and the mats, and took his place next to Oni Lee. Was that-- oh no. He was smiling, a sort of self-satisfied cat smile. Taylor gripped the teapot tightly to keep her hands from shaking, as she poured the gang leader a cup.

“I see you are entertaining many guests today, Miko.” Lung rumbled. “Tell me, heroes-- are you enjoying the hospitality?”

The protectorate heroes sat down again, every muscle tight as a piano wire. “It’s a nice change of pace from the usual.” Battery not-quite-hissed.

“I certainly hope you are behaving yourselves. I’ve declared this area neutral territory. It would be terrible if the Protectorate couldn’t recognize the value of such a place.” Was he…? Taylor took a sharp breath. He *was!* That bastard was almost daring the heroes to attack him and break the new shrine truce, AND he was taking credit for it! Lung was just the *worst* guest.

Taylor stared at Lung over her glasses and said, her voice sweet, “It’s so good of you to enforce a nonaggression treaty within the ABB, Lung. I’m very glad that you respect the shrine so much as to help maintain its open-door policy to any who wish to visit.”

Lung stopped smiling, but he didn’t say anything more. Oni Lee was giving the larger man a *look* that, even with the mask, Taylor recognized from her tutelage under the Baachan Collective. “Of course. But what business brings the Protectorate out here?”

“They wished to offer Sunny a reward for helping with the E88.”
“What a coincidence,” Lung drawled. “I suppose they’ve also asked you to join their little organization?”

“If they did,” Taylor countered, “I would of course refuse. The shrine has nothing to do with parahumans or gangs, and neither do I.”

“Present company doesn’t seem to support that claim.” Armsmaster said through clenched teeth. Taylor had to wonder how many lasers or darts the Tinker had primed to shoot at Lung.

“Sure it does. You’re all here as guests. And I am courteous to my guests, as they are to each other.”

“Mm. Curious that you decided to entertain them, after my message.”

That threw Taylor off a bit. “Ah-- what message?”

Lung paused. The gang leader turned his head to look at Oni Lee, who bowed his head in apology. “Sumimasen, Miko. I came to deliver a message, but did not wish to interrupt.”

“O-oh. Well, what message, Oni Lee?”

“The shrine does not have a phone, so I was sent ahead to offer you thirty minutes’ notice that Lung would be arriving.”

Taylor stared. Her eyes flicked over to Lung, who had picked some suspicious timing to drink from his tea. She closed her eyes and took a measured breath. “...thank you, Oni Lee. That… that’s most thoughtful of you.”

“You are welcome, Miko.”
Taylor had to excuse herself and go back to the office to refill the water kettle, as well as raid her stash of commercial teas. The relative privacy of the office also gave her a moment to catch her breath and think uncharitable thoughts about her guests without being seen. The heroes and the ABB capes had entered a bizarre form of Cold War, neither side willing to be the first to conduct their business, speak openly against the other, or leave. It was becoming increasingly obvious to Taylor that if she ever wanted to go home, she was going to have to force conversation to continue, until both parties were satisfied.

Let’s see... Lung’s contingent had technically gotten here first, so hearing out the leader of the ABB was probably the correct first option. Except Lung was an asshole, and if he thought that Taylor was trying to hurry him up and get rid of him, the gang leader would likely just dig in his heels and smirk until long past sunset. And that just wasn’t an option. ‘Hi dad, sorry I’m late getting home, I was having a tea party slash old western stand-off with Lung and it ran kinda long.’

Yeah, no.

Taylor brushed imaginary dirt from her skirts and walked back out to the tatami mats, leaves crunching under her shoes and her shadow abruptly splitting and flickering outwards. Oh, good. She was worried things were going to go smoothly.

Taylor turned slightly and looked up, calling out over her shoulder. “Hello, Purity!”

The Empire cape had stopped her approach, hovering a dozen feet above the shrine, transfixed by the collective glares of the rest of Taylor’s guests. “Is... this a bad time?” Her masked voice questioned.

“Oh, not at all. I was just serving tea. Would you care to join us?” There was a certain strange tranquility in watching everything around you go to hell. After a hesitation visible even through her corona, Purity drifted lower and took a spot on the mats across from Taylor’s own seat. Taylor settled down the new kettle and tea bags, picking out an empty cup for the E88 enforcer as she said, “It was raspberry hibiscus with one sugar and lemon, right? Or did you want something else?”

“Oh-- um, yes please. To the first one.”
“Of course.” Taylor set about making a cup. “You didn’t happen to see Skidmark or any of the Merchants on your way here, did you?”

“No, I can’t say I did… why?”

“Just checking.”

“I’m a bit surprised any member of the E88 would come here, after last week.” Battery said. She was closest in seating arrangement to the Empire cape, and after a quick comparison Taylor noted a few inches’ discrepancy between Purity’s distance from Battery as opposed to her distance from Lung. Taylor couldn’t say she blamed Purity at all.

“Yes, they… certainly had a busy week.”

“They?” Armsmaster was quick to note the choice of words. Purity tensed, and busied herself with gently squeezing a lemon slice into her tea instead of answering. Her awkward silence made Lung chuckle. Purity leaned just the slightest bit further away from the ABB leader, which only seemed to please him more.

“Ahem. If you don’t mind the intrusion,” Taylor said, doing her very best to keep her tone level, “I would like to return to some of the matters at hand. Battery, I believe you wanted to go over something?”

The heroine startled just a tad, then nodded and pushed forward that second folder she had brought. “Well, you’ve already stated your opinion on the matter, but the Protectorate would like to offer you a place within the Wards program. It’s often the best choice for new parahumans, as it provides a safe environment and experts to help you practice and develop your...powers…” She trailed off, and Taylor took advantage of the pause.

“Thank you for the offer, but I must decline. Joining the Protectorate would at the least compromise my ability to keep the shrine open to anyone, since I doubt the PRT would take a permissive stance to it. Also, as I’ve said, I’m not a parahuman, so it would be a poor fit regardless.” Taylor sipped at her tea to give herself a few seconds. “That said, the Protectorate and associated heroes or employees are as welcome here as anyone else, so please don’t feel slighted by my refusal.”

Lung started that rumbling laugh again. “Dismantle half of their enemies, and they offer you the
privilege of chains. How unsurprising.” The heroes bristled, and Lung smiled a bit wider, showing his teeth.

“From what I’ve heard, the Wards program offers many benefits and opportunities for later growth. It’s an offer made in good faith, I think, just not one I can accept.” Taylor commented. She looked over at the heroes’ side of the mats, about to say more, but caught a flash of white in the side of her vision. Taylor debated for less than half a second if she really wanted to know what Sunny was doing over there.

She turned her head slightly to face Lung. “Besides. They’ve claimed that Sunny was involved in offering assistance, so before you arrived, they arranged to offer her part of the bounties from the Empire cape captures.”

“A pittance, I am sure.”

“Would accepting that count as graft?” Purity wondered aloud, drawing the attention of both sides over to her.

Surprisingly, it was Assault who answered, shaking his head. “Nah. Two reasons, one being that the capture bonuses are publicly known, and offered through the PRT rather than the Protectorate directly, so it’s not a shady dealing from the heroes. Second, it’s only bribery or graft if it’s given for something that’s been asked for. Neither the Protectorate nor the PRT asked Brushstroke or Good Dog to take any action against the E88.”

Taylor listened, and tried to restrain the morbid curiosity that was building. She failed rather quickly, as a side glance confirmed that the white shape had moved closer. Sunny was several yards away yet, the wolf crawling on her belly and keeping her head as low to the ground as possible. While Assault spoke she shuffled a bit closer, letting the hero’s words mask the sound of her approach. After a steadying breath Taylor smoothed her expression and instead looked at the unopened bottle of sake, sitting on the mat. People in those old movies her dad watched mixed alcohol into their drinks quite a lot. Bourbon, she thought. Maybe sake could be mixed into tea? Even if not the attempt might have to be made.

“Well, since we’ve established the legalities…” Lung broke in, that satisfied cat-smile starting on his face again. “I have also brought a gift, as a token of my generosity.” Even with his smug at 100%, Lung kind of sounded like the words bit at him as he spoke. The ABB leader reached into his back pocket and pulled out a folded bundle of papers, because even a trapper keeper would be too professional. He used his long reach to set the papers near Taylor’s knees, and she set down her tea to unfold them, silently praying that they would not be sweat-damp.
“Here, Miko. These are property deeds,” Lung said, as Sunny crawled closer and carefully--
carefully!-- laid her head down on Armsmaster’s thigh. The Tinker absently started petting her head.
Taylor kept her eyes on Lung. “Five lots in total, the Shrine and the two properties on either side, for
you to do with as you see fit.”

“I don’t think the city takes blood money, Lung.” Purity seethed.

“Of course they do. They also take legal tender, and this land was purchased through legal means…”
Taylor saw the exact moment Lung spotted Sunny, because the gang cape blinked behind his mask
and lost his train of thought. Taylor decided to step in before he could regain it.

“That’s quite kind of you, Lung. I hope you didn’t trouble yourself too much for it.”

“Doubtful,” Purity interrupted. “His gang has cratered the property values around here, he probably
got them for a steal. Lung, you know she’s just a teenager so I hope you paid off the back taxes and
put some into escrow, because there’s no way she could pay them herself.” Heads turned her way,
and she scowled through her light. “What? I’ve worked real estate.”

Lung looked absolutely affronted at the accusation, though Taylor privately thought it was a pretty
good one. “Of course. You take me for a fool?”

“I take you for a brute,” Purity said.

“Purity, please.” Taylor cautioned, and the cape settled herself a little.

Battery started rubbing at her temples. “Hng… Brushstroke, you’re going to want to find a lawyer
who knows cape law, I think, since it would be better to attach these properties to your cape name
and not your own. And then there’s the whole mess on whether or not this place counts as non-
profit, since it’s a religious or a community center. Armsmaster, you have anything on Rogue
ownership law….” The cape had looked over at the Tinker and spotted Sunny laying beside him.
Assault noticed her eyes popping and looked over as well, the poor man accidentally swallowing tea
down the wrong way.

Armsmaster ‘hmmed’ to himself, holding his teacup with one hand and rubbing Sunny’s ears with
the other. “I don’t know offhand what the intersection between Rogue capes and nonprofit
organizations is, but ever since the Fallen got started I’m sure there have been lawsuits. There are
some pretty stringent limitations on Rogues and capes in general, most of them relating to Thinkers
or Tinkers, or the stock market. If you decide to develop any of those properties as a place of business, there will likely be a requirement for a certain percentage of your profits to be funneled into a charitable organization-- there’s been some pushback against that but I know Parian ran into a year or so ago, and I haven’t kept up on any changes since then.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad.” Taylor said.

“It probably isn’t, but since you’re also running a place of prayer, definitely get a lawyer because the IRS is going to notice.”

“Certainly.” Taylor sipped at her tea and counted to ten. “Well, I’m not sure what I’ll do with them, but it is nice to have the Shrine’s neutral zone extended. Thank you, Lung, it’s quite a generous gift.”

“Right,” the gang cape said, looking between the horrified gazes of Assault and Battery and the lazy smile on Sunny’s face.

“Though, that does segue into something I wanted to address,” Armsmaster continued. “We’ll leave you some pamphlets on Rogue cape laws, but you should be aware of a few basic rules first.”

“Yes?”

At the other end of the mat, Taylor saw Purity lean in towards Battery and whisper something. The heroine put up a finger to shush her, and continued watching Armsmaster as the Tinker smiled and started listing off a few general rules. Most of them seemed like common sense and courtesy, like not using your powers on others. “Master powers in particular carry a steep penalty. There has been concern about Good Dog using a Master ability to force a change in behavior or attention.”

“Oh?” Taylor said, after a moment. “Like what? Do you have an example?”

“In particular, there was a report of Good Dog compelling a law enforcement officer to stop and pet her.”

“I see.” Taylor set down her tea, very carefully. “I believe you’re mistaken, though. I really don’t think Sunny has to coerce people to pet her.”
“Master/Stranger protocols would suggest otherwise.” Poor Purity sounded like she’d caught Assault’s asthma. Taylor just nodded, acknowledging Armsmaster’s concerns. Then she squared her shoulders and looked him in the visor.

“You’re petting her right now.”

Armsmaster’s hand stopped. He glanced down to his right. Sunny, head on his lap, looked up at him and started thwapping her tail on the ground in a wag.

“SON OF A BITCH!”

* * *

Taylor looked through the documents Lung had given her while Purity hovered over her shoulder and pointed out places to sign now, and ones to sign later, and they both ignored the Protectorate heroes huddled a ways away having a tense argument between themselves. It was impolite to stare at guests, Taylor reasoned, and also this might just be a regular occurrence in the future so she had better get used to it. Sunny sat near her, positively radiant from the attention.

“Choice of guests aside, Miko, you provide excellent entertainment.” Lung hadn’t moved from his spot, and sat watching the chaos. Oni Lee was taking his cue from Taylor, and just ignoring the whole mess. Sunny made sure to wander his way for a quick pet from the assassin, as well.

“...thank you, Lung.” Taylor sighed. “Though, I really don’t know what to do with this gift. I’m sure there’s something, but-- Sunny?”

As soon as she’d signed the last few forms, Sunny had come closer again, near vibrating with excitement. Taylor tucked the signed forms into the folder Battery had given her, with her copy of the alias registration forms. Most of the street now officially belonged to Brushstroke and Good Dog, or would as soon as Lung’s check’s cleared.

Sunny jumped to her paws with a bark, ran in one tight circle, then jumped up on Lung of all people and licked at his mask. Then she was off light a shot, barking excitedly and headed for the abandoned lot next door. Taylor glanced at her guests, who had all looked her way-- even the
heroes-- then she looked after Sunny’s path. At the distant sound of the wolf’s Wooooo~! suddenly growing more echo-y, Taylor frowned and got up to follow. Footsteps behind her suggested that her guests had done the same.

“Sunny? Sunny, where’d you run to now?” Taylor pushed her way through a bit of overgrowth, and followed the dusty paw prints to… a hole? There was a hole dug in the middle of the abandoned lot, almost a pit really, measuring nearly a meter in diameter. A wooden crate had been shoved aside, presumably having been hiding the hole from casual view. Taylor edged a bit closer and peered down into it.

“That’s… straight through the foundations.” She heard Assault remark, behind her.

“Sunny… likes digging.” Taylor said. “But this is pretty big. I wonder what she--”

Taylor cut off abruptly, a sudden rumble beneath the earth making her back up towards the line of heroes and villains behind her. Just in time, as another WOOOOOO~! heralded Sunny’s return, as the canine shot out of the ground on top of a geyser. The wolf jumped off her latest improbability and, panting, jumped into the embrace of an old cement birdbath instead. The water she’d dug up rained back down, prompting a surprised cry from Taylor as the drops hit her skin and left steam.

“But that’s-- we’re on an aquifer, the nearest fault line is a hundred miles away, how--” Whatever Armsmaster was saying, Taylor stopped listening, as several things all at once began to make sense. All those times she wandered off, only to come back covered in dirt, or mud, or concrete dust…

“Sunny.” Taylor said, very calmly. “Did you… for months…” She had to take a breath. She heard Lung making a choking noise beside her, as the ‘cratered’ property values of the ABB territories steadily clicked upwards.

“Sunny, did you wipe out the Empire, dig a hundred miles or so of tunnels, and then manipulate Lung into buying up the street… SO YOU COULD OWN A HOT SPRING?!”

Lounging on her back in the birdbath, which was filling with steaming water from the mineral rain, tossed her head. ‘Mmmmbark.’

There was a moment of silence, as Taylor processed this and everyone else quietly mourned the death of rationality.
“So I brought out some sake from Sunny’s stash, does anyone want to--”

Lung had already turned around and taken three steps before she could finish. “Yes.”
Chapter 27

Director Piggot looked up at her closed office door with a sudden, inexplicable feeling of dread. Her instincts quickly proved themselves right as noise started to filter through, soft at first, then louder as footsteps and arguing voices approached. Emily pushed back her chair a few inches so that the panic button would be easily reachable, and took a moment to unlock the nearby drawer that held her sidearm. Just in case.

The clamour got louder, then reached its peak when her door was pushed open, revealing the grinning face of Assault and three security personnel who were failing to restrain the hero. Assault staggered forward, bracing himself against the Director's desk.

“Directorrrrr, this talking thing! It’s amaanaaazing!”

Piggot leaned back a bit from Assault, then shifted her gaze over to the PRT security who were making excuses. They cut off all attempts as she looked at them, then turned back to Assault, who was still in mid-babble.

“...and then th’ dog went all Jules Verne an’ dug to the center of the earth, an’ now there’s gonna be a hot springs episode ‘cause there’s always a hot springs episode, y’know?”

“What the hell are you three standing there for? M/S tank them, all of them, NOW.”

“But Directorrrrr we need to--”

“I said get in the tank.”

* * *
The morning air was crisp and scented with the melancholy of falling leaves, and the sun had taken pity on the poor East coast and decided to stay unhidden by clouds more often than not. It was truly a day for the record books, not because of the unusually nice weather, but from the blue-moon occurrence that, months ago, would have sent Taylor running for the conspiracy theorist sections of PHO to explain:

She was happy to go to school.

Taylor pressed her cheek against the cold brick wall near Winslow’s main entrance and sighed. Sweet, sweet normalcy! Let the other kids stare and whisper, she needed this. Homework, and boring lectures, and petty insults-- a return to the dull things in life! Taylor pulled back from hugging the building and nearly skipped inside. Hello, faulty central heating system! Good morning, uneven chairs and squeaky lockers! Great to see you, parting waves of asshole teenagers!

Taylor hiked her backpack a little higher on her shoulder, and sighed happily. Not a cape in sight. Wonderful.

The morning passed in a blissful doldrum, Taylor’s finely-honed skills of ignoring other students meshing well with her more recent, trial-by-fire proven talents of maintaining composure. So what if people stared, or kept sneaking glances at her? Screw them. So what if their frequent checking of phones reminded her of her to-do list? That was a worry for another day. So what if Blackwell called her into her office to-- okay wait that last one merited some attention.

Principal Blackwell looked… almost exactly the same as she had every other time Taylor had seen the woman. She had to wonder if Blackwell owned multiple copies of the same three-piece suit, or if maybe there was only the one, and Blackwell simply oozed into it every day as her chosen carapace for her gelatinous, pod-person body. It was probably the former. Probably.

“Miss Hebert, please have a seat,” she instructed, then peered intently at Taylor in her red sweater and white, already-stained painter’s pants. The woman confirmed Taylor’s suspicion of judgement when she asked, “I wanted to ask why you felt it appropriate to wear… that garment… to school.”

Taylor frowned. “Well the sweater is because it’s October and getting kinda cold. The pants are because I didn’t feel like wearing a skirt today. Possibly because of the whole ‘getting cold’ thing I mentioned.”
The principal’s expression soured a bit. “I meant that garment in particular, Miss Hebert.”

Well, what was her problem? “I was going to do some painting later, after school? And didn’t feel like changing?”

“I… see.” Ms. Blackwell shuffled some of her papers around, stacking them neatly, and Taylor’s frown intensified at the obvious time-stretching gesture. “Well, I suppose it is ultimately your decision. However, you will obey school rules and regulations while you are here, Miss Hebert. Don’t cause any trouble, you understand?”

Try to ruin her Normal Day, would she? Taylor didn’t have to take that silently. She gave the older woman an appraising glance and said, “Of course, Principal Blackwell. All students should be mindful of their school conduct. And, naturally, of the Golden Rule.” Taylor smiled. “‘Treat others as you wish to be treated.’”

Taylor saw Principal Blackwell’s eyes widen just a fraction, and she smiled a little wider in response. She could almost see all of the complaints and reports she’d filed last year flash behind Blackwell’s pupils.

Taylor had to wonder, for a moment, if maybe she was absorbing some sort of vindictive streak from the Baachan Collective. And if she was, did she particularly care? No, Taylor decided. She did not. She deserved a little vindictiveness now and then.

“...understood, Miss Hebert, so long as you keep to the rules as well.” Mr. Henrick must have seriously put the fear of God into that woman, though it was still a bit weird to be singled out like she was being. What had gotten under Blackwell’s skin? Well, as long as it didn’t interfere with Taylor, she was perfectly fine with letting the principal conspire or perspire or whatever she was doing. As soon as she was excused to leave, Taylor stood and saw herself out.

Lunch was… palatable. For cafeteria food, anyway. More palatable was watching Emma sidle up for an attempt at needling her, only to shrink away when Yuuta, Haru, and a few of their friends chose to almost crowd around Taylor. Answering their questions was well worth the show and companionship. A few rumors had circulated among older siblings and friends, and friends of those friends, and so forth, until the recent meetings Taylor had endured were a topic that simultaneously managed to be very known about, and yet hardly understood. Apparently, gang circles worked in much the same fashion as high school ones. That… Taylor wasn’t sure if that was comforting, or terrible.

“Nope. That… actually happened. Is happening.” Taylor said, politely ignoring several of the students around her breaking out into hushed conversations that she couldn’t understand. “So… yeah. I don’t really have the room or funds for a resort or anything, so I guess I’m building a bath house? Not entirely sure how that’s going to come about, but it’ll probably be fun.”

“An onsen and a shrine in Brockton Bay… goddamn.” Yuuta laughed. “That’ll be a popular part of town if you can happenstance your way into more stuff.”

“Huh? Like what?”

“Pretty sure most of those buildings around there aren’t houses, they’re old shops that got abandoned and robbed an’ sh-- stuff.” Yuuta ran a hand through his hair. “People see the area’s safe, move back in, start up businesses? You’ll get a lot more traffic at the shrine, that’s for sure.”

“Hmm…” Taylor started chewing on her lip. It was supposed to be a Normal Day, but… well, a little bit of Shrine Business was Normal. She reached down for her backpack, rummaged a bit, then pulled out a notebook and a pencil. She started scribbling a bulleted list, getting her thoughts on paper before they could flutter away.

“Eh-- Miko, what’s that?”

“Wanna make a list,” she said as she put down ‘Onsen’ at the first bullet point, “A list of stuff to do for the shrine, and… a few other ideas. C’mon, some of you guys know more about this stuff than I do, help me out here.”

Haru spoke up first. “You should start selling your charms, maybe ema too.” At Yuuta’s questioning look, he explained, “Since you’re talking businesses, I mean… I figured you could use the donations? To, uh… improve… cycle.” He made a circular motion with his hand. One of the other kids behind him snorted and mussed up Haru’s hair.

“Right!” Taylor said, as she added the suggestions. “I get it-- use donations for more improvements and such. Probably buying towels, too… what’s an ema, before I move on?”

“It’s a little wood board you write a wish on. Usually got little painted pictures on them-- all sorts of stuff. You buy a plaque, write the wish you want, then hang it up on something in the shrine.” Yuuta explained. An excuse to paint? Sounded fine to Taylor. After that, suggestions started piling in from...
the Asian students at her and the nearby tables. Things their grandparents had told them about, or parents. Ideas for businesses that might move into the street-- some serious, others not. Even things they’d mostly just seen in cartoons… the less questionable parts, anyway. Taylor’s list filled up well by the end of the lunch period.

When her last period rolled around on the clock, Taylor hurried out the doors of the school to her bike, where Sunny was patiently waiting. She squished the wolf’s face in her hands in greeting (as one does), then loaded up her bike and wheeled it away from the racks and the curb, muttering a quick ‘excuse me’ to a student who was holding their phone up instead of looking where they were going. Then they were off, Taylor chattering about her Normal Day and her List to Sunny, who ran alongside and occasionally barked in approval. Instead of heading to the shrine right away, though, Taylor steered them both back home. She pedaled down the street, then pulled smoothly into her home’s driveway and hopped off the bike.

Old Mrs. Henrick was outside, in a warm sweater and very fluffy-looking slippers, attempting to wrap cloths and tarps over her rose bushes to preserve them from the winter chill. Taylor called out a greeting, then skipped around the fence to go help the old woman finish her task.

“Well, hello there, dear! You’re in high spirits today.”

“Yup!” Taylor agreed. “Things are just… going good, y’know? Weird and difficult sometimes, but good.”

“Can’t speak for the weird, but difficult is good. Anything really worth doing is never easy.”

“Heh-- I’m starting to think I agree.” Not to say that help wasn’t welcome. Old Mrs. Henrick directed Taylor to use the shoebox of little plastic stakes she had to fix the tarps to the ground, since Taylor had an easier time kneeling and standing up again.

“So what’s going so good for you, Taylor?”

“Well… school’s a lot better, I guess. I still get picked on, a little. But it’s nothing like it was. Teachers are getting almost jumpy about bullying and I’ve… made some friends, I think?” She wasn’t sure on exactly where the lines of Gang and Shrine politics were drawn, but Haru and Yuuta sat with her at lunch most days, and Souta always nodded to her if they passed in the halls. And the regard for her that those boys had seemed to be spreading to everyone else they talked to, turning what had been silent disregard into tolerance, and from there creeping towards acceptance.
“Oh, that’s wonderful! George will be tickled pink to hear that.”

“Hey, where is Mr. Henrick, anyway? I haven’t seen him on the swing much lately.”

“Ohohoho!” Old Mrs. Henrick laughed, the gesture making all the lines near her eyes crinkle together. Taylor wondered if she could convince the old woman to sit for a portrait, one of these days. “That old firebrand! Your school really got his hackles up, sweetie. He’s been hounding the new superintendent and yelling at PTA meetings like he was thirty again!”

“Wh-- really? But… how long has he been retired?” Taylor asked, as she followed Old Mrs. Henrick into the house. The smell of fresh cookies was thick in the kitchen, and Taylor left the door open a few seconds longer so Sunny could return from her wanderings and scramble inside. Butterscotch, yessssss.

“Oh, getting close to twenty years now. George stepped down when he was sixty-seven, and that old man’s eighty-three now.” Old Mrs. Henrick poured a couple glasses and a bowl of milk, apparently perfectly fine with Sunny begging at her table. The cookies were still warm, right at that point between ‘too hot’ and ‘not as gooey as it could be.’ Perfection.

“That sounds like a lot of work… I hope he doesn’t wear himself out. He’s supposed to enjoy retirement, you know?”

Old Mrs. Henrick smiled again, and sat down at the kitchen table with Taylor. “That is what he enjoys, sweetie. What you’re supposed to do isn’t always what you should do, and my George has never been the type to rest on his laurels for long.” The old woman’s smile lines crinkled again, and Taylor couldn’t help but grin in response. “It’s good to see him with a fire in his engines again. Just the sight makes me feel more energetic, too!”

“Then, I’m glad. And school has been better, too. Probably not just for me, either.” Taylor munched on a cookie, and spared a glance to watch Sunny lapping at her bowl of milk (she’d already devoured her share of the baked treats, of course). She turned a thought over in her head a few times, then looked back up at Old Mrs. Henrick. “Hey, can I… ask a question? Or maybe for advice?”

“Of course, sweetie, you’re always welcome. What’s on your mind?”

“Well, I-- okay inherited isn’t the right word, but we’ll go with it-- I inherited an old shrine recently, a Shinto one. I’ve been fixing it up and working at it all summer and now fall…” She gave her
neighbor an edited version of her recent lifestyle. The retired couple had known about the cherry trees, but not how many there were, or for what purpose-- she’d promised to tell them more after they caught her moving bags of seeds and soil out of her garage, but had never quite gotten around to it.

“It sounds like you’re having fun, dear.”

“It-- yeah, I am. It is fun. Hard sometimes, really hard, but fun.” Taylor chewed a bit on her lip, getting her thoughts in order. Sunny moved to sit closer by, pressed against her knee, and she rubbed the wolf’s ears as she spoke. “And there’s a bunch more I think I could do, but… well, it kinda occurred to me to wonder how I’ll keep up with it after I graduate. Dad’s been keeping a college fund, and I know it’s what Mom would want…”

Old Mrs. Henrick nodded. “I understand, Taylor. It sounds like you’re having doubts about what you want to do with your life, right?” Taylor nodded, glad for the old woman’s wisdom. “And you’re right, I’m pretty sure your Ma and your Pa both would love to see their little girl walk for her diploma… but a piece of paper isn’t everything.”

Something in Taylor’s chest tightened, right around her lungs. It was an idea that had come to her late at night, right between sleeping and waking-- just a thought. Sunny working over the entire city somehow to get a hot spring was… well, that was definitely a Sunny thing to do, apparently. But the hot spring wasn’t the only thing she’d gotten.

Taylor owned the shrine now, or the land it sat on. She owned a couple of derelict shops. She owned the hot spring-- and while there was only one spring now, somehow she was sure that if she asked, Sunny would be happy to dig holes until she found another one. The shrine was suddenly more than just a space, more than just a hobby:

It was an investment. It was an opportunity.

Taylor had no illusions that it wasn’t going to be hard. But if she could help revitalize the area, get businesses going again-- and rent out the shops she now owned?

Taylor wouldn’t necessarily have to quit. She wouldn’t have to leave the shrine and go on to a career-- the shrine could be her career. Sunny (and Lung) hadn’t given her a hot spring-- she’d given her options.

Taylor took a breath, and said, “I… I think I want to keep at the shrine. Keep working at it, I mean.”
Instead of… I dunno. Being a teacher, or an editor.”

“Well, then you do that, Taylor. Just do be careful, though. I hear the ABB is thick on the ground around those parts.”

It was Taylor’s turn to smile. “Oh, kinda. I’ve seen some around. They don’t really want to bother the shrine, though.” Another thought nudged its way to her awareness, and made Taylor smile wider. “Though, I’ve met even more cool old people, since I’ve been working there.”

“Oh really?”

“Really.” Taylor’s grin was in full force, and Sunny wagged her tail. “Let me tell you about Baachan.”

* * *

Taylor didn’t get to the shrine until the next day, having whiled the afternoon talking with Old Mrs. Henrick and regaling the old matron with stories of her Asian counterparts until she’d had to wipe tears from her eyes. Then Old Mr. Henrick had come home, and wanted to be let in on what was so funny.

Old Mrs. Henrick had been right, by the way-- the old man had puffed up with pride at Taylor’s report about the changing atmosphere of her school. There’d even been time to ask the old man if he could help her with some woodworking. Haru’s explanation of ema plaques had sparked a few ideas of where to put them, and between her sketching and Old Mr. Henrick’s experience, they designed a rough blueprint for what the old pair called a ‘squirrel run.’ It was too small to be a cat run, you see. Taylor didn’t, but the framework, some cords, and a whole bunch of planter hooks made their way onto her List.

When he asked about the box he’d built, and if she enjoyed it, Taylor had nodded and explained about how she and Sunny were collecting beads. Old Mrs. Henrick thought it a lovely idea and had shuffled off to go find her jewelry box. She’d come back with a handful of loose beads, taken from old bracelets and necklaces, and even a few that looked like some of Mr. Henrick’s work. None of them matched, but somehow that made them look even better, cupped in Taylor’s hands. Sunny gave both of the retired pair a nuzzle and slobbery kisses.

Taylor kept the beads wrapped in a handkerchief until she and Sunny got to the shrine, and the wolf led the way into the shrine’s interior. She pushed the top of the wooden box off with her nose, then
pawed at one of the small cubbies until Taylor gently poured the beads inside. The wolf gave a happy sigh and leaned hard against Taylor’s leg until she petted her, then after a moment carefully set the box lid back in its place. Taylor eyed the character above the newly-occupied space, and wracked her brain a bit for what she’d put in her notebooks until she recalled the translation:

Ondori, the Rooster.
Chapter 28

Life in the Dallon household had gotten… a bit odd, lately.

Really, life in Brockton Bay was always unusual, what with the sheer numbers of parahumans creeping around the city. Or at least that was the excuse last month, before the PRT had apparently decided to take off (or maybe put on) the kid’s gloves and declare Shenanigans against the E88. What next month was going to be like was anyone’s guess, and that felt like it was going double for Victoria.

Mom getting a kitten had been a bit of the bolt from the blue, literally just accepting the puffball from a door-to-door kitten peddler, from the sound of it. After the initial burst of ‘what have you done’ and ‘how does kitten work?’ panic, arrangements were made for a cardboard box and a trip to the vet, and life settled back to normal for all of 10 minutes. Then the subject of what to name it came up, and while Victoria won the debate pretty handily, Mom sadly harpooned her idea to get a second kitten to name Sulu, but it had been a longshot anyway.

Thus, Chekov Dallon was born.

His reign began pretty much immediately, and nowhere the kitten’s little jellybean toes touched was left unaffected. Sometimes literally, like when he knocked over the jar of flour on the kitchen counter and proceeded to track tiny paws all over the house, but mostly it was more intangible things.

Intangible things were something Victoria liked to keep track of. They were always the most useful to know.

For example, she could watch Dad today to get a feel for how he’d be tomorrow. If he didn’t look up when she walked by his chair, or couldn’t return her smile, then tomorrow was probably going to be a bad day. Those days, it was unlikely Dad would manage to get out of bed, or if he did it was only to move to the couch and watch TV. But if he could smile with her, and talk for a bit (how was your day? any plans tomorrow? did you see the new episode last night?) then tomorrow would probably be okay, and she could probably goad Dad into patrolling with Uncle Neil.

She could watch to see when Mom got up in the morning. Carol Dallon was never out the door late,
but if she was in the kitchen with some toast and coffee early, then it was a good bet she hadn’t slept well. Victoria would be a chatterbox those days, filling any silences between her mom and her sister, keeping the day moving.

She could watch Ames, though her sister was a little harder to draw out. Amy was just kind of an introvert by nature, and Victoria was so far on the extrovert side of the scale that she sometimes overestimated Amy’s tolerance for sociability. Still, she could watch, and when Ames was getting too wistful Victoria could draw her into a debate over music, or academics, or cape politics, until she’d come back down to earth. Or if Ames was getting too surly, she could tease and prod and just be Hurricane Victoria until Amy laughed, and lightened up again.

And she could watch her classmates, her friends outside of her cape life. She could watch and make sure she spent enough time with Jessica, who was too quiet and tended to drift to the edges of Victoria’s coterie, and make sure that she didn’t spend time with Mike, because Susan was trying to get him to ask her out, and anywhere that Victoria went people turned to her instead, like flowers towards the sun.

Smile, and the world smiles with you.

But Chekov had a gravitational pull of his own, and it seemed like in no time, even Victoria was getting caught in it.

* * *

She’d come downstairs and found Dad in the kitchen, not Mom, and saw the man set a small saucer with a portion of canned food in it onto the floor. After a few moments too many of hesitation, he poured himself a bowl of cereal while Chekov ate.

“Huh. Morning! What’re you doing up so early?”

Mark Dallon made a face, and said, “Cat got me up, wanting to be fed. Carol’s already off to work, so he put his nose right into my ear and just squeaked until I surrendered.”

“Hey, better than the alternative.” Victoria grinned, and fetched a bowl and the milk for herself. “Two days ago he climbed up the side of my bed and patted my face until a claw got hooked in my lip. Now I know how fish feel. Speaking of, we should totally get an aquarium, it’ll be hilarious.”
Her dad made an amused sound, not quite a laugh, but better than a sigh.

* * *

She’d gone upstairs and found Ames on her computer, or more accurately, to the side of her computer. Watching *The Princess Bride* for the hundredth time had quickly taken second place to crouching near her chair, phone held up to snap pictures of Chekov as the kitten declared war upon the Rodents Of Unusual Size.

“That’s the way, soldier. Take no prisoners! Ten-hut!” She set her face into an overly-serious scowl, and saluted. Ames matched her ridiculous frown, and returned the salute. Chekov got startled by his shadow, puffed up, and accidentally walked backwards off the desk.

“Gawd. I can’t tell which of us is the bigger dork right now.”

“It’s definitely you, Ames.”

* * *

She’d gotten both her and Amy home late from Arcadia, having stopped for a quick pickup game of basketball--Victoria didn’t get to play much since she’d Triggered, as flight was an obvious advantage, and Amy said she didn’t mind waiting--and they’d kicked off their shoes in the hallway and gone into the kitchen to find Mom trying to look into the space behind the fridge.

“Oh-- girls, help me look for Chekov. I keep hearing him meow, but I can’t find him anywhere.” Sure enough, a muffled ‘*mew*’ sounded from somewhere in the kitchen, but the kitten was nowhere in sight. Carol Dallon’s voice was calm enough, but a tense frown had taken over her expression. Victoria floated up closer to the ceiling, and started to look around the cupboards. Cats climbed things, didn’t they? Things more dangerous than bedspreads and curtains, anyway.

An increasingly worried search finally ended when Amy pulled open one of the drawers and found the stray kitten curled up on one of the oven mitts. “What are you doing in there, you silly thing?” Carol Dallon sighed. “I swear, it’s like he--”

“Nonononono wait!” Amy interrupted before Mom could pick Chekov up and rescue him from his latest hiding place. Their mother’s expression darkened a tad, but slowly shifted to a more benign
bemusement when Amy pulled out her phone, thumbed to the camera, and took a picture. “Okay, now you can move him.”

“What do you need the picture for?” Mom asked, as she scooped Chekov up and set him on her shoulder. It had quickly been claimed as the kitten’s favorite perch, at least partly because of his tendency to purr and sleepily nurse on the Dallon matriarch’s earlobe. Seriously, how can cats manage to be so weird and remain cute?

“I don’t need it for anything, it’s just fun.” Ames flipped through her phone’s photos, and Victoria watched her mom move slightly closer to look over the girl’s shoulder.

* * *

Director Emily Piggot watched her herd of cats shuffle in and take their seats, the ones with the more sane exploits over the past few months sharing a sort of mixed expression of tension, the one where things are so unbelievable that you want to laugh, but really really shouldn’t. There was a pretty clear divide, one side of the table of heroes having remained relatively free of the M/S quarantine measures, and the other side looking rather hungover. Even Chessman, though Emily was reasonably certain he’d remained sober-- he just looked wrung-out from stress. She couldn’t really blame him for it.

And as much as she wanted to, she couldn’t entirely blame the other three on that side of the table, since their meeting with Brushstroke had the entire Thinker department effectively running in circles. Battery at least earned a slight twinge of pity. Despite her relationship with Assault, the heroine wasn’t a frequent drinker, and if Dragon’s claims about the BAC she’d registered from Armsmaster were any indication, she was probably still feeling wrecked.

It wasn’t enough pity to keep Piggot from turning the lights up bright before the meeting started, but it was there.

“So. Now that everyone has rejoined us… what have we learned?” Piggot steepled her fingers together and looked expectantly at the Party of Shame.

“Several things, actually.” Dragon’s avatar piped up. The Canadian Tinker’s display was on the opposite end of the table from Director Piggot, on a monitor bolted to the conference table. “We’ve managed to get a cohesive theory on Brushstroke and Good Dog’s Master ability, and they’ve been assigned a provisional rating of 3+. From the different encounters with the pair and surveillance of the shrine, Protectorate Thinkers have concluded that they most likely exhibit a Master/Stranger effect in a similar vein to August Prince. Only, instead of preventing hostile action against...
themselves, we’re thinking it’s an area-of-effect relaxation and inclination towards nonviolence.”

“Useful comparison, if uncomfortable.” Triumph muttered, from the sane side of the table.

“More reassuring is that it seems to be localized only-- that is, there aren’t lingering effects once
you’ve stepped out of their radius. PRT M/S teams did some focus testing on areas of The Sidewalk,
and test members showed no impediment to expressions of anger or the occasional sucker-punch.
PRT members had consistent blood panel evaluations pre- and post- test, while the heroes who met
at the shrine had a marked decrease in cortisol levels, which have since returned to more normal
levels.”

“That, at least, is reassuring.” Piggot agreed. “All things said and done, a nonviolence aura is a hell
of a lot better than most Master powers. What else?”

Armsmaster stood up this time, picking up a folder full of papers as he did so. “I’m not sure if I can
call it good news or bad news. Observation indicates that Good Dog is acting wholly independently
of Brushstroke-- facial analysis of Brushstroke indicated genuine surprise and lack of foreknowledge
of Good Dog’s actions in regards to the… geothermal anomaly.”

“You can say ‘hot spring,’ Armsy. It’s okay.” Assault grinned. Battery gave him a weak tap on the
side of the head-- definitely still wrecked. Nearby, Chessman took a harsh breath and held it.
Armsmaster tilted his head once in what was probably a conciliatory nod.

“However, I was able to scan Good Dog three times during the encounter at the shrine, and the
results are promising.” The Tinker opened the folder and passed it over to Director Piggot, who had
to stop and thumb the edges of the pages.

“You scanned it three times, you said?”

“Yes.”

“There are four pages here.”

“I know.”
Piggot stared at Armsmaster for a second, who had yet to sit down, then turned her attention to the printed images. The first looked like a fairly normal MRI scan of a large canine, but the rest…

“This is… the outline of a dog. Where’s the rest of it?” When the Tinker didn’t answer she flipped to the next one. “And this is a *drawing* of a dog!”

“That is correct.”

“It appears to be done in crayon, Armsmaster.”

“That was my conclusion as well.”

Director Piggot skipped staring at Armsmaster and turned to stare at Dragon instead. The digital avatar nodded. “I watched them print out. He reprinted six times, and the results didn’t change.”

“…this city, I swear to God…” Piggot muttered. She flipped to the last page, squinted, then tossed the folder onto the table with a huff. “And that looks like a wall scroll. Are you going anywhere with this, Armsmaster?”

“Yes. It is my conclusion that Good Dog is, indeed, a projection. There is no such creature.” Armsmaster reached for the folder, took it, then set the crayon drawing on top. A few on the sane side of the table leaned in to get a better look-- the drawing depicted a large canine, mostly white, but with red streaks around its body. The lines were a little crude, suggesting a younger or less experienced artist. “Chessman identified this image as one belonging to Taylor Hebert, age 10.”

The minon master nodded, his voice tight-- but if she looked, Piggot thought she could see a bit of relief, as well. Good Dog being a projection meant there wasn’t a predator latched onto his daughter, after all. Excepting the ABB, anyway. “She’s had it pinned to her wall for years now… it implies she animated a drawing, like I do for models. There’s similarities among powers in cape families, it seems reasonable.”

“Well,” Piggot said, “I guess you’ll have something in common you can talk about, then.” Chessman shot her a look of pure betrayal, but she would not be moved. He was usually one of the good ones, but as far as Emily was concerned, Chessman had lost his Sane Table privileges until this situation was resolved.
“Wait wait wait.” Assault held up his hands, forestalling any further discussion. “So let me get this straight… Brushstroke really believes she’s not a parahuman?”

“Facial and vocal analysis supports that claim, yes.” Armsmaster nodded. “She may have disassociated Good Dog out of a subconscious need for companionship. Highly unusual, but there have been a few similar cases of parahumans not having full, conscious control of their powers.”

“So… a crazy-diverse Master/Shaker: Yes triggered either two or, what, seven years ago? And she didn’t notice?” Assault slung one arm over Chessman’s shoulder. “Chessman, I take back all those terrible things I said behind your back. She is truly your daughter.”

Assault and his newly-broken nose lost Sane Table privileges for the rest of the year.

Later, after the meeting was getting cleaned up and Armsmaster had left, grumbling about having to fill out disciplinary reports again, Dauntless raised his hand and asked, “So, uh… whatever happened to Lung?”

* * *

The streets near the old Dockworker’s Union were filled with a throng of red-and-green, the ABB assembled in numbers rarely ever witnessed. Members from all stations were there, from the toughs and the pushers, to the sympathizers, to even the whores. Oil drums had been stuffed with junk and lit, bathing the docks in flickering, anxious light. The firelight gleamed off of Lung’s mask and the scattered scales that twitched and crept around his shoulders.

In this false twilight, he looked huge, untouchable. The only Warlord of Brockton Bay that still stood. He roared, and the ABB yelled, pumped their fists in the air.

“The Empire has been broken! Crushed and driven off like whimpering dogs. The Merchants cringe and scrabble at filth, and the Protectorate watch from their towers with fear in their hearts!” Lung bellowed. “And they should be afraid! Their hold here is weak, and ours is strong! And we grow ever stronger!

“This is a new day!

“This is the start of a new reign of the ABB! The bigots, the drugmongers— they will know who this
city belongs to, and it is not them!

“I am Lung!” He roared, pacing before the crowd in a suspiciously uneven line. “I am the dragon!”

Lung swept one arm wide, to encompass the full breadth of the crowd.

“And you are now UNION.”
Taylor and Old Mr. Henrick got her latest project assembled as quickly as Taylor could supply the parts, which amounted to as quickly as she could bring herself to Brockton Central Bank to check out the new account the PRT had given her. True to their word, there was just shy of three-hundred fifty thousand there, with her and Sunny’s name on it. Cape names. That was going to take some getting used to.

She supposed she probably should have been more worried about that, really. Capes tended to get into all sorts of trouble, if the Wards pamphlet the Protectorate had left her was any indication. Roughly a six month average for an independent hero or vigilante to get picked up by a gang… though, it seemed like there were a few caveats implied there. Mainly that most teenage parahumans seemed to make a lot of really, really silly decisions, like sneaking out at night to go punch armed criminals. Taylor found that inviting them for tea seemed much more effective and pleasant for everyone involved, so that took care of that. So she wasn’t putting herself in harm’s way, and she wasn’t really making any enemies-- oh, except maybe E88. The thought of any of their remaining capes seeking revenge on Sunny was a sobering thought.

Apparently catching sight of her expression, Sunny leaned closer to Taylor and ducked her furry head under Taylor’s hand. Taylor smiled on reflex and rubbed one of the wolf’s ears. “Sorry-- just thinking. Aren’t you worried the Empire might be… a bit angry at you?”

To her credit, Sunny tilted her head for a few moments to think about it, before sneezing. “I guess I shouldn’t be surprised… though I don’t know if you’re thinking they won’t do anything, or if you’re just not worried about it if they do.” Sunny’s tongue lolled in a grin. “Yeah, I figured it was probably the latter.”

The prospect of cape retaliation should have worried Taylor more, but… well, it mostly just didn’t. The ABB didn’t seem to have any ill-intent towards her, the Merchants were on the other side of the city practically, and Sunny had held her own against the Empire-- and Taylor had checked to make sure the E88 didn’t have any speedy capes. She’d cautioned the wolf once already, in no uncertain terms, that she’d prefer Sunny run than get into a real fight. The canine had the audacity to roll her eyes at Taylor, but had nodded. And as for herself?

Taylor had Sunny. The wolf hardly ever left her sight, unless she was already somewhere safe, like
home or school or the shrine. It was a big change from her usual comings-and-goings, from earlier in
the year. And even when Taylor couldn’t see Sunny, she had a feeling that the wolf was still keeping
an eye on her, or an ear to the ground. She’d stuck to Taylor like a big, furry burr ever since autumn
had started—ever since Lung had hit her.

Sunny didn’t exactly speak, but she had ways of making herself understood, and the change had
been obvious enough to Taylor: Sunny wasn’t going to let there be a second time. For Taylor, that
assurance was enough.

So, awkward or not, Taylor had gone to the bank in her red skirt and painter’s mask, and withdrawn
a tidy sum to get things started. On Oni Lee’s less-than-subtle recommendation, she was getting a
phone line installed, but after seeing how much the PRT had given her and Sunny, she might just
upgrade to an internet connection as well. There were probably packages for that—she’d ask the
serviceman when he showed up later. A computer logically followed, as well as a space heater or
two, so Taylor picked up the week’s ads and added them to her day’s itinerary. Other than that, it
was money to get some thin wood boards and supplies, and a sum of about $350 stuffed into an
envelope for Taylor to stare at uncomfortably whenever it crossed her field of view.

It was thankfully not in view, safe in Taylor’s backpack as she wheeled her bike down the pawprint
sidewalk towards the shrine, the worked wooden boards strapped to the side of the vehicle like a
parody of a jousting lance. The urge to simply leave the envelope on Dad’s desk with a note had
been tremendous.

Dad--

*Sorry my dog used your credit card, here is the money I owe you. Love, Taylor.*

*P.S: You should probably turn off one-click ordering.*

*P.P.S: Also, sorry about having to keep erasing your browser history.*

*P.P.P.S: Also also, thanks for the meatloaf.*

Right. The meatloaf.

Finding home-made offerings on the steps of the haiden was nothing unusual. The Baachans had of
course determined almost immediately that the way to Sunny’s heart was through her stomach, but
other members of the community would bring by edible offerings more often than monetary ones. If
she were being honest, Taylor kind of preferred it that way. Money and small items just seemed more
formal somehow, and for something that started out as a summer project and then a hobby, there was an implied sense of obligation in there somewhere that Taylor wasn’t quite sure what to do about. That, and… well, a lot of people in Brockton Bay didn’t have a whole lot of extra money to throw around.

So, finding a glass loaf dish on the steps wasn’t really out of the ordinary. Taylor had even put a basket next to the steps, for the tupperware containers and assorted dishes to be reclaimed after they’d been emptied and washed. But when Sunny had gone over to examine the day’s loot, a few weeks ago, she’d sat down in front of the steps and waited until Taylor had come over to investigate her hesitancy. The wolf had sniffed at the meal, cocked her head, and started a slow, careful wag of her tail.

It was far from a gourmet dish. Meatloaf is a pretty common fare, but this one had been a tweaked recipe. Diced green peppers were baked in with the meat, and a stick of pepperjack cheese had been added, the mixture wrapped around the addition to form a molten core. It added a lot of extra moisture and oil, and you had to be careful to balance it with oatmeal to give the meatloaf even half a chance of not crumbling apart the second you cut into it. Mom had been well-practiced at finding this exact balance. Dad had always forgotten, and it had been a common point to tease him on, years ago.

Taylor had taken the dish into the office, warmed it in the microwave, and watched it fall apart around a testing fork.

They’d shared it, her and Sunny, though the dynamic had been turned upon its head. Usually, Sunny took the shrine’s offerings, and shared some with Taylor if she was hungry (which she wasn’t… entirely sure if was allowed? But food was meant to be eaten, so…). This time, Sunny had waited to receive a portion, and refused to touch the rest of the dish. This offering had not been for the shrine, but for Taylor.

It was… good. There’s a difference in food that’s prepared for someone, as opposed to food from a cafeteria, or a restaurant: one is merely nutrition. There’d been a few other things left for Taylor, over time, though nothing as obvious as Mom’s own recipe. Sunny always picked them out.

She should have said something by now, she really should have, but… well, it represented a bit of a dilemma, once Taylor got some time to really sit and think about it.

Dad knew about the shrine. That much was clear, and he had to know enough about the shrine and her own habits to know that leaving the meatloaf would actually pan out. So not only did he know, but it was quite likely that he knew that she knew that he knew. So they both knew that the other knew, but neither of them had said anything. Taylor had briefly wondered if he was keeping quiet because she hadn’t apologized about the credit card thing yet, but that wasn’t quite in character for Danny Hebert. For all that he had a rather explosive temper, he wasn’t the type to hold a grudge.
rather than work things out immediately. She remembered hearing Kurt and Lacy joke a few times about Danny Hebert’s strong right hook, but that sounded far-fetched.

So if he wasn’t waiting for an apology, that left two options: that he didn’t want to be the first to say anything, probably out of some desire to let her have her ‘space,’ or that he couldn’t say anything. Dad worked for the PRT-- in hiring, sure, but still. He worked for heroic law enforcement, and Taylor regularly hosted Oni Lee for tea. Acknowledging what she was doing might actually get him in real trouble.

Hm. Of course, now that she was registered as a rogue and had a designated neutral territory… that might change things. She’d have to find someone who knew more to talk this over with. In the meantime, Taylor mused, maybe there was something she could leave him in unofficial reciprocation? A new model, maybe. She’d have to give it some thought.

Sunny let her lose herself in thought until they reached the shrine, then barked to get her attention. About time, too; city buses had bike racks, so that shortened the trip a bit, but it was still a long walk with a heavy load. Sunny ran ahead to check on her hot spring’s source, while Taylor wheeled her bike in and set the kickstand, then unloaded the day’s work from it. Old Mr. Henrick had really done a nice job. They’d put together a series of narrow boards with a deep groove, and sanded all the edges smooth before coating everything with a homemade wash: taking the idea from what she’d learned about painting Dad’s models, they’d mixed together some leftover red paint and a can of wood stain, creating a deep cherry hue that was going to look lovely against the old oak tree.

From what she’d read, there was a type of oak tree in Japan that was associated with Shinto shrines, but it was an evergreen tree, unlike the types in the Americas. Still, it made her wonder if the tree was what had prompted the shrine to be built here, rather than anywhere else in the city. It was an old tree, very large and thick, and far enough from the power lines that it had escaped yearly pruning. A large white rope was circled around the trunk and knotted, and one of the tasks Sunny had set her to near the start of summer was replacing the paper shide tags that adorned it. Right now, the tags looked intact still, so Taylor carefully set a stepladder against the trunk, then grabbed one of the boards and a few thin rope cords. Putting nails in the old tree was completely out of the question, so instead ropes were threaded through the thin boards and around branches, and as Taylor worked, a loose framework of lightly swaying boards took shape around the tree, hanging from the lower reaches and just within arm’s reach from the ground.

Sunny returned as she was setting the last boards in place, and Taylor grinned over her shoulder at the wolf. “So, how’s it look?”

Sunny barked, and wagged her tail in approval. The boards had all been lined with planter hooks along the undersides, for ema to be hung upon them once she had some ready. Nobody had said the plaques had to be hung on a bulletin board, after all. Taylor packed up the stepladder, then retrieved her new signpost from the office, and worked to hammer the post into the ground a few meters away.
Soon she’d put together a box of painted ema plaques and a donations tin for them, but for now she’d gotten some scrap wood from the Winslow shop class and passed it around at lunch, to get the translations right. Under a careful, simple line sketch of the oak, the words ‘Wishing Tree’ were written, in English, Japanese, Korean, and one type of Chinese… though Taylor couldn’t remember if it was Cantonese or Mandarin.

Taylor paused to pet Sunny and eye the completed work. It really was a lovely tree, even with its leaves already falling and carpeting the ground in red and gold. “I’m gonna paint that for my final project in class, you know.” She told the wolf, who looked up at her. “We’re doing still-life next month. I’m going to wait for the leaves to finish up, so I can see the branches better. Then I’m going to divide the crown in four, and paint the leaves from every season. I hope it’s got a lot of wishes by then.” Sunny smiled, and thumped her tail on the ground in approval.

“It’s a little bare now, but… oh! I know!” Taylor turned and marched back towards the haiden, Sunny close on her heels, curious. She located the strings of beads donated from the shrine’s visitors—not the ones in Sunny’s box, of course. She’d originally hung them in short cords near the steps, but now there was a much better place for them. Taylor unhooked the strings and carried them back to the Wishing Tree, and carefully hung a few short clusters near the ends of a couple of the long boards. Then she stepped back, to observe.

A breeze passed by, sending the hanging boards into gentle rocking motions, and making the clusters of beads click and clack together, producing a cheerful sound. Sunny sat down next to Taylor again, and the girl knelt down to pull the wolf into a hug. She wondered what the tree would look like by next summer, laden with hopes, a full year since Taylor and Sunny had come to the shrine.

“Yeah,” Taylor said, and rubbed at Sunny’s ears. “It’s perfect.”
It started out simply enough.

Taylor had gone over her To-Do list a few times, tweaking suggestions here and re-ordering things there, until she had a rough plan for what she wanted to accomplish first, and what she might need to do it. She’d put the Wishing Tree at the top of the list for a few reasons, some of them practical. As much as she felt a bit awkward about it still, the ema plaques were a potential source of income for the shrine’s upkeep, though she intended to just have a donations box rather than a set price; not only did it alleviate the phantom guilt of asking people for money, but it meant that people could come and get wishes written when she wasn’t there to oversee.

After she’d gotten her thoughts down on paper, Taylor had needed to stop for a while and just process things. She was, after all, intending to use the honor system in Brockton Bay of all places… and she was actually feeling assured that it would be fine. She had to hug Sunny for a while, just to feel grounded.

After that, it was just a matter of acquiring the plaques themselves, and Taylor found a promising lead on that almost immediately: when she mused aloud about it over her list, one of the other kids at the lunch table had suggested the Shop class. There was always scrap wood kept for student projects, and while it was kind of unlikely Winslow would just let her have it, any home improvement store that sold lumber would have scrap of its own that she could get cheaply, and then the shop class students could cut them for a modest bribe of baked goods. No telling how long it would be before the school staff figured out that the table saws weren’t being used for school projects, but it was a good first start. She even had an idea for a sort of… well, ‘opening ceremony’ sounded too formal, but a kind of welcome for the Tree. Halloween was coming up, and a lot of the baachans had grandchildren, and the thought of a combination pumpkin carving and paint-your-own-ema event sounded fun.

So, with the Wishing Tree mostly accounted for, the next item on her list was to do a proper survey of her new properties.

The Shrine she had mostly explored already, though as it turned out the actual property line extended back a ways from the fence at the rear of the honden. Not by a large amount, maybe eight feet, but even that was enough space for a host of possibilities. It was something to save for next spring, but
Taylor confessed to thoughts of maybe moving the Tea Ceremony arrangements there for a more permanent placement, or even just clearing the space for a garden. A couple of stone benches, and maybe a small fountain if she could wrangle one-- with Old Mrs. Henrick’s teachings making plant maintenance much easier, she could easily imagine creating a quiet, natural space in which to paint, or read. Sunny wagged her tail in approval, then leaned hard against Taylor’s legs until the girl lost her balance and took a tumble into a drift of leaves. The subsequent Leaf Fight delayed progress for a while, but it was worth the laughter.

The two properties to the right of the shrine were next, and while Taylor made a mental note to cover up the cheerful graffiti she’d spread around (or, maybe just make a proper mural, if she got to feeling ambitious one of these days), the buildings themselves didn’t seem to be nearly as damaged as she’d feared. Sure, the insides were filthy with both mundane dirt and evidence of uncaring occupation, but cleaning and re-varnishing the floors were simple enough things in execution that Taylor was pretty sure she could handle it. Real repairs were what she’d been worried about, since that would pose a need to hire skilled workers, and a few internet searches had taught her quickly enough that she was going to have to stretch the bounty money pretty far if she wanted to build something from the ground up. An electrician and a plumber to check the utilities were a given, but not needing roofers on top of that was a godsend.

And the utilities in these buildings were… kind of odd, Taylor realized, as she wandered through the rooms. The building closest to the shrine had one room filled with stripped pipes and hookups for water and gas, and it took her a while to figure out what the room would need so many appliances for. It had likely been a kitchen at one point in time, though there wasn’t much open space at the front for tables and chairs. A cafe, then, or something similar.

“Well, that’s promising.” She told Sunny. “Yuuta said we could maybe rent these places out, but if we could invest in a business and… co-sponsor, or whatever it’s called, that’d be even better.”

Sunny made a speculative sound, but her wagging tail betrayed her excitement. A cafe or restaurant meant food, after all, and Taylor had no doubts about Sunny’s ability to beg.

They left their appraisal of the buildings on the right, and moseyed over to the left of the shrine, where Sunny had dug for the hot spring. These two had more structural damage, but it mattered less since she was going to have to hire people to dig up the foundations anyway. It might even be an advantage, since it meant fewer walls to tear down or build up as needed. Taylor took a detour back to the shrine’s office to find a sketchbook, and on the way back out, noticed Oni Lee approaching the torii. Sunny barked at the assassin, and Taylor waved, because apparently that was just her life now. The ABB cape changed course, after a mild hesitation, and gave Sunny a quick pet.

“Good afternoon, Oni Lee. You caught me working, but if you’d like some tea I can put the kettle on real quick.”
“I would not wish to interrupt you, Miko.” She took that to mean he was willing to wait, since he seemed as reluctant as anyone else to enter the office without her there. He surprised her, though, by following-up with a question. “What are you working on?”

“Oh, Sunny and I’ve been looking over the buildings Lung gave us. Wanted to see what we’d be working with. I’m about done, though, just wanted to get a rough floorplan for the onsen.”

“...you are making a bath house?” He asked, and after a moment turned to follow her back to the abandoned foundations.

“Mhm. I mean really, what else do you do with a hot spring?” Taylor put her pencil to paper and started drawing boxes. She could get exact measurements later, when she or more likely Sunny managed to scrounge up a tape measure. “There’s a lot of details I don’t know yet, but I had some thoughts and ideas…”

Come to think of it, there was something she could get his opinion on. She could get second opinions later, to judge the idea’s practicality, but for now Oni Lee’s blunt honesty could let her know if it was ridiculous. “Uh-- hey, so… when I looked up bath houses, they’re usually split in two, right?” At his nod, she continued. “I was kind of thinking… maybe I could have a half-size third pool, as well. For capes.”

He didn’t dismiss it immediately, which was a good sign. Instead, he asked, “What is your reasoning?”

Taylor made a vague gesture with one hand, and tried to find the best way to articulate this. “Well-- as surreal as that whole thing was, with the Protectorate and Lung and all, and I’ll probably be having nightmares for years to come-- it was also kinda neat? I mean, the neighborhood is still standing, and nobody got set on fire, even a little bit.” These were her standards now, a part of her brain slowly realized. “And I thought that… if the capes were going to help keep neutrality for the shrine, they should get to enjoy that neutrality too, right? So… hot spring. For people with masks on.”

* * *

“She wants to build what?” Lung asked, glancing over his shoulder at his second in command. Oni Lee just nodded, rather than repeat himself, as the assassin continued his regular gear check. He tightened, repaired, or sharpened as needed with practiced efficiency. Lung sighed, and reached a
hand under his mask to rub at his eyes. He longed for the days without headaches. An onsen alone was both ambitious and laden with significance, but to mention a cape section specifically? It had overtones of a conciliatory gesture, an expression of gratitude towards the city’s parahumans-- and by extension, himself. But there was more to this, he was certain of it.

“What else did she say?”

“The Miko expressed hopes that with physical restoration of the nearby buildings, new businesses would come and settle there, and make the area populated and thriving again. She made specific mention of curiosity regarding the legal necessities for open-air stalls.”

“Ah-ha…” Lung breathed. The Miko’s intentions quickly fell into place.

A resort or hotel would have benefited the Miko cape specifically, but instead she turns her attention towards a wider scope. One of the few remaining draws of this city to outsiders was spectacle, the city’s large number of parahumans attracting the attention of gawkers and opportunists. The Ōkami had pared that down quite a bit, but a bathhouse that provided a place for, and encouraged parahumans--local and otherwise--to gather in a public space? Couple that with a varied market and the sheer novelty of a hot spring…

“She intends a second Lord’s Market.” Lung said, still following the threads of thought and consequence. “A subtle request for the ABB to assist with moving in new businesses, and in return, we profit from the legitimized security needs, the investments themselves, and the tourists.” Tourists always hungered for decadence, and not only from food or luxury. Drugs and sex were in high demand from travelers, and a few front stores could provide for them, with the added bonus of a reputation automatically higher than the suppliers of the Merchants. Pleasant and relatively safe experiences brought return customers.

And it would be safe, if he followed the example of the Lord’s Market. The ABB could form a private security detail, and any who thieved in the new market would be effectively stealing from Lung, a prospect only the most foolish would ever consider. The rumors of safety and opportunity would then draw more merchants, who would also need the ABB’s services. As long as he kept to the Miko’s stipulations of a paper trail, and his subjects organized to enjoy the benefits of his beneficence, then the return on his investments would be manifold.

Lung sighed, fished out a cigarette, and lit it. “Lee. Arrange a meeting of the lieutenants, and tell them to take a census of their men. I want them listed by trade skills, and by holdings. We will keep a defensive line against the Empire’s peasants, but I want the most useful of ours ready to be reassigned.”
Oni Lee sheathed the knife he’d been honing, and bowed. His ashes drifted to the floor a moment later.

Lung rubbed at his eyes again, and ran a few sums in his head. He’d held intentions of delaying things a bit, start a slow reorganization of his forces but focus on claiming new territory and assets from the remains of the Empire; reducing his protection racket and similar enterprises would have to be balanced somehow, after all. But the miko cape’s carefully-implied plans… Lung considered his usual profits from guns and drugs and women, and compared them to the take from unofficially owning at least part of the most lucrative area in the city. The difference was… substantial.

*God dammit.* He was never getting away from the Ōkami.
It was easy, living on a train. It wasn’t expensive to get a ticket, and it could take you so far, as far as you could want. You didn’t even have to pay attention to where you were going. The train would take you wherever its rails led. The constant motion of the cars thundering along became a soothing white noise, after you were there for a while, to the point that you only looked up and looked around when there was a bump in the tracks.

It was never lonely, living on a train. Other passengers were always in arm’s reach, you were never alone if you needed something, or just wanted someone to talk to. Someone who would look to your face, and smile at you, and shake your hand. Someone where it didn’t even matter if you knew their name or they yours, because you were both passengers on the same train, all of you in this ride together.

It was terrible, living on a train, once you’d gone past the Staff Only door and peeked into the engine car. Once you’d seen the coal-fired furnace leer at you with its bars like teeth, once you’d looked out the window--not out but down--and watched the wheels growing warped from the heat. Once you’d taken the Engineer’s cold hand in yours and said, “I do.”

Kayden had lived on this train almost her entire life.

In her apartment, Kayden came home from work and cooked a simple meal from boxes while Theo watched TV. They had dinner with empty conversation, Kayden too distracted to want to engage. She had one ear tuned to listen for Aster’s cries, and the other for the clattering rumble of quickly-roughening tracks. Theo did the dishes while she fed her baby, and later pulled out some of her decorating magazines and flipped through them. She waited for a commercial to look up and ask, her voice wistful and airy and joking, and without a drop of humor: “Hey, Theo-- if you could live anywhere, where would it be?”

The fat boy looked away from the comforting white noise of the screen, and considered. “I think it’d be nice to live somewhere warmer.”

“Mm. That does sound nice.” She agreed. After a moment, she added carefully, “Maybe we could
take a trip soon. See a beach maybe.” Theo turned again to stare at her, his eyes wary and assessing. “Would you want to go with me?”

He nodded, once. “If you can get time off of work, I guess.”

“I’ll look into it.”

Max Anders had lost control of his engine, and the wheels were tilting off the tracks. Kayden wasn’t sure what would finally end this ride, but it was going to be so, so bad. The wreck was looming closer, the Empire shuddering itself to pieces, but Max would only keep grasping for new passengers, for new parahumans. Any close enough for him to reach, he would. And Kayden had heard the rumors about second-gen capes.

Or third.

Her entire life was in these cars. All her friends were here, even her family. She couldn’t even remember what it must have been like, to not be bound to these rails. The thought terrified her. But she didn’t need to do this for her.

She was getting Aster off of this train.

* * *

It was Thursday, and Taylor was playing her flute.

She’d been productive already, going straight from school to the art supply store, because after carefully consideration she’d decided that yes, paints used for the emas counted as shrine supplies. So she finally had something for the donations box to go towards. She hadn’t broken into them yet, but already Taylor was anticipating it. Some brief research had shown her a myriad of things that typically went on the plaques, from flowers to short poems to… sumo wrestlers. But more commonly, the current year’s zodiac beast was a popular choice.
This was 2010, the Year of the Tiger. She was looking forward to drawing many stripey cats.

Taylor played a few more songs, restarting once when she messed up, while Sunny lay nearby and watched with adoring attention. The wolf never missed a practice, a fact that made Taylor feel light in her chest without fail. When she finished up, she closed her music book, and took it and the stand back to the office with her. Sunny stood and trotted over towards the shrine’s steps, then quickly turned around three times before settling down atop them. Taylor returned with her flute case and cleaning kit, and sat down on the steps near her friend. An instrument only lasted if you took care of it, and Taylor intended to play this one for the rest of her life.

“You know… I guess I’ve got the money to get this thing professionally tuned and looked over, huh Sunshine?” Sunny cocked her head, then shrugged. Taylor still wasn’t sure how. “What d’ya mean ‘maybe?’ It should be done every six months or so-- or, no. Um.” Sunny wagged her tail in patient encouragement. “Oh, you-- you think Dad would pay for it, if I asked?” Sunny’s tail wagged harder.

“Man… I dunno, Sunny. I mean, I still have to pay him back from when you bought those trees.” The ‘leave the money behind with the note’ option looked better every day. And putting it off wasn’t exactly helping… maybe she could put it into a tiny jack-o-lantern, so it felt more like a surprise gift instead of an admission of guilt? Trick-or-Treat, indeed. “B besides! You know he gets all sad when he hears Mom’s flute. I don’t really want to make things harder for him.”

Sunny’s expression turned flat and disapproving, Taylor’s flimsy excuse no defense against it. Sunny always knew a lie when she heard it. Because even though Taylor did feel guilty about the money, and she did feel guilty about playing the flute where Dad could hear… She swallowed. “I kinda… don’t want him to, Sunny. I don’t want him to have anything to do with Mom’s flute. It’s like-- like he put all her things in the basement, you know? So, he doesn’t deserve to touch Mom’s flute, not if he’d rather bury it to make himself feel better.” She swallowed again, hard around the lump in her throat. It was maybe irrational, but-- “Does… does that make me a bad person, Sunny?”

The wolf immediately sneezed, then blinked and quickly licked Taylor’s face clean of the snot. “Eheh… thanks, Sunny. Maybe-- maybe I’ll ask him next time, y’know? But for right now I’d rather take care of it.” Her friend made a chrrrr-ing sound, and leaned up against Taylor, half-burying the girl in her soft fur. Taylor sighed, feeling relief spread with the warmth, then rubbed at Sunny’s ears and pushed the wolf off of her. “Hey-- go get your brush for me while I finish this up?” Bark!

Taylor disassembled the flute and wiped down the parts with a soft cloth, while Sunny quickly returned with the large dog brush held in her teeth. The wolf waited patiently for Taylor to finish her task and put the flute away. When she had, Taylor gestured, and Sunny bounded back up the steps and just draped herself over the girl like a giant rug. Taylor snorted a laugh, then pried the brush away from Sunny and set to work. A half hour later she was still brushing, partly because grooming Sunny meant being there for the long haul, but also because it was a cool, breezy day, and it felt like a good day to spend in quiet peace with her friend. She could be productive and start cleaning out the
As evening started up—which was happening sooner and sooner, these days—Yuuta tromped up the path under the torii, his surly expression and wrapped gift of mochi suggesting that he had, once again, gotten sent out by Baachan for an errand at the last minute. Taylor waved as he approached. He waved back, and lightly tossed the bundle of rice cakes onto the shrine steps behind where Sunny lay. The wolf thumped her tail on the wood in approval.

“Hey, Miko. What’s up?”

“Mm, nothing much today. Busy tomorrow, though— you know I finished looking through the buildings Lung gave me?” Yuuta tended to give her a flat stare for a second or two, whenever she mentioned the gang leader. “Well, I think they used to be restaurants! Or something similar. I’m gonna get them cleaned up and fixed up. I remember you saying that I could rent them out, and I think it’s a good idea.”

“Huh! Well that’s pretty cool.”

“Mhm.” Taylor kept running the brush through Sunny’s fur, and the canine sighed in contentment. “Oh-- I did want to ask you something. Or… well, I know you don’t like being the messenger, but I wanted to ask your Baachan something.” Yuuta rolled his eyes, but made a ‘go on’ gesture. Taylor grinned, and shared her idea of a Halloween slash Wishing Tree party, which the other teen admitted sounded kinda fun. There weren’t exactly a lot of houses nearby, so it was probably a good idea for an afternoon event, before any Trick-or-Treat routes got started. Besides-- Old Mrs. Henrick had promised to show her how to make popcorn balls, so that was a bonus for anyone who decided to show up.

Though, that did remind her of something. “Hey, Yuuta?”

“Yeah?”

“I looked, but I didn’t find anything-- or maybe I wasn’t looking in the right place. Does Japan have a Hallow’s Eve type thing? I asked Haru, he didn’t have a clue.”

“Uh…” Yuuta shrugged, after a moment. “I don’t know? What’s the difference between Halloween an’ Hallow Eve?”
“Older name, closer to the roots. It came from Samhain, a Celtic festival. A couple of things merged together, really… um, All Saint’s Day is the first of November, and that’s when ghosts of family members are supposed to come around.”

“Oh-- uh, Baachan does something like that? The um…” Yuuta snapped his fingers a few times. “Lantern Festival, right. That’s back in August, though. Do you just… study holidays, Miko?”

Taylor laughed. “I guess I do now. But, a lot of this comes from my mom. She was an English professor, and she did her Master’s on folklore. So I got a lot of fairy tales growing up. Real fairy tales, not the Disney versions.”

“There’s a difference?”

“Oh man, yes. Disney is clouds and cotton candy by comparison, everything’s got a happy ending. A lot of fairy tales go back to either Gaelic tradition, or Germany, and neither pulled punches. The Little Mermaid melted into sea foam, Cinderella’s sisters had their eyes eaten by crows, Red Riding Hood got tricked into cannibalism…” Taylor noticed Yuuta starting to look a little… disturbed. She flushed, and decided to dial the enthusiasm back a bit. “Uh-- so yeah! Samhain was a spooky tradition even way back when. That and Beltane-- um, on the other side of the year. Fall and Spring equinox, basically. Since they’re right when the year is balanced between day hours and night hours, it was supposed to mean any barriers to the spirit world got thin, and all sorts of fairies and monsters started popping out.”

In her lap, Sunny stopped smiling, and her tail ceased it’s slow contented motion. The wolf lifted her head to stare at Taylor.

“Oh. Is that why everyone dresses like vampires?”

“Yeah basically… uh, Sunny?” The wolf turned wide eyes on the evening sky, then back to Taylor. Abruptly, Sunny scrambled down from Taylor’s lap and charged towards the office, shoving open the door and disappearing inside. A few seconds later, she scrambled back out, this time dragging Taylor’s backpack with her. She dumped the satchel next to Taylor’s feet, then dashed away again.

“Sunny, what.”

The wolf came back, this time with one of Taylor’s calligraphy books in her teeth, the one with all the charms and paper slips. She shoved the volume into Taylor’s lap, then turned her attention to the
backpack. A quick grip of the zipper in her teeth and she had it open, and was rummaging inside.

“Sunny, stop.”

A sharp gust of wind pushed the book open and flipped pages, until the tome was open to one of the advanced designs, with all the swirls and twining spirals. Sunny pulled Taylor’s pack of brushes out of her bag and tossed it into her lap, then did the same more carefully with one of her ink pots. She immediately shoved her furry head back in the bag for the paper.

Yuuta stared at the wolf’s frantic activity, then down at the page with the exorcism slip. He considered the Miko’s plight for all of half a second, and made a judgement call.

“I’m just-- I’m just gonna go. See you in school, Miko.”
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

Note: Chapter 32 was revised and re-posted. This version is much longer and better overall.

Director Emily Piggot’s day was going about as usual, sitting at her desk and spitting in the eye of God as he threatened her with carpal tunnel. She was going over the Protectorate forces and available Wards schedules, jotting notes for adjustments here and there, which she was sure Armsmaster would just love her interference on. Doing it herself was a hell of a lot simpler than trying to pry the Tinker away from his lab to coordinate with, though, since she also needed to account for PRT patrols. Halloween was just about here, and while most holidays saw a slight uptick in crime (at least in the Bay), the October sendoff always brought out the kooks. Usually she just increased PRT ground forces for the evening, and let the BBPD handle the rest of the mischief and petty crime that occurred, but after all the major reshuffling of power in this city in the recent past, Piggot wanted to take no chances.

For the first time in memory, heroes and villains were finally on more even footing, as long as you accounted for quality over sheer quantity. The Merchants still had their full roster, but apart from their leader Skidmark the gang lacked ambition. The biggest problem with combating the Merchants wasn’t the gang’s capes, but the sheer resilient infestation of its ideology, such as it was. Cracking down on the drug trade and sheer nihilism they peddled would take more than the PRT’s current war of attrition with them, but at least it wasn’t as costly an effort as dealing with the city’s other threats.

Faultline’s crew were mercenaries, and wouldn’t enter into the city’s power struggles until someone paid them-- Piggot had, in the past, given serious consideration to buying them off, bribing the group to stay out of local affairs altogether. It was too expensive to justify to the budget, but at least Faultline was a ‘maybe’ threat rather than a certain one. Hell, with the city’s cape scene changing, maybe they’d pack up on their own and leave. And as long as she was wishing, she’d like a new kidney and a bottle of Jack.

The E88 had been gutted by Good Dog and was hemorrhaging nonpowered recruits, but they’d been the largest villain force in the city before, and they still had enough capes on their roster to match the Protectorate-- and Kaiser had a history of calling in more if needed. It was only a matter of time before the Nazi metal-shaper made a bid to restore face, but Piggot intended to be ready, and the rest of the local heroes were gearing up for the inevitable. The main problem was that, excepting Hookwolf, the Empire still had its hardest and most dangerous capes. Purity was still out and about, though her activity had decreased a bit, but Night and Fog were unaccounted for, and those two were not capes you wanted to lose track of.

The rest of the city’s cape population was mostly in the minor villains and a few independents, few
of which were truly noteworthy. The Undersiders were a new group that had formed, but among them only Hellhound was known to be violent, though there were suspicions about their master cape, Regent. The small group knew its own strengths and stuck to hit-and-run thievery, which put them pretty low down on Piggot’s priority target list. Coil was hiding under a rock, as usual, and the Protectorate had a few Thinkers dedicated to sussing out the white-collar crimes attributed to the snake villain. Uber and Leet remained annoyances. That left only the ABB, and the Asian conglomerate had gotten a bit weird lately, to say the least. From the looks of it, the gang was slowly being drawn into Brushstroke and Good Dog’s orbit. The Thinkers could murmur and wring their hands all they goddamn pleased, Piggot was completely fine with that turn of events. Having one of the most dangerous capes on the East Coast fall into a cult based around a pacifist wasn’t anything she’d seen coming, but she’d take it.

That actually led into her second project for the day. Piggot double-checked her work, saved it, then brought up the more regular schedule that the Protectorate heroes adhered to. A synthesized tone and a glowing icon popped up before she could get anything substantial done. Director Piggot glanced at it and frowned, then double-clicked. A video application appeared on the second monitor next to her.

“Good morning, Director Piggot.” Dragon’s digital avatar greeted her. “Am I interrupting anything?”

“Nothing I can’t talk while doing. You’re usually on the Guild’s channel, not a low-priority one. What do you want?”

“A low-priority conversation, though I am sending you a priority mail that you should be getting right about...now.” Piggot’s email icon flashed red, on her work screen. “I figured it would be easier to go over in person, if you like, but I didn’t want to use an official channel for a different topic I’d like to discuss.”

Considerate of her, if unusual. “What’s the priority, then?”

“I’ve been collating data from satellite and weather drones, as well as some ground-level instruments I had Armsmaster put up around the city, to keep an eye on Brockton Bay’s atmospheric conditions after the lightning incident. I’ve forwarded the data to Protectorate Thinkers, but the short version is that the weather disturbances never stopped. In fact, they probably started earlier than we knew.”

Piggot closed her scheduling spreadsheet, and gave the Tinker her full attention. The ‘lightning incident,’ as Dragon put it, was one of the main reasons Thinkers were hemming and hawing about Brushstroke’s presence in the city. The cape ‘duo’ of Brushstroke and Good Dog were the only suspects for the unexplained phenomenon, which was an unsettling thought even with their apparent neutrality. The other option was another new trigger, and that was somehow worse. “Explain.”

“I suspect it started months ago, but it’s only become obvious now that we’re so late in the year. You’ve noticed how unseasonably warm it’s been, I’m sure? According to my data, Brockton Bay is somehow receiving more sunlight than it should.”

Piggot furrowed her brow. “It’s been a mild fall, but it gets cloudy often enough.”

“It’s not a matter of clouds. The Northern Hemisphere is tilted away from the sun during winter months, but Brockton Bay-- and only Brockton Bay-- is still receiving solar energy comparable to April or May. The temperature difference hasn’t been huge between within city limits and outside it, but within the city, plants are maintaining growth and hibernating animals are still active.” The Tinker paused, and her accented voice grew frustrated. “I’ve been comparing all the data sources I have. The Earth’s tilt is still on track, there’s no source of refraction or amplification that I can
The Director felt a headache coming on. She pinched the bridge of her nose and asked, “Alright. What does this mean for us, then?”

“I’m not sure. We have no way of knowing if this is temporary, if it will spread, or intensify. We can try and predict ecological impact, but given that the effect is concentrated only on the city itself, and not the surrounding areas, it shouldn’t be anything disastrous.”

“The Thinkers can deal with it until we know more, then. Keeping the city together is an immediate concern that we can actually do something about.” Because it wasn’t enough they had one dangerously high-rated Shaker in the city in the form of Labyrinth. “What else?”

Dragon hesitated. “A more personal inquiry. You’re aware I’m on good terms with Armsmaster and his civilian life?” Was there anyone who wasn’t aware of that? Piggot nodded. “I was glancing through the records he’s shared with me regarding his personal itinerary, and I couldn’t find when he’d last taken any time off.”

“Not surprising. He hasn’t.”

“...what, ever? Protectorate employees get PTO.”

“Doesn’t mean they use them. I know I haven’t in about six years. This is Brockton Bay, nobody can afford to step away from it. Aside from maybe Assault and Battery a few days a year, everyone just has them paid out. Armsmaster has them rolled into his Tinkering budget. Most Tinkers do, as far as I’m aware.”

Dragon’s avatar drew her eyebrows together in concern. “He mentioned Chessman doing something similar.”

Piggot snorted. “Who do you think gave Chessman the idea?” She turned and brought up her scheduling spreadsheets again. Maybe she could pitch this as a voluntary effort, so the Wards could contribute their numbers. That would keep her from needing to spread the heroes too thin… PR and the Youth Guard would enjoy the publicity and relative safety, as well.

“I see.” Piggot noticed the faint sound of disappointment in Dragon’s voice, and made a mental note to adjust her bet in the shipping pools. Dragon thanked her for her time, then logged off. Piggot checked the clock-- about 30 minutes before the week’s briefing. Just enough time to finish this proposal.

“So. Moving on…” Director Piggot set aside one file folder, then opened another. Within was a printed schedule, wherein she’d cross-indexed each hero’s otherwise unassigned on-duty hours with the days of the week, for any time after 3 p.m. “I’d like to start a new public relations initiative. Now that Brushstroke and Good Dog are rather firmly established, I’d like the Protectorate to maintain cordial relations with them. In case Brushstroke changes her mind about neutrality in the future, I want to make damn sure she’s got a positive view of us. Additionally, if we can start exposing the younger generations in such At-Risk areas to a more friendly and personable view of the Protectorate, we can hopefully decrease the ABB’s recruitment rates in the future. At minimum of once a week, I want at least two heroes to make a visit to the Shrine and meet with Brushstroke. And
I don’t want a repeat of last time.”

“Hey! I wasn’t the only one there, why are you glaring at me?” Assault protested.

“You know what you did.” Piggot waited for Battery to finish her warning smack against Assault’s shoulder, then continued. “This is a voluntary initiative, so it will not be interrupting any of your scheduled patrols or public appearances. Miss Militia, I want you to also broach this with the Wards, though there must be an adult hero along with them if they decide to go.”

“Kid Win might already be ahead of you on that, Director.” Miss Militia spoke up, and retrieved a folded paper from a pocket. “He brought this to me earlier-- seems there’s a few of these flyers being posted around Arcadia.”

She gave the paper a practiced flick and sent it tumbling over to Director Piggot, who unfolded it for a look. It was a print-out of a simple advertisement, or invitation, to a Halloween party at… She squinted. ‘Pawprint Shrine.’ It fit with The Sidewalk, she supposed… Director Piggot eyed the flyer once more, spotting a shadow of ink through it, and she turned the paper over. The flyer was a simple computer printout, but the back had a hand-drawn design-- a rectangle with looping spirals and several Japanese or Chinese characters stacked atop one another. She flipped the paper back over. Why wouldn’t the hand-drawn picture be on the front? A mark of authenticity, maybe? She’d send it along to the Thinkers to worry over.

“Well, that’s convenient… I’m willing to remove the Ward’s patrols for the day if they want to participate, but they’ll still need a chaperone. And based on the availability, that leaves…” Piggot frowned, but managed to suppress the sigh. Around the table, heads turned towards Velocity, who was practically beaming.

Well, at least someone would have a happy Halloween.

* * *

Yuuta closed his locker door with a rattling slam, then turned and headed down a nearby hall, on his way to Mr. Quinlan’s math class. Then he stopped, backpedaled a few paces, and stared at a blank patch of wall. Someone behind him grumbled when they had to adjust course, but Yuuta paid it no mind. Because that wall was not supposed to be bare, he was sure of it.

A quick step closer and a careful eye confirmed his suspicions: right about at eye level, there was half a piece of tape, still clinging to the dingy paint. Yuuta picked at it with a fingernail, and peeled the adhesive from the wall. He’d put it there himself, yesterday, when the Miko had handed him a short stack of her charms with the Halloween flyers on the back, and asked him if he’d please help her post them around the school. It wasn’t like it was far out of his way, so he’d agreed and put a few here and there on his routes between classes. Maybe someone had taken it, instead of just copying down the Shrine’s address? Or maybe the Winslow faculty were just being pissants again. Either way, rude.
Yuuta took a quick glance at the clock on the wall, mentally adjusted for this particular clock being behind by four minutes, and decided he had enough time. A quick rummage into his backpack found the battered folder with the remaining flyers, and the practice ofuda the Miko had declined to retrieve from several weeks ago. A quick slip of new tape, and the charm with its advertisement was replaced. Then it was off to math, and more than likely a nap through the lecture. Quinlan wasn’t exactly a bad teacher, not like some of the others, but he had a monotone that just put Yuuta into a fog as soon as he heard it.

A period later, Yuuta yawned his way back to his locker, to dump off his math book and grab his science one instead—seriously, who the hell thought it was a good idea to put math and science before lunch?—and passed a bare section of wall. He stopped, backpedaled, and frowned. The tape had a scrap of paper still attached this time, like it had been pulled off with force. He replaced it again, with tape on all four corners this time, then pulled out his phone and thumbed the keys. Most of the guys called him paranoid, but Souta, Haru, and a couple others could be counted on to at least keep an eye out.

* * *

One of the monitors mounted on the wall above Armsmaster’s workbench sounded a familiar tone, one that pulled the corner of Armsmaster’s mouth into a brief smile. He reached over and tapped a key on the keyboard, and the monitor lit up as Dragon’s avatar appeared over the connection. Armsmaster greeted her as he turned back to his work, adjusting the magnification viewer settled over an open panel on one of his halberds.

“Perfect timing as always, Dragon. I only just sat down.”

“It’s 2:33 p.m., you always get back here around then.” Dragon paused, then her smile shifted to a more teasing angle. “Unless you stop for a new movie… or a new TV.”

“That was one time… two times. I wanted some of that LCD liquid crystal setup to mess around with.”

“Did that ever bear fruit, by the way?”

“Yeah, kind of. Good display quality for my HUD and the liquid nature helps a bit in preventing picture disturbances from impact, but getting a thin enough layer of the stuff to be useful and not throw off the visor’s design gave me trouble.”
“You could just… make a bigger helmet.”

“Nah.” Dragon watched Armsmaster finish the calibrations to his satisfaction, then pick up a pair of his micro-tools and set to work. She spent a few seconds watching and running code, deciding on the best way to begin the conversation she had planned.

“Colin, I’ve been running some numbers recently… and I think there’s something we should talk about.”

“Yes?” He didn’t look up.

“I’ve noticed that you don’t seem to be scheduling sufficient relaxation time in your life.” Best to be direct, she thought. It worked, since Armsmaster looked away from his work for a second to frown at her.

“Sure I do. The polyphasic sleep cycle took a bit to get used to, but it’s working fine.”

“I meant social and emotional.”

“And? I do that too.”

“And I really enjoy Movie Night, but once every three weeks is not exactly sufficient.”

The set of Armsmaster’s mouth shifted a bit, and Dragon identified the expression as confusion. “Did you want to move to every two weeks?”

Dragon spun off a few lines of code, to emulate a private, patient sigh. “I would certainly be willing, but I was more thinking that we need to add a new event to your itinerary. Every two weeks, maybe? We could do it opposite Movie Night.”

“I’m sorry, Dragon, but I don’t think that will work. I’ve got more projects than I can devote time to as it is.”
“I know, and that’s really part of the problem, Colin.” She needed a different angle of approach. She needed evidence; thankfully, she had it. “You remember those blood panels done on you and your team, after that last Good Dog incident? And how I correlated Brushstroke’s Master effect with lowered cortisol levels?”

“What about it?”

“Well… your low levels were about equal with everyone else’s high levels.”

“And that’s surprising? I work harder than most of them put together.” He proved his point by turning back to his tools. “Besides. Stress is a useful reaction. It focuses attention and provides an extra impetus for effort.”

“In the short-term, yes. But chronic stress has been linked to so many problems, I couldn’t fit them all on one screen even at 8-point font. Colin, this is a problem.”

“It’s not a problem, Dragon. It’s just life.” Dragon ran code for another sigh, and this time let it be expressed through her avatar. Her digital face took on a pained expression, and her visual feed picked up a slight twitch of Armsmaster’s face and fingers. A small tell for guilt.

“Colin… I’m worried about you. I’m worried for you. Look-- I go to a casual gathering, every couple weeks. Only a few people, mostly your co-workers. I’d like you to go with me.”

“Dragon, I really don’t--”

“It’s at the PRT building, so you won’t have to go far or lose any time to travel. It’s just for a couple of hours, but if you’re really uncomfortable you can leave right away. Okay? Please. Promise me you’ll just give it a try?”

Her friend’s face settled into an unhappy frown, and the biometric sensors in his armor registered his heart rate rising into a nervous patter. He promised.

* * *
“Sunny, don’t you think this is... just a little excessive?” Taylor turned her head carefully to look at the wolf, as she stood atop the stepladder with an inked charm, a length of string, and a sincere prayer to not fall off. Sunshine shook her head vehemently, so Taylor sighed and went back to attempting to tie more charms to the torii’s arches. Both it and two of the fences bordering the Shrine were already fluttering with every breeze, laden with slips of paper as they were, but Sunny was insistent. Ah, well. Taylor had to admit, they were kind of pretty, and the sound and sight of the charms strung up everywhere lent a bit of cheer to the place, made it seem a bit busier than it was.

Not that the Shrine wasn’t busy today. Actually, the whole neighborhood was busy, by comparison. Apart from Taylor’s efforts with the ofuda, Souta had been recruited to purchase and haul back a bunch of small pumpkins for the party by virtue of being the only person present with a car, and Haru had gotten ambushed by a few ambassadors from the Baachan Collective and was currently helping with assembling tiny treat bags. Outside the Shrine, Taylor had spotted a couple groups of men and women with the ABB’s colors, going into and surveying different properties around the neighborhood, only for more gang members to arrive a couple hours later, with garbage bags, brooms, and trucks. All of the stores and houses needed work, and while she wasn’t sure exactly why the ABB had decided to begin such widespread restoration... she had a feeling she should make some more omelettes for Oni Lee. Just a hunch.

Taylor was just climbing down from the stepladder, the torii finally meeting Sunny’s expectations, when the wolf’s ears perked up. She started barking, her wagging tail reinforcing the friendly sound, and Taylor glanced up as well. Then she blinked, because she’d honestly been expecting Purity, not the blonde young woman with a tiara.

Glory Girl floated down, looking around the Shrine with blatant curiosity. “Huh! Can’t say this is what I expected... I don’t get around here much, but wasn’t this whole place, like, abandoned not that long ago?”

“Depends on what you mean by ‘abandoned,’ really. I don’t think anybody lives nearby, but Sunny and I have been here for a few months now. You’re Glory Girl, right? New Wave?” Taylor folded up the stepladder and set it aside, suddenly aware of how much dirt and sweat she had to have accumulated, working all afternoon. She’d seen photos of New Wave’s poster child--who hadn’t, really--and she couldn’t remember a single one where the New Wave poster child didn’t look both pristine and stunning.

The heroine grinned and nodded, turning her attention to Taylor. Her eyes suddenly widened, and she pointed. “Wh-- hey! You!”

“...yes, me?”

“You’re the kitten peddler!” Taylor blinked a few times. Sunny made a confused noise, and cocked
her head. “Yeah! I recognize you! You gave us a kitten-- oh man, I had no idea you were Brushstroke, really?”

Kitten? When had she-- Taylor thought back to the last house, in the fancy walled-in neighborhood. Dallon. Wow, how had she missed that? “Ohh. I didn’t know you were that Dallon! How’s the kitty?”

“Doing great! Causes trouble everywhere and everyone loves him for it. Mom adores him.” Glory Girl leaned back, just a bit, her hands gravitating towards her hips. Taylor wondered if everything she did looked like a pose. “You really didn’t know you’d found New Wave?”

Taylor shook her head. Glory Girl’s expression slowly brightened, like sunlight peeking from behind the clouds. “Would-- would you like some tea?”

“Mm. Thanks, but not today. I saw the flyers around school, and wanted to check things out-- rumors everywhere about this place, you know?” Taylor shook her head again. She felt like she was doing that a lot. “Seriously? Well… maybe I can fill you in a bit sometime.”

“Of course. Feel free to stop by whenever you want-- everyone’s welcome! I’ll get you and your family free passes for the hot spring, once it’s built.” She was planning on doing that for every parahuman that wanted one, but it was the thought that counted, right?

“Hot spring? Oh man. Now I’ve got to know what’s up with this place. I’ll definitely be back-- seeya Brushstroke!”

“My name is Taylor!” She called after the heroine, who had already departed. “Ah, well…”

Taylor turned back to her stepladder-- there was still work to do, and popcorn balls to make with Old Mrs. Henrick later still-- but she took a moment to pause and rub Sunny’s ears. “I’ve never met anyone from New Wave before. She seemed... nice. Think we’ll see her again, Sunny?”

Sunny made a chuffing sound, and smiled.
Halloween fell on a Sunday, which suited Taylor just fine. It meant that she had plenty of time to spend at the Shrine finishing up preparations for the afternoon’s event, and even some extra to spend in relative relaxation. Or, as relaxed as she could get, with Sunny’s sudden surge of paranoia. The canine had meticulously gone over every tag and charm on the Shrine’s grounds, and insisted on Taylor adding the looping swirling charms to the backs of the flyers. She’d even dig up yet another book on Shinto rituals for Taylor to look through--Taylor was beginning to suspect that the wolf had an entire ditch somewhere, just filled with books she planned to parcel out--and had dragged poor Haru over by his shirtsleeves to help translate. Taylor grumbled about being given yet another project, just a little, but she followed along with her friend’s demands to carefully cut a few sticks of bamboo from the tea ceremony area, then spend an hour or so folding new shide tags to tie to them.

She put her foot down when Sunny tried to drag a sleeping bag into the little office building. She was not having a one-person sleepover in the middle of winter, end of discussion. Sunny made an irritated noise, but accepted some brushing of her thick fur in compensation. As always, Taylor carefully picked out the long, coarse hairs from the brush and added them to her stash. The wolf’s tail fur made for way better paintbrush material than she’d have ever guessed, and she was starting to accumulate a number of the completed tools by now. Hm-- maybe she could give her dad one, as well as the gaming model she’d picked out and painted? That sounded like a nice gesture. Taylor filed the idea away for later.

She was still sorting through Sunny’s shed fur and considering what type of brush to make next when a knock sounded at the Shrine’s little office door. Not a very usual occurrence, to be honest. “Come in!” Taylor called.

The door opened to admit Yuuta, who ducked his head in greeting before closing the door behind him, before all the warm air could escape. “Hey, Miko. Got a minute?”

“You can call me Taylor, you know. And yeah, what’s up?”

“You’re wearing your colors, you’re the Miko.” Did he have to say it like she was representing a gang? Some sort of… canine-led, paint-themed gang? Yuuta pulled out the chair in front of her desk and sat down before speaking. “Anyway, Baachan an’ my pa have been skulking around the apartment and muttering for a few days, but they’re both too polite or something to come ask you directly. You said you’re wanting to rent out those buildings you own, didn’t you?”

“Well-- the ones not going to be a hot spring? Yeah, once I get them cleaned and fixed up. Why?”

The other teen scrubbed a hand through his hair, visibly picking and choosing his words. “You wouldn’t know this but-- back in Japan? My family ran a bakery, apparently. Or, Baachan did. After Kyushu happened everything kinda went tits-up everywhere, so Pa packed up and moved us to
America. I was like, four? So I don’t remember it much.” He shrugged.

Baachan having professional cooking experience didn’t really surprise Taylor, though she’d wondered at times if excellent cooking skills were something that just sort of happened once people got old enough for grandchildren to be a thing. Speculation aside, she could see where Yuuta was going with this. “They’re thinking of re-opening a bakery?”

“Think so. Pa keeps dragging out his checkbook and crunching numbers… uh, thing is--and here’s where the polite thing comes in--they’re not sure how much you’d want to charge rent. Money’s kinda tight as it is.”

“And the start-up costs alone are probably high, huh. Getting ovens and a food vendor license and everything.” She’d looked up a few things on the subject already, now that she had an internet connection of her very own. The results had been a bit intimidating-- as in, the entire sum she’d received from the Protectorate was enough to open a single business. Rent alone had a range from $1500 to $3000 a month, but she had no idea of what the average rates for Brockton Bay would be. Taylor chewed on her lip, thinking. She really needed someone who understood money and business better if she wanted to make informed decisions, here.

On the other hand, the uninformed decision-making was easy: Sunny would love a bakery, and Taylor would love to help her friends.

“Yuuta, I don’t really know what the numbers would be? But… you and your Baachan have been really good to me and Sunny, when you never had to be. So, if your dad wants to do this, I’ll help however I can. We’ll find some figures that make it work.”

“Seriously? That’s really cool of you, Miko. Taylor, whatever. Assuming Baachan doesn’t take my head off for going around her back, I’ll let you know what happens.”

Taylor grinned at the joke. “Sounds good. For now, though, I need to get things ready-- you think very many people will show up? I know I had you setting up flyers, but…”

* * *

“Probably a few,” he’d said. Yeah. A few.

Taylor had known a few of The Baachans would be there, herding around grandchildren, and probably some younger siblings of the different families who frequented the shrine. Maybe a couple kids from Winslow or Arcadia, if anyone both took the flyers seriously and felt brave enough to go poking around a known kinda-slum. Not that the unofficial ABB district was looking bad these days- people seemed to be picking up litter more, and there weren’t so many broken windows or cracked walls around. All those budding cherry trees added a wonderful bit of color to the place, too, the saplings already grown enough to not really be saplings anymore, but young trees just reaching the tips of their crowns to the rooftops. So, sure, she expected a few curious souls from the other parts of the city.

What Taylor got was considerably more lively.

Baachans were herding around grandchildren like ducklings, as expected, and small gangs of tweens were getting underfoot as they ran around, playing games. But also older kids, many even older than her had appeared, grouped up in circles to chat, or play cards. Taylor spotted a few she knew from Winslow, but many more she’d never met, their fashion sense hinting at Arcadia. And there were
adults, too, sharing not-so-discreet drinks and talking with old friends and new acquaintances. There were so many people the Shrine’s grounds couldn’t hold them, and what she’d thought was going to be a small, slightly silly gesture had overtaken most of the street. A less raucous block party than what had grown out of her sapling-planting spree, but a party nonetheless. It was overwhelming, not just the noise and activity, but how… connected it made her feel. This wasn’t a community throwing a party for itself, and dragging her in. This was something _she’d_ started, her and Sunny, and all these people she’d never met had not only accepted it, but done so whole-heartedly.

(Taylor strongly suspected that The Baachans had known this would happen. All those food vendors along the sidewalk were _awfully_ convenient.)

Still, the sheer level of social activity presented left Taylor feeling rather out of her depths, until she found the perfect excuse to deal with it: she was clearly going to need more emas. Taylor ducked into the office and found her paints, spare wooden plaques, and a short easel to balance them on, and set them up right outside. And then she went right back inside, and grabbed her kettle and a few cups.

Thus fortified, Taylor set to work painting. She drew a steady trickle of curious patrons, most of them not locals, who asked dozens of questions about the Shrine, and the emas, and her painting. Absorbed in being an informative hostess, Taylor almost didn’t notice the new guests until they were upon her. Two ripples spread through the various pockets of people all around the gathering, many breaking into excited whispers, and others growing quieter, more wary. Taylor looked up at the change and had a clear view of the torii gate, where a trio of heroes followed the first, stood, ready to go welcome the Protectorate and hopefully defuse the tension, but one of The Baachans did it first. An old woman gestured at them from where she sat in her chair, beckoning them over.

“Oh, Velocity! _Adeunim_, come over here. I did not know you were coming!” Taylor saw Velocity grin and obey the Grandmother Edict, taking the Wards with him for introductions, and she saw the previous ripple of unease smooth into acceptance. It made Taylor smile to recognize it. If The Baachans wanted them here, _no one_ would claim the heroes weren’t welcome. Maybe not even Lung. Maybe. Taylor sipped at her tea, and got back to painting.

Eventually, the Wards managed to slip free of the gravitational pull of The Baachans (it looked like Velocity was still caught) and the pair wandered over to where Taylor was painting the wooden wish plaques. Kid Win held up a hand in a wave and spoke first, prompting a slight twitch of annoyance from Vista.

“Hi! You’re Brushstroke, right? I’m Kid Win, this is Vista.”

Taylor shook their hands, and said, “It’s good to meet you! You don’t have to call me Brushstroke, though. That’s just for paperwork, I’m not a cape. My name’s Taylor, or I guess you can call me Miko, too.”

“Taylor or Miko, got it. What’s the second one?” Vista asked, taking the reins of the conversation away from Kid Win.

“Sort of a title, I suppose. Or a job description. It basically means I’m taking care of the Shrine. I can usually get people to call me by my name when I’m not here.”

“Okay. What should we call Good Dog? And... “ Vista glanced around. “Where is Good Dog, anyway?”
“Her name is Sunshine, Sunny for short. And I’m not sure, actually? She went to go check on something. I’m hoping she’ll be back soon.”

* * *

“Console, things are pretty quiet out in the Docks. I’m gonna make one more pass, then head North, over.”

“Roger that, Dauntless. Over.”

Dauntless tapped his headset’s mic to mute it, then sighed. The Docks were always a terrible place to patrol. Most crime here took place inside or in dark alleys, where it was hard to see from the air, or in the newly-claimed lairs of newly-triggered parahumans, who seemed to always want to find an abandoned warehouse to claim and decorate. Or worse, when the more foolhardy thought to try and take up residence inside a rusted hulk of the Boat Graveyard. First encounters with capes were dangerous and uncertain, and the paperwork afterward was a huge pain in the ass. Dauntless really wished he didn’t somehow manage to get assigned to the Docks so often.

The hero sighed, adjusted his ankles inside his pseudo-rocket boots like they were roller skates, and flew a bit lower. Maybe if he was close to the street, he’d have a better chance of spotting something he could actually deal with.

He was skirting the edge of the Boat Graveyard when a flicker of movement in the corner of his eye caught his attention-- and spiked his adrenaline, because the movement had been from the top of one of the taller buildings, and it was rapidly heading down. Dauntless swerved to intercept before his brain could fully catch up with him. Had someone just jumped?

“Hey, hold o-- whoooof!”

The moving shape dropped into his arms and Dauntless buckled under the weight, even with his enhanced equipment. He steadied his flight into a hover with a slight flex and a thought, then examined his ‘rescue’ of a white canine, currently held in a princess carry. Good Dog was ignoring the hero’s efforts, instead focusing on the Boat Graveyard beyond. Just barely able to see around the fluff, Dauntless spotted the wolf giving the most suspicious and disapproving stare to the rusted ships possible. Clenched in the wolf’s teeth were several strips of paper, covered in inked swirls and characters.

“Good Dog-- ugh, you’re heavy-- what are you doing?”

Good Dog ignored him, muzzle moving as it scanned the shoreline, before the canine huffed and spared the hero a single nod. Dauntless had the strangest feeling he’d just been given the equivalent of a ‘carry on, soldier’ pat on the back. Then Good Dog wriggled until he was forced to let go, and the wolf somersaulted down to the street and ran off without another bark. Dauntless hovered there for a little while, feeling a sudden swell of pity and understanding for his co-workers.

* * *

“That’s good. I’d like to meet her.” Vista remarked, then at Taylor’s invitation pulled over a folding chair and sat down to watch her work. Kid Win eschewed the chair to sit on his hoverboard, instead.

“So-- can I ask what you’re doing? Like, how does your painting work?”

What a weird way to phrase it. “Um, well… right now I’m painting some ema. They’re these little
wooden boards. Once I’ve painted them, you can write a wish on the back, and hang it up on the Wishing Tree over there.” She paused in her painting to point at the old oak tree, with its gently swaying frame of boards. “These and charms are something I’m wanting to offer for-- well, not really sale? An as-you-like donation, basically, for the upkeep of the Shrine.”

“Hold on,” Kid Win said, “I gotta ask-- if you paint these, does that mean the wish comes true?”

Okay, that was kind of cute. Maybe the Wards weren’t immune from being teenagers, after all. Taylor smiled and said, “Mm, maybe! I’ve made a few charms that people have liked the results of. Here-- let me paint you each one special, as a thanks for coming.”

The offer got the Wards’ attention, and held it until Sunny finally came back. The canine looked a bit happier right off the bat, but Taylor saw the wolf’s eyes widen and face break into a doggy grin at the sight of all the cheerful people and children-- and all the food. There was no doubt in Taylor’s mind that the wolf would manage to beg samples from each and every vendor before the night was done. But first, she came by lick Taylor’s cheek in greeting, and then to sit in front of Kid Win and make greedy eyes at the Tinker’s hoverboard.

“Awww… how could I say no to that face? Up you go, Good Dog!”

“Holy crap, why does everyone call her a dog, she could bite me in half!”

Seeing Sunny get a ride on the hoverboard sparked a chain reaction, with the younger children beginning to plead for rides was well, both with the young Tinker’s flying machine and with Sunny. The wolf didn’t seem to mind.

* * *

Taylor was glad for her extra work by the end of the party, when a couple dozen people had taken emas to hang on the Wishing Tree. The two Wards managed to cajole Taylor into making one for herself, too, though she still waited until the party was winding down. The heroes were actually some of the last to leave.

“You’ve got to want something, don’t you? Or-- oh, can you not really grant your own wishes?” Vista looked up from where she was writing on the back of her own ema, taking great care to keep her wish hidden from Kid Wn’s prying eyes.

“It’s not that… it’s just-- well, I’m pretty happy as-is these days. Feels weird to say that, heh.” Taylor glanced over her shoulder to check on Sunny, who was sitting near Baachan and accepting pets from the old woman. Taylor turned back to the ema in front of her, thinking. “There’s things I want, sure… but I think they’re the sorts of things you only get by working at them, you know? Nothing that requires divine intervention, so to speak…” She thought of her dad, and the awkwardness between them. She thought of Emma, and the deep wound her friend had given her, still scarring over.

And then, she had it. The one thing that would truly require a miracle. Taylor grinned and started writing, not caring if the Wards and even Velocity peeked over her shoulder:

*Please let Lung start wearing a shirt.*

The heroes’ goodbyes were a little stilted. They must have been getting tired.
The last person to leave, Taylor was surprised to note, was none other than Baachan. It gave her a chance to thank the old woman for all her help, though, so she was happy for it. She went over and accepted the hug Baachan offered, as soon as she was within range of speaking.

“Here, Miko. Let Baachan ask you something, hm?”

“Of course, what is it?”

“When you look around here-- this shrine, these streets-- what is it you see?”

More than mortar and wood, obviously. Taylor sat in an empty chair near Baachan and considered it, while Sunny moved over to press against her knees. “All the work that’s gone into it, I guess? The time put in, and how much things are different here now.”

“Mm.” The old woman nodded, then turned to Taylor. “Let me tell you what I see-- I see change, Miko. I see growing things, I see people-- young people and old people-- making things change. I listen to Honoka-chan smiling, telling me her Souta isn’t causing so much trouble these days. I listen to my son, at last wanting to take chances. All these things, this old woman never thought she’d see again.”

Her eyes were sad, but saying this-- Baachan smiled. “You do good work, Miko. Thank you for coming here. And thank you, Sunny.” The old woman’s smile turned wry and knowing. She reached into her purse and drew out a folded bundle of tissue paper. “Here-- for your collection.”

Sunny took the small offering before Taylor could, her tail twapping against the ground in a wag. The wolf stretched out her neck and shoved her furry head under Baachan’s now-empty hand, and the old woman rubbed her ears fondly.

When Baachan had left, her segway a distant vrrrrrrrr, Sunny took the tissues with her up into the shrine proper, and waited for Taylor to open up her zodiac box. The small handful of beads poured in with a gentle clicking. Taylor closed the box back up and picked tissue lint away from Sunny’s mouth, while she eyed the box lid and the characters over the newly-filled hutch.

Inoshishi, the boar.

* * *

Yuuta grumbled and swore under his breath, the curses misting in the cold pre-dawn air. Not that it was saying much, with the lateness of the year, but it was still well before Winslow would open its doors. He was only here to finish up a math project, but it wasn’t until he’d gotten off the bus and started walking that it occurred to him that, if the staff and janitors hadn’t yet arrived, the school doors might well be locked. He might have to spend an hour or so waiting for someone to show up.

Ugh. What a way to start the week.

Yuuta tromped up to one of the side doors and gave the handle an experimental tug. To his surprise, it opened. The teen didn’t let go of the handle. The inside of the building was dark, the lights and probably heat still turned off, so he hadn’t expected the door to be unlocked… Yuuta leaned in, and took a closer look. There was a piece of packing tape over the door’s lock, keeping the tumblers pressed. Not even Winslow kept doors like that on purpose. Yuuta shouldered his overstuffed and straining backpack a little higher, then touched the switchblade in his back pocket, to confirm it was there before he crept inside.
Schools are spooky in the dark. They're built like prisons when they're in poor areas like this, only with an added layer of decoration in the form of sports posters, and school newspapers that nobody read, and worn linoleum on the floor. Yuuta’s shoe squeaked and he winced. When nothing dove out of the shadows at him, he wiped his soles on the bottom of his pants’ legs and continued, this time much quieter. He cursed himself for being a scaredy-cat, but it didn’t stop him from sneaking.

He was glad for his caution, a few hallways further in, as he made for his locker.

He was right near a turn in the hall when he heard scraping, and a light grunt of effort. Yuuta stopped and pressed up against the wall, then peeked carefully around the corner. Over by the window was someone else, currently taking a prybar to one of the outside windows. The person—short, but he couldn’t quite tell who—had already gotten the actual window open, but they were working at the barrier of wire mesh that Winslow had put in place of actual bars. Breaking and entering was a bigger concern than fire safety, it seemed.

“And you’re sure this will work?” The person—a girl—asked.

“Yes, just as I said. I can open the doors just fine, if you’ll let me in.” Oh, shit. There were two girls, not one, and the second was actually outside. The first grunted again, swore, and finally broke a corner of the mesh away from the window frame. It was short work to tear the rest of it away, letting the second girl climb in. It was hard to see in the low light, but she looked like a blonde. Maybe pretty, but with a mouth set just slightly too wide to be striking. And she was dragging in a garbage bag, tightly closed, and full of something that couldn’t be very solid or heavy.

“Great!” The first one sighed, and turned—oh shit, oh shit Yuuta knew that one. That crazy redhead that tried to get Souta suspended. “Ugh, I swear I can smell that stuff already. Let’s do this quick and—hey!” Oh triple shit. She’d spotted him. Yuuta pushed away from the wall and stood straight. This was fine, nothing to be afraid of, just girls. Not ghosts or gangers or Baachan.

“Recognize you, crazy chick. The hell are you doing here?”

“None of your goddamn business!” The crazy chick—Emma, right?—snapped at him. “Just go away!”

“Yeah, maybe it isn’t. Maybe it is. What are you doin’ breaking in before school?”

“I said, none of your goddamn business, you fucking ABB scum!” Emma bared her teeth at him, like a cornered rat. Yuuta just frowned. This chick had a long way to go before she was intimidating. The girl behind her, on the other hand… Yuuta felt his skin crawl a little. He’d never met her and she still looked a little too familiar. And she was staring at him like she knew he had a knife in his pocket.

“That just makes me think it is. You after Taylor again?” Emma reeled back like he’d slapped her. “Man, what’d the Miko ever do to you, anyway?”

“What’d she do? What’d she do?! Nothing! She did NOTHING! She never did ANYTHING!”

“...ooooohkay. And uh, what about your friend? What’s her beef?”

“I’m Karen. I’m a much better friend than Taylor.”

“She’s Karen,” Emma parroted, “and she’s a much better friend than Taylor.”
Oh fuckdamn it that had to be a red flag about something. “Never met her. I don’t think she goes to this school.” Yuuta gripped his backpack’s strap a little tighter. ‘Karen’ smiled at him, her mouth stretching more than just a little too wide. Then her eyes widened, mirroring his, and her warped mouth turned down in an exaggerated snarl. Yuuta saw what was definitely not teeth. He reached for his knife.

Emma finally clued in to some flicker of self-preservation instinct, or maybe she just heard the hiss as the spider-woman’s pincer-like jaws spread wide. She turned, saw, and screamed.

The youkai’s illusion crumbled, the spiderwebs she’d wrapped around the crazy chick not quite strong enough to immobilize her prey, but the shock and fear apparently was. Emma screamed again, the sound jarring Yuuta just enough to override common sense. He braced his feet, then heaved his backpack at the spider. The overstuffed bag slammed into the spirit hard enough to break the already-failing zippers, spilling Yuuta’s books and papers all over the hallway. Freed of the weight, the teen reached forward and grabbed Emma’s wrist, then pulled.

The spider-woman reached for her escaping prey, but stopped as the papers tumbling around her feet began to smoke. His folder full of the abandoned ofuda the Miko had made, weeks ago, had begun to smoulder, the visible glimpses of ink taking on a sullen glow. The youkai hissed, and kicked at them, the motion dislodging a different folder from the paper pile—this one with the spare party flyers. Yuuta saw the glow even through the folder’s cover.

“Fucking run!” He tugged on Emma’s arm nearly hard enough to dislocate it, and pulled the shrieking girl away from the window and the widow. Not ten feet away and the hallway lit up with an oddly silent explosion, ribbons of light peeling away from the ruin of his backpack like someone had opened up a can of Legend. Yuuta heard the youkai shriek, and kept running.

He didn’t really get far, trying to drag along the crazy chick and all, but once they reached the other end of the hallway Yuuta looked back. There was a smoking mess on the floor near the open window, a few spare cobwebs drifting from the ceiling, and no youkai. Yuutra tried to even out his breathing, and checked the other directions of the hallway; there was nothing.

Okay. Okay. This was fine. He needed to—needed to get his phone, and call up some of the guys, and get this mess cleaned before the Miko saw it. Or the teachers, he supposed. Lucky he had his phone in his pocket, not his bag. Yuuta tried to reach for it, and ran into a bit of a problem.

“Oh-- hey. Let go.” Emma whimpered, the girl’s eyes wide and empty with shock. She was clinging to his arm like a barnacle. “I mean it. Off. Let-- let go. I need to--” Oh, no. Yuuta tried, unsuccessfully, to pry the girl off of him. He eventually managed to at least reach his phone, but it was with a heavy heart that he thumbed the contacts list, because now there was only one thing he could do.

The phone rang, then picked up with an ominous click. Yuuta sighed. “Baachan, there’s a crying girl attached to my arm, and she won’t let go. What do I do?”

“Yuuta, what you do to her?”

“Nothing! There was a-- a thing! She got attacked, and, uh… crying.”

“Then you bring her home, you silly boy.” Click.
The employee cafeteria on the Rig was not a morgue, but in the predawn hours of November 2nd one could be forgiven for mistaking it as such. Bodies slumped over tables and on benches, the air was disturbed equally by clinking silverware and the weary groans of the damned, and the other employees up and about at such an hour avoided the corner of costumed heroes like they had the plague. Triumph rested his lion-helmed head on the table in front of him and stared longingly at the carafe of coffee, sitting just out of reach.

“That’s it. No more. We’re cancelling Halloween forever.” He wished, dearly, that his voice could pull objects as well as push them away. “Who do you think we’ll have to call for that? The President? Chief Director? Batman?”

“Start a petition,” Assault offered, the hero actually laying on a bench with his head pillowed in Battery’s lap. “There must be a way to stop Christmas from coming.”

Battery ceased attempting to comb sand and saltwater out of her hair long enough to tap Assault’s forehead in rebuke. “Scrooge.”

“No, that’s the Grinch, how do you not know this.”

“Unlike some people I don’t pay attention to children’s cartoons.”

“They’re not just cartoons, they’re classics. Next you’ll tell me you don’t know who Snow Miser is.”

“Who?”

“Oh my god, woman.”

Triumph tuned the pair out and made another attempt to reach the coffee. Mercy was granted in the form of Miss Militia, who reached across the table and used her power, shaped as a golf club, to shove the carafe closer. Triumph thanked her and started casting about for a cup. At the next table over, Dauntless groaned and rolled his stiff shoulder. “This is crazy. It wasn’t this bad last year, was it?”

“No.” Militia scoffed. “Not even close. Uber and Leet caused a ruckus, but nothing like this.”

“Ha... oh yeah. I remember that-- Uber walking around wearing that giant burlap sack.” Assault sat up, then promptly used the advantage of locomotion to steal the carafe away from Triumph. He poured a cup for himself and Battery, then relented and poured another for the near-immobile Triumph. “Seriously though. I kinda lost track of the Console after that giant bird shoved Puppy in the Bay. What was happening on your ends?”

“Giant bird? Really?”

“I ran into a spate of arson.” Dauntless grimaced. “Nothing huge, but it was like every time I turned
around there’d be something else on fire. Some pyro cape getting their kicks, I think— not sure how else a parking meter lights up.”

“I ended up chasing after one of Hellhound’s beasts for an hour or so, unless there’s a different dog-themed villain wandering around.” Militia sighed, and pinched at the bridge of her nose. “Big, black furry thing, glowing eyes. Not like her usual, I’ll admit.”

Triumph chimed in, then Assault, with a litany of petty crimes and criminal mischief. Everyone had an odd occurrence or six to add, with the possible exception of Chessman, who was face-down and asleep next to a stack of long-cold pancakes. The minion master was the oldest hero on the team, and he was sure to have complaints against the energy of whippersnappers once he regained consciousness. Everyone was wrung out by pulling triple shifts to keep up with the holiday’s unexpected wrath; even Miss Militia had a few bags under her eyes.

The exception to the rule strode into the cafeteria at 5:06, freshly groomed and alert, eyes focused on a tablet. Armsmaster collected a light breakfast to take back to his lab, then walked right back out again, tossing a curt “Briefing in 20, don’t be late,” over his shoulder as he did. The collective withering stare from the rest of the Protectorate killed three houseplants that decorated the far wall of the cafeteria.

“I literally do not sleep, and I’m not that awake.” Miss Militia ground out between her teeth.

“He cheats somehow,” Dauntless yawned, “And he’s going to be quietly smug about it all day.”

“Okay, new plan-- we petition the Director to ban holidays, and get Halbeard tossed into M/S confinement while we’re at it.” Assault snacked a fist into his palm. “No one is allowed to be energetic today. No one.”

“Morning guys! How was your Halloween?”

The other exception to the rule zipped in and over to the foreboding corner of the cafeteria, already munching a bagel, and cheerfully ignoring his co-workers’ murderous stares. “Mine was great. Brushstroke’s get-together was actually a block party. Street vendors and everything, you guys missed out. No worries, I picked you up some souvenirs, I’ll hand ‘em out later. My whole patrol route was pretty quiet, too, nice change of pace.” Velocity hummed to himself, and spread cream cheese over his snack. After a moment he blinked, and looked up at the circle of incredulous faces around the table. “Oh, and I think I have a girlfriend now. Or maybe I’m engaged? The Baachans weren’t really clear on that point, heh.”

Triumph stared at the speedster for a moment more, then turned to the others and raised a hand. “All in favor of tanking Velocity too, say aye.”

“Aye.”

* * *

Yuuta trudged up the unmarked sidewalk towards the stately old house. It wasn’t in the Heights or one of the real upper-class areas of the city, but maybe it had been before the money moved. The properties around here were showing signs of age creeping up on them, so maybe it was only a matter of time before they settled into the aching mold of poverty, too, but for now it seemed a decent enough place to live, all things considered. Sort of in between gang-claimed areas, so probably not much violence got around, and there were some well-used bus stops, which made this whole errand
He trudged along the sidewalk, dragged his feet past the rows of hedges and small fences, and took his sweet time passing the black mailbox with the embossed letters spelling out ‘Barnes.’

Yuuta rang the doorbell twice before he heard a chain slide out of a lock, and the door opened to frame the less-than-imposing figure of Mr. Barnes. The man started a bit in recognition.

“Hello, sir,” Yuuta carefully did not sigh, “Is Emma awake? Grandmother sent me with melon bread.”

“Right-- you’re that boy. Ah, I’ll… go check.” And he shut the door, leaving Yuuta on the front step. Ingrate. Now Yuuta did sigh. Checking in on the Crazy Chick was not his idea of a good use of a Saturday morning, and Crazy Chick was also not his idea of a worthy recipient of Baachan’s secret family recipe melon bread, but Baachan Said So, and thus, here he was. He really, really hoped this wasn’t the start of a trend.

Mr. Barnes came back to the door and let him in, with a stern warning about being on his best behavior. As though Yuuta’s grandmother wouldn’t divine any such misconduct and take appropriate measures. Yuuta muttered some platitude to assuage him, and headed up the indicated stairs, towards the ‘third door on the right,’ as he’d been told. And damn, maybe he’d have to re-think his dismissal of this house as not being real upper-class now that he’d seen the inside. Someone here had good taste.

Yuuta knocked on Emma’s door, heard a wordless reply from inside, and took that as permission to enter. The girl herself was seated on her bed, with a plush comforter dragged up around her head and shoulders to form a safe cave of goose down. Her hair was unkempt, there were dark bags under her eyes, and her nails had been bitten ragged from stress. So all in all, she looked much the same as she had when Yuuta had brought her home with him a week ago, only without all the spiderwebs. At least her eyes were only haunted, instead of the glassy emptiness they’d been while Baachan had fuss and combed cobwebs out of her hair. Yuuta had preferred to let the old woman take charge of that, since she’d have way better judgement for dealing with shellshocked girls than he would. He’d been right, of course, but it seemed even that was going to find a way to bite him in the ass:

(“Who put such things in your head, silly girl? Tsk tsk. No matter. Baachan set you straight.”)

Because the odds that his dearest grandmother had not found a new project were currently zero to zilch.

“What do you want?” the Crazy Chick muttered from the safety of the Blanketcave.

“To leave. But I gotta deliver this first.” Yuuta tossed the ziploc bag of bread rolls onto the girl’s bed. She stared at them, apparently dumbfounded. Yuuta sighed. “It’s melon bread-- you had some at my place, remember? Basically rolls with cookie dough stuff on them. Grandmother wanted me to check in on you, see if you’re feeling better.”

Emma picked at one corner of the bag, testing to see if it would bite her. “Why?”

“I told her you hadn’t come back to school yet. She doesn’t approve, by the way.”

At the mention of school, the girl flinched and drew back further into her nest. “Not going.” Ugh. If Yuuta reported back that the Crazy Chick still wasn’t coming to school, he was sure that Baachan
would find a way to make it his responsibility until she did. Best to nip this in the bud.

“Look-- Crazy Chick-- I get it, okay? You almost got eaten by a spider and that sucks. It happens.”

Oh gods, was this his life now? No, no don’t think about it, just act like you know what you’re doing. “And you’re scared, because that’s a fucking scary thing to have happen. But you’re not getting any less scared hiding in here.”

“I’m not scared!”

Yuuta scoffed. “Yeah you are. You’re crazy, but not that crazy. Anybody’d be scared of a spider.”

“And I’m not crazy!” The girl abruptly flung her blanket down with the outburst. “I know what I saw! You saw it too, it was there, it was real, and-- and my parents, they-- they don’t--”

Ah, shit. Now she was crying. Yuuta felt a small trickle of guilt for his word choice. He sighed, and decided to risk the Wrath of Baachan by sitting on the foot of the girl’s bed, uninvited. “Yeah, I know. It was real-- Baachan called it a jorogumo, a spider demon. Sorry about your folks, I know most people wouldn’t understand.”

“It-- it was real. She was real.” He heard her breath hitch. “I-- I trusted her.”

Yuuta thought back to the youkai’s illusion of ‘Karen.’ Blonde hair that, in hindsight, seemed inclined to curls, and a slightly too-wide mouth. A tall, thin body. The spider’s veil had been unsettlingly familiar, and Yuuta had to wonder exactly why it had chosen such a guise. Wonder, but not touch with a 10-foot pole if he could avoid it.

“Yes, youkai do that. Trick people, then stab ‘em in the back. Real bitches. But yeah, you didn’t make that up, it happened.” He scrubbed a hand through his hair. “Anyway, I got more charms from the Miko and slapped ‘em up around the school, so it’s looking pretty safe there.”

Not all of the ofuda, of course. He wasn’t stupid. Yuuta was keeping a few of them on his person at all times, because if Baachan’s old tales were actually maybe true, then like hell was he letting them take him by surprise. Sure, the guys all ribbed him for it, but they weren’t quite as mocking about it now that they’d had to help clean up the greasy smear that had been ‘Karen.’ Getting to boss people around on threat of the Oni being upset was pretty great.

Emma grimaced, and pulled the comforter back up to form her cave. “I can’t-- not if it’s her that’s-- I can’t let her protect me.”

Yuuta revised his opinion to a 20-foot pole, and gave the Crazy Chick a sideways glance. “What makes you think she’s doing it for you? The Miko made some more charms because I asked her to. I didn’t even mention what happened. Hell, I don’t even think I’ve ever even heard her say your name, I had to ask your dad. I dunno what twisted nemesis thing you’ve got going on, but it’s one-sided, I can tell you that much, Crazy Chick.”

Emma stared at him from her sanctuary, jaw dropped and eyes wide. Yuuta waved one hand lazily through the air, because that was the kind of thing Souta did, and he always made it look cool. “Look-- I don’t really care, either. Stay here, go to school, whatever. Do what you want. I gave you the bread, so I’m outta here.”

“Just-- yeah, go! And tell Ba-whoever to leave me alone, too!” Oh, hell no.
Yuuta turned and gave the girl a swift poke to the forehead, pushing her back with a startled squeak. “Nu-huh. You listen here, Crazy Chick. I don’t care what you do, but I do care what you say. Her name’s not Ba-whatever. ‘Baachan’ is a term of endearment, from ‘Obaasan.’ It means Grandmother, and it’s used by family.” She started to scowl, and he poked again, silencing her. “If she wants to let you call her baachan, that’s her business, but you will respect that privilege. Got it?”

When she nodded, Yuuta huffed, and stood. He walked to the door, but turned back to face her before leaving. “So. Baachan wants you to go to school. Am I gonna see you there?”

“...yeah. Sure.”

“Cool. She’ll be happy to hear it. See you later, Crazy Chick.”
“Morning.”

“Morning, Chessman. You look cheerful today.” Miss Militia’s eyes crinkled at the edges above her bandana, even as she took a step back to allow the half squad of plastic soldiers continue marching by, each carrying a package. From the vibrant ink stamp, they’d been recently cleared from the Rig’s mailroom vetting. Chessman made an agreeable noise, then waved his soldiers to keep going without him.

“Yeah, I suppose I am.” He smiled, and the bright look in his eyes belied the humble response. Chessman had his hands full as well, a few manila folders of paperwork stacked atop one of his hard cases, the ones filled with foam cut into compartments. The older hero used them to carry and store his good models, which might have gone a ways towards explaining his mood. “Christmas came early, as far as I’m concerned. I’m just off to my workshop now, if you want to hear me ramble on about it.”

“Excellent, Assault will be devastated. Let’s go.”

The pair made light conversation on the way to Chessman’s workshop, mostly on the visual design of Miss Militia’s favorite gun configurations. Anything made by her power tended to take on a greenish tone, but when he was feeling ambitious Chessman occasionally asked her to model some for him, so he could get a better idea of how to paint the weaponry on his pawns. Miss Militia had wondered, once or twice, if Chessman used his pawns as a general conversation starter, but the ones she’d seen had gotten better detail on the armaments over time, so perhaps it was just a Tinker thing. Or just a hobbyist thing.

They soon reached Chessman’s workshop and Miss Militia grabbed a stool to settle on, as Chessman and his pawns busied themselves with putting away his newest acquisitions and returning to inanimacy, respectively. The walls of Chessman’s workshop were covered in shelves, neatly packed with the various and sundry supplies that his power demanded. Dozens of tiny bottles of paint, a rack full of airbrush parts and hoses, stands full of brushes and stencils and hobby knives; it was all quite well organized, perhaps even more so than Armsmaster’s lab... but, then again, Chessman didn’t have compartments full of tools and inventions built into drop ceilings and walls until the work space resembled a closet more than a room. That Chessman kept things stored and displayed in an easy, logical manner was perhaps the best argument against the older hero being a real Tinker.

“So, spill. You’re not usually so excited over a handful of new vehicles to assemble.”

“Well, that’s because I didn’t get a shipment for my armory. Well, I did, but that’s not what-- oh nevermind. Take a look at this.” He set the armored case on the clearest spot of his worktable and opened it up. Aside from the protective foam blocks, it was nearly empty, with only a single occupant in the center. Chessman pulled the colorful object out from its nest and proudly set it on the table. Miss Militia blinked, and leaned a bit closer. Rather than one of Chessman’s usual pawns, this was a small statuette of some sort of monster, a multi-headed thing that looked like several animals melted together.
“And… what am I looking at?” she asked.

“It’s a Chimera. My daughter left it for me as a present.” He was beaming. “Painted it herself-- which is why it looks so much better than mine, ha!”

“Makes sense, with her power…”

“Oh, no, that’s not what I meant. There’s a difference between being able to paint, and being able to apply paint to things. I’m most definitely in the latter category, but Taylor’s been painting for years. Look-- see the dragon’s neck and mouth?” He picked up a dry paintbrush to use as a pointer, and indicated where the red scales of the lizard head gave way to gold. “She’s imitated a light source here, for the fire breath. You can see the highlights and shadows.”

“That is impressive,” she agreed, and eyed the model more closely. A thought struck her, and she looked back up at Chessman. “I’m a bit surprised you have it here. I’d think that R&D would want to check for power interactions between you and Brushstroke.”

“Oh, they do. And I told them where they could put their focus testing.” His voice was clipped. “This is a gift, not a weapon. I’m not letting anyone shoot holes in it. I actually only brought it in because I want to get a paint sealant on it, and this is where I keep the good stuff.”

“I understand, but I doubt the PRT will see it that way. You might stir up trouble, Chessman.”

“Director already knows I’m stubborn as a goat, and I know a few things about being obstructive. They want to push, I can push back just as hard.” He left the table long enough to pick out a spray can of something from a shelf, then started gathering his airbrush materials. Miss Militia just shook her head with a smile. Chessman’s previous career had left him a familiarity with bureaucracy, but of a more roughshod sort than the administration--or public relations--would prefer. She decided to steer the conversation back to safer ground.

“So what’s the occasion, then? It’s a bit early for Christmas-- your birthday?”

“Ehhhh… not exactly. I think it’s actually an apology. There was a note and a paintbrush with it, they’re in the case too.” Chessman sat back down, and began assembling the airbrush with lackluster motions. “An apology. Like there’s anything I wouldn’t forgive her for.”

“Young people tend to think even small mistakes can be the end of the world. What did she want to apologize for?” Miss Militia fetched the folded note out of the case, and took a glance at it. She re-read it a couple times, just to make sure that what she was seeing was real. “Good Dog… stole your credit card.”

“It would explain a few things.”

“…do I want to ask about the browser history?”

“I’m certainly not. There are some things fathers are not meant to know.”

Miss Militia had been working with the Wards long enough to know the truth in that statement. “Amen to that… hm.”

“What?”
“You said she gave you a paintbrush?” At his nod, Miss Militia checked the case again and pulled out the object in question. It looked handmade, and considerably more… old fashioned? Than the ones arranged around Chessman’s worktable. The black and white bristles didn’t feel like synthetic fibers, more like actual animal hair. As Chessman had said, it seemed to embody the difference between painting, and applying paint to things. “You said she doesn’t know about you being a parahuman, right? And she hasn’t confessed to being one either?”

“Peas in a pod, huh?”

“Or she’s sharper than you think. Brushstroke gave you a paintbrush, her own iconic tool, and a model-- your iconic tool. Albeit a monster instead of a tank.” She gestured at him with the paintbrush in question. “Might this be a more official statement?”

Chessman opened his mouth to reply, then halted. “I hadn’t considered that. It’s… possible, sure. Taylor’s certainly gotten a lot more diplomatic than I’d have ever expected.” To put it mildly. Nobody was sure exactly what Director Piggot was writing in her reports about the local situation, but it seemed a good bet that it was being severely edited. ‘Teen parlays with most dangerous capes on East coast, subverts the rest by way of dog, news at 11.’

Chessman groaned, and pinched at the bridge of his nose as both his personal and professional lives decided to complicate each other again. “Great-- what does that even imply? There’s simple enough explanations for it, but you’re right, it’s also too on the nose to be an easy coincidence. Does that make it a gift from Taylor, or Brushstroke? Is it an apology, or a-- a peace treaty?”

“Good Dog certainly had no trouble identifying E88 capes out of costume. It’d be logical to assume Brushstroke either already knows, or can reasonably expected to find out, the identities of Protectorate members.” Which was a worrying thought. Even if Brushstroke made no indication of ever wanting to use such knowledge, there were plenty of people who would, and some of them would not have a problem with extracting that information from a teenage girl-- one who openly advertised her status as a cape. From the greyish cast of Chessman’s face, the thought had occurred to him as well-- and likely not for the first time, Miss Militia realized. The heroine didn’t keep a very deep social life outside of work; she tried to imagine, for a moment, having perhaps nieces or nephews who could fall into the crossfire of a villain’s grudge against her.

“…she’s got a power of her own to protect her, should the worst happen,” she said, and tried to ignore the parable of Fleur. Chessman didn’t look particularly comforted. Perhaps he was thinking of New Wave as well. Miss Militia gave his hand on the table a quick pat, then she stood and moved to the door to leave. Before she did, she turned her head and said over her shoulder, “And, Chessman?”

“Hm?”

“You asked if it was a gift, or a peace offering. Brushstroke doesn’t seem to make much distinction between her identities, so… perhaps it’s both.” A slight smile started on Chessman’s face, and Miss Militia returned the expression. Maybe teens weren’t the only ones to turn mistakes into disasters.

* * *

The city bus rumbled and bounced as it drove, the old roads and old suspension not doing much for the passengers’ comfort. Yuuta was pretty used to it, even if he tried to beg a ride from Souta when possible. The bus ambled along its route, and when it stopped at Yuuta’s destination it wasn’t as resentful a delay as it had been, a few months ago. The rusted sign marking the stop nearest the
Pawprint Shrine—still a good three or four blocks away—had gotten enough traffic that sometimes, the driver didn’t even need someone to pull the cord to decide to stop there. Yuuta pulled it anyway, and departed.

The walk was brisk, because the weather was finally remembering to be the same, and Yuuta reached the marked sidewalk quickly and began to follow it. Hopefully the Miko would be there. She’d started adding a couple of exorcism and warding ofuda to the container of completed charms near their little donation box, but Yuuta needed more than a couple, and he’d not managed to catch her at school the past day or two. Stupid math project, causing trouble for him again. Yuuta caught sight of the red torii and quickened his pace, hurrying down the empty sidewalk until a hand clamped onto his shoulder and squeezed.

A push and his own startled turn brought Yuuta face to face with the leering red mask of the Oni.

“You have been busy,” Lung’s chief enforcer said. “You will explain to me with what, and why it requires assuming the threat of my wrath.” The hand on his shoulder tightened, and Oni Lee dragged the youth away from the safety of the black paint pawprints, and out of sight of the torii gate.

Panic was well-established when the assassin finally stopped, inside an empty building a couple lots away from the shrine. He turned Yuuta to face him again, then took a single step back, one hand on the weapon at his hip, and waited. Yuuta swallowed, his heart beating so fast he could feel it in his fingertips. He didn’t have any excuses prepared and he was too startled to come up with one on the fly, so at least he was going to die without being a liar. Baachan would be proud.

“Gomenasai, Oni Lee-sama. I-- I needed help putting up ofuda, so I mentioned your name, and said it was to keep the Miko from being, uh, upset. Because then you’d get upset.”

The red mask stared at him. One of the cape’s fingers started to tap against the pommel of his tool. “Ofuda. And why?”

“Th-- there was a demon at the school. A jorogumo.” The assassin’s finger stopped its impatient motion. Yuuta took that as a sign to continue. “It was killed by some of the Miko’s exorcism slips. So I got some more and had the guys help put them up around the city.”

“You make this claim with a straight face.”

“It… it’s the truth, Oni Lee-sama. There-- there really was a youkai, and--”

“I know.”

Something in the ABB cape’s posture relaxed, even though his finger resumed its tapping on the blade at his hip. Yuuta felt blood slowly return to his face as the assassin continued. “There have been… strange sightings, recently. Things that cannot be explained by the presence of capes.” Oni Lee nodded, perhaps to himself. “A Yūrei ceased its pursuit of me when I passed one such paper slip, two nights past.”

The Oni pulled his hand away from his blade finally, and instead slipped his fingers into a small pocket of his vest. The assassin’s other hand reached forward and snatched one of Yuuta’s wrists, prompting another heart-stopping thud inside the teen’s ribcage, but the cape merely pressed a wad of bills into his hand and folded Yuuta’s numb fingers around it. “You show good initiative. Keep up your rounds, make sure to cover our territory. And pay the Miko fairly. I will check in after one week.” The Oni punctuated his order with the pitter-patter of falling ashes, leaving Yuuta alone.
Taylor liked cleaning. It could be a chore, particularly when sprung on her unexpectedly, but for the most part she regarded the whole of it fondly. There was a certain satisfaction in polish, carefully wiping away dirt or age to reveal the natural luster beneath, whether it was in the warm browns and golds of wood, or the cheerful shine of metals, or more rarely the hidden color and temperance of polished stones. There was a soothing quality to cleaning floors, by mop, broom, or vacuum, followed by the very simple joy of being in a place that was freshly tidied. ‘Cleanliness is next to godliness,’ as the saying went. When she shared these thoughts with Sunny, the wolf chuffed agreeably, then stayed still so Taylor could continue brushing dried mud and twigs out of her fur. Sunshine could only ever maintain godliness for about 5 minutes, tops.

Flickering shadows along the ground heralded a visitor, which Sunny’s happy bark helped to identify as Purity. Taylor waved as the glowing woman descended, turning her head to look at the Wishing Tree as she did. “Good afternoon, Purity. Would you like some tea?”

“Oh-- no, but thank you. I’m not here for long today, I just wanted to ask you a favor.”

“Oh? What is it that you need?” Taylor knew better than to agree before knowing what was at stake. She set aside Sunny’s brush and the wolf stood, then shook out her coat, sending bits of fluff flying everywhere. Damnit, she had just used a lint roller on her skirt, too. Taylor huffed and gave the grinning canine a playful shove, then turned her attention back to the visiting villain. Purity landed– sort of– and drifted a couple inches above the ground over to where the wolf and girl sat on the steps of the shrine.

“Nothing big, I hope. I just wanted to know if you could send a message for me. To, uh… Battery.” Taylor blinked. The cape noticed her surprise and nodded, the motion just visible through her corona. “Yeah-- I’d do it myself, but the Protectorate doesn’t like me flying over the Rig.”

Taylor had a sudden vision of Purity dropping a note wrapped around a brick onto the Protectorate’s base. “I see… um, can I ask why?”

“It’s nothing bad, I promise. I just wanted to know if you could send a message for me. To, uh… Battery.” Purity started to twist her hands together in a nervous motion, before remembering herself and settling them back at her sides. Taylor frowned, and ran her fingers through Sunny’s ruff as she thought. It was an unusual request, to be sure, and to be honest Taylor wasn’t certain if it was something that she should do. Purity, however courteous she was as a guest, was a member of the E88-- just as much as Lung or Oni Lee were ABB. Taylor didn’t want to get involved with any of the gangs’ businesses if she could avoid it.

On the other hand… Purity’s request was for a meeting on neutral ground. Perhaps this was the only way she had of contacting someone outside the Empire circles. And that, at least, would fall under Shrine Business-- facilitating cordial, nonviolent meetings seemed like something a neutral party should do. And Battery specifically, not Battery and Assault, or anyone else? Taylor did a quick mental accounting of the local heroes. Miss Militia and Battery were the only women in the Brockton Bay Protectorate roster, and of the two, Battery was blonde. Assuming this was a personal matter and not a very ill-advised recruitment pitch… then Battery was probably the most likely to be trustworthy, from Purity’s point of view. Taylor glanced at Sunny and caught the wolf’s slight nod.

“I can pass along a message, sure. Do you want me to try and set a time to meet?”
“Uh-- sure. Just keep it to yourself, alright? You and Battery.” Taylor nodded, and thought she could see the ghost of a smile on the glowing woman’s face. “Thank you, Taylor. Let me know if there’s something I can do in return, I appreciate this.”

Actually, since she mentioned it… “Well-- didn’t you say you worked in real estate at some point? I’ve got some questions about investments.”

She ended up making a pot of tea after all, as she explained her plans for the bakery-to-be next door. She wasn’t really pleased with the Empire cape’s promise to ‘make sure she didn’t get cheated,’ but Purity had a few insights to share, and promised to bring by some research on local rates, and some options. Taylor thanked her all the same, and waved goodbye when Purity left, floating up over the Wishing Tree and away. She then set herself to cleaning up as much of the flyaway fur that hadn’t been caught by the wind already. It was a pity it wasn’t Spring, there was probably so much material for birds to build nests from by now.

Footsteps staggered up the cobblestone path as she was finishing, and Taylor’s greeting caught itself in her throat. “Yuuta, what happened? You look awful.” Oh man, there was a sheen of sweat on the boy’s face, and he looked rather pale. Was he getting sick? Taylor glanced once at the near-evening sky, thought about her still-undone homework, and made an executive decision.

“You know what? Come inside, so you don’t catch a chill. Then tell me what’s happened.” She was going to have to buy more tea, soon. Shrine Business was never done.
Chapter 36

36

Ring-ding! Ring-ding!

Taylor carefully guided her bicycle down the thoroughfare, occasionally ringing the bell fastened to the handlebars to warn nearby pedestrians-- and admittedly, also because it was just a fun sound. Sunny was jogging happily alongside her, tongue lolling and constantly turning her head to look at the near-throng of people, this close to the Protectorate ferry. Several of those people were returning the favor, looking curiously and even pointing at the girl and her wolf. Were the tourists looking at Sunny, Taylor wondered, or had the PRT made her ‘Brushstroke’ alias public knowledge, somehow? And someWHY, more importantly… oh, perhaps because she was registered as a Rogue? Man, she really needed to check out PHO one of these days. Taylor had used to browse the website pretty often, but these days she was just too busy, a trend that didn’t seem to be going away anytime soon. She made a mental note to try and eat lunch in the computer lab at school tomorrow, maybe see if there was a thread for recently introduced ‘parahumans.’

The thought elicited a short laugh, and Sunshine turned her furry head towards Taylor, one doggy eyebrow raised in curiosity. “Heh, nothing, Sunny. Just thinking back to that last meeting we had with the Protectorate. The, uh, calmer parts of it, anyway.”

The wolf chuffed, and her eyes gleamed with mischief. Taylor stuck her tongue out at her. “No, that doesn’t mean I need a repeat! Keep your surprises to yourself for this one, would you?” Whiiiiine. “I don’t care how comfy she is, we’re keeping this thing with Battery nice and professional.” Sunshine heaved a dramatic sigh, and sat down to wait as Taylor parked her bike in a spare slot of the racks nearest the ferry access gate, then threaded the security chain and locked it. “Okay, done. Let’s get going, Sunny.”

The pair got in line next to a tour group. Taylor tried not to feel self-conscious, standing near so many overdressed adults (and a few in Hawaiian shirts, of course) when she herself was wearing some paint-stained overalls and a red sweatshirt. While this errand was Shrine Business, there was a distinct possibility that it also counted as Cape Business, since she was setting up a meeting between two of them. Accordingly, Taylor had decided on taking a painter’s mask with her, but it was going to hang loose at her neck until she knew for sure whether or not wearing a mask in a high-security area would get her tased. Common sense, really.

Once the ferry arrived at the Rig, Taylor and Sunny broke off from the tour group, and headed inside to find an information desk. Pleasingly, there was one in plain sight, though there were also a number of PRT troopers and, as Taylor glanced around at the walls and ceiling, a number of what were probably containment foam sprayers (buildings didn’t need quite that many fire sprinklers). A thought started to nag at Taylor, but she brushed it aside in favor of giving the wary receptionist a bright smile.
“Hello! I’m Taylor Hebert, AKA Brushstroke. I’m here to deliver a message to Battery, is she available?”

“The Brockton Bay Protectorate has a PO box where you can send fan mail and nonhazardous packages. I’ll get you an address card…”

“Erm, no, that’s-- I mean I need to hand-deliver it. I know I don’t have an appointment, but it won’t take long, really.” She had promised to keep it quiet, after all. Taylor caught the slight thinning of the receptionist’s lips, and hurried to continue. “I can wait a bit, or come back, but-- really, if it’s not too much trouble, could you… page her, maybe?”

The receptionist frowned a bit further, but she started typing, so something was happening, at least. Taylor shuffled her feet a bit awkwardly, and glanced around at the PRT troopers who were rather unabashedly paying attention to her, standing at the information desk. A couple of them looked a bit closer than they had been previously, too. Taylor locked eyes with the nearest one, then looked up and pointed at the nozzles on the ceiling. “Hey, are those for Containment Foam? They don’t look like fire sprinklers.” The trooper tilted his head, just slightly-- he probably had a radio earpiece, come to think of it-- then nodded. Taylor looked back up at the sprayers, baffled.

“…this is the Protectorate Base. It’s probably the most fortified place in the city, and it’s full of PRT soldiers and heroes. Plus it’s in the bay, so there’s no easy way in or out. Do… do people really walk in the front door, looking for trouble?” She thought she heard a chuckle from one of the other nearby troopers. “Man. Capes are weird.”

“Miss Brushstroke? Battery will see you shortly.” The receptionist hung up a small phone Taylor hadn’t even noticed past the lip of her desk. And so quiet, too-- maybe there was Tinkertech involved? Neat! Taylor thanked the woman, then followed her pointing finger towards an elevator near the back of the lobby. The doors opened as she approached, and out came Battery, the heroine’s costume with its glowing lines just as she’d remembered it. Relief spread through Taylor. She’d been pretty worried, to be honest. Purity had sounded rather stressed when she’d made the request, and Taylor hadn’t been sure if the Protectorate heroes would actually let her deliver an invitation by hand. It looked like the straightforward approach had paid off, though.

Battery’s face held a smile as she approached, saying, “Hello, Brushstroke. Welcome to the Rig! Did you come by for a tour? I can show you around a bit.” Was… she offering to show her around the Rig? Like, inside of it? Where the heroes were? Not just the public tour? Taylor fought against the pitter-pat heartbeat of her excitement. She was here professionally, she had Shrine Business to do.

(Would it be unprofessional to ask for an autograph? No, focus Taylor, focus!)

“I’d love to, really! But I’m actually here for business, of a sort. M-maybe some other time, if the offer is still open?” Oh please oh please oh please.

Battery smiled a bit wider, the expression turning into a bit of a knowing grin. “Sure. I’ll see how much clearance I can get you, maybe even a quick look at Armsmaster’s and Chessman’s labs. And I’m sure we can arrange a visit with the Wards too, if you’re interested.”

“That-- that’d be great, I-- er, ahem. Anyway, I came by to deliver this to you.” This, at
least, she’d known how to prepare for! Taylor took out a sealed envelope and handed it over. At her gesture, Battery opened the letter with a quick tear and pulled out the hand-inked invitation card Taylor had made up. She saw the moment Battery reached the name of her intended meeting partner, because her eyes widened.

“You don’t have to, of course, but… this person does want to meet with you. And the Pawprint Shrine is neutral ground, so it’s a good place for conducting peaceful business…” Taylor paused, then offered, “I’ll have tea and snacks prepared, too. If that makes a difference.”

“This is-- I can’t agree to this off the bat, Brushstroke.”

“I understand. They did want some privacy, though, so please use your best judgement and discretion.”

“Right…”

“Oh! And we have a phone now! With an answering machine! So you can RSVP.” Taylor smiled. Even that simple insurance against a repeat of last time was reason to be cheerful about.

“Oh, do you?” Battery glanced down at the card again, and spotted the phone number near the bottom. “Well, that’s… good. A few of us heroes were actually thinking of stopping by the shrine, sometimes, if that is acceptable?”

“Oh, of course! Pawprint Shrine is open to everyone. If you’re thinking more about having tea, or need to see me for some reason, you can leave a message for me. I’m free most days after school lets out.” Taylor kept smiling, even as she once again internally wondered exactly when casually inviting parahumans for tea had become something she’d accepted. That was probably Oni Lee’s fault, in retrospect. Oh, and while she was thinking of it, Taylor made a mental note to get some more matcha. She’d found recipes for cooking with the green tea powder that she suspected both the assassin and Old Mrs. Henrick would appreciate. She wanted to have something prepared for the next time she caught the ABB cape at the shrine, because after Yuuta’s rather confusing string of confessions, she’d promised to have a talk with the teleporter on his behalf.

Though, now she had some questions of her own to ask. Lots of questions. Oni Lee was just at the top of her list.

Taylor snapped her focus back to Battery, catching up to what the heroine was saying. “...and do that sometime, thank you. Was there anything else you needed, then?”

“Oh! Um, no, that was it. Thanks for seeing me, too.” Wait-- no, there had been. The Protectorate was on that list of people to ask questions too. And now was the perfect opportunity to set up an appointment and-- Taylor halted that line of thought. If the heroes were considering coming by the Shrine, she could ask them about recent… unusual activity then, in a more casual setting. That seemed a safer bet.

“Not a problem, Brushstroke. Have a good day, you and Good Dog.” The heroine trailed off for a second. “Did Good Dog come with you?”

“Sunny? Of course, she’s right--” Taylor turned to her right, where Sunny most
definitely was not. She turned to her left, and there was a distinct lack of wolf there, too.
“Um…”

_Bark! Bark!_ Sunshine’s excitement could be heard across the crowded lobby. Taylor turned in the direction of a large circle of onlookers, where—oh _no_. Taylor mangled an apology and a good-bye in a few syllables, then rushed towards the flashing cameras. Battery followed quick on her heels, but Taylor knew there was nothing the heroine could do to prevent this. Not even Scion could help, now.

Sunny had found the gift shop.

Taylor managed to elbow her way as politely as possible through the ring of tourists, many of whom had phones raised or cameras readied, and the rest of whom were alternating between excited chatter and helpless cooing. Sunny, of course, was at the epicenter, and the canine had managed to wear a truly impressive amount of Protectorate merchandise. There were Velocity brand sneakers flopping loose on her paws, a pair of Kid Win utility belts and a Dauntless shield hanging on her back like a saddle, a replica of Vista’s green lenses over her eyes, just visible under the Assault ballcap, which itself was nearly engulfed by the pretend lion mane of the kid’s foam Triumph-inspired visor. The wolf had even managed to fit herself into a black windbreaker jacket, with colored lines sewn over it in mimicry of Battery’s costume. Taylor spotted stickers of the different Wards caught in her fur, a Clockblocker watch on her tail, some Chessman-themed tank plushies stuck in the Kid Win belts—Taylor was sure there was more, but her brain shut down and refused to process any further once she noticed the foam toy halberd at Sunny’s feet.

The wolf _wuffed_, and picked up the pretend-weapon in her teeth. Sunny dipped into a play bow, her tail wagging. Taylor couldn’t see the wolf’s eyes through her many hats, but she knew. She _knew_ what the wolf was planning.

“Sunny, no.” The crowd had backed away from her, and now Taylor was unfortunately sure she was being recognized as Sunny’s partner in crime, and not-crime. Anticrime.

“Sunny, sto-- ack!” The wolf tensed, then jumped and somersaulted in the air, flinging the halberd over the top of the crowd, back towards the elevator. Either from a you-break-it-you-buy-it instinct, or just habit, Taylor dove for it.

* * *

“...in lighter news, our next story involves a bit of mischief at the Protectorate base today, when local parahuman rogue pair Brushstroke and Good Dog stopped by for a visit. The girl and her dog have been making a bit of a buzz recently, after local PRT spokesmen credited them for their assistance in capturing a number of E88 villains. The pair stopped by the Rig today for business relating to the Pawprint Shrine, rumored to be an accorded neutral territory on the East side of the city, but it seems Good Dog’s attention wandered a bit just in time for a tour group to get a front row seat to the show.”

Taylor sat on the couch, remote frozen in her hand as she stared at the screen. The evening news announcer droned on, promising more information on the Pawprint Shrine rogues, covert urban development, and the rumors surrounding the ‘ABB-
Union.’ Through it all, the screen behind her showcased pictures taken by one of the tourists, immortalizing forever the moment Taylor caught Sunny’s long pass of the toy halberd by plowing directly into the real halberd’s owner, who had picked exactly the wrong time to emerge from the elevator.

A car door slammed shut just outside, followed shortly by the rattle of keys in the lock as Taylor’s father returned home from work. Taylor hit the power button on the remote hard enough to sink the rubber into the innocent television utility’s frame. Danny Hebert stepped into the kitchen, shrugged off his coat and set down his duffel bag, and called out, “Evening, Taylor! ...how was your day?”

“The usual,” she replied.
Tea kettle full, check. Snacks prepared, check. Taylor had decided to try her hand at actual hors d’oeuvres, and had a serving tray of deviled eggs and tiny, fancy sandwiches. Which were not really sandwiches, some of them. More parts of sandwiches, brought together in culinary brotherhood by a toothpick. Sunny had been making longing glances at her rice steamer earlier, but Taylor had been firm. Just enough fanciness to hopefully remind Battery and Purity of courtesy, but also not Asian in origin to put Purity on edge. Or Battery, actually— ABB territory and all.

Whether or not Sunny approved of her choice initially, the wolf was more than happy to taste-test (and purloin) her efforts. So that was a green light on that.

Taylor gave the tea-setting one more check, then glanced at her wrist. Then she went into the office to check the clock, because she was in her new winter skirts and wasn’t wearing a watch. Cardigans weren’t exactly traditional wear, but she wasn’t exactly certified as a shrine attendant anyway. And it was cold out. Practicality trumped fashion in most cases.

“4:30, they’ll be here soon. And it’s already getting dark out! This is why I hate winter,” Taylor grumped. Sunny, lying near the space heater, thumped her tail in agreement. “We should get some outdoor lights, huh? You ever see those… round lantern things, the paper ones? Think there’s a sturdier version we could get?”

Musings on exterior decoration had to be put aside for the moment, as a flickering light outside heralded Purity’s arrival. Taylor opened the door and waved to the glowing woman, ushering her inside. “Hello, Purity. You’re early.”

“I am, yes. Wanted to make sure there wasn’t a Birdcage transport lined up.” Taylor huffed, and Purity put up her hands. “Sorry, no offense. I know you wouldn’t set anything like that up. Oh, and I wanted to hand this off to you, before I forget.” She set a stuffed manila on the desk, which Taylor picked up and gave a once-over. It looked like the real estate research the Empire cape had promised, complete with typed notes explaining some of the finer points. Excellent. Taylor offered a thanks and put the folder in a nearby filing cabinet, to be perused at length later.

“You’re welcome, Taylor. Let me know if you have any questions, of course, and I’ll be happy to--” Purity cut off as the faint sound of a car door slamming shut outside reached them. Taylor moved around her pull aside the curtains on the window and glance out.

“Oh, there’s Battery! And… Assault. Hm.” Beside her, the corona of Purity’s power brightened a bit. “Don’t worry, I’ll greet them and we’ll figure something out, okay? Okay.” Taylor didn’t wait for a reply, instead straightening her shoulders and walking out of the office to meet her new guests halfway.

“Good afternoon, Battery, Assault. I’m glad you could make it.” Taylor stopped in the middle of the path, and smiled at the Protectorate heroes. “We’re in the office where it’s warmer. Please, come in.”

“Sure thing, Brushstroke.” Assault’s voice was a bit more tense than she remembered it. Well, even he had to have limits on playfulness, she supposed. And he would probably be more laid-back if he
had more backup, so that was a point in Battery’s favor for not bringing a full team, she hoped. Taylor led the pair back to the shrine’s office, where Purity’s nerves were already getting the best of her.

“It’s great that you showed up, but I’d really like to speak to Battery alone, if possible.” The glowing woman crossed her arms over her chest.

“You cannot expect to be trusted, Purity.” Battery shook her head, and said, “You’re one of the most dangerous villains on the East Coast. The Protectorate is not sending anyone to be alone with you.”

Well this was off to a fine start. Taylor held up her hands and interrupted, deciding that defusing the situation was a bit more important than a little rudeness. “If I may-- the office is private enough to muffle conversation, but it’s certainly not soundproof against a call for help. And Purity is very obvious about using her powers, anyway. I could sit outside with Assault while you two have your talk. Would that be an agreeable compromise?”

There was a tense moment as both sides considered this, and to Taylor’s surprise it was Purity who broke it first. “Yes-- that would be fine. Thank you, Taylor.”

Battery frowned, but nodded, and after a look voiced an agreement. Taylor put her Good Hostess smile back on, and quickly pulled a couple of chairs into place near the snacks and a fresh teapot. “Excellent. Please, help yourselves, honored guests. Assault and I will be outside-- Sunny, you too.” The wolf nodded and stood, then shook out her coat and padded out the door. Assault gave both Battery and Purity a stern look, then followed. Taylor paused long enough to grab a spare kettle and tea set. Being able to serve only one pot of tea at a time was simply not enough.

Taylor led Assault towards the bamboo gazebo, but the hero put his foot down and shook his head before they got too far from the office. “Nu-uh. Not leaving Battery alone, Brushstroke. We stay on this side of the path.”

Taylor paused, then turned back and nodded. “Sunny, would you grab a mat, please?” The wolf barked once in salute, then darted off towards the tea pavilion and, with a quick bite, started dragging a tatami mat out of the gazebo and over to where Assault waited. As soon as it was in place, Taylor set down the tea set, set out cups and a bowl for Sunny, and settled down on her knees at the end of the mat. “There, that should be agreeable, I hope? Then please, sit down.”

Masks make it a little hard to judge expressions, but to her, Assault looked a little bit baffled as he settled on the mat. “This whole place is a little bit Through the Looking Glass, isn’t it?”

“I’m not sure what you mean,” Taylor said, as she poured the hero and Sunny some tea. “How do you take yours, Mr. Assault?” She added two sugar cubes to Sunny’s, just as the wolf liked it.

“Plain is fine.”

“As you wish.” ‘Through the Looking Glass,’ huh? Well, it was as good a segue as any. And probably the best opportunity she would get. Taylor sipped at her tea, then looked over at her guest. “Though, I was hoping to ask you something, if you don’t mind.”

“Yeah?”

“I’m not sure how to put this, but... well, you’re out and about as one of the Protectorate. Have you by chance seen anything… odd, lately?” Oh, stupid masks. Now what was that stare supposed to
Welcome to the Parahumans Online Message Boards
You are currently logged in, Brandish (Verified Cape) (New Wave)
You are viewing:

- Threads you have replied to
- AND Threads that have new replies
- OR private message conversations with new replies
- Thread OP is displayed
- Fifteen posts per page
- Last ten messages in private message history
- Threads and private messages are ordered by user custom preference.

Topic: Introducing New Wave's newest member!
In: Boards ► Places ► America ► Brockton Bay
Glory Girl (Original Poster) (Verified Cape) (New Wave)
Posted on November 10, 2010:
All hail His Grace, Chekov of the House of Dallon, First of His Name, King of the Andals and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms, and Protector of the Realm.
Long may he reign.

(Showing Page 2 of 3)

► SuzieQ
Replied on November 11, 2010:
OMG

► Chuggawunga
Replied on November 11, 2010:
This. This right here? This is the best.
Come to think of it, do we have a Cape Pet Thread? If not...

► **SuzieQ**  
Replied on November 11, 2010:  
We do not. Let's fix that.

► **IBelieveInHarveyDent** (Cape Groupie)  
Replied on November 11, 2010:  
There's lot of pictures in the "Brushstroke & Good Dog" thread, but of course that's all dog, all the time. Not that it's a bad thing, but y'know, KITTIES

► **Kid Win** (Verified Cape) (Wards ENE)  
Replied on November 11, 2010:  
Oh man I am already jelous. That is a handsome cat right there.  
I don't have any pets but I wish I did.

► **EWilliams** (PRT Office)  
Replied on November 11, 2010:  
I'll be sure to write a memo to update our records. Not an expert, but I'm guessing Chekov is a Master 3, Adorable 6?

► **Glory Girl** (Original Poster) (Verified Cape) (New Wave)  
Replied on November 11, 2010:  
Closer to Adorable 8. I present Exhibit A, the ongoing photo album compiled by loyal vassal and Royal Photographer, Ames. [LINK]

► **Clockblocker** (Verified Cape) (Wards ENE)  
Replied on November 11, 2010:  
Cape pet thread, eh?  
I don't have any now, but I used to own a peach-faced lovebird. Cuddliest thing I ever met. I'll see if I can find some pics and scan them in later.  
Edit: Panacea's into phtotography? learn something new every day

► **LethalMayhem**  
Replied on November 11, 2010:  
Well, you didn't hear it from me, but my sources say Armsmaster's had his eye on maybe getting a dog. Something like this maybe. [LINK]

*(User was infracted for this post)*  
*You know what you did. -Tin_Mother*

► **RainofDays** (Cape Groupie)  
Replied on November 11, 2010:  
Is that a samoyed? IT'S SO FLUFFY I'M GOING TO DIE

► **Myrddin** (Verified Cape)  
Replied on November 11, 2010:  
So cute! Where'd you get him?

► **Glory Girl** (Original Poster) (Verified Cape) (New Wave)  
Replied on November 11, 2010:
Brushstroke stopped by a while back, actually! Didn’t know it was her at the time, but she’d found a bunch of itty bitty kittens and was trying to find homes for them.

End of Page. 1, 2, 3

You have logged out of Parahumans Online.

Well.

Carol Dallon calmly logged off of her computer, moved out of her home office and upstairs with smooth, tranquil movements, and knocked on her daughter’s door to demand some answers with the utmost of serenity. “Victoria.”

“Oh, just a sec—” she called out, and a moment later the doorknob turned. Victoria’s bright smile paled a bit in the face of her mother’s anger. “Yeah mom?”

“Victoria, I want you to explain something to me, please.”

“Sure, what’s up?”

“I was just on PHO, and I see you’ve posted a new thread,” she began, “to introduce the newest member of our family. And I also see that you have not been forthcoming about it.”

“I’m not sure what you mean?”

“Yes, you do. Brushstroke, Victoria?”

“Well— yeah. I mean, I thought you knew. The hair and the bike are pretty distinctive, and…” Carol narrowed her eyes a little. Victoria saw and took a deep breath. “And I stopped by the Shrine to check it out a while back, and she confirmed it. She’s the kitten peddler.”

“And you didn’t think to tell me?”

“What’s it matter? She’s an open cape, mom, like us!”

“She has a Master Rating, that’s why it matters!” Was she playing dumb? Master capes were a serious matter, and Brushstroke had been here, at their home. It didn’t matter if she was an open cape or a peaceful one, that didn’t make her a hero. “We have no idea if she did anything, and then you met with her, alone? Without telling anyone? And then you advertise it to the world on the internet?!”

“Mom, calm down, it’s not—”

“Do not tell me it isn’t a big deal, Victoria. Answer me, why did you do this? Why didn’t you even mention it?” Her daughter was a social butterfly, to be sure, but she had to know better than to go behind her back when it involved capes, and—

“Because— because I didn’t want you to hurt Chekov, okay?!”
Cold shock doused Carol’s anger and prickled along her scalp. “What?”

She felt Victoria’s aura flare and pulse erratically as she gestured, upset clear upon her face and— and was she starting to cry? “I was worried if you thought— if you thought it was some kind of ploy, giving us Chekov, that you’d— give him to a shelter, or something! But everyone loves him! So I thought if— if I posted about him, and made it public, you couldn’t just shove him aside.” Victoria swiped at her eyes, and smeared her mascara along her cheek. She didn’t seem to notice. “I just— he makes everyone so happy, I didn’t want to risk anything.”

“Victoria, you… you thought I’d get rid of Chekov?” How could she? And how could Victoria think such a horrible thing?

“I don’t know! I don’t know, so I wanted to make sure!”

Carol Dallon calmly watched her daughter close the door, shutting her out. She moved back downstairs and back to her office with slow, tranquil steps. She sat down at her chair and stared at the blank screen in a numb mockery of serenity. That was… that was crazy. This was the sort of outburst she’d expect from Amy, not Victoria. Amy was much more prone to drama and teen angst than Victoria. It didn’t make sense. What would even make her think that getting rid of Chekov was even an option?

Carol knew she wasn’t the warmest mother, perhaps. But she wasn’t a tyrant. She had New Wave to run, and a law office to run, and a family to run. She had to keep them all afloat, keep them all safe. God knew Mark wasn’t in the headspace for it, so the lion’s share of stress fell to Carol. Of course she was a bit terse sometimes. But-- Victoria thinking that she had to manipulate her, to keep the family pet? That was uncalled-for.

As if summoned by her thoughts, the slinky form of Chekov jumped up onto her desk with a ‘mew’ of greeting. He was starting to look like a cat, now, and not a ball of fluff with eyes. The half-grown kitten batted a paw at her keyboard for a moment, then simply flopped onto the keys and rolled over, as though to tell her there were far more important matters for her to be concerned with, such as scratching his belly. Carol obliged, her thoughts far away.

Carol Dallon had a nightmare, that night. And while troubled sleep was not so unusual in and of itself, this was not a recurring dream she’d gotten to know. She was standing in the hallway of her home, the main thoroughfare between the rooms of the first floor. She recognised the pictures on the walls, though they were shapeless blurs of color when she turned her head. It was dark, all the lights missing, but she could hear voices from elsewhere in the house, and she followed the sound readily enough.

The voices led her to the family room, where Victoria and Amy and even Mark were huddled on the carpet around a box full of plastic pieces. Some board game, pulled from a closet. The game held no interest for her, but the room was lit and occupied, so she stepped forward to join them. She tripped on a brick.

Carol caught her balance, and shoved at the offending masonry with her foot. It clacked against another brick— the floor was littered with them, the connecting doorway stretched into a hall of its own to accommodate them. She stepped around them, but there were more, and when she looked up the door was full of them. All sorts of bricks— glass blocks, and clay, and cinderblocks— all piled up atop one another. The doorway was a wall, built up between her and her family, and she was on the wrong side of it.
Carol woke up, safe in bed with Mark snoring next to her, and with the furry heat of Chekov curled near her neck. She grabbed the cat and he woke with a chrrrr, then yawned and stretched and twisted himself over like cats do. The kitten snorted at her chin, then sniffed at her cheek and found salt. Carol felt her breath shudder when she took it, and more heat escaped her eyelids. Chekov started licking at her nose and face, and though his rough tongue hurt, it left her clean.
When Battery and Assault reported in, fresh from their rendezvous at the Pawprint Shrine, they found both Armsgmaster and Director Piggot had set up a quick debriefing to go over things. While they were both seated at the table, Armsgmaster was still buried in the wiring and innards of whatever gadget he was working on this week. A bit unusual to see him so distracted during a meeting; he usually gave such things his full apparent attention. From the look on Director Piggot’s face, she didn’t much appreciate it either. The Tinker forestalled any comments by speaking up as soon as Battery and Assault sat down, with a gruff, “I’m making up for lost time. Report-- how was the meeting?”

“Surreal,” both Assault and Battery said at once. The couple glanced at each other and Assault motioned for the heroine to continue first.

“Purity showed up alone, according to Velocity’s quick recon of the area. She was agitated, and insisted on speaking with me alone, without Brushstroke or Assault in the room; Brushstroke took Assault outside to wait while we talked.”

“And you let her?” Piggot asked.

“It was a simple enough compromise-- as Brushstroke pointed out, the building wasn’t soundproof and Purity isn’t subtle. I agreed so long as we were only a few meters away,” Assault chimed in.

“So what did she want?” Armsgmaster looked up for all of a second before going back to his tinkering.

“Out. She wants out-- not just of the E88, but out of Brockton entirely.” Battery took a breath. “And I think she’s willing to roll on Kaiser to get it.”

* * *

Battery sat ramrod straight in the tiny office chair, an untouched cup of tea near one hand and the untouched serving tray of deviled eggs between her and one of the most dangerous Blasters in the United States. Said Blaster had dampened her corona to a more tolerable level, and it wasn’t quite bright enough to hide her nervous shifts and fidgeting. Purity hadn’t touched the tea either, and they sat in strained silence for more than a minute.

“Do you watch much TV? I watch crime shows a lot,” was Purity’s non-sequitur opening. “CSI: Boston until Accord got it shut down for continuity errors, Law and Order, that sort of thing.”

“Okay.” What did television have to do with anything?

“Once in awhile, they’ll do an episode about organized crime. Sometimes there’s an undercover agents, or just an ongoing investigation, but sometimes there’s an informant too. Someone who’ll agree to testify, and the police have to put them in Witness Protection.” Battery stared, disbelief
starting to eclipse her nerves. Purity picked up her cup of tea, and the ceramic rattled on the plate from her unsteady fingers. “It’s just television, all played up for drama. But… do you suppose that ever happens in real life?”

“I-- sometimes, I think.” Battery quickly collected her wits. “But I won’t speak in hypotheticals, Purity. What did you call me here for?”

“At all, or you specifically?”

Was there a difference? To be honest, Battery was curious. She wasn’t the highest-ranking Protectorate member, and her power could be a nightmare counter for Purity in close quarters, which the glass-cannon Blaster had to know. “Both.”

Purity didn’t answer right away. Her shoulders hunched, and her head bowed a little, and her glowing hands gripped her teacup tightly. “Brockton is a bit against the odds… most of the heroes in this city are men. I asked for you because you’re a woman, and you might understand better.”

*But not Miss Militia*, Battery thought.

“Look, I’m not-- I’m not asking you to feel sympathy or forgiveness. I’ve been with the Empire almost my whole life, it’s all I know and I’ve done terrible things. And it’s because I know the Empire that I can’t do this anymore. I know Kaiser, actually really know him-- hell, I married him.” Battery’s eyes widened. This was… not at all what she’d been expecting, coming here. Purity looked up and huffed a laugh, the sound muffled by a tight throat. “Yeah, not the smartest choice I ever made.”

Purity took a harsh breath, and continued, “And maybe this isn’t the smartest choice either, but-- but I have to do something. I’m willing to trade with the Protectorate. Escape in exchange for everything I know about Kaiser.”

Battery had a sudden moment of understanding for Brushstroke’s insistence upon tea. It was a very handy prop when you needed to look in control while you desperately corralled your own thoughts. She took a sip and pretended to savor it. “I won’t lie and say that’s a bad deal. But the Protectorate would need some assurance-- like I said before, you’re not exactly trusted, Purity. Why should we take you up on this? And why now?”

Purity hesitated, her corona flickering with tension, and Battery saw the Blaster’s hand drift over to her stomach. Oh, Oh jeeze. “I told you. I know Kaiser. What kind of man he is, what kind of world he wants to build, and-- and--” If she had tried to deny the E88 cape’s signs of fear before, there was no doing so now. Purity swallowed heavily and said, “And that’s not the world I want for my baby.”

* * *

“Shiiiiiiiiit,” Assault breathed. “That’s heavy stuff, if it’s true.”

“Which we have no way of confirming,” Piggot pointed out. “Starting the conversation with TV dramas and then spinning a very TV-drama sort of tale doesn’t inspire a lot of confidence.”

“If it’s false, it’s a very long con.” Armsmaster said, his tone contemplative. He’d abandoned his tinkering work entirely. “Reports of encounters with Purity started to drop off last December, before taking a sharp dive to almost nothing by March. She’s only recently started to be seen more than once a week.”
“Implying that she may have already had a baby.” Piggot sighed. “Well that complicates things. There’s no way she’d cooperate if she knew her child would be taken from her by Protective Services.”

“...would they really have to know?” Battery turned accusing eyes on Assault, who held up his hands. “Woah, hold on-- I’m not saying just cutting her loose. She mentioned witness protection, didn’t she? New identity, new address… it wouldn’t be the first time the Protectorate’s shuffled someone around and kept an eye on them, is all I’m saying.”

“That is a risky sort of leverage,” Piggot hedged, “But if she’s actually willing to play ball…”

“If she wants to protect her kid, it’s a good offer. Even under probation, Protectorate pays well and has good benefits. Put her somewhere quiet and give her a minder for a couple of years, get her used to the idea of being a hero instead of a Nazi? Blaster 8 isn’t something you turn down easily.”

“And taking out Kaiser would behead the Empire. There’s still Night and Fog to worry about, so it will be a bit of planning, but a heavy strike…” Armsmaster mused. Battery, however, shook her head.

“That’s something I brought up when she calmed down. Get this-- Night and Fog haven’t been seen lately, right?”

“Since… July, I think,” The Tinker said.

“Yeah. Purity said that, thanks to factional divisions in the E88? Night and Fog answered to her, not Kaiser. And she told them to go into retirement when she filed for divorce. According to Purity, they skipped town already.”

“...if that’s true, then-- with Hookwolf in the Birdcage, Purity, Night, and Fog were the heaviest hitters the Empire had. Kaiser and the twins are dangerous, but for sheer destruction and lethality? If those three can be counted to not show up, that drastically tilts the odds of a raid in our favor.”

Armsmaster took a breath, one finger tapping in a nervous tic on the table. “If we take out the Empire, that would make Brockton Bay the only major population center in the US with more heroes than villains.”

There was a moment of silence at the table. Piggot spoke first, “I’ll send out an inquiry, see if there’s any reports of similar parahuman powers to Night and Fog sighted recently in other regions. If that comes back negative, then I want Purity brought in for negotiations as soon as possible.”

“I’ll have Militia start choosing strike teams-- we’ll want to break as many Empire assets as possible all at once, if this happens.” Armsmaster packed up his tinkering and stood. “And I’ll see what I have prepared for Fenja and Menja. Dismissed.”

“Just a moment-- Assault, did you have anything to report?”

“Kinda?” He shrugged. “I had tea with Brushstroke and Good Dog, and she asked if we’d seen anything weird lately. Then she explicitly mentioned Halloween.”

Battery’s face soured at the reminder. “Maybe they got hassled by giant birds too.”

“Maybe. I didn’t want to say anything, professional secrecy and all that, but she gave me a couple of
those paper slips as a goodwill gift. I’ll toss ‘em at the Thinktank.”

“As aggravating as those reports were, as long as they aren’t related to more Good Dog bullshit I’ll be happy,” Piggot groused. “Alright, dismissed.”

* * *

Purity stayed at the Shrine for a while after her meeting. She said she didn’t want to be seen leaving around the same time as Battery and Assault, but Taylor suspected that maybe she just needed some time. Whatever the two women had been talking about seemed to have taken a toll on the flying cape. So Taylor made a fresh pot of chamomile tea, and turned up the space heater, and told Purity to take all the time she needed.

“That nice streak will get you in trouble someday,” she said.

Taylor turned her thoughts to the previous year. “I think I’d rather be nice and have problems, than be mean and get away with it.”

“Heh… well that about sums it up, doesn’t it?”

“Sums what up?”

“I’m not even sure,” Purity admitted. “But… Taylor. Do you mind if I apologise for something?”

“I… don’t think you need my permission?” Taylor looked up, confused, when she heard Sunny’s tail start thwapping on the floor. She glanced up in time to see the last of Purity’s corona fade, the cape’s light leaving behind a short, mousy sort of woman, with a strained smile and slightly red-rimmed eyes. It took Taylor a couple of moments for the connection to click. “Wh-- Kayden? You’re Purity?”

“Sorry.”

“...I guess that explains why Sunny was never bothered.” Taylor tried to reconcile the nice, if stressed single mother she’d met with the infamous Nazi cape, who was also kinda nice, if stressed. Maybe it wasn’t that big of a leap? People came in all sorts. Still, you never really expected someone you knew to just be a parahuman. Capes didn’t go around and just be people, they were larger than life. They didn’t go shopping or fuss over crying babies.

Then again… Taylor picked up her teacup and sipped. If the past few months had taught her anything—and they had taught her quite a lot, thanks Baachan—it was that while capes were eminently weird, they weren’t always what she expected, either. Like, who would have thought that Oni Lee liked sweets and omelettes? That Battery snorted when she laughed, Armsmaster tended to lose track of what he was doing while thinking, Velocity also loved sweets, Purity was a single mother, and Lung was entirely petty and constantly shirtless?

Okay actually that last one was completely unsurprising, but still. There was probably something profound in this mess that Taylor reluctantly called Cape Business. “Okay then.”

“That’s… it?” Puri-- Kayden asked. “Just ‘okay?’ You are having tea with a supervillain.”

“That happens at least once a week.” Sunny chuffed at the dumbfounded expression on Kayden’s face.
“...my god, no wonder nobody knows how to handle you.” Purity rubbed a hand over her face.

“Well-- Taylor, can I ask for a favor?”

“You can always ask,” she replied glibly. “What do you need?”

“This stays between us, okay?” Taylor nodded, and made a go-on gesture. “I don’t think anyone in the Empire knows I’m here, but if they do, they will not be happy. Your Sunshine took on most of their capes, didn’t she?”

“Allegedly.” Taylor shot a look at Sunny, who only turned up the smug and wagged her tail a bit. Taylor wasn’t sure she would ever get the full story about that.

“I don’t suppose I could hire you two as a bodyguard for a little bit? I can keep an eye on Aster during the day, but… I’d sleep a bit better knowing someone was on guard. Someone that Kaiser was reluctant to touch.”

Okay wow Taylor was glad she had a cup of tea in her hands. “I’m not a match for any cape, Kayden. Let me be clear on that. If you want to ask Sunny, then that’s her decision.”

Kayden turned her pleading eyes on Sunny, who returned them with as somber expression a canine could make. The wolf looked between Taylor and Kayden a couple of times, considering, then gave a cautious nod. The E88 cape sighed in relief. “Thank you.”

“Alright… I need to close up the Shrine and I think Sunny wants to take me home, so if you give her your address I think she can meet you there later?” The wolf nodded. “Okay. Be safe going home, Kayden.”

“You too, Taylor. Here’s hoping it’s a quiet night.”
Armsmaster’s 90-minute warning alarm started beeping in the upper-right corner of his helmet’s HUD, and he spared a second away from the inertial dampener he was fiddling with to dismiss it. The device was a core component of his motorcycle—indeed, most Tinkers who built any sort of gotta-go-fast vehicle had something similar. The device helped to keep him actually on the motorcycle when it was moving at top speeds, emitting a field to reduce the effects of g-force on the passenger once the vehicle reached an MPH threshold. This one had been swapped out of the motorcycle after he’d improved both the design and his raw skill at driving, because the less he needed to actually engage it (and have it affect less of an area) the less stress it produced on the other components nearby, and--

The 75-minute warning started to beep. He dismissed that one too.

--now that it was essentially a spare, he was free to try and reverse-engineer it and create an inertial enforcer. Fenja and Menja’s giant forms were protected by a Breaker effect, and the theory was that he could perhaps bypass this by cheating the limits of normal kinetic force equations. A stab that would normally be a pinprick could be amplified into something capable of puncturing the sisters’ Breaker durability, and thereby deliver a payload of the tranquilizers he’d originally developed f--

The 60-minute warning went off. Armsmaster dismissed it, then went ahead and canceled the 45, 30, and 15-minute warnings as well. He’d just face a clock, these interruptions were not helping. They weren’t even a countdown to a deadline, they were the countdown to the ‘get ready for a deadline’ phase of the evening. Armsmaster physically turned his chair around towards the shelves where his old watch hung from a wire rack-- and spotted the sticky note he’d taped over its face earlier, reminding him to be out the door by 5:45. Yes. Thank you. So helpful.

‘You need to relax more,’ she’d said. ‘Time away from work will do you good,’ she’d said. So far he was experiencing the exact opposite effect. Tinkering in peace was not stressful, this was. Armsmaster turned his attention back to the half-disassembled device in front of him. He carefully teased wires off of contact points; 43 minutes left. He separated a couple layers of nanocircuitry that regulated the inertial field itself; 36 minutes left. He examined the power source hookups and considered which power core in which halberd would be most compatible; 28 minutes left.

Model 6, he decided, could be worked with. He’d have to remove the containment foam payload to make room for the tranqs, but that he’d expected from the beginning, so it wasn’t really an issue. The bigger project would be adapting the foremost power core to the Inertial Enforcer and removing the
cutting torch to slot the new device in its place. Oh, but that would throw off the heat dissipation and recycling systems in the rest of the Model 6… would the Inertial Enforcer produce comparable heat? Could it be made to? He had logs of the dampener’s stress testing somewhere, he could get a ballpark estimate from that and then spend some time testing the new configuration directly.

20 minutes left, and the Incoming Call light on his nearby laptop started to flash. Armsmaster reached for the Accept hotkey, and his finger hovered over it for a long, inexplicably guilty moment. He pressed the key, and the screen lit up as the voice chat program booted up.

“Hello, Colin. Doing alright?”

“Good evening, Dragon. And yes, I’m fine, but I don’t think I can make the… thing tonight. I’ve got a project going for an upcoming strike, I need to get it running and properly tested. Sorry, but hopefully next time?” What was left of November was going to be consumed by the E88 strike, if all went well, so he’d probably have some spare time in December. Surely by January. March at the latest.

“I thought you might say that,” she replied, and Armsmaster’s finger started a nervous tic-tapping on the lab counter. “I’m sure it’s important. When is this operation planned for?”

...welp. “It’s-- not, not yet. Preliminary planning phase. But very soon.”

“Mhm. Soon like ‘tomorrow’ or soon like ‘next week?’” When he didn’t answer, Dragon continued. “If it’s the latter, then would a couple of hours away really make or break it? I’ll understand if it is, Colin.” Nnnnyyyyyeeeehhhh-- maybe. But it’s not like he would know until after the fact. And, that inexplicably guilty feeling reminded him, he didn’t even know for sure yet if there was going to be a strike on the E88. Armsmaster sighed.

“Dragon, I’m… really not sure about this.”

“You don’t really have to be sure , Colin, but I do think you should give it a try.” Even without the video avatar display, he could imagine the look she must be giving him. Armsmaster gave the disassembled device in front of him a forlorn glance, then started carefully packing it up and setting his tools aside somewhere they wouldn’t roll off the table. “Is that reluctant consent I hear?”

“Yes,” he muttered. “It’s just-- you did say this was a casual gathering, right?”
“That’s correct.”

“That, Dragon, I have a question. And… it’s going to sound really pathetic.” Armsmaster glanced at the watch again, frowned, and undid the latches on his helmet. Colin set the headpiece near the laptop and asked, “What am I supposed to wear?”

The answer, as it turned out, was jeans and a light sweater, which he did have stashed away somewhere. It actually took a good five minutes to remember where (a locker in the PRT building, not his lab on the Rig) because while Colin knew where every tool, supply item, and completed device in the many hidden access panels of his lab were, denim and a cotton-polyester blend didn’t exactly fall into any of those categories. Fortunately, the commandeered meeting room Dragon directed him to was at the PRT building in the first place, so it wasn’t a huge loss of time. Which was a bit of a shame, because this was a mistake what was he doing?

Standing outside the door, listening to the voices inside and generally feeling foolish. Sigh. Colin suppressed the uneasiness in his stomach and knocked on the door. The voices quieted a little and allowed Colin to recognise the vague sounds of machinery humming in the background. It sound a bit familiar, but he couldn’t place it offhand. After a couple of footsteps the door opened, with Chessman’s unmasked face peering through the gap. The older man smiled and opened the door wider. “Hey, Armsmaster! Dragon said you might make it. Come on in.”

“Thank you, Chessman,” Colin said, out of a lack of any better response.

“Ah, go ahead and call me Danny. Everyone here knows everybody else, though if you prefer Armsmaster that’s certainly fine too. Did Dragon let you know what to expect?”

“Colin, then. And no, she didn’t…” Colin trailed off as he got his first good look at the interior of the meeting room. A medium-sized round table had been set up, with 5 chairs in a rough V formation around it; it was covered in books, papers, and several of Chessman’s non-combat miniatures. Dragon’s avatar waved at him from a monitor that had been carefully strapped to the top of a high stool. The machine sounds he’d heard from outside revealed themselves as an air purifier and a dialysis machine, both of these explained by the presence of Director Piggot sitting at the table next to Chessman’s open spot, with a pencil in one hand and a lit cigar in the other. Across from her, next to the open spot that was presumably for Colin, sat an unfamiliar dark-haired man hunched over a piece of paper. Colin scrambled for a moment to try and remember if he’d met this person; he spotted the rough robe on the coat hook and large wooden staff next to it and Colin’s brain quietly short-circuited itself.

“Myrddin?”
“That’s Grognak the Barbarian to you, sonny jim,” the ‘wizard cape’ shook a finger at him, and grinned. “Chevalier says hi, by the way.”

“L...likewise?” Coherent thoughts finally reasserted themselves. “Aren’t you stationed in Chicago?”

“Yeah, but I worked a deal with Strider. There’s a falafel place around here he really likes, so twice a month I pay for his dinner and a movie, and he gives me a round trip.”

“I see.” Colin’s eyes moved involuntarily over to Director Piggot, who glanced up and raised an eyebrow at him, daring him to speak. Chessman managed to distract her attention before he could. (“Emily, I know I say this every week, but you should really quit smoking.”) (“They are my lungs and I will ruin them as I please.”)

“We’re starting a new campaign tonight, so it’s really the best time for you to join in.” Dragon spoke up, and gestured at the only empty seat remaining. Her monitor was tilted a bit so that her webcam could see the whole table, and that everyone could see her, Colin distantly noted. “Don’t be fooled by the stack of books, it’s a lot easier than it looks. Come on, sit down.”

After waiting a moment to give the earth a chance to open up and swallow him whole (it didn’t), Colin did.

* * *

“...okay, so with the triple word square, that brings the total to 66 points to Sunny.” Bark!

“What the-- Theo, that’s not a valid entry. What does that even say, ’daijoubu?’ That’s not a word.”

“I think it’s a Japanese word.” Wuff.

“And for the last time, we’re playing in **English**.” Kayden ran her fingernails through her hair while Sunny gave an exaggerated sigh. Theo just shrugged. She’d decided to make a quick stop at the grocery store after she left the Pawprint Shrine, and Sunshine was waiting on the balcony outside her apartment when she got home. Theo, after his initial flurry of questions (you asked a dog to babysit why would you do that how did it even get in) and Kayden’s subsequent pulling him aside to explain what actually happened to Hookwolf, had apparently decided to just roll with it. That was an important life skill for cape families, so it was good he was learning it sooner rather than later.
The phone rang, halting their game of Scrabble and prompting Theo to take advantage of the break to use the restroom. Kayden picked up the receiver before it could finish its third ring. “Hello?”

“Kayden. It’s Max.”

“Oh-- hi, Max. This isn’t really a good time.”

“Then you’ll have to make it a good time, we need to talk.”

“Max, I don’t--” Aster, sitting in her high chair to preside over the game and eat strained carrots, found herself abruptly alone and started to cry. Kayden looked for Theo, didn’t see him, and said “Sorry, just a second, I need to get Aster,” before she set the phone aside and did just that. She released her baby from the confinement of the chair and cleaned her up a bit, removing the bib and applying a wet washcloth to the smears of carrot that adored her face and hands. Kayden set Aster on her hip and walked back towards the phone, only to find Sunny standing near the counter and panting heavily into the receiver.

“Kayden. Kayden what is that.” She snatched the phone away from the wolf. Sunny sat back down and smiled beatifically-- and an idea formed. Kayden started to smile back.

“Sorry, that was Sunny! Oh, no, I didn’t get a dog-- I don’t normally like them, but this one has sold me. She belongs to this nice young lady I met at the market a while back, we had ice cream and she offered to babysit sometimes. And Max, you should see this dog, Sunny is just over the moon for Aster, it’s adorable.” Kayden leaned back against the counter and continued talking over her ex-husband. “Huge white fluffy thing, I never would have thought she’d be so sweet, looking at her teeth! Sometimes I think she looks more like a wolf than a dog. Super intelligent, too: just a little while ago, Aster was playing with her blocks, and when one rolled away Sunny brought it back. And if she thinks Aster is upset or too close to something that she might bump into, Sunny herds her away or even picks her up by her onesie, just like a cat! Sunny’s such a protective dog, a real guardian angel. If it weren’t for the shedding I’d probably get a dog myself, but having her owner over a few times a week will have to do, I guess!”

Kayden laughed, not even needing to fake it, then sighed. “Sorry, I’m gushing. What did you need to talk about?”

“I can see you’re busy. I’ll call again later.”
“Oh, alright then. Have a good night.” Click. Kayden glanced down at Sunny, who was positively smirking. She raised one hand up, palm flat. The wolf reared up on her hind legs and slapped one enormous paw against it. High five, indeed.

* * *

Danny Hebert parked his car in the driveway and let himself inside his house as quietly as possible. Taylor was a pretty sound sleeper, but it was just courteous not to make more noise than necessary. He set aside his work bag and his game bag, then rolled his shoulders to stretch them before he headed upstairs to bed. It had been an… interesting evening, to say the least. When Dragon had first asked him if he’d mind Armsmaster joining the game, he’d thought she was joking. He brought up the idea with the rest of the group--without mentioning the Tinker’s name, of course--and there had been a general agreement, so he’d given the go-ahead. He had to wonder if Dragon had also asked Director Piggot in private, because Emily had pointed out that a new player entering an established game would be awkward, but they were at a good holding point anyway, so why not start a side campaign?

A good judgement call there, either way. Trying to introduce someone to the hobby for the first time is hard enough with an established history between other characters, let alone someone as clearly out of their depth as Armsmaster-- Colin, he supposed. Danny suspected that if Colin had entered a game where everyone knew everyone except him, he’d have walked out and never returned. For the moment, it looked like he was going to stay, which brought a few problems of its own. As he’d addressed Dragon, after everyone else had departed:

“He is going to min/max this to hell and back, isn’t he.”

Dragon had offered him a conciliatory smile. “Godspeed, Dungeon Master. We appreciate your sacrifice, you poor, doomed bastard.”

Danny suspected that the very moment Colin got a handle on his new paladin, things were going to get interesting. But, that was a problem for later. For now, he needed sleep. He hadn’t quite achieved it when he heard a thump from downstairs. He listened, waiting for the groan of pipes or the house settling, and instead heard a muffled crack, and the tinkling of broken glass.

There was someone in the house.

The invisible lines of his power thrummed with tension, reaching out to every possible focus in the
house, in the garage, in the basement. He got out of bed, as quietly as he could, and crept down the hall—Taylor’s door was still shut, good—then down the first few steps of the stairs. He didn’t see movement in the living room, so he crept a bit further. He heard the rattling of the door knob as someone unlocked it; the front door in the kitchen, by the sound. They must have broken a window to get at the latch. And it was they, he could hear three voices.

“Get your ass in here quick, ‘fore someone sees you,” said One.

“Man, are you sure this is the right house?” Two spoke next. “Looks kinda boring.”

“Yeah I’m sure. A couple of the little shits said this was the one.” Three’s voice was a bit phlemy. A robbery? New Wave came to mind, unbidden. He started pushing his power down the lines, getting them ready just in case. There was movement in the kitchen, and Danny cursed leaving his work bag downstairs; his cell phone was in there. He needed to get back to his room and call the police from the landline.

He took a step back, and the stair creaked.

“What was that?” “Living room!” A flashlight clicked on and turned the corner, the beam traveling over his legs by chance and then snapping up to focus on Danny’s face, blinding him. “There you are, motherfucker! Hands up, I gotta gun!”

Not good. He heard the click of the firearm and, a bit further in the house, the snickering of the other burglars as they started going through the living room. Danny raised his hands—“Good, now get down here, nice an’ slow, and then get on your fucking knees.”—and took careful steps down the stairs until he reached the landing, then sat as directed.

“Heeey, this one’s smart! Makes things easier.” Two—or maybe One—laughed and gestured with the flashlight. “Cool.”

“Look, take what you want and go. Nobody has to get hurt,” Danny said.

“Yeah, sure old man. We will. But first-- your name Hebert?” A chill ran down his spine. “I think it is, said so on the mailbox. So, limp-dick, you got a daughter, huh?” Danny’s blood turned to ice.

“You’ve made a mistake,” he heard himself say.
“Nah, don’t think so,” One—or Two or Three, he didn’t care—said. “Hate to break it to you, old man, but your little girl? That tree-huggin’ pussy cape on the news. But since y’asked so nicely, we won’t hurt her, not at all. Don’chu worry, Skids’ll treat her real nice, I’m sure.”

There was a ringing in his ears. Around him, stuffing what valuables they could find into pockets and a bag, Danny heard the Merchants talking still. (“Man, you sure we should be doing this? Kidnap a cape?”) (“S’fine man, she’s a pussy, like I said. An’ look, we even got a hostage.”) But it washed over him, near meaningless. They were here for Taylor. They were here for Taylor. They were here to hurt Taylor.

“Let me say it again,” his mouth was moving, the lines all over the house were surging. “You have made several mistakes.”

“Shut your mouth, limp-dick!”

Danny looked up, straight into the glare of the flashlight. “Queen to A7.”

“The fuck is that—”

The basement door shattered as the Black Queen charged through it, her scepter raised, only for the iron-heavy mace to crash down on the Merchant’s gun arm. He screamed, and his compatriots yelled in alarm and grabbed for their weapons, but the house was already boiling over with Chessman’s pawns. His work bag split open as plastic soldiers crawled out of it, his game bag tore on the edge of Grognak’s axe and the Chimera’s talons. Something crashed in the garage, the shriek of collapsing yard tools quickly drowned by the roar of an engine. The ATV burst through the closed garage door, rolled over Danny’s own car, then turned a tight circle of squealing tires to point its headlights into the windows of the house, illuminating the panicked interior and the refraction lighting up the roof-mounted turret.

The Black Queen battered the thug in front of him aside, and Danny surged to his feet. Shots were fired—from his pawns or the Merchants—and splinters exploded off the nearby banister. Danny’s bellow was louder.

“You think you can come in here?! You think you can come in here and hurt my family?! They’ll bury you in a shoebox when I’m done with you, you son of a bitch!” The two thugs still able to walk scrambled, firing at his pawns and blowing fragments off the more fragile of them as they tried to escape. “You tell Skidmark he is fucked, do you hear me?! Now you get the hell out of my house!”
An orange light flickered, glowing brighter, as one of the thugs jumped out a window to escape the gaming miniature that was trying to grapple him. Danny saw him look back inside, gun raised to fire now that he had a clear shot--

And the wall he thought to hide behind exploded, but not from gunfire. Windows all over the first story shuddered or even broke as the Chimera roared, and the red dragon head spat a gout of fire that impacted the window frame and detonated. The thug outside was thrown back, and Danny ran out after him, nearly burning his feet on a couple of embers. He passed by the remaining thug, who had taken shelter under the kitchen table and was surrounded by plastic men with rifles, babbling a constant stream of apologies and pleas. The Chimera followed on Danny’s heels.

He got outside and stood on his sidewalk--oh good, he could see the Merchant was still breathing--and slowly took in the scene. One of Chessman’s ATVs in the yard, half a wall broken and smoldering, the house and driveway now being patrolled by pawns and an adventuring party. Doors and windows along the street were being filled with onlookers, there was a growing sound of sirens, and here he was in his pyjama pants with no shoes or mask. Good job, Danny.

“Dad? Dad?!” Taylor’s voice called out from inside, and he turned his head to watch her come down the stairs. She had the landline phone from his room in one hand, the cord stretched to the breaking point behind her, and in the other she had a bamboo stick with a bunch of paper slips on the end. She dropped the phone and ran out to stand on the sidewalk next to him, and as she did, a motion in the corner of his eye caught Danny’s attention. There was a white light at the far end of the street, and in no time at all it coalesced into a familiar shape as Good Dog practically tore down the pavement, panting hard and inexplicably trailing flower petals. His daughter’s power skidded to a stop near her, snuffling and whining and making every show of checking on her.

“Sunny-- Sunny I’m fine, but-- what’s all… this…?” Taylor looked around, wide-eyed, at the devastation, the clearly visible pawns of Chessman’s forces, the lawn that was only a little on fire, and the surely recognisable Chimera pacing next to him. “D-dad?”

“Taylor, honey--” Danny saw Good Dog staring at him, eyes wide, jaw dropped, canine face set in an expression of such hope, and said, “Did you get all your homework done, sweetie?”

Silence.

Taylor gaped at him. And Good Dog just… fell over. Like a tipped cow, thwump, into the grass, paralysed by sheer disbelief. Danny looked at the dog, then at his daughter. Well.
“Also, I’m Chessman, and maybe we should talk about this.”

“Uhuh,” Taylor said.

“Once the police get here I’ll make a pot of coffee or something and we can sit down.”

“It will be tea.”

“That’s fair.”
Chapter 40

The Rig was a buzzing hive of activity, and it was not a friendly kind of buzzing. No, this was a kicked anthill: as soon as the PRT had responded to the break-in at home, Taylor and Danny had been shuffled away and out of sight of cameras and police both, escorted to the Rig for safety and debriefing, respectively. Taylor and Sunny had been led to a nice, heavily defended waiting room and given a standard-issue jumpsuit to replace her pyjamas, while Danny had been given his costume (or a spare, perhaps) and kept being called away for this and that official statement or need, or just as often being approached by a uniformed PRT officer or one of the Protectorate who entered the room to interrupt Taylor and Danny’s strained attempts at conversation. It was apparently starting to get on her father’s nerves.

“Triumph, I appreciate what you’re doing, but I’ve already given every bit of information I could to Armsmaster, it is almost six in the morning, and thus far nobody has been able to leave me alone for ten goddamned minutes, so I would really like to just have a cup of coffee and talk to my daughter. Yes? Good. Go.”

Taylor rubbed at Sunny’s ears, the wolf near-burying the girl under fur and fluff, and watched her hero father curse out one of his co-workers. “This is it. This is the most surreal day of my life thus far. That is a position with a lot of competition.” Sunshine chuffed, a trifle uneasily. Taylor rubbed at her ears more to reassure her. “It’s by a narrow margin, but still.”

“If it’s a narrow victory, then… can I ask what the second-most day is?” Danny moved to a chair nearby Taylor, the sight of her father’s head on top of Chessman’s body only reaffirming her decision.

“That time Sunny dug up a hot spring and then all the heroes and villains got drunk. Like, really drunk. You should have heard the things Assault was saying to Battery-- are they married? It sounded like they were at least an item-- or Lung mumbling and ranting at Purity. ‘Stop being an uneducated heathen and come and play Go with us,’ that sort of thing.” In her lap, Sunny snorted at the memory, and wagged her tail a bit. “Uh, speaking of… Dad? I haven’t, like… gotten you in trouble, have I? With the whole… parlaying with known villains and such.”

“There’ve been a few… awkward questions,” he hedged, as though both of them weren’t skirting around the biggest ones of all, “But no, of course not. You’re-- well, I won’t say you haven’t been a person of interest for the Protectorate lately, Taylor, but your whole thing with the shrine and all has been… good. Good for the city and for you. Not so good for your old man’s blood pressure, but y’know.”

“Eheh... “ Parts of it hadn’t exactly been good for her own blood pressure, either. Though, the mention was a bit odd, unless… “Um. You-- I mean the Protectorate-- you haven’t been… spying on the shrine or anything… have you?” The guilty look on Danny’s face told her everything. “I see. And who will I need to speak to in order to have that rectified?”

“Oh, I guess that’d be Armsmaster, but--” Taylor prodded at Sunny until the wolf freed her to stand up. Danny waved his hands, saying, “--but most of it got taken down already, and I will speak to him about the rest as soon as he’s available, okay?”
“Good,” Taylor relented, and sat back down. “Given that I am running a neutral space that requires the cooperation of the shrine’s visitors, having PRT surveillance would be a gross violation of that trust. I hope the PRT would not wish to compromise both their access to the shrine and its facilities, and my safety.” Danny’s face paled a bit, and he nodded.

“Excellent. That aside, then… what actually happened? At home, I mean. Did someone find out who you were and try to kill you?” She saw her father relax a bit as she shifted her tone away from Authority of Baachan and back into normalcy.

“Er… no, honey. I’m-- I don’t want to scare you, but…” Danny sighed, and gave her a rundown of the attack. Sunny’s ears flattened against her head as they listened. “...it’s a bit out of character for Skidmark, so we’re not sure yet if it was actually something he ordered, or if his punks just got the idea on their own, but… well, either way, the Merchants are not going to have a good time of things. I might not have been their target, but attacking the home of a Protectorate hero? That does more than just attract attention. Whole team will be gunning for them, now, as well as whatever reinforcements we can call in and probably New Wave on top of it.” Danny took off his glasses to rub at his eyes.

“I’m kinda surprised you’d need reinforcements? I mean… Merchants.”

“Heh. It’s not really about needing firepower, Taylor. Most of it is the display-- making a show of it to remind villains that this is not acceptable. Most parahumans hold back from attacking each other at home-- or at least if they do, they had better be certain they’ll succeed and not get caught. Nobody wants their families involved, so when someone crosses that line, it tends to paint a really big target on their backs. An ounce of civility in this whole mess.” He sighed again. “Well, that, and we’ll need to hold the line on the ABB and what’s left of the E88 while we concentrate on the Merchants. Can’t get spread too thin, or there’ll be attacks of opportunity.”

Taylor tilted her head a bit, thinking. “Why not just request a cease-fire for the duration?”

“Not really that simple, Taylor. We can’t just walk up to Lung or Kaiser and…” Danny blinked a couple times. “That is exactly what you’re suggesting, isn’t it.”

“Neutral territory and liaison, remember? Write a couple notes and I’ll pass them along. I know I can get a message to Lung easily enough, and I’m sure Sunny has an idea or two on Kaiser.”

“That-- would give some different options, I suppose. More time would let the Protectorate do a more thorough sweep of the territory, dismantle any drug dens or Squealer workshops we can find.” Danny trailed off, thinking, then scrubbed a hand through his thinning hair and sighed. “It’s very strange, talking about this with you.”

“Yeah, um… you could say that.” Seriously. Taylor wasn’t entirely sure how upset she was allowed to be, here, considering she hadn’t exactly been forthcoming about her summer project and everything that followed. But-- Chessman? Really? The whole time? Oh god, he’d been at the Rig when Sunny tricked her into playing fetch with Armsmaster’s toy halberd. Her frantic scramble to keep the TV turned off and all the newspapers hidden had been doomed from the start. How much else had he known the whole time?

“Taylor? You’re getting kinda a sour look, there.”

“...yeah. It’s just-- I can kinda understand not telling me about being Chessman. Kinda.” Taylor
huffed a bit, then continued. “But you knew I was going to the shrine the whole time, and never said anything? Even though the PRT thinks I’m a parahuman?”

“Not the whole time, exactly,” he hedged. “Armsmaster had seen you painting, you remember, but we didn’t know anything about the shrine until there was an incident with the city’s weather. Lightning without any clouds or warning, massive changes in local humidity and sunlight—Shaker effects with that wide a range are not to be taken lightly, so surveillance was set up at the epicenter and that happened to be where you were.” There was an unspoken question in his tone, and Taylor thought back to what he might be referring to.

“Oh… no, you don’t have to worry about that.”

“You know what it was, then?”

Sssssort of. I didn’t really see it myself, but, uh… the first time I met Lung he… sorta-kindaa punched me in the face.” Taylor coughed, and wished for a cup of tea. “I’m not sure on the specifics, but I’m told that he was ‘chastised’ by Sunny shortly thereafter. Very shortly.”

“Good Dog… struck Lung… with lightning. After he hit you.” Danny said, very carefully. He owed Good Dog a case of beer and Lung a case of murder, it seemed.

“I won’t say he’s been on his best behavior since, because I’m still hoping what I’ve seen from him since is not the best he can do. And her name is Sunny, you know.”

“I… see.” Danny sat back in his chair to just… process this, for a bit. His little girl was a parahuman. His little girl was a parahuman with potentially city-wide powers. His little girl had slapped around Lung, and in return, got presents. Maybe her Master power was stronger than they’d thought. Armsmaster was going to lose his shit.

Any further brooding was forestalled by a quick knock at the door, which opened to admit Velocity. His costume looked a bit wrinkled, so either the speedster had been up all night, or he’d only just awoken. “Hey, Chessman-- oh hi Brushstroke!--you’re needed topside, we’re almost ready and Legend’ll be here any minute.”

“Yeah, I’ll be right--” “Legend?!”

Taylor’s hand flew up to her mouth and her cheeks pinked as she caught Velocity’s grin in her direction. Okay, yes, he might have been third in her Top 3 Favorite (Living) Triumvirate Heroes, but-- Legend! Here! Could she call in that tour promise from Battery right now and maybe just maybe get his autograph? (Wait-- her father was a hero. He saw the heroes every day. Could… could she get all the autographs?)

“I’ll ask if he can stay a few minutes after the raid so you can meet him, okay?”

“I will get you so much dango.”

“Sold!”

“Taylor, please stay here, the Rig is the safest place right now. We’ll probably be staying here for a while, actually, I have no idea what we’ll do about the house, and--”

“Wait wait. I’m not doing that.” Taylor shook her head, cutting off her father’s protests. “I have
things to do, you know. I have school, I have work at the shrine, I have appointments to keep. I can’t just hide here. Once Sunny gets back, I know she’ll protect me, it’s okay.”

“…’gets back’?” Danny blinked, then looked at the empty couch cushions next to Taylor, covered in little white hairs. “Wha…”

“She slipped out after you finished telling me about the break-in.” The heroes stared at her. Velocity abruptly vanished from the doorframe in a red blur. Taylor waved. “Come back safe.”

Up on the flight deck, a good half of the city’s superheroes had assembled, and were going over a few last-minute preparations for the heroic equivalent of a smash-and-grab on the Merchant territories. The Merchants had four known capes (and the possibility of other, unknown capes– but if they hadn’t been advertised by the gang, then they were likely to be low-tier at best) and, while only Squealer had anything resembling known permanent residences, conflict within the Merchant territories had a high chance of drawing out Skidmark and a medium chance of luring Mush and Trainwreck. At least, the first time; once the Merchants realised that the hostilities would continue, the gang’s leaders would start to scatter and shift over to guerilla tactics, until the cost of attrition outweighed the benefit of arrests. It was a pretty good strategy for the relatively low-powered but deeply embedded Merchants under normal circumstances. These were not normal circumstances.

Legend, for all the attention he gathered simply by existing, didn’t actually tend to promote fanfare. He could do speeches, certainly, but while Alexandria and Eidolon were remote and mythical figures, Legend was a family man. It lent him a certain approachability that the other Triumvirate members often lacked. It helped that the approachability was genuine.

Battery was quick to welcome her old mentor with a smile and an outstretched hand. Legend took one look at the hand, grasped it, and used the grip to pull Battery into a one-armed hug. Assault made an affronted sound, and got a grin and a handshake. “Battery! And Assault, hello! I hear you’re all working hard down here. Half the Empire Eighty-Eight in a week, really?”

“Aha...ha. Yeah, it’s... definitely been a thing, lately.” Battery tugged at her gloves. “I’m not sure how much you’ve heard about local capes in the Bay in the last few months?”

“Not much, I have to say. It’s all very mysterious. There’s a lot of pictures of a dog online and a few rumors, but not much over official channels. Why?”

“Yyyyyeah. Well the dog is a cape.”

“...what?”

“Cape duo,” Assault explained, “And an open cape duo at that. That’s kinda why this shindig started-- Merchants attacked Brushstroke at her home. Bad enough, but she’s Chessman’s daughter.”

“Oh, my. Is this a rescue, or is she okay?”

“Oh she’s fine,” Battery grinned. “Chessman was home at the time. You can imagine what happened next.”

“Ha– yes, I suppose I can. But what was this about a dog?”

A red blur zipped between the speakers and skidded to a stop a couple feet away. Velocity held up his hands for attention. “Okay, important-- oh hi Legend sir-- has anyone seen Good Dog?”
“It accompanied Brushstroke to a secure visitor’s room.” Armsmaster’s voice carried well, even keeping the clipped tone and sense of gritted teeth. “So if there are no further interruptions, could we get started?”

“Boss, about that, you see--”

“Hey-- hold up-- has anyone seen-- Good Dog?” Chessman arrived at the tail end of a sprint, huffing and trying to catch his breath. Armsmaster’s teeth creaked, just slightly. “Because T-- Brushstroke says she’s missing.”

Armsmaster stared at Chessman for a second, then turned away as he opened a panel on his armor’s wrist and tapped at it. “Dragon, do you still have an eye on those low-flying monitor satellites?”

“I can, give me just a second…. Ah. The local air temperature over about a third of the city has increased by approximately 6 degrees fahrenheit. I suggest that whatever you’re doing, you hurry.”

“Move out. Now.”

* * *

The sunlight was harsh.

Every unrusted bit of metal in the Trainyards, every broken pane of glass gleamed with it, cast bright reflections across the rock and litter strewn ground. It was only dawn, but the Merchant territories blazed with the light of a high noon. Destitute and malicious both crept away from the heavy paws that marched with purpose, because no matter the rumors or the cute photographs or the news programs, memory always failed to accurately report just how large Good Dog was.

Sunny moved quickly, but not so quickly that word couldn’t spread. And the very moment that someone called for Skidmark, she started to run. The Merchants scattered like leaves.

She found Skidmark just as he was leaving the house he’d been squatting in. The gang leader cursed and she growled, a bone-trembling sound like thunder. Her jaws were large enough to crush his head like an egg, but she gripped his stained shirt instead, and started pulling. Bands of red and blue and purple force spread out along the ground, but a wave of her tail and they puddled like watercolors, and evaporated. Sunny dragged Skidmark over the ground for a mile or more, until they reached the highway.

She tossed him onto the asphalt. Skidmark rolled to a stop and groaned. “Shit-- hey, man, what’d I do? The fuck did I do to you!?” He got to his scraped knees and then to his feet, lips curled in a snarl-

There was a crack as a piece of the road near his foot exploded, the sound like a gunshot. Skidmark staggered back a step, on reflex. A sudden gust of wind forced him back another. Another crack of an invisible gun, a third. Skidmark looked at the wide empty road behind him, then at the towering beast in front of him. The message was clear:

Start walking.
Chapter 41

41

The Bark! from far below the Rig took Taylor off guard, though not as much as it did her Wards escorts of Gallant and Clockblocker. A quick look over the railings confirmed that, yes, that was Sunny way down at the base of the Protectorate headquarters and, yes, that was indeed a giant lilypad she was floating on. Taylor sighed; Sunny gonna Sunny.

She made a quick request of the Wards while they were too confused to deny her, then cupped one hand to her mouth and called out, “Did you forget to arrange for a way to get back up, you silly wolf?” A sad whiiiiine floated up on the breeze in answer. “That is a yes,” she told Gallant, as the older teen handed her a pad of sticky notes and a pencil. Employing her allegedly parahuman powers of Pattern Recognition, Taylor sketched a quick cat on the sticky note and slapped the paper onto the railing. It was a good sketch for something so quick, if she did say so herself; she was getting a lot of practice lately with making the Emas. Sunny whined again, far below, and Taylor pried up the paper square and flipped it upside-down before sticking it back onto the metal bar. She then stood back and waited patiently as the two Wards had a quiet freakout over Sunshine slowly jump-chaining her way up the main support of the Rig until the wolf managed to scramble over the guard railing.

“Hey Sunny, welcome ba… Sunny?” The happy bark or smug loll of the tongue Taylor had expected were nowhere to be seen. Instead, Sunny was giving her the Sad Dog Eyes and, after a moment, pressed her furry body against Taylor’s and buried her face into the girl's stomach. The wolf made a low, mournful sound, and refused to look up. Taylor instead dropped down to her knees, and pulled the wolf into a hug. Sunshine hooked her muzzle over the girl’s shoulder, so Taylor traced her fingers through the red marks that spiraled over her friend’s shoulders. Was she… scared? Afraid for her, now that they weren’t going unnoticed by the city’s rougher intentions? Taylor thought back to summer, just a bare few months ago, and her own desperate request.

“...silly wolf, Sunny. There’s nothing to forgive.”

* * *

Getting off of the Rig and back to her own life was a trial, or at least Taylor thought so. Dad was against it, of course, because if the Merchants had gotten the idea to target her after seeing her on the news just doing her own thing, there was no telling what could happen now that Sunny had gone and done… something to the Merchants. Oh, and the whole ‘attacking her and Chessman at home,’ thing. That was going to start fires that Taylor was honestly not sure she wanted to be around to watch. Better to focus on the things she could accomplish, instead of worrying about matters that were beyond her direct reach, she reasoned. Things like restocking the shrine’s basket of charms to sell, and negotiating a ceasefire with the non-Merchant factions of the city, and getting her brand new, signed, 4x6 glossy print of Legend framed and up on her office wall ASAP. All of these were equally top priority. Secondary priorities included asking Old Mrs. Henrick if she could borrow her neighbor’s kitchen, calling Kayden to check in, and logging in to PHO to see how long it would take someone to make a .gif of Sunny leaping into Legend’s arms.

Even with all of those justifications, there were protests, and they were starting to wear on Taylor’s patience. It wasn’t safe to go back to the house, there’d probably be reporters everywhere (“But I’ve already been on the news.”). The Merchants might be out for retaliation (“You think they’re getting
past Sunny? And weren’t you just there to handle them? Are you saying you didn’t do a good job?”) There might be other villains out to capitalize on the situation (“How many are even left?”). The PRT had questions for her and Good Dog (“We’ve been here for around 10 hours already and you haven’t mentioned anything of the sort, so they can’t be crucial, but go ahead and ask Sunny right now. You don’t speak dog? Neither do I, what’s your point?”). Eventually, she had to put her foot down.

“Mr. Dauntless, I understand your concerns and I acknowledge your position, but do remember that I am the caretaker for both a non-profit business and a neutral zone under truce, and I have obligations that I must attend to; foremost among these today is that I am expecting Oni Lee to stop by before evening. So, I must ask you...” Taylor straightened her shoulders and fixed her gaze on the Grecian hero’s helmet-shadowed eyes. “Are you going to make me late for tea?”

30 minutes later she and Sunny were climbing out of a PRT transport, which had graciously been provided to drop them off at Taylor’s house. Taylor and Sunny ignored the police tape and let the PRT trooper explain to the officers why they were allowed to be there. “I wasn’t so hot on the idea of a sleepover before, but for now, maybe it’s better that we stay at the Shrine. What do you think, Sunny?”

The canine gave the most approving nod, and even helped Taylor pack a few bags. Her cold-weather shrine clothes and some underthings, a few basic toiletries, her school bag-- that was all easy enough to pack together and load up into her bicycle’s saddlebags. Picking between her art supplies what to take and what to risk leaving was considerably harder, but Taylor did still have a good amount of her heavier painting gear and her calligraphy things at the shrine already, so she drug a spare, older backpack out from the depths under her bed and filled it with only what would supplement what she already had: a couple of ink pots, some spare jars for washing brushes, some unopened tubes of oil paint. The rest of that bag belonged to Sunny’s sparse possessions, like her brush and a squeak toy and their frisbee, and this bag stayed settled square on Taylor’s shoulders. The last item on the packing list was to roll up a couple blankets and a pillow with the sleeping bag, and then plead with Sunny until the wolf agreed, with an exaggerated eyeroll, to carry the plush bundle on her back.

That left just one small task before they could leave. Taylor raided the intact cupboards in the kitchen for a couple of items, then snuck out the back door and crept over to the Henricks’ house. Old Mrs. Henrick answered her knocks after a couple of tries.

“Oh! Taylor, sweetie, come in! Oh, we’ve been worried, there was a terrible commotion in the night, are you okay?” The old woman hustled them inside, though Sunny elected to stay in the elderly couple’s living room to keep an eye on Taylor’s laden bike through the window. Taylor followed Old Mrs. Henrick and did her best to assure her of their well being.

“Sorry. Some Merchants attacked our house last night, but we’re all okay. Sunny and I are gonna stay at Pawprint Shrine for a few days, so if Dad calls, that’s where I’m at.”

“Wh-- you didn’t tell your father?”

“I told his co-worker!” Taylor protested, “And since the company gave me a ride over here, that means they’re now complicit and he can’t complain.” Because that was how it worked, hopefully. She shook her head to banish the vision of Chessman’s myriad forces descending upon the shrine en masse in a fit of paternal worry. “Anyway, I’m sorry it’s so sudden and I’ll leave out the back so no reporters see me, but could I borrow your kitchen?”

“Oh-- well, sure you can, Taylor. What do you need?”
Taylor followed her neighbor to the kitchen, explaining as she took out the ingredients she’d rescued from her own, destroyed place of baking. “I’ve got a guest I need to entertain later, so I wanted to make a quick matcha cake. Takes like, 30 minutes. And I’ll be sure to leave out the back way so the reporters don’t see me coming out of your house.”

“Bah!” A cantankerous voice interrupted her, just as she got to the Henricks’s kitchen to see Old Mr. Henrick sitting at the table with a cup of coffee. “Vultures, the lot of them. Good to see you, young lady, we’re glad you’re okay.”

“George already glared a few into submission,” Old Mrs Henrick said with a smile. “Here, let’s preheat the oven, I’ll help with this cake of yours. Is there any room in that bag? I’ll pack some sweets for you and Sunny to take with you, too.” Taylor could almost hear Sunny’s ears perk up. **Best neighbors,** seriously.

* * *

Oni Lee walked through the torii gate. As ever, he could have been blind and known where the barrier was, because the blessed grounds of the shrine held an intangible difference from the rough streets outside it. Here, where the wolf spirit had invested its power, a few minutes spent at rest allowed for a feeling of contentment to pass through his mask. It was impossible to adequately describe the lack of something, but the kami’s influence allowed Oni Lee to acknowledge that lack, and he always left the Pawprint Shrine feeling more whole than he would remember by the time he next visited.

Fortunate, then, that Lung had told him to keep an eye on the Miko, and on the rising activity of the ABB in the area. The census Lung had requested had been completed to his satisfaction, and though there was friction among the ABB at being moved between peer groups, trade guilds were being formed. Builders and unskilled laborers had already begun repairing Lung’s newly-acquired properties in the vicinity of the shrine, while a few groups of skilled tradesmen were navigating the wider city’s governance for the permits to open businesses. They, and a handful of merchants from the peasantry, would have the honor of being the first recipients of Lung’s new venture. It was a sizeable investment, to be certain, but the returns would be greater still.

“Oh-- hello, Oni Lee!” The assassin turned to spot the Miko waving at him from the door to the shrine’s office. “It’s getting cold out. Would you like to come inside for tea?”

An acceptable invitation. He nodded and followed the cobblestone pathway to the small building, then entered to see that the Miko had spread a number of mats over the open area of floor, so either she had entertained guests inside already or he was expected. Either seemed likely. Oni Lee settled onto the ground while the Miko busied herself with fetching her cups and pot.

“Sorry it’s a little ramshackle, it’s just getting too cold out to be sitting on the grass.”

“Perhaps a kotatsu is called for.”

“The word sounds familiar, but I can’t place it…”

“It is a small table, with a heater and blanket.”

“Oh! Yes, that does sound familiar. And cozy! I bet Sunny would definitely approve. I’ll tell her about it when she wakes up, she’s off in the haiden having a nap.” The Miko walked carefully over
to where he was and set the now-full teapot in front of him, followed by the cups and a large plate holding some manner of green cake, shaped like a ring, and lightly covered in a clear glaze; Oni Lee could faintly smell green tea and lemon. “I was trying out a new recipe-- sorry it doesn’t look fancy, I’m still working on that-- and I thought maybe you’d like to try it, and tell me what you think?”

Oni Lee nodded, and waited in silence while she settled herself opposite him and serve the tea and matcha cake. Her movements seemed less clumsy than they had been only a few months ago, and while her implements may not have been ‘fancy,’ as she put it, the Miko was clearly putting in the effort to anticipate the needs and comfort of her guests. She was shaping up to be a fine hostess and caretaker for the shrine. She inquired after his health, and made some light conversation as he grew accustomed to the warmth of the small office.

“I am glad that things are going well for you, Oni Lee, and equally glad that you stopped by to share such news… especially as there are a few matters I would like to discuss with you.” Oni Lee felt a small thrill of alarm when the Miko looked up at him and smiled. “In particular, I have a few questions about the youkai I’ve been hearing about, and the sudden need for exorcism slips for the ABB that has followed.”

It wasn’t even that worrisome a topic, yet Oni Lee caught himself glancing down at his half-full cup and serving plate, still laden with the matcha cake. To get up and leave while in the middle of a tea service, even an informal one, would be the height of rudeness, and the Miko knew it.

Green tea and sugar
The motive inside, hidden
A delicious snare

“What in particular did you desire to know, Miko?”

She sipped at her tea. Oni Lee was not fooled; this was not a visit, it was a negotiation at best and interrogation at worst. “Well, to start… I confess, I didn’t know the ABB recruited its members so young.”

A statement framed as a question, and Oni Lee had to take a moment to figure out if the Miko had suddenly shifted topic or not. She hadn’t-- he quickly recalled the young man he’d instructed to purchase ofuda from her. Yuuta, he thought. He… had been a man, hadn’t he? One of the newer members? The Miko answered his thoughts by adopting a worried tone. “I knew that a few of the upperclassmen at school had been recruited, but I didn’t know the first and second years were ever allowed to do more than run errands. It was Yuuta, um… Suzuki, right-- I’m sure you’d recognize him if you saw him, Yuuta is here pretty often to help me work on the building next door. Oh, did I mention that? His family wants to run a bakery, so I’m going to rent the property to them.”

So that’s where the premonition of doom was coming from. He had carelessly poached both a minor and someone under the Miko’s direct authority. “I… see. Gomenasai, Miko, I did not know.”

“Hm? Oh, there’s no need to apologize, Oni Lee. I take it to mean you didn’t know he wasn’t a member already? I’m sure it’s a simple mistake…” Translation: The Ōkami will overlook your transgression. Do not repeat it. “…and Yuuta told me a few things about Youkai already, so it certainly sounds like you do need the ofuda. I’m sorry I didn’t notice sooner, really. I’m usually around Sunny and I don’t think any spirits have tried to bother her… and, I’ll admit, I didn’t even know they were real until Yuuta told me. I’m still trying to learn Japanese, so even when Sunny had me copying down the designs in the book of charms, I wasn’t sure what they were for.”
“...I will send a higher-ranking member to purchase the ofuda from now on.”

The Miko bit lightly at her bottom lip, and demurely derailed his plans before he could finish adapting them. “About that… I’ve been thinking. Selling exorcism slips—especially in bulk—to the ABB directly… isn’t that really supplying the ABB? I was kind of worried that would be a violation of the shrine’s neutral status between the gangs.” Oni Lee tensed up, but the Miko just sipped at her tea again. “But… the ofuda are important, right? Especially around here, it seems. So I was thinking—what if the ABB could purchase them from someone else? It’s a bit of a loss of business for the shrine, but it would hopefully get around the neutrality clause and free me up to make things other than just all exorcisms, all the time.”

So she was offering a compromise? That was… a little odd, at first glance. He’d intended to buy the ofuda at a good price, so that was a noticeable loss for the Miko if she did not receive the payment. The Miko must have valued the spirit of the shrine’s neutrality over its monetary success. Well, that was fitting. There was a bit of a flaw in her plan, however. “That would be acceptable, if there were another to purchase ofuda from. They would need to be effective, as well. Ink on paper by itself is worthless.”

“Well, that should be easy enough!” The Miko smiled, and a bit of the tension leached out of the room. “I gave Yuuta a few supplies and my first practice books, so he can do it. Sunny thinks he’s making great progress. I’ll keep making some extra slips in the meantime, and when Yuuta’s ofuda are up to par, you can buy them from him directly. Sound like a deal?”

So the Miko escapes the neutrality clause without breaking it, and the individuals under her patronage reap the rewards, with no loss of face or safety for the ABB. Lung was right to be wary. “That does seem agreeable, Miko.”

“I’m very glad to hear it,” she said. “Would you like some more tea?”

The Miko kept conversation light after that, and plied him with tea and her matcha cake to soothe the sting of her earlier reprimand. After an hour or so he thanked her, but it was time to return to his work. She accepted this readily and walked him to the torii, still speaking.

“Thank you for visiting, Oni Lee. And thank you for trying out the cake! I’ll see if I can find some ways to make it even better… it might be a while, though. Sunny and I will be staying here for a while, so I don’t have as much access to a kitchen. The Merchants blew ours up last night.”

What?

“What?”

“You… might see it on the news. Oh, that reminds me! The Protectorate is interested in a temporary ceasefire with the ABB, so they can focus on really clearing out the Merchant territories. Could you let Lung know? If he wants to speak to me directly, you know where I am. Oh, but please call first, don’t just let him ambush me, please?”

“I-- yes.” The Merchants had attacked the Miko at home? And the Protectorate was getting involved? What was this?

“Thank you! Well, have a good night, Oni Lee.”

* * *
Taylor walked calmly back to her office, shut the door behind her to keep out the chill, then sat down at her desk and fished a brown paper bag out of one of the drawers.

A minute of hyperventilation later, she slumped over her desk and let the bag tumble to the floor--she could clean up later, when her legs weren’t made of jelly. “I-- I did it. I did it.”

Sunny was asleep in the haiden. Sunny was asleep, and Taylor had sat down with Oni Lee, and bargained with him. She’d *reprimanded* him for trying to forcibly recruit Yuuta, she’d negotiated around the Youkai issue, she’d-- she’d *dealt with* the situation. Her. By *herself*, without Sunny nearby to smooth things over. Taylor laughed, a trifle hysterically, though that might have been the lightheadedness from the paper bag. She wasn’t even surprised, a moment later, to see Sunny’s head peeking in the window, the wolf awake and very confused by her antics. Taylor steadied herself, then got up and opened the door for her friend. Sunny looked at her, then the remains of the tea service, then back at her.

“Sunny! Sunny, I did it!” Taylor grinned, and gave a breathless rundown of the past hour. “I know-- I know what I said, and-- and it’s still true. I’m still scared, and I still want to just… hang out with you, you know?”

Sunny made a ‘go on’ sort of noise, and curled up on the biggest bare space of mats. Taylor *flumped* against the wolf’s side gratefully. “But-- but it’s not fair to make you do everything, you know? The cape stuff, and the-- the youkai stuff? Which I still don’t fully get, but, I mean… you don’t have to hide it from me. I can help! I’m-- I *want* to help, Sunny.” She took a deep breath, and steadied herself. “I want to help you, with… whatever you’re doing. Will you teach me?”

Taylor sat up, and turned to look at Sunny. The wolf was smiling, and from the look in her eyes, Taylor got the sense that Sunny was proud of her. Taylor wrapped her arms around the wolf’s thick neck in a hug.

“It might be scary and weird, but-- I won’t let you down, Sunny. I promise.”
Saturday morning dawned bright and clear and cold, but between a space heater and an oversized wolf, spending nights at the Pawprint Shrine hadn’t been at all bad so far. Hard, in some ways—her own house and her own bed had provided a sense of security Taylor hadn’t truly realized before now. And the days held their own challenges, since more than a few reporters and gawkers had stopped by the Shrine looking for her, as word of the Merchants’ attack spread. Sunny seemed more than up to the task of keeping people on their best behavior, though. Might have had something to do with the cellphone videos of her dragging Skidmark out of town that were all over now.

The PRT had picked him up later that same day, still on the road, and the Protectorate had clashed with the Merchants’ capes and ground forces twice since. Taylor had started the habit of giving her dad a call in the evenings, just to check in, so they’d each know the other was safe. Talk about their days a little, that sort of thing. It was still pretty awkward, to be sure, but it gave Taylor a hopeful feeling. And a guilty feeling, a little. Staying at the Shrine and calling Dad at work felt like she’d gone out and gotten an apartment, and now that they were both out of the house… well, the strained silence and sad memories weren’t as tied to their current surroundings. Like they were now moving forward, instead of trying to stay in moments that had already gone.

All in all, despite the hectic goings-on with the rest of the city and even school (Taylor did not appreciate all the looks she was getting these days— at least the Asian kids were quick to close ranks around her when needed), and even with how much there was to do with the Shrine, it remained an island of calm in a life that was rapidly picking up the pace. So it was probably a karmic balance of some sort that a new crop of masked visitors should arrive.

“Hallooooo, Brushstroke!” Taylor heard a cheery voice call from near the torii, and she abandoned her sweeping of the last of the fallen leaves off the cobblestone path to follow the stones to the source of the voice. Grouped together near the entrance of the Shrine was an addition to Taylor’s list of Strange Things Capes Do, because of the three teens only the big guy in motorcycle leathers was even remotely dressed for this weather. Of the others, one was either an effeminate boy or a very flat-chested girl in a Renaissance floofy shirt, and the other was a blonde girl in a near-skintight lavender bodysuit. In November.

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“Good morning! Welcome to Pawprint Shrine. I am called Brushstroke, yes, though I tend to prefer either Taylor or Miko. Is there something I can help you with?”

“Giving out your name just like that, huh?” The blonde asked, stepping forward as the apparent spokesperson of the group. “I’d think that’d be a habit you would have dropped by now.”

“I don’t believe I’ll be dropping my name, no. Though this would be a good time to namedrop yours, if you prefer.” Making a reference to the Merchants attack right off the bat? Not giving Taylor a very good feeling. Sunny wasn’t far away, though, and from the heavy pawpads she heard off near the haiden, Taylor suspected the wolf had overheard.

“Smooth! I’m Tattletale, and with me are Grue and Regent, of the Undersiders. Small-time villains, though with the recent atmosphere small-time might be the only time.” Cheerful tone and joking aside, the blonde parahuman had a laser-focused look in her eyes. Still a few decades too untrained
to measure up to Baachan. Taylor just smiled.

“Pleased to meet you, Undersiders. As I said, welcome to Pawprint Shrine. Is there something I can assist you with?”

“This all there is?” The floofy-shirted young man (aha, it was a he!) turned his masked face to make a show of looking around, blithely ignoring the irritated hiss from Grue. “I’d expected at least an open bar.”

“At present, yes, though I will try to file for a liquor license once I have the hot spring up and running.”

“Haha, wow, you’re… actually serious. Huh.” Tattletale tilted her head a bit, watching Taylor. “Anyway, it’s more that we’re here to help you, since you haven’t gotten a mailbox out here yet. Might want to get on that, if you want to run a business. Not everything’s done on email…”

Tattletale trailed off, as Sunny padded up to sit next to Taylor. Taylor gave her a quick rub of the ears as thanks for the solidarity. “Should I assume you’re here with a message, then?”

“That’s right,” Grue nodded, and stepped forward. From somewhere in the smoky recesses of his jacket, he pulled out a notecard and held it out. Taylor took a step forward to accept it. “There’s a meeting happening soon, and it concerns you, so you should definitely show up. Sorry we couldn’t warn you ahead of time, we just heard of it ourselves.”

“Some warning is better than none, thank you. Ah… who is the meeting with?” Taylor eyed the card. What was ‘Somer’s Rock’?

“City’s villains, mostly, though there’s a few neutral parties too. Faultline will probably show, for instance.”

“Um… okay. I’d protest but meeting with villains is something I just kinda-- three hours?!” Taylor gripped the invitation a bit harder. It said to be at Somer’s Rock by noon, and it was just past nine now. She couldn’t help the accusatory glare when she raised her head again to look at Grue. The cape just shrugged, unfazed. She heard Regent start laughing, like an asshole.

“These things usually have more notice. Like I said, we just found out too.”

“Alright, well-- I’ll take any amount of notice, I suppose. Though… can I ask a question?” Grue nodded, his faceless helmet still seeping that black smoke. It was kind of eerie. “If the Undersiders are ‘small-time,’ as you say, then why are you inviting me? Given my location, I’d think grabbing any member of the ABB and asking them to pass it along would work just as well.”

Grue hesitated, the slight motion of his faceplate making Taylor think he was glancing over at Tattletale. “The Undersiders are like Faultline, in a way, since we’re open to taking on jobs for pay. We got paid to run an errand, that’s all.”

“So who hired you?”

“Confidential.” Unless there was a lawyer-cape or something similar around, that meant he didn’t want to say. She certainly wasn’t going to force him, so Taylor nodded her acceptance. Grue nodded back. “Somer’s Rock might not look like much, but this is a formal kind of thing. You’re gonna want to get a bit more dressed up, if you understand. Anyway-- Tattletale, let’s go! ...Tattletale?”
The blonde girl was still staring at Sunny, who was staring back with a particularly smug expression on her canine face. Tattletale blinked when her name was called, looking over at Grue almost on autopilot. She glanced back at Sunny once, then turned to face Grue again, eyes wide and with one finger pointed accusingly at Sunny. “Dog!”

Taylor felt more than saw Grue’s attention come back to her. “Sunny has that effect on people. She’ll be fine, don’t worry about it.”

The Undersiders seemed quite keen on leaving as quickly as possible after that, which suited Taylor just fine. Formal attire and only… she ran to the office and checked the clock. Formal attire, and only two hours, forty-five minutes to achieve it? Taylor was very, very tempted to forgive Oni Lee in light of this. Taylor undid the snaps on a small chest sitting on the floor behind her desk, while Sunny—now returning to normal levels of smug—watched over her shoulder. For as well-drilled in formalities as she’d become in a short period of time under the Baachan Collective’s guidance, being able to dress herself had unfortunately fallen by the wayside, and there was simply no way she was getting into her kimono properly without help.

* * *

Taylor slid off of Sunny’s back a good twenty minutes or so later, once the wolf slowed to a stop in front of the Suzuki apartment. She had the kimono (carefully folded!) stuffed in her book bag. Yuuta answered the door after her second round of knocks, and the teen’s eyes bugged a little. “Uh-- Miko? What are you… doing here?”

“Sorry, Yuuta! I really need Baachan’s help with something, can I see her?”

Was that sweat breaking out on Yuuta’s forehead? “It’s not really a good time, Miko, could you come back in an hour--”

“Yuuta, boy, is that the Miko? Don’t just block the door, invite her in!” Yuuta went just a degree paler, and made that reluctant sound he always did when going against the Authority of Baachan was not an option. But he stepped aside, and motioned her in. Taylor shot him an apologetic smile as she walked through the door, Sunny close on her heels.

“Sorry, I know I should have called, but I’m on a time limit, and--” and what the hell was Emma doing at Baachan’s kitchen table?! “--oh I see you are working with ofuda, maybe Sunny can take a look at them while we’re here if you don’t mind.” There was an open notebook and the pot of ink and brushes at the small table, placed in front of a vacant seat, but it was the deer-in-headlights redhead sitting adjacent that made Taylor feel like a rug had been pulled out from underneath her. What was Emma doing here? Why? Why would Baachan invite her into her home? Why would Yuuta sit next to her, after the things she’d done? Too-familiar hurts and fears welled up with a hundred explanations, each terrible. Then Baachan caught her attention, the old woman’s warm hands on hers as she asked what Taylor needed help with. Taylor felt a tightness in her chest ease. Whatever the reason, it couldn’t be what she feared—neither Yuuta nor Baachan would betray her like that. They had both gone to great lengths to extend their trust to Taylor, she would just have to trust them in turn.

“I got called to a cape meeting on short notice; Lung might even be there, I don’t know. Can you help me with my kimono, Baachan?” Taylor saw the old woman start to smile, the expression maybe even a little self-satisfied. Maybe she was glad she’d been the first one Taylor came to?
“You come to the right place, Miko, of course Baachan will help you. When is your meeting, maybe I will be able to do something with that hair of yours.”

* * *

Yuuta watched his grandmother lead the Miko off, the Ōkami of hers following behind. Nothing he needed to deal with, so he sat back down and started copying another set of characters on a fresh sheet of paper. Calligraphy might be a bit more girly than he’d prefer, but he was getting pretty good at it, if he said so himself. Crazy Chick sat in stunned silence next to him, her painted nails gripped tightly around a cooling mug of hot cocoa.

He’d heard about the Miko getting attacked at her home, probably everyone had, and while the News was saying Chessman ‘had arrived’ in time to drive off the stupid, stupid gangers who’d done it, there were videos online saying the hero’s soldiers had come out of the house, not to it. Lots of people were getting banned on PHO over speculation, saying that maybe that had been Chessman’s house, not just Brushstroke’s. The Protectorate had certainly gone apeshit enough over it. At least, those were the rumors Yuuta had been hearing. And from the look on Crazy Chick’s face, they were the rumors she’d been hearing, too.

She stayed quiet while Yuuta worked, lost in whatever thoughts rattled around in her head, then froze up again when Taylor and Baachan came back out. The Miko’s meeting must have been soon, because Baachan hadn’t done much more than shove a pretty comb into her hair, but she had a pretty sweet kimono and some lip gloss to make up for it. Kinda funny to remember Haru calling her a butterface, a few months back. Guess clothes really did make the man. Miko. Whatever.

“So? I did tell you, that feud you got is one-sided.”

“I can do both!” That argument sounded better in his head. Grandmother tutted at him, clearly not letting the issue drop for ever, but she left to go busy herself elsewhere in the apartment. Maybe she didn’t want to argue in front of a guest. Score one for Emma, he supposed. The girl in question stayed quiet as he got back to work, dipping the brush in the ink and making careful lines upon the paper. Damnit, now he really wanted to know what else Taylor had to say. Because if there wasn’t the Oni hanging over him about it, getting wads of cash in exchange for some ink on paper sounded like a pretty sweet gig. The desire to join the gang proper, he’d found, had cooled in proportion with his chance of getting grenaded. It still didn’t sound too bad, but if he could make money and reputation without it…

“She… didn’t even look at me.” Yuuta finished a line, then looked up. Crazy Chick was hugging her arms around herself. “Taylor. It’s like she didn’t care.”

“So? I did tell you, that feud you got is one-sided.”

“She said she was going to a cape meeting.” Yuuta nodded. “Said Lung might be there, like she didn’t care about him either.” Yuuta considered, then nodded again. Rumors were pretty rampant there, as well, but the general consensus was that even Lung worked with or around the shrine cape. Or whatever the Miko was, exactly.
“And I saw the news,” Emma continued, “about that dog she had with her, and the Merchants-- and that her dad might be a hero. She’s… powerful, isn’t she?”

“Well, yeah.”

“No, you don’t get it! This isn’t new, is it? She could have-- at any time, she could have-- I mean, she could even sic Oni Lee on me, couldn’t she?” Crazy Chick turned wide eyes on him. And while Yuuta could understand being scared of the Oni, what was she freaking out about now?

“So? She didn’t. Why would she?” And there she goes, staring at him like he’s some kind of alien. Yuuta rolled his eyes. “Yeah, the Miko could probably smite you a dozen different ways, but just because she could doesn’t give her a reason to.”

“But I gave her reason! I gave her plenty of reasons!”

Yuuta cut her off before she could panic harder. “Yeah, but she’s not that kind of person.”

“Not that kind of person,” Emma repeated, her expression falling. “...the whole time?”

“Probably, yeah. Takes a lot of work to stop being a kind of person, y’know?” Yuuta sighed, and finished up another practice charm. “You wanna stay here a bit, or should I take you home ‘fore Taylor comes back from her meeting?”

“...just a bit longer.”

“Mkay. Hey, pass me that other inkwell? This one’s going dry.” He saw the redhead nod out of the corner of his eye, then reach behind her to the kitchen counter, where the rest of the supplies he’d been given sat. Emma plucked the full inkpot from its resting place and held it in her hand for a moment, just looking at it. Her grip tightened, and she took a breath-- then set the pot gently on the table.
Lung was on time for the meeting at Somer’s Rock, that dingy little bar that had, until recently, been the city’s one recognised neutral territory for the unlawful parahumans that resided there. Now, as he directed the deaf waitress to bring him a bottle of strong drink and took ownership of an ugly, worn chair at the similarly ugly, worn table in the center of the bar, Lung couldn’t help but scoff. He needed to find an excuse to call a meeting like this at the Pawprint Shrine, so he could watch Kaiser choke on his territory’s relative luxury and fine culture. He’d gladly lose his legs to another four-hour ceremony if it meant forcing the self-styled Iron King to do the same. After all, Lung’s would grow back.

Said false king was already at his usual place at the table, his women at his sides, though his attack dog and his thief were noticeably absent. Purity as well, perhaps the rumors of their falling out had some grain of truth to them. Kaiser usually brought a larger entourage as a show of strength, as numbers were the Empire’s sole quality. And Lung usually arrived late, making the gathered capes wait for him simply because he could, because who would dare speak against him, or pretend to mold the city without him included?

But not today. Today, Kaiser’s table had empty seats, and Lung was on time, and both of these were for the same reason. The city had changed.

More parahumans filed in, as Lung took his first pull of liquor and Kaiser pretended not to care about anything. First Faultline, and her two mutants, the mercenaries taking up stools at the bar rather than the center tables. A car door slammed shut outside and Coil walked in, the snake claiming a spot at the table nearest the door. A rag-tag trio of teenagers were last, from some gang Lung didn’t care to know about, and they wisely occupied a pair of booths rather than try and take one of the open spots at the table.

11:30, and not a single Merchant on the premises. No great loss, that. Kaiser glanced at the grimy clock on the far wall and nodded. “Everyone’s here. Let’s begin. As you surely know--”

The bar’s door opened, shoved by the large head of a large wolf, and in walked the Ōkami, with the Miko riding sidesaddle on its back. Lung recognised the kimono she’d chosen to wear in place of a costume, and the Miko’s formal appearance with the wolf spirit’s bright fur painted a sharp contrast to the bar’s other inhabitants.

“Oh-- hello. I’m not late, am I?” The Miko scanned the room once, visibly taking note of first the seating arrangement, and then the clock Kaiser had just looked to a moment before. The Ōkami padded further into the room, making the bar seem that much smaller by comparison, and stopped at a set of booths at the far side of the tables. The Miko then grabbed a chair from the empty places near Kaiser and set it against the booth’s table before sitting down, facing the gathered villains. The Ōkami jumped up onto the booth table behind her, the wood creaking in protest, and laid down, with its paws hanging over the edge and flanking the Miko’s shoulders and its head high above the girl’s, forming the image of a living throne. Inside his mask, Lung grinned as he heard Kaiser’s armor clink together as his fist tightened.

“Brushstroke-- and Good Dog, too-- I didn’t expect to see you here,” Coil spoke clearly from the end
furthest from the Miko, drawing their attention. The Ōkami’s eyes sharpened.

“And I didn’t expect to see so many here already. The invitation I received said to be here at noon. I hope I didn’t make anyone wait.”

There was a moment of strained silence, until Faultline snorted and shook her head. “Nobody? Fine, I’ll say it-- I don’t think you were invited, Brushstroke. Bit late to complain now.”

“Indeed,” Kaiser muttered, then raised his voice again, “but perhaps for the best. I should like to discuss your recent actions, once the matter at hand is concluded.”

“As you wish,” the Miko demurred. She did glance sidelong at the teenagers in the booth, signalling them out clearly for some involvement, which made their shadowed leader fidget. “Please excuse my interruption, then.”

“As I was saying-- as you surely know, Legend has relocated to the city temporarily, while the local Protectorate turns its attention to wiping away the stain of the Merchants. I would like to propose a moratorium on overt conflict for the duration of his stay. His duties in New York cannot be put off forever, I suspect that if no trouble arises here he will leave all the more quickly.”

Typical. Kaiser wanted to play for time, give his crumbling Empire time to shore its defenses. He was known for calling in favors, drawing capes from near and far to his banner as needed. Using the threat of the Triumvirate as a smokescreen to cover for his weakness, and more than likely parcelling out the Merchant’s territory to new vassals before he’d even claimed it. The Trainyards were a squalid ruin, but Lung was half a mind to conquer it anyway, before some new pest moved in or Kaiser got a foothold.

What had Lee said? The Protectorate had asked the Miko to negotiate a ceasefire. Lung felt a smile spread upon his face. He’d send a group of men to the Merchant lairs, test the waters of the Protectorate’s tolerance, and perhaps steal the vacant territory from Kaiser before his very eyes. “I find this acceptable.”

“I’m not starting trouble unless I’m paid to-- and it’d have to be a hefty check to do so while the Triumvirate is watching,” Faultline agreed, as she leaned back against the bar.

“We’re fine with laying low for a while. He’s just keeping watch while the heroes arrest the remaining Merchants, isn’t he? That shouldn’t take long at all.” The smoke-obscured teen rumbled, his voice distorted by his power. “How many are left besides Squealer and Mush?”

Coil glanced at the teen, and Lung could almost hear the smirk. “ Likely a handful of no-name dredges. My sources--”

“GAH!” A sudden shout and a slap drew all eyes to the booth, where the blonde cape had her hands covering her face. Lung saw the Ōkami quickly lean back out of the corner of his eyes. “Stop-- stop photobombing my power!”

The smoking leader of-- ah, now he remembered-- the Undersiders quickly shushed his compatriot. Lung heard the Miko scolding the Ōkami (“Sunny, be nice!”) but the damage was done. Kaiser raised his voice but lowered the tone, saying, “Brushstroke, are you aware of the rules of this sort of arrangement? You’re quite new, so I shall enlighten you-- use of parahuman powers is forbidden under truce, as is goading another into aggression.”
The Miko tilted her head slightly, and regarded the Empire leader. “I see. Thank you for taking the
time to explain this, but I don’t see how it’s relevant here. Sunny isn’t doing anything other than
existing. I’m sorry if that inconveniences anyone.”

“Hm. Well, I think we are all in agreement regarding the moratorium. I believe there was something
else you wished to discuss, Kaiser?” Coil spoke up, diverting the conversation before Kaiser could
get a proper retort in. No doubt the snake was enjoying the Empire’s loss of face, as well. Kaiser
must have been seething behind his iron facade.

“Indeed. As a matter of fact, it concerns our,” he nearly spat the word, “guest. Namely, why is she
here?”

“...do you mean in the building, or in the city?”

“Either.”

“Well,” she said, “I’m in the building because I received an invitation. I’m in the city because I live
here.” The Miko reached into her obi and withdrew a small notecard, then rose and walked over to
Kaiser, handing it to him. “This was delivered to me.”

“We don’t do written invitations, Brushstroke,” Faultline commented, leaning forward a bit as she
did to eye the card.

“Then perhaps there has been a mistake? But I can’t imagine why someone would go to the trouble
of getting me here.” Was she being facetious? The Ōkami’s narrowed eyes and her careful tone
implied that she was. If there was some sort of ploy involved, the list of suspects was dangerously
narrow.

“Is there a point to this diversion,” Lung rumbled, “Or will you continue to waste our time, Kaiser?”

“There is. I want to know why someone in collusion with the Protectorate is allowed here.” Kaiser
gestured at the now-seated Miko with an iron gauntlet. “Time and again, this one has set up
situations for the heroes to rush in, and yet she claims to be neutral?”

“I do, yes, because I am. I offer the same privileges to the Protectorate as I do to everyone here.”

“You delivered Skidmark to the Protectorate only a few days ago. As abhorrent as he was, you
cannot claim--”

“I did no such thing,” she interrupted, and over her head the Ōkami focuses its large eyes on Kaiser.
“Members of the Merchants attacked my house, and Sunny held the leader responsible for the actions
of his men. That the Protectorate picked him up after she was done with him is not my concern. I
took no oath of pacifism, nor have I promised to uphold a status quo. If someone breaks the rules of
the Shrine or attacks me, Sunny can and will redress it. Is that a problem?”

Against Lung’s expectations, Kaiser was silent for a long moment. “No,” he eventually ground out,
“it is not.” Even his women exchanged a glance with each other. Backing down was not the
response one expected from Kaiser.

Coil was the first to stand, his chair screeching on the wood floor. “Well then. If our business is
concluded…?“ There were murmurs of agreement. The Undersiders didn’t quite flee, but they were
first out the door, followed by Faultline and her beastial help. Coil slithered out, then after another
moment-- seeing Brushstroke had made no move to leave-- Kaiser and his diminished entourage stood and left. Once he did, the Miko hurried to her feet and-- Lung felt the hair on the back of his neck prickle, just a little. She smiled and walked over to him, the Ōkami on her heels.

“Excuse me-- Lung?”

“What is it?” Up close, he could see the strained quality to her expression, and the involuntary flick of her gaze. She didn’t seem to approve of his jacket, worn open over his bare chest, but of course was too polite to say so. Heh.

“I wanted to give you this. I thought about passing it along through Oni Lee, but since you were going to be here I brought it with me.” She reached back into her obi and pulled out a thin wooden slat, the wood stained cherry-red and then painted. On the item was an image of a tiger, painted like a paper screen, and a small stylized paw print in black ink. “I don’t think I’ll have the hot spring ready this year-- there’s not much left of it, y’know-- but since you helped make it happen I wanted you to have this.”

“And ‘this’ is?”

“A pass for the hot spring. Or it would be. It’s more a ceremonial gesture now, I suppose. Next year’s will have a rabbit, but you get the first.”

An appropriate if materially empty gesture, honoring his generosity in allowing her to claim territory and-- wait. Paranoia spread through Lung with the Ōkami’s smile. Every time the Miko had acted with anything approaching obeisance it had only been a trap to pull him deeper into the kami’s debt. What was hiding behind this trinket? He needed to consult with Oni Lee, the assassin had a better grip on the nonsense paths of faith.

Out loud, he responded with a curt, “Thank you, Miko.” The Ōkami’s attendant smiled a bit wider, dipped into a light bow, and left. The wolf winked at him as it followed her. *Fuck.*

* * *

Kaiser walked quickly, Fenja and Menja having no problem keeping up, but the pace made them exchange another worried glance. They remained silent until they got back to the car, and as soon as the door shut and the tinted windows hid the Empire’s leadership, Kaiser cursed. “Son of a bitch, I knew it.”

“What is it?”

“Brushstroke. She wasn’t working with the PRT, she had a grudge the whole time.” His fists clenched, iron fingers creaking against each other. “I began to suspect when she was outed, but now, after Skidmark, I know for sure.”

“Kaiser, what is it?”

“Brushstroke’s name is Taylor Hebert-- she’s not hard to find. That would make her father Daniel Hebert-- he worked for the Dockworker’s Union, until Hookwolf had it burnt down. Her little crusade against the Empire was delayed, but personal, and it more or less justifies her dog’s little stunt against Hookwolf.” Biting him in public just as he was lighting something up. He’d admire the girl’s vicious irony if it wasn’t so goddamned inconvenient. And he hadn’t forgotten her warning, staring at him through his office window.
At least the moratorium bought him some time, but he’d need to be ready before it ended. Lung and Coil were the only two big names left in the city outside the Empire, and there was blood in the water. And with Purity compromised… damnit.

“Hand me my phone, I need to call Krieg.”

** * * **

She shouldn’t have left the swingset. She knew it was risky to go to the little girl’s room, but she’d had to, and now they were going to catch her and kill her and--

12.473% chance they will kill me.

--okay maybe they were gonna do something worse, it didn’t really--

89.673% chance it was something worse.

--Holy crap, Dinah hated her power sometimes. No, all the time. It had brought her nothing but trouble and headaches. She’d only had it for a month, not that anyone believed her! And then last week she’d started seeing some really skeevy-looking guys hanging around, and her power had been way too eager to give her the odds on what it meant.

She turned left, nearly stumbling, already lost. She didn’t know where the men were except that they were following her, and as long as she kept using alleyways and making turns they couldn’t use cars to follow her faster. But she couldn’t run forever. Maybe she could catch a ride on a truck again? That had seemed to throw her pursuers off a bit, her standing on the back bumper and gripping the pickup’s bed rim for dear life. Except she couldn’t see any around here, there was less and less traffic, and her chances were getting lower and lower.

Dinah’s feet hit a stretch of sidewalk and she nearly fell over, not from fatigue but shock: 74.538% chance of escape. A jump of fifty percent?! She pumped her legs faster, fueling her stride with desperate hope. As much as her power sucked, it hadn’t ever been wrong, so when the black pawprints on the sidewalk made a right turn across an intersection, she followed. She heard yelling behind her as the men caught sight of her again. Please don’t shoot, please don’t shoot, please don’t shoot…

The pawprints juked left again, onto a rough stretch of road lined by painted fences and empty storefront. Dinah sobbed-- she couldn’t run much further, and her head hurt so bad-- and then the paws turned again at a red archway. She stumbled through it, and fell over onto a stretch of grass. She spat out a few yellowed blades of vegetation, and raised her head to look around.

She’d managed to not fall onto a cobblestone path, which led straight to a funny-looking building with a weird roof. There was somebody kneeling at the end of the path, and Dinah felt her heart skip a beat when he turned his head. A leering mask like some sort of monster, painted red looked back at her. The man stood and turned, and started walking towards her. Was that Oni Lee?

That’s it. She was dead.

As if to confirm her prophecy, footsteps quickly gained on her, until the men she’d been running from arrived. They stopped outside the red arch, slowing to a walk by the sound of it. Oni Lee stopped entirely-- she saw his mask turn from looking at her, to looking at the men. From behind--
“The little bitch is ours, she stole something. We’re just gonna take her and walk away, no need for trouble. Alright?”

Oni Lee’s mask turned towards her again, as if to consider their proposal. He looked back towards the men as Dinah squeezed her eyes shut tight. “I will need to clean my tools again,” he said.

“Look, just--”

There was a sudden *shink* and squelching sound behind her, and yells, and then a gun went off *really loud*. Dinah clapped her hands over her ears like it could stop the ringing. And after a few moments, it did. Dinah opened her eyes-- still alive, apparently-- and withdrew shaking hands from her ears. Past the pounding of her pulse, she heard the man-- Oni Lee-- speaking quietly. It took a couple tries, but she lifted herself off the ground, and stood up.

“...four. Yes; clean them up before the Miko gets back.” And then a faint beep, as the demon hung up his phone. Oni Lee turned around, and regarded her just as silently as before. He walked forward, as slowly as before, and Dinah swore she could sense his gaze moving from her scraped knees, to her grass-stained shirt, to the half-unwound ribbon in her hair. The ABB assassin stopped, a couple feet in front of her. Her head hurt, but she had to ask. She barely saw Oni Lee kneel down, through the well of tears:

*02.573% chance this man wants to hurt me.*

His voice was calm, like he hadn’t just killed four men and saved her life. “Are you lost?”

Dinah blinked away the tears. “Yes.”

A moment, and then Oni Lee held out his hand. “I will walk you home.”
Chapter 44

Taylor rapped her knuckles against the metal slats of the loading dock door again and sighed. Suddenly dropping her off in the middle of urban nowhere wasn’t the strangest thing Sunny had done by far-- and Taylor felt like she was having to quantify events against that measure a lot, lately-- but it was certainly unexpected. Even rather worrisome, since the wolf typically didn’t leave her unattended unless she was at school or the Shrine. Plus, she was still in her kimono, which meant Taylor was at serious risk of getting it dirty and disappointing Baachan, and that was just unacceptable.

Taylor raised her hand to knock a third time, and finally the metal door groaned and slid upwards, revealing her newest acquaintances. She couldn’t see Grue’s expression, not with the obscuring smoke and the skull helmet, but Tattletale looked to have found a fine mixture of wariness and anger. So apparently this was the Undersider’s lair. Now, if only she knew why Sunny had left her here and bolted off, things would be great. “Hello again.”

“Brushstroke. What’s the meaning of this?” Okay, yeah, Grue sounded like he had the same reaction as Tattletale. Only creepier, with the reverb. His head moved a bit, like he was scanning the street and alleyways behind her. Taylor shrugged.

“I don’t know, actually. Sunny just kind of dropped me off here.”

“Here? Why, is the PRT about to fall on-- no, that’s not it. So, Good Dog isn’t with you? Does that happen often?” Tattletale asked, and now she was looking around too, like Sunny was just going to pop out of a garbage can or something.

“No, not at all. It’s very odd, like she had to go be somewhere right this minute and couldn’t spare the time to take me back to Pawprint Shrine. Which is strange, because I would think she’d at least put me at a cafe or somewhere more public and safe. But instead she chose here.” Taylor shrugged again, this time shaking her head a bit. Jeeze, she hoped Sunny knew what she was doing. “I didn’t even know what this place was until you answered the door.”

Tattletale had started to stare straight ahead, almost looking through her rather than at her. A bare second after Taylor finished speaking, the blonde’s eyes went wide as plates and she spun on her heel, nearly overbalancing, and started to run. She charged up a creaky set of wooden stairs, yelling, “Computer need my computer now now NOW!”

Grue and Taylor just watched the Thinker’s exit in silence for a moment. Grue coughed. “Okay... look, I don’t like this. Showing up at people’s secret hideouts kinda defeats the purpose of them being secret. But I’d rather not piss off Good Dog right now. So, uh... come in?”

“Thank you,” Taylor said, and followed the Undersider’s leader up the same stairs Tattletale had just fled. He led her to a modest living room sort of area, with a large television and a very nice white couch. There were a number of cardboard boxes and some unopened tins of paint scattered around; perhaps the small gang of thieves had only recently moved in. She spotted Regent here as well, over by a little kitchen island counter, with an unopened can of soda in one hand.
“Yo, Grue, what the hell’s up with this? Tats just ran up here, and-- wait, Brushstroke? What’s she doing here?”

Any possible logical response was interrupted by an ecstatic cry from behind the closed door of what Taylor had to assume was Tattletale’s room, followed by shouts of “Yes! YES!”

“Well, if the pattern holds true,” Taylor said slowly, while behind her Grue’s gloved hand met his helmet, “I’m here to regret yet inevitably benefit from whatever that is.”

* * *

Okay, don’t panic, Coil told himself. This was not a panic-worthy situation, not by a long shot. Yes, he’d lost his chance at the Alcott girl, and that was absolutely infuriating; all the moreso because he’d successfully kept Good Dog out of the whole thing, only to have the operation upended by a surprise Oni Lee. At least, that’s what his agents had reported, shortly before getting their throats slit like the useless meatbags they were. All that planning, all leading up to this one opportunity, and every carefully pruned timeline during the chase had ended up at the same destination: failure.

Aggravating. The Alcott girl was the last thing he wanted from this city before he moved his enterprise to more fertile grounds. He wasn’t done with Brockton Bay, not yet, but the past few months had been too full of rapid change to accommodate his grand designs. He needed to step back, consolidate, and try a new approach. And that had been the plan, but now he was going to have to do it without his pet. Coil sighed, one version of him still at his base, and the other just getting into a car to go home and sleep off this disappointment.

In the base, an alarm sounded, and red lights lit up along the ceilings to underscore the situation. Almost simultaneously, his private security shift leader started speaking urgently into his headset.

“Sir, there’s a situation-- intruder at the East gate, he’s broken through the initial partition--!”

He? As in, just one? Coil’s safer instance drove a little quicker, putting some distance between himself and his lair, while the Coil in the base timeline queued up the security camera feeds. He accidentally drove through a red light in the first instance as he stared at the camera. Was that Lung? Was that fucking Lung?! Was fucking Lung storming his base? Why? The gang leader, though formidable, was eminently predictable, even lazy. But now he was charging through Coil’s main hideout branch, alone, setting fire to everything he got near? Lung never moved on a target unless he had to or his ego was at stake, and even then he never went anywhere without his lieutenant, Oni Lee oh. The assassin must have identified his men and informed his boss, who had correctly deduced that Coil had abused the Somer’s Rock truce to make his move. And now Lung was using Coil’s attack on his vassal’s holdings to try and start a fight.

Coil frowned, and queued up the base’s self-destruct protocols. Unless his men managed to take down the self-styled dragon, he wouldn’t be keeping this timeline, so he may as well get some use out of it. It just didn’t make a lot of sense. Everything he knew about Lung suggested the Brute would have started with threats and posturing, a single incursion into the ABB holdings should never have merited such a quick and decisive response. Did Lung have designs on the Alcott girl? No--that couldn’t be. The only other explanation was that the Shrine’s grounds were so valuable as to justify a retaliatory strike on such flimsy pretense.

Coil turned on the intercom. “Lung, what is the meaning of this? We agreed to a truce!”

“Hyoo brokeh th’ rhules, Ccoil! Did hyoo think Ah whouldnn knoww?!” Lung was moving quickly, tearing through reinforced doors, carpeting the halls with flames, taking out Coil’s men as
soon as they could enter the fray—letting his enemies pile up, stoking his growth, but eliminating them before they could overwhelm. Coil brought up the self-destruct password entry line.

Access denied. Coil nearly froze, trying to process two disasters at once. Access denied— he typed the password again, to no effect. He was locked out of his own computer— how? It had to be Tattletale, she was betraying him, but why now, at this very instant? How could she know?

“Ahnd Ahm phaying debt t’oo khami, iff iss th’ lahst thinn hyoo doo!”

Oh. Oh no.

He’d been working off of faulty information. He’d assumed, this whole time, that Brushstroke had bribed Lung— offered some service in exchange for protection. It was the only interaction that fit. And it was backwards. Brushstroke hadn’t bargained or surrendered to Lung, Brushstroke had Lung in her pocket. Coil ended the timeline before Lung could do it for him.

The instance in his car gripped the steering wheel with white knuckles. Could he afford to go to his house, or another base? No— no, there was no way he had the time. Tattletale cracking his systems at the exact moment Lung went on a sudden warpath was no coincidence. Brushstroke had them both, was coordinating their efforts, with or without their knowledge. And that meant only one thing.

Good Dog was coming.

Coil swung the car around, and wove through traffic until he got to the interstate access ramp. He split the timelines again there— one instance continued up the ramp and onto the southbound lane, the other took the merge and went for the westbound instead. This— it wasn’t the end. He could rebuild, from nothing if need be. Not all of his assets were under one name, Tattletale couldn’t get all of them. All he had to do was get out of Brushstroke’s range, in any direction, and he’d be safe.

About two minutes later, the instance of him on the southbound interstate saw something in the side mirror: a small white blur, getting larger. And larger. Any hopes that it was simply a Protectorate hero or possibly New Wave died as the image of Good Dog finally came into resolution, just above the words ’Objects in mirror may be closer than they appear.’ He sped up, pushing the speedometer closer to 100. Good Dog kept pace, its eyes boring into his.

On the westbound interstate, Coil breathed a sigh of relief, and rolled down the windows, trying to dry the sweat that was soaking his costume. He could split the timeline again from this instance at the next exit, changing directions again, and decrease the chances of Good Dog finding his trail again. He sped the car up, tried to keep his attention on the road, even as Good Dog was chasing him down in the other timeline.

The sound of sirens on the southbound made him jump, and push the gas pedal a little harder. A police cruiser tore out from under the shade of an overpass and started speeding after him. Hah— like he was going to stop for the cops now. He reached for his power to simply drop the timeline, and continue from the safe instance.

On the westbound, Coil spotted a white blur in the distance ahead of him. It quickly came into focus as his car and Good Dog approached one another. That— no. No! That was impossible! Good Dog was on the southbound! It had followed him from— Coil’s spine turned to ice. How long had it been following him? If Good Dog had seen him before he’d turned onto the interstate at all, then— then neither timeline was safe. And the southbound had the police after him now, for speeding of all things. Coil felt his options closing in, narrowing beyond acceptable levels. Fine— time to see how
durable Good Dog was. He pressed the gas pedal to the floor, lining up the hood of the car with the white shape. It looked like Good Dog had stopped in the middle of the road, did it truly think he wouldn’t run it over without a second’s thought? It was laughable. It was ludicrous, and he was going to--

Pressure. A sudden wave of pressure, like the air had condensed down and become solid, hit him. It hit his car harder. Metal screamed as the invisible blade passed through the vehicle like it was less than nothing. Coil felt the cutting force pass just by his elbow, missing him by inches, as it bisected his car straight down the middle. The two halves of the vehicle skidded, tipped, and fell apart from one another on either side of a large white wolf. Time felt slowed down to a crawl, as it did when adrenaline overwhelmed the senses, and Coil watched from his now-horizontal driver’s seat as he passed by the wolf. Good Dog’s head turned to follow him, and it looked satisfied.

Coil ended the timeline before the wreckage could skid to a stop. He didn’t want to know what Good Dog would do to him. And he didn’t have time to start a new split, because for a moment it seemed like time itself had rebelled against him. On the southbound, with the flashing lights growing in number and Good Dog keeping pace-- he didn’t blink, and yet, between one instant and the next Good Dog had gone from being a dozen meters behind him, to nearly right on top of his vehicle. There was a sudden squall of twisting metal and the back bumper came off, clenched in a pair of very large jaws, combined with the gunshot pop of an exploding tire. The car swerved, skidded, and slammed into a light pole.

Apparently, Good Dog wanted him alive; the driver’s side rear tire had blown, and it was the passenger side that took the brunt of the impact. Coil popped the driver’s side door open and crawled from the wreck, even as the police cruiser--now joined by several of its fellows--screamed to a stop. Good Dog stood nearby, panting around the bumper still clenched in its teeth, but he swore it was smiling.

“Freeze! Put your hands up, where I can see ‘em!”

“Oh, is that a cape? Get the PRT on the line, now.”

Years of work. Millions of dollars. An infinite number of possible futures, all his. And in a single afternoon, Good Dog cut them down to one.

On the highway, sitting in the twisted wreckage of his car and his dreams, Coil raised his hands in surrender.

* * *

Dinah walked up the front steps of her house, still holding Mr. Oni Lee by the hand. He really had walked her all the way home. Well, mostly-- there was the part where he held up a bus by putting a copy of himself in front of it until it stopped, so they could get on. It was a real quiet ride too, nobody bothered them or talked all loud on their phones the whole way, which was great because Dinah’s head was still pounding from too many questions. Mr. Oni Lee made another call on his phone, but he did it in another language Dinah didn’t know, and after that he just sat quietly and held her hand.

Once they got off the bus and started walking again, Mr. Oni Lee did ask a few questions, but they weren’t questions for her power, so they didn’t make her head hurt. He asked things about the men who’d been chasing her, if she’d known why they were after her, and for how long-- stuff like that. Stuff she’d tried to tell Mom and Dad. But Mr. Oni Lee didn’t think she was making it up, or having nightmares and getting confused. He just listened. For a murderer, he was pretty nice like that.
Dinah pushed the doorbell, and heard footsteps pretty much immediately as her mom ran to the front door. Well, it *had* been a couple hours since Dinah had ran from the park. She was probably pretty worried. The door was flung open and yeah, Mom looked really pale and worried, and she got even more pale when she saw Mr. Oni Lee standing next to Dinah.

“Hi Mom. Mr. Oni Lee saved me from kidnappers. Can he stay for dinner?”

Dinah always knew the *best* questions to ask.
“What do you mean, ‘no?’”

“Exactly what I said: no.” Danny Hebert pushed his glasses up a little further on his nose, and met Director Emily Piggot’s steel-eyed gaze with one of his own. “It’s my decision to make.”

“It is not that simple, Chessman, and you damn well know it! This is--”

“Still my decision, Emily, and the only sensible one besides! I was on camera, at my own house, and-- just to emphasize this-- my daughter is already out. Staying masked isn’t going to protect her or me, and you know that.”

Director Piggot shook her head, unable to deny the logic but still refusing to voice capitulation. “And what about the local team? This affects them, too.”

“My only contact with them outside of work hours is done in the PRT building,” Danny pointed out, “so there’s no change to them if I go public.”

“Public Image is going to murder you in your sleep.”

“Bah,” he waved hand, dismissing the complaint. “They’re just pissy because they want all heroes to be the pinnacle of humanity, not middle-aged men with a bald spot. They really want to put up a fuss, they can say it to my face, but I think they need to drop their love affair with the old comics. It’s gone pretty stale, don’t you think?”

“No shit,” Piggot muttered, then sighed. She didn’t think Danny was wrong, exactly, and on several points she agreed with him. That didn’t change the fact that unmasking himself officially was going to open a can of worms all its own, right on top of her desk. And there was the obvious to worry about: “This will invite trouble, Danny. The videos already out there will make the rank-and-file hesitate, but you can’t be naive enough to think there won’t be some cape willing to chance it.”

“Trouble already got an invitation. If anything, I think unmasking will let trouble know why it shouldn’t come calling: those Merchants thought Taylor was a pacifist, and got me instead. Skidmark got Good Dog. This way, villains will know not to try anything on either me or my daughter unless they’re absolutely sure they want to risk both Chessman and Good Dog.”

“That’s what I’m worried about,” Piggot said. Or at least half of it. After Lung had gone on a sudden, inexplicable rampage downtown, only to unearth Coil’s Bond Villain Barbie House before
just… walking away— and the clusterfuck that was Oni Lee deciding to walk a little girl home— the Protectorate’s stock of Thinkers were well and truly panicking. The ABB’s capes were more closely tied to Brushstroke than anyone had guessed, and while some of the Thinkers were moaning about Teacher and Master effects, those were mostly the less reliable ones. The saner Thinkers had collectively thrown up their hands and gone in search of alcohol, and since Piggot sadly could not follow their example, she had to focus on the practical concerns: any trouble that came looking for Brushstroke would stir up not just Good Dog and Chessman, but now Lung as well. A cape willing to risk that would have to be extremely dangerous, or extremely stupid.

And there were a lot of stupid capes in the world.

* * *

Taylor didn’t really understand it. It looked like just an ordinary patch of sidewalk, to her. The same today as it had been yesterday, and the day before that, just a stretch of cracked cement outside the torii of the shrine, with a few weeds poking through the fissures. Sunshine evidently thought otherwise.

When the wolf had finally picked her up from her very awkward visit to the Undersiders and gone back to the shrine, Sunny had stopped mid-step and nearly stumbled, before putting her nose to the sidewalk and sniffing around. Then she’d just… sat there, and stared, head hung low and tail still. She didn’t whine, just sighed, and when Taylor tried to coax her away she leaned her furry head against Taylor’s waist, so Taylor rubbed at her ears and neck until the wolf’s regret eased. She followed Taylor inside, eventually, but her gaze kept drifting back towards the torii gate.

Taylor watched her friend be absorbed in her thoughts, and couldn’t find anything to say. So instead, she got up, put on her work gloves, and started poking around the flower beds, looking for any shoots or even wild clover that still clung to the memory of summer. There weren’t many, it being mid-November already, but the lack of snow had preserved a few stragglers, mostly just weeds, but Taylor started carefully digging them up anyway. She heard paw pads start to follow behind her when she carried her handful of greens away from the flowerbeds and out through the gate, and over to the dry earth near the sidewalk. Taylor dug a small pit near the cement for the meager offering—a few dots of purple from Creeping Charlie, a lackluster dandelion, a smattering of closed-bud clover—and, careful of the roots, planted the flowers there.

Taylor patted the dirt down, then sat back on her heels. Sunshine sat down beside her. The wolf sighed, once, and they both watched in silence as the small weeds flushed green again, and were jostled by a single green shoot rising from the middle of the arrangement. The plant grew tall, budded, and opened into a red spider lily. Sunny leaned against Taylor, sharing her warmth and gratitude.

Taylor didn’t really understand it— there was information she was missing, and she could accept that. But even if she didn’t fully understand what was going on, she always understood Sunny.

* * *
Welcome to the Parahumans Online Message Boards

You are currently logged in, Tin_Mother (Moderator)

You are viewing:

- Threads you have replied to
- AND Threads that have new replies
- OR private message conversations with new replies
- Thread OP is displayed
- Ten posts per page
- Last ten messages in private message history
- Threads and private messages are ordered by user custom preference.

Topic: Lung spotted downtown

In: Boards ► Places ► America ► Brockton Bay

Bagrat (Original Poster) (The Guy In The Know)

Posted on November 13, 2010:

So, Lung suddenly came out of nowhere and started tearing through a parking garage this afternoon. Witnesses place his first appearance at around 1:23 PM. Protectorate forces have moved to intercept and PRT is on the ground, trying to evacuate the immediate area. Stay safe, Brocktonites.

Update: After unearthing what looks like an underground bunker [LINK], Lung quit the scene entirely, completely ignoring the Protectorate heroes arranged to meet him.

Videos of the event [here], [here], and [here].

Update 2: Lung's tantrum has been linked to this little gem: [Oni Lee spotted]. For those who haven't seen the other thread, the ABB's other psychopath was spotted walking a little girl home at the same time as Lung's attack. An extremely brave/foolhardly reporter actually approached him with questions, and was told that Oni Lee was "protecting the Shrine's neutrality."

So that's a thing.

Update 3: Lung wasn't digging for bones for Good Dog, it seems: [Villain Coil apprehended]

(Showing Page 4 of 7)
SuzieQ
Replied on November 16, 2010:
I wouldn't say he *completely* ignored them. Check that second video link at 0:35
Dat eyeroll, seriously.

Blue Yoshi
Replied on November 16, 2010:
I just
I can't

RainofDays (Cape Groupie)
Replied on November 16, 2010:
Are you serious? That whole "accorded neutral territory thing" wasn't a joke? It's being ENFORCED by GODDAMN LUNG?!

Uber (Verified Cape)
Replied on November 16, 2010:
InB4 someone adds Brushstroke to the Brockton Bay Civ4 mod.
"Our words are backed by goddamn dragons."

Leet (Verified Cape)
Replied on November 16, 2010:
[quote=Uber]
"Our words are backed by *Good Dog.*"
[/quote]
Fixed

Blue_Oni (Unverified Cape)
Replied on November 16, 2010:

[quote=L33T]
"Our words are backed by Baachan."
[/quote]

I have corrected this for you.

► Uber (Verified Cape)

Replied on November 16, 2010:

what the fuck

End of Page. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7
ChuggaWunga

Replied on November 16, 2010:

Is anybody watching the Protectorate press release right now?!

Bagrat (The Guy In The Know)

Replied on November 16, 2010:

I am. Looks like all that speculation on that Merchant attack got confirmed.

Glory Girl (Verified Cape) (New Wave)

Replied on November 16, 2010:

Posting from phone, what's going on now?

Twixzizzler

Replied on November 16, 2010:

Chessman just outed himself in an interview as Daniel Hebert, aka the father of Taylor Hebert, aka Brushstroke. Which kinda puts that Merchant reprisal in perspective.

No word yet on if all those threadbans from the aftermath will get overturned.

LethalMayhem

Replied on November 16, 2010:

Excuse me while I go purchase stock in every heartburn, anxiety, and headache med available to the local PRT officials.

Tin_Mother (Moderator)

Replied on November 16, 2010:

Please keep Chessman discussion in his own thread, found [here]. Reactions to the confirmed connection between Chessman and Brushstroke are fine, but I'm watching you. This includes speculation on armament, models, and painting synergy.

LovelyGinger
Replied on November 16, 2010:

That's crazy. Chessman's one of the scarier capes in the city, isn't he? Master 5, Blaster 7 or something?

If he's unmasked, does that mean he can go after people who pissed him off as a civilian? Can't Brushstroke do the same?

How strong is she, anyway? I can't find any ratings.

► Clockblocker  (Verified Cape) (Wards ENE)

Replied on November 16, 2010:

Chessman's a Master 5, with supplemental ratings for his armies.

Brushstroke & Good Dog are always rated together, and last I checked it was something like

    Master: 5
    Trump: 4
    Shaker: Yes
    Dog: Dog

► Brushstroke  (Verified Priestess)

Replied on November 16, 2010:

So I decided to register an account, finally. I don't have a camera so I'm not sure how to verify that it's me. Also, not a cape, so that would be a strange tag to have.

Anyway, I think asking about me or Sunny (that's Good Dog) "going after" anyone is kind of awkward at best and false at worse? Sunny has chastised a few people for some very good reasons, but for the most part if I'm angry with someone I just end up inviting them to tea.

I also invite people I'm happy with to tea. And people I don't even know but happen to be nearby. Basically, if you need to speak to me or Sunny, you can come to the Pawprint Shrine and we'll have tea.

Also I suppose since I have this account I can answer questions, if anyone has them? Actually, is there a thread for the Pawprint Shrine in general, because that would be a nice place to collect actual business and information, and this thread can keep posting pictures and .gifs of Sunny.

Edit: Speaking of strange tags, why is there one next to my name?

End of Page. 1, 2, 3 ... 30, 31, 32
That was a very good question. Dragon turned her attention away from the visible parts of PHO and started sorting through the code, looking for timestamps and authorizations regarding Brushstroke’s user name. There had been a few false and troll accounts trying to claim Brushstroke’s identity already, but they’d been easy to prune away, and none of them had been verified by a moderator or given any tags, so that made this one rather curious.

She found it quickly enough-- the username had been vetted and tagged by *mots doux à l’oreille*, one of the site’s other moderators. Dragon accounted for a little over half of the forum’s staff, but she couldn’t (or rather, didn’t want to) keep an eye on every section at all times. Another quick check found her quarry was online, but logged into his personal account. They’d spoken enough times that he didn’t mind a little intrusion, so Dragon brought up the messaging system and tried to catch his attention.

♦ You have entered a private chatroom with: Bagrat

**Tin_Mother:** I spotted a Brushstroke account that you vetted. No real verification yet, but the IP seems to match, so I’m pretty confident on this one. I am curious about the tag, though. What’s that for?

**Bagrat:** Oh, that? Don’t worry about it, just trust me on this one. The little pêche has earned it.
Even a week later, the tiny offering just outside the torii gate still bloomed. Taylor checked the soil to see if the small cluster of plants could use any water (they seemed okay for now), then turned and looked out over the neighborhood before stepping into the Shrine for the day.

The ABB was out in force today, though visitors might be forgiven for not realizing it, with their new uniforms. Well-- not whole uniforms, exactly, but it seemed like the gang had traded armbands and doo-rags for some cheap but warm enough jackets, with red-and-green appliques on the back spelling out ‘Local 433.’ They’d started wearing them just a few days ago, after they’d grouped up into teams and started surveying all the properties in the neighborhood. They had, over a period of weeks, cleaned up all the visible trash and broken branches and such, which Taylor had been impressed by already (there had been a LOT of empty cans, broken bottles, and knee-high thickets of weeds) but now they’d started doing repairs in earnest. Broken windows were being repaired, siding was being peeled off and replaced, and teams with ladders and garden hoses were testing the roofs for leaks.

It really kind of hammered home the fact that Taylor was seriously in over her head when it came to building that onsen.

She’d done what she could already, on all the properties she now owned; cleaned up the grounds, painstakingly removed all the trash and piles of long-dead leaves, even spent days and several bottles of wood polish getting the old cafe next door to finally look respectable. She’d finalized the agreement for property with Yuuta’s father, and all that work had been worth it to see Mr. Suzuki run his fingers over the warm wooden countertops, face alight with dreams for the future. Baachan had hugged Taylor tight and planted a kiss on her forehead. Half a world away and a decade later, they were finally getting their bakery back.

But while the Suzuki business venture was now out of her hands, the hot spring was not. On Sunny’s insistence, she’d ordered a good bit of construction materials already, and the pair of lots was now covered in stacks of lumber, and bricks, and unopened bags of cement mix. Taylor spent hours on her computer and in the library, finding DIY manuals and home repair tutorials, and… it wasn’t enough. Most of what she found was simple, in theory, and she’d had some practice with repairs already. But putting up a building needed more than just step-by-step pictures and a spirit of determination-- it needed more work than what Taylor was capable of by herself. All of Sunny’s clever machinations couldn’t help her hold a slab of drywall in place. Not for the first time, Taylor wondered if she should ask the ABB for help. It looked like the only available option, but she was loathe to take that route. The Shrine was supposed to be neutral, and getting help from the gang would tip that precarious balance, probably even put her in unofficial debt. She could perhaps mitigate that by hiring the Local 433 to do the work for her, but… well, to be frank, Taylor didn’t think she could afford to. Construction materials were expensive, and once the building was up she was going to need real, trained professionals to install things like electricity, and plumbing. The bounty Sunny had collected was substantial, but it didn’t stretch forever.

Taylor sighed, and turned back towards the Shrine, Sunny on her heels. Maybe there was another solution yet to be found. She’d keep looking. In the meantime, after passing under the torii gate, Taylor spotted what was quickly becoming a familiar sight, and called out, “Hello, Dinah! Did you
’get lost’ again today?”

Dinah abandoned her game of raking leaves into a big, jump-able pile and looked up. She waved at Taylor, then diverted her attention to Sunny and gave the wolf an enthusiastic pet. “Yep!”

“I suppose I’d better call Oni Lee, then. Do you want some tea and melon bread while you wait?”

“Ooh, is that Baachan’s? Definitely I want some, then.” Word of Oni Lee’s ‘errand’ had spread pretty quickly, and Dinah, by chance or design, had ‘gotten lost’ every day since, inevitably showing up on the Pawprint Shrine’s doorstep. The little girl had shown up during the Baachan Collective’s weekly visit a few days into her new routine; the cooing and fussing had been legendary.

“Sure thing. Ah, Dinah? I’m not complaining, but how long are you going to do this, anyway?” Taylor asked as she opened up her office and went inside, Sunny and Dinah trailing along behind her. Her guest gravitated over to the space heater and turned it on, then flopped down on a cushion and pulled a book out of her pink school bag.

“Until Mom lets Mr Oni Lee stay for dinner, duh.”

“I’d worry your parents wouldn’t find that a very good answer…”

“83% chance it’ll get funnier if I keep doing it,” Dinah replied. Taylor snorted a laugh and Sunny chuffed. Dinah shot them both a cheeky grin. “See?”

Taylor filled the kettle and set it to heating, then sat at her desk and dialed the ABB assassin to let him know that young Miss Alcott was at the Shrine. She thought that, just maybe, it would have been more responsible to call the girl’s parents rather than her serial killer bodyguard, but… hm. Upon reflection, Taylor didn’t have much of a justification for that. But, Dinah was convinced of her safety with Oni Lee, and she also refused to give Taylor her home phone number (and when she’d tried to look it up, Taylor found the A section of her phone book marred by chew marks and wolf slobber), so Taylor had decided to simply take the hint.

Over the phone, Oni Lee pledged to come take Dinah home as soon as his work was concluded, then hung up. Taylor dug out a few snacks for Dinah, then settled back in her office chair and resumed her mostly-fruitless Internet searches. Sunshine padded over to sit next to her and peer over the desk at the computer screen, and after a few minutes, Dinah followed suit. “What’cha doing now?”

“At this point? Retreading old ground,” Taylor sighed. “I’ve looked up as much as I can on basic construction, so I took a break and tried figuring out this tag I’ve got on PHO.”

“What tag?”

“A mod put ‘Verified Priestess’ next to my username. I’m guessing someone thought they were being clever, since this is a Shinto shrine, but it got me curious.” Taylor shrugged, and gestured at the web page she was scrolling down. “Turns out there are priestesses in Shinto, but to be verified as one, you actually have to go to college in Japan, or possibly be appointed as one by the Imperial family, though I think that was discontinued. I saw one website mention a correspondence course for it? But the universities it linked to have their pages in Japanese, and I’m not that great at reading characters yet.”

“…just to confirm: you’re looking into getting a mail-order college degree, from a country you don’t
speak the language, so that your online cape forum title is more accurate. Is that what I’m hearing?” Dinah gave her a sideways look. Sunny snorted, then immediately looked chastened when Taylor scowled at them both. “Has anybody told you your decision-making process is a bit weird?”

“There’s no harm in looking up what it’s about,” Taylor huffed. “Besides, I like this Shrine. I want to do right by it.”

“Fair. So what’s it involve, anyway?”

“That’s what’s got me frustrated. I can’t really find a course or program list in English, and any place that talks about Shinto priestesses is mostly just an overview of the history. At most, there’s a vague mention of purification rituals, or dancing.”

Dinah chewed on a rapidly-disappearing portion of melon bread, considering. “When one of my mom’s friends had a baby, everyone had to go to church and watch it get baptised by a priest. Is it like that?”

“What, getting dunked in a river or something? Maybe.” Taylor shrugged, saying, “Like I said, it’s really vague, and-- Sunny.”

Sunshine was giving her a look, a wide-eyed, sideways gaze that meant she was up to something. As Taylor watched, the wolf sloooowwwwly turned her head to peer out the office window, then sloooowwwwly turned back to eye Taylor again. Taylor followed the canine’s gaze and spotted the chōzubachi, the stone fountain visitors purified themselves with when they entered the shrine. This one had an odd design for a shrine, starting from a pile of rocks and a shallow pool that Taylor had spent several hours scrubbing when she and Sunny had first started working on on the Shrine, months ago. It fed into the stone basin lined with ladles that was more typical, but Taylor had a feeling it wasn’t the basin Sunny had been staring at. After all, the wolf had proved the shallow pool of the fountain was big enough to jump and splash in on multiple occasions. Taylor whipped her gaze back to stare the wolf in the eye. “No.”

Sunny’s tail started to wag. “No, Sunny. It is November. It is cold. If you try and dunk me, I’ll-- I’ll- ---”

Taylor faltered mid-sentence. What could she possibly threaten Sunshine with? A quick look around the office provided an answer. “Sunny, if you try and dunk me, I’ll unplug the mini-fridge. And then your sake will get warm.”

The wolf’s jaw dropped open. Taylor leaned in close and booped the wolf’s nose with a finger. “And there’ll be nothing you can do about it, because you don’t have thumbs.”

* * *

With Sunny sufficiently cowed, Taylor passed the time until Dinah left, then headed out to the abandoned lot where the hot springs crater was. Hot water still occasionally gurgled and lapped at the edge of the pit, patiently waiting for progress to be made while it suffused the area with steam and the scent of minerals. She brought a notebook with her, the same she’d started with when drawing designs for the onsen. She wasn’t an architect, but the sketches seemed reasonable, and she’d compared the design documents of real buildings to her own measurements of the lot’s space. A bit of math to adjust things, and she felt she had a good, if informal, blueprint. Sunny approved, at least. Well, mostly: the canine had requested an open bar and a buffet, but that just wasn’t in the cards for now, much to her disappointment.
Taylor’s musing on her predicament was broken when a voice called out to her, “Hey, Miko!”

“Hm? Oh, Souta! Hello, I haven’t seen you much recently.” To an extent that worried her, honestly; she used to see the upperclassman occasionally in the halls at Winslow, but for the past several weeks, she’d not caught sight of him. Haru had hinted that Souta tended to get into fights, so Taylor hoped he hadn’t been expelled. “How are you?”

The upperclassman sat on a pile of cinderblocks and pulled an unlit joint out of his Local 433 jacket before responding. “Good. Busy, the Oni’s been whipping everyone into high gear.”

“I see that. What have you been up to, if I may ask? I haven’t seen you at school, either…”

“Cause I dropped out.”

“Souta!” Taylor gasped at him. Winslow wasn’t exactly a good school, but it was still school. You don’t just drop out of school. She could feel her mother turning over in her grave as they spoke. “That’s terrible—wait. Did Oni Lee make you do that?”

Souta grinned at her—maybe he’d heard about her renegotiating Yuuta’s fate from his friend—and shook his head, pausing only to light his smoke. “Nah. You ever see that building a few blocks from here, by the bus stop? Old garage, abandoned and torn to shit?”

“…maybe? Probably. I might not have been paying attention.” Sunny made a curious sound beside her, so perhaps she didn’t remember either.

“Well, the Oni had everybody with the colors get together, and split into groups for what they can do. That building’s an old auto shop, and I’m good with cars. So the Oni finds this guy in the territory, some old retired guy who owned a garage, and tells him I’m the old man’s new apprentice.” Souta grinned again. “Wasn’t very happy with me, and neither was my mom, but whatever, I wanted to be a mechanic anyway. So I get to be the old man’s gopher while I get my GED and a license, but after that? That old garage is mine.”

“Oh! Well, congratulations!” Sunny barked in approval. “That sounds like a lot of work, but—well, if you wanted to do it anyway, it won’t be so bad, right?”

“Somethin’ like that.”

“Heeeeeeey, Miko!” A new voice called out, interspersed by huffs and pants of breath. “Hey, Souta!” Both Taylor and the upperclassman turned to watch Haru jog closer, the overweight boy coming to a stop a few feet away and planting his hands on his knees. “Oh man… running… sucks,” he wheezed.

“Don’t strain yourself,” Taylor said, though Haru didn’t look like he needed much time to recover. There was a healthier cast to his skin than the last time she’d seen him, and a solidness to his form that made Taylor wonder if he’d traded a inch or two of padding for muscle, instead.

“Got to,” Haru said, and shook his head. He stopped gasping for breath and looked up at both of them, face set in a wide smile. “Coach told me to run anywhere I can. Cardio, y’know.”

“Coach?” Taylor wondered aloud. Souta nodded at her, and answered for Haru.
“Swim team. This joker’s been spending every day after school bleachin’ his hair on chlorine.”

“Man, I don’t care if I turn blonde, I’ll just go Super Saiyan! Competition season just started, and we’re hoping to take State.” Haru held up a cloth-wrapped tupperware box, prompting Sunny to start wagging her tail and licking her chops. “Wanted to leave an offering for luck, so Mom made some Jjim Dalk.”

“I have no idea what that is, but Sunny seems to approve,” Taylor smiled, and patted the wolf’s head. “Congratulations, Haru! I’m sure you’ll do well.”

Feet scuffing on the pavement heralded a third visitor, this one a more common sight. Yuuta shuffled closer, a stuffed paper folder under one arm. “Man, don’t have a party without me, you guys. Rude.”

“Woulda invited you, but I figured you’d be busy with your girlfriend,” Souta shrugged.

“She’s not my girlfriend, you asshole.”

“Suuuuure.”

Haru snickered, and Yuuta scowled at his friends before turning to Taylor and Sunny. “Hey, I brought those charms I was making, if you want to… take a look, or… however you’re supposed to know if they’re good.”

“Oh, uh… Sunny can do that, if you lay them on the ground for her. Though maybe we should do this in the Shrine, so the wind doesn’t toss them everywhere.”

“Yeah, and I can drop off this offering. What’s this about charms, Yuuta?” Haru asked, as all three of the boys started to mosey away from the unfinished construction site and over to the Shrine proper, Sunny leading the way. Taylor heard Yuuta launch into an explanation as they walked.

Taylor started to follow, but paused when a thought struck her, and she turned to peer out over the rest of the neighborhood, and listen to the sounds of construction that filtered through the late afternoon air. The bus stop where Souta’s auto shop would be was several blocks away, but if Oni Lee was directing people to its repair, that mean that Lung had directed Oni Lee. The assassin had mentioned that Lung was going to develop the area a little, but if he was looking into businesses that far away from the Shrine… well, even if he didn’t renovate everything in that area, that was still a substantial undertaking, like trying to build a new Lord’s Market from the ground up. Taylor thought back to the last time she’d visited the Boardwalk, thought about how everything was so much cleaner, so much more lively, so much safer with the city’s officials backing the area. Not like the Docks, worn down and left to die. And, until now, not like the ABB territories.

A spot of color drew Taylor’s gaze to it, as a breeze gently pushed the branches of one of the cherry trees she’d planted, down the street a ways. They had all grown even taller, the bud-strewn crowns of the saplings starting to reach past the first story roofs of the nearby buildings, and while they hadn’t bloomed yet, it was only a matter of time.

Taylor wanted to see them in full bloom, see their petals falling on cloth banners stretched between open-air stalls, while people mingled and walked beneath them. She wanted to see that life and hope and pride that Lord’s Market had. Lung was a criminal and a jerk, but if he could help make that dream a reality, then Taylor truly wanted him to succeed.
Taylor abruptly turned, and hurried into the Shrine as fast as her heavy winter skirts would let her. She passed right by where Souta was watching Haru place the meal on the Shrine’s steps, and where nearby Yuuta was laying out sheets of paper and ink for Sunny’s critical gaze. She jogged over to the little display cabinet she’d bought for the charms the Shrine sold, a repurposed jewelry case that Sunny had found in a pawn shop, and she quickly opened it up and emptied it of its stock of Success charms, before turning around and walking briskly over to the boys.

“Hey, Haru? This is the same charm I gave you, right? For good luck in endeavors.” Taylor held up one of the charms by its ribbon, and the boy nodded. Satisfied, Taylor stepped closer, grabbed one of Souta’s hands, and pressed the bundle of charms into it. “Here, then. You said Oni Lee split you all into groups, right? For different talents?”

He made an agreeable noise, so she continued, saying, “Then, could you hand these out to them? One for you and your garage, one for each team. Is there enough?”

Souta did a quick count, and handed a few of the charms back to her. “Yeah, Miko. I can do that. Thanks.”

“Of course! Oh, and one for you too, Yuuta. Sunny, how’s his brushwork?” Bark!

“Excellent. Well, if Sunny says they’re good, then I’ll let Oni Lee know he can start buying from you.”

“Uh, thanks, Miko. Oh, uh, that reminds me,” Yuuta stopped gathering his scattered papers, and started digging into a coat pocket instead. “Baachan said I should do this, so… here.”

Yuuta gestured that she should hold out her hands, and she did. The boy emptied several beads into her cupped palms. She was about to thank him when a second hand reached over, and dumped another set of mismatched beads on top of Yuuta’s. Haru grinned at her. “I saw the sign out front. You’re still collecting them, right?”

“I am, yes…” There was a moment of expectant silence. Souta rolled his eyes, extinguished the remains of his joint on the sole of his boot, then rummaged into his Local 433 jacket.

“Yeah, yeah. Don’t make a big deal about it,” he grumbled, and emptied his palmful of beads into the pile.

The trio of teens said their goodbyes, and went their separate ways— Souta back to his work crew, Haru and Yuuta back to the bus stop— and Taylor wished them well. When they were gone, she followed Sunny into the depths of the shrine, and waited for the wolf to shove the lid off of the jewelry box. Sunshine pawed at one of the empty hutches; to Taylor’s complete lack of surprise, it was the largest of the mismatched containers. She carefully poured her handful of beads into it, then pulled the lid back into place, and eyed the character painted above the newest offering.

Saru, the Monkey.

* * *

The next day, Taylor arrived after school to find the Shrine— and only the shrine, not any of the properties nearby— was buried in almost two feet of snow. She could just barely make out Sunny’s black nose and lolling tongue poking out of a snowdrift, next to a hunk of carved ice next to the office that looked suspiciously like a wine rack.
Taylor cursed under her breath, and started wading towards the water fountain.
Dinah chattered happily the entire ride back to the wealthy neighborhoods she called home, trying to fill him in on all the details and gossip surrounding a school play she was looking forward to. Escorting the girl by car, even if she insisted on walking the last block, made it easier to ascertain her safety. Oni Lee had carefully vetted the drivers selected for the task, and instructed them to never take the same route twice in a row, as well as had a few lookouts stationed near the Alcott home to watch for suspicious activity. The villain Coil may have been arrested, but complacency was the bedrock of failure. Sooner or later, someone would come for the girl’s power; such was the reality of a world of parahumans. Oni Lee would be ready for them.

The girl Dinah kept talking, oblivious to the thoughts of the demon sitting next to her. Even if he could have gotten a word in edgewise, it was unlikely that he would have done so. Perhaps understandably, she seemed happier to share her thoughts as they came to her rather than answer questions. If she needed someone to listen to her as well as watch for knives in the dark, well, Oni Lee could do that too. It was not an onerous task.

Though, Dinah’s presence and attention and endless conversation did, on occasion, set Oni Lee’s thoughts to drift. He wondered: had Kiyoko been like Dinah, a bright and lively girl? Or had she been more reserved, more gentled by books and quiet reflection, like the Miko? Perhaps she had been both, at times. Or neither.

Sometimes, even more rarely, his thoughts drifted further: what had he been like? In truth, Oni Lee did not think he would ever know. That man, whoever he had been, was gone. It was up to Oni Lee, now, to act, to value, to live, and eventually, to die and leave memories of him behind with those who still lived. But maybe--maybe--the memories Kiyoko had left with that man might still be found: through watching the shadow of a girl with a ribbon in her hair, through the touch of her small hand in his as he walked her home. So he would watch, and wait, and guard. Even if it took years, he would wait.

No matter what he had been once, Oni Lee was a patient man.

Dinah tugged him up the short steps to her front door and knocked twice, as she had every day, and Mrs Alcott answered, her posture tense and expression rigid. And as she had every day, Dinah grinned and said, “Hi mom! I got lost and Mr Oni Lee brought me home. Can he stay for dinner?”

The routine was broken when Mrs Alcott exhaled slowly instead of grabbing for Dinah’s other hand. “Yes, Dinah. He can stay for dinner. Go wash up, now.”

Dinah’s eyes widened, and behind his mask, Oni Lee’s did the same. The girl gave an excited ‘whoop!’ and ducked around her mother to run inside. Oni Lee stayed on the porch, and watched Mrs Alcott. The woman visibly steeled herself before speaking. “Are you going to make trouble?”

“No. I will not insult your hospitality.” That assurance did rest on whether or not the Alcotts acted in good faith as well, of course. Though, with their daughter present, he rather doubted they would do anything foolish. Besides; he had every confidence that Dinah would find a new means of subverting her parents’ wishes if he declined, and by now he was certain the Alcotts knew that as well.
Mrs Alcott didn’t move from the doorway. “I don’t allow weapons at dinner.”

That was… a bit more troubling. Not for lessening his ability to defend himself, but if that proved necessary it would make retrieving his gear afterwards rather inconvenient. It was a reasonable request, despite his misgivings. “Understood. Is there somewhere set aside that I may leave my gear?”

The woman nodded and finally stepped aside, giving him permission to enter her household. She stayed several steps ahead of him as she led the way into the foyer of the large home, then gestured to a low table set against one of the walls. Oni Lee inferred that this was where she meant for him to disarm, so he began the process of removing the various implements strapped to his person. The bandolier across his chest, complete with four fragmentation and two flash grenades was first, followed by six knives in a variety of sizes (including the one hidden in his boot), and finally his short blade, once he managed to disentangle it from its place at his belt. The ojime had been easier to adjust, but the beaded cord had been offered up to the Ōkami months ago.

Satisfied with his compliance, Mrs Alcott pursed her lips and said, “The dining room is just through there. Please seat yourself, I am going to call my husband and Dinah to--”

Prematurely summoned by the sound of her name, Dinah raced down the nearby flight of stairs, now without her backpack and, presumably, now with clean hands. She zipped across the foyer and towards the wide archway that Mrs Alcott had indicated was the entrance to the dining room. Rather than enter, she stopped at the threshold, and Oni Lee felt a thrill of alarm start to creep down his spine. The girl frowned, pursed her lips in determination just like her mother, then turned and walked towards where Mrs Alcott and Oni Lee still stood. The girl reached for his wrist and tugged. “C’mon, Mr Oni Lee. You can sit by me.”

She kept hold of his wrist and marched back to the dining room, her steps quick enough that Oni Lee was forced to follow behind, rather than beside. Once they reached the entryway, and Oni Lee saw the sea of white costumes arranged around the long dining table, he understood several things at once:

First, that the Alcotts were indeed foolish enough to invite the entirety of New Wave to this affair and still request that he not cause trouble;

Second, that if Dinah’s power operated how he thought it did, then the girl considered the risk of going ahead with this to be within acceptable limits;

Third, that the sentries he had posted were either captured, or were not doing their jobs. For their sake, it had better be the former, because if it was the latter then Oni Lee was going to personally express his disappointment in them. Afterward, he would graciously allow them to offer an apology to Lung.

Assuming he survived dinner, of course.

* * *

Calculated risk was not a dynamic that Oni Lee was accustomed to needing to consider. There was nothing lost when destroying one of his clones, so for his own sake at least it was not a worry. But now? Right now, any potential move had consequences, lasting ones, and the enormity of the task before him left Oni Lee feeling numb from indecision. If he escaped now, what would that mean for
Dinah? If he stayed, and was attacked, would the New Wave parahumans shield her in time? They had a member dedicated to protective fields, appropriately named Shielder, who was at present seated next to the team’s medic; a sound tactical choice, putting the defensive cape next to the weakest link. Furthermore, if a fight broke out, would his teleportation be faster than the combined means of destruction that New Wave possessed? In quarters this close, he doubted it.

Multiple options, none of them good. None of them familiar, either. What was the closest equivalent to this situation, something that he could emulate? There was only one answer in recent memory: 

*Tea time is courtesy time.* This table was not set for tea, but it was close enough. Oni Lee sat down where Dinah directed him to, then--under the watchful glares of eight costumed superheroes--reached for the straps that held his mask in place and undid them. For lack of a better place to put it, Oni Lee hung the leering demon mask over the back of his chair, and turned back to face a number of raised eyebrows and suspicious expressions. One of the youngest of the New Wave heroes, the girl with the lasers, was incredulous. “You’re just gonna take that off?”

“No one else is wearing a mask, here. It would be discourteous to refuse to do the same,” he answered after a moment.

“And you’re not worried about losing your secret identity?”

Losing his identity? Oni Lee nearly laughed. In response, he asked, “New Wave cooperates with the Protectorate. Do you have any records of me? Do you know my name?”

Lady Photon’s face was like stone-- if she lied, Oni Lee had no idea. “No.”

“...that is a shame,” he said after a moment. “Neither do I.”

Conversation stalled to nothing as the meal was actually served, the Alcotts having employed a caterer for the night-- one that very swiftly left as soon as their task was complete. Mr Alcott and his wife remained, though they were tight-lipped and white-knuckled. Dinah was the only one to start eating immediately, which made a poisoning seem less likely. Eventually, everyone followed suit, though it was a tense affair all around. Brandish, one of the hero group’s two matriarchs, was the first to break the silence.

“So,” she began, her voice clipped and eyes sharp, “Oni Lee. What made you suddenly start following the mayor’s niece?”

“Mercenaries belonging to Coil attempted to abduct Dinah from the Pawprint Shrine. I dealt with them. I then escorted her home.” He would have thought that New Wave would already known that. Perhaps the question was just a formality. “I have instructed the… Local 433 union to consider her safety a priority.”

(“*I told you* they were after me,” Dinah muttered towards her parents.)

(“Dinah, shush.”)

“You’ve got goons following her?!?” A ripple of anger accompanied Glory Girl’s exclamation. She looked ready to pound the table to splinters with her fists.

“For her protection, yes.”
“You’re a serial murderer,” Brandish ground out between her teeth. “What she needs is to be protected from you.”

“I have no reason to harm Dinah.”

“And we’re supposed to… what? Take you at your word?” One of the men scoffed; the lightning bolt emblem on his costume helped to identify him as Manpower. “The last time I saw you this close, you blew off my leg with a grenade.”

Oni Lee considered as he chewed. “I remember that encounter. I believe that was just before your Flashbang filled the area with explosives.” The other New Wave husband looked a bit uncomfortable at the reminder. The anecdote was not a true answer to the question, however, and Oni Lee took advantage of the lull to try and organize his thoughts a bit better.

“I suspect that you do not regret your methods; therefore, I will not regret mine. I can expect no mercy, and as such, can offer none. This is the life that parahumans have chosen.” As a whole, the members of New Wave stared at him, their faced filled with anger-- and confusion. “My sister did not choose this, but others chose for her. Dinah has not chosen this. Others have attempted to choose for her. I do not agree with their presumption; that is why I do this.”

* * *

Emma sat at her vanity, the intricate table and mirror a remnant of her younger days. She’d long since stripped away the trappings of innocence that had once adorned it: colorful stickers, a pretty bookmark, pictures of her and Taylor making funny faces. She’d replaced her glitter and costume jewelry with satin matte gloss and press-on nails. Emma had grown up, in the past couple years. She’d really gotten a good look at how the world worked, not how a naive person hoped it did.

Sophia had explained it to her, in that alleyway, where every shadow was a lurking reminder of her childishness being excised by a knife. There were really only two kinds of people in the world, she’d said: those who fought, and those who surrendered. Winners, and losers. Strong people and weak people. Predators and prey. It was a dog-eat-dog world, after all. If someone was stronger than you, they’d step on you to get ahead, no questions asked. Emma had been attacked because she’d looked weak, but she’d survived because she was strong. She’d been willing to fight back, even without a hope of really winning.

Emma was willing to fight. Ready to put anyone down that she could, to raise herself a little higher. That’s how the world worked; if she didn’t take advantage of other people’s weakness, someone else would. And if she couldn’t bring someone down, then it was imperative to not show that weakness, because they’d do the same to her in a heartbeat. Fake it until you make it, in other words.

It hadn’t… really gone as planned. At all.

It was supposed to be a clean break, her and Taylor. Emma chose to end their lifelong friendship in favor of keeping Sophia, her rescuer; like a rite of passage, she’d left her childhood behind. Except Taylor wouldn’t go away, wouldn’t let years of sisterhood be shoved aside, wouldn’t accept that Emma didn’t need her anymore. She’d tried everything to sever that tie, and even when she and Sophia got serious about it, Taylor wouldn’t even bite back and give Emma the justification she needed. She was supposed to win, but that required someone else to lose, and Taylor had refused to play at all.

It was supposed to be a solid alliance, her and Sophia. She handled the physical challenges, Emma
took the social ones. They watched each other’s backs so nobody could put them down. Except Emma had failed her part, she hadn’t been able to protect Sophia from questions and investigations. And once Sophia was taken away, Emma was left without the power to back up her claims. The carefully-cultivated circles and cliques of friendship and influence at school had broken apart and reformed without her in them. She was supposed to be in control, but a rule through fear vanished as soon as the threat was gone.

It was supposed to be a new start, her and Karen. She’d prove that she wouldn’t be swept aside, that she wasn’t at the bottom because there’d be others underneath her heels. Emma had jumped at the chance to redeem herself, to use the skills she swore she had to manipulate, and extort, and raise herself high enough that she wouldn’t look like an easy target. Make herself look tough enough that she wouldn’t have to be afraid all the time. She was supposed to be the one pulling the strings-- and look at how that had ended up.

Emma had failed at every step. ‘Karen’ had made that clear. She was supposed to be able to protect herself, and she couldn’t. She was supposed to be able to stand on her own, and she couldn’t. And since she was helpless, she was supposed to be devoured.

Yuuta was supposed to abandon her. He hadn’t.

Emma stared at her vanity mirror, with its frame empty and barren of photographs, bookmarks, or stickers, and thought that this wasn’t what it was supposed to look like. Nothing was how it was supposed to be. So, what was Emma supposed to do now-- and what was she going to do?
November was honestly one of Taylor's favorite months, at least in theory: cool breezes filled with fallen leaves, the crisp taste of far-off snow in the air, the early darkness that provided the perfect excuse to bury oneself under a blanket with a book... it was a very romanticized time of year. Sadly, Brockton Bay tended to make the days gray and rainy as often as not, but this year was actually managing to live up to Taylor's standards. The cold autumn rains mostly came at night, leaving the days brighter and a little warmer, and letting the unburdened clouds drift freely. The shadows of the clouds raced each other over the sunlit grass of the Pawprint Shrine.

The fourth Thursday of the month was Thanksgiving, which had been Taylor's favorite holiday back when her mother was still alive (every holiday had been Taylor's favorite in those years), and this year found Taylor outside at the Shrine, with Sunny wrapped carefully around her feet and an easel in front of her. The drier, brighter days were perfect for working on her art project, a painting of the Wishing Tree in every season, and Sunny had been relegated to canine space heater duty until Taylor forgave her for the snow currently covering the Shrine's grounds and nowhere else.

Somewhere just past noon, Sunny glanced up at the sky for a moment before tugging at the bottom edge of Taylor's coat. Taylor finished the puff of leaves she was painting before replying, “Time already? Okay, let me get this put away and we'll go.”

Sunshine wuffed, her tail immediately beginning a continuous wag that sent bits of snow flying every which way. The wolf carefully uncurled her furry bulk from around Taylor's legs, then bounded off towards the little office the pair had started to call home. Taylor packed up her paints and easel as quickly as she carefully could before she followed Sunny's trail. Maybe this November seemed so much warmer because she was spending it with friends.

* * *

Danny Hebert received what he considered one of the most important phone calls of his life on November 24, 2010. It wasn't from the PRT, or the police, or his old friends from the Dockworker's Union: it was from his elderly neighbors, inviting him over to celebrate Thanksgiving dinner with them. As Old Mrs Henrick assured, before he could refuse, Taylor had agreed to be there already. The prospect of seeing his daughter and spending some time with her made patrolling the quickly-dwindling Merchant territory seem much less critical, so he agreed.

Danny was the last to arrive, which didn't surprise him, but he was greeted no less warmly for it. Martha Henrick was still preparing for the meal, her wrinkled face alight at the unusual hustle and bustle taking place in her kitchen. Danny spotted a pot full of potatoes still boiling in preparation to be mashed, alongside a smaller saucepan full of gravy simmering on the stove. The oven itself was currently eclipsed by the furry body of his daughter's power, the wolf's face pressed against the viewing glass in order to watch the turkey roasting within. A small puddle of drool was collecting
between its front paws.

“Oh, Sunny, clean that up! Seriously... oh! Hi Dad!”

Taylor's face lit up when she noticed him standing on the entry mat near the kitchen door, and she hurried to take his coat and bundle it away somewhere. “I wasn't sure you could make it! Happy Thanksgiving!”

There was no reproach or disappointment in her voice at all. Danny felt a hand around his heart loosen its grip. “Wouldn't miss it for the world, honey.”

It was a lie, if a soft one, and she knew it; he'd sacrificed a lot of holidays on the altar of the Protectorate and likely would in the future. That was his job, a hero's job. But maybe it made the ones he did manage to share all the more special. Any further reflection on the dichotomy of duty versus devotion was derailed when Danny noticed his daughter's power obeying her command to clean up after itself, the wolf tugging a dishcloth down from a counter and pushing it with its paws to wipe up the drool puddle.

“Ha, well... I'm glad you could make it. Oh! Um, I saw the interview on TV...”

Taylor trailed off, leaving an opening for him to respond without pressing the issue. When had his little girl gotten so political? ...probably when she started wrapping the ABB around her little finger. In retrospect that was a silly question, but it was still hard to reconcile the idea of the little girl jumping off the couch with a towel for a cape she used to be with the power-player she was now. Danny wondered if Taylor was having the same problem, with him as both her father and a hero. “Yeah. Cat's out of the bag now; I figured there wasn't much point to keeping up the charade.”

“Was the Protectorate okay with that?” She asked.

“Nnnnot exactly,” Danny grimaced. “Or, not at first. They came around a bit after the most recent polls. Apparently inquiries about joining the Protectorate are up something like 20% in the areas that interview was aired.” That had come as a bit of a surprise, at least to the PR department. Apparently the usual tactic of presenting heroes as the pinnacle of humanity wasn't as effective as originally thought. It was still pretty surreal to hear his own voice repeated from radios and televisions, saying, 'I don't need a tragic backstory or some overarching goal, I have a mortgage.'

Conversation shifted over to small talk until Martha declared the meal ready, and everyone helped set the table and carry dishes from the kitchen to the dining room. Taylor got a mixing bowl from a cupboard to fill with various foods for Good Dog, as it seemed even with as much exposure to Taylor as the Henricks had, a dog at the table was a step too far. Danny did wonder aloud, as she set the bowl on the floor and gave her power a quick ear rub, if Good Dog often ate people food-- he certainly had never noticed any bags of dog food at the house. The question made Taylor grin and reply, “Oh trust me, Sunny eats everything. If it's food, it goes in the dog.”

That, Danny felt, warranted further explanation, and happily enough Taylor was willing to do so. She started talking about the sorts of offerings 'Sunny' received at the Pawprint Shrine, and how she had gotten Taylor to take up cooking (so that's why the lunch boxes had started showing up!), and relayed an anecdote about the first time Sunny had tried to order pizza without Taylor's help. Both Danny and the Henricks asked more questions about Taylor's daily life running a shrine, which Taylor continued to answer. It made a lump form in Danny's throat and he had to take a drink of cider to cover his sudden silence.

Any awkwardness he felt about Taylor being Brushstroke, any reservations he held about Good Dog, none of that mattered. Sitting here, right now, was his daughter-- happy. Laughing. Her
previous nature as the energetic, cheerful little chatterbox she'd been before Annette's death shining through the fog that had enveloped them both ever since that loss. And as Taylor continued talking, explaining her current and future projects, an idea sparked in Danny's head. Determination followed it: it may have been late in coming, but here was finally a way for Danny Hebert to be his daughter's hero.

* * *

The next day found Taylor's routine sweep of tidying up and dusting the interior of the shrine disrupted by someone calling out from outside: “Helloooo, Brushstroke? You around?”

The voice sounded familiar, and once Taylor got outside to greet the new guest, the source was confirmed to be Tattletale, the girl from the Undersiders, and she was still wearing that skintight suit that was now even less weather-appropriate. It seemed she was regretting it, too, if her shivering and occasional stamping of feet was any indication. Taylor wasn't quite sure how she felt about the Undersiders in general or Tattletale specifically, given their likely deception involving the meeting at Somer's Rock, but her personal opinions weren't an excuse for poor manners. “Good Morning, Tattletale. Would you like to come inside? I can make tea in the office.”

“Ah, thanks but no thanks. I'd rather not stay long, if that's alright.” The villain took a moment to peer around the shrine's snow-covered grounds. “Is Good Dog around?”

“She's next door, delivering some fresh ink to a friend. Do you need to see her?”

“No! Nope, that's fine. I just need to talk to you for a minute,” Tattletale said, and visibly relaxed. “So-- if you weren't aware or hadn't guessed, I used to work for Coil.”

Now it was Taylor's turn to tense up, but Tattletale quickly waved her hands. “No no, I'm not mad at you! He was a real scumbag and I wasn't exactly in his employ willingly, but that's a long story. The short version is, you and Good Dog did me a huge favor by getting rid of him.”

“Ah, well... I'm happy for you, but it was the police that apprehended Coil.”

“Sure, officially, but everyone knows better.” She shrugged, and paused to pull an envelope out of a small pouch at her belt. “I'm not sure if you're aware, but Coil was loaded, and I managed to seize a number of his accounts before they were frozen, so even though you got rid of our boss, the Undersiders are getting a nice severance package, so to speak. And after I had a talk with the rest of my team, we decided that it would be in our best interests to repay you for Good Dog's intervention.”

“Oh, that's not necess--”

“It took me a few days to get everything laundered properly and legally squared away for a charitable donation, but I set you up with a bank account. Don't worry about the details too much, there's a parahuman that handles this sort of thing for a lot of capes. Here's the bank card, and a note with the PIN number and some tips on using Number Man's services.” Tattletale held out the envelope, and when Taylor hesitated, she sighed. “I insist-- please. I know you need the money and I know you'll put it to way better use than Coil ever would, and I really, really do not want the Undersiders or myself to be in debt to Good Dog.”

Taylor reached out a hand and took the envelope. She didn't feel very comfortable with this, but Tattletale had some good points and with how the cape was behaving, Taylor didn't see a way to
refuse the offer that she would accept. “I see. In that case, thank you.”

Tattletale finally smiled, and stepped back. “Great! So, just be sure to let Good Dog know that we're even now, right?”

“Sure, I'll do that,” Taylor assured her. “Is there anything else I can help you with?”

“No, that's it. Happy Thanksgiving.” Tattletale said as she turned away to leave. Sunny came trotting through the torii gate just as the parahuman was leaving, and the wolf gave Tattletale a curious head tilt as the girl changed her course to give Sunny a wide berth. Taylor took the opportunity to open the envelope and examine its contents, now that her guest had departed. She gave Sunny a quick rundown of the conversation as she did so.

“I'm thinking I'll just consider this as a private bounty for Coil. I'd rather not constantly worry about the ethics—think that's okay, Sunny?” Sunny snorted in amusement, but nodded her head. “Heh, thanks. Besides, she was right in that we do need the money, though I won't know how much until Dad gets back to me with that estimate.” She hadn't realized there might have been electricians and plumbers and such among the old Dockworkers, but it made sense. Tradeskills would have suited a lot of them more than office work, and the Dockworker's Union finally being shuttered by arson meant that anyone still clinging to it would have needed to find new lines of work. Now that he wasn't concealing his identity and occupation as Chessman anymore, Danny had been much more willing to get in contact with old friends and employees, and had promised he'd find out what was needed to build the onsen she and Sunny were struggling with.

“Hm... the note doesn't say how much is in the account. I guess we can run some errands later and find an ATM to check.”

* * *

Taylor stared at the tiny screen, and its display of the number 3 followed by a full six zeroes. The world slowly tilted until she literally fell into place sitting on Sunny's back, the wolf helpfully anticipating her needs. The screen refused to change when viewed from her new vantage point, and after a moment Taylor let out a short, unsteady laugh. “I guess we can afford to hire professionals for the onsen, now.”

Sunny's tail started to wag, but the wolf graciously stayed in place and waited for Taylor to collect herself.

It only took another minute or two for Taylor to realize that now she was also going to have to shell out for that open bar Sunny had wanted.
“Gonna be dark soon...” Taylor murmured as she wheeled her bike through the red torii arch. Beside her, Sunny made a sighing sound. “Yeah, that's the worst part of winter. How short the days are. The cold's at least an excuse to get comfy and warm.”

That seemed to perk Sunny up, and the wolf bounded ahead towards the Shrine's office, where blankets and space heaters and (hopefully) hot chocolate awaited. Taylor followed, setting the bicycle aside to lean against the building before opening the door and letting them both inside. Taylor's favorite wheeled transit was just a packmule these days, as once Thanksgiving had passed Brockton Bay suddenly remembered that it was the middle of winter and it had begun snowing on a regular basis. The Pawprint sidewalks were remaining mostly clear of ice and snow, and while the wolf wasn't saying anything about it, Taylor thought it safe to assume the cleared route was Sunny's doing.

“Well, whatever. Don't get too comfy, remember Dad's coming by soon,” Taylor said, as she shook off her coat and hung it up on a peg. “Do you think the estimate for the price of the hot springs will be high, Sunshine?”

Sunny paused and tilted her head, taking a few moments to seriously consider the question. Then she shrugged.

“...very helpful, thank you.” Taylor sighed as she sank into her own chair, and Sunny perked up at the sound. The wolf even left her cozy nest of blankets and shed fur (the ratio of blanket to fur was a question Taylor did not look forward to answering, come spring) to come sit over by Taylor's desk. The canine tilted her head again, this time actually taking things seriously. Taylor smiled and gave the wolf a pat on the head. “Sorry, I guess I'm kind of worried. And maybe a bit disappointed, though it feels kinda silly.”

Sunny made a questioning noise and tilted her head a bit further. Taylor scritched her ears a bit more. “I'm glad things are working out, I just kinda hoped it'd work out a bit sooner, y'know? The ground's probably gonna get too frozen to build on or something, I never see much construction going on in the winter. That means waiting until spring at least, maybe even summer if it's too wet out. And I just feel kinda silly, or maybe ungrateful, to be wishing for more.”

Sunny made a questioning noise and tilted her head a bit further. Taylor scritched her ears a bit more. “I'm glad things are working out, I just kinda hoped it'd work out a bit sooner, y'know? The ground's probably gonna get too frozen to build on or something, I never see much construction going on in the winter. That means waiting until spring at least, maybe even summer if it's too wet out. And I just feel kinda silly, or maybe ungrateful, to be wishing for more.”

Sunny made an understanding sort of murmur, and the pair fell silent, content to watch the snowflakes drift outside the window of the small office. Several minutes passed in tranquility.

“...a hot soak sounds amazing though.”

Sunny outright collapsed to the floor, making a mournful howling sound of complete and abject longing.

* * *
A car horn sounded outside twice in quick succession, prompting Taylor to struggle back into her winter coat and venture outside the office again, Sunny close on her heels. Her father was getting out of a large van, one she'd never seen before, but of course his own car had been crushed beneath a heavily-armed plastic toy. This must be a rental. That didn't explain the second vehicle that drove up and parked near the sidewalk, but Danny quickly waved Taylor over to introduce her to the half-dozen people that exited the second van. It turned out they were a handful of old contacts and co-workers from the Dockworker's Union, people that Danny had tracked down in his quest for people able and willing to do the electrical, plumbing, and other assorted skilled work needed for the onsen.

“So! I was thinking,” Danny said, after handing Taylor the quick writeup he'd done for estimated costs, “It's still going to cost a pretty penny in materials just to get the place up, and I don't even know what you'll end up needing to keep it running, aside from maybe towels. So I called a few friends, who called a few friends—as you can see—and concluded that it'd be nice to do the simple infrastructure work ourselves, rather than hiring a company. That is, if you don't mind your old man lending a hand?”

“Oh, of course not!” Taylor smiled brightly, and Sunny started wagging her tail. “I tried to start it myself weeks ago, but I couldn't really do it alone. I'd be happy to have your help.”

Danny nodded, his expression considering. He walked to the back of the van he'd driven up in and placed his hands on the door latches of the back of the vehicle. “Do you mind if your old man lends... eighty hands?!”

Danny flung open the doors to the van and people streamed out. No-- they were Pawns. Plastic figurines with mismatched designs, all with a basic paint scheme and with no identifying markings. The Pawns marched out of the van in two neat rows, the ones in back still growing in size. Both Taylor and Sunny backed away from the miniature army, eyes wide. The friends and ex-Dockworkers Danny had brought laughed.

Danny Hebert grinned and cracked his knuckles. “Ladies and gentlemen, let's build a resort.”

* * *

Sometime later, a low rumble heralded a new visitor, if the term could be applied to Armsmaster. The Protectorate leader's motorcycle turned a corner at the far end of the street and slowed down to a stop a few meters from Danny's van. The hero dismounted his vehicle and strode over to Danny, his halberd, for the time being, still magnet-locked to the back of his armor. Danny could see Armsmaster's jaw visibly tighten as another squad of Pawns marched by, carrying sacks of dry cement. “Chessman. What. Are. You. Doing.”

“Doing some yard work on my day off. Why, what does it look like?”

“It looks like an unsanctioned use of Protectorate equipment, in civilian identity, in the middle of ABB territory, and at the direction of a Master.”

“Might need to adjust your visor, sir. These Pawns are mine, paid for out of my own pocket, and you'll note none of them have Chessman's or the Protectorate's emblems on them.” Danny hooked his thumbs into his belt loops, the very picture of subversive compliance. “I'm also not on the clock,
Brushstroke never asked for me to do this, and technically this is neutral ground and not ABB holdings.”

Armsmaster stayed quiet, and Danny didn't need Gallant to tell him the Tinker was frustrated beyond belief. He didn't have any room to censure Danny, at least not as far as Danny had been able to find in careful re-readings of his contract and Protectorate off-duty regulations. A few moments of watching the Pawns work later, Armsmaster spoke quietly through gritted teeth, “You do know that tomorrow we're both going to be in front of Piggot's desk for this?”

“It will be fine, I've already gone over all the-- oh hi honey!” Danny broke off his consolation to greet Taylor, who had come out to see who had arrived. His daughter's power was with her, as usual, and as the wolf turned its gaze towards Armsmaster Danny swore its expression shifted a few more degrees towards Smug.

“Hi Dad! Oh, and hello Armsmaster! I didn't know any Protectorate heroes were coming by today. Would you like some--”

“No,” Armsmaster said. The Tinker pointedly ignored the irritated glance Danny shot at him.

“Oh. Well... okay. Anything I can help you with, then?”

“...do you even have a permit to dig foundations? Or had the power lines and cables underground pointed out?” Sunny's tail stopped its languid waving. The wolf stared at the Tinker before it abruptly turned around and dashed back across the Shrine grounds, towards the office. The three left on the sidewalk watched the wolf awkwardly turn the doorknob with its teeth, and let itself inside.

“I believe so, yes... at least, I did remember to have the utility companies locate the buried wires and such when I had them re-connect the power and water to the cafe, on the other side of the shrine. The rest of the paperwork should be in the filing cabinet, and,” Taylor winced as a loud crash sounded from within the office, “...I'm gonna go help Sunny look.”

“Taylor's pretty good about crossing her i's and dotting her t's. I'm not worried,” Danny remarked once Taylor had fled. “She's been keeping good records of everything, and I made some phonecalls earlier, so... erm. Armsmaster?”

From the angle of his helmet's visor, the hero wasn't looking towards the office where Taylor had gone to. Nor was he looking in the direction of the Pawns, still busily working in the neighboring yard. Instead, the Tinker wasn't looking anywhere in particular, just staring into the middle distance. Growing concerned, Danny said his name again, and reached out to give his armored shoulder a rough shake.

“I--” Armsmaster started, then swallowed. He continued in a low, monotone voice, “I'm demanding paperwork from a dog.”

“Uhh...”

Armsmaster slowly turned, and walked back to his motorcycle without a word, heedless of Danny calling out to him again. The Tinker started the vehicle back up and drove off, and was long gone before Tayor and Sunny jogged back over to the sidewalk, the wolf with a folded set of papers in its mouth.

“Taylor,” Danny said, his voice tight, “Did you or Sunny do something to Armsmaster?”

The pair exchanged a baffled look before turning back to Danny and shaking their heads. The gesture looked kind of odd on a wolf, but Danny couldn't deny that the canine actually did look
confused. Danny sighed, and started looking for his work phone.

* * *

After being politely, but firmly informed that the Master/Stranger Quarantine cells were not a Time-Out Room, Arrmsmaster did something he'd likely not done in years:

He took a sick day.

That meant retreating to his lab, and locking the door in case Piggot got any funny ideas about not allowing him to remain on Protectorate grounds while not on the clock. His phone was silenced to everything short of emergencies and tossed onto a desk, followed by his helmet. He pulled the cot he usually slept on out of a wall, lay down, and proceeded to stare through the ceiling and into the gaping maw of existential crisis.

It took a long while for Arrmsmaster to become aware of a blinking green light over by his workbench, where a monitor setup for Dragon was installed. He dragged his hands over his face and sighed. “Dragon, I know you have an emergency override that you think I don't know about, just use it. I'm not getting up.”

The monitor turned on with an almost guilty beep. “Eheh... sorry. You didn't respond to a couple of emails I sent you, and I got a little worried. What's going on?”

“Nothing work-related. Well, nothing directly work-related.”

“You can tell me anyway.”

Arrmsmaster went quiet again, and when he next spoke it was with none of his usual certainty. “Dragon... am I an asshole?”

“Um.”

“...oh.”

“N-no! Just-- you can be a bit abrasive to people who don't know you well. And you're rather curt when speaking.” Arrmsmaster didn't look over at the monitor, but he heard Dragon sigh over the speakers. “What brought this on?”

“I stopped by Bushstroke's shrine today. Chessman was helping her build something, that hot spring. I asked if she even had permits for digging and construction.”

“Ah... okay?”

“No, not okay. I'm not-- that's not my jurisdiction! I don't really care if she's doing it, as long as it doesn't hurt anybody. I just...” Arrmsmaster raised one hand back up to his forehead, and held it there. “I just said it because I wanted to throw a wrench in her and Good Dog's plans. That's all.”

“Oh. I see.”

“And it just... occurred to me that I didn't want that. In general. That's... not why I'm here, in the Protectorate.”
“It's not the kind of hero you wanted to be,” Dragon finished for him. She was always better with words than he was. He could hear the hesitation before she asked the next question, voice gentle. “What made you decide to join the Protectorate?”

There was really no easy way to put that into words. After almost a minute of trying, Armsmaster simply said, “I thought I could be doing more.”

“And are you?”

These days? Anchored to Brockton Bay, where for years there'd been no way to proceed without tipping over a careful balance of power and making things worse for everyone. Tinkering to counter the same villains, because taking them out simply wasn't often feasible. Doing nothing but work, spending every day mired in paperwork and legal tape and trying not to screw up in front of the press. And even if he did it all perfectly, there... really wasn't anywhere to go from here. He was already head of the ENE branch, above him was the Triumvirate and not much else, and after this long it was looking like they weren't interested in filling Hero's vacant spot.

Looking at it all together like that, it was hard to suppress the odd thought that came to him: this wasn't fun anymore.

“Not really, no,” he finally answered.

“Well,” Dragon offered carefully, “maybe after this E88 thing, you could take a little time off, so you can think it over? What you want from the Protectorate, and from yourself.”

“...yeah. Maybe I will.”

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