Tabloid

by babylonsheep

Summary

PRT photographer by day and cape paparazzi by night, Tabloid explores the effects of parahumans on society with the help of his quirky sense of humor. Each chapter contains original artwork. World-building, slice of life, comedy/drama.

[COMPLETE]
Summary: In which a photographer/tortured artist/parahuman OC snarks his way through Earth Bet.

This is not a self insert, metaknowledge, parody, crossover, or crack fic.

This story takes place pre-canon, from November and December of 2010. I've written this fic to be canon-compliant, within the bounds of artistic license, and it will elaborate on some of the events mentioned but not described in *Worm*. The character interactions and background details of *Tabloid* lead directly to the events in *Worm* canon, and characters will stick to their canon personalities. No intentional OOC or crack in this story.

—ARC SUMMARY—

ONE: CAPE ON CAPE COMBAT
Introduces Tabloid, the parahuman paparazzi, and explores what he actually does for a living. Tabloid works a day job at the PRT, and becomes a Stranger in the night to photo stalk capes for money.

**TWO: NOT SO HEROIC HEROES**

Introduces Paul, the civilian persona of Tabloid, and explores how he balances his two lives and identities.
Paul works as an image consultant, and helps the Protectorate capes maintain their PR approval ratings.

**THREE: THE SHORTENING OF THE WAY**

What it means to be a parahuman on Earth Bet, and how powers come at a cost, to both individuals and society.
Two lives turns out not to be as easy or as convenient to manage as Tabloid makes it look.

This work can also be found on [SpaceBattles](http://www.spacebattles.com). The Author's Notes following each chapter are posted on that site, and will answer questions and explain the canon details explored in the chapter, along with extra content and research. I recommend reading them if you want to know more about the world-building. There is also bonus art content for my SpaceBattles readers.

**LIST OF SPACEBATTLES EXCLUSIVE OMAKE CHAPTERS:**

**OMAKE 1**, June 2013. Added 01/04/2017. 3.5k words.

**OMAKE 2**, January 2011. Added 26/05/2017. 5.5k words.

**OMAKE 3**, June 2011. Added 22/06/2017. 7k words.

**OMAKE 4**, July 2013. Added 04/07/2017. 2k works.

Feel free to read comments, join discussion, or ask questions either there, or here.
"So, Kid Win," I said, adjusting the zoom setting of my camera. "Are you planning on keeping the name when you join the big leagues?"

Kid Win, clad in Tinkertech armor of red and gold, grinned. He was the type who had a fondness for making chit-chat with the support staff, unlike some other heroes who either played up the mysterious-and-aloof angle when dealing with people outside their team structure, or were just antisocial. Sometimes I couldn't tell the difference. But Kid Win was friendly; he got along with others and he got along with me, and if he was only doing it because Hero did it, he did it well enough. Kid Win turned his head, and his helmet's visor caught the light reflected from the studio umbrellas, and glowed a warm red. I took several shots.

"Nah, I'm thinking of changing it when I level up," said Kid Win, still smiling. "Do you want me to do another pose?"

"Stay where you are, but lift your head a bit higher," I replied from behind the camera. "Lean forward a bit, there we go. Good shot. What kind of cape name would you pick? Something on the same theme, like 'Victorious'?"

"Well, since I won't be a kid forever, how about Win Man?"

"Win Man?"

"Win Man and Clockblocker. It'd be awesome! If Assault and Battery can pull it off, I totally could." Kid Win laughed and I glanced at the PRT staffers standing off to the side, outside the circle of studio lights. Their arms were folded, and they did not look particularly amused.

I liked the kid. The Wards, unlike a majority of the Protectorate members, weren't completely jaded with all their personality ground away by time and years of shift-work. For them, it was still a novelty to get the star treatment, the attention, and the pointed cameras of parahuman celebrity. Over time, the novelty would go away, and the praising vox pops would turn to pointed criticism for too much collateral damage, or too little visible action. It was only the rare exceptions like Mouse Protector who actively bucked the trend of being seen as municipal hall monitors.

I took several shots. Kid Win changed his pose. I took several more, going down the checklist the PR team had given me. Front, back, profile, sitting, standing, various angles. The costume department would use the photos to update the official costume reference files – and this happened with a lot more regularity for Tinker heroes who adjusted their powersuits on the fly with no consideration of the approval system. The other photos would be used for official profile pages on the Protectorate website and social media, and press release packets sent out to journalists after successful actions. The Protectorate felt it was safer and more convenient to have the under-18's photographed by a PRT-affiliate rather than mobbed by pushy paps and even pushier fans. And it did net them the benefit of having high quality photos to pick through and use for the posters and merchandising.

Some people would probably point out right now how demeaning it is that I, an artist of light and shadow, had to sell my talent for cold and soulless dollars. You can't put a price on art, beauty doesn't have a price tag, et cetera. Well, after a bit of a reality check after graduating from art school, turns out you can put a price tag on art. The easy way to imagine the value is to hypothetically give
someone one of your creations—maybe it's a photo you took, or a picture you drew. You let them spend time with it, hang it on their wall, use it as their profile photo or screensaver. And then you take it away. The value comes from how much that person would pay to get it back.

So I enjoy those cold and soulless dollars paid out by the PRT, and the swanky lanyard and staff badge that gets me into official functions and the cafeteria, and the expense account that racks up the airline travel miles. Those dollars are really great. So are the platinum-tier airline lounges with goodie bags and breakfast buffets. It almost makes up for the bad part of the job: dealing with the brats.

"Turn left. Now face me, please," I said. The girl in front of me, in a paneled armor suit and a black cloak that swished around her legs, turned. She held a crossbow in each hand, brandished aggressively. Definitely not following the appearance guidelines.

Every Protectorate branch, hell, every workplace, has someone you immediately dislike on first impression. I'm not saying that there's a guaranteed bad apple in every batch, because sometimes what you get is a succession of lightly bruised ones that are perfectly edible and photogenic if you turn them to the side a bit. But usually there is at least someone you don't get along with as much as you do everyone else, and if there was a classification system for it with ratings from 1 to Eidolon, I'd give this girl an 8.

Her kneepads had scratches on them where the black paint had flaked off to reveal the lighter gray metal beneath. Official procedure required wearing the newest iteration of your costume on photo day, and when you knew photo day was coming up, you wore your old costume or components on patrol on the couple of days before. You left the new one on the shelf for the costume team to go over it for popped seams and dented panels. Client WD1378 (she never introduced herself or spoke much during her photo sessions) obviously didn't read the memo. I sighed and made a note for post-processing.

I've heard it said that if you do the things you love for a job, you will end up ruining it and hating it. And that is the explanation for why most teachers you had at school were lemon-faced prunes in orthopedic soles and unpleasantly colored nylons that were almost but not quite flesh-toned. With a special mention to the librarians who must have loved books once but somehow turned into spectacled harridans with an area-of-effect hate aura, wielding return-date rubber stamps like war hammers. I'd like to make a note for the record that I haven't yet reached that point. While I'll happily take money for what I do, there are still ways to blow off steam and keep the fun in the game.

Yes, the game. The most dangerous game, in fact.

I hunt parahumans.

On my off-days and evenings, I go by Tabloid.

There is no greater satisfaction than lining up the perfect shot, with the fine black lines of the crosshairs centered on a subject who will unknowingly become a treasured trophy. When the lighting is just right, with the ideal balance of shape to contrast to negative space, that moment lasts forever and I live for it.

But sometimes I settle for something less impressive, something with a little less artsy flair and a lot more scandalous or unexpectedly candid. There's a sort of charm in dimly-lit amateurish, phone camera, or found-footage style snaps, something that gives the impression to the viewer of "This must be real" or "I could have been there". Whatever it is about the ratio of graininess to authenticity, I've found that the intersection of cape beat journalism and the gossip rags is one that appeals to most
people who shop at the grocery store and try not to be seen looking at the rows of tawdry magazines hung under the little racks of chewing gum and breath mints.

It's okay to look, you know. Celebrities or parahumans – we're just like you.
I'm perfectly aware of how gimmicky capes tend to be. Theme names everywhere, from theme twins like what Kid Win suggested earlier, to villain gangs and corporate cape groups consisting of a bunch of capes named after various synonyms for "darkness" or trademarked products, respectively. Throw in the matching costumes that somehow incorporate the theme aesthetic with a silk-screened logo designed by a long-suffering graphic designer (we brethren praise the God of Money with our daily devotional eye roll, huzzah), a couple of catchphrases, and it's unsurprisingly not that far from what you'd get at a children's bowling alley birthday party.

But hey, if it ain't broken, don't fix it.

The cape costumes that separate the parahuman from the merely human are meant to be a show, an unconscious demonstration to the normies that parahumans are different, more powerful, stronger, better than being plain old puny earthlings. Like the spots on a toadstool, or the warts on a toad, you will rarely find parahumans without their skintight bodysuits and chunky utility belts. It makes them – us – easier to pick out from the crowd. And easier to find with the crosshairs.

This time, however, the subject wasn't wearing a costume.

To be fair, I wasn't wearing my costume either, it being the middle of a weekday. Inconvenient.

Hm, I thought. Now I understand the whole bodysuit thing.

It's much easier to wear under your civvie clothes instead of going home to change. As a suggestion for all the amateur and newbie capes out there who are taking that to heart, it would probably be a good idea to put a flap in the back or you may be asked by colleagues why your bathroom visits are never under ten minutes. There's also a classic cape party joke, about the guy in the one piece latex jumpsuit who had to take a time out in the bushes during a fight and came back with his neck all smeared with—

Yelling, calling for help, car alarms going off, glass breaking. My attention returned to the thing in the middle of the road. No, it had no costume on, just like me. But unlike me (disappointing, I know), it wasn't wearing anything at all.

A naked, lumbering creature, swollen at the belly, one club-like arm much larger than the other almost dragging on the asphalt of the traffic intersection. Cars braked with a screech, metal crumpled with the crisp squeak of soda cans being crushed underfoot, pedestrians on the sidewalk screamed.

I'd call it a "he", since "it" didn't do it justice, and it was very obvious that he was currently not wearing a thing, if you didn't count the pendulous, tumor-ridden skin that sagged beneath the belly like an apron of propriety. "Birthday suit" crossed my mind, and I wondered what kind of mutant mama could give birth to this. Whatever it was.

People around me ran. I popped the lens cap of my camera and stepped back from the sidewalk, under the shadow of a storefront's striped canvas awning, slowly breathing and shuffling backwards until my back brushed against the reconstituted limestone of the wall.

Slow breaths.
Relax.

Minimal movement.

I faded.

The creature flung out a heavy arm at a man burdened with two children, and tossed him to the ground. A giant mottled fist, lumpy with growths, rose up and struck the man. He didn't get up. The children shrieked, then somehow shifted back a few yards, tumbling to the ground.

"Hey!" called out a young man in a mask, holding his arms out and waving them in front of the creature. "I'm the one you want!"

The creature roared, misshapen chin unhinging in a crooked underbite. The young man in the mask disappeared, and appeared on the other side of a stalled car. Other people appeared and disappeared just as quickly, hopscotching back and forth as the mutant and the young man moved them, and moved themselves. The masked man could pop himself in another direction faster than the creature, but every move he made created more chaos among the screaming pedestrians and trapped drivers stuck in their cars, and whenever he got too far away, he was somehow dragged backwards.

Huh. So the lump monster wasn't limited to self teleportation.

I snapped photos. It's not like I had a Brute rating or anything helpful to contribute to that freaky game of outdoor checkers. But I did notice that the man in the mask turned his head and did a quick glance around before teleporting off, so it seemed he was limited to line-of-sight. The monstrous creature pulled him back; they went back forth until both disappeared around the corner, to the sound of emergency response sirens and screaming.

I walked off in the other direction, moving out of the shadows in a heatwave shimmer that swiftly darkened and solidified into the clean lines of pressed trousers and smart blazer.

It wasn't the first time I'd witnessed a cape fight. Most people who live in large cities have seen at least one or two in their lives. They're uncommon, but not rare – whenever you see "POLICE PUZZLED BY MYSTERY MURDER" as the headline of your local paper, there's a good chance that a parahuman was involved. If it's not a parahuman, it's usually a copycat who thinks that wishing really hard to be a cape turns you into one. It's not that far of a stretch to believe it these days, with stories of third-gen capes getting set off by a foul ball or a sneeze. If you live in a city large enough to boast a subway or metro system, any friend-of-a-friend or at least a dude-you-met-at-the-local can hook you up with an autograph if you ask nicely.

And those "joke" newspapers featuring front pages full of spontaneous combustions and exclusive interviews with victims of alien abduction, probing, and mindwiping are probably true too.

>>>
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 five messages in private message history
• Threads and private messages are ordered by user custom preference.

♦ Private message from ziplocker93:

ziplocker93: i heard from krenken that you do promo shoots
TABL0ID: Yes. You looking to debut indie?
TABL0ID: Need info on time and place.
ziplocker93 *New Message*: pburgh, 2 weeks from now?
ziplocker93 *New Message*: i want the full package w/ showreel. how much u charge?
TABL0ID *New Message*: Message me to discuss pricing if you're serious. tabloid@capeflunky.

♦ Topic: Boston Zombies
In: Boards ► Places ► America ► Boston
TABL0ID (Original Poster) (Verified Cape)
Posted on November 26, 2010:
Everyone see the cordons at Harrison and Walton on tonight's news? They blocked the streets off after the "incident" this afternoon, and that's why there was the two hour traffic jam. They said it was an accident, a multiple pileup, but it's not all it was. Trust me, I was there, I saw it. It's a cover up.

Yeah, yeah, how come I always get to be there at the wrong place at the right time. I call serendipity and my wallet calls FEED ME.

• CapeFlunky site gets the first photos out 30 minutes after the gunshots go off. SFW, the good bits are censored.
• Herald website picks it up, copies almost word for word from the CF website. LAME.
• Social media starts picking it up. You guys too, I'm making this thread because I haven't seen anyone else who knows what the fuck is going on.
• Photos make national news by evening along with security cam footage. B&W, no sound and low res, but you can see how it rolled. Reports say 6 people died, and there were at least 3 of the Z's.

Here's my take: it's a fresh and freaky new type of Case 53. We've seen lizard men and orc C53's, so the new zombie types aren't that out of left field. Check the timestamps. The camera was set at auto. This mutant zombie teleports. Short distance only, but still a hefty Mover/Brute combo if it can
deliver a one hit KO.

If you haven't got a bugout kit yet, you probably should.

And because you know I love you guys, here's some exclusive shots from on-scene that you won't see anywhere else. NSFW. link 1 and link 2. link 3 aftermath before they put down the crime scene tape and kicked everyone out. Enjoy.

xoxo, gossip guy

(Showing Page 1 of 1)

► Coyote-C
Replied on November 26, 2010:
Saw the news footage during dinner. Thought it was a hoax or publicity stunt (95% of gossip site content is clickbait asspulled by an intern, no offense Tabloid). Turns out people actually bit it and they're doing an official statement about it tomorrow. We'll see.

► Andjelka
Replied on November 26, 2010:
Case 53's are people too. One of the security cams picked up mask guy shooting one of them point blank. Instead of starting zombie panic we should be looking for that masked gunslinger.

It's good you made this thread with the sources linked, but I still think you're an asshole, OP.

► XxVoid_CowboyxX
Replied on November 26, 2010:
@Tabloid, how do you just stand and take photos instead of running and screaming like everyone else?

► TABL0ID (Original Poster) (Verified Cape)
Replied on November 26, 2010:
@ Coyote-C: It's legit. They don't just pull out the hazmat suits and helicopters for a fire drill. I think they would have gone full quarantine hush-hush on this if the news and pics didn't go out so fast.

@Andjelka: Would an asshole by any other name smell as sweet? I take it as a compliment.

@XxVoid_CowboyxX: Notice from the vid feed that the ones that run got teleported. The people who made a big panic on screen caught the attention of the Case 53 and the teleporting guy and got moved around.

UPDATE: mayor's confirmed a speech tomorrow. Don't know if they got enough evidence to start pointing fingers at a perp or not. Any peeps with Boston PRT or PD intel?

► Dornerman
Replied on November 26, 2010:
SHIIIT grabbing my survival sack RIGHT NOW
If you fellas don't have a bugout bunker or cabin innawoods prepared for this, I highly suggest you do it. I got my tactical bowie, piss filter, and 50 cans of tang. That's the minimum you need to survive out there.

► aze356
Replied on November 26, 2010:
Is this real? News said there were at least 3 Z's, other threads here make it look like there are 5+. have they found Patient Zero?

not suprised it started in Boston tho.

► Karnage666
Replied on November 26, 2010:
THe zombies are way off balance and imho kinda slow.

Meh, I could take it.

► Coyote-C
Replied on November 26, 2010:
@Karnage666: You forgot that they teleport too.

► Karnage666
Replied on November 26, 2010:
Zombies can't cross running water. Just hvae to sit on a brige and plink em 1 by 1.

► casmir
Replied on November 26, 2010:
We have to worry about supervillains and now zombies? Tax dollars at work, yall.

THEORY. The villains caused the zombies, I called it first.

Does anyone know which burb Blasto lives in?

End of Page. 1
Ever since mankind has entered the era of existence where WiFi is available on every street corner, and where the kids of this generation consider internet a human right, complaining about things has entered a new and unforeseen level of efficiency. Naturally, complaining about capes goes with that, and if all those "here's my two cents" opinions were worth two whole cents, you'd be a lucky guy. A lucky guy with floorboards cracked from the weight of a couple of tons of coinage, but still, Parahumans Online, the site for capetalk, is probably the best place to get a peek at the most popular opinions.

Cape morality is one of those hot topics that pushes everyone's buttons. How come bad guys with powers get three strikes, while a guy with no powers doing the same bad things gets none? Why is it three strikes, and not only one, or five? For those people who live in countries where the long arm of the law's limited reach is determined by precedent, for those who live in places where a fossilized codex tells you what you can and can't do, and the people who live everywhere else, no one had any idea how to fit capes into the established framework of applied philosophy that is the legal system.

Integrating capes into society is a tricky problem, especially since there's a big division between powered people and the powers that be. The largest cape organization in the country, the PRT, makes a big deal about putting normal guys in charge of the capes. It makes for a big Them versus Us dichotomy with a lack of trust on both sides. While capes have a big impact on society on an individual basis, with powerhouse like Alexandria or the Siberian being household names, normals still outnumber us ten or twenty-five thousand to one.

It bothers me that if the unpowered community can agree on anything, it is that all capes, no matter their affiliation, have a responsibility and an obligation to go out and fight Endbringers. That doesn't fly with me. It may be a result of having a weenie power, but the first place I'd head to when I hear the sirens is the underground shelters.

So it is a very good thing that there exists a second set of Unwritten Rules, slightly more obscure than the first set, that was developed as a result of all the interactions between capes and civvies. It's essential knowledge to anyone who wants to walk the cape beat.

**Tabloid's Unwritten Rules for Avoiding Preventable Violence**

1.) Never ask a cape if he or she is planning to join the next Endbringer fight. It's such a horrifying social faux pas that even thinking about asking it or being asked makes me cringe. It's worse than asking a woman how much she weighs on the first date.

2.) Never ask about a cape's powers, unless said power is common knowledge. Most capes will keep a few tricks or applications of their powers as trump cards, especially the Trumps. If a cape volunteers the information, then it's polite for other capes to return the favor. The "I'll show you mine if you'll show me yours" approach is a basic move of schmoozing with other capes. And in befriending them, as a prelude to mutual unmasking. Not like I'd know anything about that, though.

3.) Never, ever, EVER ask about a cape's trigger event. If it was a public trigger, don't comment on it. Capes don't share that information with teammates they've known for decades, so they're definitely not going to tell some third-rate journalist in a phone interview. Protectorate capes have been coached by the PR department enough that they wouldn't lay the smackdown on-air, but asking a
villain makes suicide by cape a real possibility.

The fact that these rules exist further separates parahumans from normies. We're not normal, we're paranormal. They don't trust us, we don't trust them, and it is only because of the hard work of PR and media teams (and myself, of course) that we're not called freaks. Not to our faces, at least.

Which brings us to today.

Nothing is more profitable for news journalism than capitalizing on fear and uncertainty, especially fear of parahumans. It's a tried and true Path to Revenue that is well-endorsed by villains everywhere.

Saturday morning, 8AM, and I was sitting at my desk in my underpants, bowl of cereal in hand, scrolling through the twenty pages of comments that had gathered overnight in my Boston zombies thread. The newest comments were links to longer news articles with quotes from witnesses and authority figures about the incident. And on the twentieth page a thumbnailed picture upload of the scanned front page of this morning's special edition newspaper.
Nice. They'd used my photo. I'd get a royalty for that, cycled through a few accounts so that nothing could be traced to my cape name.

My phone rang. The caller ID revealed that it was a PRT number.

"Braganca," said the caller, a tired sounding female. I recognized the voice: the support staffer in charge of roster coordination. "You need to come to work. Be here before nine-thirty."

My immediate response was to say "Fuck off".

Although much personal satisfaction (not to mention fun) can be achieved in being an asshole, doing it publicly doesn't endear you to anyone. I know I'm a sanctimonious piece of shit who keeps a
running mental commentary of how much the world sucks because I'm not in charge of it; I'm not going to pretend otherwise. But in the name of public decency, I have an interest in keeping the asshole from the public eye.

"Fuck," I muttered, under my breath. I cleared my throat. "What's this for, then? The charity reps aren't coming in until Tuesday."

"Armstrong is on damage control mode. He hasn't left the building since yesterday. PR is scrambling. You'll see when you get here. Are you heading up now?"

I set my bowl on the table, irritated. Welp, there went my weekend plans of sitting in my underwear posting inflammatory forum comments on PHO and laughing at the responses. "This isn't a scheduled project, so I don't do call-ins."

"You'll get compensated, trust me."

"Magic words. See you in thirty."


Weld was one of the more challenging subjects I'd had to tackle in my civilian identity. In the wrong lighting, he would sparkle like a disco ball, and a media team intern trying to Photoshop bad pictures into good ones would more likely than not turn him into a tinman panhandler mime in metallic bodypaint. My solution to that was bounce boards and reflectors to diffuse and soften studio spotlighting. Lots and lots of bounce boards.

As soon as I'd heard the first few sentences of the briefing, I knew how hamfisted this project was. It didn't even attempt subtlety, and my eye twitched in an effort to hold back a roll when I saw the first drafts of the copy that PR was drafting.

I saw the direction they wanted to go. The PRT wanted to push Weld as a representative of the Case-53s, and this shoot was supposed to make him look human and sympathetic. He was one of the most human looking of the 53's I'd heard of, if you ignored the silver skin that made him look like a particularly artistic robot sculpture. The whole project was meant to calm the panic over monstrous parahumans, and keep the normals from thinking that they didn't need to be rounded up and watched in case they caught the Z-virus and started attacking civvies.

"Hey, Paul," said Weld from behind me. "I'm not surprised they called you in for this."

"Of course. I'm the best," I said, with no hesitation. I didn't offer to shake his hand.

Being a cape myself, I was aware that most of us had our little idiosyncrasies that people, especially non-powered, never bothered to learn. Weld disliked shaking hands because it was embarrassing to suck up some poor schmuck's wedding ring or thousand dollar watch, and equally embarrassing to turn away a handshake. It soured a first impression and reinforced the belief that these freaks could
never successfully integrate into polite society.

In fact, many of the suits in the PRT subconsciously tiptoed around capes, displaying a cautious
devance based on fear, or else an unwarranted aggression from the knowledge that a fifteen year-
old girl with a sparkly skirt and a tinsel barrette could knock a man out in one hit. Just another reason
why I'd never registered as a rogue, even if the signing bonus was tempting. Add to the fact that the
people in charge handled the Wards like either children or child soldiers and nothing in between, and
I could see why so many of them turned into assholes by the time they aged out of the program.

I try to build rapport with the clients, and I guess it showed. I had a higher than average security
clearance, trusted enough to be contracted for off-the-books private commissions for Protectorate
members. I'd done Triumph's graduation cruise in the Bay, and Weld's promotion party for making
Boston team leader in the past. Legend's family Christmas card photo was a real possibility one of
these days. No wonder I was the first called for this little PR stunt.

This little doozy I'd already labelled "Case-53s, just like you and me". I kept it to myself.

Weld showed me around his room, stepping over the various extension cords coiled on the floor like
jungle vines. The metal stands holding up the reflector umbrellas had been wrapped in electrical tape
on my request.

"Do you want me to sit down or do the back-front-left-right thing?" Weld asked.

I glanced around the room, noting the wall to ceiling bookshelves stacked with plastic jewel cases
and collectible cardboard vinyl sleeves. I was more impressed by the clean organization of the
collection rather than its size. Framed posters decorated the walls in the gaps between shelves. The
room had no bed, only a large chair, a few tables and cabinets and a speaker system with the power
cords lifted off the floor on small wooden risers. This kid went all out.

"The powers-that-be have told me that they want you to 'just be yourself'," I replied. "We both know
that's bullshit. How about you just tell me what you do when you're not working, and we'll go from
there." I smiled, and kept the lens cap on my camera. No pressure. Contrary to some interpretations
that I am a judgemental prick because I don't know any other way to be, I do, in fact, have the
rudimentary social set. I find it more convenient to play the game and leave the antics in my head and
in the anonymity of the internet.

Weld nodded, and ran a silvery finger over a shelf containing row after row of CDs in cases. There
wasn't a trace of dust when he inspected his finger, which had a fingerprint formed from a faint
whorl of fine steel wire. I glanced at the spines of the CDs. The few with "Special Collector's
Edition" on the sides were still shrink wrapped.

"I don't really eat, but they still give me a food allowance, so I spend it on music," he said. "They
do n't care because the others go home after patrols and eat there; it's more of a pocket money perk
than anything." He drifted past the shelves, one metal finger brushing on the rows of the CD's,
making small tink, tink, tink noises. "I listen to music at night when everyone goes home and it gets
really quiet. Since I don't sleep, either."

Looks like making Weld into "just your average teenager" would be a hard sell, I thought.

"Do you go to the store and buy CD's by the box? Looks like you could stock a pretty well-rounded
shop with the collection here," I commented.
"I buy them from the internet, some of them secondhand. Most of the vintage and out-of-print ones are second- or third-hand. The internet has been really great for us," said Weld, without pausing to explain what he meant by us. "The posters are from eBay. What do you think of them?"

We took some time to admire a black metal band poster that was designed around a woodblock print of a snowy forest at night under a dark sky. *Jantteri*, I read. The smaller text on the bottom was written in a Nordic language I didn't understand.

"It's one thing to admire art," I spoke slowly, thinking. To the PRT, I was a tool, and Weld was a tool. Useful tools nonetheless, and Weld was the second most popular team leader in the Wards according to social media polls, no matter his inhuman appearance. I could make him number one with the right approach. It just needed a soft touch, something that the PRT lacked, when all tools were hammers to them. Armstrong had good intentions, and he had the benefit of being more reasonable than most of the PRT directors I'd met, but he was no artist. "It's another thing to create art. Tell me, Weld, can you play me anything you've made?"

I could see him hesitate. "Only experimental stuff with a synth kit, nothing amazing or worth sharing," said Weld carefully. "I don't think I'm that good at it."

I laughed. "Do you want to know where I started? Ankle deep in literal bull shit taking photos of things that would make the most hardcore carnivore feel weird about eating steak."

"That's a story I'd like to hear."

"Tell you what, how about you show me yours and I'll show mine."

>>>
In response to the events of November 26, and to address all the speculation going around about new parahumans, we did an interview with Weld, our hometown hero, regarding Case-53s and keeping Boston safe. He's a local favorite, so we know you're going to love it.

The news segment will be on the evening news on Monday Nov 29. For those outside Mass., we'll post the extended video on Youtube and the PRT site afterward, so you can watch it in full there. An exclusive interview transcript will be in Monday's Herald and will also appear in next week's release of American Hero magazine, with some backstage pictures you won't see anywhere else.

Here's a sneak preview of what we've got.

As always, thanks for your support.

The Boston Team.

(Showing Page 15 of 18)

► Miss Mercury (Protectorate Employee)
Replied on November 27, 2010:
I think this is the perfect answer to all the Case-53 rumormongering going around since yesterday, which wasn't helping anything. I got a chance to watch some raw footage of the interview, and it's good stuff. If you're planning to skip watching it because you think it's just pre-packaged sound bites, you'll miss out. It's pretty casual and really funny at times. And the camera guy is great too.

► Tumbles
Replied on November 27, 2010:
Why is the extended cut only going to be on the PRT site and not the news?

► Weld (Verified Cape) (Wards NE)
Replied on November 27, 2010:
@Eurekachan: The Youtube channel is available for non-Americans. We also have enough footage to make a blooper or extended reel for the Wards Youtube channel, so everyone will be able to watch it there when it comes out.

@ShyMueller: I might drop a mixtape one day, actually. And I can guarantee that it will be fire.

@ Miss Mercury: Thanks, I'm looking forward to seeing how they ended up cutting the interview. We had the cameras rolling for over 3 hours, but the news segment is going to be a little under 4 minutes and the PRT video is around 10.

@Tumbles: There's a strict time limit on the news so they can fit in their other segments and the ads.

@BakeandShake: I'll ask about the merchandise, but if you want a faster response, try emailing the Boston merch team directly.
To everyone: Your support means a lot to me. To clear up a few things, no, I wasn't pushed into doing this interview. The PRT and I agreed we needed a media response to all the media drama over "zombies", so I stepped up because I thought this was the best way to reach out to the public. Yes, we are doing something about the situation. We are actively working on making Boston better for everyone. It takes public trust and support, and this is a start to making it happen.

► Gurkburb
Replied on November 27, 2010:
OMG WELD REPLIED

Back2topic - are they going to be doing interviews for other Wards and Protectorate members?

► aze356
Replied on November 27, 2010:
Weld called them zombies!!!

They're officially zombies, I knew it!!!!!!!!!!!!

End of Page. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 ... 16, 17, 18
It may be somewhat shameful to admit, but my civilian day job produces higher dividends in terms of money and reputation compared to my cape identity. As the PRT affiliate photographer for most of the northeastern Protectorate branches, I do get assigned a lot of routine housekeeping for the costume department, but in return gain an opportunity to work with a stream of top talent and promising newbies who know that image is a big part of maintaining a heroic persona. It's steady work with steady gains as my portfolio gets padded out over time, but when you're an artist in the industry, churning bit parts in quantity is nothing to be scoffed at.

My cape identity, in comparison, cannot even scrape by on the D-list and is probably hovering somewhere in the dregs under H or G. My PHO Wiki article is a one sentence stub of a page created by me when I came up with the name and was excited to see that no one else had claimed it first. And I have to be careful about photos of Protectorate heroes in case anything is linked to my civilian identity. Cape journals also don't exactly shell out the big bucks for scandalous photos of certain supervillains sampling the merchandise when said supervillains are well known to be suppliers and distributors.

My most reliable source of income in costume (aside from the unsavory bout of kleptomania I'd succumbed to in my first month) has been from making demo reels for independent vigilantes who want to go pro. A well-edited showreel containing efficient non-lethal displays of power in a takedown compilation makes a great audition tape for those who want to join a corporate hero team. It also invites Protectorate interest if a cape's skillset is shown to be photogenic on top of being versatile, which allows the potential recruit more contractual leeway in negotiating their salary and choice of branch office.

Some perceptive observers might point out that I don't even need to be a cape to make videos of other capes. However, in my experience, the newly parahuman tend to be overly paranoid when working with others; the longer-lived ones never grow out of the habit. It's somehow more reassuring for a fledgling cape to trust his or her life and wallet to a dude in a gasmask met on the internet. Yeah, acquiring powers tends to make people a bit weird sometimes.

Unless I score a sweet demo reel contract or happen to be in the right place at the right time to get good, sale-worthy photos of bad people showing off their powers while doing bad things that are genuinely shocking and won't get dismissed by my contacts as "just another Tuesday for the Satan Squad", I actually make more money per hour sitting at home remote-accessing the PRT servers and doing my Big Boy Job. That's the depressing life of a low-rated rogue living legit.

The alternative money-making scheme is dipping into kiddie pool villainy, doing low-risk, minimal prep, low-reward thievery involving pick pocketing and robbing ATMs. But really – I think my standards are a little higher than that. I mean, once your mattress is so stuffed with bundles of unmarked bills that it's hard to fall asleep at night, you start questioning your life decisions.

So caping is pretty much relegated to being my recreational activity. That's what happens when you get shafted with a weaksauce power. I went through the whole trigger deal and all I got was this lameass rating. I heard that a shitty "Been There, Done That" t-shirt was a consolation prize, but it's been a couple of years now and I still haven't gotten mine.

The upside of being so weak and obscure is that I don't have any villain groups trying to forcibly recruit me, and the forces of legitimacy aren't gunning for my incarceration in their revolving door
prisons. I've tested my abilities to discover if there was some hidden quirk of my power that's a super secret gamebreaker (nothing, unsurprisingly), so I'm aware of my limitations and know when a situation is out of my league and I need to get the fuck out. This self-preservation instinct practically counts as a Thinker 0 rating, right?

But it still stings a little when I namedrop Tabloid at work and all I get is a blank-faced "Who?".

>>> 

"The choices we get to pick from for the Christmas charity are: senior citizens, handicapped children, soup kitchen, illiteracy, arts for youth, vocations for youth, tree planting, and community center renovation," announced Aegis, standing in front of a projector screen with a clicker in hand. Behind him was the first page of a slide presentation. "We can't choose animal protection because it looks like the New York Wards already took it, so it's not on the list. But I'm going to go through all the rest and then we'll have a vote."

The Brockton Bay Wards were seated around an oval conference table, dressed in their casual costumes – no helmets, minimal armor, no weapons and simple masks on. The back of the room held a few rows of folding chairs, which were currently occupied by a few PRT staffers, PR drones, and me. I'd placed my chair with its back leaning against the wall, and now sat, extremely bored, with a tablet computer resting on my lap. One window had Aegis's slideshow up, and the other was open to the Brockton Bay forums on the PHO website.

After Weld's successful evening news debut, I'd been given notice from on high that my assignments had been shuffled around for the Wards' Cause annual Christmas charity operation. The Wards picked a charity, did some form of televised community service, and generally proved to the neighborhood that they could contribute to society without having to beat people up. It was a publicity thing that also happened to be a sneaky recruitment tactic; the PRT wanted parents to think that their children would do so many more constructive activities as a Ward than as a villain, which was the only other option that the recruitment teams offered as an alternative to going hero.

Dead or rogue were also possible choices, but for some reason, no one talked about them much.

I had expected to work with the Boston Wards in coordinating their own charity campaign, but after their very recent PR boost, it was decided that Brockton Bay needed more attention. Recruitment was low and there hadn't been another addition to the team in over a year; Clockblocker and Aegis were slated to leave within a few months of one another, and the Wards lineup would take a blow. So I had been granted the privilege of sitting in on the Wards' planning session, and now put it to good use by settling my undivided attention on the front page of Parahumans Online.
Welcome to the Parahumans Online Message Boards
You are currently logged in, TABLOID (Verified Cape)
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 five messages in private message history
• Threads and private messages are ordered by user custom preference.

Topic: Pyro villains on the loose
In: Boards ► Places ► America ► Brockton Bay
Oida1923 (Original Poster)
Posted on November 30, 2010:
A number of unexplained arsons has been going on in the Docks area of the Bay, with a building or two going up once a week for the last couple of weeks. Seems to have escalated in the last few days, with explosions and fireworks every night since Friday. The news shows the police and fire dept picking over the the wreck hours later and not saying much about it. I think we can do a better job of figuring it out. Could it be a parahuman or gang new to town?

Post info, theories, and sightings here.

(Showing Page 2 of 8)

► gina_xo
Replied on November 30, 2010:
I live in the Docks area and heard the sirens last night, a few hours apart in two different places. There were body bags, so someone died, but it wasn't on the news. I'm guessing it was hobos or gang members or maybe hobo gangsters getting cleared out of the area.

► Gurkburk
Replied on November 30, 2010:
I think it's a new gang coming to town and trying to build a rep for themselves. Everyone in Boston has been looking at Blasto for making the zombies, and Accord pretty much painted a target on his back. Blasto won't get a kill order unless the Z-virus is contagious, but there's still heat on him. So he's probably looking for a place to go if shit hits the fan. The fires are him casing the joint and getting rid of squatters.
XxVoid_CowboyxX
Replied on November 30, 2010:
@Gurkburbk:
I see more gang stuff at school these days... The PHO wiki says Blasto is an independent villain who takes tribute but doesn't run a gang himself. I dunno, I think it might be more than a solo villain in Boston if gang stuff is happening here.

Gurkburbk
Replied on November 30, 2010:
Blasto has zombie minions, he can do a bunch of stuff at the same time, and set a self destruct so no perps are found. His wiki article says property damage is part of his MO. Explains the explosions.

Cornelius2
Replied on November 30, 2010:
Has anyone got got pics? Pyro villains are pretty conspicuous...

XxVoid_CowboyxX
Replied on November 30, 2010:
@TABL0ID ???

TABL0ID (Verified Cape)
Replied on November 30, 2010:
I don't do this shit for free, buddy.

Kanzler
Replied on November 30, 2010:
@TABL0ID: I'm interested. Can I PM a serious offer?

gina_xo
Replied on November 30, 2010:
Holy FUCK. TABL0ID, are you really going after hobo murdering murder hobos?

TABL0ID (Verified Cape)
Replied on November 30, 2010:
I got bored of doing birthdays and weddings.

End of Page. 1, 2, 3, … 6, 7, 8

Re: custom project
Kanzler <ad394gtgb23@fastmail.com> on 30 Nov 2010:
You don't have the do the surveillance. I made a map of the locations they've been hitting, all in the same area. In attachments. Here's a map of where I think they're going to hit in the next few days.
Tabloid <tabloid@capeflunky.com> on 30 Nov 2010:
How do you know which places get hit?
The deal is for 3 HD photos, and 10 seconds of footage of the villain(s) using powers. Anything else I can either sell to you for extra, or keep for myself. Contract is in attachments, with payment instructions.

Kanzler <ad394gtgb23@fastmail.com> on 30 Nov 2010:
They're all gang spots and hideouts in the Docks. Might be some more that I don't know about, but so far that is what has been targeted. I am almost certain it's a new cape. I heard you can get closer than anyone else can.
Sent the deposit over, check invoice.

Tabloid <tabloid@capeflunky.com> on 30 Nov 2010:
Thanks, it went through. If you have the maps, why haven't you called the PRT?

Kanzler <ad394gtgb23@fastmail.com> on 30 Nov 2010:
I don't trust the PRT.

Tabloid <tabloid@capeflunky.com> on 30 Nov 2010:
Me neither.

"I vote for the easiest one," said Clockblocker. He leaned against the back of his chair and the rolling wheels squeaked.

Kid Win looked up from fiddling with his wristwatch. "How would you even tell?"

"It'd be the one that has the least amount of doing stuff. Those handicapped kids won't be able to talk to us, right? Let's go with that," replied Clockblocker, with a lazy wave of his hand. "Get in, get out, take pictures, go home."

"Why do we even have to do this shit?" snarled a girl in black to Kid Win's right. Client WD1378, I recalled. She closed her flip phone with a flick of her wrist. "It's not like taking photos is going to fix the spazzes."

"Shadow Stalker!" gasped the small girl in a green dress seated next to a boy in gray. "You can't say things like that!" She shot an apologetic glance to the group of PR staffers at the back of the room who were taking the minutes of the meeting.

"They know everything about us already," Shadow Stalker said. Her masked face turned in my direction, and she sounded scornful. "If we were perfect little angels all the time, Mr. Braganca would be out of a job. So fuck you guys, I'm going to say what I think." She gave a nonchalant
shrug and looked at me, awaiting my response.

_Huh._ A challenge.

"You're right, you know," I responded, setting my tablet down and giving a slow, drawn-out yawn. "Every day I'm grateful to be here. Feels like I'm fulfilling my life's purpose doing this job. After all, these turds aren't going to polish themselves."

Clockblocker snickered. Aegis cleared his throat and rubbed the back of his neck.

"Pick 'Illiteracy'," I continued. "We'll do an autograph signing at the library, with a meet-and-greet. We'll also throw in a couple of book readings at the elementary school. You guys can handle a twenty page picture book, yes? You won't even need a script. Less work for you, less work for me."

My eyes skimmed over the Wards group. "You can have a vote now."

They voted. Shadow Stalker abstained. They chose the "Illiteracy" program.

In retrospect, that looked kind of bad for someone whose job description involves working with children. People who are supposedly professionals are meant to be better than sinking to that level, or so I've been told. But something about Shadow Stalker rubbed me the wrong way. She seemed so angry, like there was a smoldering rage inside her that built and built and the only way to deal with the heat was to pass it on to someone else, either the nearest or the weakest.

It didn't go unnoticed by the rest of the Wards group. The easy camaraderie they had wasn't shared with her, and she obviously didn't care either, if she was texting a civvie friend on her personal phone during an official meeting. I doubted that there would be any complaints filed against me for unprofessional conduct. Client WD1378 was known to be a troublemaker in the costume department, and always had way more wear and tear on her equipment than had been accounted for by the repair team.

Perhaps it was worth contemplating how easily pettiness came to people when they had no fear of consequences, and how quickly fear of consequences was lost when one gained parahuman powers. But now probably wasn't the most convenient time for it. I waved a quick farewell to the Wards and flashed my staff badge at the elevator scanners. There was something I would rather do, something more exciting than watching high schoolers talk to grade schoolers while whispering under their breath at how young and stupid they were.

What I really wanted to do was to clock out and suit up before it got fully dark.

_Time to go hunting_, I thought, a thin smile creeping across my face. _There's a bundle of money out there calling my name. And when money talks, you can't help but listen._
INTERLUDE

It was a pleasant summer day. A clear sky arched overhead, dotted here and there with wisps of cotton candy clouds. Carried on that warm summer breeze was the scent of spun sugar, and fried foods on sticks dipped in batter, and roasting meats dripping with sauces. For everyone else, it was the perfect day for a county fair. For Paul, it was too hot, too bright, and too crowded.

If the choice were offered to him, he would not have chosen to be here, but here he was, resolute under the white canvas pavilion of the Agricorp Industries expo booth. His scalp itched as the hair pomade he'd combed into it that morning slowly dissolved in sweat; he knew his quiff was falling limp as the day dragged on, and it wasn't the only thing that found today's attendance disagreeable.

In Paul's hands was a camera that was not as nice as the one he was saving for, but nicer than what he could afford himself. It was a loaner from the Agricorp marketing department. He had used this very camera to create the catalogues and informational posters that hung from easels and sat on spinning display stands by the entrance of the pavilion. Behind him, Kathleen demonstrated the use of a vapor analyzer wand that was a customizable attachment to the electric tractor, which sat in pride of place on a spotlit pedestal.

This, along with the LIDAR mapping module and the mini sample coring system, was one of the many nifty gadgets that were the powered windows and leather seats of the agricultural equipment world. It was a world that on a regular day, Paul would have been proud to say he was a part of, but he was not feeling so generous right now.

The internship had been too good an opportunity to pass over, as Agricorp possessed enough influence to have wrangled a number of legal judgments that put several profitable monopolies and disputed patents into its pockets. And the fact that people didn't know about it made the marketing department look formidably effective. He admired it; it was why Paul had signed on in the beginning.

That, and the money was good enough that he wouldn't have to go back home.

"Kathleen, I'm taking a lunch break now," said Paul abruptly.

The technician diverted her attention from the San Joaquin Raisin Trust representatives, and glanced at Paul, pursing her lips. She wore a wine-dark lipstick that had smudged slightly in the heat. "Take some of the flyers with you. We both get a cut for whatever we sell, don't forget."

Paul nodded, shoved a few flyers and business cards into the pocket of his linen blazer, and headed for the food booths. He had never tasted battered cheese sticks covered in cheese sauce before, or deep-fried cheesecake. There were a great many things one could do with a frying vat and cheese, and he intended to study them all carefully.

He eventually wandered his way into the livestock show barn. It was less crowded, and there were fewer screaming children demanding ice creams and replacement balloons after their first had drifted away unattended. He liked it better that way; the animals couldn't speak to him or demand to know
why the G384-FS was priced at $475,000 when Grandpa Cecil's old Bess had cost $600 and a barrel of shine.

Soft-eyed Charolais heifers gazed at him under long lashes, chewing mournfully. A five-legged boar pig snuffled in slumber on a pile of straw. Heh, that wasn't actually a fifth leg, after all.

The last stall at the end of the row contained a twelve-year-old girl in overalls with a freckled face and braided hair in the process of becoming unbraided, tugging at the lead of a recalcitrant ram.

"Do you need help?" asked Paul politely. He didn't know if a pre-teen would be interested in an electric tractor, but it wouldn't hurt to try.

She raised her head at the sound of his voice, and her eyebrows shot upwards. She gave him a calculating once-over. "Brillo is being judged in twenty minutes but he doesn't want to leave his stall. You could carry him better than me, I think. Or maybe we can push him out together," she said, then added, with a trace of pride, "He weighs almost three hundred pounds."

Paul unlatched the stall gate and slipped inside. The girl handed him the lead rope and stepped behind Brillo, pushing at his rump. He gazed down at the woolly beast, whose curled horns reached the height of his belt buckle. He had no real experience dealing with livestock, and supposed like most animals, Brillo would be more afraid of Paul than the other way around. So he stayed still, and made no alarming movements, and gently patted the ram on the head.

The girl gave him a look as if to hurry him up. Paul rubbed Brillo's cheek and watched the oval-pupilled eyes open and close, felt the tagged ear twitch under his hand. The ram stopped fidgeting after a while, and Paul very slowly led the now obedient animal out of the stall.

"Tell me what you did to him!" the girl ordered, hands on hips. "He's been antsy all day because he's not used to being around so many other animals with weird smells." She took a step closer to him, and then circled around to his back. Paul heard her take a deep breath, then another, as if she was about to sneeze. "Something is wrong with your smell," she said finally.

"I'm wearing deodorant, if that's what you're asking."

"No! It's not that. Or maybe it is," she hesitated. "Wait here."

Paul waited. The girl ran back into the stall, sifted through the straw beneath Brillo's water trough, and came back with her hands cupped around something.

"Here, take this," she said, and when Paul held out his hand for her, she dropped something moist and squishy into his open palm.

Paul looked at his hand. "What the fuck. Did you just give me a handful of shit?"

"No, no!" she cried, seizing his wrist before he could fling it to the ground. "Hold it." Then she bent over it and sniffed at the moist brown pellets of sheep scat in his hand. "It doesn't smell like anything. It should, but it doesn't."

She looked at him, at the stuff in his hand, and then at Brillo. Her eyes widened as something occurred to her. "I think you're one of those people. I... I have to go now. Um. Bye. Thanks for the help."
And then she darted away with Brillo trotting after her.

Paul stared at his hand and brought it up to his face. He sniffed. No smell. He lifted it up closer, until it was an inch away from his nose.

Nothing.

>>> Paul transferred the video file from his Agricorp loaner camera onto his computer, and then cleared the memory card. The video opened in a new window, and he sped the footage up to ten, then twenty times normal speed.

He'd set up a tripod and recorded himself sleeping again. Some nights nothing happened, and sometimes he found – this. Paul changed the time settings back to the default.

There was a lump beneath the blanket that was his sleeping body. Slowly, over a five minute period, the lump grew flatter and flatter until it looked like nothing was underneath. Of the times he had recorded it previously, it had lasted anywhere from ten minutes to an hour and a half, before his body returned to the bed from wherever it had been, in the same position it had been in before.

This time was slightly different. A car alarm had woken him up last night.

Paul's speakers played the recorded car alarm. In the video, a disembodied hand flung itself from the edge of the blanket, and then an arm appeared, and the empty blanket seemed to spasm and Paul saw himself roll over in bed, as if nothing had happened at all. He hadn't remembered feeling anything odd when he had woken up in the morning. He hadn't even remembered the car alarm until he'd been headed to class and seen the car with a smashed in driver's side window a block from his apartment.

Well, good thing he had a camera.

>>> Paul glanced at the red indicator light of the camera, and then rolled onto his back, closing his eyes and breathing deeply. He tried to clear his mind, to think about nothing, to be calm and still all movement. He could hear the whispering of his blood pulsing through his ears, and the liquid gurgle of his stomach digesting the quick lunch he'd eaten in the school cafeteria earlier that day. Next time,
he decided he'd play one of those ambient tracks. Waves on the shore, or maybe rainforest storm, or if he was feeling particularly frisky, the Peruvian pan flute CD he'd bought out of a mixture of guilt and pity from some guys in the grocery store parking lot.

The background biological noises faded. Paul could feel the mattress beneath his back, but he wasn't pressing into it, leaving an indentation on the memory foam. No... he was resting on it, lighter atop it than his body weight would normally allow. He kept focusing on the breathing exercise, focusing on the sensation of being not there. It was weird; he could feel things, but the feelings were dull and muted...

Strange. He felt something around him, but that shouldn't be right, he was supposed to be on the bed. His eyes opened as he slipped smoothly through the mattress.

Paul panicked. His body jerked, and he lost concentration. His faded, immaterial form suddenly became substantial, and he cracked his head on the wooden slats beneath his bedframe. There was no dullness of sensation now; he felt a spear of pure pain lance mercilessly through his forehead, until his sinuses ached and his eyes watered and he almost vomited, but he kept himself from coughing up a mouthful of bile with the thought that if he did so, it would go all over his face. There was no room to turn, and barely any room to move, in that small space between floor and bedframe.

Fuck.

>>>  

From the first day of his enrollment in the Bachelor of Arts degree program, Paul had been under the impression that the measure of a man's worth was the volume of kegs he could chug, the number of reps in his set, and the amount of pain he could tolerate. He'd disregarded the first two benchmarks immediately after attending a few fraternity welcome evenings. But that last one was discouraging, because he'd found that he did not, in fact, have as much in the way of pain tolerance as he would have wished.

He sighed, and he wiggled his toes on the edge of the diving board, thirty feet above the smooth, glassy surface of the swimming pool. This was to be his twenty-seventh jump. Sixteen of those tries, he had hit the water at full force, pancaking himself painfully. He'd heard that jumping into water from high enough would feel like smashing into concrete, but as he was still struggling at thirty feet, he wasn't even going to try anything more dramatic. Besides, filming himself jumping off a tall enough bridge would draw more attention to himself than he really needed.

Seven of his tries had felt less painful than the others. He didn't know what to make of them, but he decided to double check the camera footage when he returned to his apartment. Three tries – two of the last five jumps – had been completely painless. That was the result he wanted.

The problem was that he panicked. Before he reached the water, he'd instinctively move his body, in an attempt to lessen the pain, to turn a full body hit into a side impact. Because it hurt.

It really hurt.
It was one thing to successfully be able to fade in and out in the comfort of his bed, taking all the
time he needed; it was another to do it on command, at speed. And although he was starting to hate
this method of self-instruction, it did produce noticeable results. He had timed himself going
intangible in around four minutes at the beginning, but his successful jumps were ones that made the
process happen in seconds or less.

"Fear is the mind-killer," Paul whispered to himself, turning his back to the glassy surface of the
water. "Fear is the little death that brings total obliteration."

He closed his eyes and fell backward off the diving platform.

There was no pain this time.

_I will face my fear. I will permit it to pass over me and through me_, thought Paul, who was somehow
there in the pool and somewhere else at the same time.

He still wasn't sure about the molecular physics or quantum chemistry explanation of how his
abilities worked, or even if there was one at all. Before he'd done some research, he'd only known
enough about inorganic chemistry to not burn himself in the darkroom, but after he had spent a few
evenings in the library, all he'd found in the way of explanation were vague theories about
multidimensionality.

He could feel the weight and resistance of water pressing against him on all sides, but he could it
ignore it, as long as he kept still and calm and focused. He'd gotten better to the point where he could
think about things and hold his... his invisible state, but strong emotions could distract him enough to
thrust him out of it. The ripples from his jump had created light currents that caused his not-body to
sway and float gently underwater. After a while, he got bored, kicked his feet, and swam to the edge
of the pool to find his camera.

Jump twenty-seven was recorded to be a total of eight minutes and thirty-four seconds underwater.

>>> 

Paul cut two eyeholes into a black knit beanie, set the scissors aside, and turned on the camera. The
indicator LED flashed red and began the recording.

"I know I shouldn't bring a borrowed camera into the field," Paul remarked, voice hoarse with
nervous anticipation. He'd always preferred being behind a camera than in front of one. "But it won't
be for long. I'm going to find a way to make money with this. I don't know what will happen if
someone shoots me or I get hit by a car, or I have to jump off a building... but if it does happen, it's
probably better to get it on film. Then I'd know what not to do for next time." He paused for a
second, then continued. "Or I won't have to worry about any next time, I guess."

Paul pressed a strip of electrical tape over the red light and jammed the beanie over his head.

"Cape life video diary," he said. "Day one."
There's a reason why crime procedurals on TV tend to skip past the stakeout scenes with a fade to black, followed by a cut to a pair of buddy cops kicking down a perp's door or jumping him in an alley after he tries to run. It's because stakeouts are really fucking boring.

I guess it would be tolerable with a partner (with my personality, it was no question that I'd get stuck with the straight-laced by-the-book veteran), because then you'd be able to take a time out while someone keeps an eye out for criminal activity.

As it was, I had no partner. Only an empty bottle of iced tea that I'd very grudgingly refilled.

Another thing about stakeouts is that when you're doing it outdoors in late November, so late in the month that everyone just has shrugged and changed to the fresh December page of their wall calendars, it's cold. Brockton Bay isn't as cold as it could be, due to some fortunate interaction of weather patterns and ocean currents, but the city is not unfamiliar with the concept of snow. Growing up, I'd never seen snow outside of indoor ski ramps, so feeling the chill soak into me from the tiled floor of someone's fifth floor balcony was not pleasant at all.

It made me pretty damn grateful that insulated thermal long johns existed. I once would have laughed at the idea that I'd come to depend on them like a loyal friend, but they had convenient button-up flaps, and I couldn't ask for more in an improvised costume.

Right now, the prospect of making some money was enough to warm my frozen little nugget of a heart, and the thought of meeting some crazy pyro villains was enough to thaw the rest of me.

Currently, I was lying on my back with my video goggles on, flicking through the various video feeds of the cameras I'd set up on the roof of the apartment building whose balcony I was sequestered in. It was a building situated in the approximate center of many of the marked out gang spots, better maintained than the rest of the condo blocks around, and was one of the tallest in the area. Cheap battery-powered webcams were perched on the edges of the roof and water tower, one in each major direction so that I would be able to pick up any unusual activity with my goggles. They were also inexpensive enough that it didn't matter if I lost or abandoned them after this night.

And yeah, I was totally aware that this could be a set-up. Was I really going to trust some dude on the internet who hands out maps with local gang hidey holes marked out with big red X's? Was I really not going to wonder why he (or she) wanted photos and videos of a new villain in town, when it was just a matter of time before someone uploaded some shoddy over-filtered and over-exposed pictures from their phone? Sure, my photos would be much better quality, but the information would inevitably come out, as information does. It was only a matter of time, probably less than two weeks before the Protectorate had to take official notice, if the arsons kept going at the same rate. What my client Kanzler was really paying for was speed and convenience.

No, I didn't trust Kanzler. I had enough faith that my money would be delivered when I could produce proof of services successfully rendered, but that's as far as my faith can stretch when it comes to people I've never met, people who contact me through mysterious little messages promising great returns if I do what they say.

It won't be much of a surprise to admit that I'm not particularly pious, either.
I'm not paid to ask questions, I know. Those in the service industry who make it a habit to keep their questions to themselves are the ones who are rewarded with dodgier customers who have deeper pockets. But not asking questions doesn't mean not having them at all.

So, just to be safe, I'd taken precautions.

**Number one.** I'd keep on the move, tracing a wide loop from vantage point to vantage point, maintaining a line of sight with the gang houses marked on the map. If tonight didn't work, I'd start again with a new building and a new set of roof cameras; my deposit had been paid in exchange for five earnest attempts, so whatever the result, my terms had guaranteed me adequate compensation. I wouldn't actually stake out the gang buildings themselves, or the ones directly adjacent, but I'd stay central enough to tell if shit was going down, and in what direction. And it would protect me from getting sniped if this was a set-up. My Tabloid persona is fairly obscure as capes go, but a cape is a cape, and people don't like parahumans with unknown powers poking about and looking for gossip. As a rough rule of thumb, someone who has tens of thousands of dollars to burn on stalker snaps is probably not someone involved in legitimate business. It might be a completely unfair generalization, but that's life.

**Number two.** Looking like an obvious parahuman is a good way to get targeted or identified. Colorful bodysuits, fancy visors and face masks, utility belts, and conspicuous overconfidence is equivalent to a "**KICK ME**" sign on the school playground, when you're dealing with villains who by their very nature don't play by the school rules. And I had no intention of being identified. Nothing I had on marked me as a parahuman: I was wearing a dark quilted puffy coat that was warm, didn't draw attention, and best of all, was easily replaceable. If you stalk enough people to realize how easy it is to stalk people, wearing layers and tossing them into a dumpster is a good way to dodge the heat, in more ways than one.

I figured that being mistaken for a burglar or a peeper was preferable than a parahuman. In instances of the former, they'd only bring in regular police. I could probably escape from a cop car; I'd never been doused in containment foam, but it was not something I could say I was eager to experience. It's always a good habit to make sure you are always underestimated.

**Two point five.** Identifying a cape by their costume is one thing; letting their face be seen is a whole other kettle of fish. When dealing with pyro capes, preparation for costume damage or emergency medical treatment is essential. While I didn't care so much if my clothing was burned or tossed (and I did care at least a little if my equipment was damaged), I really didn't want anyone to see my face. I've heard it suggested that you could wear a mask under your mask, but it turns out not to be quite so practical in real life. It gets itchy pretty quick, and you soon regret it when you move your face too much and the eyeholes stop aligning properly.

So my weird solution in the event of an unmasking is to trim off my leg hairs and keep them in a plastic bag in my bathroom cabinet. I'd like to remind everyone that you can put hair in a bag and the hair grows back, and no harm done – but you can't get your civilian life back when that information finds its way out of the bag. I'd brushed a spirit gum adhesive over my face and cheeks, patted on the hair, held it until it dried, and then filled in the gaps with a brown powder that women use when they pluck their eyebrows too much and have to paint them back on. I couldn't say that I looked like a distinguished older gentleman with my new beard, mustache, and sideburn combo. Maybe a recently rehabilitated hobo, but definitely not like regular me, which was all that mattered.

It sounds like an overly paranoid contingency, but trust me, if you show up at an ER covered in oozing burns while adamantly refusing to remove your mask, warning flags get sent up the line. And then you will wake up strapped to your hospital bed with foam nozzles aimed at your face and
humorless men in black asking some very pointed questions. It's much easier to go in bare-faced claiming to be a victim of just another episode of gang violence. And it wouldn't even be a lie.

This is Brockton Bay, after all. It might be a rancid wrinkled asshole of a town compared to where I grew up, but you never needed to explain to the authorities that you'd had an unfortunate accident falling down the stairs.

**Number three.** Triple layered contingency plans. Some people say eating apples daily, or going to bed and waking up in a timely manner is the secret to a long, healthy, and wholesome life. In my opinion, it's a hearty dose of self-preservation that does the trick. It's my one super special trick that makes doctors hate me. Shh, don't tell anyone.

I've got no qualms about abandoning ship when I see no purpose in continuing with an unsalvageable mission. To some people, what doesn't kill them makes them stronger. For me, the things that don't kill me make me more cautious. Others flee to fight another day. I flee to flee another day.

When it comes down to it, my Plans B, C, D, and E are all just variations of "Scram".

>>>{}

It was a quarter past two when the fireworks started.

I caught a brief flash of light in the east-facing camera, checked the adjacent feeds to confirm direction, and began preparing my stuff. Out came the chest harness from inside my coat, on went the main camera, in went the fresh battery and memory card. The Galaxa Light was one of the biggest splurges I'd made after joining the cape scene. It wasn't my dream camera, but it was pretty damn close; what it lacked in focus and stability was balanced by its portability, and set me ahead of all those other cape paparazzi wannabes. Few people had the means to casually risk a $60,000 professional-grade camera in cape fights. Especially not my civilian identity who, for all anyone knew, lived modestly and logged most of his expenses on company cards.

The auxiliary cameras on my shoulder straps and attached to my video goggles I'd turned on, too. One had a thermal imaging function, the other a night vision setting that was meant for photographing moon phases and star trails. It lightened deep blacks and automatically adjusted contrast in minimal light environments, and effectively let me see further in the dark than my own eyes could. Its drawback was a slight lag that gave me a headache over long use, and tendency to blind me when hit with direct light. So I turned off my goggles' right side screen and used my handheld remote to switch the left eye back and forth between thermal and night vision.

My equipment was beyond the reach of most normal professional photographers and definitely off the menu for hobbyists. But as an independent cape who takes no sides and asks no questions, I've met enough other capes to know that money isn't the only valuable thing that can be brought to an exchange. It's still a little sad when capes have nothing to offer beyond their powers, no value added skills on top of initial capital to increase marketability, like my own. No wonder so many of us end up as criminals and villains.
For my final preparation, I made a voice recording on a burner phone – a last testament, if you like – with a deliberately disguised voice, punctuated with a few grumbling coughs. I'd set it to call a pre-programmed number at the tap of a key. A panic button, a plan for when the rest of my plans didn't work.

My feet crunched on broken glass, and I could feel the presence of a source of warmth in front of me, unnatural in the chilly winter predawn. It was warm, dry air, and a soft convective breeze that tingled in my nostrils with particles of soot. Above the rooftops, an angry orange glow lit the sky, pointing the way.

Another explosion in the distance. I hurried onward, turning off my video goggles; at this point the arsonist's fires produced enough light that I took a second to enable the filter function for brightness past eighty lumens.

The explosions came more rapidly as I got closer – beneath my earplugs, it sounded like microwave popcorn cooking: steady, consistently timed pops with a rate of fire of one every five to ten seconds. It had to be munitions.

When I reached the half-crumbled industrial warehouse, I could feel the heat pushing against me like a heavy blanket, making me sweat in my winter overcoat. The now-empty windows had unfurled a glittering carpet of glass shards over the ground, warm and chiming under my boots, and the roof had been partially torn away. From inside came crashing noises, and hoarse screaming, and a bestial roar followed by an ominous creak as a corner of the building shook and buckled, causing the twenty foot loading dock door to rupture and pull free of its hinges.

I cleared a space, swiping the glass aside with my foot, and folded onto the ground a safe distance away, making one last check to ensure my cameras were all running on automatic and that the apertures would adjust for any changes in the fires' light output. No sense in having the sensors damaged. Battery check. Memory. Harness straps. Quick lens wipe...

Coughing, shouting, panting people tumbled out of the broken half door, attempting to flee. These would be the rumored hobos being smoked out of their burrows. I sat impassively, watching from the shadows, fading away so that the smoky air no longer itched at my throat, and the twinges of thirst, and the tickle of sweat down the back of my neck, and all the human bodily functions that encumbered my human body receded. And then only my consciousness remained.

I knew I could have done something. If I was a hero, there was no question that I would have leapt into the fray. But I was no hero, and had come to terms with that almost immediately after I had acquired my powers. My careful mind knew that there was little I could do without risking myself, and I was not risking myself. The pragmatic part of me pointed out that I'd never tried half the cool features listed on the Galaxa's tutorial CD, and that the people who were in need of assistance from a new gang's inaugural power display were most likely gang members themselves.

The gang members tried to run, to scatter, to get out of the way of the blazing warehouse fire. But the ones who had gotten ahead stalled, and began to run back to the warehouse, but were stymied by an explosion. More explosions, bright bursts of light and sound that I could see and hear, but in my intangible state, I was not blinded or deafened. Screaming, crying, and finally begging as the gangers were surrounded by a number of men in grinning, fanged masks, who exploded, or caused explosions, who moved too quickly for me to keep a consistent count of their numbers.

They were herded into a panicked circle by the masked men, and some fought back with handguns
and pistols, but the arsonist parahumans came on relentlessly – a Brute rating, I thought – in the flickering light, faster than I could easily tell – maybe a Mover? I’d have to play the footage in slow motion later. Then they were executed one after the other, by knife; the limply twitching bodies dropped unceremoniously to the ground, and blood pooled onto the carpet of glittering glass, and the fire raged beyond, warm and luminous and implacable.

It reminded me of iced grenadine punch under the twinkling lights of work Christmas parties.

Perhaps I should feel bad for being indifferent when a bunch of people just died in front of me, but I have long since learned that having a mental freakout while in my intangible state, in an unsafe area, surrounded by dangerous people is not conducive to maintaining said intangibility. In any case, most children who grow up knowing that parahuman powers and Endbringers are a fact of life become somewhat hardened to violence, and the ones who don't, the ones who freak out – they often end up becoming part of the problem.

By the time the last body fell to the ground, I could count six masked men... wait, now there were five, then three? All in the same costume, with what looked like the same equipment.

A self-duplicating Master?

Three became two, then finally there was only one figure, backlit by flames, wiping down a knife and tucking it into his chest bandolier. A hard glint of light in the air, whispering past the masked arsonist, and suddenly one became two and three and four, and the group of masked men whirled about wildly, looking for someone who was shooting down silvery bolts that struck and pierced and turned duplicates into swiftly condensing clouds of ash.

I saw the tail end of a dark cloak pass right through me, as a second parahuman joined the fight, swiping and dodging the man with the grinning mask, leaving explosions in their wake. A Mover, with an insubstantial form not unlike a tenuous, writhing pillar of smoke. A Breaker, then. In a dark cloak. Armed with projectiles.

I stopped myself from gritting my teeth. What was the probability that this was Shadow Stalker of the Wards?

Pretty fucking likely.

It seemed like the fight was coming to a stalemate, as I watched. Shadow Stalker had an incorporeal form that was not affected by knives, and could dodge thrown explosives. She bounced back and forth from her Breaker state, bounding up from the ground in her physical body and transitioning into a dark cloud, over the heads of the masked men, shooting bolts from her crossbows. But the masked arsonist had a seemingly unlimited amount of duplicates he could summon, so for now they couldn't do much more than duck and lunge at one another, and any swipe they took was mostly ineffectual.

Until the door of the warehouse clanged and skidded on the ground, and a giant, twisted creature bulled its way past the ruined doorway, tearing off great chunks of mortared brick that glowed with heat.

It roared, and it carried fire with it, an aura of fire from skin that glimmered sharp and metallic, from its misshapen head and corded neck, down to its hunched back and malformed shoulders from which sprouted gnarled nubs that angled and twitched. The curved neck turned, the lumpen head opened its mouth, and out came disjointed syllables, followed by blasts of fire into the sky so that the air shimmered with heat and the whole area was illuminated in rippling sheaves of light.
Shadow Stalker fell to the ground, her advantage lost, supremely visible as a black cloud in the midst of the burning bodies and dazzling flares of the new mutant parahuman's fire. The duplicator began sending out copies to press her, to herd her into the grasp of the mutant cape, which I assumed was another Case-53.

Now, I couldn't say that I liked Shadow Stalker much, but it would be a shame if she died. If she died, the Youth Guard would no doubt be called in, because underage heroes are not sent into potentially deadly patrols, and never alone. And then it would come out that she wasn't scheduled to be on patrol tonight at all – I realized now where the excess wear on her costume came from – and then there would be a formal inquest on the lack of oversight on the part of the adult heroes.

That, of course, had nothing to do with me. But I knew I would be roped into managing the PR fallout, to steer it from a scandal to a tragedy. So sad she died, she was a real hero, taken from us too young, so much potential, she will be missed by everyone whose lives she touched, et cetera. I'd been involved in managing her image in the past, and I'd seen some of her file that the powers above thought relevant in emphasizing about her character. She was eager, she wanted to clean up the streets, she'd even gone beyond the call and registered for Endbringer duties.

So I'd presented her as dark and stoic and a little severe, but elegant and effective. The collectible autographed poster I had designed was a best-seller from the Protectorate gift shop among the teen demographic. All that previous successful involvement was going to shoot me in the foot.

And maybe a part of me recognized that my dislike of her stemmed from the fact that in some ways, she was like me. She was actively aggressive to my passive aggression. She chafed under authority, against expectations laid upon her, within the team structure. We even had a similar powerset from what I'd seen tonight. I was basically untouched and unnoticed... while the smoke and flames did not seem to be meshing well with her Breaker form.

Some might say that we were nothing alike. Shadow Stalker had no subtlety, no control, no patience or foresight. That was true.

Shadow Stalker was everything that I was glad not to be, and I pitied her, even though she would have hated me for it, as I would have hated it from anyone else.

I pressed the panic button. The call went out.

"There is a parahuman in serious distress, and in need of urgent medical attention, at 832 East Dockside. There is a cape fight in progress. Please bring fire extinguishers. Backup would be good too."
Many children possess an unbridled optimism that is, for reasons I cannot fathom, generously indulged by their parents or guardians or whoever it is that fills up their kibble bowl every evening. They have such high hopes for the future, and because there seems to be a mutual agreement in maintaining this state of innocent hopefulness, I have become highly suspicious that there might be yet another set of unwritten rules, of which I am sadly ignorant. Because somehow, that memo never got to me.

Parents smile and nod encouragingly when their children say things like "I want to be a ballerina" or "I'm gonna be an astronaut one day", not bothering to tell little Timmy and little Susie that excellence in the arts comes at the cost of years of your life that you will never get back, and for dancers, a career that lasts for as long as their tendons can keep up. And the less said about the half-finished biodome squatting on the moon, the better.

There is one sentence that children say on a regular basis that makes me roll my eyes so much that my optic nerves are in danger of being permanently tangled. And no, while it's a perfectly valid guess, it isn't "Santa Claus is real".

"I want to be a hero".

While I leave some room for uncertainty for outliers like Mouse Protector, I strongly believe that most official heroes don't even want to be heroes. From what I know of snooping around Protectorate members, many of them are people who want to use their naturally destructive powers but don't want to end up in prison or the Birdcage, or people who couldn't cut it as a villain or a rogue, due to having a firm ethical stance or a lack of work ethic – hey, no one ever said rogue life was a hundred percent aboveboard. And finally, there are the people who do it for some advantage or other, like Tinker resources, a steady paycheck, or a chance to be on TV. On that note, there's a surprisingly large number of people who want to be on TV, but all they can think of to say when the mic gets in their face is, "Hi Mom" or, "I can see my house from here".

I can't comment on the retirement package and pension, since it's been talked about like an inside joke from the first day I ate lunch in the staff cafeteria. I'll get back with the details if I ever get a serious confirmation.

There are some within the Protectorate structure who genuinely want to be heroes, but almost all of these people, with one or two exceptions, are Wards. Who are children, and as such, know better by the time they age out of the program and get the full unclassified files dumped on their desks – usually the instant they get back from their graduation ceremony. All these rules and regulations and responsibilities are things that a newly ex-Ward won't be able to evade with a signed permission slip from mom. At that point, any remaining enthusiasm for heroism starts to evaporate, if it hasn't already.

I suppose that it would be unbecomingly smug of me to admit (not that anyone would ever accuse me of it, of course) that there was never a point in my life, not even in the most naïve years of my childhood, that I had held any interest in being heroic. Capital H "Hero", maybe, after I had tested the extent of my powers and had carefully considered what options would guarantee me a relatively comfortable and economically secure existence. But that thought had not lasted for long.

Heroes were expected to be Heroic, at least in the public eye, and the public eye was something I
preferred to steer well clear of. I was not Heroic, and in my unpowered days, I had no predisposition toward behaving heroically either. I could not demonstrate impressive feats with my powers, so there was no doubt that I would have had to start at the bottom rung of the Protectorate hierarchy. A good prior Wards record builds networks and connections that compensates for low power ratings, but it was something I obviously lacked; I would probably end up in some half-forgotten PRT office in Alaska counting seals, babysitting the dregs of the Wards roster, and letting go of any criminal cape that the Directorship declared useful in Endbringer fights.

No, heroism has never appealed to me, and the more I see of it, the more I’ve come to realize that the PRT PR department's true goal is to clumsily paste an illusion of invincibility over a group of parahumans who are just as human as the rest of us, in the worst of ways. Some of us have left our frail human bodies behind, some of us are no longer the fragile sacks of flesh and blood we once were; many of us can ignore pain altogether. But we all of us can hurt.

And when you are a person who earnestly believes in Santa Claus no matter what insufferable classmates like Paulie say, he who thinks he knows everything except when to shut his mouth; when you are a person who became a hero because you believe in Heroism, losing that illusion of invincibility hits hard. When you think back and realize that the illusion was part of the deal from the very first day you publicly stepped out in the cape and mask, and it was a big fat lie the whole time, that is when it hurts. It hurts bad.

It hurts because Paulie from homeroom 4B was right all along.

Now you know why he looked so goddamn smug.

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I might have been blasé when a bunch of gangbangers were executed in front of me by a grenade-toting villain with obvious suicidal tendencies, but I did manage to spare a wince for the heroes of the PHQ ENE when they showed up and got their asses kicked. Not just kicked, but ground into the dirt. And then set on fire.

Most of it was due to the fact that the costume department had recently racked up several hundred man hours of overtime to get the costumes upgraded and repaired in time for photo day. And now it looked like they'd have to put in several hundred more, where they didn't have to start from scratch with new fire-retardant and heat dispersion fabrics. The heroes, in the meantime, would have the image guys pulling a working order older iteration costume from archives.

If I had wanted to avoid paperwork when I hit the panic button, this was probably not the right way to go about it.

Well, at least I got to enjoy the show.

Cape fights in real life are nothing like the publicity clips circulated on the evening news, which are usually the best three to twelve seconds of the whole footage reel, cut like a bespoke suit in the most flattering way possible. These types of videos show the best of everyone: teamwork, coordination, gritty determination without being too gritty, because you can't show blood pre-watershed. And
effectiveness, because the public should be reminded why their tax money goes to a bunch of weirdos playing dress-up in colored spandex. But of course they never show how truly effective a cape can be, either hero or villain, with the capacity of their powers for destruction and collateral damage.

Cape fights in real life are also nothing like the edutainment animated shows on TV, *Protectorate Pals* being the foremost example. Heroes are trained to coordinate and communicate in fights, but they aren't choreographed. They also suffer damage as the fight goes on, and cannot maintain peak effectiveness as their energy flags and the protective panels of their costume burn up and fall off. And unlike the cartoons, there is no power of friendship, or justice, or whatever virtuous quality it is that gets promoted to counter the villain of the week. Unless a Protectorate team boasts a Trump rating, there are also no heroic second winds to call upon in a time of need.

Having known all this, I surprised myself by feeling a tiny amount of sympathy at watching the thrashing get doled out, double helpings for everyone. It was immediately followed by a significant amount of second-hand shame. To be clear, I have nothing against heroes; their self-sacrificing career choice is astounding in the face of facts and statistics, but I guess facts don't matter when you believe in The Right Thing To Do. In my waking memory, the guiding compass of The Right Thing To Do has never appeared to me, to be my chaperon and my burden as it was for the heroes in front of me.

My benign guardian has always been The Convenient Thing To Do, and tonight I was glad of it.

The Protectorate heroes and their PRT support arrived less than five minutes after I had sent the call. I suspected that they had already been planning to check on the Dockside fires, but my information had given them the exact location, supplanting their slower methods of trying to aerially pinpoint a gang of presumably fire-proof arsonists within the radius of the flames.

Velocity arrived first, within the minute, circling the duplicating villain, buying time with a distraction to allow a visibly drooping Shadow Stalker to phase through a wall and escape. He was followed by Assault and Battery, and then Armsmaster cutting a dramatic looping skid on his tinkertech motorcycle – I knew he had been given a dispensation for any parking and speeding violations, if any ticket-targeter cop had somehow overlooked the silver "HALBIKE" licence plate. Dauntless came as the last of the frontline heroes, on sparking electric-white boots that granted him a low Mover rating which still put him in the slower half of the Protectorate roster.

At the appearance of the heroes, the monstrous twisted hulk of a villain straightened, and gave a languid roll of his stooping shoulders, his skin dappled by a shining layered mantle of silver flakes. The jaw of the beast cracked open, and sound came out, pure sound from a face that had no lips and too many teeth and could not form words. It was loud and came from somewhere deep within him, a bellowing roar of arrogant defiance, a challenge; it ended in a gravelly yipping that suggested he was laughing. His message was clear.

"Come and take me."

The veil of fire from his skin blazed bright; it surged upward to match the height of the collapsing warehouse. Beneath his feet, the shattered glass had melted into glowing orange pebbles, and the burning bodies crackled and popped as they were consumed in the wave of heat that struck like an almost physical wall.

The heroes didn't hesitate. Assault picked Battery up and threw her at the beast. Velocity darted back and forth, batting thrown grenades to turn them aside, altering the trajectory to put them out of the way of the engaging heroes and PRT crews setting up cordons and foam gun emplacements.
Dauntless's lance struck out blinding white like a punch to the cornea, spearing through three duplicates of the masked grenadier at once, but they dissolved into ash that swirled up in currents of burning air.

Battery's superpowered punches broke the beast-like villain's collar with a crack, and a chunk of masonry shot by Assault tore away clawed fingers and half a hand; darts flying out from the end of Armsmaster's Halberd plinked off the scales and barely penetrated the patches of mottled skin, and were soon brushed off without a pause.

The fires rose. The PRT created a barrier of containment foam to prevent the fires from spreading. The missing hand grew back, claws longer and sharper than before. And the stunted nubs protruding from the beast's shoulders twitched and shuddered and unfolded into a pair of membranous wings limned in flame. He roared once more, sharing his joy of fighting, his satisfaction of winning.

The fight went as well as I expected it would.

The fiery beast unflinchingly withstood the ball bearings that flicked out and melted into dark patches on his skin, and regenerated from broken bones with a remarkable tolerance for pain. I watched, unnoticed, and kept an eye on the expanding walls of foam that were keeping fires in, which would eventually block my escape if I overstayed my welcome.

I rose to my feet, slowly and silently, as claws scored rents down the backplate of Armsmaster's powersuit, ruining the paint job. Armsmaster turned to bring his Halberd around to bear, and the claws caught on something, and the motion ripped into a panel over his backside, tearing it off and open, revealing bundles of sparking wires and rupturing a pouch-like container that emptied its contents in a hiss of steam.

Assault took a brief moment between aiming ball bearings to laugh; his visor covered his eyes, but not his mouth.

At this distance, I couldn't smell anything, but I supposed that this was the Tinker equivalent of having one's polka dot boxers being exposed for public inspection.

Well, I had my footage and a good idea of how a fight goes when you challenge a high-rated regenerating Brute and a duplicator that cannot be taken down unless you also get his unlimited number of copies.

I crept away one shuffle of a step at a time, pausing and moving and fading in a broken rhythm, until the hungry flames flickered above the rooftops in the far distance. Then I ejected the memory cards, popped them into a slim shockproof case, and slid it into my mouth. In the shadow of an alley, I removed my mask and stuffed it into a pocket, and unclipped the harness in order to re-position it beneath my coat. The burner phone I disassembled and crushed beneath my boots, collecting the fragments and leaving a bit in each dumpster and trash can I passed.

It was well past 3AM when I rinsed the last traces of soot from my skin and watched the bits of my fake beard circle the drain.
Re: custom project

Tabloid <tabloid@capeflunky.com> on 1 Dec 2010:

File Upload: [File11210.zip]

Fresh OC straight out of the oven.
Table of contents, notes, documentation in the included text file. I stripped the metadata, so if you have to know, you have to ask. Subjects in the annotated reel I designated [Kamikaze] and [Gargoyle].
Apologies if I woke you up. I assumed speed was important to you.

Kanzler <ad394gtgb23@fastmail.com> on 1 Dec 2010:

That was faster than I expected. Sending over the rest of the payment and a bonus. Please check your invoice inbox.
How did you do it?

Tabloid <tabloid@capeflunky.com> on 1 Dec 2010:

Lots of luck and trade secrets. You'll probably see more details on the news soon.

Kanzler <ad394gtgb23@fastmail.com> on 1 Dec 2010:

Could I acquire your skills for another project? Krenken recommended your good work to us. I am pleasantly surprised how well your reputation holds up.

Tabloid <tabloid@capeflunky.com> on 1 Dec 2010:

How the f do you know Krenken? He doesn't even go by that name anymore.

Kanzler <ad394gtgb23@fastmail.com> on 1 Dec 2010:

He was looking for a group to join and he found us. Might you be interested in joining our family?

Tabloid <tabloid@capeflunky.com> on 1 Dec 2010:

I'm looking to lay low for a while. Also not looking for a group. There will be a lot of heat on me in the near future, so I won't be taking commissions for a while.

Kanzler <ad394gtgb23@fastmail.com> on 1 Dec 2010:

I will be looking forward to seeing you back in action. You know how to contact me.
Connecting to CapeFlunky #StaffChannel, joining chat automatically.  
Your state is set to Online.  
Bulletin is now Online.

Tabloid: [FileDec12010.zip]  
Tell me what you think.

Bulletin: Is this new stuff?

SHIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIITTTTTTT

it is

Tabloid: It's great, isn't it?

Bulletin: Really great. Like, really really great.

Tabloid: How much can you offer?

Bulletin: We're authorized to offer a max of $15k, maybe $18k if we scrape the piggybank.  
Sorry.

Tabloid: Yeah, I know. Too low for what I could get elsewhere. But I had to show you, you've done me a solid in the past.

If you can't buy it...

Bulletin: We can help you sell it.

Tabloid: That's exactly what I wanted to ask.

Bulletin: How big do you want to go?

Tabloid: East coast minimum, national if you can get it out that far.

Bulletin: We can get it out. Is this all you have for me?

Tabloid: Some other stuff I'll send later. Wouldn't want to let everyone have a slice while CF gets none. But one request

say it came from anon, or was the work of the whole team

leave my name out of it

Bulletin: Too much heat? I can see it.

This is going to be embarrassing all the way up to the top.

They'll be looking for a donkey to pin a tail on.

Tabloid: And it's not going to be me.

Bulletin: Of course not.

Bulletin is now Busy.

Bulletin is now Online.

Bulletin: I'm filing the paperwork under CF LLC, is that ok?

running past a couple of interested parties, up past 200k now.

I got offered 450k if you did an exclusive witness interview.

Tabloid: No.

Bulletin: Thought you'd say that.

[Offers112.zip]

Here's what I have and from where so far.

Tabloid: Go with 14

Bulletin: You sure? You could get higher if you waited a bit longer.

Tabloid: Yes.

Bulletin: Ok.

The money will go through the usual methods.

Have you saved a little something for me?

Tabloid: [FileDec1122010A.zip]
Don't crash your servers with this.

**Bulletin:** Wow.

**Tabloid:** I know.

**Bulletin:** ...

Fuck it. I'm calling IT now.

Enjoy your anonymous fame, Mr Moneybags

---

**Bulletin is now Busy.**

**Your state is set to Offline.**

---

**Welcome to the Parahumans Online Message Boards**

You are currently logged in, TABLOID (Verified Cape)

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 five messages in private message history
- Threads and private messages are ordered by user custom preference.

---

✧ **Private message from XxVoid_CowboyxX:**

XxVoid_CowboyxX: did you make the video from **this thread**?
TABL0ID: No.
XxVoid_CowboyXx: come on, you can tell me
XxVoid_CowboyXx: i can keep a secret
XxVoid_CowboyXx: please
TABL0ID: No.
XxVoid_CowboyXx: pretty please?
TABL0ID: Stop asking.
XxVoid_CowboyXx: DUDE
XxVoid_CowboyXx: i THOUGHT WE WERE FRIENDs!!1!!!
TABL0ID: Fuck off or I'll block you.
XxVoid_CowboyXx: :( 

Topic: BREAKING NEWS: ARMSMASTER'S NEW BUTTBLASTER
In: Boards ► Places ► America ► Brockton Bay
CapeFlunky (Original Poster) (Media)
Posted on December 1, 2010:
Someone (maybe our secret admirer? <33) sent us some interesting footage of a cape fight in Brockton Bay last night.
Looks like the pyro villains from this thread met up with everyone from the ENE Protectorate, and Armsmaster got a chance to demo his new high impact high efficiency weapon. Maybe it's a fire extinguisher?
We're still scratching our heads over what it is. We even have a staff poll for best unofficial name. Vote here.

Short article is on our site.
Video upload is on our channel.

Don't forget to reblog, watch, and subscribe.
We love getting followed!
arsene_L
Replied on December 1, 2010:
I'm voting for HALBUTT!

Gurkburk
Replied on December 1, 2010:
This is pretty funny, but do you have more of the actual fight?
Edit: wait nvm, just checked the Herald site.

RainbowMickey
Replied on December 1, 2010:
Armsmaster is like number 7 (or 8? top 10?) in the Protectorate.
Damn, he goes down hard.
Geronemo
Replied on December 1, 2010:
Honestly, if I saw that thing (video desc in link calls it "Gargoyle"???) in real life I'd shit myself too.
I had my speakers turned all the way up (PLEASE ADD A SOUND WARNING OR SOMETHING) and almost shit the bed.
Poor butt monkey Armsmaster.

KINGLETO_the_GREAT
Replied on December 1, 2010:
Isn't that thing on his ass part of his recycling apparatus?
Most powersuits have them, because they need to spend the whole day in them without a break.

Verhoeven
Replied on December 1, 2010:
@KINGLETO_the_GREAT
Probably, but how often do you even see them?
We all know what a butt looks like, but when you get pants'ed, I'm still gonna laugh.

XxVoid_CowboyxX
Replied on December 1, 2010:
armsmaster will shit his pants when he sees this video

PharlapTimtam
Replied on December 1, 2010:
lol, he already shit his pants.

Verhoeven
Replied on December 1, 2010:
Good thing he has a lifetime supply of Armsmaster underpants.
Holy kankerlijers, just searched up where to buy them and people are auctioning them off for $400.

Phinfogg
Replied on December 1, 2010:
They were limited edition from 2005/2006, I think.
You can't get them from the merch shop anymore.

gina_xo
Replied on December 1, 2010:
Aww, I wanted to see Armsy's butt for real.
I can't be the only one, right?? :( 
@ Verhoeven: I have an extra pair, been through the wash a couple times, if you want to buy it.
$250.

Gurkburbk
Replied on December 1, 2010:
@gina_xo: Keep buy and sell talk to PMs or the Classifieds/Merch forums, please.
You see, public consciousness is fickle, and the information that the public is interested in knowing about is not necessarily the information that is in their interest to know. In a carefully managed environment, the public would never find out about the separation of information they are allowed to know from what they aren't. But, unfortunately, there are people like me who throw careful control into disarray.

One of the things the public doesn't know is that the status quo is vigorously maintained by the PRT and the Protectorate, and they have discovered that the best way to ensure the cooperation and respect of baseline humans toward Protectorate parahumans is through establishing capes as strong, effective, and actively doing things to make life safer. They do this through rigorous image management, through controlling exposure, interaction, and appearance, with the result being an impression of parahumans as untouchable and superior.

That is part of the illusion of the status quo.

That is why people keep their heads down and remain obedient at the sound of the sirens.

None of this makes parahumans better integrated into normal society. What has been done sets us apart; it redefines society as one with lines drawn between powered and unpowered, between hero and villain, and no room is left for those who do not want to be part of either side.

I would say that I want to see the status quo changed for the better, to the benefit of the weak and forgotten among us, the timid and the neutral, the disinterested and the unaffiliated. But it sounds suspiciously heroic, coming from me.
Being a parahuman can be unexpectedly difficult at times. The primary challenge would probably be maintaining two (or more, if you're especially paranoid) identities, and pulling them both off without arousing suspicion. It's important, but many beginner capes don't recognize how vital it is to their long-term survival until it's too late.

To the newbie, it sounds incredibly fun to go out in the mask. Your mundane daylight life sucks, because it's filled with the mundane daylight people who turned you into what you are. Putting on the mask means putting aside the issues that made you weak on the worst day of your life, and at night you get to be a different person who has the power to twist the world into giving you what you want. The world that previously shat on you from all directions at once can now have the shit shoved back through the new hole you ripped into it.

That is how many a cape thinks on his first day out. That is why first days and last days are often one and the same. Caping is dangerous. With how much the Protectorate talks about safety and security, no one points out that the operating protocols of the PRT designate the security of civilians and infrastructure over the personal safety of the capes in their employ. Caping as a new rogue or a villain is even less safe than going hero, as you always start without a team.

And that means no one cares when you die.

Fortunately, for all those new capes who have lofty ambitions and no plans to back them, there are resources out there to keep accidental suicides at a minimum. While I seem the type of person who wouldn't give a damn when a stupid person gets himself killed in an idiotic way, I believe that people can improve themselves if they choose to, and the aforementioned stupid person need not be stupid forever. If someone wants to stop being stupid, I wholeheartedly support that.

It's a good thing that resources exist for the resourceful, and the things that helped me in the past do not need to be hoarded, when they can raise the average intelligence of the caped community if shared out.

One of the prized possessions of my youth is not the lucky sweater with yellow ducks on the front, or the antique cartography kit inherited from a distant relative. Nor is it the analogue camera with wood paneling on the body and a single roll of film left that will be almost impossible to replace when gone.

It is a mid-1990's edition of *The Cape Cookbook*, rumored to be written by a Thinker who specialized in understanding social systems. It is not the author's original raw-draft version, created in the early years of the decade, but the one from a few years later, proofread and annotated with advice and useful anecdotes from other capes. It is not only substantially more informative, but easier to follow as well.

There were a number of cape guide variants floating around, but *The Cape Cookbook* was the most thorough, and slowly subsumed the best bits of the rest of them. It was spread through primitive bulletin board forums and private chat servers; at times, it was passed hand to hand on physical disks, on dot matrix sheets, and handwritten pages. I swear I've seen it on microfiche, too. These days, you can find it properly printed and bound at your local bookstore, ever since the publishers realized there was no one who could claim royalties. But the new versions, while aesthetically non-offensive to my tastes, have cut out anything that could possibly be deemed illegal or even slightly questionable.
And that is why I like my copy the best.

The Cape Cookbook: Recipes for Success
as abridged by Tabloid

1. **Develop your identity before you go out.** That doesn't just mean deciding on your stage name and costume. Mannerisms, speech patterns, accent, voice, body language: all basic quirks of appearance and personality that you consider yours must be downplayed or, preferably, expunged. If someone asks why Capeman and Friendly Guy Next Door have never been seen in the same room together, you've already lost. They suspect you. You should probably kill them before it's too late.

And when you get really good at holding your costumed identity, you must never forget your legitimate daylight face. If you are planning on going hardcore and killing off your day face, which is justifiable for some situations, it means you can never contact the people you knew in your old life again, and you can never safely go to the movies or out for drinks, because supposedly dead people walking about throws up red flags. Exceptions, of course, can be made for Changers, post-plastic surgery patients, and antisocial orphans.

2. **You are under surveillance at all times.** Get used to acting under the assumption. In the costume, or out of it, you are being watched, and there's nothing you can do about it. There's no point in being self-conscious about it when you're alone and in the shower. Unless you are an especially notorious cape, your mysterious watcher (or watchers) will not be paying particular attention to your junk unless you decide to draw attention to it.

Leave no breadcrumbs, watch your back, and don't act suspicious. Don't craft a non-suspicious act unless you are good at acting. The "I know you know I know you know I know you know" approach seems like insane paranoia, but trust me, it's a sensible survival technique.

3. **Don't be stupid if you can help it.** If you can't help it, then this book can do nothing to help you. Read this book to the end, and make sure you understand its contents before you try to carry out any of the instructions or follow the advice. Be warned that some of the instructions are actually secret tests for stupidity. The real lesson is not to trust what anyone says. This book was compiled by a bunch of anonymous randoms on the web; there's a fair chance that at least one of them is a spook.

And one freebie hint: don't print this straight out at your local copy shop, public library, or school computer lab. Translate it, print it in code or Braille, use a script font in light gray and reverse the text for mirror reading. Or maybe buy your own goddamn printer.
The Cape Cookbook was something I'd read as a kid, when I was wide-eyed and innocent, and thought that capes were secretly living among us. Maybe the mail man, or the pizza delivery guy, or the air conditioner repair technician. All seemingly ordinary people who could have valuable bounties hanging over their heads.

It wasn't the information contained within the Cookbook that made it useful – the text itself is formatted like a self-help book combined with a DIY craft guide, with some basic summaries on finance and law. None of its contents are entirely unique or original; it is, essentially, a broad assemblage of relevant information collected in one convenient place. A decade and a half later, and you can see how poorly it has aged in sections. No, the Cookbook is useful because it was written by parahumans for parahumans, and develops certain critical thinking skills in those who want to succeed.

I was thinking of the Cookbook's main points of advice, helpfully located immediately following the Table of Contents, while I was making myself presentable for the office. The goal was to pass as a completely normal, non-suspicious guy with a normal job and definitely not a cape. Because appearances matter, whether you are a cape or just a regular person, and the advice that capes follow in maintaining their costumed persona I'd used before I even knew how trigger events worked.

Using cosmetics might be called effeminate, but when you see adult males prance about in skintight spandex and still call themselves men, people tend to keep such opinions to themselves. I'd like to think it's out of respect, but I'm sure a disco display of city block destroying lasers on command helps a bit.

Staring into the bathroom mirror, I patted on a concealer paste to hide the fact that I had only had two hours of sleep since the previous day. I then dug through my kit for a disposable sponge and a setting spray that would make it waterproof. It wasn't the most perfect job, but it would hold up well enough under close scrutiny by people who don't know what they're looking for.

The PRT pays for a basic cosmetics kit as part of the necessary tools of the trade, and it would be a real shame not to make use of it, and carefully ensure that products that match my own complexion would be included. When you are dealing with a bunch of greasy teenagers and stressed out supercops who don't take proper care of themselves, using a touch of light powder (or heavy pancake if necessary) can save a lot of work in post-processing. I personally cannot say I enjoy editing out white spots caused by the bright studio lights meeting oil slick patches of teenage skin. And I probably shouldn't mention the hours spent airbrushing pimples out in high resolution.

Major Protectorate branches have an image team with dedicated makeup and hair techs on call for high-profile publicity events; for smaller events, heroes do up their own faces with personal kits bought with their expense allowance, or gifted by a beauty brand looking for extra publicity. There is, however, a great variability of skill levels between the younger Wards and the more experienced heroes, and between the male and the female members of the Protectorate. The smaller regional PRT offices with one or two capes don't have an image team, let alone a public relations rep, so I have ended up pulling double duty more than once. It was an easy matter to requisition a kit for myself.

The ultimate goal was to present an appearance of looking completely normal. A hero with a bruised face had to look good for the next day's press conference. I had to look like I hadn't spent the night staking out a cape fight and most of the early morning editing footage for sale. I might be 85% awake after downing an energy shot, and feel 60% functional, but I looked 100% normal after washing, shaving, and getting dressed in pressed trousers, crisp dress shirt and cashmere sweater. No yellow ducks this time.
It was a good thing that I had been assigned mostly Ward duties. I had the morning to myself – which I'd spent doing things that the PRT would definitely disapprove of if they knew – and was only required to show up in person at 3PM, which was when the Wards finished school and could suit up for hero duty in the PRT HQ. My day job had a flexible schedule that allowed me little freedoms like this, where I could go out as a cape and have time to prepare for the office. On the downside, I often got called in for weekends and every major holiday a publicity stunt could potentially be shoehorned into.

For all the aspiring rogues out there: if you are raking it in as a cape more than your nine-to-five, consider faking a non-fatal accident and switching to part-time. If you happen to be female and known to be romantically attached, aged around 20 to 35, you can feasibly fake another sort of "happy accident" with even fewer questions and no insurance quibbling.

Now, while I am perfectly comfortable with the physical bits and bobs that I currently have attached to me, I cannot say that I am not envious of certain advantages possessed by the fairer of our species. No one jumps to conclusions if a woman displays inexplicable mood swings and lethargy caused by extended sleep deprivation. They just shrug and mutter, "She must be PMS'ing" under their breath. It's patronizing, I don't disagree, but I think it must be so much more convenient when it is the automatic first assumption instead of, "He must lead a secret double life at night".

Trigger events don't distinguish between sex or gender, and the number of male to female capes balances out to match the relative distribution of the area. But if you've worked in an office, you will notice there's a mysterious time manipulation effect going on in them. That is why the three and a half hours until lunch break feels more like five – it's obviously time dilation. And that is why you have to undergo the annual performance review a week from now, even though you swear you last did it a couple of months ago. Society marches onward, but office time moves at its own inscrutable pace, and thus you will still hear those timeworn stock phrases bandied about, which are just as overused and overworked as you are.

Before I left, I searched through my files until I found Christmas charity programs from the past few years. I ripped sections that I'd written in the Pittsburgh PRT 2009 and Philadelphia Wards' Cause 2009 event outlines, and cannibalized the Boston Wards 2010 plan that I'd prepared before my re-assignment to Brockton Bay. Weld, during his interview, had expressed his interest in the Arts for Youth campaign, and it was close enough to the "Illiteracy" theme Aegis had settled on that I could use a good portion of it.

I added some notes of my own, suggested a handful of specific venues, dates, and activities, leaving room for comments and improvements from the Wards. After a quick proofread, I uploaded the file to the PRT servers for the Wards to access on their personal devices on their way back from school. It looked like I'd spent the morning productively.

Then I went to work.

>>>
I arrived at the PRT HQ building at twenty to three, earlier than I was expected to arrive, in the hopes of grabbing a late lunch at the cafeteria. I twisted past the groups of tourists in the lobby, who were lining up at the tour guide desk for the visitor wristbands, flocking around the gift shop, and taking selfies in front of the floor-to-ceiling banners of this region's top two Protectorate heroes: Armsmaster and his deputy, Miss Militia.

I could hear some of the younger guests crowding in front of the twenty-foot-tall Armsmaster banner, giggling and whispering to each other. "Buttmaster" was one word that was repeated a number of times.

My work phone's tracking chip automatically connected to the building’s grid and vibrated in my pocket as a reminder to type in the passcode and check in. My security credentials were accepted and there was a chime as an unread notification appeared in my inbox.

Braganca:
Deputy Director Renick wants to talk ASAP, regarding assignments.
Wards notified you will be late.
— Staff Co-ord Desk

The number three reason, as you might already have guessed, for my dislike of showing up at the office was the time dilation effects going on at full force. The number two reason was that I did not appreciate being pulled into conversations out of courtesy, with people whose faces I knew but names I did not, in order to listen to weekend plans for parties I wasn't invited to attend and exciting stories of children that weren't mine. If I want to, I can easily navigate my way through the arcane intricacies of office break room talk without colleagues knowing how much I want to be elsewhere. I do not mind if they have their water cooler conversations; I just prefer that I not be included, and not because I hate everyone, or that I hate unpowered normies, no matter how hard it is to believe.

It is because they always enquire about my weekend plans, and I am backed into a corner, and I must smile and look them in the eyes and feed them a direct lie. It goes against my guidelines for remaining inconspicuous, which recommends omission and evasion as much as possible as an alternative to a direct lie; it is much better for people to think you a private person than a liar. And if you have older ladies regularly expressing their disappointment over the fact that such a handsome and well-mannered young man would not have a lucky Mrs. Paul in his life, and how he might be interested in having dinner with a lovely daughter, conveniently divorced, a niece or two, or maybe a nephew, then you will understand why people arrange their non-fatal workplace accidents.

The number one reason, as I stepped into the elevator and flashed my badge at the blinking light on the button panel, was the very thorough surveillance integrated into everything. The mirrored glass had sensors behind them. The floor of the elevator was built over a pressure plate. My phone was the least of it. The only place that I suspected wasn't under complete scrutiny was the Wards HQ, because they were officially sanctioned capes and minors, both attributes that I couldn't claim.

Deputy Director Renick's office looked like every other PRT executive office I'd seen before, probably because the PRT bought their furniture from their suppliers in bulk. A hard-wearing carpet underfoot in an unobtrusive bluey-gray, shelves, chairs, side table, and a desk you could approve of for its budget-friendly functionality... and pretty much nothing else. Deputy Director Renick himself was similarly unremarkable: sandy hair, graying. Calm blue eyes. Neutral expression. Dark gray suit and generic white shirt, no sharp lapels or fun necktie or dashing pocket square. I was almost tempted to duck under the desk and check if his choice of footwear was as uninspired as I imagined
"Mr. Braganca," said Renick, turning away from his computer monitor and loosely settling his hands on the desk in front of him. "Please, take a seat."

I took a seat. "Good afternoon. I understand that this has to do with the assignment. Has the project outline I've submitted been rejected?"

"No, I do not foresee any issues with the approval committee accepting the project," Renick replied, coolly gazing at me. "I think it's a very good cause the Wards have picked this year to support; there's no issue from me for how you're planning to handle it. Director Armstrong has left good words for you, and based on that, we're putting the creative direction entirely in your hands. Whatever Aegis and the project budget agree with, we'll leave up to you."

"Thanks for telling me that," I said. "I bet the Wards will be excited to hear that you're putting me in charge."

"Ah."

Renick's fingers on his desk twitched slightly. "About that."

"Yes?"

"We aren't going to change your project proposal," Renick said, his features composed. "We'd just like to make a small addition. We're assigning Miss Militia to the campaign." He glanced at me, gauging my reaction, and then continued when I wasn't complaining. "Yes, I know she's not a Ward. But the project theme is 'Illiteracy', and Miss Militia learned English as a second language, and the people in need that we're reaching out to can relate to that. She's been notified of this and has accepted, by the way."

I leaned back in the chair. "Does the real reason have anything to do with the recent news? If I'm going to be presenting an angle, I should probably know what the public shouldn't be focusing on."

"The Wards are being told Miss Militia will be there for safety reasons. The Christmas charity is one of the biggest public events of the year for the Wards, and there's a lot more close contact with members of the public than the school assembly talks they usually do. The Ward parents feel better for their kids knowing that there's an adult hero present and directly involved.

"We chose Miss Militia for this not just for her language background, but because we think she's a very good face for the public. She's well-liked, and putting her with the Wards will give all of them, and the PRT, some good public exposure. I think you can agree with that, Mr. Braganca."

I could tell what he wasn't saying. Miss Militia was liked. Miss Militia would make them look good. Armsmaster, the official Protectorate East-Northeast leader, looked bad as of this morning. He looked really bad, epic internet meme level bad, which probably wasn't doing anything to improve his charming personality.

"I see. I can make her look good," I answered. "It's my thing. Is there anyone else who needs a fresh new coat of paint? Armsmaster?"

Renick looked at me carefully for a few seconds, then spoke. "Please understand that while I had a voice in certain decisions that were made, I wasn't the deciding vote. Your time here is valuable, and Brockton Bay is lucky to have you for the Christmas campaign, when your skills are most in demand. Because of the recent... events, PRT ENE is being granted extra time on your schedule for
next year. However, extra time is not unlimited time, so we must prioritize.

"It's been decided that your time will be better spent working with other members of the local Protectorate. Miss Militia is one of them. We also want you to do a special on Dauntless, whom many consider our rising star."

"I'm pretty sure Dauntless is part of the rotation for May or June next year."

"We want to have him in the media before that, before February. New York PRHQ is still working on the details, but we are willing to trade those days with Newark or Baltimore to move it up. If that is impossible, we can fly you in for a weekend or two."

While the artistic side of me was quietly jubilant that my talent was being recognized as talent deserves, my pragmatic side was shaking its head. I had been careful to be more than just good enough but never stray past very, very good. Maybe I played it up a little, but artists had a penchant for being divas, and people accepted it without question. My recent portfolio had been a number of consecutive hits, and that made the New York executives take notice. It meant I had to rein it in a little, and from now on deliver results with the technical merit but not the artistic vision.

*But damn.* It doesn't feel good when I can look at my work, and pick out places where minor adjustments like a change in focal length or lighting or angle could result in a big step toward perfect. Then just ignore it and do nothing in the name of being inconspicuous.

"I'm flattered at your confidence in me," I said smoothly.

"I am confident that you can deliver," Renick replied, and then got to his feet. "I know that you weren't expecting to be involved in Brockton Bay's Christmas campaign, but we're genuinely glad you're with us. I think the project has a lot of potential. If you need anything, any resources, please don't hesitate to ask. Now, I think the Wards will be expecting you."

He offered his hand to shake, and I shook it.

"I'm sure the Wards and I will have a lot to discuss," I said.
Like every comfortably situated First Worlder with an internet connection, I like complaining. I enjoy it; I enjoy indulging myself once in a while, as you can probably tell. I am the person who likes to write online reviews for car rental businesses, plumbing services, and restaurants. I am the Diner Junky review poster with a reputation for being stingy with stars and a habit of critiquing plate presentation. I am the person who takes the time to fill out the feedback card in the hotel rooms provided by minor PRT departments when they are too small to have furnished housing for traveling consultants. I've even won a few $100 gift cards from doing it.

I complain about things (read: everything), but it doesn't mean I am a big raging ball of hate. There is, in fact, very little I truly, absolutely loathe, and that is limited to people who don't know how to line up in an orderly fashion and wait for their turn, noisy people who cannot moderate the volume of their conversation when indoors and in the presence of others, and people in the sandwich-making business who don't ask if you want mayonnaise before they squirt half a bottle all over your artisanal rye. These problems are easily mitigated with well-structured and attentive parenting, so it is rare for me to find all three of them in one place. And anyway, these days I have neither the time nor the pettiness to break into a sandwich shop at night and write a strongly worded letter of disapproval on the walls with mayonnaise.

There are things I hate with a burning passion. And there are things I merely dislike. Children are a nuisance, but tolerable if trained correctly. Children granted superpowers, powers held in check by a Manton limitation and a fear of causing fatal injuries and very little else – that is what I dislike. I do not hate cape children as individuals, and I cannot hate them for triggering, because reaching that point of despair is not something anyone ever willingly chooses to experience.

I dislike that they do not have the years that I have had, years I've used to train my level of control and judgement, in order to determine how much power or what aspect of it is most appropriate for any troublesome situation in which I am involved. They haven't had the years to understand what has happened to them, the maturity or worldly experience to decipher and internalize the trauma that has placed in their hands their sincerest desire, delivered by a monkey's paw.

Instead, they are given two options as soon as they are caught dumpster diving for discarded televisions, or fighting outnumbered and winning against a group of bullies in a parking lot, or found in an emergency room, masked and delirious. The first option: become a villain or a vigilante, and get knocked off sooner or later by a rival or taken down by the supercops. The second: join the Protectorate-lite.

Let's get this straight. I do not hate the Wards. I dislike the Wards program. I see through the informational pamphlets handed out in bundles to the parents, the ones that spout inspirational copy along the lines of "Children are the seeds of the future to be nurtured in the garden of good intentions". The nutritional value of this metaphorical garden, like all successful gardens in the literal world, comes from shit. The purest, squishiest, triple digested bull shit.

In some areas, being a Ward is all right. In the small towns there is often a tiny Protectorate division headquartered in the local town hall, which consists of two offices and a secretary shared with the alderman in charge of making sure your recycling bin gets collected every week. You have one or two Protectorate members and one or two Wards, who get picked up after school in a hero's civilian car (with lights on the dash), and have a fun time doing homework in the back or playing with the radio communication system. Sometimes they go out to the woods and have a jolly afternoon plinking empty cans perched on tree branches, or once a month meet up with other heroes and Wards
in the county area for a weekend barbecue.

In these small towns, it's easy to figure out the real identity of a hero, since everyone is related to everyone else in some way, and there are only so many employers and so many part-time flexible positions. Privacy is held closely out of a sense of community loyalty rather than a fear of lawsuits or imprisonment for endangering a public official. Being a Ward in the middle of nowhere turns out to be pretty cool; you and the parents get flown to the big city for a costume fitting and an official badge, and every year, the PRT pays for a summer holiday training camp to network with all the other Wards in the region.

This is the Wards program at its best, where it turns out relatively well-adjusted heroes who retain some faith in the system, if only because the system hasn't deemed their powers necessary for maintaining the status quo and forced them into servitude. If I had triggered young and impressionable in a small town, and an after school daycare filled with ride-alongs and unlimited free donuts was offered to me, I might have seriously considered taking it. Even if it would mean I'd end up with an atrocious cape name like "Strapping Lad".

In the big cities and their sprawling metropolitan areas consisting of dozens of suburban satellites, that is where the Wards really have the opportunity to do the opposite of shine.

You see, from what I know of capes from all moral alignments, powered people don't actually add much in the way of economic productivity. The energy manipulators don't hook themselves up to nearby power stations and provide clean electricity for surrounding towns. The matter generators don't sell off their huge chunks of sculpture-grade jade or marble to become kitchen renovators and masons. While there are legislative and bureaucratic barriers for capes wanting to operate legitimate businesses, the alternative uses for powers should be profitable enough to encourage some ambition.

But, strangely, there isn't much of it. The best among our kind, those who possess both powers suitable for and an inclination toward conscientious contribution, have mostly become mercenaries – an example being Big Rig of the Toybox Tinker crew. The worst among us are the destructive and uncontrollable S-Class capes who wipe out assets and infrastructure. The rest, a category which encompasses most heroes and villains (and me), are productivity re-distributors. We don't create value – we merely shuffle it around and pass it into our possession with various degrees of subtlety.

We capes are essentially parasites. It is the normal people, the unpowered, who produce all the lovely things we want to own, who generate value and build a society that allows us all of our comforts. Thanks to all of their wonderful efforts, I can wake up in the middle of the night and complain on the internet about a plot hole that just occurred to me, from a movie I watched a week ago.

These comforts are best and most abundantly found in cities, the larger the better, and it explains why the ratio of normals to parahumans is much higher than it is in the small towns. Cities are where the villains aggregate; it is much easier to hide when no one knows you or can be expected to remember your face from thousands of others on the street. And so, the Heroes have to put more effort into looking like they're doing something about the crime, and they pull the Wards into it, which is why I, over time, have come to dislike the Wards program.

In the cities, the Wards are on call because crime could occur at any moment, not like the small towns where you can easily predict which mobile home will cause a domestic disturbance after the loss of a championship sports team. The Wards kids in the big cities have special privileges granted to them by their school administrators, but they're always playing catch up with their coursework and their sleep, and never get fully caught up. They spend their impressionable years being told they're helping to "make a difference", and that is the payment they get for the sacrifice of their childhood.
They train, they get better, it gives them the impression that they're making a bigger difference, and eventually things like calculus worksheets and reading lists and soccer practice seem meaningless. When graduation looms, it is no wonder that these Wards find it difficult to imagine a future involved in anything other than law enforcement.

This is one of the reasons why I think so few of us contribute anything of real value.

It also saves the PRT on paying out those $50,000 a year college funds.

>>> I arrived to the conference room fifteen minutes late, and when I pressed the entry button and waited the thirty seconds for everyone inside to get themselves decent, it looked like they'd started their planning session already.

The conference room was the same one as last time, one of several on this floor of the building, with white walls, paneled ceiling tiles from which bars of fluorescent lights shone, and a central rectangular boardroom table with outlets concealed on the underside for people to plug their chargers. The rolling chairs were not quite up to boardroom standard, however, since they had to be replaced on a regular basis as careless capes practiced their powers on them during boring meetings when they thought no one was paying attention.

The projector was on, synced to a Ward's laptop and playing a news clip from a website when I walked in and let the door close behind me. Kid Win and Clockblocker were focused intently on said laptop; the girl in green – Vista – was watching the news on the big screen. Gallant, a boy in gray athletic sweats, was typing a message on his phone. The only one who noticed my presence was Aegis, who had a tablet computer open to a text file on the table in front of him.

"Aren't there supposed to be more of you?" I asked, glancing around the room and counting the occupied chairs. "I could have sworn there was another one. The edgy reaper kid?"

Aegis looked down at his tablet, then at the projected news footage, which was showing members of the Brockton Bay Fire Department picking through the smoking rubble of a burned-out building.

"Shadow Stalker isn't coming today. She's, ah..." said Aegis, fumbling for a response.

"—Sick," Aegis finished. He shot a pointed look at Clockblocker, who just shrugged and went back to the newsfeed. "Shadow Stalker won't be joining our planning sessions. You don't have to worry about asking her for suggestions, because she's going to follow all the instructions. Without complaining."

"Interesting."

Earlier, much earlier, that morning, I had edited out any frames containing Shadow Stalker from the footage of the pyro villains attacking gang members. The short videos I'd sent to Kanzler only showed the duplicator and the Case-53 beast man in their baseline forms, and then a clip each of them demonstrating their powers at full force. The videos I'd sold through Cape Flunky depicted highlights of the Brockton Bay Protectorate getting their asses handed to them. No hint of any Ward involvement, because that would have been more heat on me than I thought was safe: it would have
gotten the Youth Guard's attention, and their unsubtle brand of spreading around the bureaucratic accountability made everyone implicated want to look for a patsy. That good old classic "If everyone looks bad, I look less bad" kind of logic.

I still had the footage of Shadow Stalker's fight against the duplicator cape, carefully hidden away. A video of the Protectorate heroes in their moment of humility would be relevant for as long as the public consciousness remembered it, so it only had a lifespan of a few weeks before the views dropped off and the potential sale price tanked. It was best to find a buyer for something like that as soon as possible, because the media market had a sweet spot. If it was presented with quality footage delivered with perfect timing, that sweet spot could be milked to produce a sweet bundle of cash.

In comparison, a video of a Ward engaged in questionable activities would be relevant as long as they were still a Ward, and therefore my video of Shadow Stalker could be safely shelved for years, for that future rainy day – unless she was kicked out of the program or something. According to Clockblocker, she was in trouble, but nothing permanent had happened if she was still going to be participating in the Christmas charity program. My secret stash was safe for now.

"Aegis," I said, pulling out a chair opposite his and dropping into it. "Is Shadow Stalker really going to follow all the instructions? I never took her for the cooperative type, last time I saw her."

"Miss Militia is going to be watching her. To make sure she doesn't step out of line." Aegis sent me as much of an apologetic look as he could manage through his mask. "If you tell her to do something, hold a baby or something, and she won't do it, let Miss Militia know." He rested his chin in one hand and irritably poked at the screen of his tablet, flipping to the next page of the document. "I'm the Wards leader. I can't tell if it's more disappointing that they need to assign a hero to help me do my job, or that I even need help in the first place. It really sucks."

Gallant set down his phone; he turned to Aegis. "It's not your fault, you know," he said.

"Because it's Shadow Stalker's," came Clockblocker's voice.

"Actually, Deputy Director Renick said that Miss Militia was attached to the project just in case someone tried to attack you guys," I said quickly, not wanting to get pulled into the boring teen drama. It was apparent to me that everyone in the Wards group thought Shadow Stalker was a bitch, because, well, she was a bitch. No juicy revelations here. "She'll just be there for backup, just in case. Nothing about your performance as leader. And if it is, what's the worse that can come out of it? When you graduate, you'll just get moved to a different PRT branch, that's all." I smiled, and continued. "And it would probably be an improvement on Brockton Bay."

"What's the Protectorate like outside Brockton Bay?" asked Vista curiously. Her chair squeaked as she rolled it closer to Gallant.

"There's not as much fighting, since the hero to villain numbers are more balanced in the other districts," I answered. "In the small towns, there's no fighting, since most of them don't have villains at all – a lot of them end up moving to the cities to make money; you run out of things to steal pretty quickly in the sticks. I guess you'd find it pretty boring out there if you're used to living here." A thought occurred. "Haven't you met other Wards and done the inter-Ward championship stuff? The guys in Boston look forward to it every year."

Aegis sighed. "I've heard about it. I asked once, and they told me it was too expensive to fly us to New York for a week just to train. And besides, they wouldn't be able to spare us from the patrols. We all do patrols with the heroes and even with Wards and Protectorate combined, we're still pretty stretched."
"Shadow Stalker volunteered for most of the night shifts," Gallant added helpfully.

"So, yeah, we're more stretched than normal," corrected Aegis. "Because she's sick."

"Hmhm. I drummed my fingernails against the tabletop. "Once you graduate the Wards, you don't have to immediately join the Brockton Protectorate and do the swearing in. Unless you really want the signing bonus, maybe. Your status just lapses to registered rogue since you're already in the system. So you could, if you wanted, visit a bunch of Protectorate branches and check them out, see what the teams are like, and pick which one has the nicest people, or the ones with the powers that go with yours.

"Some of the branches would pay for your travel and accommodation, if they want you in their team. The more extras they throw in, like front row tickets to a game, or comped room service in a fancy hotel, the more they want you. And the more you know you can squeeze out of them with a contract. Just make sure you have a lawyer to lock everything in tight – HQ might try to move you around, but if your contract says you choose where you stay, they have to back off or cut you a better deal.

"Or... you could stay in Brockton Bay."

"That's a lot to think about. It sounds like a good deal," Aegis admitted. "But I grew up here, you know? I call this place home."

"There's nothing wrong about taking a look around before deciding to settle," I said. "You could always check out the other places and eat the free food, talk to other Directors, and come back to Brockton Bay because it's better. No harm done." I shrugged. "I think that if I had it bad enough to get powers, I'd want to pack up and move out as soon as I could. Maybe it's different when you can't sign your own contracts and never get to see your own money."

The Wards were quiet for a moment as they considered this.

"You're not that bad for a grownup," Clockblocker said into the silence. "I mean, you get kinda bossy if we get sloppy with the front-back-left-right thing, so I don't actually think you're nice. But you're like the only person who works here who doesn't care what I do outside of saying 'Cheese' for the camera. Everyone else is 'You have patrol in thirty', 'Console duty for you', and 'Why aren't you in class?'".

"Because I don't really care what you do. I get paid for showing up, not for babysitting," I said indifferently, and leaned back against the headrest of my chair. "You guys have the power to trash this room in under a minute if you wanted to, but you haven't. So I trust you probably are all responsible people who aren't completely retarded."

"How come you haven't gotten in trouble for saying things like that?" Aegis inquired.

"Are you going to report me?" I turned and looked at his masked face. Aegis blinked and slowly shook his head. "See? I trust you. And as long as I'm useful, and you're useful, they can't—"

"Hey, look! Piggy's on the news," called Clockblocker. He slid the laptop to Kid Win, who tapped a few keys and soon the video feed on the projector filled up the whole screen. The speakers powered on a moment later, picking up the voice of a news reporter in the middle of a sentence.

"—Scene of last night's incident at East Dockside, where PRT emergency response teams arrived to witness the debut of a new parahuman group, whom we are led to understand are responsible for the arsons that have caused massive property damage over the last several weeks," said a female reporter
wearing a hard hat and oversized fireman's coat on top of her smart bouclé jacket. "We now switch over to the studio, where Director Emily Piggot of Brockton Bay's own Protectorate team would like to address a number of concerns about the official handling of new parahumans and how it will affect public safety. Angela?"

_Huh, I thought. That's how you pronounce the Director's name. Looks like I'm not the only one with a last name people keep butchering when they need to talk to me outside internal memos._

The news feed split-screened for a moment, then the square containing a view of the newsroom studio expanded to fill the whole screen. The _Brockton Bay News Network_ anchors shuffled their papers on their wide curving desk, and the female anchor – a woman with heavily-styled auburn power hair that looked almost crispy with hairspray – turned to the side and smiled at Director Piggot, whose combination of dark navy suit and chemical blonde hair did not do her any favors under the studio lighting.

"Director, last night the Protectorate and PRT forces confronted these arsonists and civilian witness recordings released later on revealed them to be highly rated parahumans," read Angela from the teleprompter, so skillfully that it appeared she was giving both the audience at home and Director Piggot her full attention. "The extent of their abilities drew much attention from news media and all the concerned people who were watching the news and wondering how we are going to feel safe when the official response was, as some would say, 'inadequate'.”
Director Piggot turned toward the camera, for her chance to read a prepared statement from the teleprompter, expression stiff and more on the side of severe than sympathetic. Her voice didn't quiver when she spoke. Her jowls – quite the opposite. "We have classified these new parahumans as villains, with high ratings as a Brute for the one with the monstrous appearance, and a Mover for the other. As such, we urge you not to approach them, nor attack them or attempt to negotiate with them. Instead, we recommend you contact the authorities who are much better equipped to handle them, and to prepare yourself, please review safety and evacuation guidelines..."

Piggot listed a number of ways for concerned citizens to feel safer, most of them common sense instructions like checking smoke alarms and replacing batteries, using the stairs or fire escapes instead of the elevator, and immediately leaving at the sound of emergency sirens instead of sticking around to pack valuables or loot a neighbor's.

It sounded so sensible and reassuring when these instructions were delivered by an authority figure with confidence, and it was helped by the fact that she was right – these were all good ideas that would help save lives when carried out promptly. Not bad stuff, I thought. People felt less helpless because there were so many options available to protect themselves, and it softened their fear of being attacked by one set of capes, and their uncertainty of protection from another. Delivery was on point, but it was a shame that Piggot's appearance didn't lend much to the impression that she was entirely trustworthy on the subject of cultivating one's personal health.

"And one last point," Piggot continued. "We strongly recommend you not stay around when emergency responders arrive to handle the situation. While we appreciate the good intentions behind those who want to record videos and preserve valuable information to help identify and convict criminals, we stress that these situations are incredibly dangerous. If you value your life, please reconsider attempting such activities.

"Finally, on behalf of the PRT and the Protectorate East-Northeast, thank you for the invitation here and letting us share important information. All of this will be posted on the PRT website, with a list of suggested safety procedures to review in order to ensure the safety of your home and families."

Angela continued the news report and Kid Win dialed the volume down.

"What do you think of our dear old Piggy, Mr. Braganca?" Clockblocker's voice rang out boldly with undisguised amusement. "They say the camera adds ten pounds. How many cameras do you think she had on her?"

"Usually they have one big camera on a dolly for news studios, two cameras if they're big enough to have the network backing for a separate weather room. Throw in a couple of mini-cams for the techs, and she'd probably have four or five on her." I hummed inconclusively for a moment. "But I don't think the cameras are really the problem, since she can hide everything behind the anchor desk."

"What is the problem, then?" asked Clockblocker.

"The Director needs a new makeup artist. She has to wear dark colors to look serious and professional, I get it, but it really washes her out and the contrast makes her look bad compared to the other anchors," I said. "To me, she looked like she was sick or something." I glanced at Clockblocker, who looked suddenly shifty. "What? I thought going for the fat joke was low-hanging fruit, honestly. I know you can do better."

Aegis cleared his throat. "Maybe we should do some actual work now."

"Right then," I said briskly. "Before we start, is there anyone here who is actually illiterate? It's
better to admit it now before we have a *situation* and Director Piggot has to apologize for you on the news."

"Um," Kid Win mumbled, uncharacteristically nervous. "I have a condition..."
Some people might wonder why I bother working a day job, when it seems like a massive inconvenience getting in the way of my really profitable night-time adventures. And when the CafeFlunky accountant's e-mail invoice popped up on my list of new notifications, showing a transfer of $197,000 after the subtraction of legal and administrative fees, sometimes I wonder about that myself. Rogue caping is, after all, office-free, child-free, and best of all, tax free.

There are many reasons why I maintain my identity as Paul, and they're not just purely sentimental.

Firstly, you need a real identity in the system, with all the documentation, if you want to live some semblance of a legitimate life. If you want a driver's license, if you want to open an insured bank account, if you want to buy a house or start a business, or buy and sell stocks, or enroll for a university degree, and a number of small insignificant things that would suddenly make life incredibly inconvenient if you woke up one morning and they were suddenly unavailable.

If you are ridiculously rich, like nine digits rich, then none of these rules will apply to you, parahuman or no. You could probably start your own country and make up your own legitimate documents, and if anti-contraband agents approach you at your private air hangar, you can just flash around your diplomatic immunity which comes in denominations of 50 and 100. If you are ridiculously poor, and happy to live off kelp and shellfish in a hermit's cave, then none of these requirements matter – the government doesn't exactly collect income tax in the form of sand dollars.

It is the necessity of a real identity that makes rogues grit their teeth, since it is a requirement of registering a business. To stay aboveboard, to own a company that can put up shares and futures in exchange for investment funding, to hire workers and lease real estate and sign contracts with promising buyers, a rogue has to put up a real name. You could, of course, hire a lawyer to act as proxy on contingency, if your prospectus looks impressive enough, but they would demand something like 49% ownership, and your "Get Rich Quick" scheme swiftly turns into a "Maybe Break Even". It is the bureaucratic handicap that turns many a rogue onto the dark path to villainy, and I can't blame them.

Secondly, I am an employee of the PRT, and that puts me mostly beyond suspicion. There's a huge distinction made between the PRT and the Protectorate: the PRT is for normies, for oversight and accountability and management, because the parahumans of the Protectorate can't be trusted to manage themselves. The separation of powers is, as many a red-blooded American can confirm, a foundation of this country. Capes can enforce laws, but they aren't allowed to make them, or interpret them, with very rare exceptions in the form of dispensations given in times of crisis – which can be rescinded whenever the powers-that-be want to teach an important lesson or ground a cape with a troublemaker reputation.

Any accusations of an employee being a cape are taken seriously, because it puts the PRT's hiring procedures and safety protocols into question, and makes the whole organization look incompetent and hypocritical. Anyone outed can claim that they recently triggered, long after their hiring, and the PRT will hush it up because real identities are involved; it is only inevitable for one out of their thousands of employees to experience a really, really bad day. The accuser on the other hand, whether the accusation was correct or not, is either guilty of breaking the Unwritten Rules or laws against defamation, and a slap on the wrist is a consequence they can only dream about.

Yeah – and I can't believe I'm saying this – but on this matter, I will unironically agree that the PRT
keeps me safe.

Third: when you forget you were going under the name "Peter" until the barista announces she's putting your drink in the trash if someone doesn't collect, you will realize how overrated second identities are. Especially when you end up drinking lukewarm coffee for the third time in a week. If you have what it takes to pull it off successfully, that's great. But for those that don't, sometimes it's better to be known as the flaky guy who is late to everything than the dude who forgets his own name.

There are parahumans out there who have fallen into the deep end of capedom and define their identity by their powerset. They are the ones who spend more hours per day in costume than not: the people who automatically reach for their costume as the first thing they do in the morning, and feel weird and itchy and irritable when their jumpsuits are in the wash and they have to go without. They are the type who have bought into the act so deeply that they can barely remember the name they were born with, and the life they had before their trigger event is all but forgotten. I have personally always found the thought of having cape withdrawals when too long out of costume pretty disturbing, along with being so out of touch in interacting with normies that they barely register as real people.

When it truly comes down to it, beneath the costume and gimmicks, beyond the stage name and the daylight face, I call myself human, not parahuman. There may be times where my heart does not beat because I do not have one, nor blood, nor bone or skin or body – but I will always consider myself, however inconvenient it may be, a human. And part of that, though I try to resist it, means I am compelled to seek a community, to create a place for myself that I can call my own, and for others to acknowledge that it is mine and I am me.

I am only Tabloid because it is convenient and useful to me, and taking a stage name is pretty much an unavoidable side effect of parahuman ascension. It is traditional at this point – it's an expectation that you must become a different person if you want to use your powers, and as far as I know, people named Paul certainly never go out as themselves. They pick a cool name like "Muad'Dib" or "Midnight Rider" or "Apostle", or for me, "Tabloid". But when the mask comes off at the end of the day, behind it is always Paul, just another human who happens to have powers.

I am Paul not because the bureaucracy demands an identity, a social security number, and a documented proof of income, but because I'd like to keep believing that acquiring powers has not changed me. That I am now what I always have been, even if in my bleakest moment of true despair, a part of me cried out for deliverance, and was answered, and whoever or whatever answered seized that piece of me that was despicably frail but still unquestionably mine and tore it away forever. And in its place I got power – not unlimited power, not even close – but enough that afterward I found I was no longer frail.

It might be called strength, that resistance to pain and hurt that I was granted. I know it had a cost; I know something was taken from me even though I can't remember what it was. But I can still be Paul as I once was, just a little bit tarnished, a little less whole, but still perfectly functional. It bothers me that I basically received a non-consensual lobotomy that is, as far as I know, irreversible. There is nothing I can do about it but seethe at the unforgivable trespass made upon me, which really does nothing to help my situation. The only thing I can do is to continue as I am, which is something I have ensured that I am very, very good at.

To the PRT, Paul might be considered a useful asset; to the Cayman Investment Trust he is a valuable contributor, but to me he is necessary beyond utterly mundane utilities such as having an ID that can pay the bills and order pizza delivery with a credit card.
It is true that many capes who trigger because their lives are shitty choose to abandon them as soon as they have an alternative presented to them by the manifestation of their powers. I've always thought of that as needlessly wasteful, because having powers doesn't fix a shitty civilian life, and having an outlet doesn't negate the fact that bad stuff happened. I know that the daylight life can be improved, beyond bearable to even enjoyable, for those who are truly creative and circumspect with the use of their powers.

I won't say that getting a Brute rating will allow you to punch depression in the face, or that being a Master or Thinker will help you get over your social anxiety and talk to girls. But the Cape Cookbook's advice on improving your quality of life on the costumed side can be applied to the cape-free side of life, and maybe, just maybe, things might look a little bit brighter and then you realize that is very much worth it to maintain a registered identity instead of being in costume all day, every day.

Sure, it might suck a little to watch as the long arm of the government's sticky fingers dip in and turn your gross income to net income, but it has its benefits in all the small and insignificant things you'd miss if lost them. Things like seeing your tax return notice hiding amidst a bundle of flyers and bills, things like being able to walk around on the street without people around you cringing in fear, or things like watching TV and being able to laugh along without ever stopping to think, "Wow, those normies really are stupid so why am I watching this junk and do people really act like that".

All heroes and villains know that crime doesn't take a holiday. There are no office hours, paid leave, sick days, or lunch breaks when it comes to caping. There are rarely any time outs in the government endorsed game of cops and robbers, and they only happen when an Endbringer comes calling. Taking off the costume at the end of a long and grueling week is nothing like going on a beach resort vacation in Tahiti... but there are times when it can feel just as good, and be just as welcome.

>>> 

By 5:30 PM, the Wards had made decent progress with their charity event planning, settling on the Brockton Bay Central Library as their main venue. A shortlist of picture books and children's novels were tentatively selected as potential reads, dependent on which publishers sponsored their Christmas cause with a cash donation or a crate of free books. From there, it was up to the Wards to write sugar-coated letters for the PRT corporate liaison team to funnel through to companies willing to take on a little tax deductible philanthropy in the name of "thinking of the children".

The PRT had allocated a budget for the Christmas charity, but any expenses that might be passed onto corporate donors saved money that could be used elsewhere. Fundraising and the associated schmoozing was an almost mandatory job skill for full-time Protectorate heroes, and I thought it was better that the Wards got some practice while they still had some kiddie cuteness left in them that made people overlook their potential for destruction. Everyone respected experienced veteran heroes like Alexandria, but giant disfiguring scars did nothing to make them appear more approachable.

By 5:45 PM, the Wards had begun to drift off, leaving for home, or to their headquarters to prepare for patrol or console duty. After seeing that there wasn't much else left to do, I departed the
conference room and headed downstairs to the office floors of the PRT building, swiping my badge at the security panels built into the glass doors.

Past the rows of cubicles I strode, until I reached the open plan workspace with a row of computer terminals in the corner for temp hires, transient workers, and techs from other departments to freely use. A large rectangular table took up the middle of the space, with a number of chairs gathered around, currently unoccupied. The whole office was mostly empty now, too, since most people not on the nighttime skeleton crew had better things to do.

I logged onto one of the computers, skimming through the Wards' public file folders to check if they'd uploaded the revised versions of the event plan. Then I added a few notes to the shared document creatively titled HOMEWORK.

To: PHQW.Vista
Sign off your letters with your ID tag, but make sure to use your oldest badge photo, the one with the teeth.
Attached file: [IMG_Client1173.PNG]

To: PHQW.KidWin
The Very Hungry Caterpillar has been taken off the list now.

To: PHQW.Clockblocker, PHQW.ShadowStalker
Please revise the presentation and appearance protocol by next week. Especially section 14.C, "Acceptable Use of Language". There's a quiz on the network portal, and I'm not saying you have to do it, but logging a 90%+ pass looks good in case something bad happens. Just in case.
Attached file: [Regulations_07102010.PDF]

To: PHQW.Gallant
Add your corporate sponsor to the mailing list ASAP. Even if they can cut a check right now, as you say they can, we have to do it through the PRT lawyers for tax reasons.

To: PHQW.Aegis
Proofread the letters before you have everyone send them out. Leave some small mistakes to make it look like you need the help, like a semicolon in the wrong place or something. Nothing that spellcheck would obviously pick up. Remember, you're writing to a publishing rep – you want them to feel sorry for you, not hate you.

To: EVERYONE
Submit your docs here for proofreading. If you are having trouble with writing, please ask for assistance. If you can't finish your letters, make a note in the filename and I'll have someone check up on it. Your ID tags are to be attached to the document. This is IMPORTANT.
PROTIP: If you're copy-pasting, make sure your "Dear Sir/Madam" is addressed to the right person. This is EXTRA EXTRA IMPORTANT.
It was almost seven by the time I had reached the bottom of my to-do list: composing the last of the emails, and checking with the merchandise department to see how many sets of Wards collectible postcards they could spare from inventory, and if they could contact their warehouse for more. They would be good for autographing and handing out as freebies, because people generally don't attend events unless there is free stuff being given away. Postcards were good for this; stickers were an option, but experience proved they were too much of a temptation for purposes of creative vandalism. Palette knives and containment foam dispersal spray can remove sticker residue, but very little else.

I heard the beeping of the security scanner at the door while scrolling through the list of officially recognized merchandise suppliers, looking for a printer that could do small runs at low cost. The door slid open with a swoosh of air, and I heard heavy footfalls thump into the carpet. I kept browsing, occasionally pausing to type out my wishlist in a text document.

"Braganca." The voice was deep and authoritative.

I didn't turn around to look. Over many years of meditation exercises, I have developed a good sense of awareness of my surroundings. Most of the time when I practice, there is nothing to listen to but the sounds of my own body, so when other bodies are involved, I tend to pick up their presence if they get close enough. My senses are not enhanced, but I don't get distracted easily, nor do I immediately focus my attention on the single loudest sound in my vicinity.

This time I heard a low, resonant mechanical thrumming, and a soft whirring like an overclocked CPU fan. There weren't many guesses for who this visitor could possibly be.

"You shouldn't be here," I said calmly, eyes on the screen. "There are rules, you know. PRT and PHQ are separate for a reason – I could be working on super secret confidential stuff, for all you know. That's what the conference rooms are for. And anyway, don't you have your own building?" The Protectorate ENE had their own exclusive treehouse in the form of the forcefield-protected oil rig that drifted around the Bay.

"We need to talk," said Armsmaster.

"Office hours are weekdays from two to five-thirty, or by appointment." I put emphasis on the last word. "'Accountability' is the PRT's watchword, if you didn't know."

The man behind me was silent for a moment, then I heard the thrum and whine as motors within his suit shifted around. There were a few tapping sounds, and after a few seconds the work phone next to my keyboard buzzed.

**PHQ.Armsmaster:** Requesting appointment. Preferred time slot 1 Dec 2010 19:00.

I opened my notifications panel and saw the message pop up in the internal communications system. The appointment I logged on my timesheet, which served as an explanation for Armsmaster being present where he wasn't supposed to be. Heroes were to be kept in designated cape-safe places in the PRT building, not wandering about wherever they wished, and unless Armsmaster had a solid justification, such as an appointment with a department or a Director, the security team could be
called in to kick him out. That meant paperwork, or worst case scenario, the ever-tiresome Master/Stranger Protocols, which were more tedious than practice fire drills.

I didn't have to do it in this fastidiously bureaucratic way, and both of us knew it, but Armsmaster had probably found me through my phone tracker. I didn't want to disappear without a trace. And besides, it was kind of fun because everyone in the image department who had ever spoken to him knew he hated wasting time, and this waste of time was something he couldn't complain about.

**PRT.PBraganca:** Accepted. Subject?

I heard a sigh, and some more tapping.

**PHQ.Armsmaster:** PR. What days and locations am I scheduled for appearances?

**PRT.PBraganca:** What makes you think I know?

**PHQ.Armsmaster:** Timesheet said you met Renick. MM and DL got pinged straight after.
I didn't get a msg, checked database didn't see my update. What days am I up?

Huh. Armsmaster didn't get a message from Renick. Most people would immediately understand what was going on if they were left in the dark, but I supposed that Armsmaster was the type who didn't get the message until the official appearances schedule dropped in on the first day of January and slapped him in the face.

I didn't want to have to be the one to break it to him, but Armsmaster had sought me out under the impression that I knew, and I couldn't pretend that I didn't know, because we both knew I knew, only Armsmaster didn't know how much I knew exactly. This was a guy who had been digging into the PRT database where he probably shouldn't have been, so tact was probably required.

I thought about what to say, typed out half a message, deleted it, and started again.

**PRT.PBraganca:** ...

*(PRT.PBraganca is writing...)*

Two minutes into my four-line long message, there was a clinking sound and a few loud thumps and suddenly Armsmaster stood behind me, casting a sinister shadow over my monitor.

"Can we talk like normal people, please?" he growled.

"Uh... Alright," I managed, and put aside my phone, message unfinished. "Might be difficult, but we can try. Why don't you have a seat over there?" I gestured toward the group of chairs at the table, and rolled my own chair around to face it.

Armsmaster lowered himself carefully into a chair, which produced an alarming creak. "What's going on? Piggot makes a big speech on TV today, and says nothing about the heroes." He scowled
under his visor. His beard-growing ability, I noticed, was much superior to my own, even when I cheated and used leg hairs and brow powder. "Is there going to be a separate news segment for the Protectorate?"

"Sort of," I replied noncommittally.

"What does that mean?" demanded Armsmaster.

"It means that PR is working on it. The Protectorate is going to have a chance to look better, when and where it can do the most good." I hesitated. "Just not all the Protectorate."

"Fuck," Armsmaster muttered under his breath, then his voice grew louder. "Fuck! I worked so hard and they're fucking throwing me under the bus for this."

"I'm sure everyone works hard," I said, trying to be diplomatic.

"I train every single day, I sleep four hours a night, I work harder than anyone!" The chair squeaked ominously.

"It's not just about working hard."

Armsmaster looked up. His voice was hard. "It's about looking good on TV, isn't it? Just because I can't talk to people, make them believe the things I say, they're not going to give me a chance."

"It's not about that, either," I said. Armsmaster frowned. Damn, talking to people through visors was hard. Domino masks were easier; at least you got to see the eyes and could tell which direction someone was looking. "Well, it is sort of that. But there are other things, too."

"Like what?"

"Do you know much about how the PRT budget works?" I asked. "I know you capes are always busy with your caping stuff, but did you ever look into the admin side of how a branch office is run?"

Armsmaster sat silently, and spoke in a gruff tone. "Continue."

I spun my rolling chair around and began digging through the PRT file directories to which I had access. There was a separate server for Protectorate staffers, but I didn't doubt that Armsmaster had the ability to bypass security authorization and read PRT files, at least the ones that weren't marked ultra-classified. I pulled up a couple of pages of documentation from the Brockton Bay image team's folders.

"Dauntless' costume cost $17,000 to manufacture, and $9,000 of that was labor and set-up costs for the body scan, design, and molds for the armor and foam padding," I summarized. "The budget for replacement foam inserts he wears over his undersuit is set at $2,400 a year. How much do you think his armor and weaponry cost to maintain?"

"He uses his power on them," Armsmaster spoke slowly. "They don't break, as far as we know, and the Arclance doesn't require fuel or ammunition to function."

"So, as long as we remember to feed him, we get the armor for free." I pulled up a second file. "Miss Militia's costume costs $4,000 to construct, and $3,250 of that was a one-time fee for having the
The rest was spent on materials, alterations, and accessories. Miss Militia's full costume, without the boots, at this point in time costs $280, and we can get them cheaper if we order multiple sets in bulk from the supplier. She goes through something like ten to fifteen sets per year as we rotate them between wearing and washing, which is around $4,000, not including boots. A full set of her costume in good condition can be auctioned off for at least $6,000."

I flicked through the sewing pattern diagrams of her stylized army fatigues costume. "The PRT officially allocates $7,500 a year to keep Miss Militia in rubber bullets and beanbags, but every year, she has consistently come under budget." I closed the file, and opened a new one. Armsmaster's costume reference photos, showing front and back views, and side profiles. It was not a perfect match for the Tinker suit he was wearing right now. "Your current suit. How much did it cost? Including the Halberd."

"One hundred and thirty five thousand dollars," said Armsmaster, his voice tight.

"What is the amount you request on the annual budget form to build your perfect suit?"

"Three hundred thousand." His jaw was clenched. "Even that's lowballing. They refuse anything too expensive as wasteful."

"When your suit was damaged last night, how much would you estimate for upgrades and repairs?"

"At least fifteen thousand," Armsmaster answered softly.

"Do you see now?" I glanced at the visor, wondering if it felt like wearing sunglasses indoors. "It doesn't matter if you work hard. The harder you work, the more you build, the more patrols you pull, the more you cost. That is what it means to be a Tinker in a villain city. For what you cost the budget, the PRT could easily buy in two or three out-of-towners as transfers, like that Assault guy on your team with a custom contract. Which is actually pretty sweet. I wonder who his lawyers were."

"But I'm not being transferred," retorted Armsmaster. "They at least would have given me advance notice for that."

"It wouldn't stop them from looking at offers from other branches." I shrugged. "You're a Tinker with a good specialty. That makes you valuable, and you are an investment. In Brockton Bay, the investment doesn't produce enough dividends when your tech is always getting destroyed in cape fights and your downtime is spent more on maintaining your own stuff than doing force multiplying stuff for your team members. You'd produce more for less if you were in another city, especially if that city doesn't have a Tinker of its own. East-Northeast has two."

"I'm valuable," the Tinker grumbled. "Just not here. It's a compliment and a slap rolled into one."

"Extra efficient." I smirked, then continued. "Don't worry, they're not going to trade you off next week, or even next month. What PR is doing is balancing cost to benefit. The two most popular Protectorate heroes get promoted, and the whole team looks good. If they gave you the star treatment, they could spend everything they budgeted and it looks like a cover-up. But you're still leader, and they're not changing that for now. So it counts for something."

"For now? How long do you think I have?" The beard twitched and the lips curled downward. "This is bullshit. I get shitcanned from a position I earned through years of hard work, all because some fucker with a camera makes me look bad."
"You have until the next time something bad happens, I guess. In this town, who knows when that could be. And anyway, it's not like you became a hero so everyone could admire you on camera, right?" I spun idly from side to side in my rolling chair, keeping my amusement hidden. "Did you lawyer up when you signed your contract?"

"No," he scowled. "I signed up to do good, not pick which bean counter could give me the most beans."

"Tough." I kept spinning. "The official advice I can give you to improve perception is to do outreach. Visit the people whose houses burned down and hand out goodie bags, do a video on fire safety, talk to people on patrols, tell them you're looking out for them and all that nice scripted stuff. Then there's the bad advice you totally shouldn't listen to because it's very bad and makes you a bad person."

Armsmaster leaned forward. "Which is?"

"Make your excuses and cut back on patrols except for ones with Dauntless. If you go out together, and get thrashed again, both of you look bad. If you catch some baddies, you both look good. Lose-lose or win-win, as long as you don't do anything too stupid on camera."

"That... might actually work," admitted Armsmaster. He scratched his chin. "You know, you talk straight for a PR guy."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm Image, not PR. I don't do copywriting."

"Same thing."

"It's offensive! It's like if I called Changers and Breakers the same thing." I shot Armsmaster a sly look. "Or if I called you a Tinker two."

"That was a low blow." The mouth under the visor quirked into a thin smile.

"Yeah, and you've had enough of them, haven't you?" I laughed and spun the chair in one last circle, then got to my feet, stretching and feeling my muscles creak. "I know your suit takes care of the other end, but do you eat? There are a couple of pudding cups in the break room fridge a few days from expiry, and no one wrote their names on them. I think I'll take them."
Every freshly minted parahuman reaches a point where they have to ask themselves whether or not they want to get serious about caping. The ones that don't choose to take it seriously, usually the capes with the weaker or heavily limited powersets, keep their powers on the down low and continue with their normal daylight lives as best they can, only using them when they deem it necessary or convenient – a robbery at the convenience store while they're pumping gas, for instance, or cheating to collect Boy Scout badges at the annual sleepaway camp. This is the easiest choice; the status quo is not budged from its delicate equilibrium, and one's quality of life is marginally, but unmistakably, improved.

Then there are those parahumans who want to get serious: the capes that recognize their abilities have not insignificant power ratings. That their power levels allow them to become a formidable force for good or for evil if they decide to throw themselves into the game, whatever side they choose. This is the type of serious power that cannot be ignored once it is revealed, and prompts the aforementioned capes to make another hard decision.

One. Hold onto what remains of their civilian life as best they can, knowing that it is impossible keep the charade going forever, and it is inevitable that the truth will come out. One tiny little slip will have people start asking questions that can't be answered; one late arrival or an unexpected plan cancellation and the subsequent fumbled excuse will have friends and family demanding an honest response. And then you have two people, then three or more, holding onto a secret that only one should keep if it is to remain a secret for any length of time.

Having support is heartening to a cape who gets his hands dirty doing things that need to be done, so obviously some justify the risk worth the reward. Maybe they consider it worth the danger to know that there is a house with the porch light kept on at the end of a long day, that towels and clean clothes are laid out fresh and folded, and that there is a covered dish of dinner leftovers warming in the oven. It never lasts forever, although no one likes to think that. But while it does last, a cape can be immensely comforted by the fact that the civil blood he spills keeps the civil hands of his friends and neighbors clean.

Two. Cut all ties, knowing that sooner is better than later, and the less that is suspected, the greater the life expectancy of everyone involved. To some capes, this is the natural solution to a question that turns out to be not so difficult to answer, since civilian lives are often the cause of many a trigger event. It is only reasonable that many capes would want to have nothing to do with their old circle of contacts as soon as they have the power to do something about it.

After all, it's not like it's as drastic as faking your death and skipping town. Social circles undergo an entropy effect; they dissipate unless they are maintained with time and attention and energy, and when you get powers, you realize how little extra anything you have to spare for trivialities. "For the greater good of everyone" is all you have to say to yourself to rationalize such a decision. And "I've got new friends now who are way cooler than my old friends" is all you have to say to others to make them accept your decision and leave you alone.

Just remember not to jump into the deep end headfirst and forget to brush up on your social skills now and then. Small talk seems like a useless skill but it is an attribute people generally associate with well-adjusted human beings who totally don't go out and beat people up in their spare time. You won't immediately go from high school heart breaker to awkwardly stuttering "Y-you too" when the
supermarket cashier thanks you for shopping at FoodMart, but it makes for some pretty mortifying flashbacks when you're waiting in line at the checkout and hoping she doesn't remember your face.

Moderation is, as one learns eventually, one of the ingredients on the recipe list to success.

Another thing for new capes to remember is that the Unwritten Rules are not completely inviolable. Just because people aren't allowed to shout your civilian name from the rooftops doesn't stop them from finding out who you are. Just because people aren't allowed to slit your throat when you're sleeping in bed doesn't mean they can't trace you to where you live and watch you when you're conked out on your reclining sofa. The Unwritten Rules are merely rules, and like all rules, there are no consequences if no one finds out that you've broken them. And there are very many ways for someone who is sufficiently creative and equally motivated to break the rules and not be caught.

It is in every rookie parahuman's best interest not to underestimate the level of creativity of which some people are capable. I speak, of course, from personal experience.

Whether a new cape chooses to dirty their hands in selflessly defending the innocent, or selfish enterprises in defrauding the same, hard decisions pave the road to success. Occasionally, some decisions are easier than others to make. For a rogue cape, it is usually the big question asked when he or she has become confident with exploring the limits of their powers and is now standing at the edge of the deep end, wondering how big a splash can be made.

The question: hero or villain?

The answer was easy, almost instinctive, to me. I took the third option and chose neither. The advantages that each side offers its members I found to be unnecessary and not worth the risk.

The primary advantage of joining a team and choosing a side – no matter which one – is to become part of a community, to be surrounded by people who can speak aloud the name you call yourself, people who are just as strong as you are. People whom you also know are as flawed and damaged and messed up in the head as you. I imagine it feels good to work in concert and experiment with ability synergy, to put bite behind the Unwritten Rules so that if someone does break them, they get what's coming to them.

I've always thought that the innate purpose of belonging to a team was the capability of putting other people in their place, whatever place you think they ought to be, while your team members clap you on the back and remind you it is the right thing to do. It's not something to which any hero would publicly admit, but there are certainly a number of villains who wouldn't hesitate to venture their opinion on the matter. When some people are granted things that other people are denied, there is bound to be a stratification effect.

Hero or villain, human and parahuman: it is much easier to go through life without dividing one's loyalties if one is not particularly loyal to anything.

You don't get handed too many hard decisions that way, which suits me fine.
The break room was empty when I flicked on the lights and strolled in. The refrigerator was not, to my delight. Three pudding cups, no name written. A cup of yogurt, a cup of sliced peaches in syrup, also unlabelled. There was a carton of community milk with an inch or two sloshing at the bottom, and a soggy half-eaten sub sandwich wrapped in plastic that looked like it had been there for a while, so I mentally marked it as "community food" and left it as it was.

I have some standards, you know. A good life tip is to not put your mouth on things that other people might have put their mouths on, unless you know where exactly they have been putting their mouths. It saves unwanted trips to the bathroom, or if you have exceptionally bad luck in life, an embarrassing and potentially expensive trip to the doctor.

The pudding and yogurt I set on the kitchenette counter while I dug through the drawers for spoons and mugs. The spoons were haphazardly arranged in a cutlery drawer; I picked two of the cleanest and rinsed them under the faucet. One mug was a novelty gift with #1 MOM printed on it, but I washed it out with soap and filled it with water. It would have taken too long to get the coffee machine started, and I preferred to sleep later on instead of chemically delaying fatigue and ending up with an even worse sleep deprivation hangover.

I collected my snacks and spoons and mugs and headed for the door, but stopped for an instant to admire the framed poster on the wall.

The PRT wouldn't license their intellectual property unless they knew it was for something that would either make them a great deal of money or make them look good. They preferred both, but couldn't always have them, and thus the world was blessed with such travesties as the limited edition Armsmaster underpants (for boys and girls) released in 2005, which I'd recently seen listed at auction: $550 for a shrink-wrapped mint condition pair. It was a pity that Armsmaster wouldn't get a cut; it would have sweetened his shame of being unofficially nicknamed "Assmaster", "Buttmaster", "Assblaster", "Halbutt", and similar variations that euphemistically combined synonyms of derrière and domination.

Unless a Protectorate cape has the foresight to negotiate a generous contract upon joining – which is rarely granted except to capes with exceptional powers who have hired exceptional lawyers – the PRT owns the rights to the cape name and their costume's appearance. A Protectorate cape who goes rogue or independent, retires from the organization, or is fired (most of the time they call it an early retirement or extended administrative leave and leave it up to you to read between the lines) cannot expect to keep their cape name unless their contract specifies it, or if they can afford to buy the rights.

I understand the purpose of such a restriction, even while it must be extremely frustrating to the heroes bound by them. It keeps capes from making the rest of the Protectorate look bad by association if they leave for discipline issues and try to start their own team under their old name. It keeps new unaffiliated parahumans from picking up an already registered name and trying to coattail on established rep, or potentially even devaluing it.

The PRT owns the name, the likeness, and the emblem of the parahumans under their employ and they can license it out whenever they want to, and sometimes you get something more embarrassing than executive desk toy bobbleheads and catchphrase-spouting cartoon adaptations. Like the Armsmaster-branded undergarments.

A stage musical wasn't so bad in comparison.
I carefully peeled the foil lid off the cup of chocolate mousse pudding. Then, watching Armsmaster sitting on the opposite side of the table, I, with apparent nonchalance, licked the traces of pudding from the back of the lid.

There are certain types of people, my mother included, who get fidgety when they are witness to behaviors that suggest that the person doing them is poorly brought up. Things like throwing paper balls into the trash can instead of walking up and dropping them in like a good little boy, and then doing nothing when they bounce off the rim and fall to the floor. Eating all the pickles and leaving the empty jar full of pickle juice in the fridge, dirty dishes overnight in the sink, drinks without coasters on wooden tables. Honestly, these things bother me too, but I was interested to see what kind of person Armsmaster was.

I lamented the fact that his reflective visor covered up any eye twitches or furrowed brows that might indicate a reaction. Guess I'd have to go another route.

"So, what's your deal with Dauntless?" I asked, stirring my spoon through the pudding. It had a caramel layer at the bottom. Nice. "I know a bit of healthy competition is normal for the corporate teams, because they're all about sales figures and pushing the merch instead of actually catching baddies. But I'd never have expected an 'arch rival' deal at a Protectorate branch. Brockton Bay is kind of a weird town with a bunch of 'irregularities'—" here I sent Armsmaster a knowing look, "—at least according to the operations manual. Do you have some kind of storyline thing going on? I haven't seen an approval form for that."

Armsmaster frowned. "It's not like that."

"Feel free to explain," I said, keeping my tone light and casual. I watched him with interest. He hadn't opened up the pudding cup I'd set in front of him.

"Fine," he grunted, folding his arms in his power armor with a soft motorized whir. "I take issue with the fact that Dauntless is the... the anti-Tinker." The last word dropped off his lips as if he'd really wanted to say "Anti-Christ."

"He touches an item once a day and it gets better by a fraction, every single day," continued Armsmaster, visor flashing in the fluorescent office lighting. "He doesn't have to take time away from training or sleep to work in a lab. He doesn't have to waste his time with the Tinkertech review board getting his equipment approved. He doesn't need to request resources and get denied because it's too expensive. He doesn't have to schedule ten hours of maintenance a week just to keep his shit from exploding in his face!"

Armsmaster's voice rose steadily higher with every word. "He doesn't get distracted by plans flashing into his mind when he least expects it! He doesn't have to worry about people stealing his tech and using it against him! He doesn't need to schedule ten hours of maintenance a week just to keep his shit from exploding in his face!"
And a lot of good that did you, I thought, remembering the "Butt Blaster" video. My expression remained neutral as I ate my pudding and allowed Armsmaster some time to compose himself. After a minute, I added: "And people like being friends with him."

"Yes," grumbled Armsmaster. "That too."

Armsmaster placed his gauntleted hand flat over his pudding cup, and when he lifted it off, the foil lid was cleanly torn away, with no stubborn remnants of dessert left on the bottom. An armored finger flexed, and a spork popped out from the end. Wordlessly, he started on the chocolate pudding.

On a scale of 1 to Eidolon, I suspected that Armsmaster might rate a 5. His personality could be grating to the kind of Protectorate cape who had read *The Hero Presentation Protocol* cover to cover and aspired to live up to the title, by doing good deeds whenever they could and thinking happy thoughts whenever they couldn't. Fortunately, I had a high tolerance for assholes, being in close proximity to one at all times, and Armsmaster was not unaware of his own behavior. He just didn't see a need to do anything about it.

It was, let's be truthful, kind of refreshing, but it also did nothing to improve his situation.

"Why do you even want to be Leader, anyway?" I inquired. "Doesn't seem like you're getting that much out of it by the way you talk. You could resign and drop down to Protectorate affiliate instead of official hero and have all the time you want for Tinkering. No training, no admin. You wouldn't have to do appearances or fundraising. Or Youth Guard workshop. It sounds like a pretty good deal to me."

"I don't want to drop down," Armsmaster stated flatly. "I want to make myself better. I want to be the best. If you can be the best, why would you settle for just mediocre? That's what an affiliate position is. Capes who couldn't cut it, who don't have what it takes, who are too weak or too lazy to be a real hero." His lip curled. "If you are the best, why would you let anyone take it away from you? I wouldn't. That is why I deserve to be Leader."

"You don't even do a bunch of the Leader stuff anyway," I pointed out. "Renick does the Wards' admin, Miss Militia does the Wards' training. That's part of why East-Northeast is all irregular – that stuff is supposed to be your duty. They're cutting you slack here, but you're not making it count in other ways." I paused, and scraped the side of my pudding cup with the spoon. Armsmaster watched me intently. "I can't see how it's sustainable at all. Guess they're starting to pick up on it too."

"How long," said Armsmaster, his voice tight, "would I have had? If last night hadn't happened?"

"How old is Kid Win?" I replied. "I mean, not his exact age; I'm not supposed to know that. Approximately how long does he have left in the Wards?"

"Three years," Armsmaster looked down at the pudding cup in his hand. "Would they have told me?"

"Three years then," I echoed. "As long as nothing bad happens to move it up earlier. I don't think they would have told you, not until they already had a couple of solid offers on your transfer. Because your reaction would be... unpleasant."

"Yes," He grimaced. "But Kid Win? Really? He's a Tinker, yeah, but he's not as good as me," muttered Armsmaster with his usual modesty. "He doesn't even know his specialty. He can't even look at a spec sheet without going cross-eyed at the numbers. How can they replace me with *him*?"
"Geez, I thought. Isn't this guy supposed to be Kid Win's mentor? That's why they've been holding onto him. At least until Kid Win ages out.

"Look at it from the point of view of a poor, overworked PRT administrator," I said calmly, putting down my spoon and resting my hands on the table in front of me. Non-aggressive. "We have Kid Win, who for now only logs something like fifteen to twenty hours on the bench per week until he graduates. He is young. True. He has a condition, also true. But that means the budget people can give him $2,000 and a box of scraps and he won't even notice that the numbers are pathetically low. He builds a dozen laser pistols with what he's given. If they can motivate him to keep making them, even if they're nothing impressive, he can arm the Wards non-lethally, and start arming the PRT. It doesn't matter if they only last six months before blowing up, if it's effectively a taser with an extra long range, it'd be faster than containment foam.

"They're pretty much taking advantage of him because he doesn't know any better, and I'm pretty sure he's the type of person who feels good when he can contribute something. He built Gallant's suit, after all."

I looked in the direction of where I thought Armstrong's eyes were. "But they're not replacing you with him. Not exactly. He's an alternative to you, who also happens to be easier to deal with. No offense."

Armstrong sat stiffly in his chair. "I've heard it before." The chair creaked. "So I should be looking into making equipment for other people, cheap builds, low resource cost, minimal maintenance, then..." His lips moved silently, and the spork retracted back into his gauntlet. A panel on the power suit's left bracer slid back smoothly, and his gauntleted hand began tapping the revealed virtual keyboard. "Needs stable power supply..."

"Unless you can think of anything better that you can do with your specialty," I noted. "If you really want to prove your value, you'd aim for something with as cheap a cost price as you can go, that you can make in quantity. If you can do it without it exploding after a few months of use, it would be safe enough to sell for a decent profit."

Armstrong typed furiously on his bracer console for a few moments. "Software," he announced. "I can produce software. A prediction program. I've been working on it off and on, but if I can get a working copy..." He trailed off, staring at something on his visor's internal display. "It would be cheap. Very cheap. Almost pure profit if it hits the market."

"As long as you remember to clear it with the patents department. Never let those dollar signs blind you."

"This will give me an edge over Kid Win," Armstrong said smugly. "But what about getting one over Dauntless?"

"Yeah, can't help with that," I answered. "You can't exactly out-Tinker the anti-Tinker. You could maybe grab his stuff while he's sleeping and dump it into the deepest hole you can find, but it would probably get you into more trouble than it's worth."

Armstrong studied me from behind his visor. "You are not what I expected, Braganca."

"What did you expect?"
"When I met you before, you kept going on about making everyone wear lip balm and eyeliner."

"That's because the studio lighting makes everyone without an eye cover squint. And everyone without a mouth cover looks like their lips are so chapped that they have mouth dandruff." I gave him a pointed look. "It's not like I get off on that kind of stuff."

"Could have fooled me," said Armsmaster with a trace of amusement. "You seemed to enjoy everyone's discomfort."

"Aren't Protectorate leaders supposed to do sensitivity training?" I shot back. "Sixteen hours a year. I wonder when someone last checked up on that."

"You wouldn't."

"You said you didn't know what to expect from me," I said, smiling.

"Not until I finish my prediction program."

"Well, when you're done, try it on me and I'll tell you how good it is." I reached out a hand and snagged a second pudding cup. "Want another?"

Armsmaster reached into the gap at the edge of his chestplate, where it joined his shoulder armor. "I shouldn't. I have nutrient paste. See?" His fingers dug into the gap and dragged out a long transparent tube with a cap on the end, which he flicked open. The end of the tube he bit between his teeth, and a yellowish substance the texture and viscosity of apple sauce was slowly drawn into his mouth.

I inspected it with caution. "It's not made from soybeans and lentils, is it?"

He lifted the tube from his mouth. "Nothing that tastes that good, I'm afraid."

I opened and ate a new cup of pudding while I watched him drink dinner through a straw. Dinner and dessert with Armsmaster, the leader of the Brockton Bay Protectorate. It was almost surreal. Going almost thirty-six hours with barely any sleep and using heavy-duty concealer and energy drinks to compensate helped with that impression.

After a while, Armsmaster re-capped his drinking tube and let go of it; it was automatically retracted into his armor. "I have been wondering," he said slowly, "what kind of camera would someone use, if they wanted it to be fireproof and produce high quality footage?"

"Well, I thought you'd know already," I began, voice level. It was easier than I thought it would be. I had expected this subject to come around eventually. I had, in fact, expected it from the moment Armsmaster's appointment was entered into the system. "Tinker equipment can easily do it. Wouldn't any camera in your power armor be able to do just that?"

"I was curious about cameras on the civilian market."

"I know that there are rugged cameras out there used for making nature documentaries," I answered, pausing to take a bite. "Exploring volcano craters, underwater geothermal vents, things like that. They're pretty expensive, though, a couple hundred thousand easily. And they're really bulky, to keep the important stuff from being damaged by the elements – they're usually attached to a robot or a dolly dragged by a couple of guys. It would be too heavy for one person to manage if they have to
aim and focus the thing at the same time. Does that answer your question?"

"It helps," Armsmaster conceded. "So it was a group behind that video." He didn't elaborate what video was meant; he didn't need to.

"I don't think you can arrest them for anything," I said. "I'm not sure if they've broken any laws, as far as I can tell. And you wouldn't be able do anything if they had. The Protectorate and PRT are supposed to be for cleaning up parahuman crime. If they're a bunch of civilians, then it would be under the jurisdiction of the Brockton Bay Police Department."

"I'm not going to arrest them," Armsmaster said in a low voice. "I just want to talk to them."

Now that didn't sound ominous at all.

"You should be careful about what public appearances you make in the next few weeks," I looked him straight in the visor. "If you go digging around town for a bunch of shady cameramen, you're asking to get punked again."

"You're right," he admitted, looking away. "I... When I get focused on something, sometimes I forget about other things." He straightened in his seat, as if coming to a decision. "But if they're not capes, I can prepare for them. Proximity and motion sensors on my suit. EMP blaster for the Halberd. I can find them first and shut them down..."

I sighed. "This is exactly why we have a problem here. You could be spending that time on working on your software thing. Do you want to keep being Leader or what?"

"Fuck." Armsmaster winced. "I really need to work on that."

"I think you need to talk to people more, honestly. It might help you prioritize. Anyway," I said, kicking my chair back and standing to collect the empty plastic cups and foil lids and dirty spoons, "I think I'm going home now. Next time, make an appointment the regular way, please?"

Armsmaster nodded and rose to his feet. "This was more productive than I thought it would be."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

I stopped at the break room to dump the cups into the trash can, and rinse the spoons and mugs. I left them on the drying rack where I'd found them; the #1 MOM would never know who'd used it. Before I switched off the light, I took one last look at the framed poster.

It wasn't my work, of course. But it was good. And maybe it was enough to convince me that I was in the mood for show tunes.
“MY FAMILY LOVED IT!” — LEGEND

ALEXANDRIA!
THE BROADWAY MUSICAL
STARRING JOSEPHINE VILLIERS
INTERLUDE

Paul had never thought himself vain. Perhaps he concerned himself more than most with how others perceived him, and therefore aimed to present himself as well as he could, but he would not call it vanity. He did not comb his hair in the mornings, or shine his shoes, or starch his collars as a means to inflate his own sense of self-importance. For him, it was never about narcissism. He did it because people treated others based on how they perceived them, and if he could choose how he presented himself, he could control how and what they thought of him.

It was about control.

There were things he couldn't change about himself, Paul knew, but certain aspects of his appearance were things that he could affect. And it worked – he would be scrutinized, but he could not be found wanting; those to whom he spoke would unconsciously place him in their mental hierarchy as someone who could perhaps be an equal. He would never seem shabby nor ostentatious, but rather, respectful without looking overdressed; he knew it was reassuring to those who might pay him money to consider him not just another stuffed shirt in a suit.

And right now, vanity was the farthest thing from his mind.

On this hot and sweltering afternoon, Paul wore denim and flannel, and a pair of beeswax-treated horsehide boots that had cost seven hundred dollars but definitely didn't look it. Especially not now, with fragrant dollops of cattle manure smearing the hand-stitched welted outsoles. In hindsight, it might not have been the best idea to wear nice shoes to meet a client in the field, but recently he had come into a great deal of money, and what use was money if one could not spend it on nice things? Paul very much liked nice things, and he respected the skill of craftsmen, and the best way to support the artists and makers was to pay them as he was being paid today.

"Mr. Mulligan, you can bring Boris out now," announced Paul, as he nudged a brick over the corner of the tarp he'd laid down on the grass to keep the legs of his tripod relatively clean.

Mr. Mulligan, a heavyset man in well-worn jeans and a mesh trucker cap, waved an arm. A field hand levered open the gate of the crush chute, and Boris stepped hesitantly out, snorting, his nostrils flaring wetly. They'd put down a trough of alfalfa hay, the expensive stuff, as the height of summer did not make pasturing prospects look particularly tempting.

Boris was a show-winning bull of Hereford ancestry, mostly brown with a few white splotches on his face and legs. Boris was more manageable than other unfixed bulls, but he disliked being kept too long in the crush chute, or in a travel trailer, and when a two thousand pound animal in a small metal cage got antsy, everyone in his vicinity got nervous too. Boris was breed registered and stud proven, which Paul understood to mean that he had a record of satisfied lady cows and their owners. But the lady cows he had visited were from the properties surrounding Mr. Mulligan's – Triple H, Ten Points, San Pasqual, Big Bend, and Tulare Rancheria, all within one hundred and fifty miles.

Boris had sire potential, as Mr. Mulligan had boasted many times, but his distress at traveling limited him to covering local herds only. Boris could do better. Boris was going to be a father many times
over through test tube samples and make Mr. Mulligan a lot of money, and Paul was going to help him.

Paul had tested it out. He could get closer to Boris than the field hands, without their having to resort to the crush chute, something that did not look good in stud catalogue promotional photographs. He had played chicken with Boris just to see how long it would take the bull to notice and react, and it had eventually come to Mr. Mulligan's notice. Paul had shrugged it off with a vague explanation about being "in touch with animal chakras", like an equivalent of a green thumb only for the warm-blooded, and offered his services in assisting with Boris' "services", to Mr. Mulligan's delight.

Now he had the opportunity to expand his portfolio with what he'd optimistically titled "wildlife photography", but it turned out a lot of it was high resolution photos of Boris' important bits. As Paul angled the lens of his camera through the slats of the paddock gate, he tried not to think of himself as a cow pimp.

>>> 

The sky had reddened to evening by the time Paul extricated himself from Mr. Mulligan's eager but one-sided conversation detailing Boris' many virtues. He had expressed interest in how much it cost to buy a chance at producing a prize-winning calf, and if it was more profitable to invest in dairy versus beef. Mr. Mulligan had almost leapt upon him in his earnestness, and Paul had been forced to stay and listen. Still, it was enlightening, although Paul would have preferred the information be delivered efficiently in the form of neat little diagrams with labelled axes. Definitely not the anecdotes that Mr. Mulligan helpfully supplied, which were punctuated with an occasional "Gramps told me" and "Dad always said".

But he was unfailingly polite, and Mr. Mulligan clamped a meaty and calloused hand on his shoulder one final time, calling him a "good lad", and Paul was sent on his way with a check made out to the tune of two thousand dollars for a few hours' work. Sure, he could have made more in costume, but doing this built connections, and he had been promised referrals for more commission work in the future. It would do.

He returned to the tidy little bungalow on the edge of the Monaro Station estate. It was within sight of Mr. Mulligan's own house, barely, and was kept ready for any visiting technicians who came to work on his property: veterinarians, repair crews for the irrigation pumps, OSHA inspectors, and consultants like himself and Kathleen.

Paul kicked off his boots, leaving them on the porch, and stepped into the house; he noticed that the lights were on in the small kitchen and combined dining room area, and Kathleen was bent over the table, surrounded by reams of paper. A pad of narrow arrow-shaped sticky notes rested in one hand, a highlighter pen in another.

"How's it going?" he asked. Their official duty was to be consultants and demonstrators of the new Model G384-FS tractor that Mr. Mulligan had purchased with a bunch of additional equipment, and Kathleen had spent the morning training the field hands how to run and charge the machines and interpret the diagnostics. Paul had recorded her lectures to be used in Agricorp's future tutorial CDs.
Kathleen rubbed her eyes tiredly. Her frizzy dark blonde hair was caught in a rough ponytail, and her usually colorful lipstick looked patchily applied. Her empty coffee cup was stained with purple marks around the rim, and she looked up when Paul entered the kitchen and stood in the doorway.

"Back from Boris? I don't think you're allowed to solicit personal work on an official visit," she said, voice sharp. It softened, and she continued wearily. "I'm almost done with this. It's way, way more work than it is usually, because apparently Mulligan isn't ponying up all the cash up-front for this deal. He's got debts, and those debts have been bought up, and now there are a couple of groups taking over management control." She shuffled a few pages. "It's got to be boring stuff to you, I know."

"Actually," Paul offered, "I looked it up, and it turns out I can make extra on the side if it's not directly competing with Agricorp. And I'm using my own equipment." It was true; his recent series of cash injections had allowed him to retire the loaner camera for use during his unofficial activities. "I'm interested, believe me. Why are they taking over? Mr. Mulligan kept telling me about Monaro Station being in his family for generations."

Paul was enrolled in summer classes: economics, finance, business management, property law. The Agricorp Industries internship had stipulated that he take a number of classes on their approval list, generously paid for. He took as many as could, because it was free course credits, and it would give him more slots during the semester for the art electives he really wanted. It was a heavy course load, but he had always been a reader, although he could never say he was naturally inclined toward studiousness. If he kept it up, he might be able to graduate early, or maybe even turn a minor into a double degree.

It was proof of success, earned on his own, and thus worthy of pride. And best of all, it was the kind of thing that no one could accuse him of not having earned fairly, and that was a satisfaction of its own.

"Mulligan bought a couple hectares of riparian prime ten years ago, but he didn't have enough left to properly develop it and it's not producing what it could," explained Kathleen. She swept a few stray hairs behind an ear, and spread the papers out in front of her. "He went to the bank, never paid it back, and the debt was sold on to a new group. Instead of demanding repayment through asset seizure or mortgage, they're taking management out of his hands. Mulligan gets to keep the name, title, and a cut of the profits, but he's getting sidelined. He gets the hobby cows and a token patch, but the rest is being run by the new group who are financing the equipment." She frowned. "I'm pretty sure they're loopholing antitrust laws, since we've been getting orders from a bunch of properties in this area, and they're all using the same accountant."

"Better not look too deeply, right?" Paul remarked, with a smirk. "Don't bite the hand."

"Yeah, no shit." Kathleen rolled her eyes. "We both get a cut. That's fair. But they're making me earn it this time. Fucking HDG..." she muttered, and reached for her coffee cup.

Paul froze. "HDG?"

"HDG Securities. You know, the big one, out of LA?" She looked at him quizzically, as if she expected this common knowledge to be obvious to everyone. "They're using shells and subsidiaries so I have to follow up with a paper trail. You should know this – aren't you minoring in finance?" Kathleen raised her cup to her lips and took a quick sip. "I'm surprised you didn't apply to intern there, if you managed to score this gig. Agricorp is pretty exclusive, and I would never have expected a pure arts major to get in unless they knew someone."
"I passed the application and evaluation process like everyone else," Paul said stiffly.

"Sure. Whatever," said Kathleen, with a casual flick of her ponytail. "When you get out of here, remember me, okay? Until then, can you give me a hand sorting these?" She gestured at the dining table covered in papers. "I want to be able to see the table again."

Paul sat down at the table next to Kathleen, and numbly helped her pile the papers into groups, paperclipping together stacks as indicated by their colored sticky note labels. One pile for Mr. Mulligan to sign tomorrow morning. One pile for representatives of American Equipment Corp LLC, one for HydroTech Solutions, California Rural Development Group... His hand stopped when his eye caught on the stylized candle and flame logo of HDG Securities. He skimmed to the bottom, turning to the next page, and the next.

Standard legalese: burden of debt and liability passed onto signatory parties, Nathaniel M. Mulligan named de facto proprietor, day-to-day operations subjected to authority of advisory board appointed by investors...

He skipped to the last page.

Signed, Howard Loconte, CFO HDG Securities.

Signed, Naomi Villiers, Senior Partner, Investments.

Naomi Villiers.

His mother.

"Paul? Paul? Hellooo!" called Kathleen. She waved a hand over his face. "Flashback overload from too much Boris? Are you alright?"

Paul blinked. "Sorry. Just blanked out at the wall of text here. It suddenly felt like I was pulling an all-nighter cram session for a moment," he explained, putting on a weak smile for her benefit. Reasonable enough excuse.

Kathleen gave him a warm grin. "It gets better when you graduate, trust me. When you have a nightmare with your professor telling you your exam was yesterday, it feels pretty good when you can wake up and remind yourself that you finished college years ago."

"Yeah, can't wait for that," mumbled Paul. He put the papers back down. "Let's just clean this stuff up for now and then we can worry about what to make for dinner."

Paul helped Kathleen clear away the papers into labelled folders and then stack them into her briefcase. He carefully tried not to think of his mother and the argument they'd had months ago, about how he didn't need her help, how he didn't need anyone's help, and all those words that sounded so pathetically adolescent in retrospect. He'd never quite said "Leave me alone, you don't understand me!" but it was a close run thing there.

>>>
"Hello, is this Fiernan Event Planning? I'm looking to book a venue for a bachelor party, preferably a night club, but I'd like some information, because some of my guests have specific needs," said Paul into his burner phone.

The voice on the other end spoke back, sounding inexplicably bouncy. "Yes, hello! This is Gwen from Fiernan Events. Our caterer contractors have non-allergy and vegetarian options to suit everyone."

"I have a guest who uses a wheelchair," Paul scanned his prepared script. "Are there are any clubs that are handicapped accessible? Elevators, ramps, private rooms with enough aisle space, I mean. And bathrooms on the ground floor."

"Let me check..." replied Gwen, and Paul heard the clicking of a computer mouse. "Yes, there are a couple that meet your requirements. Gilded Cage, Speakeasy, Diamond Dozen, Neverest, Gianni's, Sinaloense. We can narrow it down if you have a budget or specific location in mind."

"Can you tell me more about Neverest and Gianni's?" asked Paul. "How is the parking? We're getting a party bus and it needs to be able to use the handicapped parking spaces. This is really important to my guest. And it's the best man's job to make the best party."

"We're here to help with that," Gwen smoothly assured him. "I can send you the floor plans so you can check with your friend. We want to make this the best experience for everyone."

"Thank you," said Paul, smiling. "It's shocking how many places aren't handicapped-friendly."

>>> Paul patted the liquid latex over his nose and cheeks with a silicone spatula, sculpting it to change the contours of his face and render his features unrecognizable as his. While he waited it for to dry, he smeared the latex over his hands, spreading it out until it became a thin, flexible layer all over his palms and fingers. It felt like glue, and peeled off like glue when it dried, but it kept his fingerprints off things, and was not as conspicuous as wearing gloves in summer.

The liquid latex was a staple of stage makeup that he'd purchased at a professional beauty supply store; actors used it to change the shape and texture of their skin, from extra wrinkles when playing an older character as he was doing now, or wounds and scars for less child-friendly productions. He'd taken a class in film production last year and he figured it was good to practice some of the theatrical makeup techniques he'd learned.

This heist was something he'd been planning for two weeks, following the celebrity rags and online tabloids until certain patterns became obvious. There were several high profile clubs, the really expensive ones where the guests racked up tabs in the hundreds of thousands, where events were held to celebrate the end of filming for a TV series or a movie – wrap parties, as they were called in the industry – or the release of a music album. Occasionally it was the release of a celebrity from jail or rehab.
Anyone who was anyone wanted to be seen in attendance, and the club management indulged their patrons in this by rolling out the red carpet and the velvet ropes at the front doors. Not that Paul was interested in entering through the front doors. He was planning on going in through the back, which took away much of the glamour, but then again, glamour wasn't the goal of this job. It wasn't really much of a heist either, since a true heist required a lot more planning and teamwork, and Paul was essentially an opportunist doing a one man job.

Paul planned to pick pockets at Club Neverest on the evening of DJ Apex's drop party.

He had done jobs like this before, but nothing this big. He'd sneaked into strip clubs in the past, in his first week out, taking loose bills from the patrons here and there where they wouldn't be missed. He never took from the girls: he figured they'd earned it and they were artists in their own way, which he could respect. The gains were modest at first, one thousand here, two thousand there. Until he had been at the Ruby Slippers after the Lakers had won a major game, and he had stumbled across a shoebox full of cash and, naturally, took it for himself.

That was when he realized that going after celebrities made nighttime adventures very efficient when effort was measured to reward. The rich and famous would hardly miss what he took from them, especially later on in the evening when they'd had a few drinks, or more than a few, and could not be trusted with car keys, let alone their wallets. Paul figured he had saved a few lives when he'd put their car keys out of reach. It was his one little good deed.

He never tried to convince himself that anything he did was morally justifiable. Stealing was stealing, and he was not being a Robin Hood about it, because he only gave to himself, and at this point it would be laughable to consider himself the wretched and hungry. But he had his limits, and he sometimes did a little good, and he had never dropped into any behavior remotely deserving of the title "supervillain".

The latex on his face had dried now. Paul sponged on a layer of foundation to blend the edges where it met his real skin, and applied a few swipes in a second, darker foundation shade on his forehead and cheeks. It changed the shape of his face, and he appeared older, more worn, and with his dark hair, he looked like a Hispanic version of himself. Paul wondered if such an impersonation was in poor taste, but then again his paternal grandmother had been born in Brazil so he could probably get away with calling himself Latino. He decided not to think too deeply about it, since he'd wear a ski mask over his face anyway.

His last preparation was to unpack the small body-mounted Galaxa Satellite action camera. It was the cheapest of the cameras in Galaxa's consumer line, and it was the model that BMXers attached to their handlebars, and spelunkers wore on their helmets. It definitely wasn't professional gear, and the picture quality showed, but the build was robust and a single battery charge was more than enough for his needs.

"Cape life video diary," he said. "Day twenty-three."
Parvenu could taste a man's fear.

She could taste a woman's too, if she wanted, and she wasn't just limited to fear. Happiness she could also taste, and it was pleasant, but nothing was better than true exultant delight, when she could get it. Sadness, desperation, fury, pain, shock, loneliness, envy – the things people felt registered in her mind as a colorful palette of tastes, every person perfectly unique, all mixed together in lovely combinations that could inadequately be described as a supermarket's condiments aisle squirted over the floor like a piece of modern performance art.

It was easier for her to taste the minds of people as a whole, like a combination of all the drinks at the gas station soda fountain, each cup mixed in different ratios, everyone different but with similar base notes. It was more difficult to pull it apart for a specific flavor, to confirm that, yes, this drink is one-third lemonade and one-quarter raspberry punch. For most people, she registered the taste and that was it – after that, she remembered them, and knew where they were, and they could not wander off without her noticing.

It was for this reason she had been shafted with tonight's assignment: babysitting clients of Mile High Talent Management, who were useful in generating revenue and providing a legitimate front for the boss' activities. They were useful, but not really likeable, not after the fame had gotten into their heads. And if it weren't for her mask and bodysuit proclaiming who she was, who she really worked for, they would have treated her with attitude; the agents and contract negotiators of the MHTM worked for the clients, not the other way around, and it was something people like DJ Apex never got tired of reminding everyone.

Parvenu had to tolerate him for one night. She was his parole officer, and she had been ordered to keep him and a few of their heavy hitter earners from wandering off with the wrong people, or getting caught pants down by said wrong people.

Protect the investments, said the boss. She could do that, and prove she was more than junior associate material. It was a damn shame she couldn't have a glass from the ten-thousand dollar champagne magnum DJ Apex had ordered for the Neverest VIP room and was currently splashing messily over the white sofas and the body-glittered décolletage of his two "hunnies".

At least she could taste his pleasure, and derive some enjoyment for this waste of her evening.

DJ Apex's feelings... they were unremarkable in depth and breadth for an unpowered human. But tonight they were very strong, buoyed up by the news that his most recent single had gone gold and had the potential to go further. His pleasure was not buttercream wedding bliss, whipped and frothy and clean. More like a gluttonous thrill, dark and sticky molasses with a hint of spiced rum that warmed while it burned.

Parvenu closed her eyes behind her mask and expanded her senses, until she could feel everyone in the Neverest, until she could feast upon their emotions, second-hand though they might be, as if she was plating up leftovers from the finest, most elaborate royal banquet.

Delicious.

This was what made cities worth living in.

She felt DJ Apex head to the bathroom, and she signaled one of the club's bouncers to follow him. They wouldn't go in with him, but they would knock on the door and drag him out if he was spending too much time in a cubicle. It was easier to manage the artist when he knew there was
someone waiting outside who could burst in and interrupt whatever unsavory bit of hedonism he wished to sample.

He could do it on his own time, and not on company property. The company didn't want coroners investigating if one of the clients did something spectacularly stupid. And the boss, as usual, did not want to lose an investment.

Apex came back after a handful of minutes, rubbing his nose on his sleeve. His taste had changed; it had a sharp sherbet tang to it now, fizzling away merrily on Parvenu's tongue. He waved a waitress over, ordered a handle of vodka, and patted his pocket for the roll of cash in the fancy silver clip he normally carried; he had once complained to her that no one could tell how rollin' he was when he used a wallet, and he liked his bills rolled instead of flat, for various... reasons. Parvenu didn't ask. She didn't really want to know.

His frantically searching hands dug through the pockets of his baggy camo-print pants, coming up with a silver money clip but no roll of bills.

"Fuck!" he swore. "Who the fuck took my cash?"

One of his girls, in a short sequined dress and rhinestoned platform heels, spoke up. "You had it before, when you ordered the champagne."

"Yeah, I know!" said Apex, angrily tearing away the cushion on the champagne-stained sofa. "I had it before I went to the shitter. I had it when I was in there, when I was..." He trailed off. "Some motherfucker fuckin' jacked me in there!" he shouted.

"You didn't just drop it?" Parvenu scoffed. Idiot.

"No!" yelled Apex, anger and frustration boiling away without the thin veneer of his inhibitions holding it in check. That had been stripped away several hours ago. "Use your voodoo magic and get that motherfucker! And get me my money back!"

"Did you see anything?" she asked. When he shook his head, she concentrated, sweeping through the club, picking up the signals of the less valuable clients among the attendees. All accounted for, no unusual stress or anxiety that she could taste. One of them would probably need a bucket within the next ten minutes.

He lost his money in the bathroom...

Parvenu brushed against the minds of people en route to the bathrooms, feeling their urgency burst upon her senses, aromatic and almost pungent, liquid rushes of relief, salmon roe caviar and cod liver oil. Into the ground floor men's room her senses glided, lightly grazing on the mixed palette of flavors of each person, with nothing unusual about them but the organic satisfaction on the forefront of their minds.

Nothing unusual.

Except...

She skimmed through again, feeling out the flavors, spending a bit more time with each one. Until she found the odd one. Someone in the men's room whose feelings were more muted than usual: warm and oily satisfaction, not unlike the other bathroom occupants, but this one was dulled and
somehow distant, like someone on the edge of her range, where she should be able to feel it at the same strength at the others.

This felt wrong.

Parvenu stood up, straightening the skirt she wore over her bodysuit. "There's an intruder in the bathroom. Maybe a cape," she said. She turned to the bouncers. "Call for security, armed. They're coming with me." She glanced at DJ Apex, who was sulking between his two girls, leaning back with arms folded and his basketball kicks resting on the low table amidst a mess of dripping champagne buckets and tapas trays. "Apex. Stay here. I'm going to use my voodoo magic and you are not going to move a fucking inch."

She swept out of the room, bouncer trailing behind her, murmuring into his earpiece with a low voice.

She could taste it stronger the closer she got to the bathroom door. Still distant, still only a basic flavor, no nuances, no depth, no texture, no aftertaste. Parvenu hated it; it felt like she was going in half-blind. She relied on her taste to read people and manage them, and if they didn't want to be managed, she could make them heed in a way that didn't visibly mark them.

It was what made her valuable to the boss. She tried it now, sending her taste outwards – blasting it out in a wall of sensation, everything magnified to the point of overload and beyond, bitter and salty and sour lashing mercilessly out, scouring through perception, further and further, until it reached choking incapacitation.

She couldn't taste the floury graininess that she interpreted as unconsciousness. Looked like she was going to have to roust this intruder out herself. Ugh.

The security guards were heavy, reliable men with closely cropped hair and black polo shirts with the sleeves stretched out by muscle. At a nod from Parvenu, they surrounded the door, tasers in hand, and bulled into the bathroom shouting at all the occupants to clear out. She heard them groan, their disappointment – it tasted bitter, of course – their arguing about only being halfway finished, their discomfort at being seen at the urinal troughs.

As they were kicked out, she tasted them one by one. All humans, no cape.

"Miss Parvenu, it's empty. The stalls too," reported Hernandez – bald, goatee, vinegary anxiety peppering up his normal semolina-smooth calm. "We scanned the room and checked the ventilation ducts. Didn't see DJ Apex's money either. You wanna come look?"

"Yes," said Parvenu, and she stepped into the men's bathroom, wrinkling her nose as the physical smells of sour piss and urinal cakes interfered with her mental tasting. "It's still here. I can feel it... Him?"

She toed open the first stall door with a heeled boot. "I know you're here. You're one of us, I can tell," she called, pushing out her senses in a lapping wave, not to overload, but to foster a sense of warmth and trust and cooperation. Her voice was smooth and overlaid with sweetness, rich and strong and pleasant – coffee and cream, chocolate fondue – pouring out in friendly little ripples. "Did you come to talk? I want to talk. So let's talk. You don't come to Elite territory unless you want to make a statement. And I'm here and willing to listen."

There.
Fifth stall down.

She could feel it – *him* – flicker into her mind as a swirling margarita drum of emotion, and then it dulled again. But for that instant she could taste a man's fear, acid and sharp, a mouthful of cold pebbles heavy on the tongue.

Parvenu approached the fifth door. No legs were visible under the gap, but she kicked it open anyway.

"Boo!" she cried, and tasted what she knew to be the mind of a cape.

It was deeper than anything that the mind of an unpowered could produce. Everything was richer and brighter, more intense, almost overwhelming with the information it carried, but she had trained herself to interpret it bit by bit, associating each vibrant section with flavors and combinations she already knew, so she would not be carried away by the tide of sensation.

This cape tasted... dry. Dry and dusty, a sponge left out in the sun, the attic floor after years of abandonment. Stale, the subtly starchy taste of week-old bread; stale, the smell of the air in an underground cave that no one had breathed in ten thousand years. Parvenu had an impression of a vast echoing space, and an endless number of vast spaces, stacked layer on top of layer, so closely compressed into one another that they became indistinguishable from this one immeasurable chamber, of which she was experiencing the smallest, most insignificant corner. This was... interesting. She would remember it.

It flickered, grew dull again. She tasted dust: mostly bland, slightly salty, powdery to her senses. But nothing like the boundless void, nothing close to that. She blinked, and inspected the toilet stall. It was empty.

The taste of his mind faded from her own as the physical distance between them grew greater. Soon it was entirely out of her range.

She stepped back out, jerking her head at the row of toilet stalls. "Rope this room off. Get the heat sensors, the metal detectors, the black lights, the crime scene team," she ordered. "No one in without my say so. I've gotta make a call to the boss." She groaned inwardly. "Unknown cape, unknown name, looks like a Stranger. Passwords from now on."

"Ma'am," acknowledged Hernandez, and began murmuring commands into his earpiece.

Parvenu crossed her arms and kicked the door of the toilet stall, which smacked into the wall with a loud bang. "And I still have to deal with DJ-fucking-Apex. *Fuck this.*"

Paul pressed himself against the bathroom wall. He could hear the security guards politely but firmly ordering the men at the urinals out, who complained about not being finished. Each toilet stall door
was knocked on, and the guests ejected, fumbling at their belts.

He was trembling. This had never happened before. He should have expected it. Paul felt stupid and unprepared; events were spiraling out of his control. His intangible form matched his mental state – unsettled, unsteady – a gray, flickering blur that shimmered opalescent, like hummingbirds' wings to the naked eye. With a professional camera set to the highest shutter speed, he knew his body could plainly be seen.

He took a deep breath, then another, forcing himself to be calm, to remember the swimming pool and the cool water that washed over him, the light pressure and gentle drifting of peace. He faded away as the security guard barged in, eyed the empty stall, and called "Empty!" to one of his colleagues.

Then the woman strode in, heels clicking on the tiled floor, the woman with the beautiful voice.

"I know you're here," she said.

HOW?!

"You're one of us."

Her voice sang. The words that she spoke were almost musical, rich and lyrical, as melodious and smooth as Josie's voice when she practiced her scales. He remembered listening to Josie; he remembered the taste of hot chocolate, and the sound of her voice...

Wait.

What the fuck.

Josie didn't drink hot chocolate – she couldn't; she had always been on a strict diet for as long as he could remember. She drank hot lemon tea with ginger and honey. Someone was messing with his mind, trying to distract him with implanted false memories. He swallowed.

Fuck. He was going to have to do something he really hated doing. But he lacked the time to calm himself down, to meditate, to push away his panic and recite the Litany Against Fear over and over until he knew with certainty that he was bulletproof.

Paul pushed himself against the wall, and stepped slowly through it.

It hurt, just like it hurt every time he had tried it, whenever he actively moved himself through solids in his not-fully-insubstantial state – instead of falling passively through as he had done with his mattress at home. There was resistance as he forced himself through; his body still had some substance, and it could feel pain, and it felt like the tiny particles of clay in the wall tiling and the less-tiny particles of the concrete blocks of the wall were scraping up against every tiny particle of him. At this creeping speed, it was like fine grit sandpaper chafing against him, inside and out. At higher speeds, the sandpaper became a cheese grater.

Paul pierced through the resistance – finally – and staggered, and almost fell, took a deep breath, then another. He walked away, through another wall – this time it was easier, now that he had calmed down somewhat – until he found himself behind the club, in a narrow back alley littered with cigarette stubs and empty beer crates stacked eight feet high.

Stealing was unsustainable.
It was only a matter of time until he got caught for real, and this was just too close. He had not expected to meet another parahuman, if he could call that a "meeting". He hadn't seen her face, and he was sure she didn't see him. But it was a reminder of how vulnerable he was, and how much worse it could have gone if he had been just a bit slower, a bit less controlled.

He still needed money, though. At least he had emptied the cash out of a few wallets, and taken DJ Apex's roll of bills in his moment of distraction. He estimated that his take tonight would be well over five thousand dollars, cut unexpectedly short as it was.

Before Paul reached the street, he pulled off his ski mask and unclipped the camera from his chest harness. The sidewalk in front of Club Neverest was barricaded with red velvet ropes, holding back the eager tide of paparazzi hungry for a chance to photograph some big name stars. Stars like the rising musician DJ Apex.

He had footage of DJ Apex doing questionable things in the bathroom. That could be valuable to the right people, and very, very interesting to everyone else. Paul smiled.

Maybe there was a less risky way to make some money.
One of the most disconcerting things about living in Earth Bet is the knowledge that because it is named Earth Bet, it is only logical to assume that there is an Earth Aleph out there, and probably an Earth Gimel too. So far, only the confirmation of Earth Aleph's existence has entered common knowledge, thanks to the generous efforts of a mysterious group with unauthorized access to Professor Haywire's technology.

The government has kindly informed us citizens that the gap between worlds only allows information to transfer, not people, and therefore we should not be afraid of our evil twins evilly twirling their mustaches and coming to kidnap our families and evilly tie them to train tracks. As evil twins are naturally wont to do, of course.

Most people don't seem to be able to differentiate parallel Earths from opposite Earths, and the government hasn't seen fit to correct their assumptions. However, at times they can be somewhat capable in reassuring the citizenry. The influx and dissemination of Earth Aleph technology, movies, TV programs and other consumer entertainments go a long way to placate what might have been panic and hysteria at the revelation that when the divergence occurred in 1982, anyone over twenty-eight years old probably has a dimensional twin. Who may or may not sport devilishly stylish facial hair.

There are things that make Earth Bet, our Earth, different – special – compared to Earth Aleph. Some people, the religious sort mostly, would say it is the advent of Scion (whether it is His first or second appearance is a whole other debate) that makes Bet unique. But most people, myself included, believe it to be the advent of capes that changed everything on the branching trouser legs of dimensional divergence.

You start to notice how so many small things are different, if you watch Earth Aleph episodic sitcoms with any regularity, especially the ones about young professionals living in New York City. They possess a certain careless ease when going about town that real Bet New Yorkers don't have – they've long since replaced it with a guarded wariness you can often pick up in anyone who lived through Behemoth's 1994 visit, or anyone in general who has survived the attentions of an Endbringer.

The people are subtly different; all our lives are different. If you are curious enough to ask a friend or a relative who lived before the divergence, they will not hesitate to tell you about how much things suck these days. Once you steer them away from complaining about how noisy and undisciplined the children are – that is something that hasn't changed, no matter how many dimensions you care to travel – you can pick up on the little details that make Earth Bet truly unique.

As I have been told – from conversations with aforementioned relatives – insurance premiums have risen since the 1980's, beyond what can be accountable for by currency inflation. Insuring belongings for some people nowadays turns up inconvenient annual increases requiring a more carefully balanced yearly budget, and the sacrifice of coverage options considered too expensive or too unlikely. For others, the people that live in big cities, the standard response to an enquiry about insurance options is a polite "Fuck off, we don't want to have anything to do with you".

The general trend one can gather from following market patterns like this suggests that life on Earth Bet has become significantly more unstable. Nothing is guaranteed with full confidence anymore; no one is fully confident in anything at all these days, especially not the markets. Economic expansion
has tanked, and not even the most optimistic forecasters can massage a magical green arrow of net positivity out of the available data.

How can a garment-making business be expected to take the risk of signing a futures contracts for a million pounds of Indonesian cotton per year from the next five years' harvest, if the cotton farm can be flooded by a tsunami or wiped out with a water echo at any time? How can a cotton farm invest in and afford the payment installments for mechanical harvesters if they aren't guaranteed a buyer beyond the current season's crop?

Things like this have made the hippies of the First World parade around in gleeful triumph because now all those poor Third Worlders cannot have their lands and labor exploited by greedy monocle-bedecked capitalists. They don't seem to have noticed that it has affected the poor of the First World, too. Basic commodities are more expensive than they could be, and wages are lower than they should be, as businesses are managed to minimize risks than to maximize efficiency. All those deadweight losses accruing left and right is more than enough to make an actuary trigger.

But there are some silver linings to be found, at least. While many ordinary people prefer to keep their money in mattresses and closets instead of in banks, there are some things for which they will empty the old sock drawer. And that reason is escapism.

It is the entertainment industry that has thrived while the commodity markets have flatlined – not enough to pull up the declining economy, but enough that it is seen as worth the investment, worth the effort, and worth the risk.

Part of that is capes. The people who offer a little spot of hope in this grim and dreary world; the people in the bright costumes whose powers defy all the known rules, who perhaps have the power to defy what most know and never dare to articulate as the decline of modern civilization. These are the people who represent the existence of a slim chance of hope, like any hundred million dollar lottery ticket draw, which promotes the notion of "It might just be you one day!". Or barring that, "It might just be your neighbor!".

I think that is the appeal of cape entertainment; I have never been much of a cape geek personally, only educating myself for the practical purposes of ensuring that my comfortable existence can comfortably continue. But I know that people revere capes, the bright and colorful heroes: they place their hopes upon them, entrust them with their dreams, and go through their less bright and less colorful lives with the expectation that they will not be let down; they can't be, or else there is no hope left in this grim world.

And it just so happens that the role of the Image and PR departments of the PRT is to indulge these fantasies – to make the capes in our charge not only appear heroic in deed and action, but also in hearts and minds.

Hey, it's not only the paramilitary grunt squads who get the PRT's "We're fighting a war" speech.
Braganca:
Image Dept. [Daily Operations Planner] for Dec 3, 2010 has been updated following yesterday's discussion between Deputy Director Renick, Aegis, and Miss Militia.
PS. You might want to show up early and bring consolation refreshments.
— Staff Co-ord Desk

Staff Co-ord Desk:
Which place in town makes the best sandwiches?
Is there a group order list?
— Braganca

Braganca:
Lenny's by the Palanquin is the best.
PS. We like turkey club + french dressing and meatball marinara.
— Staff Co-ord Desk

Staff Co-ord Desk:
Has anyone told you that you're the best?
— Braganca

"...And one turkey club lunch set, with French dressing," I read from the list on my work phone. "Meatball marinara, orange soda and corn chips. And pastrami on rye with extra pickle and extra mustard, but hold the mayonnaise. Actually, can you make that two pastrami on rye sandwiches?"

"Yes sir. Will that be all?" asked the young man behind the counter. "Your order will take a few minutes to get ready, sir."

He wore a hairnet and an apron, both of which looked clean and in good condition. That boded well for an eatery in what was popularly condemned a "villain city", a place where the rule of law was subverted by local criminal elements, with the full knowledge of legitimate law enforcement personnel. If there are places in Brockton Bay that the police consider a no-go zone, then it is only reasonable to suspect that there are also places that the health inspectors dare not tread.

The dark-haired woman next in the order queue gave an emphatic cough. I eyed her: around my age or close enough, with long hair tied up in a ponytail. She wore a crisp white dress shirt and shiny polished knee boots that I might, under duress, admit were as nice as my own cordovan brogues.

"Must be a busy day at the office," she remarked. Her posture was relaxed, but her fingers tapped impatiently on the wallet she held in one hand.

"I'm just really hungry," I replied, watching the sandwich artist wrap paper around each order and place them in a cardboard box. Over thirty sandwiches, assorted bags of chips, cookies, muffins, and cans of drinks. It was easily over two hundred dollars' worth of food, but discretionary budgets were
meant to be spent if you didn't want them to be hamstrung by Accounting in next year's round of allocations. "The whole 'reading the order list' was me getting one of everything on the menu, without looking suspicious." I shot her a knowing smirk. "But I actually take it all home to pig out. Now you know my big secret."

The sandwich guy put the last wrapped sandwich in the box and rang up my order. $267.50 after sales tax. What was the rate for this state, anyway?

"Hmm." The woman stepped up in the line as I left the counter, hefting the cardboard box into my arms. "You keep your badge out of sight, but your lanyard is navy blue." She winked. "Enjoy your lunch, Mr. PRT."

I left Lenny's Sandwiches wondering who had joked whom, and if so, who had done it best.

>>> 

I carried the cardboard box – now two sandwiches lighter after a brief stop at the staff co-ordination desk – under one arm as I tapped my badge on the door scanner.

"Lunch is here," I announced, stepping into the brightly-decorated open plan central workroom that was the Image Department's unofficially designated Creation Space. "Don't all rush in at once..."

I stopped and took in the atmosphere of anxiety in the room; the artists of the image team uneasily sitting at their desks, attention entirely centered on their work and not on goofing off, not throwing ideas around, or loudly debating the merits of drafted concept designs. They, uncharacteristically, looked as industrious as the PRT's admin department, and as somber as the stiffs in the Accounting. Their patchouli-scented artist souls looked as if they were wilting away from the unaccustomed tedium.

My eyes narrowed, scanning the Creation Space.

Ah. She was here earlier than expected.

Shadow Stalker, costume looking a little worse-for-wear, leaning against the wall a few yards from the door. She didn't look up when the door beeped and opened, instead choosing to tap blithely away on her civilian cellphone.

Yesterday, Renick and Aegis had elaborated on the little hints Clockblocker dropped during the Wards planning session, about Shadow Stalker being "in trouble". I knew the whole story, being witness to the events two days ago, but the sanitized version handed down from on high was definitely less troubling after much of the detail had been heavy handedly redacted.

Shadow Stalker was in trouble for going on patrol outside the official patrol schedule, without a Protectorate hero supervisor or a Wards patrol partner. She was in trouble for not calling the console when she saw evidence of a crime being perpetrated, instead choosing to approach and initiate an unauthorized attack. She was in trouble for not bringing her Wards cellphone with the installed GPS
tracker and distress call on speed dial. She had gotten injured, mostly minor, but with her previous record of disciplinary issues (this didn't surprise me one bit) it was enough for Renick to rescind her patrol privileges for the rest of the year.

Aegis agreed, and had signed off on the forms, carefully backdated so that the Youth Guard, if they ever looked into it, would never find anything but the asses of those involved covered in several papier mâché'd layers of legal statements. Shadow Stalker was still signed on for a minimum of fifteen hours a week of Ward work, so her patrol time would be taken up by extended console jockeying. Renick still had to throw in a couple of hours of "constructive time", as Shadow Stalker wouldn't be participating in the Wards' Cause preparations, which counted as community outreach activities – although she would be appearing at the actual event, closely supervised.

And thus Shadow Stalker had been assigned "constructive time" with the image team, so she could pick up some work experience and build some character (I personally did not think that she was lacking in this quality, for all her faults) while learning to appreciate how much effort went into maintaining the costume she had an unfortunately regular habit of wrecking.

Normally, I wouldn't consider myself an authority figure in the workplace. While there are many people on the pecking order lower than myself, not just limited to those who make coffee runs or sort paperclips, there are also many others on the ladder above, handing down assignments and jacking my schedule whenever they need emergency duct tape for a PR coverup. I take orders from the PRT brass. It's part of my job description. But one thing that I made damn sure of when I signed the employment contract was that when it comes down it, when creative decisions get involved, my input takes precedence over any cape's objections.

In most instances, it's an easy "Shut up and let me do my job" card to pull. Most Protectorate heroes really hate it when people from the PRT tell them how to cape better; the more conscientious ones would be aware of the extreme hypocrisy of their telling the professional propaganda mill how to spin faster. In this instance, however, it looked like my colleagues had deferred authority – and responsibility – to me. Mr. Interim-Creative-Director Braganca.

I set the box of sandwiches on the central workspace table, scarred in patches where someone had used a pen knife without laying down a cutting mat first. A few workers at their desks gave shifty glances at the cardboard box, but they didn't say anything.

Time for a group speech, I thought. Workplace authority comes at a steep price.

"Let's have a time out for lunch," I declared. I pulled out plastic-wrapped muffins, cookies studded with chocolate and nuts, and Lenny's sandwiches parceled out in individual papery logs, names marked with a sticker on the side. "Come pick up your free food before someone else takes it." I waited for people to leave their seats and gather around the sandwiches. "December is the busiest time of the year for us, and you've probably all heard the speech last year or the year before, about us all pulling through and working together, getting stuff done with the power of perseverance.

"I don't think it really helps, because we all know there is no magical power to guide us through, if we believe hard enough. But I believe in the power of caffeine, and the lure of overtime. I believe in Christmas bonuses. So just hold on until Christmas, and then you can sleep as much as you want until someone wakes you up on the first of January. Enjoy the food and take an hour off to do whatever. Right. Eat up, guys. I'm out."

I quickly grabbed my two pastrami sandwiches and a bottle of water, stepping away from the hungry artists (because no one can feel hungry quite like an artist can), doing their vulture circling around the
helpless box of sandwiches.

"Shadow Stalker," I said. "Let's have a talk."

She ignored me, attention on her cellphone screen.

"You know, I don't mind if you spend a month on the bench." I kept my voice soft. "Maybe even two or three. The costume stays nice and pretty that way. Much better than being burnt to a crisp, right?"

"Fine." She snapped her phone shut. The metal face rose. I was taller than her, but that stern-featured face frozen in perpetual disapproval had its own unique form of intimidation factor. "I let you talk right now, and you can shut the fuck up later."

"Generous, but fair," I said, and gestured with an arm. "The workshop is empty." I followed Shadow Stalker in, noting the frayed edge on the hem of her cloak. The door I left a few inches ajar. It signaled private conversation, please keep out with a good dash of nothing suspicious is happening in here, move along.

The workshop was a messier version of Creation Space. This was the place where things were built, where ideas on paper in the main room became real, tangible things, the prototypes and the costume pieces that the Protectorate heroes and Wards wore to fight crime. Work benches spread out in rows, each station dedicated to a different purpose: industrial sewing machines and sergers, belt sander and jigsaw, laser cutter and 3D printer, airbrushes, blowtorches, soldering irons. Along the wall, a row of battered model mannequins stood on adjustable stands, some with masking taped pads on the chest and shoulders to simulate an adult's proportions on a teenager-sized dummy.

I set the sandwiches and bottle of water in front of me, and pulled out a stool. Shadow Stalker didn't sit down. She folded her arms and glared at me through the holes in her mask.

"Well?" demanded Shadow Stalker. "Aren't you going to flail your limp wrists around and tell me what an honor it is to be a Ward, and how I'm a waste of potential? Because I'm not buying your wannabe cool boss routine."

How would my mother have handled this?

It was not a train of thought I liked venturing down, because for so long I had told myself that we were nothing alike. But like me, she was routinely acknowledged as being very, very good at what she did. And although I couldn't find it in myself to agree with her actions and her rationalization for such, her consistent results were something that I could grudgingly admire. She would have put herself in the position of the authority figure: not threatening, no condemnation or condescension, but also no trace of parental leniency or tenderness.

"What do you get out of the Wards?" I asked.

"Nothing." Her reply was swift and certain.

"Why are you here, then?"

The masked girl lifted her chin. "I didn't have a choice."

"I see." I looked at her mask, searching for the edges where it clipped into the balaclava that
Shadow Stalker wore under her hood. "There is something worse than the Wards that they offered you as an alternative. What you get out of the Wards is freedom."

"It's not fucking freedom," she spat.

"Because the PRT has power over you," I said. "But you get a taste of relative freedom because you have value to them. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever heard that the world is divided up into two types of people?" At her slight nod, I continued. "I think it's a really simplistic way to divide things, since the world isn't as simple as that. But if you want to look at it that way, each individual person has value, and you can divide that up, and from there you can tell how much they're worth.

"Each person's value comes in two forms: capital and labor. Capital is the resources you currently possess – you're a cape, which has a rarity value of being one in twenty-thousand, but in this town it's closer to one in five thousand. Your labor is what you can produce, your potential – you can be their Ward for the next year or two, and then go on to being a Protectorate hero after you graduate. That's how the PRT summed up your value, and why they gave you a choice."

She inclined her head. "It was a shit choice, both ways."

"They thought your value was kind of... shitty."

"Fuck the PRT, then."

"They still have power over you. Otherwise you wouldn't be here," I pointed out. "You don't have to cooperate, but you still showed up. That means something. But whatever actions you take from now on determine how much value you have, and when you ignore the tasks you've been given, you're tanking your labor potential. It means after a certain point, the PRT will think you're unreliable, you're a risk, that you're not Protectorate hero material, no matter how much polish and spin they can throw at you."

"As I said, fuck the PRT," she said coldly.

"When you waste your potential, your only value comes from your capital. From being a cape," I spoke, voice dispassionate and even. "And being a cape is risky, especially when you take a lot of big risks. One injury that puts you out of the game, a knock on the head that can't be fixed, something like that. Something that makes the PRT wonder whether your value makes it worth getting you fixed up." I inspected my fingernails. "Capes are not so rare in this city, are they."

"Like I give a shit," said Shadow Stalker stubbornly. "I take knocks, I get back up."

"Backup," I repeated. "I hear you almost didn't get it, that other night. Shame if something had happened, right? And if something does happen, serious enough that you can't be a cape anymore, go out on the streets in costume, what do you have? What is your value outside caping? You're only a teenager in high school.

"And that's why Renick gives the Wards 'constructive time'. So if something happens to you, you can actually do something with your life instead of moping around thinking about the days when you used to wear tights. This is an opportunity here, to improve your skills. Because if fighting is the
only thing you can do, that's pretty damn sad."

Shadow Stalker gripped the edge of the work bench, as if she wanted to tip it over, or sweep everything on it to the floor. "Fuck off," she snarled. "You don't get to judge me, tell me how much I'm worth."

"No," I said. "It's the PRT's job to do that."

"So what do I get if I cooperate? If I play your little arts and crafts game and make your handprint turkeys or whatever the fuck you do in here?"

"You get another chance. In January, they reset the scheduling rosters. Maybe if you play nice, they'll return your patrol schedule to what it was before, instead of cutting it down permanently because they think you can't be trusted."

"I... I can play by the rules," Shadow Stalker answered stiffly, not mentioning the word "nice". I could tell that there was also an unspoken for now hidden in there.

"Good," I said, smiling. "You know, there are two types of people in the world."

"And what are they?"

"The people who get caught." I gazed serenely into the eyeholes of her metal mask. "And the ones that don't." I slid over one of my sandwiches and the bottle of water. I had gotten an extra for myself, because the department was paying for it, but I thought a little token goodwill would close the bargaining off nicely. "Eat your lunch in here, and come back out when you're re-masked and ready to work. Nina will show you how to prep your costume pieces."

>>> I returned to the Creation Space, and settled into one of the seats surrounding the central work table, which was cluttered with discarded paper sandwich wrappers and empty cans. I even caught the end of an episode of the Protectorate Pals spinoff series from years ago, "The Adventures of Alexandria", which someone had downloaded to play on the big screen TV.

It was the episode with "that poor guy, Hero", as one of my colleagues, Nina, whispered to me. She nibbled on a muffin with her eyes rapt on the television, gasping when the cartoon striped naked woman burst through a wall and stuck her hand right through a gold-armored Tinker character.

It turned out, to my complete lack of surprise, that many of my colleagues happened to be the cape geek type, the ones who used to collect all the comic books and cereal box trading cards, and still followed the animated television programs closely enough to debate the quality of one season over another. I was told "The Adventures of Alexandria" was better than the current airing episodes of Protectorate Pals and almost as good as the classic, cheesy original episodes from the 1980's, but I suspected their judgement was swayed by a bias of nostalgia.
"'The Adventures of Alexandria'," said Nina, her eyes bright and her smile eager, "is better than the hamfest from the Eighties! And I know it's better than the new Alexandria reboot that's coming out next year. I haven't seen it, but I can tell it's going to suck!" She turned to me, as I appeared to be the only paying attention. "The old Alexandria actress sang the opening theme, and the credits. She's fantastic, I've bought all the CD's; they should've brought her back for the reboot."

"Yeah," I muttered, rolling my eyes. *Cape geeks.* "She's good. I guess."

"Like I keep telling everyone! Did I tell you about the time I went to the conference in New York and met the actress in real life? When I say met, I mean that I said 'Hi' and got an autograph. I even saw Legend in person – from a distance, but that totally counts. He's *hot*; the pictures don't lie, one look at him and you can only go 'daayyum'..."

From my personal experience, the idea of capes and celebrities – the intellectual property sculpted by Image, PR, and Marketing into a vaguely human-shaped figure onto which people would happily project their hopes and insecurities – *that* is substantially more compelling, more *alluring*, than the capes and celebrities could ever be on their own.

And that is what I do. I take up lumps of parahuman coal, wrap them in colorful paper and tie a ribbon on top, and make them presentable to the world. If you can watch the shows, and buy the merchandise, and name your favorite Protectorate hero or Ward, then I can only say that I have done my job well.
If anyone is interested in applying for a job with the PRT, it is important to know that there are certain attributes that the recruiters are looking for in their potential hires. They will never outright appear in the list of skills and requirements on the Careers and Opportunities page. Nor will they ever ask about it in the interview. They are just a few of many things on the interview panel's checklist, and unless you happen to have the supernatural ability to read through clipboards, or the very sneaky habit of reading upside down papers whenever you find yourself within a foot or two of a PRT executive's desk, you might go through your entire career without knowing about it.

The attribute that the PRT finds most valuable in their employees is a certain type of level-headed temperament, an unflappability of disposition – someone who doesn't panic at the sound of sirens, someone who doesn't scream and flounder about at the sight of blood, or in the event of unexpected lockdowns and containment foam dousings, or capes who burst through the wall during lunchtime, leaving behind a trail of broken breeze blocks and a sheepish "Sorry to interrupt, don't mind me, please ignore the layer of concrete dust on your pasta salad and keep eating".

In other words, the PRT is looking for people who are calm in the face of paranormal events.

It is considered a very helpful trait in many roles and occupations: emergency responders, bank tellers, casino managers, butlers, personal secretaries, and the British. But due to its relative scarcity, the PRT ends up hiring the less than desirable. The people who answer the call and apply for careers with the PRT often turn out to be the type who relish paranormal encounters. They want to interact with capes, and it gives them a strong emotional response to do so.

There are the people who dislike capes, who want a legitimized, government endorsed means to screw with them. These people join the PRT, usually the Kevlar-armored division where all the assignments are ominously labelled "Ops" and all the participants possess a demeaning nickname they refer to as their call-sign. Like the old letters-of-marque used by legitimate governments of the past to legitimize left-handed doings of which the right hand has no knowledge, the most hardcore of these types of people end up in what I like to call regimented bounty hunting.

Vigilante capes who follow the letter of the law (the spirit is take it or leave it) enough to get a pass by the authorities have a legal exemption in the "Finder's Keepers" code, which allows them to keep most of the proceeds of what they pick up from the villains they defeat, once they declare the full contents of the villain's stash. For tax purposes, as the PRT calls it, when they come by to collect their Sovereign's Share, and anything else deemed to be illegal, or too dangerous to be floated in the gray market. At the end of the day, these vigilantes are nothing more than officially sanctioned bounty hunters.

The cape-hating gun-toters in the PRT are not much different. They don't get to directly collect the villain loot drops, and often don't even get to directly engage with them in fights – most of the time, the PRT squads stand support and reduce the chance of collateral damage and never go Lone Ranger in classic TV bounty hunter style. But I'm pretty sure the references to "batting averages" and "base runs" I've overheard the black-clads argue about in the cafeteria don't refer to baseball statistics. Nor does their eager anticipation for the arrival of "Christmas bonuses" come across as truly authentic, when it is the middle of July and a week since the highly-publicized arrest of Chain Man and a dozen of his Chain Gang mooks.

I doubt such people are genuinely interested in assisting in the integration of parahumans as working
and contributing members of society, as the PRT's mission statement repeats *ad nauseam*. Because *they* are the people who came up with the PRT's parahuman power classification scheme – that old rhyme that lists the twelve types of powers, which every child who has watched *Protectorate Pals* can sing on demand. It is telling that the PRT's now-defunct name for it was once the "Threat Assessment" chart, and they only retired it (at least in publicly circulated memos) to avoid offending the sensibilities of the closely aligned Protectorate heroes.

But all Protectorate heroes get a numerical power rating from the PRT, which most of them do not ever get a chance to see; the purpose of the numbers is a rough reference to the amount of resources needed to "defeat" them, and what containment strategies would be most effective to counter their power sets. Now that's what I call synergy.

It's the reason why I never use the classification names or numbers in relation to myself. It's not only offensive, but if I see them used for me, it means that someone thinks they know me enough to put a label on my capabilities and call me a threat. I object to that: just because I am a cape, doesn't mean I am a criminal. Just because I enjoy the occasional steak and therefore admit to being a meat eater, it doesn't, contrary to the beliefs of some close-minded individuals, make me a murderer.

The other side of the coin is the people who absolutely *love* capes, the ones who tag themselves on the PHO forums as a self-professed "Cape Groupie". If you could make a list of the worst things that the Post-Scion generation has introduced to the world, you would probably shortlist the Top Ten to include the cape fetishists. Not everyone's fascination for capes skirts creepy territory, as some people just want to buy the replica costumes for Halloween, Purim, themed birthday parties, or Frosh Week. But the collective also encompasses a certain minority we would all like to pretend doesn't exist whenever the image team auctions off a Protectorate hero's old costume, with proceeds going to charity. They are the type who trespass into creepy territory, at full force with siege engines. That their interest even extends to the Case Fifty-Threes is something I don't even want to contemplate.

However, in defense of the cape fanatics out there, I do prefer them over the cape-haters. Most of them, even the weirder sorts, are perfectly harmless and keep their geek power-level hidden, unless they find themselves in the middle of a heated debate with another fan and want to prove themselves the best at regurgitating parahuman trivia.

They're the people who are repeat customers at the PRT gift shop, the ones known by name to the long-suffering sales assistants. They are the obsessed fans who buy all the hero posters on release day, and buy two if they're limited edition signed prints. And more than a few times, have bought out the Protectorate booth at San Diego's annual CapeCon. I have no complaint with that: there's a quarterly bonus in it for me, when my portraits of the Protectorate North East outsell the heroes of the Protectorate South West, who have the benefit of a home-field advantage.

My colleagues fall into that category in some degree or another, but I prefer to think that their fanaticism has waned to mere enthusiasm after meeting capes in person. Glamor does not last long in the face of familiarity, after all. Speaking with parahumans, dressing them, poking them with seamstress' pins or aestheticians' tweezers and hearing them squeak, and having them fitted for compression moisture-wicking tactical underwear (and their attached athletic cups) eventually wears down one's zeal enough that the word "parahero" comes more easily to the mind than "superhero". To be fair, extended laundry duty tends to do that to anyone's enthusiasm.

I think it is my apparent ambivalence toward capes that recommended me to the PRT's Human Resources and Labor division, when they finished combing through my priors and found that I had no previous experience dealing with capes, or any personal involvement with parahumans and parahuman groups. No fifth column alliances with criminal gangs intent on inserting a mole into the
organization, which was good. No firmly held preconceptions of capes, even better.

There was a multiple choice personality test as part of the interview process, and if no one picked up that I was playing the "I will pick what I think they think I should pick" game with the answer sheet, then I'm pretty sure I aced it. The PRT wants employees who retain composure and sensible thought in the occurrence of critical situations, no matter how small or how large, and that is an appearance that I find easy to affect.

Much of the time, I remain calm and unruffled, and I can remember exactly where I last saw my towel—

"—Paul. Uh, Paul?" Nina's voice cut through my mental railroad tracks, which promptly twisted around themselves and each other until they resembled Sherman's neckties. "Sorry, did I interrupt something there? You looked like you were having a super serious moment and all..."

I cleared my throat. "No, I'm fine," I assured her. "Please continue with what you were saying."

Nina, a woman with dark hair tied up in a bun atop her head, and thick-framed eyeglasses, gestured toward the mannequin in front of us, on which a set of carved and painted foam armor rested. "We made a mock-up based on the designs Client Six-Oh-One-Eight picked out from our concept book. It's mix of designs Two and Four, which you can see in the armor. I was wondering what you thought about it — are we pushing the lion motif too far here? Design Four's haberdashery components are still in limbo, and since the client wants 'More lion', whatever that means, I was thinking maybe a paw print jacquard? Is that too much?"

"In paw taste, maybe," I said. Nina rolled her eyes and bit her lip to hide a smile. "How many lions have we got here? Three, four?"

"At least six, once we draft the greaves," she replied. "Yeah, cruelty to animals is not exactly the angle we're going for, but New York keeps giving us the green light no matter what ridiculous designs Giang and Terry submit. I swear they're just seeing what they can get away with."

"I don't like the 'Classics' angle either," I remarked. "Dauntless is already doing it. It's way too close, the colors too. It'll be a pain to organize for the promo shoots."

It was true: Dauntless' theme colors were white and gold. Triumph's prototype armor was painted in metallic gold. It would be a pain in the neck to fix the studio lighting for that, and a pain in the ass to make sure the Protectorate heroes arrayed in the archetypal V-formation didn't blind one another with their respective reflected glows.

Nina sighed. "Dauntless went Greek. We told Triumph he had to pick something different, and he picked Roman. Apparently it's enough of a difference to New York." She lowered her voice. "I wouldn't be surprised if someone's been pulling favors for this." She waved her hand disgustedly over the mannequin.

"It's high maintenance," I agreed. "He'll have to forgo his uniform allowance if he wants to take it on the street. He's obviously not caping for the money." I turned to Nina. "You should have Giang prep an alternate costume with cheaper components for street wear, if you don't want to spend weekend overtime polishing lions."

"Already done," said Nina, with a smile. "Don't teach me how to suck eggs, Paul. I know how. I graduated past that years ago." Her smile grew wider; she sent me a stealthy glance from behind her
A fake wedding ring seems like a good idea right about now, I thought. If it wouldn't make people ask who Mrs. Paul is and why I never talk about her, since anyone who looks young enough to be newly wed talks about nothing but their wedding.

"Speaking of the job," I said, purposefully obtuse, "how is Shadow Stalker?"

Nina frowned; she probably knew me well enough to know that I wasn't oblivious to social. Fortunately, her professionalism took over. "I gave her the box of armor pieces and showed her the order of how to coat them, primer to sealer. I think she got the idea."

"How many times did you tell her to start over?"

"Twice. She got the message quick enough. You should probably talk to her." Nina folded her arms and her eyes turned to the swinging door in the corner that separated the heavily-ventilated painting room from the rest of the work room. "I don't know what you said to her before lunch, but she's been more... quiet than usual. Still kinda rude, though."

"I'll go see how she is," I said, quickly sweeping up Nina's concept sheets into a neat pile. "You should e-mail Triumph and tell him that 'Too much lion' is a thing, and he's so far up there that you might as well give him the lion mascot suit that he really wants but is too afraid to ask for." I gave a dry laugh. "I'm off to talk to Shadow Stalker. Maybe she'll even talk back."

"Good luck."

"'Break a leg' would be more appropriate," I replied.

>>> 

I pushed open the door, and it swung slowly back behind me with a hiss as the air pressure adjusted between the two rooms. The painting room was brightly lit with recessed bulbs set into the ceiling; slatted ventilation covers high on each wall circled the room's perimeter, circulating air to filter out the chemical stink of industrial solvents and automotive paints. One wall was taken up by a long, rectangular drying cabinet with a set of perspex sliding doors. It chuffed as its contents were blow-dried by fans. The floor beneath my feet was stained and uneven from layers of built up spray paint, where someone hadn't been careful enough with their disposable plastic drop sheets.

Shadow Stalker sat in a plastic lawn chair, ragged-edged cloak draping down on the paint-stained floor, feet carelessly propped on an upturned cardboard box marked PRTNY AP-F39/02-6pc. She was browsing on her phone, and behind her, armor pieces in varying shades of gray and black were laid out in a neat row on a sheet of plastic, next to a bucket of spray paint cans.

"Hello, Shadow Stalker," I said, inspecting her progress. There was a cardboard box that contained a stack of finished black armor pieces, and a half-filled box with plain gray pieces. "How are you?"
"Bored to death," she answered coolly, not bothering to look up. "Not that you care,"

"You're right, I don't." I was silent for a moment. "You don't want people to care. That's fine with me. But you're still thinking like a vigilante. Before you were a Ward, how much time were you putting into equipment maintenance?"

Shadow Stalker shrugged. "A couple of hours a week."

"Nina says Image logs one hour for every ten hours you hit the street. Official hours, at least."

"It was more than two for every seven for me. I had to blunt my bolts and file off the serial numbers. And now I'm here." Her voice was bitter.

"Would you say your equipment and costume is better in the Wards than as a... freelancer?" I asked.

Shadow Stalker's gloved fingers stilled over the buttons of her flip phone. "Yes," she said, grudgingly.

"Do you like having a costume laid out for you every time you do patrol? Never having to buy new pieces to replace worn ones, never going out hoping that everything will stay together till the end of the night."

"...Yes." She glared at me through the mask. "I'm getting tired of this. Get to the point."


"It's not fucking worth it," Shadow Stalker said harshly. She kicked at the cardboard box beneath her heel, denting it.

"Maybe it is," I calmly said. "You might not see it that way, but every hour of your time at HQ has value. Every hour you spend doing maintenance on your gear is an hour you can't be doing something else. And when Nina's team does maintenance, they can do it faster and better than you could do it yourself.

"I'm not a hero, and I not a vigilante either, and maybe I can't understand how or why. But you were doing something instead of sitting on your couch at home. You were going out, night after night, for a reason."

"Because this city is full of shit and no one was going to clean it but me."

"Good enough reason." My reply was carefully bland, with no hint of judgement that I could discern. "What we do here is make you more efficient. Nina takes care of your costume so you have one more hour to yourself, to hit the street, to train, to study, to make yourself stronger and better. I take care of your image so even on the days when you don't go out, people know that Shadow Stalker's out there, and maybe she's looking for them. And they're afraid of you.

"If you can say you do better on your own, there are lawyers who can get you out of the Wards."

Shadow Stalker grunted. "I'd end up in juvey."

"Not my problem."
"It's a problem for me."

"Then maybe you should reconsider how much freedom is worth."

She was silent for a number of long seconds. "What do I have to do after this?" she finally asked.

"Nina will show you how to work the sewing machine to attach the straps and buckles to the finished armor. And she'll help you fix up your cloak, too."

"I can't fucking wait," Shadow Stalker muttered under her breath. She kicked the box again.

"Yeah, January feels too far away." I gave her a bright smile, and headed for the door, one hand reaching into my pocket for my work phone.

**PRT.PBraganca:** SS is cooperating. No broken legs.

**PRT.NHristova:** That took a while. What did you say to her?

**PRT.PBraganca:** That we work hard and she should appreciate the effort.

**PRT.NHristova:** And that's all? I could have done that.

**PRT.PBraganca:** Use charm next time. It's super effective.

**PRT.NHristova:** No, seriously! How do you do it!!!!!!

I returned to my boring and mundane desk work, reading through PRT internal memos and sorting the ones with "Please remember to hang PARKING PASS on car mirror!" and "Annual Secret Santa Sign Up" on the title line into the Trash folder. No matter how much the PRT presents itself on its careers page as a unique employment opportunity, much of it involves desk work just like any other desk job, and even the capes have their share of it. Maybe not so much in Brockton Bay, but I knew that many other branch offices had capes that saw more incident reports than crime fighting action.

I filled in the budget allocation forms, reviewed what had been diverted to the Wards' Cause event and approved by Accounting, and placed a few orders for posters, multi-yard-long banners, and life-sized cardboard cut-outs of the ENE Wards. You can't have an autograph signing table unless it's flanked by life-sized cardboard cut-outs – it's a fact of life, just like throwing something out of your window results in a glass-shattering sound even if the thing you threw wasn't even made of glass.

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**Re: question**

SF <ziplocker93@gogomail.com> on 3 Dec 2010:

hey, i asked on PHO if you could do pburgh a week from now. Im in brckton bay now, can i change the place to meet? you said the fee covers travel expenses on the east coast.
Tabloid <tabloid@capeflunky.com> on 3 Dec 2010:
Why are you in Brockton Bay?
I can get there.

SF <ziplocker93@gogomail.com> on 3 Dec 2010:
my power is fire...
i heard there was a pyro group forming brockton, and capes who do fire are fireproof. I dont want to hurt people anymore and i wanted to join a group. i got there and it turns out they were all villains... and now i still need a group.

Tabloid <tabloid@capeflunky.com> on 3 Dec 2010:
Do you have the money for Package C?

SF <ziplocker93@gogomail.com> on 3 Dec 2010:
yes, i have it.

Tabloid <tabloid@capeflunky.com> on 3 Dec 2010:
If you can find a place in Brockton that the fire department doesn't care about, we can arrange a meeting.

SF <ziplocker93@gogomail.com> on 3 Dec 2010:
south brockton beach?
anywhere with water is good.

I made a few phone calls with the Merchandise department, and finally filed a staff assignment request form. We would get a few police officers to direct traffic and manage parking outside the Brockton Bay Central Library, but the BBPD couldn't loan too many men, and security was a point of concern following the recent and dramatic defeat of the Protectorate at the hands of a new gang. Any gaps in security would therefore be filled in by rotating squads of PRT troopers. I'm sure they'd enjoy it; I'd heard their discussions in the cafeteria – which were closer to bragging – when they returned from a successful "Ops". This operation would be so easy that success was guaranteed.

I won't say that inter-departmental rivalry isn't a thing. But while I have never been caught using the affectionate (or not) nickname of "meatheads", I can't say that I have ever liked the black-clad grunt squads that much. They are just irrevocably dissimilar to the more creative side of the PRT – the troopers have their bi-annual recreational weekend event in the form of a full-contact pickup football game; Image and PR in comparison have a movie marathon filled with an obligatory five solid hours of "The Adventures of Alexandria". It doesn't help that when most people are told to think of the PRT, they automatically jump to the image of a menacing man in black with a tank of containment foam.

I get along better with Accounting, who go by the definitely-not-affectionate nickname of "stiffs". And for some reason quite unknown to me, they are almost universally hated by the entire PRTHQ.
Four-thirty ticked by slowly. I could hear the rotary sander in the workroom stop grinding, and the rustle and squeak as people got out of their chairs and started clearing away their supplies – it was one of the basic rules of the office, to return shared equipment to its proper place – next to respecting the name-tagged food in the break room fridge, reporting visitors without guest passes or badges, and never messing with the thermostat because something will break and the office will turn into a sweating sauna pit of hell.

The door beeped as it opened and closed; people gathered their coats and bags and headed home, chattering to one another about their weekend plans, and which local pub had the best happy hour, as decided by the range of drinks on offer, and their price. There was a momentary lull in the conversation, and then it continued, as I continued shuttling off e-mails and dropping a few notes into the Christmas event itinerary file.

Someone knocked politely on a cubicle divider and made a muffled coughing noise.

I spun my chair around. It was a young man, dressed in a plain gray hoodie and athletic sweatpants with a security badge clipped to the pocket. His hood was on over his head, covering his hair, and the upper portion of his face was concealed by a basic white half-mask.

"Gallant," I said. "Nice of you to visit. During office hours too." I didn't mention that he lived up to his cape name. I had a suspicion that he had been forced to listen to that particular line so many times that he probably wished he had chosen another name instead.

"I came by to drop off a copy of the receipts from the sponsors I talked to you about." Gallant slipped a backpack off his shoulders, and unzipped it, digging through the interior until he came up with a folder, which he slid across the desk to me. "I got Legal to process them. They should clear by Monday."

I opened the folder, and flicked through the neatly organized pages listing each sponsor and their levels of commitment. The Stansfield Group, Heritage Insurance, Harborside Development LLC, Concord Cultural Society. "Thirty-thousand in two days?" I observed, flipping to the last page and tallying the total in my head. "That's impressive. How did you manage that? You could make a fortune selling Girl Scout cookies."

Gallant knelt down and zipped his bag back up, throwing the strap over his shoulder. "Fortunes are overrated." He looked at me, and opened his mouth, almost hesitant, his voice soft. "I like doing this, being a Ward, being a hero. It makes me feel like... like I'm part of something bigger. Something that has *real* purpose."

"Overrated?" I laughed. "Sleeping on a pile of money isn't that bad either."

"I guess you'd know all about that."

I leaned back in my chair, and inspected his masked face and serious expression. "What are you trying to say?"

Gallant shrugged. "I know that you could be working corporate if you wanted, making twice as much as the PRT pays you."

"Maybe." My reply was non-committal.
"You used to work corporate," said Gallant. He raised his hands. "I know. When I recommended you to New Wave, Brandish – the lawyer – did a background check on you. It's standard; Glory Girl told me later." He sounded slightly apologetic. It still wasn't an apology. "I think you know what it feels like, too. To find purpose, that isn't just about making money."

My eyes narrowed, but my posture remained relaxed and open, and my hands rested loosely on the chair's armrests. "I'm not offended that my privacy was invaded. But my thoughts are mine," I said. My voice hardened. "Stop it."

"I'm not—" Gallant began, then paused. He chewed on his lip. "If it helps, you're a hard one to read. Your surface emotions don't give me much. Most of the time I don't bother anymore."

_Good to know._

I didn't say anything.

"Look, I just wanted to say that..." Gallant continued. "That I know what it's like. To have expectations, and then to choose another path. I'm grateful for what I have, and what I've been given. My powers too – they let me find my purpose. To be _here_." He waved his hands to roughly indicate the room we were currently occupying. "And in some ways, I'm grateful to... to, you know." Here he shot me a smile. It was kind of weak. "I know what she did; I know that a lot of people would hate her for it. But because of her, I have the opportunity to do all of this. Just like you, instead of working corporate—"

"Good for you," I said, cutting him off. "Do you think I'm here for second-hand atonement?"

Gallant stared at me for a brief moment, and then nodded.

"Well, I'm not." I spun the chair around slightly to the left, glancing at the folder open on the table. "You don't have to try to help everyone, you know," I spoke, carefully light. "You can't fix everyone. But if you want to try, start with Shadow Stalker. She's still in the workroom."

"I shouldn't have brought it up," Gallant admitted. He took a deep breath, straightened, and adjusted the strap of his backpack. "Sorry."

"Your mind reading needs some work," I said.

"Yeah." Gallant's face broke into a lopsided grin. "Enjoy your weekend, then?"

"You too."

I waited for him to leave, and turned back to the computer screen.

There were only a few companies in Brockton Bay large enough to be called "corporate", and if there were any that would hire a Wards-aged teenager, then they'd have internship programs recruiting from the pool of students attending the better local schools of Arcadia and Immaculata.

I narrowed it down to the Stansfield Group, Heritage Insurance, Fortress Construction, and Medhall Pharmaceuticals. Brockton Bay Central Banking, Harborside, Ruby Dreams Entertainment Corp, and the Dockworkers Credit Union were either too small or didn't take high school interns. My eye fell on Gallant's receipts, thoughts churning away, putting together what exactly I knew of him, how the costume team documented the repairs and maintenance on his power armor...
I stopped my thoughts there.

This was getting dangerously close to discovering Gallant's civilian identity, which he must have known when he gave his attempt at a heartfelt heart-to-heart speech and dropped hints as subtle as a grand piano. He was either trying to initiate a bond of trust and friendship between us, or he was trying to get me arrested. It was impossible to tell.

* Fucking mind readers. *
ART INTERLUDE: PAUL’S OFFICE
NW
NEW WAVE

Shielder
This is the dumbest fucking costume I've ever seen. Who the fuck came up with this shit???

- Braganca

CLIENT 6018
CONCEPT 2010
This picture is too big to view properly. Apologies if it's cut off or stretching your screen.

CLICK HERE for a larger version.

BONUS:
(Astrid Berklaw from the fanfic Mixed Feelings, a slice-of-life story that features the day-to-day running of the PRT. Read it, it’s excellent world-building.)
Everyone wants something.

I, for example, want to be filthy rich.

Few ever reach the pinnacle of prosperity where one can own a vault stocked with a dragon's hoard of gold, wealth piled deep enough to permit a headfirst dive into a slippery, clinking ball pit of extravagance.

I'll probably never get there, but ever since I saw an illustration in a comic book depicting just that when I was a kid, it's been something I've kept in the back of my mind as one of those things I want to try at least once. I know it's irresponsible to keep movable assets in one place like that, especially when it has a dollar sign marked on the door. Hinged floorboards under the carpet, secret safes behind the still life in the dining room, and the classic revolving bookshelf exist for a reason. After all, they say fortune comes to the bold and the daring, but with prudence can one keep fortunes forever.

However much I've matured since my youth, diving into my own money pit has always been something of a childhood dream, and it is those dreams that form the foundation of one's adult psyche.

I like money. Maybe more than other people, but not for the reasons you might think. It's not the smell of it, fresh bills bundled up straight from the engravers, microprinted security features clear and crisp on each banknote, untouched by the hands of a cashier or the thighs of a stripper. It's not the sound of it, the cheery jingling of reindeer's traces in the pocket, a festive greeting with every step. I'm pretty sure that stuff is appealing to everyone, not just me.

What I like most is the idea of money. The conceptual idea of money, and what it represents – instead of measuring barter value in terms of cows or camels or strings of beads, modern civilization has developed a way to measure it with nice clean numbers that won't get my hands dirty. Money represents potential. With money, I can put a price on an hour of skilled labor. With money, I have the means to visualize productivity in charts and graphs, and through that, predict the future. With money, I can buy and own other people's time.

That's only possible if I have money, though. And so, over the years, I have gained the money – enough in recent times to bring me easily into the top 20% of the American population by net value, even with my census-declared household size of one person. Through mostly legitimate means, I might add, or at least nothing more illegitimate than retaining creative accountants who make it their business to interpret tax incentive loopholes with applied bureaucratic innovation.

If you want to join the capitalist class, the original wealth may be inherited or borrowed from those who have it. But in my opinion, those who want to truly join the ranks have to do something with wealth, instead of letting their assets stagnate to the annual march of inflation. The monocle and top hat must be earned. And what better way than through earning?

The traditional way to earn wealth is through market redistribution: have something other people want, and trade it to them for something you want. Many transactions work that way, a straightforward exchange of one form of wealth for another, whether it is in commodities, services, real estate, intellectual property, or private equity. When you want to excel at that, to maximize your
potential earnings in order to make the exchange as efficient and rewarding as possible, you must understand the market. And you must understand your customer.

What I do for a job is to sell the idea of an organization composed of traumatized individuals, a group of flawed people with major issues numbering two to three-and-a-half thousand (depending where and when the last Endbringer struck) as Heroes, with a capital H. The currency of value is public approval when I can have it, and a minimum of grudging respect if I can't. The customer is the population of the United States of America, who make a fickle citizenry when their opinions are counted individually. But there are trends that can be observed at the community level, where an understanding of group dynamics and social thinking can be applied to great effect.

In these interesting times, it's always good to have a steady hand at the helm. And it's even better when the public knows that the steering hand is a steady one, when they're reassured on a regular basis that their best interests are being looked out for, and there is safety just beyond the horizon.

That's where the Heroes come into it. It's not only hope that they represent, but stability, and order.

When the investment into a nation's military-industrial complex has been diverted in favor of disaster relief, recovery, and reconstruction, and war waged between governments has been largely abandoned when there is a greater threat that affects everyone, that is where the heroes step into the breach. They are the flexible force with the strength and presence to ensure that the law is, visibly at least, upheld when the civilian police or the National Guard or the underbudgeted US Military cannot.

The assurance of order is all people want.

What people really want is for every day to be like the last, with just enough variation from day to day so it feels like they're making progress on their personal goals. It sounds simple, maybe a bit too simple, but I think there's some truth in there; it's what I would want when my basic needs of food and shelter have been taken care of. I like knowing that the money in my bank stays my money, and that everything I can buy with it today is everything I can still afford tomorrow.

Similarly, people like knowing that their heroes, the sentinels of justice, are watching over them. Like the local hospital, or fire department, the Protectorate in the last few decades has entrenched themselves as part of the establishment, but better – they have a visible face, a personable one that speaks and smiles to the audience, something with which the audience can form an emotional attachment. From amongst the Protectorate's full roster, there is at least one hero even the most stoic of us can call a favorite, and there are thousands of heroes, thousands of individual looks and personalities to choose from.

It might be hard to believe – and I would make perfectly sure to never be caught gushing about it – but even I could admit that I've got a favorite hero, too.

>>>
The studio is one of my favorite places in the world.

When the lights go up over the curling vinyl waterfall of the studio backdrop, everything else darkens in comparison. No longer can the scaffolds be seen, bearing a canopy of reflective umbrellas overhead. Nor will you notice the sinuous tangles of extension cords underfoot, the silent honor guard of costume mannequins lurking in the periphery, or the assistants in drab practical vests with bulging pockets and an attitude of watchful urgency.

The studio is a microcosm of purpose, and everyone has a niche. In the darkness, I have a role that I know well, which comes to me with easy fluency. Light is my medium, and from the darkness I can see it and direct it; the dullest and most mundane subjects brought into the clearing within the incandescent forest of metal stands can thus be made to shine. Perhaps all of us have some primal part of ourselves that awakens in the dark, something that is more *us* than we are ever consciously aware of, which latches onto an item – or a person, a space, an idea – and upon claiming it, whispers *mine, mine, mine*. For me, it is the studio. There have been many of them, spanning the years, but they all had in them the potential to be my own insular world.

"Can you look up and face the left, please?" I called, waiting a few seconds for my subject to shuffle over a few inches and adjust her posture. "Look in the direction of the exit sign over the door in the corner, the green one. And try not to squint."

The lights were especially bright today; gold reflective umbrellas instead of the usual pale silver towered above the heads of the photography crew. Outside the glowing circle of lights, I sat behind a camera tripod with a laptop on a rolling trolley at my right hand, tapping back and forth through the uploaded photos of the day's session. Fans blew through the twisting streamers attached to their cages, but the lights radiated heat, and it was still uncomfortably stuffy even for staff used to the office thermostat's winter setting.

I double-checked the most recent photo and frowned. "Bridget, can we have a touch up?"

The makeup tech trotted over to Miss Militia, pushing a small TV dinner tray on wheels, on which was balanced cups of brushes, cans of hairspray, and a battery-powered blow dryer. Bridget wore an apron over slim-fitting trousers, and her brown hair was twisted up in a knot secured by two brushes and a barrette. Miss Militia stood calmly and removed her flag-printed scarf, turning away to slip over her nose and mouth a plain blue surgical mask that Bridget handed to her. She closed her eyes when a thin sheet of blotting paper was dabbed over her cheeks, nosebridge, and forehead, removing the shine that had developed in the heat of the studio lamps.

I observed the process with interest from my folding chair, one eye on the screen of my laptop, where a camera attached to a nearby scaffold played a live feed close-up of Miss Militia's touch up. Bridget was better than me at perfecting the look of a person's face. She had more experience with people of different ages and skin-types, whereas I was only good at working on myself or those with a similar complexion; with everyone else, I was anywhere from fairly adequate to decent, depending on how well-documented their product list was, and if I had a face chart to work from. My kit could fit in a lunchbox, while Bridget's filled up a steamer trunk, with extra hatboxes for wigs and hair extensions.

Miss Militia was someone I could competently pull double-duty on, I thought, watching the video feed. True, her complexion was darker than mine by several shades, with skin leaning more toward a rich olive than my own slight tan. But working with someone of her coloring was not completely unfamiliar to me. She had dark hair and dark eyes like mine, or close enough; a warm golden palette
could enhance her features. I had seen such a look done in the past, and I imagined I could replicate it if I tried—

Bridget stepped away from Miss Militia, rolling away her tray and slipping a spray bottle back into one of her many apron pockets. The studio assistants aimed the fans, and Miss Militia re-tied her scarf to cover her face. Her hair swirled dramatically in the artificial wind.

I took several photos, still not entirely happy with the images that loaded onto my laptop. Zooming in made it worse.

"Miss Militia," I said, pitching my voice to carry over the whirring fans. "I know the lights aren't comfortable to look at, but you keep squinting. The 'fierce and determined' look works, but you're making it too angry when you squint."

She gave me a nod in acknowledgement and took a deep breath, squaring her feet over the X marked out on the floor in masking tape, tilting her head up and slightly to the left. I still wasn't satisfied – nothing was glaringly wrong, but my posing instructions hadn't resolved the issue. When I glanced at my laptop screen and zoomed in enough to magnify the image resolution to six times the original size, I began to pick up what had been bothering me.

This wasn't going to do. Maybe for a two-dimensional cardboard cutout, but not for the close contact of a handshake meet-and-greet. I sighed. "Let's take a coffee break, please. Thirty minutes," I announced. "Miss Militia, I'd like to speak with you."

The fans and bright lights switched off, and suddenly everyone's overburdened senses were assaulted by an uncanny lack of stimulation. Violet afterimages flickered in my eyes with every blink, the overhead lights went on, and the staff packed away their equipment and started to chatter to each other. They filed to the door. I remained in my chair, watching as Miss Militia shook out her hair and brushed a few stray strands from her face. Bridget shot me a concerned look and waggled her eyebrows at me from the door, and then she turned away and passed through. The latch clicked as the last person left the studio.

Miss Militia approached. The rubber treads of her boots ensured that her footsteps were almost silent. "What's the matter?"

"Can you pull out a chair from over there?" I nodded to the corner. "There's something I want you to see."

I heard the scrape of a folding chair being folded, and then a creak as it was opened up next to me, and Miss Militia settled down to my left. The rifle on a bandolier over her back blurred and became a knife with a jagged edge that narrowed to a dangerous-looking triangular dagger point. She rested it casually on her lap, fingertips grazing the handle.

On the laptop, I opened up the web browser to a popular video site, and after typing in a phrase, wordlessly slid the laptop over so Miss Militia could watch the screen. "Watch this," I said.

While she watched a short ninety-second video of baby pandas frolicking about on a picnic blanket, I watched her. She was older than me by several years. I didn't know her exact age, but the years of her service to the Protectorate were on record, as were her Wards years, since she had been a founding member. The patriotic scarf of hers obscured half her face, but I could tell that although she had aged with grace – which made her better than most people – she hadn't been perfectly preserved, nor had she lived the most stress-free life.
One panda sneezed unexpectedly and fell down. I watched Miss Militia's eyes, and the change in her expression as cute animals did cute animal things. The video ended. She turned to me, questioning.

"What was that about?"

"Do you remember to use sunscreen when you go out?" I asked.

This wasn't a completely random question. According to *The Hero Presentation Protocol*, anyone who wore a mask or covering that left part of their face exposed was expected to wear sunscreen on daytime patrols, even when they weren't expected to interact with the public. It was a habit a hero had to get into, if he or she wanted to live a civilian life without arousing suspicion. Not wearing sunscreen meant that you developed a suntan over time, and tan lines. While it might be natural for someone to get a sunglasses tan on a holiday, it is incredibly unusual for someone to have a tan line halfway down their face in the distinctive shape of a visor, while the rest of their arms and body remain their normal shade.

It wasn't a problem for me personally, as I didn't go out masked during the day. But I am someone accustomed to warmer weather and sunnier days, and being a stickler for the *Protocol* (and sunscreen) has side benefits beyond the most obvious ones of avoiding unmaskings and being sunburned.

"Yes," Miss Militia replied. "Of course."

"This might be difficult to talk about," I said slowly, thinking my way through how I expected this conversation to go. "You've been with the Protectorate as a Ward and a hero for twenty years or so, haven't you?"

"Yes. I'm the most experienced Protectorate member in Brockton Bay." Her hands rested loosely on her lap, next to the knife.

"I have a backlog of your photos here, from the time you joined the Protectorate." I tapped at the touchpad of the laptop, opening up the file directory of Protectorate members until I found Miss Militia's. "We document everything, so the lighting arrangements and focal lengths that suit you best are kept consistent from year to year. Here's the bust portrait – for your ID and profile page from five years ago, from three years ago, and last month," I said. "And here's today's. Let me zoom in."

Miss Militia's eyes darkened. "Oh," was all she said.

It wasn't a very flattering thing to point out, not to a woman, and never one with a knife in her lap and the skills to use it.

But I don't think anyone's ever called me a coward to my face before. Maybe to my back, but if the situation calls for a "drop everything and run", I don't usually stick around long enough to listen.

"I wasn't sure if it was a camera thing, or someone goofing off in post-processing. It's why I wanted you to watch the video." Everyone loved baby animal videos; they made a person smile, even if they weren't really smilers or their mouth was covered up. Miss Militia smiled with her eyes, and it was obvious to see, maybe too obvious, and not in a good way. "A public appearance means you'll be seen up close, and in-person." I hesitated, looking from the screen to Miss Militia. "And from what I can see, you're, ah, getting wrinkles."
That's the reason why you should wear sunscreen every single day, and get religious about it. Every morning when you wake up, it should become part of your daily routine: shave your face, brush your hair, change into fresh underwear, and slap it on your face and praise the sunscreen.

"What can I do about it?" said Miss Militia wearily. "I can't just stop getting older. I'm doing the skincare regimen Image prescribed."

"That's good. But it's... not enough." I looked down at my hands for a moment. Neat fingernails, unmarked skin, no scars or callouses or bruises in sight. "It's not fair, I know. But you're a woman, and a hero, and there are standards that have been established that are very important for your image. You were never supposed to be a Myrddin-figure." Myrddin was the leader of the Chicago Protectorate, the wise old wizard character who went around with a scruffy beard and dressed in a sack. "Your image as a veteran Protectorate member and local icon is all about presenting stability, continuity. It's why I have to put, um, more drastic procedures on the table."

"Procedures." Her voice was hard. "You mean surgery?"

"Cosmetic medicine, yes," I confirmed. "We can start you on non-invasive things first, like collagen jabs. You can get them from the medical bay here. But if you want to stay on as a highly visible Protectorate member until you retire, it'll have to be surgery at some point. Either that or a full costume rehaul, but New York isn't likely to approve that and lose the brand recognition."

"And the alternative is to stop being... visible?"

"Yes. You can do all the heroing and emergency response stuff as normal. But they'll scale you back on doing as many public appearances, and merchandising will be cut back too. You might lose your position as Deputy Protectorate Leader, but your seniority means that you can take a backseat advisory role." Looking at her expression, I added, "You'll keep the close association you have with the Wards. And the extra funding and deputy's office and any contract bonuses they're giving you at your HQ. Everything but the name. It's respectable."

"Advisory?" Miss Militia's brows furrowed. "For Dauntless, I assume?"

"Dauntless." I laughed. "Funny how his name keeps coming up. But yeah, Armsmaster isn't looking like he'll be dropped from his Leader position, for now."

"He mentioned you the other day, when I spoke to him. He said he had a good idea that he was working on from talking to you," Miss Militia commented. "He's been working overnight on it."

"He came for an appointment last week and we brainstormed a bit," I said. "It's part of why I think he can hold onto Leader, at least for the next year or two... Anyway. You'd probably be Number Three, which isn't bad, and if they shuffle the roster a bit, it won't be forever." The current crop of Wards equaled the number in the Brockton Bay Protectorate's hero roster, and when they graduated, I could predict some intercity trading. Maybe Velocity – he was kind of useless in a town with two Tinkers and a pile of Movers. But probably not Gallant, from what I knew of him. I glanced at Miss Militia's knife, which I now noticed had become a handgun with a ridged black grip. "I know that they limit what you can do in the field. By a lot. Your image is a more valuable tool than your parahuman abilities."

Her parahuman abilities were versatile, but not really non-lethal to the standards by which the PRT judged parahumans in their employ as valuable or not. But in New England, it worked. She had a well-cultivated image of being a proud and patriotic all-American daughter, which had resounded
well to an enthusiastic audience in the northeastern states – the original thirteen where patriotism and national pride was born and fed on gunpowder and impassioned pamphlet writing. If not for the unpleasant association with parking timers (which no one liked. I'm pretty sure they're rigged like arcade claw machines) and the legal dispute of violating an in-use brand name (that involved lawyers, which are even less liked), Miss Militia might have gone under the cape name "Minute Maid".

Whatever her name was, and whatever her power, what it really came down to was that audiences expected certain things from their heroes. And a Miss Militia who didn't always appear sprightly and vigorous to her adoring fans was someone who disappointed the expectations built around her from a long career in the Wards and the Protectorate. It was always worse for the female heroes than the male ones. If they saw her aged and tired and worn, it would be like the Vikare thing all over again from the early Scion days, and the glamor and illusion of being a hero would dissipate, to reveal that there was only a human underneath.

And *that* is exactly what Image seeks to avoid.

Miss Militia sighed. "When do I have to see Medical?"

"You can make an appointment today. They'll put you in as soon as possible, and it'll be a quick thing, thirty minutes or so for a half dozen jabs. But there might be swelling that takes a few days to go down, so as soon as possible is best."

"Are you sure there is nothing else? I know that I'll have to, but right now?"

"If it was just for photo day, you could put it off. But in public appearances, where people can get close enough to touch, you have to do something," I answered, then paused, as an idea came to me.

"There might be another option, though..."

"What is it?"

"We have some face masks. Kind of illegal since the FDA hasn't approved the active ingredients for use here. We ordered them from Canada and keep it on the down low since none of us are medical professionals and head office wouldn't approve if they knew about it. It's a very last minute fix. Here, let me show you."

I rose to my feet, heading over to Bridget's trunk of beauty supplies. Beneath the expanding drawers and neatly organized compartment was the bottom shelf of miscellaneous but useful tools – rolls of double sided tape, spray bottles of ethyl alcohol, and a paper bag containing the individually sealed face mask packets. They were expensive for a one-use item, but they worked, so every now and then an intern was sent to Vermont to pick up a box or two from a shifty-looking mail forwarder with the almost supernatural ability of crossing Canadian customs without ever being searched or taxed. They were used more often for PRT executives meeting prospective donors at fundraiser events than actual heroes.

I checked the contents of the bag. Three vacuum-sealed foil packs marked *TOXIN REWIND* and the instructions on the back labelled in French. I brought them over to Miss Militia.

"You put it on your face for twenty minutes, like a standard spa treatment," I explained. "It numbs your face and your pores and causes localized water retention so the lines smooth out. It's only temporary, and lasts around fifteen hours, so you'll have to do it in the morning and get home before it wears off." I found myself smiling. "Before the clock strikes midnight."
"And the side effects? You said it was illegal," she said, wary.

"You could burn your face off if you're allergic to it. So test it on your arm beforehand." I slid the paper bag over to her. She tucked it into one of the cargo pockets of her military fatigue-style pants. "I wouldn't recommend using it more than once a week. When your schedule comes in January, and you have back-to-back appearances, you'll have to have something more permanent done. Sorry."

Miss Militia winced, and let out a heavy breath. "There's nothing you can do about it. It's the price of being in the spotlight."

"I don't envy it," I replied with genuine feeling, after a second or two of silence, and was suddenly self-conscious. I replayed the conversation so far in mind, realizing that I had not been as guarded as I normally was when dealing with heroes. Miss Militia didn't set me on edge like most other heroes, and I began analyzing my impressions of her. Why not?

She was cooperative, and reasonable, and that was rare. I was pretty sure I knew the limits and extent of her powers, which was rarer. She wasn't a mind reader. We were meeting during a scheduled appointment, in the studio, my studio, where everything was familiar and I was in control, and that made me more comfortable than I ought to have been.

Too late to do anything. These people are clients, not my friends.

"You sound like you have personal experience with that," Miss Militia said, a curious note to her voice.

"I have an older sister. You'd probably recognize her name if I told you," I answered.

"Oh?" said Miss Militia. "The only Braganca I know is you. It's not a very common last name."

"She uses a different name." That came out a bit more sharply than I intended.

Miss Militia's eyebrows lifted a fraction. "I had an older sister, too." Her voice was quiet and thoughtful, and almost... wistful. "I don't think it's something you should take for granted, no matter your reasons for not getting along."

"Had?" I picked up on what she meant too late. "Ah. Sorry."

"It's alright," she assured me, and the corners of her eyes crinkled with a nameless emotion that I was happy to leave unnamed. "She died. Before I joined the Wards."

Miss Militia's immigrant origins were known. There were old TV interviews floating around on video cassette, featuring the younger Miss Militia of the old Wards days, when she spoke with a strong accent and was never allowed to be seen carrying firearms on-air. She came from somewhere in Turkey, a war zone, but there were many things in a war zone that could cause a child to trigger, and...

Shit, I thought. Is she hinting at her trigger event?

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't—" I stopped, course-corrected, and began again. Pity was one of those things that annoyed people in large doses. Especially from strangers who only gave it out of awkward conversational obligation and not true emotion. Besides, it didn't do anything to help when
what had happened already happened and everyone involved had moved on and gotten over it long ago. "You don't have to talk about it to make me feel better. I understand what you're trying to say."

"You only get one family, is what I'm trying to say," said Miss Militia, eyeing me carefully.

"It's something to think about," was all I could say.

She nodded. "You've given me a lot to consider, too."

I put on a pleasant smile. "You know, most of the limitations and requests that come from the Image department and the head office aren't just for arbitrary reasons," I said, changing the subject. "Most heroes that come through here get told what they need to do or say, and they don't ask why. If you're interested, there are a couple of papers written about focus groups and perception – it might explain some of the decisions that get made around here."

"I'd be interested in reading them."

"I wouldn't know if you'll have time with all the patrols and preparations you have to do, since they're pretty long and kind of dense reading. But sure." I shrugged. It was unusual for anyone with a full-time job, let alone a hero, to do educational reading on their own time if they weren't getting paid for it as with the PRT's extracurricular certification courses. "I'll send them to your e-mail."

"I have more time than you think," Miss Militia said casually.

"Huh," I said, wondering how Miss Militia's patrol schedule worked if she had that much free time. Her time management skills must make Armsmaster extra jealous. "They'll all be back in a few minutes. Want to watch another video?"

I opened up the video site again. Then the Deputy Leader of Brockton Bay and I watched funny animal videos of kittens playing with ducklings and getting their heads stuck in toilet paper rolls, and puppies exploring cardboard boxes and falling into oversized food dishes.

The faint wrinkles around Miss Militia's eyes scrunched up in a friendly way, and I could tell that she was smiling beneath the stars and stripes of her patriotic scarf. I felt a pang of regret that this was a part of her which would soon be gone – a part that she might consider unimportant enough that she was willingly putting it aside in the name of being a hero. It would make her a more effective hero and a more useful one, and public approval had a price.

Everything, I knew, comes at a price.
There is a difference between becoming a parahuman and making an entrance into the cape scene.

No one ever asks to be a parahuman, and when the immediate novelty fades away after weeks or months or years, many wish they didn't have the powers they had, because these powers never actually solved their problems. It doesn't take supernatural abilities to fix personal problems. It doesn't take work to be a parahuman. Being a parahuman... just happens.

Someone, one person out of ten or twenty thousand people, is bestowed powers on one momentous day, their one worst day, as if the world wanted to give them a consolation prize to make up for a life of pain and suffering. But there are many out there, as anyone who watches the international news can tell – many people who feel worse, who see worse, and have fewer comforts and even less support, who aren’t granted mysterious powers. Parahuman abilities feel deserved, but they aren’t earned. And no one ever asks for them, let alone works to get them.

Being a cape is a whole different thing.

Parahumans and capes might be synonymous in the minds of most people; they are similar, and are used interchangeably on forums and in schoolyard arguments debating the strength of one power set over another. I, however, consider them to be two distinct concepts.

A parahuman is a person with a paranormal ability, a power that can ignore the known laws of physics, thermodynamics, or municipal legislation. An ability which causes the scientific community to constantly question its own methods and relevance when no independent variable can be found other than a glowing blob in a brain scan. Parahuman is the person who has the powers, an enhanced human who has experienced a trigger event, but was born a human and is presumably still a human, at least when not actively using their powers.

A cape is the public identity of a parahuman, their codename, stagename – whatever name they choose for their professional career as a performance artist with a specialty in law enforcement or law evasion. This is the costumed persona, the one most people refer to when they namedrop a local villain or a favorite hero in conversation. Not every parahuman is a cape. I'm sure many of the weakly powered parahumans, non-combat Thinkers mostly, prefer to use their powers surreptitiously and can happily do it, without requiring a second identity. But while not all parahumans call themselves capes, all capes are parahumans. They are the parahumans who have embraced the utility of popular recognition as a tool, and public acknowledgement as a secondary weapon in their arsenal.

Becoming a cape takes work, and being successful at it, like being successful at anything, requires a sacrifice of resources: time and money. The preparations necessary for a cape's debut can be just as stressful and intense as any debutante's. Care and consideration, not to mention hours of labor in the crafts department, should be taken when introducing a new cape identity to the scene. If the job is half-assed, then you risk not being taken seriously, and that first impression as a joke or gimmick cape can last forever unless you re-brand yourself and do it right. The laziest of efforts are often the ones that are rewarded with unsuccessful first night outs, where a new cape is killed in action, or worse, publicly immortalized on the PHO wiki as a laughingstock.
1. Choose an alignment for your cape identity, and stick with it.

Three choices are available: villain, rogue, or hero.

If you don't want to pick any, then it means you don't have what it take to be a cape – you're better off as a small-time parahuman who uses powers to shortcut dinner preparation, or cheat at inconsequential things like community bingo evenings, church raffles, or carnival games. If you want to pick two or more alignments, or switch sides after changing your mind, then you must prepare a separate cape identity for each alignment, as long as your abilities are versatile enough to pass as two different power sets. Participating in heroic and villainous activities in one identity is guaranteed to lower your reputation level with capes of both sides.

Exceptions are made for vigilante heroes, who are granted some leeway that Protectorate heroes aren't. They can dispense justice in a vaguely villainous way, as long as they don't break actual laws (bending them into pretzels is fine), or be so brutal as to lose public approval. That freedom lasts as long as the line is toed, so I recommend that anyone who takes this route should refrain from leaving evidence lying around, such as trophies and photographs that can turn alleged activities into incontrovertible proof. Dead bodies goes without saying.

2. Choose your name carefully, and do the research.

If you choose a cape name belonging to an already established cape, they might take offense to it and hunt you down. If it belongs to a hero, have fun being slapped by a trademark infringement lawsuit. If your chosen cape name belongs to a recently deceased cape, you should still walk carefully – teammates and relatives might hunt you down for disrespecting the memory of the fallen. It's best to pick a name that is unique to you, because cape etiquette does exist, and it doesn't look fondly on riding fame and respect that you haven't personally earned.

Once you've picked one, you should browse the dictionary to ensure that your chosen name has no unwanted associations, meanings, or homonyms. No one wants to find out too late that the name they had their heart set on is actually crude street slang used to describe illegal or even salacious activities. And you have to check for misspellings too, especially if you used a foreign language because the English translation was taken. Nothing is more discouraging for a new cape adventuring into the real world than realizing that his name spoken aloud doesn't sound nearly as cool as it did in his head.

3. Don't skimp on your costume.

A cape's costume is the first thing anyone sees when they meet a new cape, and it is the last thing anyone remembers when they go home and tell all their friends (and the internet) about the
encounter. No one you meet on the street will ask whether you're a hero or a villain, as most people who see masks and costumes take it as a cue to run far away and watch the pending cape fight or crime in progress from a safe distance. It is the purpose of the costume to announce your alignment, and whether you are a rival... or a target.

Dark, edgy costumes with chains and spikes scream VILLAIN. Costumes in white with splashes of bright colors tend to be associated with heroes, along with masks that expose part of the face – a cape with a partially uncovered face is more approachable than a faceless figure, to anyone who cares about audience appeal. Conversely, villains favor respect gained from fear, and care very little about pandering to public sensibilities. To them, actions based on following the fluctuating numbers of an approval rating are nothing more than constraints that limit profitability and efficiency.

Cape costume creation is actually a thriving business for craft and DIY stores, and the gray market. Good costumes cost money, more than many people can afford, and thus new capes often find themselves browsing flea markets, scouring thrift stores, or searching through community trading and recycling groups to build their first costume. Costumes are an investment, and it is the labor and skill of the craftsman you are paying for when you commission one – and quality materials are not inexpensive either. Just as the imported woolen gabardines and Charmeuse silks used by bespoke couturiers cost dear, the technical synthetics (with fire-retardant, anti-chafing, or sweat-wicking qualities) in good costumes never come cheaply.

A second-hand set of motorcycle leathers, which provides protection against road rash and some impacts, costs $400. A made-to-measure costume ordered over the internet after providing credit card details and physical dimensions starts at $2,000 and goes up to $8,000 (or more) with all the extras, which includes bulletproof body armor, removable and replaceable interior linings that can be tossed into the washing machine with minimal fuss, and high-wear areas on knees and elbows patched in durable kangaroo leather. The really expensive Tinkertech stuff from gray market merchants like Toybox don't even have price tags. If you have to ask – or if you want to haggle – you wouldn't be able to afford it anyway. For gear of that quality, you have to pay upfront for an invitation just to view the merchandise.

It's why I recommend that any newbie capes making a list of preparations before they hit the street should add "How to work a sewing machine" underneath "How to create a workout plan" and above "How to write a will". If caping turns out to be incompatible with your lifestyle or ethical standards, you will have learned valuable lessons that you can easily apply to your civilian life. And you get to extend the lifespan of your wardrobe with your skill at garment repair and alteration.

In the end, when all the effort needed to become a cape is added up and declared insurmountable, passing off the responsibility to another party becomes one of the biggest draws of joining the Protectorate. The PR management, the burden of cost and upkeep of a quality costume, the training and nutrition plans, and the necessity of working a day job to pay for nighttime activities – when you sign the contract and shake the Director's hand, all of that is made someone else's problem.

All for the low, low price of your personal autonomy.
Re: question
SF <ziplocker93@gogomail.com> on 6 Dec 2010:
can you do south brockton?

Tabloid <tabloid@capeflunky.com> on 6 Dec 2010:
Yes.
Where do you want to meet?

SF <ziplocker93@gogomail.com> on 7 Dec 2010:
marina pier on lovell street, the beach underneath the pier. i don't want to be seen. night time preferred.

Tabloid <tabloid@capeflunky.com> on 7 Dec 2010:
I know the place, it's near the lobster shack with the red neon sign.
Sunset is at 4pm if it isn't cloudy. I am available past 7pm.

SF <ziplocker93@gogomail.com> on 8 Dec 2010:
how will i know its you?

Tabloid <tabloid@capeflunky.com> on 8 Dec 2010:
I will say the name of a dessert that starts with the letter A.
If you recognize it, say a dessert that starts with B.

SF <ziplocker93@gogomail.com> on 8 Dec 2010:
ok, that sounds good.
can you do dec 11 – 17?

>>> 

I spent my morning dealing with the Merchandise department, and having my calls directed back and forth from their office line to their warehouse to the supplier in Boston. Each supervisor was intent on deflecting responsibility to the others, when it turned out that a pallet of child-sized t-shirts printed with the PRT's shield logo was missing from inventory. They weren't top sellers from the gift shop – most visitors to the PRTHQ came for the superhero swag – and I figured that I could get them for cost price and hand them out as a "first one hundred to show up at the event" freebie deal. People, including me, love getting things without having to pay for them.

It was an incredible waste of time. The issue was finally resolved when I managed to talk the shift supervisor into having the warehouse searched; the merchandise was eventually found in a dusty corner with its bar code tracking label half torn away. Just goes to show that when the gears of bureaucracy churn away, things get lost and will never be noticed unless there is someone who goes
looking. It wouldn't surprise me at all if there was a storage room in Accounting filled with misplaced reports on balancing the PRT's budget for the next ten years – something that some poor cube farmer had probably labored weeks over, handed in, and never heard word from again.

I clocked into the office after a pleasant lunch of baked ham and cream of potato soup in the staff cafeteria – the seasonal menu for winter was usually hearty dishes that the PRT grunt squads claimed put hairs on a man's chest. I assumed it was the type of hyper-masculine banter traditional to military organizations, which every member (even the female ones) was expected to contribute to in order to build team spirit.

My colleagues were busy at their work stations, on their computers, cups of coffee and graphics tablets on hand, or flipping through reference books of fabric swatches stapled onto sturdy cardstock pages. Giang was at the central work bench, bent over a portable light table; it was piled with reams of typography transfer sheets held in place by a battered steel set square.

"Have you seen Nina?" I asked him.

Giang, a man with coppery skin and clinking metal rings wrapped around fingers and wrists, didn't look up. "She's in the workroom," he said. "Taking care of a special guest. She'd appreciate it if you popped in to say hi."

"Thanks."

"No probs, dude."

I gave him a brief nod and strolled over to the workroom. The door was closed, which meant that delicate work was being done – the sander or rotary grinder being in use, for example, which was extremely noisy and resulted in little flakes sent flying everywhere. Safety guidelines required we shut the door, for the sake of the ears and lungs of everyone in the office. Special guest, though, that could only mean one thing.

"Oh," I said, shutting the door behind me. "Dauntless. Didn't expect to see you here. Hello, Nina."

"Hey, Paul," said Nina. "Great timing."

She looked a bit flustered, and it could have been caused by my unexpected intrusion into her appointment with Dauntless, or, as I analyzed the situation, it could be the presence of Dauntless himself. Dauntless was seated on a stool with his costume's white bodysuit halfway unzipped, exposing a heavily muscled shoulder and the upper portion of his right arm. His crested hoplite's helmet rested on the workbench, and his face was covered by a basic non-woven fabric half mask secured by an elastic – the plain white disposable type that the PRT ordered in bulk and left lying around for the convenience of visiting capes.

"One of my seams popped again," Dauntless explained. "My alternates had the same problem." He kept still as Nina stabbed long, glass-headed dressmakers' pins through a fold of his sleeve.

"I can fix it, but it'll only be temporary," Nina said. She pointed to the open seam, loose bits of thread dangling from each side of the cut. I noticed that Nina wore a pincushion strapped to the back of her left hand, bristling with needles and an assortment of pins. "It's not just the threads. When you move in the costume, you're pulling on the fabric, too. The weave is loosening at the stress points, and we'll have to replace the whole panel if it keeps happening." She looked down at the fabric, then sent a speculative glance at Dauntless's muscles. "Getting busy in the weight room
"Winter is a slower season for patrols. I've been benching and squatting more, aiming for two hundred by ten chest reps. I'm getting pretty close at hitting my weight goals," Dauntless replied. I picked up a trace of nervousness in his voice. Interesting.

"Hmm." Nina rifled through a plastic tub of bobbins on the bench. "The design was cut on the bias for extra stretch. The last time we touched up your costume's suit, we cut into the seam allowance for extra room. There won't be much seam allowance left at this rate."

"You're going to hate this, Nina, but I think you have to re-measure and re-cut the Dauntless undersuit," I remarked. "It needs to be ready for television next year. I've got a heads up for February from Renick."

"Ugh. I'll have to look in Archives for our original pattern book with all the pieces." She gave an aggrieved sigh. "You know how much I love oak tag."

"You're using the same design?" Dauntless asked.

"Same design, different size," I said.

"But maybe different materials. We have a few samples of fire-retardant fabrics to trial," said Nina. "Could be useful, after that thingaling from last week... you know."

"Oh."

I looked at him. "Do you not like your costume, Dauntless?"

Dauntless was young, I knew. A younger hero, not too much experience – the skin of his shoulder was smooth and unblemished by scars, but there were a few faded, silvery stretchmarks, probably from gaining muscle mass quickly over a short period of time. It was strange to suddenly realize that I was older than him, and that I was older than most of the East-Northeast Protectorate apart from Miss Militia, Armsmaster, and possibly Assault. I hadn't ever considered myself old – jaded, yes, but never old. It occurred to me that Dauntless saw me as a figure of authority.

Dauntless was silent for a few seconds before he spoke. "Don't you think it's a bit... much?" He tilted his head toward the mannequin in the corner, where Triumph's half-finished lion armor prototype was strung together with wire and rubber cement. "I mean, I don't hate it, and you guys do a good job on it. But I picked it out of a list of options, and didn't get that much to choose from. I don't understand why Ror—" he coughed, and then continued, "um, Triumph, is picking something that's so close to mine."

It was something that I'd pointed out to Nina earlier, when I'd complained about the similarity of Triumph's costume to Dauntless', in theme and color scheme, which made arranging poses for team photos a challenge – one that could easily be avoided by nudging him into a different look. But it turned out that Triumph had outside support; it was the only feasible reason we could think of that might explain why such a ridiculous concept would be greenlit without question.

"There's a reason for the 'classic' look," I said. "Trends come and go over time. If you know your Protectorate history and seen the old costume archives, not many capes these days have actual capes."
"Same for domino masks," Nina added. "They fall off unless you use stage glue, and the stuff they use for dissolving containment foam washes it right off. It's not practical; it's just asking for a wardrobe malfunction to happen. They started phasing them out for visors by the early Nineties."

"Yeah. The PRT brass wanted your look to last, and something with historical weight won't need to follow the ever-changing rules of modern fashion. And there weren't that many themes we can give you that has a shield built in." I leaned against the edge of a workbench, dredging up what I'd read from the Image team's documentation on the Dauntless design, and what I understood of the Brockton Bay Protectorate branch's team structure. "It means no re-branding for you, since your equipment is part of your power, and you can't change it once you've zapped it up. So you're kind of stuck with what you've got. Sorry."

Dauntless let out a slow breath. "I guessed it was something like that. It makes sense, in a way. But why exactly is Triumph picking the gladiator look? He's not limited like I am."

"Short answer? Meddling from up top."

"What does that mean?"

"Normally Image sends in a list of costume concepts with a few good options, and the rest is padded out with a couple of recycled bad ones that a normal, sane person would pass over. Triumph picked the bad one and ran with it, and has the connections to push it through as a serious choice." I shrugged. "It's tacky, but it's on purpose. I suspect that he wants it that way."

Dauntless turned his masked face in my direction. "Why do you think that?"

"Most major Protectorate teams have a sort of theme, a visual aesthetic they tend to follow, to look cohesive as a team. Chicago has a mystical, spiritual look – Myrddin the wizard, and Revel the flying Jack-o-Lantern. Philadelphia is Camelot, and Las Vegas is a burlesque show," I explained. Nina gave a quiet snort of laughter. "Sometimes it's more subtle, like similar mask shapes or metal-based costumes, a shared element like that. What Triumph looks to be doing is picking a costume so tacky that any other city will think twice about trading for him. He wants to be the odd one out. He wants to stay in Brockton Bay, for some reason I don't understand."

"Oh," said Dauntless. "He has... personal reasons."

"Fair enough," I said. "But I'm also pretty sure the admins of East-Northeast shoehorned you into your costume because they want to hold onto you. That's something to think about."

Dauntless didn't say anything at that. In the deafening silence, Nina returned to her work and continued stitching up the torn seam on his costume.

"They call me the hope of Brockton Bay," Dauntless said after some time had passed. "It's... it's a lot of expectation to live up to."

I met his eyes beneath the cloth mask. "Do you not think you can live up to it?"

"I try to. But every day only gives me a tiny amount," admitted Dauntless. "And it doesn't feel like much."

"You're getting better every day. Not many heroes can say that."
"I'm only barely getting to the level that everyone else started with." He sounded almost bitter. "It's taken years, and it still doesn't feel like enough. It's like I'm waiting and waiting for the day where I wake up and realize, 'Hey, I'm a hero now'."

"I'm not a hero. Nina isn't either. We manage to deal with it just fine."

"Sorry," Dauntless said, sheepishly. "Living at the Rig means living with capes. It's hard not to think that way. About all the other people out there who don't have powers, and don't complain about it."

"It's fine," I said, and offered an encouraging smile. "For what it's worth, I don't think being a 'hero' is an absolute. Nina could make me a costume, and I could come up with a silly name for myself, and that wouldn't make me a hero. It's more about... motivation. Do you put on the costume and go out on the street because you signed a contract for a hundred and twenty thousand a year?"

"No." Dauntless hesitated. "Wait, how do you know how much I get paid?"

"It's on the recruitment brochures. Didn't you read them?"

"Uh... Not all the way through?"

"Look," I said, "if you joined not because it was the easy thing, or because you felt like it, or had nothing better to do, or no other options – because you thought it was the right thing, that's the ideal motivation. We have a bunch of people pass through here, and we coach them on what to say if they get asked in an interview. The stuff that audiences want to hear. But if they're as genuine as you are, we don't need to teach them how to act like a hero. It's already there."

"When we get you onto the media circuit next year, that's what you have to show them," I continued, and amusement colored my voice. "But more eloquently, of course. You might want to practice public speaking in front a mirror or with a webcam, to build your confidence."

"I'll try," promised Dauntless, as my words sunk in. "And what do I do if it doesn't work?"

"I'll get you a teleprompter." I laughed at his expression. "It's not like I ever signed up to be a hero."

>>> 

Nina swept up the tiny, fraying pieces of loose thread that had scattered over the workbench and floor with a dustpan, and emptied them into the trash. Dauntless' costume had been repaired; he'd thanked us both for our help and left the workroom a few minutes ago. The door was now cracked open.

"Is it always like that," she asked, "when you speak to them? Is that what you meant by using charm?"
"No," I replied. "Most of them need image coaching for good reason. Dauntless is pretty grounded. All he needs is to be pointed in the right direction." Some of the other Protectorate "heroes" I'd spoken to in the past needed to be violently prodded to get where the brass wanted them to go.

"It's hard to think of them as the hope of the city when I see them up close like this." Nina sighed.

"You shouldn't put them on a pedestal."

"But you've seen what they can do," she said, her voice soft. "It makes them special."

"I think it's just a lucky roll, for them to end up like that," I said. "Not everyone gets one, but that's life. That's why you're here making the tights instead of wearing them yourself. And the ones that do – some of them end up as a Case Fifty-Three. I wouldn't say it's that great of a deal."

Nina gazed at me, her lips pursed, and her agitation clear. "Haven't you ever thought about all the things you could do if you got powers?"

"I would still want to be here," I said. "And by that I don't mean as a Protectorate cape."

She nodded, and slipped the pincushion off her hand, tidying up her work space and returning her sewing kit to the cupboard built under the workbench. "I like this place. I'd want to be here too," she said quietly. Her eyes turned to me, dark under her thick-rimmed glasses. "I don't get you, Paul."

"Thank you? I guess." I met her gaze evenly, and kept my features neutral.

"You're the most anti-people people person I know," said Nina. "I think you're the only one I've ever met."

"I still don't know what that means, but thanks."

"It's... hard to explain," she mumbled, trailing off. "But I think you know what I'm trying to say."

"I'm sorry, Nina, but I don't really understand." I said, in a suitably confused and somewhat hurt tone, followed by an apologetic smile. "I have work to get back to. Shoot me a memo or something if you've figured it out, yeah? It was good talking to you."

Anti-people?

I suppose that term could be applied to me, if you didn't particularly care about being limited to flattering descriptors. It wasn't something I'd care to use for myself, even if it was true in a roundabout fashion. I know that I am a person who vastly prefers to be vindicated as a cynic than disenchanted as an idealist. I am one who believes that the only person who can be truly relied upon is myself. I don't know anyone else who is as trustworthy with my secrets, or as conscientious about keeping them.

The best-prepared people in this world are people whom, I think, think like I do, and through that find their success. It stems from an awareness of all the little things that can go wrong with the best-laid plans. Only when problems are identified can they be resolved. And while this level of diligence may not make for the most carefree – or pleasant – life, it is practical. And it works.

On Earth Bet, that's something you should never take for granted.
## Costume Reference Sheet

**01-11-10 IPR/5874(W2)**

**Author:** P. Braganca, N. Hristova

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"Where do you see yourself in five years?"

It's one of the classic tricks in the recruiter's repertoire, the one they pull out at the end of your job interview to unbalance you, just in case you thought you had that evaluation in the bag. Because no matter how hard you prepare, or how many obscure logic puzzles you memorize when they try to test your problem-solving skills, or how fluently you can explain that your greatest flaw is probably that you work too hard, or care too much, the truth is that there is no right answer to this question. The recruiter knows this. You, I hope, should already know this too.

This question is asked as a sort of Rorschach test.

When they ask this question, there is no set answer from a pre-written list that they're looking for. Essentially, it is a test of character, and that will determine how well you fit into the workplace, whichever workplace it is you wish to see yourself in the near and distant future.

The answer you give is a demonstration of how informed you are of the people and culture of the workplace, and how socially astute you happen to be. Because that particular question is yet another problem-solving puzzle, where the best answer depends on how aware you are of what other people are expecting to hear. And it shows what kind of person you are. Or what kind of person you want other people to think you are, at the very least.

For a boys' club type company where you already know or are related to the interviewer, and the whole interview is merely a formality for Human Resources, your answer might follow along the lines of "Where do I see myself? With your job, hahaha!", which is a cue to deploy the secret bro handshakes and high fives. For a tech startup running on hype and borrowed money, a more appropriate answer might be, "Unemployed. I'll come out of this rich or broke; either way I won't be working." No-nonsense honesty is a good trait for employees assigned to extremely time-sensitive projects.

For a job in the PRT, an exceptional response would be a heartfelt, "Serving this country to the best of my ability, sir or ma'am", with a sniff and a quick wipe of the eye for extra patriotism points. You might follow it up with a, "Sorry, sir or ma'am, it's just a speck of dust", which grants a double brownie bonus for humility. I don't know why that one works so well, but it really does, and it's worth practicing to get it just right so you fall on the loyal side rather than the jingoistic side of patriotism.

And if you're preparing for an interview to join the Protectorate, to be truthful, it really doesn't matter what you say or do, they're still going to take you no matter how bottom-of-the-barrel your powers are, or how unimpressive your physical appearance or personal charisma. The interviewers don't care about your answers; they're only there as paperwork facilitators, to make sure that you've acknowledged the liability waivers and terms of employment. They don't even care if you are incapable of signing – or remembering – your own name, whatever name you chose to present yourself with. And there's a reason why they don't ask you where you see yourself in the not-so-distant future.

Five years is a long time.

Five years is a lifetime in terms of a Protectorate career.
There are many Protectorate heroes who don't reach that milestone.

When you consider it carefully, five years is the time it takes for twenty Endbringer landfalls, if they continue their once-per-three-months schedule, cycling from Simurgh, to Leviathan, to Behemoth – the so-called Herokiller famous for a consistent seventy-five percent level clear rate. Not everyone has the power rating to take on an Endbringer, but most Protectorate members are expected (or pressured, as I suspect) to sign on and contribute wherever they can. The squishiest Thinkers can do their part when the Simurgh visits, to dampen her precognitive abilities. And everyone else can serve as support, or search and rescue.

It is the strongest and most durable among us who go out time after time, and throw themselves upon those great and unfathomable creatures of monstrous destruction, and time after time, find out too late they are not as strong nor as durable as they thought they were. It's not a very comforting thought, and it's the reason why I never answer the call when the sirens blare with unwelcome regularity every few months. I suppose it says something that the villains and crooks of the country heed the summons while I do not.

In defense of myself, the fewer people who see me and know me as Tabloid, the better it is for me. Not to mention that it adds another layer of difficulty in retaining my civilian identity, when participants are told to gather on the roof of the PRT building for the Strider Express.

Endbringer fights follow the rules of the Endbringer truce, and fraternization is not only allowed, but encouraged for better power synergy. The traditional way to introduce yourself as a cape is to explain and demonstrate your power set and ask for the same, and that is something I would really prefer to avoid. If the price of not throwing in my lot and fighting the good fight is to be plagued by my conscience, then I will bear it happily. It's been almost eighteen years to the day since Behemoth showed up for the first time, and as I'm still alive to have a conscience to bear, I consider my policy a good one.

The Protectorate as an organization is affected by the constant cycle of Endbringers. The first thing that rookie heroes who sign that six-digit contract never get told is that the turnover rate is quite impressive. The Protectorate is waging a war on multiple fronts, the least of which is against the eternal forces of attrition. Capes fight, and capes die; the weaker and the more eager capes who are pressured into confronting Endbringers leave spots on the roster that are hopefully filled by the newly recruited.

But that happens to leave the top spots on the Protectorate ladder filled by the strongest capes, the ones who have the power to meet an Endbringer face-on and deal some serious damage, and have done so in multiple instances over multiple years without biting the dust. If these capes are capable of being administrators – or capable of delegating the task to loyal minions and deputies – then that is qualification enough for being promoted to the leader of a Protectorate branch. The current crop of Protectorate leaders is hand-picked by HQ and vetted by the Triumvirate, and it doesn't tend to budge much once the pecking order has been firmly established.

That poses a problem on the other end of the ladder.

The Protectorate is full of capes who are all but press-ganged into potentially lethal action. The Wards, on the other hand, are not. They are legally protected from being pressured into signing on to fight an Endbringer. All service is voluntary, and even if the Ward concerned knowingly consents, their parents and guardians can overrule the decision and pull them out of the program. The Wards are less heavily hit by the war of attrition, and trigger events occur more often for younger people,
who these days are triggering younger and younger...

What you get from this situation is a Wards roster that equals the numbers of the adult capes in the Protectorate, or in major cities, outnumbers it. You have impatient youth who feel restricted by the rules imposed upon them for their own protection, restless young capes who have great potential but are lectured into keeping their powers restrained, people who can look up the ladder and see how far it goes. And what they see is a ponderously bureaucratic institution guided by the firm hands of three people who haven't moved from their spots in almost thirty years.

I think it's traditional for each generation of youths to rebel against the guidance of their elders, as much as it is customary for the elders to think that the youth of today are flighty and impetuous and in desperate need of guidance, wisely given and well intentioned. Such beliefs are not helped by throwing parahuman abilities into the mix; in fact, the results can be quite volatile, as young people will always find a means to defy the establishment, and powers are much more fun to play with than spray paint, loud rock music, and leather jackets with iron-on skull patches.

I've always figured that the best and most effective way to rebel against the rules is to infiltrate the establishment, and integrate within it, and climb the ladder so that the restrictions cease to matter. When you're at the top, there is no one to enforce the rules, and the rules are yours to make.

I'm pretty sure that anyone who has put the slightest bit of intelligent thought into breaking rules and not getting caught has come to a similar conclusion.

Good thing that *this* personality test mixed with problem-solving puzzle never comes up at job interviews.

>>> 

Giang waved me over to his desk, and the steel rings pierced through his ears swayed. "Hey, Paul, I got some stuff you should look at." He slid an expandable A3-sized folio over to me, along with two thick spiral-bound sketchbooks. Colorful sticky notes peeked out enticingly from between the pages like the processed cheese in a burger. "The pattern books that Nina wanted. And the paper patterns I dug out of Archives for her. She has a four o'clock with a guest, and you might want to see what's new on the Fall-Winter lineup." He laughed, and then searched through the tray on his desk marked IN. It was was overflowing with papers of all sizes, while his OUT box was relatively empty. I could even see the bottom.

"Oh, and this is for you." After a few seconds of rustling, Giang drew out a large tangerine-golden envelope and offered it to me. "You don't have a pigeonhole in the mail room, and this was sign-on-delivery. I signed for it, hope you don't mind." He raised an eyebrow. "Looks like fancy stuff. Parchment paper, feels thick. One-seventy weight at least, very nice. And whoa, it even has a watermark."

I turned the envelope over in my hands. "Thanks."
At a glance, it looked to be similar in shape and color to standard shipping envelopes, the ones you could buy in bulk from any office supplier, or "liberate" from the office stationery cupboard. But on closer inspection, there was a floral design printed on it, an elaborate chintzy pattern reminiscent of sitting room upholstery belonging to grandmothers and stuffy maiden aunts, too faint for me to call garish. It was postmarked from New York, and also rubber stamped from the Boston PRTHQ, where my regular office was located. The address on the front was written in a looping, very feminine script.

Paul F. Braganca.

I seldom had contact with New York; most of the time, orders or information packets from up top weren't sent in hard copy, but rather through the internal servers. Either way, all mail went addressed to my [PRT.PBraganca](mailto:PRT.PBraganca) handle, and this person used my middle initial, something that I had no inclination to make public knowledge.

Once a year...
I put that thought from my mind. I had work to do, and there were more important things to worry about than personal correspondence, which was rated low on my list of priorities, especially when it didn't concern the pile of money I'd accumulated, or an opportunity to make even more. I slipped the envelope beneath the sketchbooks, and headed for the workroom, pattern folio under one arm.

Nina was in the workroom, wide swatches of fabric spread on the benches in front of her, drooping from the edges of the table in bright colors, like festive bunting. She paged through a thick three-ring binder of fabric swatches, muttering to herself in a low voice. The square-cut fabric samples in the binder book were organized by weight and type, each with the distinctive zigzagged edges cut by pinking shears, which prevented the cloth from fraying.

"Hey, Nina," I greeted her. "Giang had these for you." I set the pattern folio on the corner of the table that seemed the cleanest.

"Oh. Paul," Nina raised her head, blinking sluggishly. She rubbed her eyes and adjusted her glasses. "Thanks. You have the sketchbooks, too?"

"Yeah." I handed the books over. "What do you have for your four o'clock?"

Nina opened the front cover of one of the sketchbooks to the first page, and her finger traveled down the index of contents. Each section within was labelled and highlighted in a different color, which corresponded with the sticky note page markers. She flicked to the relevant section.

"Vista," she said, frowning. "A costume like hers is pretty light, so we make Spring-Summer and Fall-Winter versions to keep up with the temperature." She bit her lip. "I don't think Vista likes me."

"Why not?" I asked. It was true that I didn't like all of the capes I worked with, and never expected them to like me. But I liked to think that I fostered a sense of mutual respect, and if there was never any true friendship, there could at least be familiarity. It was mutually beneficial.

"When I showed her the pattern bases when she came in to pick a design, I told her that the 'Junior Petite' ones would fit her the best, or we could alter something from the children's section."

"Wait," I said. "Did you actually say that, word-for-word?"

"Uh... Yes?"

I laughed. "Yeah, I think Vista hates you."

"What?" Nina frowned. "Really?"

"She's sensitive about being the team kid. There's a list of words you shouldn't use around her, and 'child' probably tops the list. Next to 'adorable', 'tiny', and 'sweet'."

Nina huffed and flicked irritably through the pages in the sketchbook. "Well, how was I supposed to know? There's a list of descriptor phrases on the reference sheets and it said just that."

These were the key phrases, the essential concept summaries for a hero's overall aesthetic that the department came up with during brainstorming sessions. It was written into the documentation for each cape's costume, accompanied by preliminary concept sketches, photographs of heroes with a similar aesthetic, and illustrations from other sources – comic books, animated shows, paintings and
vintage posters. It made handing off a design much easier when a new department head was appointed in an unavoidable management re-shuffle, or when a cape was traded to a new Protectorate branch. In this way, Armsmaster was "cyber knight" and Triumph was looking to be "lion gladiator".

"I usually go by a don't ask, don't tell policy," I said. "If a cape comes through only caring about getting in and out as fast as possible, I'm not going to waste my time telling them why we did this or chose that." I glanced down at the rolls of fabric on the tabletop, all in shades of white, surrounded by scattered paint chip samples: Snow White, Powder, Bridal Ivory, Vanilla Cream. "You don't have to talk to them, you know. No one's expecting you to be friends with them. No one's rating you on your bedside manner."

"But Vista's so young – she's just a girl. She reminds me of my niece," Nina sighed, and turned to me. "Besides, you make friendly with them. What's the deal with that?"

"Being friendly makes it easier to work with them. And that makes things easier for me. As long as it actually works," I answered, with a careless shrug. "If any of these capes makes it big time on your watch, they might specifically request you for their appearances, or put in a good word for you if they get their own team. If you didn't have the connections to land a gig at New York HQ, you have to take what you can get."

"Ambitious," Nina commented. "I never took you for the type."

"You get a lot more options opening up that way. And the contract re-negotiations and bonuses don't hurt." I sent her a curious look. "Do you want to live in Brockton Bay forever?"

Nina smiled wryly. "Brockton isn't really that bad. Yeah, there are bad parts, but every town has them—"

A knock interrupted her mid-speech, and our eyes turned to the door, which swung open to reveal a girl – short of stature, blonde hair, and slick green body armor that failed to conceal the delicate build of a pre-teen, even with the foam padded and generously molded chest piece. She was followed into the workroom by a young man in a dark, faded red sweatshirt with a white shield design, and matching pants. White stripes trailed their way down each leg. It was, I could admit, gift shop merchandise put to a good use. A disposable cloth mask worn over Aegis' eyes didn't cover the tanned skin of his jaw, or the dark hair that was tied into a tail at the back of his head.

"Looks like your four o'clock is here," I said, with a glance at my wristwatch. "Five minutes early. Extra punctual."

"Hello," said Vista cautiously, eyes skimming across the bolts of cloth unfurled over the table. "Are you busy? Or can I start now? What am I trying on today?"

Nina spread open the spiral-bound sketchbook to a page marked with a green sticky note. "Your winter costume. We're switching the tights out for fleece-lined leggings in the same color, which will be a bit warmer when you do Christmas market patrols on the Boardwalk. I'll measure you for them today." She hesitated for a brief moment, then went on, "I'm also going to re-measure you so we can update your Spring-Summer costume.

"We'll have to re-cut a new skirt because there are length regulations. The proportions have to stay the same to the rest of your costume, and your current one is looking a bit too worn to be let down. The Youth Guard liaison will get on my case with a ruler otherwise, and, um, you're a growing girl,
and—" I made a quick gesture with my hand. Nina swallowed, and bravely continued. "Um. Yeah. If you want to pick a new fabric – HQ approved a couple of new suppliers a few weeks ago – you can have a look, and I'll send it off to the digital printer to get the swirls done."

"Oh, okay, then," Vista said, nonplussed. "Can you make it in the same way as the one I'm wearing? I like the weights sewn into the bottom. They keep the skirt from flying up when I'm roof running."

Nina gave me a look. I returned it, eyebrows lifted in silent amusement.

"Uh... right," said Nina. "Sure. No problem. Let me get my measuring tape."

"Sounds fun," I remarked, in a cheery voice. "I'll leave you to it. See you later, Nina."

Youth Guard regulations again. Female Wards were to be measured by female costumiers, in the name of preserving their comfort and safety. It was one of the rules I didn't have a problem with, and I expected Nina could handle it without me, as long as she remembered my advice when she inevitably had to refit Vista's chest armor. I grabbed my orange envelope and turned to the door, passing Aegis in the threshold, whom I noticed was an inch taller up close, and a dozen pounds heavier.

Cheating with powers? Not that I could blame him.

"Mr. Braganca," he said quietly, "Can I speak to you? If you have time."

"Do you need costume work done?" I walked to my temporary office, Aegis on my heels. "Giang – Mr. Nguyen – can handle it while Nina's working with Vista."

"No. Just some advice."

I settled into my rolling chair and propped the envelope against my computer monitor. "Is it about the Wards' Cause event? I read the funding request letters you sent to me. They're fine. Or passable, which still counts. Legal is mailing them off tomorrow."

Aegis drew in a slow breath. "I'm thinking about requesting a transfer."

"Huh," I replied. "Why don't you pull up a chair. Admin usually does this career counseling stuff, but I'll give it a go."

Aegis disappeared around the corner of the next cubicle and returned with a rolling chair of his own, which he set opposite mine. He sat down heavily, and it squeaked. "Aren't you going to ask why?"

"Is it what I said a week ago? You seemed set on staying in the Bay."

"I thought about it, and I knew that if I told anyone, they'd tell me to stay. That the team needs me. But you were talking about other options, things that no one in Admin ever mentioned. I had to look it up on my own."

"East-Northeast has problems maintaining the hero to villain ratio," I said slowly, thinking about the direction this conversation could go. "They need as many hands on deck as they can get. However they can get them." I recalled Shadow Stalker's unhappy deal with the PRT. "It's the Director's prerogative as to how they manage recruitment. If you want to lodge a complaint about how
information access is being handled, you should speak to Deputy Director Renick or Director
Piggot. They'd make time for you."

"That's the problem," said Aegis reluctantly. "I don't think Director Piggot has my best interests in
mind. If I complain, I'll get deflected."

I'd never had any sort of lengthy conversation with Director Piggot. Renick handled the Wards, and
any communication with them was either through him or the internal servers where everything was
monitored by in-house security and a Youth Guard representative for inappropriate contact. With the
Protectorate heroes, I could message them directly or sign off memos with the generic office
PRT.DeptIPR tag. But the office grapevine had been colorful enough for me to put together a
rough, second-hand picture of what Piggot was like. It was rumored that there was some irregularity
with her appointment as Director, and that the PRT HQ had stuck her with a town like Brockton Bay
for a reason.

"Ah." I leaned back in my chair, and closed my eyes. "Last time, during one of the planning
sessions, you said that you asked to participate in the inter-Ward championship program, and you
were refused. Does your... friction... with Admin have to do what that?"

"It's to do with training in general," Aegis answered with frank honesty. "I don't think they're
preparing us, the Wards – me – as well as they should. We're always backup for the Protectorate,
whenever they can't make it or need the time off, or else it's repping for the PRT. No offense.

"The thing is... I'm supposed to be the leader of the Wards. Or the next Leader, whatever. But I'm
not prepared to be Leader – I know I'm not – and they're not going to do anything about it, other than
tell me I'll pick it up quickly, and that it worked for Triumph. But the truth is that Triumph is a good
friend, but as a leader..." Aegis trailed off with a grimace. "He isn't."

"You can never tell who makes a good leader or a bad one until they're placed into a position of
responsibility," I said. "It's why they give everyone a chance to lead the Wards. His leadership
qualities, or lack of them – I haven't read the assessments and I don't know for sure, but I suspect it's
why they've switched Triumph onto Protectorate duties where he starts at the bottom of the pile,
instead of letting him lead the Wards activities. That, and he's turned eighteen and would rather draw
a full salary instead of Wards pocket change."

Triumph had completed his high school education sometime during the summer, and had since
celebrated his eighteenth birthday. He'd had a party, a pretty damn fancy private one on a hired
yacht. I had the pictures to prove it. But the general public wasn't made aware of his birthday –
heroes never shared their real birth dates, with the exception of some heroes who announced fake
birthdays if they wanted to host and sell tickets to a fake party to raise money for charity. Triumph
would have a presentation ceremony sometime next year, when his costume was completed and he'd
finished the security and sensitivity training necessary to be signed on as a full (if Junior) Protectorate
member.

Aegis nodded in thought. "He's been away at the Rig more since his party, and even before that, he
was more interested in his civilian life. Vista almost lives at HQ. Shadow Stalker, too; whatever
anyone thinks of her, I know she puts in the hours. Triumph always had his own friends, his civvie
extracurriculars, college prep, and Wards Leader just fell by the wayside."

"If you told Admin you had doubts, they'd tell you that you'll be fine." I inspected Aegis' mask, and
his long hair. Did it get sweaty under his helmet? They were built more for protection and to present
a distinctive look rather than comfort and ventilation. "If you told the other Wards, they wouldn't
"care, because they're used to Triumph's light touch leadership and don't know any different."

"Exactly," Aegis agreed. "But I believe in self-improvement. I can be a better leader than he was, and I can be better prepared for it, if I have the chance to try and train and learn properly. I'm just not getting that here, not in Brockton Bay."

"Nothing wrong with wanting success. Very commendable," I said, with a cool smile. "Where do you want to go? San Diego is usually the place for high-intensity Wards power training. It turns into a national training camp every summer, but it's kind of slow other times of the year, when the short-term transfers go home."

I didn't mention that the San Diego Wards camp was the place where they sent a lot of third-strike teenage troublemakers to be straightened out by a certain rough-edged type of drill sergeant who'd been personally appointed by the Iron Lady herself, Alexandria. Wards who had trouble with authority, or had trouble controlling their powers or using them safely, were sent to a pretty hardcore boot camp that really worked, and turned out (mostly) functioning members of cape society. Somehow, it had the reputation among people who'd heard of it (but never been there) as a sleepaway camp with marshmallow roasting and campfire singalongs.

"Boston."

"And that's why you're talking to me instead of Admin. What do you need, a recommendation? A list of contacts?"

"If you could," Aegis said. "Thank you. Could you get me in touch with Weld, the Boston leader?"

"Sure. But just so you know, if you transferred to Boston, they wouldn't move Weld from Wards leader for you, even if your birthday falls earlier."

"I know," he met my eyes. "That's why I want Boston. I watched all the video interviews, read all the media transcripts, and Weld is competent. He knows what he's doing." He lowered his voice. "And that's what I want for myself."

"You'd leave Clockblocker as interim-leader while Triumph's big league official presentation is in progress."

The PHO forums had plenty of obsessive people who were good at calculating the relative ages of everyone on the Wards roster, based on small hints dropped in interviews. Triumph, Aegis, Clockblocker, then Gallant. I didn't know Clockblocker very well, but the announcement of his name when he was officially presented as a new Ward had made a bit of a stir in the Image and Branding departments. The internal memos had flown fiercely that day.

"I think Clock would do well with some responsibility. He'd step up. Gallant would help," Aegis said contemplatively. "I only want a temporary transfer. When I'm done, I'll come back to Brockton Bay."

"What is it with you Brocktonites? Brocktonians?" I asked, sounding a bit sharp. "What does everyone see in this place?"

"You're here, aren't you?"

"You think I actually live here?" I said, my voice tinged with mock horror.
"Well, I don't think you're living in a cardboard box," Aegis shot back.

"It would be less of a fire hazard than the average Brockton house." I laughed. "But seriously, I'm here because I was re-assigned here, and the expense account and accommodations package was sweet. I just don't understand the, ah, appeal of this town. I mean, the Boardwalk is scenic, but every other town on the coast has a beach. Downtown is nice, but only if you like the traditional 'we built this with whale hunting money' style of architecture."

"It's home," Aegis said simply. "You're not a New Englander. You don't sound like one, like a local; you don't have the Boston accent either, even if you have your real non-cardboard house there."

"You're right," I admitted. "I'm not a local. Maybe I just don't get the 'steadfast colonial spirit' stuff that everyone born here grows up channeling."

"To be honest," spoke Aegis with a grin, "'Live Free or Die' is not the kind of state motto that just anyone can channel." He paused for a second. "If you don't mind me asking, what is the motto of the place you'd call home?"

I didn't think there was anywhere that I'd call home, if home was something real, not just a way to trick people into buying kitschy needlepoint decorations to frame on their walls, or novelty doormats. There was, however, no reason why I should tell this to Aegis.

"'Eureka', I think," I said after a moment of consideration. "I wouldn't say I have the best memory for trivia."

"Aegis? Aegis!" came a girl's voice in the distance. "Where'd you go?"

"Looks like Vista's finished," I remarked. "It was good to talk. I can e-mail you the list of contacts... but if you'd prefer more privacy, I can have it in hard copy."

Aegis stood, and peered over the wall of the cubicle. "Thank you, that would be great. I'd better take this chair back to where I found it." He smiled, and offered his hand to shake. He had a firm handshake. More parahuman cheating? "Clockblocker swears you're playing fake-nice, and it's good to know that he's wrong." Aegis caught my expression. "Don't worry, I'm not going to tell him."

"Good," I said, standing too. "Feel free to tell him that I'm not the second coming of Scion. I have no preference for kittens either way."

Vista came around the corner, an indigo-colored PRT gift shop bag dangling from one arm. She looked at me with clear curiosity, but Aegis shook his head and murmured something to placate her, and then they left, Aegis wheeling the chair in front of him.

It was nice to know that there were capes out there who didn't let their parahuman powers go to their heads, as power has a habit of doing. Capes who could think clearly and levelly, and had ambitions that weren't destructive, a rarer trait than I liked. It was the reason for villains outnumbering heroes in every large city, every major popular center. These villains typically wanted something – usually to be proven the most powerful, to control the most territory, to lay down the rules and have them obeyed regardless of what the official authorities said.
But capes who can cooperate with one another, who have acuity and foresight enough to consider their options carefully instead of jumping in and hoping for a lucky break... I liked that. Even better when he or she worked within the bounds of the establishment to claw out an advantage for themselves, and could pluck the golden goose without killing it.

I could respect that. I could work with that.
There's a mangled quote out there, which floats around marketing and PR departments in the form of motivational posters and novelty coffee mugs. It goes something along the lines of: "All respectable capes are alike; each disreputable cape is indecent in their own way."

Nothing can be done to make people lose their interest in capes, so anyone who works with them learns to roll with it. Specialized PR approaches have been developed over the years to pander to the public's desires, while limiting the potential consequences of introducing a new public figure to the public consciousness. When on the job, it's all about careful risk management. And the sales figures, of course.

Because people will always wonder what capes do when they're not caping.

It isn't enough to see the heroes on television or on computer monitors, heroically saving the day by cutting kites out of trees, or towing jet skis to shore after some smart cookie forgot to fuel up before a weekend beach house party. The sound bites on the evening news, or front page photographs in the morning papers don't contribute nearly enough to satisfy the intrusive, voyeuristic cravings of the masses.

There's something peculiar about the way that people want to see their heroes as distant and wondrous beings, untouchable and aspirational creatures who surely never have to worry about who has custody of little Timmy and little Susie this week, or how much is left for food after essential expenses and loan repayments have been deducted from the monthly paycheck. Capes are treated as celebrities in this nation of ours, and it boosts morale to have role models to look up to, idols whose public personas are thoroughly scrubbed clean to give the appearance of being nothing but respectable.

And then these same people are the ones who relish the tawdry details of a cape's life. They enjoy the wholesome public front but they also really want to see if the private back is just as squeaky clean.

If it's not...

Everyone loves a scandal, and it becomes the type of dross that fills up the daytime television programming slots on the cable networks, and makes up the front page photographs of the bi-weekly supermarket gossip magazines. Many, though they would never dare admit it, are accustomed to seeing parahumans raised above the status of ordinary non-powered people, and with the assistance of heavy media exposure, can live vicariously. It's another type of appeal to see them lowered to a merely human level and torn into for a vicious sense of gratification.

I think it says something about human nature, that we are so eager to see the same people raised high and brought low, all for our entertainment. It also says something about the good citizens of the First World, when I observe the fascination people have for capes, how much attention is placed upon them, and how contemporary popular culture seems to revolve around, and be shaped by them.

The truth is that wholesome and respectable capes tend to be boring after a while, since they are all quite similar when you deconstruct their public personas – I wouldn't be so generous as to call it a personality. You will find that there is very little true substance there. It's nothing more than a cardboard cutout that speaks aloud what it is told to say, and does nothing at all which isn't first
rubber-stamped by an approval committee. Easy to work with and easy to manage, definitely, and it sure looks good on camera. But it doesn't satisfy the demands of the public any more than scented candles can satisfy your hunger cravings.

Just look at Scion, internationally renowned as the first and the greatest of the parahumans, the most powerful among us: the guy who can take on an Endbringer with one hand and wipe out the Triumvirate with the other. He's a man of few words – no words at all, in fact. Scion is without a doubt revered and respected, but everything about him is so squeaky clean that there is nothing about him that is the least bit relatable, the least bit human.

But Scion doesn't need the public's support. The Protectorate does, and thus the PRT is tasked with presenting capes as people with a semblance of humanity, who can dispense a side order of mercy with their justice, and can't be all that scary if you think they're as approachable as your next door neighbor. It's a fine line to toe, when letting a cape show something of his or her personality on screen, to be truly personable. Too much in one direction, and the cape becomes a controversy; the things that are said will be taken out of context, looped, and set to a catchy beat for a million hits in twenty-four hours. Too little, and your scripted false personality doesn't ring true, and the result you get is a robot who might as well be cardboard.

The standard protocol for debuting Protectorate cape personalities into the media is to allow them to choose two or three adjectives to define their "character", because a person who wears a costume in front of the camera is an actor, even if they don't know it, and what they're playing is a stylized version of themselves.

Myrddin, the great archmage of Chicago, is as wise as he is eccentric. Eidolon, the most powerful hero of the Protectorate, is well known for his mysterious and aloof demeanor. The sword-swinging Mouse Protector, according to the files, chose "Keen" and "Cheesy" for herself, and like everything she does, it's ambiguous as to whether or not it's supposed to be a joke. In this way, heroes are shown to be more than blank slates, but are still limited in what they can show the public, and what the public knows about them.

I think everyone who works in the PRT is in some ways grateful to the independent heroes, the corporate capes and the alternative groups who don't follow the same restrictions as the Protectorate capes. They don't represent the government, and don't have to personify the ideals of the American people – all of them, impartially. Instead, the independents have the flexibility to adapt their image to target a specific demographic, whether it is the wealthier households, or the young adult age bracket, the religious, or the urban audience.

They're the ones who satisfy the hunger the public has for "human" capes, when the Protectorate capes cannot. That's where cape media gets such a boost: the salacious affairs and inter-team rivalries between capes which make up the bread-and-butter of corporate hero culture would never be tolerated in the professional atmosphere of the Protectorate. The reality television shows – Cape Clubhouse, or the very infamous Atlantic Shore – the public beef and trash talking, the dropping of F-bombs in live broadcasts, and promotion of age-restricted products like alcohol and snuff – to the consumers of this type of media, knowing that invulnerable capes have weaknesses in the form of petty vices is rather reassuring.

Behind doors, cape drama is not so rare as the Protectorate makes it look, as I've discovered over the years working with the PRT. Interpersonal conflicts abound, and petty vices afflict everybody. Parahumans possess no inherent immunity, and I suspect that they are more susceptible than most, although casual viewers will never see anything but a unified front presented by the organization as a whole, and a cohesive team at the city level.
Believe me, it doesn't take a corporate executive or a PR team to manufacture cape drama. Capes can easily stumble into it on their own. The real talent goes into making sure that what you hear of it is only what we let you hear.

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Team meetings.

It's one of the joys of working in a big (or biggish) city.

On one hand, the bigger Protectorate branches have more resources and more manpower to offer, so you can skive off if you know how to delegate. All those interns sitting around, taking selfies of themselves with the cardboard cutouts of the local hero roster? Put them to work, doing anything from fetching coffee and picking up snacks from the staff cafeteria, to all the tedious setting-up and packing-up in the studio that would ordinarily have me coming in early and staying late to organize. Not to mention the dozens of other competent staff members who have specialized equipment on hand, as well as the skill sets to use them.

In the smaller, small-town Protectorate branches on the other hand, you don't get assigned any extra staff apart from the Mayor's part-time secretary, Doris, an old-fashioned battle-axe of a woman who has a dozen grandchildren that she won't hesitate to tell you about. And she calls everyone "young man" or "young lady", regardless of how old you actually are, and makes a habit of criticizing all your choices, because a plum-colored lipstick for Serenade doesn't fit a young lady like her, no indeed; it makes her look like a fast lady, and we wouldn't want that, would we—

Anyway.

The central table in the Image and PR department's work space was occupied by my colleagues, and I sat at the back, as far away from the big screen and the speaker as possible. While it is considered rude to occupy yourself with other, unrelated work while someone is hosting a presentation, it is even ruder to be caught doing so. So I'd spent most of the time filling out the paperwork necessary to procure metal detectors and arrange transport for them, along with some other bulky and fragile lighting equipment from the studio. I didn't completely ignore my surroundings, however. The presentation was interesting, but I was not interested enough to involve myself in the debate.

"If we put a lion on the backplate, we can get it up to seven," announced Giang, gesturing with one be-ringed hand at the screen, which displayed concept drawings of Triumph's costume and armor details. "Terry had the idea of making the gloves have little lions' heads on the knuckles, four per side. So that's fifteen up."

Nina groaned. "That's stupid! Isn't the lion helmet enough to say 'Hey, I like lions'?"

"I e-mailed him the sketches," Giang answered. "He said it was cool, and he can't wait to punch things with those gloves."
"That's a little too violent," said Sharon, one of our PR supervisors, a gray-haired woman who was one of the rare suit wearers in the department. "We can't promote that. It looks like knuckle dusters."

"That's pretty much what they are," said Giang casually. "If you don't like it, we have some clawed glove designs, too."

"That's a definite 'No' from me." Sharon was firm.

"Looks like it's a no-go for the 'Fists of Triumph'." Giang turned to Terry at his left, who shrugged and murmured a quiet, "I told you they wouldn't go for it." Terry tapped his tablet computer and swapped in the next slide.

I continued with my own paperwork. Triumph's costume was a Brockton-centric dilemma, and it wasn't my role to judge what unique weaponry would be most useful and effective on the streets of Brockton Bay. All I really had to do was to make sure it looked suitably impressive on camera, and that there wasn't anything offensive about it that could result in an unfortunate and unwarranted nickname upon his first public presentation. Nicknames that arise in the aftermath of an embarrassing viral video are out of my hands, and are therefore fair game.

"The real question is: do we make it historically authentic, or Hollywood authentic..."
"—It's not insensitive. You can't be offensive or racist to Romans, I think they're all dead..."

"—Puma from Phoenix has a cat-themed costume. Aztec styled, and they're dead too..."

"—I'm pretty sure he's allowed to do that, the interviews implied he was Hispanic..."

I droned out the chatter. It wasn't hard.

I'd gotten a piece of personal correspondence forwarded to me from my Boston office. I knew who'd sent it, and as I slipped it out from beneath the stack of papers on my clipboard, I recognized the handwriting; it was all too familiar to me, as was the bright golden-tangerine-yellow of the envelope. Everyone has their little idiosyncrasies, and this was my sister's.

I slit open the envelope, and felt around inside – normally, I wouldn't recommend you do this, but the PRT checks all incoming mail for things like parcel bombs and razor blades – and slid out a thick rectangle of card.

A greeting card, heavy premium linen-rag cardstock, semi-gloss coating, a promotional piece from the Alexandria! musical collection. It had a printed signature on the top: Alexandria's autograph, neat and recognizable, and the familiar looping signature of the Broadway star, Josephine Villiers. The card featured a portrait of Alexandria in costume, steel helmet covering her eyes and much of the silvery scar that wound its way down her cheek; her trademark tower logo was centered on her chest.

With a fleeting burst of apprehension, I opened the card.

Two tickets, center orchestra seats, to Alexandria! – Caroling with the Cast on the Friday, December 24 showing.

I pushed them aside to read the message. Someone's phone seemed to be ringing in the distance, a tinny tune like one from a music box, a simplified form of a more complex melody. Something that I thought I'd heard in the past, maybe on the radio, or in an advertising jingle.

The letter. Part well wishes, part apology, seemingly meaningless courtesy greetings. Maybe the message was inconsequential fluff to the eyes of any other reader, especially the first half, but I knew it – and I took it – as an act of genuine sincerity. The act itself was a statement, a promise kept that was never intended in any serious way to be an obligation; a silent confirmation of a shared memory; an understanding that communicated itself through the lines on a page and the space between the lines, which brimmed with words unwritten and words unsaid. Something that spoke to me quietly and discreetly, whispering: "I remember what you choose to forget."

Beneath the message was a phone number, scribbled hastily in the corner as if it were an afterthought.

I hear the call, I hear its song.
It keeps on calling,
I will be strong...

"Paul?"

I looked up.
My colleagues were staring at me. The tune continued to play, and I realized with a prickle of awkwardness that it came from my card. The tune was the theme song to the animated television cartoon, "The Adventures of Alexandria", which also happened to be the chorus of Alexandria’s signature song from the stage musical, her leitmotif. I closed the card. The music stopped.

"No way, you got a collectors' edition singing Alexandria card?" Giang remarked into the silence. "Forty whole dollars, limited print run, New York exclusive, and someone wrote all over it?" He shook his head in disbelief. "What a waste."

"Secret Santa," I said. "Looks like I won the lucky dip."

"I still haven't bought something for mine," Terry muttered to himself.

"Who sent it?" Nina demanded at the same time. "They sold out on the day, and I really wanted one."

"Uh, the point of Secret Santa is that you don't know who sent you stuff," I replied. "So I can't tell you who sent it. It could be Alexandria for all I know."

"Haha, very funny," said Nina, and then her eyes narrowed. "You'd tell me if you were friends with Alexandria, wouldn't you?"

"I'm not sure Alexandria even does friends. She doesn't look like the type."

"That's only what her costume wants you to think," Nina said with a pensive frown.

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"The more impressive we make your armor, the more expensive it'll be," I said, glancing down at the supply list that Giang sent to me after the team meeting. It listed the materials and machines required to create what we called the Lion Armor, in spreadsheet form, with all the approximated costs tallied in a neat column. "The finer the detail, the larger the pieces, the more man hours and machine time that has to go into it. You get a custom costume as per the terms of your Protectorate contract, and we're allocated a budget for it, but it's not infinite. If you want more lions on your armor, we'll have to cut corners from the other end. Your bodysuit, for example."

Triumph folded his arms and hummed inconclusively. "Can I see the pictures?"

"Nina?"

Nina slid around the corner of the work bench to stand next to Triumph, a young man in his late teenage years. He nevertheless managed to be over six feet tall and conspicuously well-muscled, even under an unflattering maroon winter-weight sweatshirt which bore an image of two crossed baseball bats beneath the large printed words Brockton Bay Boomers.

"You and Dauntless have the same, or very similar, measurements," Nina said, giving him an approving top-to-toe inspection. "Same height, within half an inch of each other. Identical inseam. Shoe size is half a size off, easy to deal with. And you've got a larger neck and collar circumference, but we can give you a different type of zipper closure for that."

"So what you're saying is that you're giving me Dauntless' bodysuit?" He sounded almost offended.

New heroes.

The PRT wanted the heroes who hadn't signed the official membership contract approached with kid gloves and the star treatment, so after a few weeks of soft handling and room service, they started to believe they were actually hot shit. Triumph had been in the Wards for a year or so before he graduated, but he'd been a minor then. The Youth Guard and Ward parents wouldn't allow too much special treatment or too many freebies, under the explanation that it gave the benefactors undue influence over a child, which was seen as inappropriate contact.

But adults were different. They could be courted, could be contacted and visited by brand reps without parental interference or even knowledge. Gifts could be accepted freely, with a wink and a nod. The more excessive the gift, the better. There were a number of Protectorate capes who maintained relationships with corporate sponsors that passed Legal's approval, and returned the favor by only wearing a single brand of lip gloss or hair gel in photo shoots – which would be name dropped in personal interviews. This kind of entitlement with in-house staff, however, was perpetually grating.

I stepped in. "You and Dauntless are getting bodysuits made from the same pattern base. They won't be identical, because yours will be tailored specifically for you, and will be finished with different details. Just think of them as brother designs." I watched his reaction with interest. "That's the price of having extremely custom hardware for your armor. It's either going with this... or the Lost and Found."

The Lost and Found was what we called the closet full of generic costumes for probationary capes, leftover costume pieces that were still in wearable, often good, condition after a re-branding and couldn't be used. And yes, mothballed costumes from retired and deceased heroes, which most capes would consider distasteful if they knew. Not that we told them. Waste not, and all that.

"Fine. Okay. We'll go with that." Triumph gave a reluctant nod, and blew out an irritable breath. "It's just that... at the Rig, everyone goes on about Dauntless. Armsmaster goes on about Dauntless. I heard him talking to himself in the gym locker room the other night. Dauntless this, Dauntless that. And here, too? Really?" He threw his arms up in frustration.

"Do you not like Dauntless?" I asked. I felt like I'd asked this question way too many times in the last week and a half.

"I like him; he's a great friend and the closest guy my age at the Rig. He's helping me get adjusted to living there," said Triumph. He scratched his chin. "But the only person who doesn't go on about Dauntless... is Dauntless. Is there something I'm missing here?"

What was the best way to explain the situation, which wouldn't get me caught out later for omitting too much in the name of being diplomatic? Better just to tell it like it was. Triumph seemed like someone who could handle hearing uncomfortable facts, even if he wouldn't be happy about it.
"Dauntless is on the career fast track," I said calmly. "You know what his powers are? Good. Expect Dauntless to make Brockton Bay Leader within the next five years, which will make him one of the youngest leaders to be promoted to the position. If they don't give him the spot, or they spend too long deliberating about it, another city, maybe even New York HQ, will snap him up with a bigger offer, a better placement. Either way he's got a guaranteed Leadership position in the next few years."

"Jesus." Triumph leaned against the edge of a workbench. "Armsmaster figured it out. No wonder." He turned, masked face looking in my direction. "What about me? Armsmaster and Miss Militia will be shifted down if Dauntless is put on top. I'm still the newest guy on the team. It can't be what I think it's going to be, can it?"

"Hard choices," I said quietly, leaning closer. "If you really want to stay in Brockton Bay, there's nowhere for you to go career-wise. Same goes for everyone else in this town."

Triumph sighed. "Damn it. Solidarity, my dad calls it."

"Solidarity's not a bad thing, you know."

"It sure doesn't feel good."

"Being a hero sucks," I said. "More news at nine."

Triumph shot me a speculative look. "No one's ever said that to me. All I hear from the PRT is that joining up is a worthy contribution, a worthy cause, things like that. Makes me think that the things people aren't saying is the stuff that's actually important."

"If you want your career to go somewhere, it's best to get good at reading between the lines," I replied. "You can learn to hear a lot more in the things people don't say. It still won't make you feel any better." I spared him a tight smile. "But that's being a hero for you."

"Well, I still want to be a hero," Triumph said stubbornly, and lifted his chin. "So come on, suit me up, will you?"

Nina rolled the mannequin over and began lifting the armor pieces off. Triumph stripped off his sweatshirt to reveal a gray tank top underneath, and slipped on the white suit that he was handed, zippers clicking as he struggled to pull it on over his head.

"You should practice quick changing," I remarked. "Never know how quickly you might need to get in costume in an emergency. You wouldn't want to be caught pants down when the alarm goes off, would you?"

"It feels like there's a lot of things I'm missing, that no one's telling me about," Triumph said, muffled by a panel of fabric obscuring his mouth. "Yeah, the training courses help, but I keep falling into situations where I'm just like, 'Why didn't anyone tell me this earlier?'"

"Did you read the guidebook?"

Triumph grunted as he plucked at a zipper tag that was digging into his underarm. "I finished The Hero Presentation Protocol a few weeks ago. Way too long. And then I had to take a quiz on it."

"It's helpful, I'll admit. But not light reading," I agreed. "Have you ever heard of The Cape"
"Cookbook?"

"What's that?"

I gave him an incredulous look. *Kids these days.*

Nina spoke up. "Don't listen to Paul. He gives good advice, and it's useful, yeah, but it's never nice." She glared at me. *The Cape Cookbook isn't nice stuff."

"You've read it?" I directed the question to Nina.

"Everyone's read it." Nina sent an apologetic glance to Triumph. "Maybe you're a little too young for it, but when we were kids, it was hot stuff. I think most of it was just made up crap to trick kids into doing stupid things and getting hurt."

"If you fell for the tricks, you were doing it wrong." I laughed, and stopped when she didn't refute my statement. "Don't tell me you fell for it."

Nina stiffened, and her cheeks flushed.

"You did!" I ran the list of chapters through my head. "Which one was it? Chapter Eighteen? Everyone falls for that one; it was the first thing they cut from the print version—"

"—Anyway," Nina interjected, "as I was saying, the *Cookbook* is more dangerous than it's helpful, and if people don't know about it, that's a good thing as far as I'm concerned."

"You still haven't told me what it is," said Triumph with a curious note to his voice.

"It's the street-level guide to cape life," I answered, ignoring Nina's dirty look. "Where and how to start a cape career, from the ground up. Nina objects to it – and the PRT does too, since the Wards apparently aren't finding out about it – because the book doesn't assume you'll be a hero. It teaches you how successful villains and rogues think, too. Which most people would agree is not nice stuff."

"It would be useful," Triumph mused. "I'll be fighting them one day. Isn't it better to know how they think?"

"Yes," I said, while Nina said, "No."

We looked at each other, Nina frowning, and I with a hint of a smile.

I coughed politely. "I think, Triumph, that you should start thinking about what kind of image you want to present when you have your formal induction ceremony next year. When you wear the costume, it's easiest to think of yourself as playing a character. Are you going to be the straight-laced type of hero like Gallant is shaping up to be, or are you going to be a scrapper like Assault?"

Triumph traced the edge of a lion buckle on his belt prototype. "My power isn't exactly subtle, is it?"

"Go with whatever you feel is most natural for you," I advised. "Just as long as you won't break character, or the code of appropriate conduct. But remember the limits. You get a max of three adjectives."

Nina went to help Triumph strap the shoulder pads onto the clips built into his costume, and lay the
lion-shaped shoulder armor pieces on top. Triumph straightened, and at Nina's direction, stretched his arms up, and down, and in a circular motion to test that the armor didn't limit his range of motion. She then had him twist from side to side, and bend down to touch his toes, attention on the zigzagged double stitched seams that held together panels of micro-perforated Abrado™ nylon.

"'Resourceful'," Triumph said suddenly. "And 'Vocal'. That's what I want."

"Good picks. 'Vocal' is one I haven't seen for a while."

"What you're saying – I mean, not saying – is that the PRT doesn't like it?" asked Triumph.

"You're learning quickly," I said, eyebrows lifted.

"I'll take that as a 'Yes'." Triumph looked to me, and his gaze wandered to Nina, who was currently busy untangling paracord straps knotted around the mannequin's stand. His eyes flicked back. "Can you...?"

I smiled and nodded.

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"You shouldn't have told him about that," said Nina after Triumph had slipped his sweatshirt back on, gave us both a friendly wave, and left for home. Her tone was accusing. "That book tells you how to blackmail and torture people!"

Chapter Thirteen, I recalled. On the difference between cartoon villains and real villains.

"He's an adult. I'm sure he can tell the difference between the things he reads in a book and the things he should do in real life," I responded coolly. "He's going to find out eventually."

"You don't know that."

"He lives in Brockton Bay," I pointed out. "You live in Brockton Bay. It's better to be prepared about these things."

Nina folded her arms irritably. "Why are you always so... so... sensible? How do you live like that?"

"One day at a time, same as everyone else."

Nina blinked, and burst out into a laugh. "Arguing with you never works, does it? I always end up forgetting what I'm supposed to be arguing for." She sighed, and sent me a sidelong glance. "Now, are you going to tell me what you got for your Secret Santa giftee? I didn't think you'd actually sign up for it; it never seemed like your kind of thing."

"Uh," I trailed off, thinking quickly. "Scented candles. Everyone loves candles. Or at least no one
hates them, which is just as good."

"Paul, Paul." She shook her head sadly. "You have a lot to learn about the art of Christmas. And yes, Christmas is an art form."
Josephine left her car parked in the Our Lady of Mercy visitors' lot.

She took a moment to inspect her reflection in the mirror, to make sure everything was perfect, and that no strands of her dark hair stuck to her lip gloss, or smeared micro-glitter over her cheek. She stepped out of the car, and swung the door shut with a delightfully solid thump. It was a brand new car that still smelled deliciously of the chemicals that had tanned the leather, a gift from Mom after graduating from her performing arts high school and being accepted into her first choice college.

Her car was as glossy and new as her full driver's license, which was admittedly not as attractive – the DMV workers never cared about making the obligatory headshot look good – but it was still satisfying to own. It was a freedom to her that she had not known she craved until she'd spent several hours past sunset circling town and playing her favorite CD's at full volume. She liked that her car was new enough for a CD player. She didn't like waiting for cassette tapes to rewind; she didn't like the forced silence in between songs. The whole appeal was in singing along to the top ten pop hits so loudly that she couldn't hear herself think.

She liked the car. She liked driving. It was too bad that it came with a condition of having to drive her brother places when no one else was available.

Josephine swept past the neatly trimmed hedges encircling the tall iron gates of the school. There, at the end of the row of lily-topped spikes was a black-painted archway guarded by a graceful pair of stone angels, one on each side. Their wings were flung wide, and carved trumpets were held in their stone hands, each flaring bell soundless, the figures silent and motionless. They were meant to gently remind people who passed beneath that it'd been a long time, hadn't it, since they'd last gone to confession.

Around the back of the school, she followed the winding sidewalk, remembering the directions from the few times she had visited for open house days, for sports-related activities, for the annual student arts exhibition. It wasn't her school, and she was glad of it – Our Lady of Mercy was a boys' school, and if Mom had tried to enroll her for an equivalent parochial education, Josephine thought she would have gone mad from boredom.

Or just plain mad.

She didn't like the Latin, the hymn books full of forty-year-old songs only the oldest parishioners knew, or singing in a choir with a bunch of other girls who took the phrase "Make a joyful noise unto the Lord" to heart and produced music that was almost entirely noise with only the tiniest bit of joy. She wondered how her brother stood it. Then again, Paul was always someone who went with the flow as long as it took less effort to do so than to resist it.
She turned the corner, and she smelled chlorine, and heard splashing, shouting and the shrilly piercing squeal of a whistle piping away at full blast. The swimming pool. Paul was a member of school's swimming team, an extracurricular he'd picked up when Mom said he had to take an after school activity because he couldn't spend all of his afternoons scribbling away in his notebooks, or on the computer talking to no-one-knew-who until one in the morning.

The boys were finishing their swimming practice, one of the last sessions of the school year; the awards for Best Time and Most Improvement had been handed out at the final tri-county swim meet just last week. They dragged themselves out of the pool, cheering and splashing, water dripping from their shorts – azure blue with a white stripe on each side, the school's colors. Tightly rolled towels were unrolled with a crack, boys laughed and whipped each other, and their pubescent voices cracked too, and Josephine curled her lip.

Boys. They were years younger than her, most of them high school freshmen. Years more immature, with awkward, coltish arms and legs attached to disproportionately overlarge hands and feet, spotty faces that blushed with the slightest glance in their direction, trembling voices and nervous stutters when they tried to speak without saying what she knew they were thinking.

What everyone could tell what they were thinking.

A few heads turned in her direction. Josephine heard a snicker, and a few more, as those responsible were not even bothering to stifle themselves. They looked at her; she could see their eyes go up and down, inspecting. She looked back, and lifted her chin. She was wearing a fitted daffodil yellow sundress with a tightly belted waist that left her arms and most of her legs bare. There was nothing they could find in her to criticize; she had made sure of it, and if they found something, they were not people whom she would want to talk to, anyway.

"Paul! Hey!" she heard one boy cry out. "Isn't that your sister?"

Her brother Paul was sitting on the aluminum bleacher benches under the shade of a white canvas awning, talking to two of his little friends. He was toweling himself off, and his hair – the same dark brown, almost black, like her own – hung limp and wet over his forehead, down to his eyebrows. His face silently turned, a face with rounded and boyish features that hinted toward more angular lines in adulthood. His dark eyes blinked; her attention on him never made him awkward and stumbling as it did for other boys his age. Then he looked away and said something to a friend on his left, who punched him on the shoulder and barked out a laugh.

Josephine wished she could read people better. Mom could do it. Mom was well-known for it, and she was sure Paul could do it too, but she didn't know for certain – she didn't know what exactly Paul knew these days.

He these days was more quiet and reserved than he used to be, and he spent much of his time doing his own things, and whenever she barged into his room without knocking she found nothing suspicious, not even that, and that was probably pretty suspicious of itself. He kept things to himself, and she couldn't figure out what he was hiding, if he was hiding anything at all, and it frustrated her that there was nothing in his sock drawer more alarming than a stack of backdated issues of Lens Flair.

Paul went inside to shower and change, and Josephine waited by the latched swimming pool gate, resting her folded arms on the topmost slat. She watched as the boys cast sidelong glances at her, nudging one another with their elbows, until one of them – one of Paul's friends – approached, blue
towel draped over one shoulder, the wet fabric of his shorts making shush-shushing sounds with each step.

"Hey, Josie," he said. It was Gino Loconte, a boy with a slender build more gangling than average, curly hair, and long, dark eyelashes that she almost envied. She knew his mother. Most students who went to Our Lady had a family that knew, or knew of, every other. "How's Rolf the Nazi?"

"He's not a Nazi," said Josephine irritably. "The brown shirt is only a costume."

She was playing the role of Liesl von Trapp in the local theater's production of *The Sound of Music*, and her boyfriend Curt was Rolf. Most of the cast ended up calling him "Rolf" out of convenience, as "Kurt" was another character in the play – Liesl von Trapp's brother – and after a number of not-so-hilarious mistakes with the stage directions, the whole crew just went with it.

"It looked pretty real to me," remarked Gino with an indifferent shrug.

"That's the point of a costume!"

"Sure, sure." Gino waved a dismissive hand. "Hey, want to come over and watch a movie? My parents are going to Uncle Howie's party tonight, and I'll have the house all to myself." He flashed her a cheeky grin. "They just passed the National Economic Protection—"

"NEPEA-Five," came Paul's voice, as he strolled up to the gate. "Dude, are you really trying to hit on my sister by pretending to be smart? Won't work unless you can prove you have the power of the Holy Trinity."

"Acting, dancing, and singing," Josephine said, unlatching the gate so Paul could pass, his hands full with his school backpack and blue-and-white gym bag emblazoned with the school's emblem of a cross over a starry shield.

"Or if you don't have it, a brown shirt will do." Paul laughed and Josephine closed the gate after him. "Works for Rolf."

"Hey!" cried Josie. "Come on, he's not that bad!"

They said goodbye to Gino, and Paul waved to a few of his other friends, and then they walked back down the path to the visitors' parking lot. When they were out of earshot, Josie muttered to her brother. "You sound like Mom when you complain about Rolf." Then she added, "Gino is a twerp. I don't know what you see in him."

"Gino thinks you're the prettiest out of all the women he's seen this year. He can't help it."

"Is that a compliment I'm hearing?" Josephine smiled. It didn't take much to turn a teenage boy's head, but she knew she liked the attention, as crude as it was, and it made the effort she put into presentation feel worthwhile. "Okay, he's just a misguided twerp, then."

"All the women he's seen this year are relatives or teachers. Remember what school I go to?" said Paul smoothly, his expression indecipherable. He was really getting good at it; she'd seen him backtalk adults and no one caught onto the subtle impudence hidden beneath courtesy.

A scowl briefly crossed Josephine's face, and then she rolled her eyes in exasperation. *Boys' school.* The female teachers were all Sisters and not a single one was under forty years old, and it was
considered a good thing, to discourage coarse thoughts and coarser imaginations. "Yeah, now I get why you two are friends." She unlocked the car door, and let Paul throw his school bags onto the backseat, tossing his uniform blazer atop the pile. "Mom and Dad are going to be out all night for the company NEPEA party. Mom left money to buy dinner and I want to eat real food for once."

For the last few years, her diet had been strictly controlled, more than usual. It wasn't that the food was disgusting, or there wasn't enough of it – there was, and she never went hungry, even if her castmates and classmates gave her curious looks when her lunchbox turned out to be full of small measured portions of cashews and celery sticks. It was all very healthy, all perfectly portioned to match the necessary nutritional groups, but it was dreary. There were just only so many ways one could serve steamed turkey breast, broccoli florets, and brown rice mixed with buckwheat.

"How much money?" asked Paul, his eyes narrowing.

"Chill out," said Josephine. She pulled shut the driver's side door. "It's not going anywhere. Prepaid credit card, two hundred dollar limit."

"Let's have real food, then," Paul said. "The nicest food we can find. Mom can't complain if everything we buy is edible. We'll even keep the receipts."

"Wow, Paulie." She knew the elementary school nickname annoyed him. "When did you become such a sneak?"

"When did you become such a snitch?" he shot back.

Josie laughed, and started the car. "I thought my little brother was finally outgrowing his ass-ness, but it turns out he was just evolving into a bigger one."

"Ass-ness isn't even a word."

"I made it up because there isn't any other word for you."

Josephine squeezed lemon juice over her split lobster tail, and after a moment's consideration, poured half the cup of melted butter on top. It was an extravagant overindulgence that almost made her feel guilty, but the whole meal was extravagant, and she was hungry.

She and Paul had decided to patronize a high-end restaurant, the kind where the role of host was held by a man with a shiny golden name tag that read MAÎTRE D'HÔTEL, and there were three different drinks menus and a sommelier to serve them. Two teenagers fine dining was unusual, but they didn't try to break the rules and order alcohol, and they didn't look like grubby street urchins. Paul wore his school blazer over his school uniform dress shirt and tie, and Josephine a light bolero jacket over her sundress. They looked smart – although she thought that Paul was in dire need of a haircut – and not like they were on a date, which was good. The maître d' had eyed the two of them carefully, but the trick was not to look nervous, but rather to look like you were a customer, and therefore couldn't
possibly comprehend being wrong.

She thought the maître d’ was clever enough to make note of the blue and white of Paul’s uniform, because not many local schools had those colors; few schools had uniforms at all. And so they were shown to a table covered with a thick cream linen tablecloth with matching serviettes, and addressed as "Miss" and "Sir".

They ordered an upscale version of the "Surf and Turf" restaurant classic for two, with broiled lobster spilling tender white flesh from sliced open shells, thick rounds of rare filet mignon that dripped pinkly in the middle, served with asparagus spears and fondant potatoes with crisp and savory butter-browned skins. It was delicious, and it was rich. This was restaurant food, Josephine consoled herself. If it wasn’t drowned in butter or didn’t come from a menu with the dishes helpfully described with à la, aux, and avec, it wouldn’t be authentic, or worth the money.

And since she was already eating it, a little more butter wouldn’t hurt.

"What do you think of the NEPEA bill, Josie?" Paul asked suddenly.

Josephine lowered her fork. "This is a trick question, right? Not all of us have the free time to read the papers."

"It’s not a trick," said Paul, scowling at his buttered potatoes. "Didn’t you ever wonder why Mom has been working non-stop overtime the last couple of months? She got you the car because she wouldn’t be around to drive us around herself."

"You spend all your time reading and you never learned tact," Josephine sniffed. "For your information, the car was a reward for a four-point-oh GPA. Maybe if you spent more time studying instead of reading your novels, you wouldn’t have to be jealous about my success."

Her brother had an inexplicable fondness for pulpy novels with garish covers and cheap, yellowing pages. Books that featured the adventures of young male robot suit pilots, or young male spacefaring princes, the sort of escapist dross with more weird alien characters than women. And the few women characters that did appear... well, it was better not to think about it too deeply; it would only irritate her if she tried.

Paul rolled his eyes. "I still think it’s important to know what NEPEA means. What the implications are, even if it’s not something you can find in a school textbook. Did you know that it was supposed to target capes, but the version they’re pushing – what Mom was lobbying for – Number Five, affects everyone? Including you."

"I know about that," Josephine said. "I’m not stupid. It’ll keep those terrible variety shows off TV, the ones where capes do tricks for the camera and everyone gawks at them juggling with their minds. Sooner or later, they’ll get a bad one – well, one worse than usual – and then the audience will be mind controlled before they can do anything to stop it. Better to be safe than sorry, I say."

She knew it was a populist opinion. It was vicious sensationalism frequently repeated by the worst of the tabloid broadsheets, but in the end, she found that she couldn’t disagree with it. It wasn’t fair that someone could capture their target audience with magic powers, wherever the hell they came from, while she herself had to practice, memorize scripts, and spend an hour in the makeup chair just to pass for presentable. Josephine didn’t like capes, or trust them, when it came down to it. The Protectorate capes who’d professed to be heroes she’d seen tear buildings apart on live television, and come out bloody, and then the cameras would cut away before anything child-unfriendly could be
seen.

But she knew.

They always claimed it was unavoidable collateral damage, it couldn't be helped. That they'd tried to bring their criminal suspects in peacefully, but sometimes it just didn't work. They killed people. She knew it. Everyone knew it. The Protectorate capes would keep boasting about their policy of not killing. And people would keep loving them.

The real reason, the honest core of her prejudice – which she only reluctantly admitted to herself – was that show business was competitive. And it wouldn't hurt Josephine's career if the toughest competition in the business was quietly shunted aside. That her own mother was involved with it didn't bother her at all; parents who cared about their children would not hesitate to go to such lengths to help them. And Mom had always supported her, had always encouraged, no, pushed Josephine in her pursuit of excellence.

"Is that all you care about?"

"Yes – hey, what's with that look?" demanded Josephine.

"I thought you were going to say something meaningful, but then I remembered who I was talking to." Paul looked at her over his plate, eyebrows lifted in an insolent way, and carved at his chunk of rare beef.

"It's what I want," said Josephine, drawing in a deep breath. She knew Paul loved to see what kind of reactions he could get out of people. And he liked seeing how far he could push to make her break character. "I want to be famous. I want to be a star," she said, her voice hard. Her eyes glittered, harder and hungrier, in the restaurant's dim lighting. "It's what I've always wanted."

Paul contemplated her, his head cocked, as she gave a savage stab to her lobster. The shell cracked, spraying clarified butter over the tablecloth.

"I wondered if you'd pick up on the bigger picture," Paul finally said. "There's more to it than getting a few lame shows you don't even watch cancelled."

"The rest doesn't matter to me." Josephine was blunt, but it was true. "I don't see why you care about it. What do you even care about?" she asked. "What do you actually want?"

Paul was decent in the school swimming team, but he wasn't the best. They had a swimming pool in their backyard, and Paul was more likely to be found floating on his back rather than productively doing laps. He was decent at school, but not the best, either; he preferred his space fiction over his schoolbooks. He seemed to take pleasure in straddling the precarious line between mediocrity and excellence. The "just good enough" approach was never good enough for her.

It occurred to her that the gap between Josephine and her younger brother seemed to have expanded far beyond the almost four years' age difference between them. She didn't understand him, not anymore. She didn't actually spend much time with him these days, as busy as she was with her own affairs. This dinner was the first time in a long time they'd had a conversation that was an actual conversation, and not just mutual complaining about who spent the most time in the bathroom.

"I want to be rich," he said, without a trace of hesitation.
"And then what?"

"What do you mean 'and then what'?"

"No one gets rich just to be rich," said Josephine, matter-of-fact. "Money is a tool you use to get where you want." They weren't her own words, but she thought there was truth in them, regardless of whether she liked it or not.

Paul's eyes bored into her, dark and inscrutable. "Fine, then. I want to buy a farm in Alberta."

She blinked. "What."

"Then I'd build a big fancy cabin to live in, miles and miles away from the nearest town," Paul continued. "And I'd grow all my own things, so I wouldn't have to go out, and no one would ever be able to find me."

"What about me?"

"I'd send you a postcard once a year."

Josephine's brows furrowed. "Are you joking me?"

"You know me, Josie," Paul said breezily. "I never joke."

<><><> WINTER 2002 <><><> Paul washed his hands in the bathroom sink and checked his reflection in the mirror.

His hair was an inch past the length where he'd normally visit the hair dresser, but if he combed it with some pomade, it stayed neat and out of his eyes. Ever since he'd started college and fallen into the habits of dorm life, he hadn't had the time to ensure everything about his appearance was immaculate. There wasn't anyone he really needed to impress either; most of his classmates showed up in jeans and casual sweatshirts smelling vaguely of herbs that Paul suspected could not be laundry detergent lavender.

At college, he lived in a shared dormitory with people whose standards of presentation fell well below his own, let alone his mother's. No one there would scrutinize him or comment that his hair made him look like a delinquent. Additionally, not one of his dorm mates would take him to the salon and pay $140 for the perfect cut, which needed a maintenance trim once every three weeks, a cost he'd rather avoid if he had the choice. As such, Paul right now could not consider himself perfectly shipshape, but he hadn't yet descended into slipshod.

It would do.
He was only spending a few more days at home, and then Christmas break would soon be over, and he’d go back to his dorm, and have some time to himself, to catch up on his required reading and maybe even his recreational. It wasn't that he disliked being at home. The familiarity of home was comforting, and everything in his room was in its proper place as he'd left it, when he'd left for college.

No. He knew that things had changed. People changed. He had changed, for one.

He was a legal adult now. Reaching that milestone might be a small, inconsequential thing to most people – and it wasn't like the sun had shone any brighter, or the day had been anything different, anything special, when he'd turned eighteen last year. But that was a year ago, and he’d been young and sheltered then, under the watchful gaze of his parents and the shadow of a sister. He didn’t live at home now.

Paul could open up a private mailbox, and a personal bank account, and the bank statements would never be seen by anyone else – not that he spent his money on frivolous things. He’d made some money off day trading, and he was saving it up. There was enough that he could buy a decent camera, not a great model, not even brand new, but it would be his. He could rent a car and drive to Canada, like he'd always—

A door slammed loudly outside, interrupting his thoughts.

Paul sighed, turned off the light, and opened the bathroom door to see his mother standing in front of Josephine's bedroom door with an exasperated look on her face. A few seconds later, the sound of someone bashing all the keys of a piano came from Josie's room, and then she switched to the pipe organ setting on her digital keyboard and it filled the hallway with an angry march, precise at first, then faster and faster until there was nothing but pure, frenzied noise that drowned out any possibility of speaking or thinking.

Josephine lived at home.

She had graduated with a degree in drama and performing arts, but landing long-term paid parts was difficult, and there was much waiting involved between auditioning and acceptance. It had been a blow to her pride that the success that had followed her most of her life did not come immediately when she thought herself capable, and accomplished, and no one at her college had told her any different. There was a difference between local success drawn from a suburban-scale talent pool, and making it as a star, and Josie was only now finding out about it, and it was... hard.

Paul looked at his mother, and then at his sister's door, which was decorated with a golden star-shaped nameplate engraved with Josephine Braganca. His mother returned his gaze, and inclined her head, indicating that he follow, so they could speak without needing to shout.

He followed his mother downstairs, to her home office on the first floor. It was a room he had always thought sterile and impersonal, but after experiencing institutional interior décor for himself, he recognized the small personal touches for what they were. The glass-fronted curio cabinet didn't just contain what he’d once assumed were novelty desk toys. They were mechanical pocket calculators, each easily forty years old, which resembled elaborate combination locks and cut-down typewriters. By the wall, a side table held a vase of pale blue anemones, and framed family photographs were arranged in a neat row.

She ushered him to one of the matched sofas in front of the executive desk and sat down herself,
opposite him.

Naomi Villiers was Ma'am to the suit-and-tie office crowd at HDG Securities. To his father, she was Mimi, and his parental affection made up for his mother's lack of it. To him, she had always been Mom. She was a woman who had entered a graceful middle age, and the chin-length hair that was tucked behind one ear was striped with a single lock of gray. Still, she had a natural elegance, and the years had not diminished it. She was as impeccably polished as always; her appearance had been carefully cultivated to give the impression of an understated stylishness that could only be fully appreciated by those who applied a similar approach.

The dozen pintucked darts of her blouse, each perfectly placed to ensure better shape and fit, were the result of bespoke tailoring. The sheen of the fabric came from a silk crêpe, and her knife-pleated herringbone trousers tapered to slim ankles and feet shod in delicately embroidered velvet slippers.

Paul suddenly felt small and young again, as if he was under another school uniform inspection, but he gave himself a mental shake. He wasn't a little boy anymore. She could look at him, she could inspect him, but she couldn't look down on him any longer. When he stood, he was taller – even when she wore heels – and he could see the top of her head, and the gray roots that were outgrowing the ash brown hair dye.

"Is Josie going to be alright?" asked Paul.

"Josephine is facing a minor setback," Mom said.

"I thought working on her audition tape would have helped," Paul ventured. "Was it another rejection?"

He'd spent Thanksgiving break filming an audition video with borrowed equipment for Josie. Paul thought the cinematography was technically proficient if nothing groundbreaking, but he'd thrown in a few experimental techniques for fun – cutting and grading like he'd seen in a few B-rolls, just to see what would come of it. Josie composed the music and acted, while Paul directed and edited the footage. In the end it looked slick, better than one might expect for a student production, and he would prefer to think it was because of their combined talent rather than the quality of the equipment.

"It helped."

"Well? How did it go? She's got to be this upset for a reason."

Mom was silent for a moment. "The casting director was impressed by the production value of your video, and wanted to know who made it. She got in contact with Josephine to find you, Paul."

Paul stiffened, and said nothing.

"I sent it to Monsieur Paillet at the academy." Thierry Paillet was Josie's mentor and supervisor at her arts college. Mom had to arrange a few sponsorships for the school to get Josie accepted into Paillet's advanced program, which was extremely exclusive and limited to the students he thought were the very best. He had never liked Josie that much, and it angered her that he hadn't used his industry connections to help her after graduation. "Along with your portfolio. He was also quite impressed, and has extended an invitation for you to join his sophomore program."

Paul felt numb. His body felt frozen, laden with dread, leaden limbs weighted down, sinking – sinking – sinking, down into the darkness.
His sister's dreams.

Josie's dreams.

When she looked to the sky above, and gazed at the stars, she wanted nothing more but to find herself among them one day. Those dreams – not his dreams – were insidiously chaining themselves to him, and they weren't in the sky above, they were below him, beneath his feet. Deceptively fragile they were, these dreams. But they were subtler still, and they had a weight, and he could feel it, twining about him, slinking around his body and pinning him into place with an imperceptible force.

Mom took his silence for assent. She rose to her feet and went to her desk. Paul sat numbly on the sofa and heard the snick of a lock, the rumble of heavy walnut on metal tracks as a drawer slid open, and the rustle as papers were searched for and gathered. Mom soon padded back, an accordion file folio in hand, from which she withdrew a sheaf of papers. She slid them over to him, along with a pen with a silver barrel and a shining steel nib.

"Sign here," said Mom. "And you'll be enrolled in the program, and you can start in the Spring-Summer semester. I can handle the withdrawal of enrollment for your current degree, and have your credits transferred."

Paul didn't pick up the pen. "Why should I do this?"

She gave him a disapproving look, which quickly smoothed away. "Don't you want to help Josephine?"

"This is about helping you."

"This is about helping all of us, our family," she said coolly. "Josephine needs your help. And you need mine."

"No," said Paul. "No. I don't."

"Paul." Mom's voice was brittle. "You don't agree with the things I do. That's fine. But do you understand why I do them?"


"Oh, Paul," said Mom, almost sadly. "Because I value this family. Because consolidating resources will be the only way to survive. The earlier the preparations, the better prepared we can be."

"Survive? What are we preparing for?" Paul folded his arms, and shot his mother an apprehensive look.

Mom slipped a packet of papers from the file folio. A thick, stapled booklet bound in heavy black card, and embossed with a logo of a candle and flame in gold on the front cover. She offered it to him, and he took it, slowly and hesitantly.

Appendix 14.5D. A systematic approach to time series modeling.
Appendix 14.5E. Impact of parameter uncertainty in model construction.
Appendix 14.5F. Novel applications in market prediction.
Appendix 14.5G. Conjectures for a fifty year forecast.

"Skip to the last section," Mom instructed him. "The conclusion is the most important part."

She fell silent while Paul read the last five pages of the booklet, and then read them again. When he finished, and closed the book, he felt ill.

"The base data is incomplete," Paul said. "It said so. It's only a conjecture."

"Ten years of public data, almost to the day, from Behemoth's first appearance." Mom took up the booklet, and returned it to the file folio. "The rest... we had to buy it, pull favors for it, and it's better than any other forecast I've seen so far."

"So," said Paul, turning the information over in his mind. "Fifty years, and then we're all dead?"

"No," Mom snapped. "We're not." She lowered her voice. "Maybe Dad, maybe me. But not you, and not Josephine. Fifty years. For whoever isn't dead, it's every man for himself. That is why family is so important. That is why we need to help each other."

"You tried to help Josie," Paul said. "And then you got NEPEA-Five pushed through."

He knew the Act had dismantled a number of parahuman-owned businesses, by imposing bureaucratic restrictions, all of them selfishly protectionist in nature. Companies had to be registered with a real identity, for tax and auditing purposes, and capes who didn't want their names released into the public record lost control of their businesses unless they had the cash on hand for hiring lawyers and accountants as proxies. A few rogues had signed their businesses away and into the hands of a trusted human partner, who'd immediately screwed them over and left them for broke. Uppermost, a parahuman talent agency, had been dissolved along with a few other cape companies, and many of the founding members had united in organized crime.

Josie had been pleased when she'd found out about the new media restrictions for capes, and didn't think very deeply on what else NEPEA-5 meant. It was anti-competition legislature, essentially, sold to the public through a very visible and discriminatory fear-mongering campaign. When HDG Securities allied with established financial groups and investment funds all across the country, they were locking arms to keep parahumans locked out of profitable – potentially extremely profitable – businesses.

Long-term economic stability was what they endorsed, which parahuman businesses could not be. Relying on one person, one company, to produce a commodity that was rare in nature and expensive to refine? Allowing them to price out and bankrupt their baseline human competition who had no choice but to resort to costly and mundane methods of manufacturing? If they had no competition, they could hold the commodity in question for ransom, while the industry languished. There would be no other alternative to be found, no other suppliers still solvent. Parahumans would end up controlling key sectors of the economy.
And that was completely unacceptable.

Parahumans needed human oversight to prevent this from happening. They needed leashes. The Protectorate had a leash, in the form of the PRT and the laws of the United States. It kept people safe. And it was only a coincidence that the cabal of financiers who had pushed the Act through Congress profited heavily by buying up previously parahuman-owned businesses at fire sale prices.

Paul had found *The Cape Cookbook* almost a year before the Act came into effect, and had been excited at the prospect of investing his money in a cape business, which he thought could be quite profitable if properly managed. Unlimited raw resources? Unlimited clean energy? He could invest as soon as he was old enough to sign a legal contract, and become a millionaire before he was old enough to legally buy alcohol.

He had all those plans written out in his notebooks, about finding and tracking down a cape, one with useful powers, and getting rich. But after NEPEA-5, capes wouldn't put their trust in human intermediaries anymore, and those intermediaries didn't want to make themselves targets. So that dream had died. The lobbyists hired by HDG's Board of Directors killed it.

"If that's what it takes," she answered, and her lips pressed into a thin line. "The hard choices are often the necessary ones."

"I'll make my own choices," said Paul, knowing that doing this – saying this – was casting away a lifetime of history, of familiarity, of affection. It wouldn't be the same after this, but he couldn't live with it if it was the same. It was stifling him, it was the weight around his ankles, it was the paralysis leaching the strength from his limbs so that if there ever came a day where he decided to strike out for himself, he would find that he'd forgotten how to swim. "You don't need to make them for me."

"You need my help, Paul," Mom said impatiently. "I have never demanded perfection. I've only wanted success, for Josephine, for you, in whatever field you choose. This is your chance to shine."

"I want my success," said Paul. "My own, not yours." He stood up and looked down at the woman with a single lock of gray in her hair, for an air of maturity that elevated itself above mere old age. "I don't need your help. I don't need anyone's help."

When Paul left his mother's office, he turned his head so he didn't have to see the expression on her face.

He stumbled to the bathroom once more, turned the faucets on, and watched the water swirl down the drain. Clean water, drinkable water, delivered on demand to his home. No, not his home. Not anymore. His mother's house. He shouldn't take it for granted. He shouldn't take anything for granted. Not anymore.

He was ill, violently ill; he retched, and felt wretched, but he washed off his face and shuffled into his bedroom where everything was the same as it was when he'd left it, but everything was different now, even though the framed posters hadn't been moved, and the notebooks beneath the false bottom of his desk drawer were still hidden away.

Paul collapsed onto his bed and stared at the ceiling, and listened through the wall as Josie played her keyboard and wandered her way through a thunderous three-part fugue.

How very appropriate it was.
Parvenu never forgot a cape.

When she tasted a cape, tasted them fully, and let the overwhelmingly rich flavors of their presence surge over her, so that she was inundated in the cascade of tantalizingly heady information, she knew them. She knew what they were – the sheer overload of information when she reached out for them was deeper than any normal human's. And when she did, she had some idea of who they were.

Their cape-souls.

The boss, he was bitterness with an edge, sparkling wires in an ozone sky, tin roofs in a heat wave; the taste was metallic and sharp and hard, but with so much energy contained within that it was leaking out at the edges. Rolling waves of it, slow and constant; she could feel it. And beneath it, a rigid core so tightly held that it was brittle, with fragments falling from it in twinkling flakes that tickled her nostrils like freshly-ground pepper.

Agnes was earthy and warm, a solid weight. She was forest humus built up from centuries of spring growth and autumn death, overbrewed tea so thick with flavor and caustic with tannins that the mouth puckered, leaving behind an after-texture of damp tea leaves that had a springy, chewy give. The feel of her was something soft, something that easily crumbled into its constituent pieces, but each piece carried a taste, a memory, of the whole.

Alexandria, for the brief seconds she'd tasted her on a fly-by, was a champagne bucket filled with crushed ice and shattered glass, completely without taste, and not much of a texture, but an impression was left behind. A cutting pain and a grateful numbness at the same time, interlocked and inseparable and Parvenu couldn't decide if it was actually unpleasant. It was the strangest contradiction.

But this cape, she knew him.

She recognized the way her tongue felt ashen and stale in her mouth, her lips dry. She remembered the still, breathless air of a burial mound. And there it was: the empty cavern in the darkness. The well of his soul that extended far beyond what her senses could reach, the endless space that went on and on and on, a blank and featureless emptiness that yawned open and beckoned her to delve within and never find herself again. It was more vast than she remembered it.

Perhaps it was something about the distance. She felt it; the sense of him, his presence – it wasn't fading into the distance as the last time she'd felt him. It was dulled, and there was that peculiar mutedness about him, but she knew he was close; his presence was overlaid with the same oily satisfaction that dripped from him before, a hot and sinister triumph crackling like fat on a stove.

Parvenu made her way to the Neverest's security booth, where black-uniformed guards watched the
wall-to-wall camera feeds attentively. They acknowledged her presence when she slipped into the room, and then turned back to their posts, remaining silent and observant.

"Bar Three," she spoke suddenly. "Switch the feed back."

The guard monitoring the nightclub's first floor complied, flipping through the menu interface until the screens showed views of Bar Three, all from different angles on the ceiling. It was a slow night. The winter season – or what passed for winter here in California – was always slower than summers, and tonight they hadn't been booked up for a private function or party. The bar wasn't even half filled, and there was no queue to catch the eye of the bartenders.

Parvenu brushed her senses through the patrons and staff in Bar Three, searching for that one particular cape. The strength of his presence hadn't diminished. He wasn't moving around – so he must be seated. Making comparisons with other people nearby, she observed that he must be closer to the wall than to the center of the room.

"Him," she hissed, and pointed to the screen. "That's the one."

"Juan Rico," Parvenu all but snarled. "I've been waiting over a year for you to show your face."

The man seated on a stool by the bar turned his head to spare her a quick glance, and that was all the acknowledgement he gave her; he returned immediately to his drink. His drink order: clear drink, bubbles in the tall glass, lime and ice mingled at the bottom with the dregs. Probably a gin and tonic. People who went to a bar for the first time often got a boring, on-every-menu cocktail that was almost impossible for a bartender to get wrong. And if it wasn't made quite up to standard, it was still perfectly drinkable.

He was a man of medium height and medium build, as far as Parvenu could tell – he was sitting down. Dark hair, a slight wave to it, parted down the side and slicked back, with a glossy look from styling pomade. Very classic Hollywood. His complexion suggested he was someone who'd seen a lot of sun recently, or maybe he was ethnically Hispanic, if his name was Juan, as the bouncer who'd checked his ID at the door had informed her. A thin mustache followed the curve of his upper lip. The man was dressed in a well-fitted dinner suit, the jacket with sleekly shining lapels, complemented by a waistcoat in dove gray and a silk ascot tie that was set in place with a silver pin.

She couldn't decide on his age. Somewhere around thirty? It wasn't that his age was completely indeterminate, but there was something very odd about it, an inconsistency in his features. She settled on a number older than herself. There was a fine tracery of wrinkles on his forehead and around his eyes; his face had a worn, hollow look to it, especially in the cheeks, but the lines on either side of his mouth were not as deep as she'd expect in someone who'd weathered life rather than breezed through it. Perhaps he had few reasons in life to smile.

He didn't talk much either, as she waited a few seconds, then half a minute for him to respond to her greeting, which was truthfully ruder than how she usually greeted a guest, even the unpleasant ones
she secretly wished she could send tumbling to the floor, gasping and heaving and begging. After a long while – she waiting for him to say something, he for her to go away and mind her own her business – the man gestured for her to take a seat next to him.

"Parvenu," he said, his voice low and rasping. "Please, call me Johnny."

Parvenu settled onto the bar stool and caught the eye of the bartender, signalling him to bring a fresh round for the two of them. A refill for his previous order, soda water flavored with a fruit syrup and an umbrella garnish for her. As long as it looked like a real cocktail. The bartender nodded apprehensively, and Parvenu could taste vinegar rising in sour fumes from his skin, the sheen of sweat at the back of his neck leaving his collar feeling cold and damp. A cutting board and two clean glasses were set on the bar, the bartender uncomfortably aware that Parvenu's undivided attention on someone meant cape business... and it was best not to speculate too much on what exactly that meant.

"Johnny?" said Parvenu with a trace of surprise. "I thought you preferred to go by 'Voyeur'."

"Wasn't my choice. They gave me that name and I never liked it." Johnny chuckled, a dark rush of elation – pride, mixed with a brackish flare of annoyance. "Funny how things turned out that way."

"Yes," agreed Parvenu, who didn't think it was funny at all.

DJ Apex had been arrested, his penthouse searched, but the cops didn't find anything on him, even if the dogs could smell it. He had plausible deniability; the dogs' positive could have been blamed on any other guest in the Neverest, many of them who had the means and the history for it. But the media had leapt upon it, when the photos came out, even if there was no legal trouble, and the boss' people managed the record label and refused to drop the DJ. Apex was publicly vilified as a bad influence on children.

Not that he'd ever been a good one. But the public as a whole was cursed with tunnel vision, and amnesia, chronic myopia and probably brain damage too. She had a long list of other possible afflictions.

They'd sent DJ Apex to rehab, a "private and exclusive cleansing retreat" that celebrities used to find themselves, or at least hide until the media circus lost interest. He'd recorded a new album with some of his fellow guests, about his new outlook on the chill life, and when it dropped, it went platinum. He was forgiven – the media that had previously flayed him now reminded everyone that he hadn't been convicted for anything, and had gone voluntarily to his exile. His album's honesty, the candor PR encouraged him to present in interviews, made him an inspiration. A role model of sorts to those who tried and failed to find questionable ways with which to cope with their stressful lives.

The boss had almost forgiven her for the fiasco, after DJ Apex was cleared for touring and started raking in the cash again. She might even be given a fresh assignment – although her mind rebelled at the thought of being labelled a member of Apex's entourage. It was better than spending night after night at the club, guarding the guests who hired the private rooms for business and gambling, counting the take at the end of each day, making sure no one was walking off with the Organization's money.

Their drinks were delivered.

Parvenu swirled her straw through the clinking ice in her glass. "Why did you come back? Why now?"
"I wanted to see what this place looked like from the front."

"I can show you every room, if you want," she said carefully. "The VIP rooms on the top floor. And our other clubs."

"Tempting. What's the catch?"

"Join our Organization."

"Ah." He let out a slow breath. "Recruitment. I think I'll always be too much of an independent to buy into a pyramid scheme."

"It's not a pyramid scheme!"

"That's exactly what a pyramid scheme recruiter would say," Johnny pointed out. "Anyway, the answer's 'No'."

"The boss doesn't take 'No' for an answer," remarked Parvenu. She didn't understand why he felt so... confident. This close to him, she could feel that reflux-warmth simmering within him, cinnamon-spice emanating from him in curious licking tongues of peppery heat.

"Well, looks like the first time is going to come from me," said Johnny, smiling smugly.

"I suggest you change your mind on this." Parvenu said. "You'll regret not saying 'Yes'."

"Or else what?"

"My boss will make sure that you hurt, until you wished you were dead. Because it would be too late to wish for a second chance. The boss wouldn't give you one."

"Huh, scary." Johnny took a sip of his drink.

He looked at her, falling still and silent, his brows lowering over dark eyes, hard and cold and unflinching. Her awareness of him flickered and faded; the second sight she had long been accustomed to suddenly struck blind. Parvenu's hand shook, and then she steadied herself. She caught his eyes dropping down to her hand and then back to her masked face. He'd seen it.

"You're the Elite's best tracker," said Johnny at last, in his raspy voice. "If you can't find me, I'm off scot-free."

"I know you," Parvenu answered. "So I'll remember. And I'll never forget."

"It means nothing if you can't find me. Or catch me." He traced the path of a condensing bead of water on his glass. "I don't know how far your range goes, but I think my chances are good if I never come back to this club."

"Farther than that," Parvenu sneered.

"Good thing that I've said my farewells already," he said. "I've grown tired of this town. I've been thinking for a while that it's time for me to leave." He pushed his stool back and stood up, slipping a hand inside his jacket to pull out a crisply folded fifty-dollar bill, which he dropped onto the bar
counter. "Fourteen dollar cocktails, bah. I hope you get an employee discount."

" Skipping town? I can still find you in the next one."

"Do that, and I'll buy you another drink."

"You're leaving now? Aren't you afraid that we'll come after you?"

"I'm not afraid. Not anymore," he said. "Have a good evening."

"What? Hey!"

"Merry Christmas, Parvenu."

He left, and she felt his satisfaction, a thick and oily tar trap that puddled its way around the edges of the endless, empty well of his cape-soul, and the sense of it flicker-flickered into her awareness and then out of it, so quickly that it was giving her a headache trying to pin him down. She was reduced to using her own eyes. She shuddered, and took a pull of her soda cocktail. It tasted like grenadine syrup.

He never came back.

Parvenu looked for him, and later had one of the security guards drive her around town and the next town, and then the next, searching the whole county in a rough grid pattern.

But she never found him.

She didn't think his name was really Johnny Rico, either.
ALEXANDRIA!
THE ORIGINAL BROADWAY CAST RECORDING

ALEXANDRIA
Josephine Villiers
I Will Be Strong
Call and Return
Their Eyes on Me
Strong Together
Suddenly
The Lady in Black
Protector
You Know I Can’t Be Hurt
Strike Fast
The Hard Choices
I Will Be Strong (Reprise)

LEGEND
Simon Jankunas
The Call Came For Me
Lightspeed
In the Spotlight
Test Drive
Lead and Follow

EIDOLON
Wesley itzak-Chiang
Our Strengths Combined
I Am Ready
A Worthy Opponent

GROUP
Fallen Hero
Our Strengths Combined (Reprise)
I Hear Silence
The Three of Us
Stronger Together

HERO
Evan Cimentideos
I Answer the Call
Forgiven
When it comes to self-education, beyond the structure of the schoolroom, beyond the restrictions of the local library – those librarians are just the least of it; most tax-funded institutions lack resources, especially if they are giving them out for free – the internet becomes a marvelous place of learning. The Library of Alexandria of the modern age, if I was feeling particularly generous.

Once you get past the obvious uses of the internet (the one that everyone uses it for but no one will ever talk about), there is a wealth of information on offer for anyone who has the patience to find it.

For those who follow the pulse of the cape scene, the most obvious way to use the internet for intelligence would be to lurk on Parahumans Online. It's a site with a strong presence in every English-speaking country, which consistently ranks high on the top twenty most popular websites every year. Hundreds of thousands of users browse PHO at every moment, constantly posting, constantly updating – although whether the content posted is credible or even useful is up for debate. Most people have heard of the website, if they haven't used it themselves. Even government officials have accounts registered.

Parahumans Online is for casuals.

There, I said it.

It's fine if you're a schoolkid in the library, using a public computer during a free period or lunch break. It's fine if you're at work, and your employer has set stringent filters because some types of content are definitely not appropriate for the workplace. Any place where there's a chance of someone passing by and peering over your shoulder is a good place to post on PHO. It's not that embarrassing to be caught looking at as websites go, and the moderators are active enough to make sure dodgy stuff isn't getting posted. Even an implication of improper behavior is enough to rouse the mods into swinging the ban hammer.

But it only cements Parahumans Online as a playground for casuals.

If you want to do real "research", try the Leek Net.

Yeah, I know it's a dumb name, but apparently the original founders were Welsh nationalists whose opinions clashed with those of the main UK hero group, the King's Men, a bunch of London-based tweed-and-tuxedo type fuddy-duddies. Whatever the name of the network, and however silly an animated spinning leek logo is, I will happily cut an annual check to access the Leek's marketplace. The good work done by the admins go a long way to preserve my anonymity and that of all my fellow Leekers. And best of all, their escrow system ensures that the listings and offers made through the marketplace site are legitimate ones.

When you make most of your deals with people whose faces you will never see, and often will never meet – and knowing that their presence on the Leek is a good indicator that their moral alignment swings closer to villainous than not – that guaranteed level of trust is a very good thing. I don't trust my customers; that's a given. But I trust in their fear of the consequences. I trust they've been informed that being blacklisted from the best black market on the internet means their personal details will be delivered to a pitchfork-wielding mob made up of all the Leek's – in relative terms, I should add – legitimate users.
It was Saturday afternoon, and the weak winter sun was setting over the Boardwalk. A romantic sight, or as romantic a sight as you are ever going to get in Brockton Bay, I supposed. The sun was going, but it hadn't been warm anyway, and the only thing that I was starting to miss was the light. People were heading home, or ducking indoors to visit one of the trendy cafes and restaurants that lined the tourist district of the city for hot chocolate and hot dinners.

The town’s yearly winter market was beginning to light up, with small booths serving Styrofoam cups of steaming spiced cider and mulled wine; dessert stalls were hawking squares of thick-cut gingerbread and maple blondie bars dusted with powdered sugar, and salted taffy and walnut fudge packed in collectible tins stamped with the distinctive Brockton Bay skyline.

While waiting for my client to show up, I leaned against the railing, and watched the people who walked past. It was getting gusty, but this wasn't unusual for an Atlantic beach in the winter, so I'd dressed appropriately in a heavy quilted overcoat with the hood thrown back, my equipment hidden underneath. The less expensive tools of my trade were strapped securely down in a backpack slung from my shoulder – things that were bulky enough I couldn't carry them on my person, but replaceable enough that I wouldn't mind too much if someone tried a grab and run on me. Hey, this was, after all, Brockton Bay.

To occupy my time, I thumbed through the Leek Marketplace on my phone.

LeekNet Marketplace
Croeso, TABLOID!

New Deals  |  Create a Listing  |  Search Site  |  Help & Contact

My LeekPot
Shopping List  |  Buys & Offers  |  Buy History  |  Sell History
Watching  |  Following  |  Search History

Account Information
Site Preferences
Communication Settings
Messages (1 New)

Message from the Admin
HARLECH_MAN: Reminder! Please renew your account for 2011. Funds will be held for discontinued accounts for a maximum of thirty (30) days before they disappear for good.
Multi-year packages are now available. Click HERE to read more.
Buy an annual membership for yourself and a friend, get 5% off both!
MEMBERSHIPS ARE NON-REFUNDABLE. We have one month trial accounts for that.

Have a good day!

LeekNet Site Search

Category > MARKETPLACE > SERVICES > SELLERS
Sorting by... Location: North America  |  Best Rated (Highest to Lowest)
PAGE 1 OF RESULTS

1.
Strider Express  |  Location: USA
Services on Offer:
– Premium no-customs, no passport, no-hassle transport.
– Packages to suit most budgets. (Basic interstate package to Gold Star international with champagne on arrival)
– No questions asked!

5/5 Leeks
582 Reviews. Click HERE to read.

2.
Number Management  |  Location: N/A
Services on Offer:
– Secure banking and financial management.
– Brokerage and proxy services for high-profile asset transfers.
– Investment advice and services.
– No names, no questions.

5/5 Leeks
1281 Reviews. Click HERE to read.

3.
Toybox  |  Location: N/A
Services on Offer:
– High tech solutions and servicing.
– Custom equipment and equipment customization to suit all needs.
– Extensive and ever-changing catalogue of products on offer.

5/5 Leeks
358 Reviews. Click HERE to read.
4. Dragonslayers | Location: Canada

Services on Offer:
– High tech, professionally equipped guards for defense and offense.
– Online and offline services.
– Highly negotiable. Custom requests are welcomed for paying customers. Yes, we will do that.
– International contracts accepted. We provide our own transport.

5/5 Leeks
447 Reviews. Click HERE to read.

5. Faultline's Crew | Location: USA

Services on Offer:
– Asset acquisition.
– Infiltration, retrievals, and extractions.
– Information trading.
– Protection and defense.
– Reliable services, guaranteed. Contracts are contracts.

5/5 Leeks
73 Reviews. Click HERE to read.

PAGE 8 OF RESULTS

45. The Unofficial Acquittal | Location: USA

Services on Offer:
– Pesky Birdcage sentence got you down? Madcap can help!
– All sentences, all customers. As long as you can afford it.
– Payment options: installment plans available, and all major credit cards accepted. (Transaction fee applies)
– UPDATE: NOT TAKING ANY NEW CUSTOMERS

4/5 Leeks
15 Reviews. Click HERE to read.

46. The Ambassadors | Location: Boston, USA

Services on Offer:
– Event planning and custom itineraries for every situation.
– Guaranteed successes for all clients. Please read DISCLAIMERS.
– Contracts non-negotiable.
– Very exclusive client list. You must meet OUR standards.
I wasn't sure how to feel when I saw that I was rated below Accord.

Four out of five leeks?

Ouch. What a blow to my ego.

From my personal experiences of dealing with him – and most capes who'd spent any significant length time in Boston had to meet him at some point, as he was the biggest player in the local underworld. It's part of cape etiquette, when showing up in a new town, to introduce yourself to the local power structure and pay your tithes if you want to stick around without getting hassled or
forcibly recruited. To me, Accord was equivalent to the worst type of primadonna perfectionist
director, the kind that made producers cut the funding off when Scene Eight of Act Three was being
re-shot for the hundred and fortieth time.

Sure, he was good, and his plans had a high chance of coming to fruition as long as you followed
every single step on his list to his satisfaction, but he definitely wasn't personable or practical about
things. Normal people working on a cloudy day would throw out a green screen as the backdrop
and digitally correct it to a sunny one. Normal people would airbrush any imperfections out in post-
processing. But Accord wasn't like that. He was the type of person that made the phrase "Shoot the
engineer" sound like a good idea.

I'd never gotten held back by one of his assistants in a last minute reminder to fix my hair or
straighten my necktie when I visited, nor had I ever been subjected to the Carbomb Surprise or seen
any suggestion of the rumored Trapdoor Trick Floor, so I suspected that Accord must have approved
of me in his meticulously obsessive way. The fact that I'd met him, gotten paid, and am still alive to
spend the money makes for pretty solid and undeniable proof.

The Leek Net is a very useful place, regardless of what I think it does for the health of my ego or my
pride as a professional – I imagine anyone would feel a little hurt – or at least somewhat annoyed –
by low-effort review posts from customers that give 2/5 leeks followed by a comment that is nothing
but, "It was ok." How is that helpful at all?! It does nothing but bring my rating down!

The Leek Net is everything that Parahumans Online tries not to be. It's not completely "anything
goes", but most of the things for which the moderators on PHO would ban are fair game on the Leek
Net. Including encouraging morally dubious and probably illegal behavior, sharing mysteriously
acquired work prints of censored footage from Endbringer fights and S-class battles, swapping
classified research documents from government facilities, to straight up copyright infringement.
Some Leekers even go so far as to speculate on the civilian identities of capes (the identity laws only
cover Protectorate members on American soil anyway) and – this might sound shockingly crass to
anyone used to the culture of PHO – guessing what kind of trigger events famous and infamous
capes have had, based on their publicly known power sets.

Yes, users of the Leek Net are exactly the type of people who would download a car. They also
would have no qualms about jacking one, taking it for a joyride, breaking it down, and selling it for
parts.

A man, dressed in an overlarge Santa suit that bagged out around the traditional wide buckled belt,
rattled a bucket full of jingling coins. This was followed by the ringing of a hand bell a yard or two
away from me, which interrupted my thoughts.

"Christmas coin drive!" he called. "Support the vets this Christmas!" He punctuated his cries with a
ring of his bell, loud and raucous above the dull booming of the waves on the beach below the
Boardwalk.

Veterans or veterinarians?

The fake Santa's coin bucket had a picture of a happy German shepherd wearing a vest. At his
earnest expression, I dropped in a few coins, and decided to make myself scarce. Panhandlers
tended to be possessive of their patch once they'd claimed it. My loitering about in the same area
would tempt him to try to extract rent for being in his spot, through a liberal application of guilt. And
happy pet photos.
As I made my way south to Lovell Street, I felt glad that I'd be out of Brockton Bay in less than two weeks. Brockton Bay had charm, as maritime towns went. But it wasn't unique, not by far: beaches and waterfront views and hearty salt breezes could be had in every city on the map from Portland to Bridgeport and all the little towns in between – which more often than not had the word –Port in their names.

If I had to admit it, I could not fully appreciate the charm of Brockton Bay because, looking over the city, over the Bay to the lights of the North Side that lay opposite the water, I felt uneasy. I knew towns that depended on labor and industry were struggling, and there was many a city these days whose unofficial motto went something like, "We Are All Struggling Together"... and Brockton Bay looked to be struggling more than most. The town was decaying, stagnating on its own impotence, and that, I was unpleasantly reminded, was not an unusual sight these days. It was like a mechanical clock slowly winding down to the end. It was unsettling; I felt chilled, and drew the collar of my coat tighter around my throat.

Boston was better.

It had a financial industry that propped up the city, unlimited by the logistical constraints of blue-collar manufacturing. Boston was kept orderly, and it had rules which were followed, because the people in charge (no matter if I disliked or disagreed with them) cared to make sure they were followed, both the codified rules and the unwritten ones. There was no almost imperceptible air of decay in Boston that lingered over this city, as it hung menacingly over many others, where – if you were looking for it – you could see that the core was rotten all the way through.

Boston was better. I couldn't see the rot. I preferred it that way.

One gloved hand on the railing, I descended the stairs to the beach under Marina Pier, the rubber soles of my boots grinding against the sand that had gathered on the risers. The street lamps had gone on, spreading warm yellow circles of overlapping light on the Boardwalk above. This was the quieter part of the beach, far from the tourist-friendly Boardwalk closest to Downtown. The boom and roar of the surf was the loudest sound I could hear, and the wind chuffed through the barnacled wooden posts of the pier, cold and wet with salt spray.

I wouldn't be in Brockton Bay for Christmas. Boston looked like a much better alternative.

*Or maybe...*

A person under the pier, a slight figure dressed in a bulky parka with a hood. Standing against one of the posts, which continued on into the distance before they disappeared under the lapping Atlantic surf. Twilight was falling now – high tide was drawing near from what I could see of the dark rings around the base of the pier posts. In the darkness, no swimmers or surfers would brave the waters, even if the lack of life guards couldn't dissuade them. Winter, damp and chilly – no beach party-goers either; they'd rather stay indoors for hot eggnog and brandy cake.

*Cake.*

There was a faint smell of birthdays, beyond the kelpy odor of beach detritus. Smoldering wicks that crumbled into specks of carbon dust that always got onto your frosting, no matter how careful you were about blowing out your candles.

"Apple pie," said the figure half hidden in the shadows. A woman's voice, or more likely, a girl's. Young and high, not entirely confident.
"Birthday cake," I replied. "Good evening. Ziplocker? That's the e-mail account you used."

"It's not my cape name," she said grudgingly, as I crunched over the wet sand. "I haven't settled on my official name yet. You must be Tabloid." She turned to me, and the yellow sodium light of the street lamps fell across her face. Masked, in the cheap disposable style, with a pale jaw beneath, skin blotchy with freckles. She twitched in surprise. "You're not wearing a mask!"

"This isn't my real face." I let out a low chuckle. "Am I the first cape you've met up close?"

She shifted slightly, the sand scraping under her feet. "Y–yeah," she muttered. She lifted her chin, and her eyes narrowed behind the mask. "You don't look like how I thought you would."

"What did you expect?" I asked.

She glanced to the side. "I don't know. I figured with a name like 'Tabloid', you'd be a weird guy with long hair and an ugly hat. You know, the ones you see getting punched by celebrities. But you look normal." She hesitated for a moment, frowning in thought. "Normal for a Spanish soap opera, that is," she added.

My skin tonight was a few shades deeper than my natural skin color, aged a handful of years. In the middle of another cloudy New England winter, my tanned complexion would be distinctive in a pasty white crowd. It would be memorable; people would remember the Fabio-looking guy with a crispy pompadour, and they'd have no idea who I really was, the way I liked it.

"Names are important." A thin smile crossed my face. "Choosing a cape name is a big decision. It tells the world what you want it to know about you. A name can be appealing, or descriptive, or suggestive. My name tells you exactly what I do. 'Tabloid'. I deal in photographs. It's not an aggressive name, and I'm not a fighter. Can you guess what my power is?"

"Changer? Is that why you don't wear a mask?"

"Something like that," I said approvingly, which gave the impression of a confirmation without actually being one. "The point is that you don't know what exactly my power is, but you have some idea of what I use it for, based on what I do. Your name, your placeholder name, whatever – Ziplocker'. It's not a bad name, as they go. What it suggests: an offensive power, probably non-lethal, and requires close contact. Shame about the copyright infringement, which would be a problem if you joined a hero team. Unless it was a corporate gig for that specific company, maybe."

She looked down, abashed. "It's not my name. I chose it because I couldn't think of anything for my e-mail. Because I'm new..." she mumbled.

I must have looked perplexed at this revelation.

"Fresh," she finished. "To the scene, I mean. It sounded funny when I thought of it."

"Ah. I wondered how it tied into a fire power."

Her e-mail handle had been ziplocker93. As usernames went, this was usually an indication that the creator was an amateur to the ways of the internet. Not very surprising. I wouldn't be shocked to find out that she was actually only seventeen years old. At her age, I would have known better... but honestly, not by much.
"The name I'm thinking of choosing makes more sense."

"And what is it?"

"Spitfire."

My mind flashed back to the e-mail conversation we'd been having over the last few weeks. She'd come to Brockton Bay looking for a team, people who had powers like hers.

"Is that what I think it is?" I asked cautiously.

Cape names that were literal descriptions of a cape's power I'd always thought rather gauche. Names like Punch Man or Armor Face, which I hoped no one would ever choose. The local independent group, New Wave, was particularly guilty of this, with a Shielder and a Flashbang in the same family.

When I was starting out, I'd briefly considered the name "Tableau", which was a closer-fitting descriptor, and properly theatrical in a way that appealed to my teenaged tastes. But it gave away my weakness, my limitation, and happily, I recognized it for what it was: a stupid name. Not to mention that people would probably mispronounce it as "Table" and I'd be forced to carry business cards with the encyclopedia article copied onto it. If anything is a sign of a struggling Z-list cape, it's descending to that.

She unzipped the collar of her parka, and dug around inside, pulling out a gas mask with smoked lenses that reflected the lamplight.

"I can show you."

>>>Steam billowed above the waters of the Bay. Clouds of white rose above the dark and rippling surface, drawn into twisting patterns as the wind tore at them, and the lights of North Brockton on the other side of the shore glimmered through the pale drifting shreds of mist like darting fireflies.

I stood ankle-deep in sand, my Galaxa Light video camera strapped on my left shoulder, as the narrow column of fire trickled down to nothing, and finally sputtered out. Spitfire gave a surprisingly ladylike cough, and then her hands reached behind her head to the buckles of her gas mask, tugging it off.

"It's really stuffy in there," she explained, turning away from me to slip the elastic of her disposable mask behind her ears. "It's not made to be comfortable. And it's hard to talk."

"It's why I don't wear a mask," I said. "Never liked them. But it's like suits at a funeral – it's part of the tradition of being a cape, and it's disrespectful to show up to a party without one. Word of advice, if you're ever invited to meet an uptight type of cape. Some of them are prickly."
"I'll get a better one if I join a team," said Spitfire. "It's normal for the team to pay out for a matching costume for the newest member."

"Normal for hero teams," I corrected. "Is that how far your range goes?"

"I have a longer range with a thinner stream. That's as far as I can make it go at low fire. More fire gives me a shorter range."

"Hm, more fire. Recruiters like seeing that. How's your control?"

"Uh... It's alright. I mean, I haven't killed anyone." She rubbed her neck. "Yet."

I was silent, thinking. The wind sighed, and the steam on the water cleared away, and I could hear the soft rasping as grains of sand shifted and settled on the beach as high tide rolled in.

"Are you afraid that you'll kill someone?" I asked.

"Isn't everyone?" she answered. "I don't want to go to the Birdcage. But... I destroy things. I burn them up. My power isn't like yours, Tabloid. I only have two settings." Spitfire looked down, and her hands clenched into fists at her sides. "Hurt. And kill."

"You're afraid," I confirmed, stepping closer, until I was a yard away.

Spitfire looked up as I drew near, and then she turned her head away, and scrubbed at her eyes, sucking in a deep breath that hissed between her teeth.

"I'm not afraid," she whispered.

"There's nothing wrong with being afraid," I said, and letting her have a moment to collect herself, I turned my gaze to the curling waves of the Atlantic Ocean, wondering how cold it was, and what would happen if I dived in. "I used to be afraid." My voice was soft. "It goes away over time."

"What happened?" she asked. "What did you do?"

"I had a mantra," I said. "Something that I repeated over and over when I was afraid, until over time I saw that I needed it less and less. I worked on my control, and got better at it. And I got to the point where I knew I couldn't be hurt. After that, not feeling fear was easy."

I peeled off the glove from my right hand and held it out to her, palm up. For a few seconds Spitfire did nothing, only stared at it, and then she tentatively reached for it, slender fingers with bitten-down nails trembling in the chill air. Freckles spotted the back of a pale hand. She held her hand above mine, inches above, and then lowered it, biting her lip as her eyes met mine for an instant, before she looked down and away.

My hand flickered and disappeared.

Her hand passed through where mine was.

I twitched my wrist and my hand appeared above hers, palm up, as if nothing had happened.

"You see, you can't hurt me. You don't have to be afraid of killing anyone. Not tonight, at least," I
spoke quietly, pausing to shake my glove out and slip it back over my right hand. "Don't limit yourself. I want to see what you can do." I sent her a reassuring smile. "And I won't be afraid of you, no matter what happens."

Spitfire gave a resolute nod, and lifted the gas mask above her head. "More fire? As big as I can get it?"

"Yeah, without hurting yourself. Oh, and aim it at me." Her mouth opened, probably to voice her disagreement, but I continued. "To the side, over my shoulder, not straight at my face, please. Don't worry." I headed for the waterline, kicking up clumps of damp sand with each step. "I've done this before."

_Time to put my money where my mouth is_, I thought, as I adjusted the angle of my camera on its harness, flicking through the settings. High contrast, high resolution. Capturing the process, the action, mattered more than artistic framing. I could deal with making it pretty and balancing out the color levels in post-processing. Right now, this was the money shot.

The cold water lapped around the soles of my boots, and slowly I sank into the wet sand, the weight of my body pushing me down as much as the sand was sucking me in. Locking me into place.

Spitfire had her mask down, and she waved her arm at me as a signal.

I inhaled, and exhaled, and my warm breath gusted out from my lips and nostrils in streams of smoke. _Fear is the mind-killer_. The Litany Against Fear. I'd never stopped using it completely... there were just fewer opportunities where I needed the words these days, fewer situations where I desperately needed something to hold onto – something I knew, from memories that I knew were mine – because to have nothing would have me lost and drowned in my own panic and fear.

I wasn't so desperate these days. I didn't feel fear and panic, because I didn't want to. No one wants to. It's never pleasant to feel paralyzed by your own helplessness, pinioned by an implacable creeping dread, and reminded of your own frailty. The benefit of honing perfect control to true perfection is that, unlike other people, I can choose not to feel it.

I closed my eyes, and waved an arm in response.

The mist engulfed me as seawater boiled in great gouts of steam, sheets of spray blossoming upwards around the thick streamer of yellow-white light that spewed out from an opening in Spitfire's gas mask. On one side, there was a quiet and empty Atlantic beach, the black line of the pier in the distance, along with sand and surf and everything you'd like and expect from a seaside holiday. On my other side, a torrent of liquid flame burst upon the water, a hot and searing light that left me unaffected, sparkling droplets falling on either side of my body, and through my body, until they fizzled out on the wet sand.

It was beautiful, the artistic part of me silently remarked. _This was power_. The ability to draw fire from... somewhere else. To take the fire, and to channel it, all of that potential for destruction, to make a dark and empty ocean rise up in mist that glowed with light. And I had power of my own, so that I could stand in front of the fire and see it all without being destroyed.

Power never comes for free. I wondered what price she'd paid for hers.
I zipped up my coat, feeling the thick wedge of a paper-wrapped bundle pressing against my chest. Spitfire's payment, tucked securely in an interior pocket, a Christmas bonus come early.

"Are you leaving now?" She'd returned her gas mask to the inside of her parka, and her fingers twisted the drawstring around the collar of her hood into knotted spirals.

I gave my coat one last pat, feeling the camera harness settle into place. "Are you hungry?"

"Um..."

I rolled my eyes. "There's a place called The Lobster Shack near here that Diner Junky says isn't completely terrible. Neither of us are locals in this town, and we should try local food at some point. I'll pay," I said. "No strings, alright? You're a little too young for me."

"I wasn't—" she stammered. "I mean, that sounds nice. Thanks."

"Don't mention it. It's good to meet a cape who isn't another massive primadonna."

We trudged through the sand, and then up the sandy stairs, where the circles of lamplight illuminated parked cars and the silent street of South Brockton. I led the way, and Spitfire followed, trotting to keep up with my longer strides. The cobbled pathway soon transitioned to wooden planks, and our feet made drumming sounds on the Boardwalk.

"Do you meet a lot of capes?" she asked.

"A good few, over the years," I said. "Depends on what you mean by 'meet'. I didn't make friends with them."

"Oh."

We kept walking until I saw the red neon sign of a lobster with open claws sitting on a plate. Spitfire hurriedly tore off her mask, slipping it into her pocket. The rest of her face was as pale as her uncovered jaw had been, freckles dusting her nose and cheeks. Her hair was a medium brown, soft tendrils curling around her temples in the damp sea air, the rest tied back in a ponytail that was tucked into the collar of her parka.

The Lobster Shack was a restaurant that looked more like a sea shanty; it was small, wooden-shingled, with nets dangling from the eaves of the roof. The Shack had an open hatch at the front where a server took orders and money, and delivered food on paper-lined trays. There was a roofed and open-sided eating area adjacent with weathered wooden picnic tables, on which tin cans filled with napkins and sporks were scattered at random intervals. It had a beer garden feel, only without the garden. I quickly scanned the menu posted over the window. They had beer, at least.

Spitfire made her order, and I made mine, and handed over some cash I'd kept in an outer pocket. Lobster rolls, fried pickle spears, coleslaw, crab fritters, battered oysters, with soda for her and beer for me. There was no point in writing a thorough review for the folks at Diner Junky if I didn't have
a thorough understanding of this place's offerings. I caught Spitfire surreptitiously eyeing my ID when I flashed it at the cashier.

We collected our food, and chose a place in the corner out of earshot of the other customers.

"You're from California," Spitfire whispered, as she dipped a crab fritter into tartar sauce. "Your driver's license said California."

"And you're from Pittsburgh," I replied. It was a fake license, an old one made out in the name of Juan Rico. "What about it?"

"We're from different cities, different states. But somehow we both ended up in Brockton Bay."

"You wanted to come here," I pointed out. "You asked if I could meet you here. Why did you come to Brockton? To find your pyro group?"

"I read on Parahumans Online that there was one in this city," she said. She took a swallow of her soda. "They turned out to be the villains who got on the news for burning down part of the Docks and..." she leaned forward conspiratorially. "Making Armsmaster do the butt blaster thing."

"That was pretty funny," I agreed. "But the pyro group – am I wrong in thinking that you were specifically looking for people who wouldn't be afraid of you?"

Spitfire prodded the coleslaw in a cup with her spork, and the wooden bench seat creaked as she shifted her weight. "I left home because I didn't want to hurt them. I don't want to hurt anyone. But my power makes me good at it." She rested her chin in one hand. "I know I'm a freak." Spitfire made a quick motion with a hand in front of her mouth to demonstrate. "I figured they'd be the only people who wouldn't think of me as one."

I bit into my lobster roll – soft brioche bun, buttered and grilled on the inside, the lobster sliced into generous chunks and sprinkled with finely chopped chives. Some places served theirs on a crisp split baguette, but I preferred this type of bun with my lobster dinner. The service here was nothing like what you'd get in a proper restaurant with a menu à la carte printed on marbled linen card. We'd ordered off a list scrawled on a chalkboard.

Humble food. But it tasted good, and I had decent company to share it with.

"You want to know the truth?"

Spitfire tilted her head. "What truth?"

"We're all freaks. Yeah, I'm a freak too." I sipped my beer. "Is anything we can do normal? No. It's not." I looked at Spitfire over the rim of the plastic cup filled with a weakly foaming local draft. "This is what we are now. The only thing you can do is accept it for what it is – because you sure as shit can't give it back."

"I don't want it! I never wanted it!" said Spitfire, distress and frustration leaking into her voice. "I never asked for this."

"Yes, you did," I spoke sharply, looking around at the other patrons. Good, they weren't paying attention. "What you have is something you wished for, and the only reason why you're not like all those other people over there is because you actually got what you wanted."

I went on, hoarsely, "I
wanted safety. And I got it. It took me time – a long time – to realize that what I got was my exact wish granted. *My own wish.* No one else's.

"It's not fear," I said slowly, coming to a realization, pieces clicking smoothly into place with an unexpected understanding. "I know what fear feels like. You're not afraid of your powers. It's self-pity for having them."

Spitfire shook her head, looking away, not daring to meet my eyes. "You're not a fighter; you said so yourself. You don't have an offensive power. You don't know what it's like to slip up, to hurt people, not like what I know. I hurt the people I—" She blinked, speared a batter-coated oyster with a fork, and continued, in a fierce and desperate hiss. Her tongue was beginning to glow a pale white. "I burned my house down. You don't know what it's like! So shut up!"

I shut up. She needed time to cool down.

And the food was getting cold.

Spitfire ate silently, digging into the oysters, then starting on her wax-paper wrapped lobster roll, which she tucked into with hearty appetite. I ate my own food, all the fried greasiness reminding me of the pleasant, cholesterol clogging goodness of county fair snack booths.

At last, dinner was nothing more than grease-spotted paper wrappers and cardboard baskets printed with fake newspaper articles, scrunch up napkins, and empty plastic sauce boats. Spitfire patted her mouth with a napkin, and took one last drink from her soda cup.

I closed my eyes, and opened them, and spoke. "I haven't spoken to my mother in eight years. I haven't seen my father or my sister in six years. I know what it's like to hurt people. You don't need fire to do it. And you know what else I know? Time doesn't make it feel any better." My voice was low and dispassionate. "But at least it doesn't get any worse."

I pushed my tray back and stood. "I'll have your video finished in a week. Keep checking your e-mail for progress updates. Have a good evening, Spitfire."

"Emily," she said, standing as well. "My name is Emily."

"Emily, then."

"Good night, Tabloid. Juan. It was good to talk to someone who – who..." she trailed off, and cleared her throat. "Thank you," she finished lamely.

"Moving on will help, if you want to forget," I advised, drawing out my gloves from a pocket. "Don't go back to Pittsburgh. And find a task for yourself, a purpose, a goal. Maybe it'll be with the new team you end up picking. As long as they're the right people."

"The right people?"

"People who don't care if you're a freak," I said, and laughed. "Good night."

Spitfire – Emily – offered her hand for a shake, and when I took it, she gripped my hand hard, squeezing until my bones ground together. I patted her on the shoulder, which she took as some kind of cue, because she dropped my hand and wrapped her arms around me in a fierce hug. A few seconds later, she let go, drew the back of her hand over her eyes, and stepped back.
"See you around, Emily. Good luck."

"Yeah," she whispered. "See you."
Everything comes to an end.

Those are the first words of the very last chapter of The Cape Cookbook, if you have the 1995 edition or older. The official print version released to the mainstream public has it replaced by a legally obligated afterword tacked on by the publishers, which is nothing more than a long winded explanation that the Cookbook was written as a hypothetical exercise, and that nothing within its covers should be taken as serious advice. In other words, "Don't Try This At Home".

But the original Cape Cookbook was written with the intention of being serious advice, and that anyone who read it and understood its message would benefit from its knowledge. It's just a shame that for many people, reading and comprehension are not the same things.

The Cape Cookbook: Recipes for Success
as abridged by Tabloid

Chapter Thirty-Seven – So You've Reached the End... What Now?

1. If you're going to get off your ass and do something, don't be stupid about it.

This book contains the best and most valuable resource any newbie cape can get: knowledge. But knowledge can't make up for a lack of practical experience, or bad judgement, or bad luck – and you shouldn't be thinking of it as a viable replacement. Situational awareness is required, because nothing in your cape career is a guaranteed certainty. The cape world is competitive, and there is no room in it for overconfidence or incompetence, especially if your future opponents are people who have studied The Cape Cookbook just as intently as you have.

There's a statistic floating around which says that most independent capes don't make it past their first six months on the street, before they meet a bad end – a forced recruitment, or death. That statistic is bullshit. It is misinformation, scare tactics, deliberately spread by people who are trying to forcibly recruit you to their teams without resorting to force. Yet. The truth is that there are no hard statistics on independents and small-timers who are killed before they make it big; there is no register or survey hotline that makes a note of your existence when you first hit the street, asking you how you're adjusting to your new life as a parahuman. When you start out as nothing, no one notices, and no one cares.

What you can do, however, is to be clever and be resourceful, and stay one step ahead. It doesn't matter (much) if you're weak and you have no equipment, or if you look like an obvious easy target. All you have to do is arrange things so that you aren't the easiest target. You won't be the playground punching bag if you've made sure that someone else has taken the job.
2. The most effective currency in the cape world is respect.

The second most effective currency is... currency.

Some political theorists over history have debated whether it's fear or love that is the most effective motivation in followers, but the real answer is respect, however you can get it. When you become big enough on the scene to catch the attention of the establishment – whether it's the government capes or the underworld enforcers – resistance is not futile. Respect, legitimately earned, will be the currency that keeps you from being assimilated. Or steamrolled.

When you become successful enough to attract minions, respect will also serve you well. A new cape with few connections and no allies makes a tempting target to any ambitious wannabe gangster who wants to level up in their organization. Infiltrating, discovering private information, and turning in an unattached cape is a brownie point earner to the leadership of a parahuman gang. Any meddling kids who won't be blackmailed with personal threats can be trussed up and sold for a small fortune to mysterious foreign facilities whose main goal is to extract the powers from a parahuman.

But if you have what it takes to earn respect, and have earned it – along with money – of your own, minions and rivals are more prone to treading warily around you. And they might even give you their loyalty. Congratulations, you've become your city's newest gang leader.

3. The Cape Cookbook didn't make you do it. YOU did it, so stop trying to blame us for it.

You are accountable for your own actions.

When you're sitting in your cozy little prison cell wearing the government issued edition of your Sunday afternoon sweatpants, and enjoying institutional room service (read: unwanted body searches and dinners with no cutlery, not even plastic sporks) you might be tempted to place the blame of your predicament on The Cape Cookbook. Especially when you have no minions and no money to get you out of your eventual Birdcage prison bus. It turns out, very surprisingly, that "The Cookbook told me how" does not count as a valid legal defense.

This book gives you the hows and the wherefores of the cape life. The decisions you make, the motivations behind them, the objectives you strive for, all of the accomplishments you earn in your career – if you have them, give yourself a pat on the back, because they're all yours, and you've earned them fair and square. But all your failures are yours as well. When you choose the high risk, high reward path of the villain, you might find that crime does indeed pay – but you're up against the heroes and all the other villains who see you as competition taking away a slice of the pie that could very well have been on their plate. Defeat is an occupational hazard, and sorry buddy, but there's no OSHA for the cape life.

If you've done everything right and happen to fall under the very fortunate and statistically approximate one-in-twenty who make it big in the long run, feel free to toast your success. If you're asking yourself why, after having everything you worked hard for, and everything you aspired to own in your possession, you're still not happy, that's something this book can't help you with.

People whose lives were dysfunctional enough to land them with trigger events are usually people who were never destined to have happy lives, anyway.
I first read the book on long perforated sheets of dot matrix printer paper, and I could tell I was down to the last chapter when the stack was getting thin, and the last few sheets felt light in my hands. It felt like an end of a journey, only I was fourteen years old at the time, and the thought of a destination had barely crossed my mind. The *Cookbook* to me was less of a user manual and more like a secret club to which I was an honorary inducted brother. The end of the book thus left me feeling forlorn at the loss of a friend, a dear friend who spoke to me – harsh words that rang with truth, a truth that no one else in my life dared to speak.

Yes, when I was a teenager – like most teenagers – I was a little shit who wanted to feel special. If that meant infiltrating super secret chatrooms on the Leek Net, and pretending to be a hobbyist embezzler in order to access the *Cookbook*, then I’d do it. And I did. It worked.

In hindsight, I realize that a young teenager reading advice written by successful older capes who more often than not are actually successful criminals... is probably not a great idea. Teenagers will always be impressionable, and I was no different, no matter how much I wished to be. But if in the end, a shitbag teenager was turned into a functioning member of society, widely acknowledged to be relatively successful, maybe the journey was worth it, and the destination isn't such a bad place to be.

But it's still not something I'd recommend to other people.

>>> "You seem to have everything well in hand, Mr. Braganca," remarked Deputy Director Renick. "It looks very good, what you've done with this place. The Director will be pleased to see that my recommendation for your transfer turned out so well."

His hair was combed neatly in one direction – I could see the comb lines in his thinning sandy hair – and other than that, the only other visible indication toward spiffing up his appearance for today was a small, round shield logo pin secured to the lapel of his unexciting everyday gray suit.

*Translation: Renick proposed my transfer; Piggot objected. Armstrong wrote a reference; Piggot conceded after setting conditions.*

Another success would not just be a feather in my own cap, but a round of feathers delivered to everyone who could claim some contribution in the success of today's PR pageant. Ah, the familiar stench of office politicking. It made me feel quite at home.

A creative consultant in one branch office who proved to be a versatile asset elsewhere could be loaned out in exchange for concessions from another branch – sometimes equipment, or another skilled specialist or squad officer swapping out in an equivalent exchange. Capes too were traded and borrowed from other cities if their powers were particularly useful – Tinkers and those with healing abilities especially. It was common enough that the PRT had come up with a document, a *Form 554*, and most branch Directors kept multiple copies of it in their desk drawers, all neatly filled out in advance.
"Everything is going to plan so far," I replied, fingers curling around the shockproof case of my PRT-assigned work phone. "I've accounted for anything I could think of. It's up to everyone else to make sure it's carried out."

I looked down the second-storey gallery to the lobby on the main floor. The gallery rose above the tile floored entrance way of the Brockton Bay Central Library proper, which was guarded by a pair of temporarily borrowed metal detectors, and a half-squad of PRT troopers. Their visors were off, to appear less intimidating. Christmas garlands of braided green and red ribbon twisted their way around the banisters of the gallery, and from them dangled silver foil snowflakes and gold paper die-cuts in the shape of jingly bells. Just for today, though, long banners draped themselves down from the second floor gallery railing, to remind people in whose name this event was being held. Just in case they'd forgotten.

The Wards.

"I'm sure everyone here read the information packet you've kindly sent around," said Renick. He smiled humorlessly at me, and I smiled back. "Otherwise I'd be disappointed in them, and it'd have to go on the post-event report. Will we see you at the office get-together afterwards, Mr. Braganca? I hope East-Northeast has made a good impression on you."

"This town has its charms," I answered. "I imagine it's something that has to really grow on you."

"We'd like it if you'd stay long enough for it to really grow," Renick said. He inclined his head, and then his eyes flicked down to the watch strapped to his left wrist.

"I'll think about it," I said noncommittally. It was a blatant attempt at poaching. "Looks like you've got an appointment to shake some hands coming up."

Someone like me who could reliably turn out successes, someone who was young enough (according to the personal details on the personnel files) to lack connections but harbor ambitions, was attractive to Renick, who'd been second-in-charge of this branch for almost a decade. I would be useful, but with my position in a separate department, I would never factor as direct competition to the Deputy Director in Admin – and he could pose as a suitable mentor figure to me.

Renick straightened his necktie. "I'll head downstairs to greet our guests, then. East-Northeast would love to see you here on a more permanent basis. So please do think about, Mr. Braganca."

"It's a big step to take. You can be sure I will," I said. It sounded very promising, but I made no promises. Perfect deflection without looking at all like it was deflecting, I realized too late with an internal wince, which was another rueful check mark towards my perceived level of competence. "I'll be seeing you at the after-party, Deputy Director."

He nodded serenely, smoothed down the lapels of his suit jacket, detached himself from where we'd been standing by the gallery railing, and descended the stairs to the first floor lobby of the library.

Cardboard cutouts of the Brockton Bay Wards were arrayed against the walls of the first floor entryway, and between them were arranged folding tables covered in deep indigo-blue cloth. PRT staffers and librarians manning the tables stamped the backs of people's hands and handed out program pamphlets. The building codes stipulated that only a certain amount of people were allowed in the library at any one time, so that emergency evacuations could be carried out in a smooth and timely manner. We'd made sure all the rules were followed to the letter, and that everyone who'd
lined up early to see capes got at least a glimpse of them.

It wouldn't do to have any muckraker journalists trying to start trouble by retroactively pointing out that the city's beloved superheroes were endangering the public, yet again. The unpowered citizenry of most towns tended to get really touchy about collateral damage, and that sentiment had a staying power that lasted longer than any lingering gratefulness of being saved from dying.

But that was the purpose of this PR extravaganza.

Most of the department's PR staff were here, as were representatives sent by the local TV stations and newspapers. This was the PRT's official and unfortunately regular reminder that, yes, heroes are trying to do – and sometimes actually do – good things for the local community. This was a way to show the public that their local superheroes were not just leeches living off tax money in order to indulge their inner exhibitionist urges.

This year's census showed that Brockton Bay's median household income was a bit above $55,000. A full Protectorate member, no matter what city they were assigned to, got something close to $120,000 after their food and fuel allowances were factored in. In a town with a distinct and ever-growing gap between the working class, the looking-for-work class, and everyone else, that wage gap was somewhat upsetting to any struggling families who saw footage of their local heroes at the local watering hole doing tequila shots after work.

Kid heroes, like the Brockton Wards roster, were a more palatable option to the people who fell on the disapproving side of the opinion dichotomy. The Youth Guard's own PR departments contributed to promoting this belief, with their explanations that the Wards under their care were all troubled teenagers in need of guidance and protection. As irritating as it was to deal with their liaisons – I'd met some individuals whose overly enthusiastic bounciness I could never bring myself to like – not everything they did was completely terrible, or completely off the mark. I also couldn't object to them on the grounds of being resource hogs, as the Youth Guard had the advantage of relying on their own budgets and funding.

It helped that the fundraising I'd made the Wards – well, Gallant mostly – do earlier paid for most of today's expenses, and not public tax money. That shut down the first questions from the mouths of the cape beat journalists who had been invited to the event, if only through their winning a press ticket through the raffle system rather than anyone actually wanting them present.

That reminded me.

The fundraiser "donations" weren't gifts given out of genuine generosity. There was the obvious tax deduction angle, of course, but anyone familiar with the ways of the world knew that no one ever gave or got a free lunch expecting that the lunch was entirely free. The people who'd paid out money for the Wards' Cause Christmas charity expected an introduction to the Wards at the very least, maybe a public thanks in an interview with one of the invited press reps. In Boston or Philadelphia, a private donation was usually a prelude to courting certain Wards with an official sponsorship once they'd reached their majority. Sometimes they were attempts at poaching for a corporate team.

Welcome to the magical world of professional schmoozing.

You can talk money out of trees if you know how to do it, and other people (who don't know how and don't know any better) will call it magic. I've always understood it to be a very unique talent that takes a particular mindset to properly master, a sort of self-aware empathy that is so perceptive as to
be aware of other people's selves.

With that in mind, I made my own way downstairs. I should make sure that the company reps who'd showed up with press teams of their own came through today with the impression that their money had been well-spent. If a one time donation was turned into an ongoing subscription, it would be a delight to Accounting's bottom line.

Aegis and Gallant were in conversation with a group of suit-clad guests, more formally dressed than the standard Brockton Bay crowd. Three men and one woman, in leather shoes that I noticed had the gleam of a recent polish; the men wore subdued laced oxfords and the woman suede stilettos – no sign of the practical rubber boots that could withstand a wet Brockton Bay winter. That meant they would have come here not by public transport, but by car, and it was no mean feat to find a parking spot in busy Downtown during a public event.

High rollers.

Aegis spotted me when I came around the last row of bookcases, and waved me over.

"Mr. Braganca," he said, "the Heritage Insurance people want to take photos with us for their newsletter."

"Gallant should be on the side," I said, quickly glancing over at the Heritage press team and the uninviting natural lighting that was all we were going to get on yet another cloudy winter day. "Can we have some bounce boards over here? Gallant's armor can be finicky, and we don't want your cameras or your faces reflected from his chestplate.

"Ma'am, you should be in the center with Aegis, the gentlemen on each side, then Gallant on the left where the light won't be directly on him." I stopped abruptly.

The last man was wearing a suit; he was an older man with close-cropped hair, in a severe black suit that matched the aesthetic of the other Heritage Insurance representatives. It would have been an obscenely tight suit if he wasn't stringbean skinny, so lean that the veins rose from the back of his hands like knotted cords, which were faintly striped across with thin ridged striations like... old scars?

My eyes skipped across the details of his dress. Small round pin with a shield logo on his lapel. Dark indigo lanyard beneath the suit jacket, the cord tucked neatly away under his dress shirt's collar. His badge was hidden. A PRT employee, most likely. He had a hard and wary alertness to his eyes that wasn't like any actuary I'd ever seen – it was more like that of a seasoned PRT trooper than anyone I'd met from the Accounting department. His gaze swept across me with a sharpness that prompted me to turn my attention away before it was noticed.

"Would you like to be in the photo too, Mr... ahh..." I said. The sentence trailed off at the end with the slight lilt of an unasked question, which I followed up with an embarrassed smile.

"No photos for me, thank you," he said, and then he picked up the cue. "Calvert. Consultant, part-time. I do most of my work with private firms." He nodded in the direction of the Heritage people, who were getting a final touch of the lint roller on their black suits, and a pat of pressed powder for the woman. Calvert leaned in closer. "I find private practice pays better."

"I do some freelance stuff when I have the time," I remarked, watching the Wards in costume posing with soberly-dressed insurance executives. "You're right, it does pay well, as long as there's work.
It's still good to have a regular job. And everyone knows that a government job comes with decent perks."

"I've heard that young Aegis is thinking of leaving us," said Calvert in a low voice, giving me a sidelong look. "The perks must not be enough for him."

"The office rumor mill likes to exaggerate things," I answered with a shrug, returning his look, my expression subtly transitioning to a tired indifference. "You know what the office is like, if you've worked here before."

"Indeed." He was silent for a few seconds. "Are you returning to Boston when this is over?"

"As long as there's nothing else left for me to do. Don't really get to pick and choose as a full-timer."

"Boston's a lovely place. I've got friends there." Calvert reached into an interior pocket of his suit jacket and withdrew a business card. "If you're ever considering a return to Brockton Bay, or a switch to part-time, I think we can use another capable planner. The security documentation for this event was impressive. Very thorough."

He handed me the card, a rectangle of thick cream-ivory cardstock. The letters were stamped in a precise black serif font.

THOMAS CALVERT
OPERATIONS CONSULTANT
PRT – HERITAGE INSURANCE – FORTRESS CONSTRUCTION
1800–22552645

That was a suspiciously vague job description.

I got the impression that Calvert was a high level fixer-upper, pulled in for the rare occasion when things at the office went disastrously off the rails – when illegal activities had a good chance of being uncovered by state authorities, or worse, the Feds. If he did contract work for a construction company, it would be something along the lines of covering up illegal dumping of building materials, asbestos insulation and corroded antique lead piping, for example.

"Pays well, you said?" I commented.

"Very well."

"I'll think about it," I said. Translation: You know exactly how to convince me. "You can request my schedule through the PRT. Next year's too. I'll be in town February next year."

"Keep in touch, Mr. Braganca."

"Of course."
When he left with the Heritage Insurance people and their retinue, Aegis and Gallant came over to me.

"What was that all about?" Aegis asked. Instead of the sweatpants I'd gotten used to seeing him in at the PRT HQ, he was wearing his proper costume consisting of a dark red bodysuit with armored panels, silver-white facings double-stitched over the seam lines for extra durability during flight and landings. The ponytail was concealed under his helmet.

"Corporate recruiters," I said. "The PRT goes under an unofficial policy of, 'We'll tell you more about it when you're older', but it's a good idea to read up on it before you turn eighteen. Know your options, and all that."

"You make it sound like a birds and bees talk," Aegis remarked.

"In that case, they'd probably be vultures," I said with a laugh. "I think Gallant can fill you in on the details. Anyway, I should go check up on what the others are doing."

"Thanks for the references, by the way," said Aegis. "See you later."

"See you. You too, Gallant."

>>> 

"'One day,' Mama said, 'Conrad dear,'" read Clockblocker from the large, illustrated picture book he held in one hand, "'I must go out and leave you here. But mind now, Conrad, what I say. Don't suck your thumb while I'm away.'"

Miss Militia and I watched him over the backs of thirty elementary-school-aged children, who were sitting on the novelty rug, patterned with a design of intersecting train tracks and city streets. Bookshelves circled the walls of the Brockton Bay Central Library children's reading room on all sides, and the spaces between the shelves were decorated with colorful framed motivational posters depicting happy cartoon animals reading books and making silly puns. "Reading is toad-ally awesome!", and "I'm just batty for books!".

I had the camera tripod set up in a discreet corner of the room, taking quick pictures with the flash off. Clockblocker was one of the Wards who'd earned a reputation and a large online following, due to his unfortunate choice of cape name. Showing him to be a good role model with children would be a good PR boost. And it would make the top results of a search engine trawl pull up nice news articles and press releases, the ones the PRT preferred people to see.

"I think I've heard this story before," I muttered to Miss Militia, who was leaning against the wall to my side, her arms folded, and her pistol holstered at her waist. We both listened as Clockblocker read out rhyming lines from the picture book he'd picked out for today. I assumed he'd chosen it because it was very short, with more pictures than text.
Miss Militia gave a quiet snort of laughter. "It's Assault's favorite. He picks it for every grade school visit. Every chance he can get."

"The door flew open, and in he ran," said Clockblocker with dramatic emphasis. He held up the book so the children could see the pictures. "In he ran! The great, red legged Scissorman!"

"Ah. I see now." I scratched my chin. "No wonder."

"The best part is coming up," she whispered.

"Look! Children, come and see! The tailor has come, and he's caught our little Suck-a-Thumb!" Clockblocker announced. "Snap! Snap! Snap! The scissors go." He slid forward on his seat, and he held one hand forward, fingers out and shaped like the book's illustrated scissors. The children gasped. "And Conrad cries out – Oh! Oh! Oh!"

Clockblocker turned to the next page, another large double-spread illustration, and the children squealed, pointing and laughing at poor Conrad.

"...Well. That was an interesting story. And I got some good footage, too. It's hard to pull off charismatic with a full-face mask, but he actually did it." I checked the time on the video camera's digital display, and grimaced. "Guess who's coming up next."

"Shadow Stalker?"

"Got it in one."

The children surrounded Clockblocker now, bringing picture postcards to him, waving them in his face. A PRT staffer stuck glittery holographic stickers to the back of each card, and they were handed up to Clockblocker, where he autographed them in silver paint pen, finished with a flourish.

The cards were the standard hero portrait postcards requisitioned from the PRT's gift shop; the circle-shaped stickers printed with the text "Wards' Cause ENE 2010", superimposed over the PRT logo, were an exclusive to this event. Many of them would be found listed on auction websites when the day was over, but for now, they were a good way to boost the numbers. Even if we couldn't fit that many bodies into the library, having large crowds cheering the Wards at the entrance way looked good for the press.

"She's been told what to do," Miss Militia said. "Multiple times."

"I never got the impression that rules mattered much to her," I replied, as the door opened and Shadow Stalker swept in, dark cloak billowing behind her. Small grabbing hands reached out to touch her cloak, but she phased briefly into her shadow form, and their hands passed through. There was a chorus of disappointed moans. "I think it's about having the right approach, if you want to get through to her. Except most people keep who try to work with her keep getting it wrong."

"And you're the guy they go to, to get it right," said Miss Militia softly.

Shadow Stalker snatched up her book, ignored Clockblocker's greeting as they crossed paths, and threw herself into his vacated armchair, settling down in a nonchalant slouch.

"Most of the time. It comes with practice. But it doesn't always work." I started the recording as Shadow Stalker opened up her picture book. "Some things just don't work out." I finished flatly,
"Doesn't mean you shouldn't try," suggested Miss Militia, and watching Shadow Stalker begin to read aloud in a bored monotone, one hand reflexively reached down to her belt. Miss Militia curled her fingers around the rubberized grip of her pistol, and then her at-attention posture relaxed slowly to at-ease when it seemed that Shadow Stalker wasn't making an attempt to veer off script.

"'A cat?' he cried. 'Have you gone mad? Here we are starving and you must bring home a goblin, a goblin to share the little we have, and perhaps to suck our blood at night.'" Shadow Stalker read indifferently. The children were shifting around, listless and disappointed after enjoying Clockblocker's very theatrical reading. "'Yes. It will be fine to wake up in the dark and feel teeth at our throats and look into eyes as big as lanterns.'"

"I think it's better that I stick to the things I know I can actually win," I murmured, speaking quietly.

"Better for who?" Miss Militia gave me a searching look.

I turned my attention to the camera.

We listened to Shadow Stalker in silence.

"'Sometimes it's good fortune to have even a devil in the household. It keeps other devils away. Now I suppose this cat of yours will wish to eat,'" Shadow Stalker read, and then turned the page. She flashed the page illustration at the children but didn't give them enough time to take it in, preferring to rush through as quickly as she could. "'Perhaps it may arrange for us to have some food in the house. Who knows? We can't be worse off than we are.'"

"I visited Medical the other day," said Miss Militia after some time. "They said it was good that I'd checked myself in."

"Oh?"

"Apparently my skin type is changing from combination to dry, and it's making my regular sunscreen go on patchy and wear off faster. Less coverage, and more chance of skin damage over time."

"Did they recommend any... treatments?"

She shook her head. "Nothing like that for now – they haven't gotten a list of my appearances for twenty-eleven yet. But they said in two or three years, if I didn't do anything, it'd be brought up in our annual performance reviews, and at that point I'd have fewer options open to me, compared to doing a preemptive strike now."

"You get those performance reviews too?" I said. "Wait, government job. Duh. We all get them."

"We have brain scans for ours, and then a six hour fitness exam. It's not as bad as you think it is," Miss Militia said dryly, amused by my face of exaggerated horror. "It's worse."

I stifled a laugh. "I'm glad I'm not a hero."

"It's rewarding in its own way." Miss Militia inclined her head to the children sitting in a circle on the rug, clutching their signed Clockblocker cards. "And you helped make all this happen. I think you're better at doing good than you think you are."
"You're making me sound humble." I smiled. "That's a first."

"You underestimate yourself," Miss Militia said calmly. "Sometimes you have to take a risk."

"Fine," I said, with a sigh. "I can't win this one, can I?"

"Not if you don't try."

Time slipped away like eels in a hovercraft.

The Mayor arrived in a shiny black chauffeured car, and posed for group photos with the Wards and the senior librarian on the steps of the Brockton Bay Central Library. The crowds cheered, as the Wards walking past the steel crowd control barricades brushed their gloved hands against the outstretched fingers of their fans. People thrust their portrait posters at the Wards for autographs.

Miss Militia came out waving, to the adoration of the mob, a fixture of the local cape scene for the last decade and a half. She was an artillery expert, and hadn't engaged in close quarters combat like the other ENE Protectorate heroes during the Butt Blaster incident, choosing to stay behind the lines with the PRT troops laying down a cordon of containment foam. The embarrassment that had fallen mostly on Armsmaster had so far only lightly touched Miss Militia.

Kid Win and Vista handed out goodie bags to everyone who had a stamp on the back of their hand – the stamp was a way to make sure we had enough bags for everyone who'd showed up. The sponsors had come through and donated books and school supplies, and the PRT interns had spent the last week sorting them and packing them into paper shopping bags with the shield logo printed on the front. But the donations weren't endless, and it'd been a bit of a logistical nightmare to attract as large of a crowd as we could drum up, while still keeping the numbers limited to what we could actually supply and control.

"Too many people!" Kid Win groaned, as reaching hands slapped against his Tinkertech armor in their urgency to take a goodie bag. "Vista, can't you do something?"

Vista pushed a cardboard carton filled with pre-packed bags into the crowd, which had deformed from what had once been an orderly line when it was noticed that the supplies of free stuff at the back of a PRT van were running low. Impatient people pushed against each other, in an effort to be first.

"Too many people!" Vista called back. "Can't do sh–sugar. Hey! One per person! Stop pushing!"

"Why are they fighting over this?" asked Kid Win. "It's just children's books and notepads and branded pens."

"People fight over dumb things all the time." Vista ducked under a grasping hand. "You get used to
"I don't think I'll ever get used to this," he muttered. "At least having a tinkering budget makes up for doing this stuff."

Kid Win and Vista were down to the last few boxes. I decided to call it a day, tapping out a quick text message to the PRT trooper on standby to get the Wards into the van and dump the boxes into the crowd. Time was almost up anyway – the permit I'd gotten from the city for staging a public event would expire in fifteen minutes, and it wouldn't be a great end for the mandatory post-event report if the PRT was fined for over-staying.

I assisted the PRT staffers with getting everything packed away – the folding tables were refolded and sent back to the storage room in the basement of the Brockton Bay Town Hall. The decorations, the cardboard cutouts, the posters: we could take them back to the PRT HQ, set them up in the lobby, and sell them in the gift shop. I'd always thought it would be a little weird to have a life-sized cardboard hero in my living room – not to mention unnerving to see a mysterious figure in the house when coming home late at night – but some people thought it was cool. Selling them would at least recoup part of the cost of having them printed. Like giant novelty checks, these things didn't come for free.

Eventually, everything was as neat as we were going to get it, and the librarians confirmed we'd have our deposit returned for using their building for our venue. Nothing was permanently wrecked, except for maybe one of the upstairs toilets, and we'd made up for that with a sizeable donation of new books that one of the sponsors had sent us.

It was dark by the time I returned to the PRT HQ, and I was one of the last to arrive to the after-party being held in the staff cafeteria. It was a small token of appreciation from Admin for all staff members who'd put in overtime to ensure that the Wards' Cause 2010 event ran smoothly, and everyone else assigned to Christmas duty – the PRT troopers on the Boardwalk doing joint patrols with the Wards, the merchandise team who kept up with the Christmas rush of customers and online orders.

No matter how old the guests are, or whichever workplace it's held, a cafeteria party will always have a very distinct feel, reminiscent of your middle school dance. It's something about the twisting streamers of crêpe paper strung from the walls, and the handful of balloons that bob along the grayish white tiles of the ceiling. Maybe it's the grocery store sheet cakes with a thick layer of white piped frosting, the plastic utensils and plastic cups full of non-alcoholic beverages, and the listless way people wandered around the room to songs no one particularly liked but no one hated, silently hoping that the DJ wouldn't demand everyone hit the cleared space in the middle of the room that passed for a dance floor.

I had no personal nostalgia for my middle school days, but I could understand the charm of this party. It had a delightful kitschy quality – you could see that a committee in Admin had put some effort into trying to make it look halfway decent. And once you scraped away the layer of non-dairy, gluten-free frosting on your slice of sheet cake, it didn't taste that bad. They'd also set out pizza with globs of cheese congealing on the cardboard boxes, and bowls of punch, with orange slices and pineapple chunks under the floating ice cubes. Extra fancy.

I watched people circulate around the food, and then around each other, forming small groups that drifted apart and reformed a few yards away. I was dragged into some of them; I greeted colleagues by name and made banal conversation with them about Christmas plans; I shook Deputy Director Renick's hand and someone from the Image department took our picture for their annual scrapbook,
blinding us with the camera's flash.

It made me glad that my status as a non-local justified my aversion to attaching myself to any workplace clique. I wasn't an old hand, not by the standards of the veterans who'd been around since the formation of the organization. Nor did I count as a green newcomer who treated the PRT like the first stepping stone to a cushy corporate position.

Nina ended up making her way to the wall where I was loitering, dressed in a rustic woolen sweater knitted with a snowflake design, over a pencil skirt and stockings. She held up her plastic cup of punch in a mock toast.

"What's up? You enjoying the party?" she asked, her head turning as she looked around for people she recognized – or preferred to avoid.

"Not much to enjoy," I said, with a slight smile. "The pizza was mostly gone when I got here, except for the cheese. And no one likes plain cheese pizza. Maybe the vegetarians do." I peered over a few heads to inspect the pizza boxes lying open on the food table. A few lonely cheese pizzas still remained, one or two slices missing. "Or not. But the punch is alright. So, how are you?"

"Bored of the punch. It's always punch at these things," Nina said, and then she took a step closer and leaned in, covering her mouth with a hand. "I hid a six pack of beer because I knew it would be punch."

"Alcohol on company premises? Isn't there a rule against that?"

"They banned drinking it in the building, but there's no rule against bringing in alcohol. I checked. We order bottles for cleaning up epoxy," said Nina primly. "Medical uses it too."

"But what's the point of being allowed to bring in beer if you can't drink it? Are you just going to look at it?" I asked, eyebrows lifted in amusement.

"We can drink it on the building," Nina answered. "On the roof, where people go to smoke because they put a ban on that too."

I gave the cafeteria and the people that occupied it a calculating look. No one would be looking for me. "Sure. Why not?"

>>>...

"...And over there, that's where the ferries used to cross the Bay when I was a kid. That's the ferry station now; it's closed for re-modeling, so they covered it up with 'Coming Soon' signs. But nothing's changed in years."

Nina pointed over the edge of the roof to the curving waterline of Brockton Bay. It began as beaches, tourist central in South Brockton, which transitioned to glass-fronted high rise apartment blocks, and the old shipping magnates' heritage listed sandstone townhouses of Central Brockton's
historical Downtown district, and then last came North Brockton. The town's industrial heart, now shrunken and sluggishly beating with many of the dockside warehouses lying empty, some of them burnt down to blackened shells of brick and rubble.

"It used to be better when I was little. People had hopes that the downturn was only going to be temporary," said Nina. She sat back on the rooftop bench, and hugged her knees to her chest, a can of beer at her side.

The rooftop gave a good view of the city. The PRT building's roof was mostly flat, with a few benches and potted plants for color – though these were a dry and leafless brown in winter. Yellow reflective paint marked out a section for landing aircraft, and signs stenciled on the ground designated standing room for any waiting volunteers who gathered when the sirens went off. I didn't comment on those. It was considered tactless to mention Endbringers in polite conversation, an instant moodkiller. Most people knew someone who knew someone who'd died as a direct result of an Endbringer landing.

I sipped my own beer, and buttoned up the collar of my coat. It was windy on the roof, not so much that we couldn't hear each other, but enough to remind me of endless past hours spent in stakeouts, and how much I disliked them. At least it chilled the beer so that it wasn't lukewarm from sitting in Nina's desk drawer all day.

"But these days, I guess we're all just living one day at a time, like you said. Waiting to see what happens," Nina finished. She regarded me uncertainly from behind her thick-framed glasses. "What was it like, where you grew up? I can't tell from your accent. It's very... television standard."

"Very sunny," I replied. "With good beaches, too. The kind of beaches you could swim in every day of the year without people thinking you're weird or crazy, like they do for anyone who goes swimming here this time of year." My fingernails tapped against the flimsy aluminum of my beer can with a hollow sloshing sound, while I thought of what else to say. "It would be boring by your standards, since it was in the suburbs, and all suburbs are pretty much the same. None of the neighborhood divisions between North, Central, and South like Brockton has."

Nina said nothing for a minute or two, and then she spoke, her voice soft. "I've noticed that you never say anything about yourself, Paul. You get other people talking – I don't know how you do it, but you do. But you don't talk about yourself, and you're so good at talking that no one else notices, and I didn't notice it myself until just now, and..."

"And?"

"And I don't understand it. I want to know more about you."

"Why?"

"Because I like you, Paul. Because..." Nina blew a flyaway strand of hair out of her eyes, suddenly hesitant. "Doyouwanttogoondate?"

Well.

That was not entirely unexpected. I'd had the suspicion that she felt something like that for a while now, but the feeling wasn't exactly mutual. Since the days of my youth, however, I'd managed to learn some tact, and not all rejections these days had to end up as permanently burnt bridges.
"I—"

"You're not married, and you don't wear a wedding ring," she continued, breathless and pink-cheeked. "I even checked the Massachusetts registry for your name just to make sure. I asked the Boston Image team if you were seeing anyone, and they said probably not. It doesn't have to be anything fancy, you know, just coffee or something. And I should stop right now and shut up, shouldn't I?"

"Ah... please go ahead if you've got anything else to say," I said patiently.

"No, that's about it." Nina wrapped her arms around herself and looked at me, and I returned her gaze steadily.

"It's very flattering and everything, but I'm afraid that I have to refuse," I said, speaking calmly. One other benefit of no longer being a teenager was that my voice didn't crack.

"It's the distance isn't it? Boston and Brockton aren't that far apart, but your scheduling sucks."

"Yeah, 'sucks' is a good way to put it," I agreed. It was a good way to make money, racking up weekend and holiday overtime bonuses, and all those little travel perks from frequent flying. But I didn't say that aloud.

"Miss Militia and Chevalier made it work," Nina sighed. "For as long as that lasted. It's possible, if —"

I interrupted her. "It's not just that. I'm not interested in a relationship. Sorry."

Nina didn't say anything for some time, and a sad and forlorn look crept across her face. The wind whistled through the gaps in the buildings around us, and ruffled my hair, as I looked down at the regular rows of slate tiling that covered many of the roofs in this middle class Downtown area in which the PRT HQ was located. The gray shreds of cloud above were being swept aside by an eastern wind, wintry with a briny, stinging bite.

"Are people still allowed to say 'It's not you, it's me', and 'You deserve better'?" I said into the spreading silence. "I know everyone tries to use it as an excuse, but it's actually true in my case."

Nina opened her mouth to argue, but I continued, "and by the way, I'm not joking.

"I'd say I'm not a nice person, but you'd take it that I'm the rascally type of Not Nice, the type with problems that can be solved by the power of love." I stuffed my hands into the pockets of my coat, and breathed deeply, feeling calm settle over me. "So here's the truth: I have goals – ambitions – that I want for myself, that I've been planning for years, and having a personal life is a low priority.

"You were right in calling me an anti-people people person. That's exactly what I am, and I've known it for a long time. Maybe being this kind of person won't ever make for a happy life. Maybe I've never really felt happy and have no idea what the fuck happiness is, because I don't give any fucks about having it or not. But I think you care about it, which makes us... incompatible." After a brief pause, I added a half-hearted, "Sorry."

Nina looked at me, wide-eyed and blinking. Then she tipped back the rest of her beer, and squeezed the empty can between her hands until it folded in half with a creak. "Jeez, Paul," she mumbled. "Are you going to say that you're secretly a supervillain too?"
A burst of dry laughter from me. "No, that's something I can promise you I'm not. And I'd never be caught wearing skintight spandex in a New England winter."

Nina giggled a little at the imagery, and it turned into real laughter, hearty laughs that could probably be heard from the neighboring rooftops. She leaned back against the wooden slats of the bench, wheezing, and gazed up at the sky above, breath steaming out from her mouth.

"I just got friendzoned, and now I'm laughing about it," Nina murmured. "That's so weird!"

"I think that's just alcohol," I said. "You should go back to the party and have a few slices of pizza. I bet the cheese pizza will still be there."

"Not a bad idea." She sat up, and smoothed the wrinkles out of her skirt. "Are you coming too?"

"I'll be down in a few minutes. It's nice to see the stars once in a while." I gestured up to the evening sky, a rich and saturated blue twilight connected to a thin line of spreading ocean blue in the distant horizon. "Brockton Bay doesn't have as much light pollution as Boston."

Nina gathered the empty cans in her arms, and headed to the door. "See you later, Paul."

"Take care of yourself."

She opened the door, and looked back at me, a silent and fleeting wistfulness in her eyes, until she turned away and the door closed behind her with a loud click of the latch.

I paced around the roof, back and forth, hands in my pockets, wondering if I should be feeling bad for the rejection, or if I should feel guilty for making someone hurt, someone who'd called me a friend for half a year and known me longer than that. Or if it really ought to be misgivings for sharing personal details – private details – about myself that I had made a habit, a strict and self-imposed policy, of not sharing with anyone. Especially not speaking them out loud like I'd just done.

There was more to the truth, the real truth, which I hadn't shared. Yes, it was true that I didn't care much for maintaining a personal life. It was another complication. Another layer that would have to be juggled between my already complicated daylight life of a PRT employee, and the nighttime life of my cape persona. A personal life meant questions I couldn't answer, people who pried because they cared, people who shared themselves with me in the expectation that I would give something back.

I had nothing that I cared to share with anyone. And so I'd severed those personal connections, along with any interest in maintaining a personal life, years ago.

There were other parts of myself that I'd cut away, piece by piece, over the years. Fear and panic, both reflexive responses, were the first to go, out of utility. Leaving them behind betttered my level of self-control; I was made more decisive, more assured, confident in my parahuman abilities. The next to be put aside were despair and dread, more abstract states – but they could seize and hold and smother a person just as mercilessly as anything concrete. They went out of convenience.

They were the first steps, the first of many. There was a price required for perfect control: an emotional investment. But it did pay out a profitable return.

Did it make me stronger? Yes, mostly. It wasn't true strength, more like... resilience. Good enough.
Did I feel regret for doing this to myself? Not if I didn't want to. And most of the time I didn't.

Did it make me successful? This month alone, I had earned over two hundred thousand reasons to say yes.

So. This was my life now, the path of my life that I had willingly chosen. It was a reaction – a response – to being granted something that I didn't choose and could never have anticipated. But I was aware there were people with worse problems than mine, who got worse powers that demanded a higher price. I'd seen it. I'd met them. My life wasn't so bad in comparison. If it couldn't make me happy, fulfillment and satisfaction made for a perfectly acceptable alternative.

I paced the length of the roof, whose surface had been treated with a non-slip textured coating similar to that of boat decks. It was cold, and growing colder as evening set on; I slipped my hands back into my pockets... and brushed against my phone.

If my life had gone in another direction, if I hadn't had my one worst day, hadn't recognized the importance of self-reliance to my continued sanity, I would have lived Josephine's life.

_How did she live?_

Did I care?

No.

Yes.

*Maybe.*

I brought out the phone, and scrolled through the speed dial menu. I'd been sent a card, and there had been a number written down on it, and I normally saved numbers somewhere, just in case I lost the paper it was written on. I had Calvert's number saved. I had Josephine's.

567-374-463.

Ring ring. Pick up before I cancel the call. Ring ring.

"Hello? Unregistered caller? Who is this?" A woman's voice on the other end, a fluid and expressive speaking voice, each syllable clearly and properly enunciated. "This is my private line, and if this is a prank—"

"Hello, Josie."

A sharp intake of breath, a sudden silence.

"Paul. I didn't think you'd actually call. It's been a long time."

"I know. Six years, give or take a week."

"You moved away without saying what you were doing or where you were going."

I lowered myself down onto a bench, wincing at the unexpected cold. "If you knew where I was, you'd try to use me."
"No I wouldn't!" Her denial was fierce and immediate, and then she trailed off uncertainly. "Well. Maybe, okay. But for a good cause!"

"Just like Mom."

I knew those words could wound. I knew we both shared an instinctive and unspoken distaste for our mother's actions, just as in our childhoods we'd shared in the gains of what she'd given us. The two of us were accomplices together, years ago. The advantages, the motivations, the justifications – by now I was sure we both thoroughly understood why, and we could easily see ourselves doing similar. At this point in our lives, I had no doubt that we had done so.

"There was no other way to get what I wanted unless I was little bit like her," Josephine admitted. "The price of success. I think you know exactly what I'm talking about, Mr. PRT." She was dealing back some of what I'd dealt.

"Do you have plans for Christmas?"

"Were the tickets supposed to be a hint?"

"Is that a yes?" asked Josephine. There was a lull of a few seconds before she spoke again. "You should come to New York for a visit. You could see the show, backstage too, and the whole cast and crew. Wes wants to meet you."

So this was Josephine's life now. And she wanted to share it, some part of it at least, with me. I knew it was tempting; she'd fully intended it to be a temptation.

"I have plans in Boston," I said stiffly. "I don't get as many off-days as you think I do."

"It's only for a few days," she countered. "It would be nice to see you again, even if it's for a day or two. It would be nice to pretend things were the way they used to be when we were kids."

"I never want to go back to being a kid," I said.

"Then," said Josephine. "Show me who grown-up Paul is. I know I'd like him just as much. Two days, please?"

"I really don't think—"

"We're family. No matter what, I'd still like you. Two days, come on."

"Two days?"

"Two days."

"Fine."

"I've missed you, Paul."
If you're interested in injecting some drama into your life, there are a couple of stock phrases that are guaranteed to make people upset when they hear them. The best (or worst) part is that they're the kind of sayings that will inevitably be said, and it's up to you whether you want to rip the bandage off in one go, or wait until someone else says it, prolonging the experience as a perverse form of popcorn entertainment.

"It's not you, it's me", "I have bad news and good news", and "It's not what it looks like" all work quite well, and I'd like to throw an honorable mention to the good old classic, "I told you so".

That one always makes people mad.

"I told you so," I said. "You should have let me drive."

Josephine edged the SUV onto the shoulder of the road, turned off the engine, and threw herself back into the driver's seat with a loud groan. "The map said it was all empty roads and farms!"

"We weren't supposed to draw attention to ourselves. As I said." I observed movement in the side mirrors of Josie's car. "Just let me do the talking, please," I hissed.

It was a clear late spring day, bright and sunny and dry without sweltering heat or sticky humidity. Beautiful weather – the travel guides I'd looked at boasted that this was the usual for Alberta – with good road conditions and high visibility. The highway stretched on before us and behind us, featureless plains on either side, the flat horizon occasionally interrupted by a stand of trees planted as a windbreak. In Josie's canary yellow SUV, we would be the most noteworthy thing on the horizon. Especially if that thing was breezing past with no regard for speed limits.

The cop car was parked behind ours, and a man in a short-sleeved uniform shirt under a black armored vest approached the driver's side door. Josie lowered the window as the police officer drew near and the shadow of his broad-brimmed "lemon squeezer" campaign hat blocked out the sun.

"Do you know why I stopped you?" he asked, with what I thought was snide indifference. It sounded like a phrase he trotted out with tiresome regularity, along with others like, "Please step out of the vehicle", or "Do you know how fast you were going?"
But I was silent and kept my hands in my lap, in clear view. It wasn’t a wise idea to tempt someone who packed heat into thinking that I was packing my own.

Josephine blinked innocently, and her fingers twisted around a lock of her hair, before she tucked it behind an ear. "I’m sorry, officer, I don’t know." She looked down, then back up to meet his eyes, and gave him a slight smile that wavered with shy modesty.

"Do you know how fast you were going?"

"I—I don’t know," Josephine replied. "But I had to get somewhere, and the road was empty... and you know how these things are."

The police officer’s eyes narrowed, and he now regarded Josephine suspiciously for a moment, before turning his attention to me. Josephine glanced at me out of the corner of her eyes, her smile fixed and her posture languid, and I lifted my eyebrows in response.

My lips parted slightly, and I said nothing, but I knew Josephine. Although I was aware that she had never been as good as I was at picking up the subtleties in other people, Josephine knew me. She had something of an understanding of who I once was, and for what reasons I’d changed myself. We’d drifted apart years ago – it had begun fifteen years ago, as I recalled – but there were things you could never truly forget, even if you wanted to. We’d been accomplices together, a long time ago. It wasn’t hard to do it again, in a different way.

_Improvise_, I didn’t say.

"Where are you headed, Ma’am?" the officer asked, and I could sense a dangerous undercurrent beneath the seemingly routine question. "Why would you be in such a hurry?"

Josephine didn’t reply, but there was a flicker of tenseness, a brief curl of the fingers in the hand that rested loosely on the steering wheel. _There’s no script!_

"Ma’am? Are you a refugee?" he continued. "Your plates are American. Refugees and emigrants have to be processed with the border guards. If you are one of them, you’ll have to turn back and apply for entrance."

_Let me do the talking._

Technically, we weren’t actually refugees, because we weren’t fleeing, we were _emigrating_. Yes, it was true that we were leaving the country, but it wasn’t because our home had been destroyed – for a brief fraction of a second the memory of the news from a week ago – that Los Angeles had been torn apart by Tohu and Bohu – flashed into my mind, an unwelcome contradiction. That wasn’t my home, hadn’t been my home, not for years.

We were running to Canada, and that was the difference. We had a plan – I had a plan. And a place to go.

"We’re dual citizens, and there was a family emergency," I said, injecting confidence into my speech. This would require self-assurance, because obviously we were innocent and we knew it, but a certain amount of politeness worked wonders with Canadian bureaucracy, especially when there was no takeout coffee on hand to act as a peace offering. "We work in the States, but our main residence is Canadian. The American plates are for convenience. I’d be happy to show you proof of residence, sir." A clear deference to (petty) authority. Cops liked that sort of thing. I gestured to the
shotgun seat window. "If you'll step around, please."

The officer nodded, and walked around the front of the car to my side. I unrolled the window, and popped open the glove box.

After digging around for a few seconds, I slid out a wooden box secured with a metal clasp, the lid polished smooth with black letters in Spanish burned into it. I held the box in my lap, propping the lid open under the wary eyes of the police officer, and then I sifted through the envelopes, receipts, and cigars stored in corked plastic tubes. Until I came up with a sheaf of papers, which I handed to him through the window.

Utility bills, delivery invoices dated as recently as April, and last year's receipt slip acknowledging the payment of 2012 property taxes for a Canadian residence, paid through a Canadian bank account. All the documentation was up-to-date, and under the same name. The matching ID I whipped out solidified the impression of authenticity.

"Everything seems to be in order," said the cop, reluctantly. He handed me the papers, and his gaze flicked downwards. "Are those real Habanos?"

"Yep," I answered. "Want one? It'd be rude if I didn't offer."

He looked over his shoulder, and turned back to me, a glint in his eye. "It'd be rude not to accept. And we Canadians don't do rude."

"Of course not." I grinned and held out two cigars, which quickly disappeared into a belt pouch.

"You'll report anything suspicious if you see it, sir?"

"You know I will. Have a good day, officer."

He returned to his car, and the flashing lights on the top of his cruiser turned off. It pulled away, and finally we were alone on the right-side shoulder of the road. A fence of wire and posts lay a few yards from the car, and beyond that, fields of knee-high wheat in neat, plowed lines waved in a soft breeze, and I could hear grasshoppers chirping in the roadside grass.

Josephine drew in a deep breath, and reached for the keys. "I didn't know you smoked," she remarked.

"I don't," I said. "I thought it would look bad to carry bags full of cash, in case I needed some extra persuasion. My luggage under the backseat is all top shelf whiskey. Farming towns, you know. They see more utility in trade goods than cash."

She gave me skeptical look at this, and started the car. We resumed our journey. I sorted my papers and settled them back in the cigar box. The miles slunk away under the tires of Josephine's car.

"Is that why the box under your seat is full of syringes?" Josephine's lip curled in disapproval. "More trade goods?"

There was an insulated lunchbox under my seat, something I'd packed when we'd started this trip. It looked like an innocuous storage container for road trip snacks, and Josie probably thought that it was at first, if she'd taken a look. But the lunchbox was actually stuffed with sterile disposable syringes individually vacuum packaged, along with a number small glass bottles, tightly stoppered,
unlabelled, and containing a clear fluid.

"No." I shut the glove box with a click. "That's for the horse tranquilizer."

Her hands tightened on the steering wheel. "What."

"We're not refugees, because I've prepared everything for us," I said, pulling the lever on the side of the shotgun seat and leaning back. "But the Endbringers—"

At the mention, Josephine winced. They came more often and in more variety than they had in the past – even with the death of Behemoth, the so-called Herokiller – more often than I or my mother could ever have anticipated, and the destruction made headline news every two months. It wasn't like we as a society could overlook the effects anymore. It was obvious enough, serious enough that the previously ignorant were now becoming marginally aware.

I continued onwards. "The Endbringers are going to make some real refugees – not halfway across the world, but here. They'll be people used to a certain life, who don't have it anymore. And if they see what I have – what we have, the resources that I've spent years saving and gathering up, that we aren't going to share with them... they'll want it. That's what the tranquilizer is for. A non-permanent solution, just in case."

Josephine laughed. "You think people are going to try and fight you for a box of cigars and a bottle of whiskey?"

"They might want my house." And then I added, "And don't forget that it still works on horses. And cows."

"It's just a farmhouse in Nowheresville," Josephine said scornfully. "You sent me the postcards, and it doesn't look anything special. Okay, maybe a cute bed-and-breakfast if you squint, but really, why would anyone want it enough to take it?"

"It's not just a farmhouse. You'll see."

With that, I turned my gaze to the window, and watched the fields flash by through the glass, straight rows green with young wheat crops only a month or two old.

I had months of leave accrued from years of never taking any lengthy vacations, always signing up to the PRT's "on-call" and "will travel" list for weekends and holidays.

Immediately after the Tohu and Bohu attack, I'd applied for a five to six week break, citing personal reasons. The HR department management no doubt went through my personnel files and came to their own conclusions. It helped that I appeared suitably subdued and didn't elaborate on the application form with anything specific, other than a generic, "It's personal."

It would have been impossible not to notice the PRT troopers on edge in the cafeteria, growing restless and more apprehensive with every day, participating in full-day practice drills with real ammunition. That was something that the Directors usually wouldn't approve more than once every few months, because using up consumables just for simulations cut into a branch's budget, and left less equipment available for the real thing. The fact that they didn't care, and that it wasn't only a single city's branch office involved, was enough to make me cautious.

The Leek Net had the answer. Well, it had an answer, and it might have not have been perfectly
accurate, but Leekers generally had greater access to information than the public, the papers, or Parahumans Online. Not that the last was particularly hard. It hadn't taken Leekers much time to piece together the delayed deliveries and sudden lack of response from sellers registered with the Toybox Leek Marketplace storefront. And if you had a thousand dollars lying around, you could purchase a one-time decryption key to view a copy of some classified files "acquired" from the Chicago PRT servers. The information was enlightening.

That was two years ago. Because of it, I'd adjusted my plans. And now it had come time to take my well-deserved holiday.

...With my sister.

But it wasn't as bad as it could be, I decided. Josie wasn't under any semblance of gainful employment, not after the producers had pulled the plug on her show, and to her utter disbelief, started an open casting call for a male lead to play Chevalier. She'd lost her major role, the one that had defined her career and made her famous, and she was too closely associated with the branding to easily branch out to taking on others.

I'd found that the years had softened the harder edges of her personality, when I'd first gone to see what she'd made of herself, and who she'd become, as she'd seen what had become of me. Not softer by much; she had her own opinions, and didn't hesitate to make them known. But we agreed on the most essential things, and that line of pragmatic thinking was something we had in common – we both knew where it came from, even if we didn't speak about it, and probably never would, not after the disaster that was last week.

Josie knew me, not fully, but better than anyone else in my life. She let herself trust me.

And for some reason, that didn't bother me as much as I thought it would.

The hours trickled slowly away by the count of the digital display on the dashboard. The distance from the border lengthened; daylight soon began to fade into evening, and shadows stretched across the fields and over the road. I instructed Josephine to take an exit ramp, and from there we passed through a small town that was nothing more than a single main street (creatively named Main Street) with a few stores on either side. Past the outskirts of the town, and simple, blocky houses with large grassy front yards with a fenced-in goat or the occasional horse wearing an embroidered blanket, past small farms and then finally, a turn-off down a long and winding private road. Gateposts on both sides boasted signs proclaiming, "Private property" and, "You are now trespassing".

"Keep going," I said. "Parking's at the back."

The farmhouse was not your typical rustic and rugged log cabin, the type which made passersby assume that it was lived in and owned by a farmer. My house was two storeys, large enough that a family with two active children and a dog could have comfortably lived in it, with practical touches in the form of steeply canted rafters tiled in mottled slate, and wide overhanging eaves that shed snow in winter and in summer, gathered light through modular solar panels. The windows were shuttered, and a chimney rose against one shingled outer wall, the red mortared bricks soot-free and spotless. I'd never actually used the furnace, only ever popping by to check on the estate's maintenance, oversee construction projects, or supervise special deliveries for a few days each summer.

The garage was behind the house, and I motioned Josephine to stop the car so I could get out and disable the security system with a quick retinal scan and the administrator's password. Permission to
fly the flag: the admin is now in residence. The garage door rolled up after I finished typing the last letter into the control panel hidden on the side of the water meter box.


Sietch – a place to gather in times of danger.

It was an indulgence to my younger self, who'd had grand dreams of wealth, and no solid plan to make it happen. The foundation might have been built on naïve daydreams, but there was real purpose behind it – something that I hadn't forgotten, hadn't been able to put from my mind, from the day I'd first seen the numbers and understood what they meant. I'd built the fortress of my dreams, and even if I was capable of feeling regret, I don't think I would have.

"Kitchen, dining, living room, laundry are all on the ground floor, through there," I said, as I switched on the garage lights and unlocked the door to the house proper. "Bedrooms are upstairs. You'll have to assemble your own furniture if you want to sleep in a bed tonight; I ordered everything flat packed.

"Oh, and the basement, storage, panic room, and bunker complex are through here." I rolled aside a camouflaged panel on the wall to reveal a heavy steel door, which I unlocked with a pass code. Pushing the door open activated a light strip set into a handrail attached to the wall. A flight of stairs led downwards into darkness. "If you can't find me, I'm probably outside or in there. If you go looking for me and get lost, remember to follow the lights."

"The fuck, Paul." Josephine peered into the tunnel that went on further than the light strips illuminated. They were motion sensor activated, and turned off automatically when the sensors couldn't detect any movement. "How much did you spend on this place?"

I did a quick calculation. "The whole estate, including the grounds, the equipment, and everything in storage? For convenience's sake, I'll say somewhere north of ten million, and we'll just leave it at that."

The money I'd made, over all these years. Most of my liquidity had been funneled into creating the house that was built over my fortress. My Ark.

"Did you really think you'd need... all this?" Josephine stepped back from the bunker door, and returned to her parked car, running her fingers anxiously along the cheery yellow paint job of the open driver's side door.

I was silent for a moment, considering. I was almost certain she knew what I knew – that she'd been told – but I suspected that she hadn't understood the full implications. Josephine was accustomed to a certain standard of lifestyle, and like many people in the civilized world, having it mattered more than wondering where it came from, and what it took to deliver. To be fair, people rarely thought about what they had. Until it was gone.

Fifty years left, my mother had once told me. That was ten years ago, and it was an estimate calculated for three Endbringers running on a set schedule, definitely not what we had now. But there was little chance of getting another statistical forecast.

"I don't think it's enough," I stated flatly, and then changed the subject. "You should start sorting out your luggage and fixing up your room. It's the one with the star on the door. I'll cook dinner tonight. And I suggest you get to sleep early."
"Why?" Josephine asked curiously.

"Because I'm picking up my cow from the neighbor tomorrow, and you're going to be up early learning how to milk her."

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**SUMMER 2013**

The cow's name was Natasha, and she had to be brought into the barn and milked twice a day.

When Josephine had asked Paul why he'd named the cow Natasha, he'd just shrugged and said that Boris was the paternal grandfather. And then he'd showed her how a cow was milked by hand, and laughed when he saw that she was afraid to get close enough to touch the udder of a thousand pound animal with hooves the size of her hand and splayed fingers, an animal that smelled of manure that had to be shoveled into a wheelbarrow, and probably couldn't see her when she was poking around down there...

The milking machine was a series of rubber hoses attached to suction cups that automatically gripped onto the cow's bits, and sent the milk into a collection tank. It was all very simple, not frightening at all, but there was a lot of work involved in running Paul's farm, and it was nothing like the summer holiday adventure he'd invited her to, what she'd imagined it would be in her own mind.

In some ways, she was grateful for the distraction – for all the tasks that needed to be done immediately, every single day, all the things that depended on her to run smoothly, that Paul trusted her to do right. Natasha was one of them, a well-behaved cow, as cows went – not that Josephine really knew, as all the cows she'd met in her life were of the two-legged variety. Natasha appreciated music; she lowed happily and butted her head against the door of her stall when Josephine sang to her, even if the songs never sounded quite right when Simon or Wes weren't there to sing duet.

Wes... or Eidolon, as the fans knew him.

_Fiancé_, she'd called him for a few months, and then Alexandria! had ended its run, and Wes had gone to London, because he'd gotten an offer for a leading role in a West End show, and he couldn't turn it down. It was what he'd always wanted. Josephine couldn't blame him for it; no one could be expected to spend their entire career playing supporting roles. Things had fallen apart from there, when long distance hadn't seemed like it was working, when she couldn't land a role of her own – no one wanted to touch her – and a holiday in the country, in a quaint house that had been so picturesque on the postcards Paul had sent her had sounded like a good idea.
The image had been better than the reality, crisp and perfect and idealized, because Paul had taken the picture, and that was what he did. The day after that first day... It had been the hardest for her to stomach, because her brother had expected her to contribute, not just loaf around or noodle about with the piano he'd thoughtfully provided in the living room. He drove himself with a ferocious intensity, she observed, something that he was careful to hide under a façade of easygoing nonchalance. He'd learned to hide a lot of things, it turned out.

Not one of the workmen who'd come to dredge the pond and build up the weir to feed water into the half-completed windmill noticed it. Josephine suspected that they didn't even know that Paul was an American white-collar office worker for ninety percent of the year.

A week passed, and then the new month came on, bringing with it a hot continental summer, so strange when she had lived near coasts her entire life. Nearly a whole month after she'd settled in, and her nails were now clipped short for convenience, the French manicure chipped away. Some standards still had to be kept, though: every morning, part of her routine involved curling her eyelashes and applying a quick coat of mascara along with patting on some SPF foundation. Even a touch of lipstick was enough to grant the illusion of relative normalcy.

Josephine had begun to realize why Paul had put his life savings into this house. Savings and more – she knew he couldn't have paid this off on a single-earner government salary, no matter how much overtime he put in. When Paul went up to his room or descended into the depths of the bunker to sort his collection of agricultural manuals after dinner, Josephine watched the news on the television. As the news stories came on, she with a sinking feeling saw that there was a bigger picture, which Paul had noticed, and that this summer holiday invitation had a greater purpose.

The Slaughterhouse Nine, which somehow now numbered more than nine, and even counted among its membership villains who'd been killed years ago – the bounties had long been claimed and awarded. Yet now they all were alive, causing chaos and confusion in major population centers, more than one of each infamous parahuman villain appearing at the same time.

The footage was time-delayed, supposedly to prevent onlookers from interfering with law enforcement and emergency response, which Josephine knew to be media talk for censoring out the worst bits for the benefit of sensitive eyes. But what she saw of it, what little the news allowed its viewers to see, was completely horrifying. A tourist town in Vermont, massacred. A city in New York state, turned into a battleground.

Paul must have known, Josephine thought to herself. This was the reason. He knew about it. Or at least, he strongly suspected.

And he hadn't even told her! No explanation, not even a hint. He'd just offered her a cure for the restlessness that had set in after months of putting about her penthouse alone, the apartment empty and eerily silent in the brief moments between filling the rooms with music and noise.

_Goddamn Paul and his goddamn self-reliance._

Josephine stood up abruptly from where she had been reclining on the sofa, and then strode to the garage, her bare feet padding over the wooden floorboards and hard-wearing rugs of the ground floor living room, the loose and flowing wrap dress she'd taken to wearing after washing up from the day's duties swishing around her ankles. It was a glamorous bathrobe, essentially.

Through the garage door she went, unlocked when it was only she and Paul in residence. Then past the sliding panel, tapping the guest pass combination _7–2–8–5_ into the keypad, and then the descent
into the black hallway, a darkness that fizzled into light as she passed. The stairs led downwards and downwards, the ceiling above a high and stony polished concrete, arched ribs curving up the walls at regular intervals like the nave of a cathedral.

_Goddamn Paul and his goddamn secrecy!_

When the stairs leveled out, she saw a row of doors down a long hallway, the end too distant for her to make out. Some of them were simple doors – minimalist bar-shaped handles, no locks – and some had steel plates bolted to the front, labelled in code with what she assumed were the contents of the room. Some doors had keypads next to the handles, the displays blank and dormant to signify a lack of recent use. And other doors had no handle at all: they were smooth, featureless rectangles set into the wall, with a thin crack of a join to differentiate wall from doorway.

There was one open door, an oblong of pale light spilling into the hallway.

Inside was a room furnished with a wide bank of monitors, a wall of television screens, playing multiple video feeds at the same time. Some of them were views of the farmhouse and grounds, from surveillance cameras set into the roof. The rest of the screens were playing footage from the attic's satellite link, picking up news broadcasts from around the world.

Paul was within, his appearance neat as usual, a linen shirt with the collar looking inexplicably ironing board crisp. His sleeves were rolled up lean and sun-tanned forearms, and he wore sturdy trousers with steel-capped boots that he was conscientious about scraping clean of mud and caked dirt at the end of each day, whenever he came back from wherever he went. Paul paced back and forth in front of the monitor bank, each step slow and measured, a tenseness to his posture that quickly slipped away once he noticed her presence at the threshold.

Josephine's attention was caught by the screens on the wall. Bright flares of golden light, a trail left in the wake of a flying man whose power flared in a shining nimbus around his golden body. Cities torn apart by spears of incandescence, individuals targeted, populations disintegrated, and... entire countries. Many of the screens blanked out, returning to a gray fuzzy static for a few seconds before the feed was switched to something else, news reporters in a multitude of different languages that played across the screens in scrolling ticker panels, mouthing words she understood even less with the sound muted. But their intent was clear. Their alarm, their horror, was obvious.

It was also infectious, and suddenly Josephine found herself breathless, her throat hoarse, and the smooth, polished concrete of the floor freezing cold against her bare legs. She felt cold, cold all the way through, as if a space between her ribs had been hollowed out, and something torn from her, so quickly that she was reeling at the suddenness of its loss, and now there was a miserable aching emptiness within her that ached all the more because there would be no proper farewell, because there was _nothing_ to say farewell to.

Paul rolled a chair over to her, and lifted her up under her arms. She grabbed handfuls of his shirt and didn't let go, her eyes bleary and wet, her lips dry and voice wavering. His crisp collar soon dampened and drooped, but Paul said nothing to console her, only patting her back in a comforting manner, his shoulder warm beneath her cheek. His face was smoothly neutral, and his eyes dark and impassive when she looked up – and Josephine realized that he was the taller of the two of them, and the last time she had ever been as close to him as she was now was years ago, when she'd boasted the greater height. When they were children.

But he was different now.
There was a coldness about him that no one else noticed, because he took care to hide it under a layer of charming affability, something he’d never had when he was a boy. She knew it for what it was now, when she'd left home and moved to New York and saw for herself how many people did it, or tried to do it and pulled it off poorly. It was their mother's coldness, when she held Josephine's hand and kissed her on the forehead, and whispered to her in a soft and gentle voice, telling her that she would have everything she wanted, as long as she did exactly as she was told.

"Did you know?" she mumbled, when she had gathered some of her composure. The show must go on, she thought bitterly, and the screens had never stopped playing the awful footage.

"No. Not everything," said Paul, and a note of distaste entered his voice. "I knew it was only a matter of time before someone lost control and broke something important. But I never thought it would be so soon... or so permanent. Or that it would be him."

"What's going to happen?"

"We wait and see what happens. And we cross our fingers that he doesn't notice us here." A wry smile twisted his lips. "I chose Nowheresville for a reason."

Paul soon returned to watching the news feeds, and Josephine explored the room. Paul's surveillance office, with small adjoining rooms behind sliding doors, containing a toilet in one and a kitchenette in the other, sink, kettle, microwave, and mini fridge neatly arranged and looking barely used. No personal touches anywhere. Everything here was even more practical and functional than the farmhouse upstairs, which was strange for Josephine when she remembered that Paul was an artist in his own right. He wasn't like any other artist she knew.

But if economics was an art as some considered it, then their mother would have been an artist too.

The next day or two passed in a blur. Josephine woke up earlier than usual, and did her chores and her fitness exercises and her beauty routine as quickly as she could, just so she could visit the surveillance room and watch the big screens. Nothing they showed was good news; there were no uplifting human interest stories, no kittens rescued from trees, only repetitions of the same report. The rising death tolls. But she needed to know.

The news showed the roads choked with evacuees from the east coast of North America, where Scion, the most powerful of the parahumans, had made a strafing run. People were running to the closest thing that seemed like safety, the tear in reality that led to another version of Earth, in Brockton Bay. But many of them couldn't make it, when fuel ran out on the congested highways, and drivers abandoned their cars and went on foot, bundles of their belongings in their arms.

They carried video game consoles, computers, luxury goods. She saw how scared they were, how disorganized and woefully unprepared. And she knew that she would have been one of them, one of many, if she wasn't here. Because of Paul. Paul's preparations. The secret ambition he'd once shared with her, at the time in his youth when he'd been less guarded, the time when all she'd cared about was herself and her own dreams of stardom.

Paul was there in the evenings too. She sat next to him, an arm's length away, and she found his presence a comfort.

Was she weak for thinking that?

Josephine had long believed that women were just as capable as men, and when she saw the way
Mom ruled her office, sometimes more capable.

She was Alexandria, the woman famous for her strength and invulnerability. But Alexandria turned out not be so invincible. Neither was she. And it pained Josephine to admit that Paul was better at this than she was. He knew what to do – and she didn't.

So many people, lost. And she among them.

Mom couldn't help her anymore. But Paul was still around. He wasn't affectionate, and he preferred his solitude. Paul was family, and it was all that mattered, and she thought he believed it too, even if he'd never say it.

He had found his way back after six years apart, after all.

On Monday evening, Paul didn't show up for their regular viewing session in the bunker.

Most of the feeds were dead, with no new updates on the whereabouts of Scion. The few remaining ones showed the migration of hundreds of thousands of displaced city-dwellers searching for safety, and the expansion of refugee camps in ten different realities, rough shanties filled with shell-shocked refugees who'd only just realized that they would have to restart civilization with nothing but what they brought.

She waited for him, but midnight came and went, and before she headed upstairs to bed, she checked the kitchen refrigerator. The covered bowl of vegetable soup she'd left for him was there, untouched.

Josephine went to sleep, troubled and uneasy.

In the morning, she milked Natasha and led her to pasture, collected the eggs, and inspected the estate in a walking tour. The vegetable garden and greenhouses closest to the house, the straight trunks and ordered rows of young trees in the plantation forest to the north, the creek on the western edge of the farm, the pond, irrigation piping pale and hazy under the water. And finally, the skeleton of a building, and the tarp-covered bundles of construction materials for Paul's windmill generator.

She tried not to think of what to do if Paul didn't come back. She couldn't manage the farm on her own. Most of the doors underground were locked to her, the guest passcode only working for a few of the rooms: a reference library, the surveillance office, a linen storage, a medical bay, a pantry containing rows of shelves, stacked to the ceiling with thousands of cans and jars, sacks of flour, dried cereals, and beans on the bottom-most levels.

The evening came and went, and still he was gone.
Josephine spent the next day weeding the garden, worried and trying not to be. Paul was an adult. He could take care of himself, and had done since the last Christmas he’d spent in their home, before he refused to have anything to do with their mother.

She didn't want to consider the fact that without Paul, she had no one else left. No home in California, thanks to Tohu and Bohu. Her apartment in New York was in ruins, Scion's compliments. This farmhouse was the only thing she had, a hand-me-down inheritance left to be slowly squandered by her pathetic lack of experience.

Afternoon signaled time to bring the cow in. Josephine stroked Natasha's bristly muzzle as the milking machine chuffed and slurped and filled the aluminum tank. For the first time in years, Josephine made a prayer. She'd always thought them useless – people helped other people, or people helped themselves. That was how you got what you wanted. Prayer was purely lip service, for people too weak, too ignorant to know how to improve their situation.

When she walked up to the house, the tank sloshing in her arms, she saw a silhouette on the winding drive that led to the main road. The setting sun shone in her eyes, but she blinked and swiped the back of a gloved hand over her face. A man, a dark figure stumbling toward the house, backlit by the sun.

She dropped the tank and ran.

Paul leaned against her, his dark hair falling over an exhausted face, his shirt dirty and torn, splotched with dried blood.

"Paul, Paul, Paul," Josephine whispered, and she shrugged her shoulder beneath his arm, propping him up. "What did you do to yourself? Are you hurt?"

"I can't be hurt," said Paul, and his voice cracked. He began shaking, and Josephine felt him slipping, so she gripped his arm fiercely, and didn't let him go. His breath wheezed in her ear, and she realized that he was laughing – short, sharp gasps that she could barely distinguish from sobs. "But he can."

"He?"

"Scion. Scion's dead."

"Where did you go?"

He didn't reply. Josephine unlocked the front door one handed, and got him up the stairs, somehow. Then she pushed him into the bathroom, sat him on the edge of the bathtub, and unlaced his muddy boots. The first aid kit was in the cupboard under the sink, next to the tube of grout and the drain cleaner.

The skin beneath the blood-splattered shirt was smooth and unmarked. The shirt smelled of sweat and small round pockmarks, burns through the fabric, were scattered along the left sleeve.

"Where did I go?" said Paul, a manic look to his eyes. He looked down at his hands, graceful pianist's hands like her own, the neat nails leaving imprints in red on his palms. "I went to fight him."

"And you killed him?" Josephine filled up the bathtub, tossing in handfuls of dried rose petals.
Maybe aromatherapy would work on Paul.

"I didn't do shit." Paul stepped into the bathtub, his boxers still on. "It was all her."

His expression twisted into something like... fear? Josephine couldn't tell. She had never seen him look like this before, never seen him in this state, wild-eyed and almost hysterical. He was the stoic one. Expectations of masculinity never bothered him – even now she noticed that the hair on his legs was short and ragged – but he was always composed, unfazed, ready to take charge, with a plan for everything.

She heated up soup in the microwave, cooked some grilled cheese sandwiches, and brought it up to Paul's room on a covered tray. He was asleep in his bed, so she left it on his writing desk, a practical modern design, all straight ninety-degree angles and steel legs. The cork board above the desk was the only personal touch, covered with postcards and Polaroids – she recognized her own among those sent by clients in Boston and Philadelphia. And then there were cards packed with text on the side opposite the picture, signed with feminine names in a feminine hand, names like Kathleen, Nina, and Emily.

On the desk was a three-ring binder book, plain white office stationery. Josephine couldn't help herself, and opened it to the front page.

**The Cape Cookbook: Recipes for Success**
*as abridged by Tabloid*

Printed pages, holes punched down the side. Writing filled the margins and the gaps between the double spaced lines. Paul's handwriting, the same smooth and even lettering he used when he'd sent her photo prints of his farm.

She glanced at Paul, asleep atop his covers. His damp hair lay limp over his forehead, down to his brows, and the stiff, taut way he held himself when he was awake was gone. He looked younger like this, like the younger brother she'd once known. A boy who had lost that part of himself to ambition, when he found that success demanded a price. She was regretfully familiar with it.

With one last look at her brother, she came to a decision. It wasn't hard. She snatched up the binder, and headed downstairs to the bunker, where she turned on the monitors and set the kettle on for tea. Then she read *The Cape Cookbook*, and in the background, refugees organized themselves into rough communities on the big screens, as the information slowly sifted through that the ultimate threat was no longer a threat.

A beeping sound from the house's security monitor interrupted her when she was halfway through Chapter Eighteen.

Josephine looked up, eyes flicking to the screens, and shot to her feet, tossing the book onto her abandoned seat. The motion detectors around the farmhouse sensed movement. The motion activated, solar powered garden lights that Paul had planted in the grass and along the bushes that surrounded the house were switching on as someone moved past them. A slim figure darting from
window to window, too short to be Paul, or even a man.

She stopped by the medical bay to load up a few needles with horse tranquilizer.

The garage door rolled up by a foot, and Josephine slipped through, on her back, before it closed down. She followed the activated lights, around the side of the house, until she saw the person who scrambled back and forth through the bushes under Paul's window on the second floor. A woman... who was attempting to climb up the chimney?

Josephine slipped through the grass. She'd walked this way every day for the last month. She could find her way in the dark, avoiding the lights she knew were there, so they wouldn't turn on and give her position away.

But the woman seemed to sense her presence, and her face turned, a white face in the brightly lit perimeter, and their eyes suddenly met.

A woman with a slender build, clothing shredded and dirty, hair in tangled knots around a frightened face and a mouth that opened in surprise. Then she blinked, and the moment ended, and Josephine pushed herself to her feet and pelted after her.

Running in the darkness, the yellow summer grass snapping under her pounding feet, the woman ahead of her, turning on the lights hidden in the grass, abruptly jinking left and right when Josephine drew near, always ahead, seemingly aware of exactly where Josephine was. Through the vegetable garden – Josephine winced as she crushed tomatoes beneath her feet, sprinting diagonally over the raised beds. The woman stumbled, got back to her feet, losing some of her ground, her motions jerky, her speed coming more from panic than coordination.

Josephine gained on her, and gained some more, and with one desperate lunge threw herself into the other woman, bearing her to the ground, face first into the grass. The woman pushed; they rolled, clawing at one another, pulling hair and aiming for the eyes.

The most unpleasant taste filled her mouth, as if her tongue had rotted off and she'd kept it between her teeth the whole time, as it swelled and putrefied into a bitter, corrosive liquid that clogged her throat and rose through her nostrils, until her eyes watered, and she felt like she was slowly choking on the foulness of it, feeling as if it were trickling down to her stomach and poisoning her body...

This was wrong, unnatural. Because it was. It was a cape – it had to be.

I was Alexandria, thought Josephine, who had the advantage of weight and reach. I don't have Alexandria's strength, but I trained to make up for it.

She could punch like a hero, even if she lacked the strength to make it truly authentic.

A cracking blow across the jaw, teeth snapping together, and the woman fell back, dazed.

She turned her face aside and vomited, drops of it spattering on the woman's ragged halo of tawny-brown hair. Josephine wiped her mouth with a grass-stained sleeve.

Josephine reached into her bra and pulled out the small plastic box of the first aid kit she'd tucked inside. The pre-loaded syringes were there, and she stabbed one into the woman's thigh, pinning her down with knees on her shoulders, until the woman's shuddering breaths slowed to unconsciousness.
She hoisted the woman up over her shoulders in a fireman's carry, and brought her back to the house, to the kitchen where she dumped the unconscious body into a chair. Digging through the cutlery drawers, she found a roll of gaffer's tape under a tea strainer and a collapsible colander, shrugged, and proceeded to tape the woman's arms and legs to the chair. Finally, she set a pair of loaded syringes on the counter, within reach.

Half an hour of lights out for the dosage volume.

The minutes on the kitchen clock ticked away, painfully slow.

The woman blinked groggily, stirring in inches. Her arms twitched, to rub at her eyes and her bruised jaw, only to find herself bound to a chair. With Josephine standing in front of her, carving knife in one hand, a syringe in the other.

"Who are you?" demanded Josephine. "What are you doing here?"

She knew the woman was a cape. Most capes came in groups, if only for safety and convenience. It was what the book had said. If there was one, there would be others. If this one left, reported their whereabouts to a group, then they might try to take the house away from them. Paul was right about that. He was right to be prepared for it.

The woman's mouth opened, her eyes narrowing, and suddenly Josephine felt the taste in her own mouth, that awful taste, but there was nothing in her stomach left to expel. She swung the knife at her captive's face. The sensation abruptly disappeared.

"I came looking for him." Her voice was barely above a whisper.

"Who?"

"Him." The woman's eyes flicked to something behind Josephine, but Josephine didn't fall for it. The woman licked her cracked lips, and a thin smile flitted across her face. "Johnny."

"You can put the knife away," said Paul.

Josephine whipped around, and Paul ducked under the knife. "I didn't hear you!"

"I'm a sneak. Of course you didn't hear me."

Paul was barefoot, in navy blue pajama pants and matching pajama shirt, half the buttons crookedly done up. He looked terrible, dark rings under his eyes, hair messed from sleep, his voice rough and tired. But the confidence was back, that easy self-assurance which suggested that he had all the answers, if only you asked the right questions.

He turned to the bound woman, leisurely stepping closer to her, closer and closer until the woman began to rock the chair back and forth, scraping its legs against the floor and almost tipping it over in an inexplicable panic. When the chair tilted dangerously backwards on two legs, Paul grabbed the back of the chair, and held it steady, still leaning at a precarious angle.

Paul loomed over the woman, his face inches away from hers, and she shrunk away from him, until he gave out a short bark of laughter and set the chair back to rest on all four legs.
"Parvenu," he said. "It's been a long time."

"Ten years," she breathed.

"Eight and a half."

"Ten from the first time. And you still look the same." She bit her lip. "Aren't you going to ask how I found you?"

"She found both of us, and used us. I don't normally do get-togethers like that." Paul folded his arms and leaned against the kitchen counter. "I'm guessing you followed me back through the door."

Josephine returned the knife to the wooden knife block, but she kept the syringe. "Is someone going to tell me who Johnny is? And how you two know each other?"

"We met in a bar, a long time ago," said Paul, looking vaguely amused. "And I told her my name was Johnny."

Parvenu watched them, eyes darting from Paul to Josephine, and then they widened in shock.

"You're Josephine Villiers! What are you doing here?" Parvenu said. "With him!"

"Excuse me. I'm right here, you know. Josie and I, we're close," Paul remarked. He made a gesture with two fingers, formed into an X shape. "We're like this."

"Enough of this!" snapped Josephine, brandishing the syringe. "So your ex-girlfriend is here. She's a cape, in case you were planning to keep messing with her. What are we going to do about her? Keep her locked up in the basement?"

"Yes," mused Paul. "What are we going to do with you? Why did you follow me, of all people?"

Parvenu swallowed, and when she spoke, her voice came out hesitantly. "Everyone I know is dead. She set Leviathan on us." Her head drooped, and tangled hair fell over her eyes. "You were the only one left, the only one I knew."

"No thanks. Still not interested in a pyramid scheme."

"I don't want to recruit you!" objected Parvenu. "I want to join you."

"What makes you think I'm looking to recruit?"

"I'm useful. You could use me," she said, reluctant. "Synergy. You saw what it could do out there. What we can do, if we work together."

"Hello!" interrupted Josephine. "She's a cape! She's dangerous!"

Paul waved a dismissive hand. "You took her out with a punch. She's no Brute – she's a tracker." He inspected the woman, the frayed dress she wore, stained with green, muddy black, and a rusty dark red. "Can you do animals?"

"Yes. If they're big enough."
"How far is your range?"

"Between one to two thousand feet."

"One last question." Paul scratched his chin, dark with three days' worth of stubble. "Your weakness. What is it?"

"I need people," she answered, her voice so soft that Josephine leaned in closer to hear. "The taste of them."

"Hm," said Paul. "I think I can work with that."
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