Oddments

by RHJunior

Summary

A place for the one-shots and partial story ideas that may flourish into full works... or that others may wish to adopt (Hey, it's fanfic. Feel free to steal my ideas for your own. Take two! They're small!)
Harry's Horcrux

<You’re a Horcrux, Harry.>

Harry’s breath caught in his throat as the fateful sentence echoed in his mind. No… it couldn’t be. Clue… the voice in his head, the not-so-imaginary friend of his childhood-- was Voldemort? No, was a piece of Voldemort, a chunk of the evil man’s soul stuck inside Harry’s skull, Oh Merlin, get it out get it out GET IT OUT--!

<STOP IT!> Clue yelled, his voice in Harry’s head so loud Harry clapped his hands over his ears in reflex, nearly cracking himself in the skull with the pomme of Griffindor’s sword. <Calm down Harry! Even if you could get me out, clawing the scalp off your own skull isn’t the way to do it. So stop hurting yourself.> The stern voice waited for several moments while Harry got his breathing back under control. <Good. Now, before we go any further, let’s get one thing straight: I AM NOT, NOR AM I A PART OR EXTENSION OF, LORD VOLDEMORT.>

“You’re-- you’re a piece of his soul, you told me yourself,” Harry said.

<Yes.> Harry got the mental impression of someone resisting the urge to gag. <But I am absolutely, positively NOT HIM. I am NOT.> The revulsion was visceral. It gave Harry pause.

“But you’re part of his soul--”

<Your finger is part of you. If you sever a finger and stick it in a jar, is it still alive? Is it still ‘you’?>

“Well….no,” said Harry, reluctantly.

<Of course not. I quit being even a part of Tom Riddle, or Voldemort, or whatever he’s calling himself today, the moment he cut me loose. And I’d like to hope that after all these years I’ve shown I’m nothing like him.>

Harry swallowed and nodded. It was true. He was nothing like the cold, ruthless thing that Harry had confronted growing out of Quirrel’s head, or the vicious and arrogant spectre that had inhabited the diary. The voice in his head he’d long ago dubbed “Clue” had been a constant companion, and had shown himself to be of good conscience and a loyal friend… if a bit obnoxious and snarky. Well, VERY obnoxious and snarky-- and rude. And opinionated…

<I can hear you thinking, kid,> Clue said sarcastically. <If you wanna insult me, turn down the volume.>

“Sorry.” Harry mumbled. “But you really are different from, well, HIM.” He shifted his stance. “...Why?”

Clue chuckled. <Because Voldemort didn’t just make Horcruxes,> he said. <He refined the technique into a self-improvement method.>

Harry scowled in puzzlement. <Think about it, lad, think about it!> Clue said. his voice in Harry’s head was high and urgent, the way it always sounded when he was imparting something extremely vital. <Put yourself in Riddle’s shoes. You’re an evil wizard. You’re willing to do anything to make yourself more powerful, more indestructible. You’ve decided you’re going to make yourself immortal by tearing out pieces of your soul. What parts of your soul are you going to want to tear out first?>
Realization stole over Harry. <Ah, the light dawns, does it?> Clue said, his dry tones returning to normal. <That’s right. Since you’re cutting out chunks of yourself anyway, you’re going to want to get rid of any weaknesses. Or anything you see as weak. Things like-->

“Compassion,” Harry said, his throat thick. “Mercy.”

<...Honesty, decency, charity, temperance, so on and so forth.> Clue finished for him. <Oh, and things like doubt, fear, sadness...> at Harry’s mental noise of query he clarified. <We have a word for people who don’t feel any fear, never have any doubt, don’t feel sadness, Harry. They’re called sociopaths. The so-called ‘negative’ emotions, the ones everybody today runs around trying to never let themselves feel, those are as important to your mental health, to your moral conscience as the so-called ‘positive’ feelings. Never being afraid sounds good till you realize you’re not afraid of anything, not even making the wrong decisions. Never feeling sad means never feeling sorry for your actions.>

“Never feeling angry?” Harry prompted.

<Means you’re angry at nothing, not even injustice.> Clue said. <Though old Riddle-boy seemed fine with holding onto wrath. Indiscriminate rage is one of the more pleasurable vices.>

“So what you’re saying is, you were his… his conscience?” Harry ventured.

<Something like that.> Clue said. <“Or maybe I was the part of him that made him able to have a conscience.>

It occurred to Harry to wonder what part of Riddle’s conscience Voldemort would have wanted to tear out last. “So what part were you? His honesty? His compassion?”

<It’s not that simple, kid,> the soul-scrap replied. <Morals and virtues aren’t stuck in your head in tidy little boxes. They’re all interconnected, mish-mashed together. You can’t get one without getting little bits of the others.>He gave the equivalent of a mental shrug. <Whenever old Tommy boy decided to make a new Horcrux, he basically reached into his own head, felt around for whatever parts of himself gave him feelings he didn’t like, and yanked out a fistful to stick in one of his geegaws.>

Harry winced at the mental imagery; it was anything but pleasant. “Wait… does that mean the other Horcruxes are--” he hesitated to say ‘alive’-- “Like you too?”

<Doubtful,> Clue snorted. <In fact, let’s say ‘no way in hell.’ They’re just preserved, amputated bits. No more real life and awareness in them than a fingernail. They can seem lifelike, like a toy robot or a talking doll, but there’s nothing really there. That diary of his would have been in for one hell of a disappointment, so to speak, if it had taken over the Weasley girl’s body… a piece of a soul can’t vivify a body properly any more than you could reanimate Frankenstein with just a couple of scoops of random brain. It would have ended up a particularly talkative Inferi, shambling around and mumbling nonsense and not doing much else.>

“So how are you different?” Harry challenged. "WHY are you different?"

There was a long silence. <I don’t know.> Clue confessed. <I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about that-- I do mean A LOT of time-- and I only have guesses. I do know that I’m different. I can remember, I can learn, I can feel and think for myself, and cognito ergo sum, am I right? All I can guess is, from what little muddled memory I have of when I was created… Voldemort botched the job.>

<There he is, about to kill you and make his final get-out-of-Death-free charm. He reaches in,
grabs that last little wriggling bit of his conscience with one hand, and hits you with the Avada Kedavra from the other… and it all blows up in his face. And that yanked-loose scrap of himself, instead of going into whatever talisman he’d picked out, goes and gets stuck in your head like a piece of Riddle-shrapnel… along with a lot of stuff he didn’t intend. Like a lifetime’s worth of memories and knowledge.>

<In one way I was like that Diary: when he made it, Voldemort included a full copy of his memories up to that age.> Another mental shrug. <It was his first try, after all. Maybe he wanted it as a backup for if he returned without his memory, who can say. Well, if you’ve done it once, it’s easier to do twice…>

<So at least I THINK, what got put into you through that scar,> here there came an imaginary tap on Harry’s forehead, <had little bits of everything. And back here in one corner in a little pocket, surrounded by a healthy, whole mind and soul, it… germinated. Till it healed and grew and became… me.>

<That’s why you were nearly five years old before you heard from me,> Clue said. <Before that point there wasn’t enough of a ‘me’ to speak up. I wasn’t sure I even WAS a ‘me.’> His dry, sarcastic voice in Harry’s head got somber. <Figuring out what happened, sorting out what was really ‘me’ and was you and what were the garbled, mixed up pile of memories and information that came in with me--> Clue’s voice was suddenly thick with loathing. <Separating myself out from the horror story that was Riddle’s past, even as I was re-filing it and putting it all in proper order and locking it away--> Harry felt him shudder. <Oh, THAT was a load of fun.>

Harry remembered that inaugural day; the day a stubborn, sarcastic, authoritative voice had begun faintly speaking up in little Harry Potter’s head, telling him how to pick the lock on his cupboard from the inside… “Is it… that bad in there?” Harry said.

<Like being the curator at a Holocaust museum,> Clue said. <Be thankful I’ve locked and filed those memories away inside myself, kid. If you’d been able to access them, to re-live them as if they were your own, you would have spent your first years of life screaming. Then it would have gotten worse.>

“Worse??”

<You would have stopped.>

Harry felt like ice water had been poured into his gut and through all his veins. A baby, growing up reliving the horror show that was Tom Marvolo Riddle’s memories… the best result would have been a broken mind. The worst… a child with Voldemort’s knowledge and all human feeling burned out of it. He hastily tried to move the topic of conversation along before he got the staring horrors.

“So you grew into a whole new soul,” Harry ventured. Stuck in someone else’s body, Harry thought. A helpless passenger unable to do anything unless Harry let him. What a horrible existence.

Clue gave a negatory grunt. <I… don’t know. I don’t know WHAT I am, for certain. Whether I qualify as a whole person or just a fragment of human decency or even just a really active figment of imagination. But whatever I am, I decided pretty much immediately that we were stuck in this mess together, so I might as well make the best of it. You were my responsibility-- and anyway I wouldn’t have been able to live with myself if I’d let some kid suffer...> he trailed off.

Harry felt a surge of warm affection for the voice in his head, the friend, mentor and adviser that had been looking out for him so long. “Maybe we can fix this,” he said suddenly. “Riddle…
Voldemort… He figured out how to stick pieces of a soul into things. Maybe we can find a way to put you into a body of your own. A magical portrait, maybe, or a magical suit of armor… Dumbledore could help—"

<NO! No, not him,> Clue shouted inside his head so loudly Harry winced. “Not him, not ever him, Harry. We can’t trust him.”

Harry huffed. This was far from the first time the recalcitrant mental voice had expressed mistrust of the venerable Headmaster. At first Harry had just taken Clue at his word, but it was growing tiresome. “What? Why not?” Harry protested. “He’s Dumbledore—"

<Yes, he’s Dumbledore. And Dumbledore has an agenda for you. And I don’t think it’s for your good, either.>

That stopped Harry cold. Till now, Clue had been cryptic, almost as cryptic as Dumbledore himself, about what made him mistrust the man. “What do you mean?”

<Harry, pretty much every rotten bit of your life can be traced back to Dumbledore’s interference,> Clue said. <Right from the moment he played Ding Dong Ditch with you as a baby. And some of old Tommy boy’s memories tell me the old codger isn’t as benevolent as he lets on.>

“Old Tommy Boy might not be the best judge of character,” Harry growled, annoyed.

<Fine. Let’s review the little adventure we just went through, then. Let’s forget all the living portraits in the castle, and the ghosts, and the house elves, and the animated suits of armor, and all the OTHER pairs of eyes he’s got in Hogwarts that this giant sixty foot snake somehow avoided. Tommy Junior suspected the Castle’s defenses were blind to it thanks to Slytherin making the thing a part of the castle’s defenses, but still. Anyway, more important question: how likely is it that a hundred year old wizard-- the most powerful and knowledgeable wizard of the current age-- would fail to recognize the effects of a Basilisk attack? Something a schoolgirl found out in a library book?>

Harry’s mouth opened and closed. <Uh huh. Here’s some more to chew on. Why did he never evacuate the school? Not close it-- evacuate it. Call in the Unspeakables and scour the castle from top to bottom while the children are all someplace safe. The last time the Chamber opened, a girl DIED, Harry. Yet instead of leaving, he decided to act like a white chick in a cheap horror movie.>

<Let’s make it more personal. Isn’t it interesting that the “traps”--Harry could almost see the fingers etching quotation marks in the air-- protecting the Stone last year weren’t just weak enough for an eleven year old firstie to get past, but were all but tailor made for you, AND the ones in your circle of friends most likely to accompany you on a little misadventure? The Devils’ Snare for Neville. The flying keys for you. The chessboard for Ron. The logic puzzle for Hermione...>

“The troll for all three of us,” Harry murmured.

<--And the cerberus for anyone with a book knowledge of the legend of Orpheus,> Clue went on. <Hermione again… even if she wasn’t a bookworm with a classical name like that she was a shoo in to know it… or for that matter, anyone who held a conversation with Hagrid for more than five minutes> Clue added snarkily…< And of course a way to play a little bit of music. Like, say, someone with a wooden flute they got for Christmas?>

The wooden flute was in the pocket of Harry’s robe; he carried it with him everywhere, one of his
favorite mementos. It suddenly seemed to weigh ten stone.

<And consider who he has working for him even now.> Clue added as an aside.

Harry seethed a bit at the reminder. *Snape*. Courtesy of Clue Harry had known for years that the poisonous potions master had once been a Death Eater, and had been the one most directly responsible for fingerig his parents for death. He had spent the last year choking down that knowledge, chastised over and over again by Dumbledore’s words on the matter. “Dumbledore said he’d reformed, that he’d turned against—”

Clue’s snort was as loud as it was derisive. <By their fruits shall ye judge them,> he misquoted. <Spending every year since his ‘reform’ terrifying children? Tormenting the orphaned son of the woman he claimed to ‘love?’ Does that sound like a reformed man to you? No, Harry, Dumbledore doesn’t keep Severus around because the greasy git has seen the Light, he keeps him around because he’s *useful*. Just like he sees YOU as useful.>

<You’re a Horcrux, Harry. A weapon to use against Lord Voldemort.> The Old Coot’s scared to death the bad tempered little animated fart will find a way to get a body and return to life. If he had an inklign of an idea that I was in here, talking to you, guiding you, ‘influencing’ you-- he’d think I was taking you over like the diary nearly took over Ginny and he’d kill me in an instant, and kill *you* to do it. And then cry big crocodile tears over our lifeless corpse about how tragic it was but that it was for the Greater Good...> the sarcasm in Clue’s voice could have etched glass. It almost covered the fear.

That more than anything convinced Harry that Clue was telling the truth. “So what do we do?” He leaned against a nearby wall, the Sword of Griffindor still heavy in his hand.

<For now, we keep mum, like always.> Clue said seriously. <And we work on getting some allies. Preferably ones with skills… connections... and most importantly the sort neither the Old Coot nor Moldy Shorts would ever suspect.> His mental voice grew thoughtful, brooding.

“Like who?” Harry said irritably.

<Like a certain House Elf who’s going to owe us one hell of a favor.> Clue said suddenly.<Look.> Harry looked up; Just ahead, where the hallway intersected another, he saw Lucius Malfoy striding imperiously through, a very familiar gnomish figure scurrying along at his heels. <Quick, pull off your sock and get that diary out. We’re about to pull a fast one on old Luscious...>
“…So yeah, my life didn’t quite go as somebody planned,” the black-clad boy said as the train rattled along through the countryside. “Course, things rarely do. Story of my life and everyone else’s I guess. But I think you can relate, right?”

Harry’s two compartment companions said nothing. They were too busy sitting as rigidly as they possibly could, their eyes fixed on the legendary Boy-Who-Lived. He didn’t mind, well, not much. It was sort of understandable that they weren’t meeting his eyes— he was wearing tinted spectacles after all. The fact that they were staring at his fangs was a bit more bothersome.


Harry’s smile dropped (it seemed to help; they snapped out of their fugue once his fangs disappeared behind his frowning lips.) “Yeah, I think I already explained that,” he said, miffed. “Like I said. Vampire, since I was little more than a year old. I’m going to give the long version for those in the nosebleed seats, aren’t I.”

The two had entered the car at the beginning of the trip, finding it occupied only by a lone trunk, a folded umbrella hanging in the corner, and a tow-headed, black haired boy dressed to the nines in a jet black suit and, strangely for the heavily overcast day, wearing dark glasses. They had sat down, introduced themselves, and found themselves captive of their own horrified fascination as the strange boy introduced himself and they realized who…and WHAT… he was.

“How could they let something like that happen?” the frizzy-haired girl said. She was actually sounding a bit distraught, as if something she had relied on her whole life had betrayed her. Somewhere, somehow, The Proper Authorities had failed in their duties.

She couldn’t see it but he rolled his eyes at her. “Stupidity,” he said. “I mean, what would you expect? An evil wizard murders my parents. Every magical in the British Isles is out boogying down like Belushi because this tosser’s dead-- and not just wizards, either; this guy was a real jerk to everybody, “Light,” “Dark,” or “Other.” …Musta been something to see. Man, can those Worgen party…”

“Of course the Dark Tossers’s flunkies are out there too. So some genius,” he said with considerable scorn, “gets the idea to put me someplace “safe.” By playing Ding Dong Ditch and dumping me on a doorstep. In the dead of night. On HALLOWEEN NIGHT AT MIDNIGHT. IN THE MIDDLE OF A MONSTER JAMBOREE.” This was obviously a sore point; his voice had grown, somehow without shouting, to a volume that made the window shake, and there was a faint red glow briefly visible through his tinted spectacles. His two cabinmates shrank back against their seats.

His voice instantly dropped from the alarming timbre it had started to take back to normal. “And of course, one of Da’s more troublesome ghouls— a guy whose brain hadn’t quite made the transition with the rest of him—it happens; the metamorphosis sometimes pickles their brains and they go psycho, what’re you gonna do-- decides to slip his leash while he and Mama are out celebrating, and go looking for a snack. And looky looky, Baby in a Basket, his favorite.” He smirked and ran his fingers through his hair, briefly revealing the jagged scar that ran from his brow and up under the hairline, where a white streak grew through his hairline. “Mom and Pop caught up with him just as he’s sinking his choppers into my noggin.

“Someone up there must’ve been looking after me though, because when his teeth broke my scalp the Soul Curse the Dark Tossers infected me with burst out of my head and latched onto his face.”
He snickered, teeth gleaming. “Dad lets me replay the memory in his pensieve sometimes. Nearly peed myself laughing the first time I saw it.” He pantomimed someone rolling on the ground clawing at his face. “Aaaaagh get it off get it off!!”

The redhead… Ron, that was his name, sort of huffed, as if he didn’t know whether he wanted to laugh or scream. Harry decided to let it slide. “Aanyway, scratch one rebel ghoul. Of course I was messed up pretty bad, so Mom and Pop did the only thing they could do to save me—” he shrugged and tapped one overlong canine.

“And now you’re a vampire,” Ron repeated.

“Vampire Prince, actually,” Harold corrected him. “Prince Hadrian “call me Harry” Orlock-Potter of Old Wallachia.” He grinned, his fangs gleaming. “Mom was a soft touch, and she had been pining for a baby….” he shrugged and smiled. “So it all worked out. They swept me away to the old country and adopted me.

“And then they did a little digging and found out who I was… and wasn’t THAT a hair-pulling fiasco, my Dad always says. The Grand Mugwump of the Wizarding World was fit to be tied.” He chuckled. “Of course Dad says MOM was fit to be tied when she found out who was responsible for dumping me on a doorstep...or fit to tie the one responsible in a knot, one or the other.”

“Of course after all the Kung Fu fighting was done, the Ministry of Magic and my Dad had a compromise. My family keeps me, and we make a few trade concessions to amend for the ‘international mishap’ -- but I attend wizarding school here in Great Britain.” Harry shrugged. “A bit petty of them, but better than a feud.”

“SO, a Prince,” Hermione said carefully. “Of what exactly?”

“Pretty much every so-called ‘Dark’ creature in Moldava, Wallachia and Transylvania,” Harry said, waving his hand in a circle. “See, Old Wallachia is sort of like a sanctuary for ‘Dark’ or ‘Undecided’ magical races. The High Count-- that’s my Dad-- is sort of like the Minister of Magic, except for werewolves, vampires, hags, that sort of thing…. Even some creatures in neither camp.”

“Oh really?” Hermione sounded interested in spite of herself.

“Yeah, Old Wallachia’s crawling with ‘Dark’ or semi-Dark or Neutral or Dark-but-not-quite types…. but we prefer the term ‘Nightside,’ by the way. Remember that if you visit. It’s only polite.”

“And why’s that?” said Hermione, making a mental note to tell her parents to never, never, never EVER arrange for one of their little junkets anywhere in, near, or approximate to "Old Wallachia."

Harry smiled cheerily and shifted in his seat to a more comfortable position, obviously happy to expound on the topic. “You see, most of the creatures and stuff that Wizards label ‘Dark...’ It really doesn’t apply. Look, you got genuine Dark types like You-know-what-a-wanker-he-is. People and beings who are just evil and do horrible things because they like to and want to...or they have “dark urges” and don’t even try to resist them.

“But wizards don’t stop there. They call any being or creature Dark who’s the least bit dangerous, or just happens to give one of their politicians the heebie-jeebies. They call vampires “Dark” or “borderline Dark” because we drink blood to live. But do they call a lion “Dark” because it eats meat? Or a mosquito, for that matter? Yeah, hinkypunks grab people by the leg and drown them.
They’re animals, ambush predators; they do that to anything that wades into their pools! Does that make a crocodile “Dark”? Or a hippo?”

“A hippo?” Ron interrupted, his voice full of derision. He’d seen one of those things at a Muggle zoo once on a family outing; the groundskeeper had fed it a watermelon. He couldn’t imagine a less intimidating looking animal outside a flobberworm.

Harry gave him a wide, toothy grin. “Most dangerous animal in Africa,” he said. “It kills more humans than any other… ten times the number of people are killed by hippos than by crocodiles. Stay clear of the hippos, man, they got it in for you.”

“Bizarre,” Ron said, eyebrows raised.

“Yeah, but any wizard who labeled the fat goofy looking things ‘Dark’ would be laughed out of the Wizengamot, wouldn’t they?”

Ron chuckled. “Probably,”

“Yeah, well, they labeled us vampires as ‘Dark’ because we drink blood and because of a few bad eggs.” Harry’s smile faded away. “Wizards and Muggles eat mutton and roast chicken, and that’s just normal. I drink lamb’s blood and chicken’s blood fresh from the butcher, and I’m a monster. How’s that fair?”

“And, you know, sometimes some ‘Dark’ creatures just sort of happen,” he went on. “Like ghosts. Or zombies. Or ghasts… go to sleep someplace with a lot of magic boiling around, kakk it in the middle of the night and wake up as a specter. Or fall in a cursed pool, climb out as a swamp monster. Or end up like werewolves, who are just poor unlucky tossers with a disease. Those guys need someone to throw their weight behind ‘em’, so that’s what the vampire clans do.” He grinned again. “Wizards think they’re all that, but a thousand-year-old vampire aristocracy isn’t so easy to push around.”

“When you say Dark, you should mean genuinely evil— not just complicated or inconvenient.

“aAAaanyway, enough vampire politics. Guess I spend too much time listening to Count Dad rant about his job.”

“What happened to the guy—”

“Ghoul.”

“The ghoul that attacked you?” Ron couldn’t help asking.

“Beheaded.” His tone was blithe and his smile feral enough to give sharks nightmares. “Beheaded, burned and buried in salt. We gotta police ourselves hard if we want to keep living peacefully with all the Dayside types, so Pop pop doesn’t put up with Nightside creatures going off the rails. And he’s big on preventing recidivism.” His face lit up. “Hey, you wanna see the Soul Curse that came outta my head?” He reached under his cloak and fished around under his shirt collar. “They gave it to me as a memento.”

“Really?” Ron leaned forward, curious.

Hermione leaned in the opposite direction. She preferred her knowledge to come out of books, not come leaping out of the shadows at her in person. “No, that’s not really—”

“Here, check it out!” Harry held up what looked like an unbreakable glass vial on a chain. Inside something black and liquid writhed around in a nauseating fashion. “Gen-u-wine chunk-o-Dark-
Wizard. Patent pending. Watch what it does when you squeeze it.” He clutched the bottle in his fist. The black thing inside thrashed wildly and let out a high, thin, ear-piercing scream.

“Screeeeeee…."

Before either saucer-eyed child could express their appreciation of the vampire princes’ choice in mementos, he looked over at the door, his ears perked up. “Oh, hey, the snack lady’s coming! You guys want anything? My treat!”

Childish gluttony is a marvelous equalizer. Several minutes and more than a few galleons later, the three were all sitting in the midst of a pile of wrappers and feeling FAR more copacetic. Even Hermione, who had the shadow of two overweening dentist parents hanging over her, had finally been persuaded into indulging. “Really, Hermione,” Harry said as she dithered over whether to try a cauldron cake or a chocolate frog. “You think wizards haven’t figured out how to enchant candy to prevent tooth decay?”

“Really?” Hermione had asked skeptically.

“Cross my heart and hope to put a stake in it,” Harry said. “Trust me, vampires are kind of big on dental hygiene.” He tapped one fang by way of explanation.

“I thought vampires only drank blood,” Ron said around a mouthful of licorice wand.

Harry shook his head. “Nah, we eat regular food too, Doesn’t do much for us though… well, except for certain things with the right essence of vitality. Milk, orange juice, chocolate…” He popped a chocolate frog in his mouth. “Fact is, chocolate acts like a blood substitute for us. Cuts the cravings.”

Hermione scowled. “Oh now you’re just pulling our legs.”

Harry nodded. “Why do you think the ancient Aztecs valued it so highly? They used it to buy off the vampires, that’s what. And why do you think reports of vampire sightings dropped off so much after the eighteen hundreds?”

“Most of the books I read attribute it to the rise of photography,” Hermione said cynically.

“More like the invention of milk chocolate,” Harry said. “Milton Hershey is a national hero in Old Wallachia.”

“But milk chocolate was invented by Daniel Peter and Henri Nestle’,” Hermione said. It was an odd bit of trivia to know, but Hermione read everything. Even candy bar wrappers.

Harry actually shuddered. “Brr. Don’t mention Nestle’,” he said. “If you knew what that evil old goat and his company get up to, you’d never touch a Nestle’ bar again. Lord knows I won’t.” Hermione gaped at him. Harry clarified. “Poisoned babies, water tables drained, third world slave labor… and that’s just the muggle-side stuff. You really don’t want to know what that warlock and his company get up to when the doors are locked and the werewolf guards chase the muggle employees out. It ain’t just the chocolate in his factory that’s Dark.”
Hermione continued to stare at him. An evil chocolate factory? What?? “Oh, company,” Harry said, derailing her already stalled-out train of thought. Harry waved his hand and the compartment door slid open on its own; outside stood a round-faced boy, his hand just raised to knock. “Yes? Can we help you?”

The boy paused, stammered, and started again. “Uh, hullo. I’m Neville… L-Longbottom. Have any of you seen a toad? Mine wandered off…” his voice faded out as he caught glimpse of Harry’s smiling face for the first time. His eyes went round as he took in the fangs.

Ron shook his head. “No, I’m afraid not,” Hermione said.

“Can’t say I have, either,” Harry said. “Wait- I just thought of something, hold on, let me ask--” there was a large umbrella hanging from the rail next to him; he leaned over and poked at it. “Hello, wake up! Got a question--”

It was a close bet as to which of the other three screamed the highest when the “umbrella” moved, squirmed, and opened up its webbed wings. A furred, foxlike head with enormous lamplike eyes made its appearance, its toothy maw gaping wide as it yawned. The three children screamed and all but climbed up the walls of the compartment; it looked like Neville wanted to bolt down the corridor but was too frozen in terror to leave the doorway. The creature squawked, discomfited by the sudden noise.

“What???” Harry looked up to see his classmates standing on their seats and doing their best to climb up the walls with their buttocks. “Oh, honestly, what’s all this?”

“That’s what I wanna know, mate,” Ron said, pointing at what was now obviously an enormous bat hanging upside down from the luggage rack.

“I thought it was an umbrella,” Hermione said weakly.

Harry snorted in amusement. “Sorry, I should’ve said something, I guess-- this is Lurch, my pet bat. A giant golden-crowned flying fox, to be precise.” There was a touch of pride in his voice.

“I-it it’s nearly as big as a real fox,” Neville squeaked.

“It’s nearly as big as a real fox,” Hermione said weakly.

“Hence the term “giant”,” Harry quipped. “Oh calm down you lot, Lurch is harmless.”

“Do tell,” Ron said dryly as he carefully lowered himself back down to his seat.

“He’s a fruit bat, Ron,” Harry snorted. “He’s only a threat to you if you’re a banana.”

“I must say he’s rather intimidating all the same,” Hermione said with a nervous laugh as she carefully sat down. “But why on earth are you bringing him to school?”

“He’s my pet,” Harry said as if that explained everything. “Besides, I needed something to deliver my mail and owls aren’t my thing. I’m used to using bats back home. Better night delivery rates.” He grinned toothily at his own joke.

“But why a great brute like that?” Ron said. Lurch snorted and blew a raspberry.

“And any of the smaller bats and there was a danger one of your owls might mistake him for a snack,” Harry said. He turned to Lurch. “So how about it? Seen any toads lately?” Lurch made a series of squeaking, chirping and grunting noises. “He sneaked in while I was at the loo?” Lurch nodded.

“You can talk to him?”
“And most other creepy crawlies,” Harry said. “It’s a vampire thing. Though I’m generally better with snakes for some reason… okay you said “Check my boot?” Lurch squeaked. “All right then…” Harry reached over and grabbed a pair of rubber wellingtons that had been on the floor next to the bat’s head. First one, then the other, was tipped up over the floor; with a thump and a croak an enormous toad with a rather wall-eyed expression on what passed for its face made its appearance.

“Trevor!” Neville said happily. He scooped the toad up, his relief obvious.

Harry shrugged. “Sorry about that, Longbottom,” he said with an apologetic smile. “It’s a vampire thing. We kind of attract creepy crawlies for some reason-- toads, snakes, bats--” Lurch squeaked- "bugs, rats… it’s a good thing we can talk to ‘em, tell ‘em to bugger off when we don’t want them scurrying around our feet.”

Ron “hmmed” and poked at the scruffy rat sleeping in his pocket. “Doesn’t seem to be working on Scabbers,” he noted. “Probably too lazy to care.”

Harry stared at the rat for a long moment, frowning. Then he shrugged and looked away with a shrugs. “Eh, rodents gonna rodent,” he said dismissively. “Not like I’m trying to command him or anything.”

“Heh. Too bad you can’t command Trevor to stop wandering off,” Neville said, the corner of his mouth twitching into a smile.

Harry sat up straight. “What? You doubt my power, mortal?” he said in mock outrage. “I am Hadrian Orlock-Potter, first childe of Count Orlock, and prince of Old Wallachia! All the creeping things of the earth are mine to command!”

“He’s more of a hopping thing of the earth, though,” Ron said, rubbing his chin in pretend skepticism.

“Hah! I’ll show you all. Give me the toad!” Neville dropped Trevor into Harry’s outstretched hands. Harry whipped off his tinted glasses; Hermione stifled a gasp as he revealed his eyes for the first time. The irises were a beautiful, almost gem-like green, but the sclera were a brilliant, bloody red. Harry held the toad up to eye level and glared into its eyes. Trevor stared back with all the sharpness of a stunned herring.

“Behold, I shall now exercise the arts of the mind, the powers of Occlumency and Legilimency, to make this creature into your obedient servant!” His eye-glow actually grew sharper and brighter. “Obey me, Trever the Toad, Obey me!”

Trevor looked, if anything, decidedly unimpressed.

Hermione smothered her giggles. “Is that really even going to work?” she asked.

“Of course,” Harry said without breaking the gaze he had sort of locked with Trevor. “It is now a battle of wills between us. But in the end, the more powerful of our two minds shall overcome….” he trailed off into silence. The silence stretched for half a minute. Then a minute. Then a minute and a half…

“Harry?” Ron said worriedly.

Harry puffed out his cheeks. “Brrroooooarrrrrk,” he said.

All three children folded up laughing. Even Harry was bent double, his facade cracking when Hermione slid out of her seat and hit the floor. “Sorry, Longbottom.” he said, handing the toad
back. “Looks like your frog is stuck on factory setting.” He gave Trevor a mock kowtow. “All Hail Hypnotoad...”

Neville grinned. He WAS a vampire (and wasn’t Gran going to have a tizzy about that!) and strange even without that, and Neville wasn’t quite sure he understood some of the jokes he was making, but… he hesitated, then stuck out his hand. “Call me Neville.”

Harry shook it and gave him a glistening grin. “Harry.” He waved at the compartment. “Come on in and take a seat. Have a chocolate frog... at least they won’t hop too fast to catch.”

“Hah, hah...”

“Want a candied fruit, Lurch?”

Idle chatter between the four filled the long train ride. Eventually though the chatter (and shocking surprises) settled down, and each found something to while away the hours while the conversation lulled) “So why did you name him Lurch?” Ron eventually asked as he flipped through the chocolate frog cards. None of the others collected, so he’d gotten quite the haul.

“It’s from his favorite classic television show,” Harry said idly, not looking up from the tiny flickering screen in his hands, his thumbs working the controls.

“You have television?” Hermione said, while the other two muttered “what’s television?” and shrugged.

“Yup. Satellite TV. And cable. And broadband internet…” the tiny box in his hands booped and bleeped. “Vampires don’t sleep much, and we sleep less the older we get. So we gotta fill up those hours with something. For Great-Grandpa? Lots and lots and looooooots of bad late nite movies. I thought he was going to rupture something the first time he saw ‘Blackula.’ “

“Made him mad, I suspect,” Hermione said.

“Laughed his ass off,” Harry corrected her, still without looking up. “It’s his favorite VHS tape. Cheesy vampire movies, tapes of cartoons like Duckula, Count Chocula boxes, cheap halloween costumes… he collects all that stuff. Sort of a cross between a hobby and an in-joke, I guess.” He shrugged. “Like I said, gotta do something with all that time. Dad would go nuts without his wide-screen and his Everquest account.” His thumbs wiggled and the box in his hands went SQUACK.

“I get by with my Gameboy though.”

Hermione gave him a know-it-all look over the book she’d been reading. “Well I hope you can do without it,” she said smugly. “Muggle technology doesn’t work at Hogwarts. There’s too much magic in the air in the Wizarding World for those things.”

Harry looked up over his glasses at her and gave her a knowing smirk. “Oh really?” he said. “Sure of that, are we?”

Hermione frowned. She didn’t like having her knowledge questioned. “It’s a well known fact,” she said.
“Then why isn’t London in a perpetual blackout?” Harry pointed out, his smile widening. “It’s got Diagon Alley running right through it, and the Ministry of Magic—along with the Department of Mysteries itself—smack dab in the middle of it, right underneath the streets! Even Hogwarts isn’t THAT magical, yet Jolly old London Town is ticking along just fine.”

“But...” Hermione’s brow furrowed as she tried to reconcile the facts as they were, with the facts as they were printed in a book. “But it’s true; my digital watch stopped working the moment I walked onto Platform 9 ¾.”

“Well yeah, but things like digital watches and microchips are fidgety things anyway,” Harry pointed out. “And you dragged it right through the middle of a powerful magical illusion. Small surprise it fritzed out something that could be fragged by getting too near a refrigerator magnet.” Hermione huffed but didn’t retort. “Most ‘muggle technology’ works just fine around magic. And for the stuff that doesn’t... well, that’s part of why the Ministry of Magic is willing to bend over backwards for Old Wallachia.”

“What do you mean?” she said. Ron and Neville, their curiosities piqued, scooted around so they could see what Harry was doing with the tiny box in his hands. They were immediately entranced by whatever they saw on the screen.

“We have hundreds of Sons of Ether living in the Old Country,” Harry said. “It’s a fraternity of... well, think ‘mad scientists...’ like right off the telly, no lie. Dad has one on staff; he has a lab in the castle. It’s really awesome: Lightning machines, plasma generators, ooghy things in giant glass vats, the whole nine yards. It’s really cool. Anyway, one of the things the Sons of Ether specialize in is making muggle technology and magic--they call it ‘poly aetheric Morphic Resonance Manipulation’ by the way---work side by side and play nice with each other. Oh the old fuddy-duddies in the Ministry are throwing a fit and making up nonsense about ‘misuse of Muggle’ whatis, but the smart ones are licking their chops at the thought of marketing upscale Muggle electronics to British wizards.” He held up the box so Hermione could see it properly. “And of course, since they need field tested, I get to play with some of the shiny toys Dad is trying to trade.”

“Is that a Game Boy?” She marveled. She’d recognized it immediately…. Though as for that she didn’t recall any model of GameBoy having a wooden case, or brass fittings or glowing vacuum tubes or any of the other odd victorian-esque kibble stuck to it.

“Yup,” Harry said smugly. “With a few post-production add-ons, of course, courtesy of the Doc.” He held it out in his hand, screen turned towards her. She could see a backlit Mario running through his opening screen antics. “One of a kind, first-run prototype. It cost over five hundred galleons...”

“Five hundred galleons?” Ron yelped. “What does it do, grant wishes??”

“It plays games, Ron,” Harry laughed. “Not just arcade games. Table Tennis, card games, puzzle games, chess...” Ron perked up at the mention of chess. “And it even has full color and an illuminated screen... even the muggles don’t have that yet--”

Before he could finish extolling the virtues of his Mad Science electronic toy, the sliding door to the compartment was suddenly slammed open. It was the worst of luck; Harry was still holding the GameBoy out in one hand by his fingertips, and the doorhandle clipped one corner at just the right angle to send it flying out of his grip. It tumbled to the floor and struck with a resounding CRACK, and the little glowing screen went dark.

Everyone, including Harry, froze, staring at the crack across the device’s darkened screen. Neville was stunned, Hermione was appalled, and Ron looked like he was having a heart attack. And
Harry stood three boys. One was a thin, haughty looking boy with slicked-back blonde hair and a sharp, ferret-like face. The other two were large, lumpish, and sported dark burr cuts on their squarish heads. “Are you Harry Potter?” the blonde boy said without introduction. “I was told he was on this car of the train...”

Harry didn’t look up from his deceased GameBoy. “That was a custom made, one of a kind, Five HUNDRED Galleon, GameBoy Deucalion,” he said in a monotone. He let out a sigh and with great deliberation slid back in his seat, put one leg over the other, folded his hands on his knee, and gave the blonde boy the biggest smile he could manage. “So, what the HECK can I do for YOU?” he said jovially.

The other Hogwarts students-to-be in the carriage were now frozen for an entirely different reason. Every eye was riveted on the Heir of Wallachia.

Draco Malfoy hesitated. For the briefest of moments he imagined he’d committed a terrible--something told him potentially fatal--faux pas. But whatever the trinket was on the floor, the boy he was looking at seemed to have dismissed it from his thoughts. Draco gave a mental shrug; not his fault if whoever-they-were wasn’t careful with their trinkets. He held out his hand. “My name is Draco Malfoy, scion of the House of Malfoy. This is Crabbe, and Goyle---”

“And I’m Carmen Sandiego. Guess where I am!” Harry beamed.

“...What?” Draco stared, hand still held out. The frizzy haired girl let out an explosive snort. She quickly smothered it when Draco glared at her. He shook it off. “I assume I’m speaking to Harry Potter, Hadrian Orlock-Potter of Old Wallachia?” He said with the slightest of bows.

“Suuup?” Harry flipped him a salute.

Draco suppressed a twitch. “I’ve heard many things about you, Potter,” Draco said, smiling insincerely and slathering his voice with admiration like treacle. “I’m quite the admirer, actually. We’ve all heard your story... The Boy Who Lived. The Prince of Wallachia. The Childe with one foot in the Light, one foot in the Dark--”

“Oh baby baby,” Harry suddenly moaned, his face deadpan. “Oh yeah, work it--”

Draco gaped in shock. “Excuse you??”

Harry’s eyebrows went up and he smiled brightly. “Oh, I’m sorry. I just figured you were trying so hard for it, I should at least try to fake it for you.”

Draco pulled himself together. “Perhaps I should get to the point...”

“As I’m sure you know, my father, Lucius Malfoy...”

“Your dad’s name is Luscious?” Harry’s grin only got wider and sharper. "Bet that goes over well at the pub."

Draco tamped down on his temper. “Lucius!...Ahem. My father has a seat on the Wizengamot,”
he said. “He also has many political connections, including the Minister of Magic himself… the sort of men your father would like an ‘in’ with?” He held out his hand again. “If we stick together, we could be a big help to both our families… I can help you out, too. Keep you from getting tangled up with the wrong sort.”

“The wrong sort, is it?” Ron said. His voice was low and just a touch dangerous.

Draco looked at him, contemptuous. “Let’s see, red hair, shabby robes, slightly vacant expression… a Weasley if I’m not mistaken. A family of blood traitors who dug themselves into a hole and never came back out.” Ron’s ears flamed red and opened his mouth, but Draco was already moving on. “And Neville Longbottom. The Longbottoms used to be something… till their heir ended up in the St. Mungo’s loony bin and left nothing behind but a doddering old grandmother and their near Squib of a son.” Neville had seemed to swell up at the insult, but had quickly shrunken back in on himself when the words “Squib of a son.”

“And…” Draco’s glance quickly swept over Hermione, her possessions and garb. “A Muggleborn, obviously,” he said, his voice dripping with scorn bordering on disgust. He was confident of his guess; only a muggleborn would carry one of those pack-bag… back-pack?… Things with them on the Hogwarts Express. Especially one covered with ridiculous Muggle stickers and labels…. And the uncomfortable look on her face clinched it. He turned away from them in obvious dismissal and back to Harry. “These sorts will only drag you down. I can help you with that, show you to the RIGHT kind of people—"

“The Nineteen Ninety Chudley cannons, HUZZAAAH!” Harry said, waving an imaginary pair of pom poms around. Immediately the other three children lost their discomfited expressions and exploded into snorts, smothered snickers and in Ron’s case open laughter.

“I’m trying to have a serious conversation here,” Draco seethed, glaring at the ones laughing and grinding his teeth.

“And so am I!” Harry said. Something in his voice snapped everyone’s attention back to him. His face fell.

“And I’m failing.

“And I’m sorry for that.

“It’s just that I’m so agitated right now.” His smile, already toothsome, returned. Only morphed into something… carnivorous. “Because just a moment ago this blonde little shit and his two no-neck friends—” here he paused to slap Crabbe’s hand away where he’d been rifling through the remains of their stash of candy—“ barged into my train compartment, insulted MY FRIENDS, destroyed my one-of-a-kind, FIVE HUNDRED GALLEON GameBoy, and is now trying to impress me and demand my attention like I’m his alcoholic father.” Draco’s eyes nearly bulged out of their sockets. Even Crabbe and Goyle went a little round-eyed.


That did it. Draco’s expression went from gawping disbelief to sputtering rage. He whipped his wand out of the sleeve of his robe— only to come up short as the tip of Harry’s wand was now pressed against his forehead, right between his eyebrows. There had been no transition, no sign of motion; the vampire Childe had gone instantly from lounging casually in his seat to standing, his wand arm extended and the red, smoldering tip of his wand brushing the skin between’s Draco’s eyebrows. And Harry’s fang-edged grin hadn’t changed. “Be a sport and go grab Daddy another
pumpkin juice off the cart, would you?” That said he planted his booted foot square in Draco’s chest, and shoved, ramming the skinny blonde boy back into the chests of his flunkies. Draco and his two would-be muscle sailed out the door and hit the opposite wall with a thump.

After several seconds of flailing about Draco got to his feet. “When my father hears about this--!”

“He’ll what, cuddle his Voldemort body pillow and cry himself to sleep?” Harry said. He made a sweeping motion with his hand. Draco, Crabbe and Goyle’s robes flipped up and wrapped around their heads and they were sent stumbling down the hallway. “BEAT it, doofus!” Harry's eyes glowed bright enough to be visible through his tinted glasses.

Draco decided that discretion was the better part of valor-- or at least, he didn’t resist when his two lunkish bodyguards grabbed him by the elbows and dragged him off down the hall at a stumbling, blindfolded run.

Harry stood there for a moment, looking down the direction they’d run. “Bluh, bluh bluh BLUH,” he muttered, flapping his arms. He turned around and went back into the compartment and slammed the door, latching it behind him…. Before sinking to the floor, howling with laughter.

The others stared at him, discombobulated, as he hooted, his fanged mouth a gaping hole. He composed himself for a moment, wiping tears from his eyes, and saw them staring. “Would you believe I’ve been waiting my whole life for an opportunity to use that speech?” he wheezed.

Ron looked at Hermione while their vampire friend cackled. “It’s gonna be an interesting seven years,” he said.
He floated, inert, aware but without any measurable sensation. No sight, sound, scent, texture. He couldn’t even feel his own anatomy; his proprioception was completely gone. He couldn’t even tell if he had arms or legs anymore. He was an amorphous shape, if that, housing a spark of consciousness.

Hello, Adrian.

“What? Who’s there?” he said in alarm. Even as he spoke he felt a surge of satisfaction that he could speak.

Allow me to introduce myself. I am…. The voice paused, as if searching for words. I suppose an approximation of my name is necessary, your language sort of lacks the nuances for my full name. Call me… hmm… call me Agent.

“Agent… right.” That wasn’t a comforting nomenclature, all things considered. “Where am I? Why can’t I see?”

To answer the latter first, you are in a semi-amorphous state which has, er, left you without sensory apparatus for your environment. You sense nothing because you have nothing at the moment to sense it with. Agent sounded a little embarrassed at this. I apologize, I’m sure it’s not comfortable. But you really don’t have any sensory approximates for the environment you are currently in; you wouldn’t understand what you were “seeing” if you could...

Here, let me adjust a few things. The ‘nothingness’ faded… or rather Something faded in: a misty, featureless plain under a twilit sky. Adrian found himself looking at/addressing/facing a soft misty cloud of light hovering over that plain; he realized in the next moment that he himself was an identical cloud of light— though how he could tell he couldn’t say; he certainly couldn’t crane his neck to look himself over. There, I hope that’s better. It’s all illusory but at least it gives you an avatar of sorts to communicate with.

“Yeah, great.” Why wasn’t he panicking? Wait. No adrenal glands, no fight-or-flight response. Of course. Interestingly enough he was still capable of getting agitated at his situation. “Okay. So my first question? Where the heck AM I? And let me throw in “WHY” while I’m at it?”

You are in my native environment. An existential plane. Call it the Between.

“Between what?”

Everything.

That gave him pause, for sure.

As to what or who I am, I am an extradimensional hyper-advanced… though “advanced” isn’t quite the right term… well, you’d call me a “cosmic entity.” And I have brought you here because I wish to make a deal.

“A… deal?”

An agreement, yes, an exchange of services.

And that kicked Adrian’s bump of skepticism right in. Cosmic beings snapping up random individuals and offering them deals… superhuman powers, or magic green rings, for example… it
was a cliche’ in ninety percent of the fanfics he’d read. And more than a couple he’d written.

*Yes, you are familiar with the concept.*

Adrian squinted suspiciously, or at least thought really hard about squinting suspiciously at the amorphous cloud of light before him. “Okay, why me?”

*Why not you?* Agent pointed out reasonably. *You are well within acceptable averages for the necessary attributes. At the very least, you are familiar with the concept, and seemed agreeably inclined to the idea. Missing fight-or-flight glands or no, you would be surprised at the percentage of three-dimensional entities such as yourself who would go into either screaming hysterics or a catatonic fugue by this point.*

Adrian gave a mental snort. At least it wasn’t trying to pass him off as “the Chosen One” or the like. If this was a dream or a hallucination it wasn’t offending his literary sensibilities yet, at least. Of course if he was lying in a hospital drugged to the hairline then all this was coming from his own mind, so it wouldn’t seem excessively ridiculous then either would it? “SO… this deal?”

*Let me begin at the beginning. As you can guess I am not the only one of my kind. We live in the interstices between the universes and planes of reality. We’re timeless, eternal, immortal, vastly powerful… and rather BORED.*

Ah, here it comes, Adrian thought. The old Bored Cosmic Entity Wants to Play routine. Poker Night of the Gods. Oh well, there were worse cliches.

*To alleviate our ennui, we organized a series of contests and games. Each round, every participant-- each Agent-- chooses an Avatar from the more finite races, such as yourself, from one of the three dimensional universes. We spend… I’m picking up the word “quatloos” from your mind?… ah, no, a better word there off to the side in your vocabulary, “chips.” Yes, a limited pool of points or “chips” on empowering and equipping the Avatar. Then we place them in a different universe, with a stated mission. If they succeed, they are rewarded, and their Agent moves up in the next round and chooses a new Avatar.*

“And if they fail?”

*Then the Agent is moved down in ranking.*

“And the Avatar?*

Agent seemed reticent. *There is no punishment for failure. We do not work like that. But the missions assigned are often… hazardous. The consequences for failure are… self-explanatory.*

“Uh… huh.” So it was pass or fail, with a probably lethal “fail” option.

*You must understand something, Adrian. Our “game” is about creating and endowing HEROES. The quests they are set on are consequent… to save a person, a family, a tribe, a nation, a world, from some imminent catastrophe. To battle an evil empire, or an overlord, or an alien horde… or just to fight for a humble cause. Any and all of those are dangerous pursuits in places of crisis, even for those endowed with extraordinary gifts they are dangerous. Failure is often fatal.*

“Kind of high stakes for a GAME,” Adrian said.

*We wish to make the universes a better place,* Agent replied. *You can’t do that playing tiddly winks.*

“Well, why don’t you go into these, these places in crisis and intervene yourself?”
Agent gave what had to be the approximation of a heaving sigh. Adrian, we are a race of super-advanced cosmic entities. We number in the trillions. Does it not follow that we have powers, governances, authorities, laws, codes of conduct that restrain us as well? Our civilization is so complex and intricate it makes the operation of your own world’s governments look like the internal politicking of an aboriginal tribe over who gets the biggest share of animal pelts. It would take years to explain the codes of conduct that restrict our behavior interacting with the baryonic, euclidean universes, and most of it still wouldn’t make sense to you. He grumbled a bit. They often don’t make sense to us.

The Game is, for reasons too complex for you to fathom, one of the few legal, safe, legitimate ways in which we can intervene with the fates of other worlds, even for their own good. Because in part it places the power in the hands of mere mortals to determine their fates themselves. It’s THE RULES.

There’s a world out there where somebody’s in trouble. I am asking you to help me, to help them, and to help yourself. Will you accept?

“My reward?” he asked.

Your primary choice of reward will be: You will be returned home… or allowed to make your home in your new universe… or even pick a third… in any regard, with all your powers intact. There are other, lesser options, but those are the prime rate ones.

Adrian thought it over. Great power. Be a hero. But risking it all… maybe even his life. No guarantee of success, and who knows how much suffering and hardship.

But wasn’t that what made the effort worthwhile.

“I accept.”

He could feel Agent practically beaming with satisfaction. Excellent. The contract is sealed, let us begin. The planescape swirled dizzyingly, and Adrian found himself hovering before a massive, and very familiar opening screen.

WORLD OF WARCRAFT

Begin Character Creation

“I’m going to AZEROTH?” He yelped. No way in hell… it was his favorite online game ever, but that world and its lore were messed up three ways from Sunday, and it had at least a dozen Doomsday scenarios waiting in the wings to do it in at any given moment, with Lovecraftian Old Gods being the LOWEST ranked world-ending threats. If the literal armies of superhuman wizards, warriors, paladins and whatnot couldn’t handle it, adding one more dink with a plus-one sword to the mess would do nothing. Agent would just end up with his Avatar a greasy stain on an ogre’s foot.

No, absolutely not.

Adrian sighed in relief.

You’re getting your power set from there.

“What?” Okay, that was better. A guy with a World of Warcraft character’s powers and skills could hold up fairly well in most “fictional” universes he could think of…. “Wait. Where AM I going? That’s sort of an important question before I pick my powers.”
There was a sound of shuffling papers. According to the Rules, I’m not permitted to tell you your destination, if at all, until AFTER you have selected your powerset. Of all the… Agent grumbled a bit. Sorry.

“Not your fault I suppose,” Adrian said. “Still, it makes this a bit dicier.” He flipped through the options— he had hands!— and watched as the screen flickered between races, classes, appearances… he suddenly had a twinge of paranoia. “Hey, uh—”

Look, I’m not some Jerkass Genie, Adrian. I’m not going to trick you into becoming a woman, or turning into a black man and drop you into the middle of a Nazi rally. I want to win this as badly as you do, so I’m going to do everything to make sure you get the best deal possible.

“Right. Sorry,” Adrian apologized. He looked over at the amorphous light next to him. “You know you’re sounding a lot more human than when this conversation started.”

A cosmic entity with nigh infinite resources and control over time and space, learning things quickly. Imagine that.

“Touche.” Chagrined, Adrian turned back to the screen and proceeded with his dicey choice.

If it helps, most of the… limitations, I’d suppose you’d call them… on the various races, classes and such you recall from the game are not in effect. Those are the products of gameplay—programmers putting in things for the sake of design and balance, not the actuality of how such powers work in Azeroth.

“Really.”

Yes. Think, do you think in real life that a gnome would run as fast as human? Or a human would be as physically strong as an orc? Or that a worgen, after the cutscreen, is suddenly unable to claw or bite anymore? Many of the limitations found in gameplay, you can disregard.

“Well you’d better baby-walk me through it then. I don’t want to miss an advantage I overlooked because some programming doink in Blizzard thought it wouldn’t make for good ‘game balance.’ “

Very well. Oh, and you’ll be starting out at maximum level, so to speak. So don’t worry about learning curves for skills or talents.

“Oooh, nice.” Adrian mulled over the screen. He hemmed and hawed, but the choice was inevitable. “Species: Worgen.” he clicked.

May I ask your reasoning why? Agent was looking more and more humanoid; he tipped his ersatz eyeglasses in Adrian’s direction.

“Innate abilities. Stronger than human, faster, quadrupedal locomotion, natural weapons, and going by the cut scenes, incredible leaping and climbing ability. The ability to change back and forth to a human form means an instant disguise option, too. Even a baseline worgen will be pretty kickass.” Adrian shrugged his ghostly shoulders. “Plus worgen are cool.”

A good choice, and good reasoning. Two notes: contrary to game lore, your worgen “curse” is not contagious. It is innately genetic. As if the elves would be so foolish as to leave INTELLIGENT werewolves with a contagious curse, he muttered in an aside. All it would take is one contagious sociopath and Azeroth would end up like the final reel of the Omega Man...

This does however mean that your Worgen form is your default form, the human one is essentially
a shapeshifted disguise. If you violently lose consciousness -- say you are drugged or concussed-- you will revert.

“Yeah, important safety note. Thanks.”

Agent waved his hand. The screen filled with a side-by-side image: to the left, a young, dark haired, athletic man, caucasian with some hints of something exotic, about sixteen or so if Adrian judged correctly. To the right, a black-furred wolf-man, sleek and deadly. “So that’s me?” Adrian asked.

Yes. Acceptable?

“Better believe it. I haven’t had abs like that since never.”

And now… class?

Adrian looked over the screen. “Druid.” He clicked. The two figures were now carrying staves and wearing Celtic-looking robes… an odd change from the original game’s raven-wing-shoulder “druid look,” but he could roll with it.

Ah. And again, why this and not any of the others?

Adrian had the strangest suspicion that Agent already knew why, and it pleased him. “Flexibility. Dunno where I’m going, so I’d better pick the one with the most options. Multiple forms for land, sea and air, and they can opt for melee, ranged attack, defensive, stealth or support. I figure whatever you hit me with, a Warcraft druid will have an option that can cope with it.”

Agent nodded. Definitely pleased. Coincidentally, you get all the druid forms. Another little plus I spent chips on.

“Even the owl and the treant?”

Even the owl and the treant. And now for skills-- or crafts, professions, however you might call it. Coincidentally, you get all the gathering skills as a freebie, regardless. Along with fishing, cooking, first aid, and archaeology. He peered at the screen, seeming to squint. What an odd amalgamation of skills, he noted.

“Engineer,” Adrian said without hesitation, clicking the appropriate box. “And Enchanting.”

Be warned, the skills won’t work like they do in the game, Agent said. You won’t be able to take a handful of copper bolts and some sheepskin and make a helicopter. And some of the materials needed, while they do exist-- you will find creating or finding the more exotic ones to be difficult.

“I didn’t figure they’d have bars of Adamantine down at the corner drugstore,” Adrian said. “But I figure that at the very worst most of the skills and knowledge in Engineering would apply in the real world-- er, my real world-- as to be useful anyway.”

And enchanting?

Adrian grinned. “You basically admitted that it worked just fine on Azeroth. I figure wherever I’m going has to be similar enough to both Azeroth and my own reality to make it work and for me to be functional.”

Agent cocked an eyebrow. Yes, his appearance was coming right along. Clever boy. It is true: all three universes operate under the same thirteen cosmic forces as every other. Still, you may find it difficult to obtain ingredients like Strange Dust and Astral Essence, even with your Disenchanting
“And ain’t it interesting how many Engineering projects can be ‘disenchant’ for ingredients?” Adrian grinned even wider. He paused. “Thirteen forces? I thought there were only four.”

Agent’s head was still only a blank white shape, but Adrian got the distinct impression of a knowing smirk. *So young and so much to learn.*

Adrian shrugged that off. “Anyway, Alchemy would be even dicier about ingredients… I mean, when the nearest source for peacebloom is Azeroth, it’s a bad idea to take Alchemy as a profession. Besides which people are antsy about taking “home remedies” someone whipped up with back yard plants. Tailoring is too limited, as is leatherworking… even the toughest armor you can make from those is like tissue paper next to chain or plate. Blacksmithing? You could make a Venn diagram of the “mining” skill-- which includes smelting, making ores and other metallurgy-- and engineering, and the overlap would be Blacksmithing.

“Plus Enchanting and Engineering come with their own salvaging skills, in addition to the three basics.”

Agent smiled--- the mouth suddenly appearing on that blank bespectacled face was a touch alarming. *Very good. Very very good. You might just stand a chance.* He gestured to the screen.

*And now a name?* The blank box blinked, waiting for an answer.

Adrian only hesitated a moment. “Bayleaf.” He looked at Agent. “My old World of Warcraft handle.” he shrugged. “It’s also a healing herb. I considered “WarCrafter,” but that sounded too… aggressive. I want people to know I’m not just there to run around getting in fights-- I’m there to help.”

Agent nodded. *Done and done.* The choices on the giant screen vanished, leaving the worgen character standing in a battle ready pose. Below him blinked a single option: ENTER WORLD

Adrian looked over at Agent. “Well?” he said, a little nervous. “So where’s my big debut gonna be?”

*A world almost exactly like your own… within 99.9999 percent actually.* He grimaced, obviously unhappy to disclose the rest. *But that ten thousandth of a percent difference is a doozy.* Agent waved. The image on the screen faded, to be replaced by an aerial view of a coastal city. An American one to judge by the flags waving on some of the buildings. *This is Brockton Bay.*

Adrian felt the nonexistent blood drain from his face. “Worm? You’re sending me into Worm??” he floated there, listless with shock. Had he been truly solid he would have hit the ground with a thump.

*Yes. Or rather, it is one of a multiplicity of universes in this local brane where this timeline is, has, or will play out. So you are familiar with this particular panverse.* Agent cleared his throat nervously.

“Oh yeah, you might say that,” Adrian laughed bleakly. “Worm? The Wildbow-verse? One of the most famous superhero genre online fiction worlds, and one of the most notorious? Oh yeah, I know about it. It’s a superhero deconstruction-- if you can call someone violently smashing a basket full of puppies with a sledgehammer “deconstruction.” The storyline is like a cross between a demolition derby and a head-on train collision stuck on instant repeat, with someone standing off to the side pushing toddlers into the middle. It starts with a teenage girl being tortured into a psychotic breakdown and ends with an APOCALYPSE by a MAD OMNIPOTENT COSMIC SPACE WHALE DEMIGOD. It’s so grimdark it shits BATS!
“I’m supposed to fix THIS? Stop SCION from destroying a couple dozen parallel worlds? With nothing but some werewolf druid powers? The entire Justice league backed by the Avengers, Optimus Prime and Chuck Norris couldn’t hack this!”

*Godlike powers are not what is needed here, Adrian, Agent said gently. You know that in the original timeline, that--*

“That Taylor Hebert ends up saving the world? Or what’s left of it, anyway?” Adrian said. He scowled in anger and suspicion. “So why not let her do it again?”

*Because the price paid, even if she wins—by countless billions of innocents, including one poor innocent girl-- is too terrible.*

*“If she wins?”*

*As the unaltered ‘verse plays out, the margins between victory and defeat are far narrower even than they look. Agent looked away, his white eyes staring at the endless plain around them. Far more often than not, when the original events are allowed to play out in yet another universe… Taylor Hebert loses.*

“...well ain’t that just a ray of sunshine,” Adrian muttered, his veins ice cold.

*Adrian, I am, in Agent terms, normally a “low roller.” These are the highest stakes I have ever played for. But every universe in this particular panverse of this particular brane has been labeled as being at high risk. The need is so great that I was able to barter for more intervention-chips than all my previous rounds of the Game combined-- and I have spent nearly all of them just to find a champion, prepare them, and inform them in such great and terrible detail. He hesitated, then placed a spectral hand on a spectral shoulder. Even so, if you wish to withdraw, you can--*

Adrian shook his hand off. “No,” he muttered. “No, I’m not gonna quit. How can I? If it was one person I was saving, I wouldn’t. But with a whole world? A whole multi-world of people in danger? I can’t back out… I’d never be able to sleep again.

“It’s just… what can I do? Taylor had… has… will have insane-level powers that will put her BARELY on toe-to-toe basis with one of the Space Whales. What can I contribute in the face of that?”

*Often the fate of worlds hinges not on the most powerful, but on the least, Agent said gently. Throwing overwhelming power into the mix won’t save the day here. I didn’t pick you to save the whole world in one swoop; I picked you because I wanted someone to go there and do the right thing. The little things. Maybe you won’t even be in the final battle--- but even the smallest good deed in the right place can change everything.*

Adrian sniffed. “Save the girl, save the world?”

*Something like that.*

He got to his feet. “So let’s do this then.”

Agent gestured to the screen. “Bayleaf” had reappeared, floating in the foreground over the skyline of Brockton Bay. *Just walk through the screen.*

*“When and where--?”*

*Somedewhere in the Brockton Bay area, I cannot be more precise. And November, two months before--*
“Two months before the locker incident,” Adrian—Bayleaf—said grimly. He was already imagining what he’d do if he got his hands around Sophia’s neck.

_I was unable to secure you identity papers_, he said regretfully. _I did not have sufficient chips for that level of direct involvement. It would have involved either mass memory editing, time travel, or somehow creating a false identity and paper trail sufficient to fool the resident tinkers, hackers, and Dragon herself. I recommend you pass yourself as a refugee from one of the cities destroyed by Endbringer activity or the like. Secure yourself some finances, obtain a residence and submit yourself to the authorities as an emancipated youth to be enrolled in Winslow High… they have streamlined that process due to the number of young people rendered orphaned and homeless by superhuman catastrophe._

“urgh. Not even a driver’s license, maybe?”

_I spent all those points on concealing you from more important threats_, Agent said drily. _While your powers are in no way derived from the Entities or their Shards, you will be imbued with a false Gemma and Corona Pollenta that will trick most medical scans, and even most psions._

“I can see why that’s important. A cape without a Gemma or Pollenta? That’ll attract attention nobody wants. What about Contessa? Or the Simurgh?”

Agent gave him an evil smile. _Due to the combination of your alien powers, your nature as a being from outside their timespace continuum, and the… well think of it as a “holographic” Shard projected by your false Gemma and Pollenta…. you will be a rather large blind spot for the lot of them. In the truest sense of the word; much as your brain ‘paints over’ the blind spot in your own vision, you will be a blind spot they aren’t even aware they have._

“Ohoho. I can see why that cost a lot of chips.”

_Worth every one. Especially for Contessa and her Cheat Code Mary Sue ‘path to victory’ power. She’s in for a hell of a surprise if your paths cross. If you see her, punch her smug head up into that stupid little hat, would you?_

“I sense a backstory.”

_No, I just despise her existence on principle. Her overriding influence makes things WORSE, by ERASING potential options from the board before they can even be considered. And considering the shitty nature of the ‘victory’ her Path leads to…_

“But not a friend of the Agents, yeah.”

_Or anyone. Nothing causes more Hells on Earth than people like Contessa or Doctor Mother, who think Mother Knows Best. He closed the folder with a snap, it disappeared in a cloud of sparkles. And that is it for pre-flight checkup, he said with a hint of amusement. Ready?_

Adrian nodded. “Let’s do this.”

_Just step forward into the screen_, Agent said. _Be warned, you’re going to get one hell of a download of knowledge and neural information, in addition to having your body dramatically metamorphosed. You’re going to get knocked out… and your recollection of your “time” here may be a bit fuzzy for a while. Just remember: your first step is to get into Winslow and help Taylor Hebert. Beyond that… you’ll have to improvise._

Adrian nodded and straightened his shoulders. Maybe he couldn’t save this world. Or any world. But on the other side of that screen there was a little girl who was going to be kidnapped and
enslaved by a supervillain. There was a group of teenagers who were going to be railroaded into villainy. There was a miracle healer who was going to utterly destroy her own life with one terrible mistake. There were countless innocent people who were going to be destroyed in the crossfire between gangsters, drug dealers, and Nazi lunatics. There was one young woman on whom the entire world’s fate hinged, who was going to be put through utter Hell on Earth for no good reason.

Maybe he couldn’t save them all, but if he could save one, he was going to damned well do it.

Remember, Adrian: you are not as limited as you think.

He stepped through the screen and the world went dark.

In the realm he just left behind, the screen winked out. The endless twilit plain disappeared, and all detail faded away till there was nothing but a vaguely humanoid figure of glowing smoke floating in the void. Agent clung to the shape for a little while longer; he found it-- appealing for some reason.

Another glowing amorphous shape appeared. That seemed to go well.

Indeed it did, Agent agreed. Hello, Oversight.

--for a given value of well. Your stratagem in this round… eludes me, ‘Agent.’ Most would regard it as incredibly unwise to reveal so much to their Avatar beforehand. Especially of our own inner workings.

Revealing the Game?

Revealing-- or at least hinting-- at just how far you have gone, Oversight said. He knows that you are gambling on his future. What will it do to his chances, I speculate, when he realizes just how reckless a gambler you are?

To win big, one must risk big, Agent retorted. As risky as my past stakes have been, have I not produced victories like any other Agent? Innocents spared, lives rescued, worlds saved, futures changed for the better?

And each time, you have spent more...”chips”…. Than you have gained, Oversight said, his voice heavy with chastisement. You have been running at a loss for cycle after cycle. One more “victory” like that and you will be destitute. And now you spend your last few Quatloos on a desperate gamble-- on not one world, but multiple parallel worlds in peril, and a single lone Avatar to try and stem the tide?

And if he achieves one small good deed, I will weigh it as worth the cost, Agent retorted. You and I have different value judgments on what constitutes a profit, Oversight.

How did a spendthrift like you persuade the Exchequer to even loan you as little as he did?

Oversight said scornfully.

Agent indulged himself and let a slow, genuine, visible smirk spread across his illusion of a face. Because I illustrated to him that I am playing a longer game than it looks, he said. I do not intend to save one panverse world… but two.

Oversight’s regard-- what a material being would have called a puzzled look-- passed over Agent. Then came a moment of comprehension. Azeroth, he said. You have somehow incorporated
Azeroth into your gamble. He “glared” suspiciously. _How?_

Consider the fate of Azeroth, Agent said. Their technology, their thaumaturgic sciences, have been barely sufficient to save them from catastrophe over and over again. And each cataclysm has been worse than the last...while their sciences have barely progressed a few short, halting steps in thousands of years. Do you know why?

He didn’t wait for Oversight to reply. _Because they have continually failed to unify their theories._ Paladin powers, arcanist abilities, druidic “nature” magic, gnomish and goblin technology--- all of it operates under the same scientific laws; it’s all a continuum. Yet their various ‘schools’ remain divided-- in part by the conspiracy of outside forces but also by politics, by ideology, by terminology, by symbology-- they even use different maths for each; one works in base eight while another works in base ten!

The closest any of them have come in tens of thousands of years to a grand unification theory have been the druids. Their world philosophy is about both diversity and balance, and they subsequently have hodgepoded bits and pieces from all the separate disciplines and have, miraculously, made them work together, discovered which ones were all but identical under the trappings…

_and you have just sent out a Druid_, Oversight said suddenly.

_A druid, and an engineer, and an enchanter_, Agent said. _From a world whose scholastic philosophy is entirely about unification and finding a single grand underlying theory for Everything and More. Into a world full of artifactors and devisors and ur-scientists. When he starts trying out his new powers, flexing his new skills, if he starts digging deeper, if he begins cooperating with the natives of similar mind-- he will begin discovering parallels and synergies that will be staggering in their implications. Staggering enough to trigger discovery of the true Grand Unification Theory… and a new model of the universe that will give both Earth Bet and Azeroth--- which he shall surely be drawn to visit next-- the tools to overcome._

_IF_. The single word from Oversight was enough to weigh like mountains.

_That is where the risk comes in_, Agent agreed. _But it is the risk that makes it all worthwhile._

Adrian woke with a start, the icy wind rushing past him snapping him to consciousness. He rattled his head, utterly disoriented. Weird images, some strange dream-- a glowing man, an Agent of some great cause, or … a game contestant/host… offering him the deal of a lifetime… what?

He raised his hand to rub his eyes-- and a massive clawed paw groped at his face. He yelped before he realized the clawed, hairy hand was his own. As was the hairy, muscular arm it was attached to…

“HOLY--!” He felt himself over (not like that, you freaks.) In a mere second he had stock of himself: massive hands with semi-retractable claws; _seriously_ hairy chest rippling with muscle, arms like fur stockings stuffed with footballs, powerful digitigrade legs with padded clawed pawed feet, wolfen skull and muzzle, pointed ears, wet nose-- no tail though-- coal-black fur over everything-- He was clothed in a loose cotton tunic and trousers that hung loose on even his
massive form and flapped madly in the upward rushing wind.

“Holy crap, it was real,” he said to himself. “Then that means...” He looked up.

Spread out below him was a city-- a city that HAD to be Brockton Bay. It hugged the coastline and curled around an enormous harbor. He could see-- that had to be the PRT building. Or maybe it was Medhall? He couldn’t remember a description. But there, that over there had to be the Protectorate base, floating out in the water, oh wow, he could see the glittering dome of the forcefield, wow a real forcefield… He could see everything up here, he was out over the middle of the bay--

He was over the bay--

Over-- the bay--

Slowly, the rusted gears of cognition clunked into alignment.

“HOLY CRAAAAAAaaaAAAaaaAAP!!” he began flailing wildly, which only started him tumbling, as he suddenly realized he was thousands of feet in the air without a plane. “AGENT, YOU RETARD!”

He indulged in a couple seconds panic (he was really high up) before he realized he’d better get a grip or he was going to say hello to Earth Bet in a really sudden and final way. He gasped for air as he lay out spreadeagled, slowing his plummet. “Okay, breathe breathe breathe, remember, you’re a worgen—Worgen can’t fly!!- no, but worgen druids can, come on, change into your flight form, bird bird birdbirdbird come on OWL OWL OWL--!!”

He felt a massive, sort of internal twisting and folding, and suddenly where there had been a plummeting, panicking Worgen, there was now a plummeting, panicking, giant owl. It was several long eternities before he managed to right himself and began turning his demented flailing into at least an effort at flapping. Finally, his long dive began to turn into a swooping glide. He leveled out mere feet above the waves and flew, wings spread wide, hooting in victory…

“hooo Hooo HOOOO..”

And plowed into a whitecap a few yards from shore.

A wheezing, waterlogged Worgen sloshed his way to shore a few moments later. Once the waves were no longer lapping at his ankles, he bent over and shook. What had to be a gallon of water sprayed over the sand. He stood up, relieved and feeling a good bit lighter, if not precisely drier. He shook the last of the water out of his ears in time to pick up the high pitched whine of… was that an electric turbine?

Around the end of one of the derelict ships came a low, sleek motorcycle. It looked, Adrian thought, rather like someone had crossbred a lightcycle from Tron with a particularly old school Harley. The rider looked to be wearing a full suit of futuristic armor, with only his bearded chin showing from underneath the visor on his helmet.

Of course, Adrian thought. With disgust. Armsmaster. It would be the egotistical wannabe Iron Man who’d find him first. What were the odds? Of course they probably had all sorts of futuristic radar out on that floating base looking for incoming flying threats. He wondered what radar profile a wolfman plummeting from 10,000 feet left behind…

The armored hero pulled to a halt in a spray of sand a few yards away. He dismounted quickly, pulling out a collapsing rod that folded out into a six foot staff, a shimmering blade snapping into existence at the end. He planted one end in the sand and struck a commanding pose. “Stand where
Apparantly whatever Armsmaster had been expecting to see, it hadn’t been a sodden, bedraggled, seven foot tall wolf-man. He actually staggered back a step in surprise at the sight of him. Then, obviously miffed at his faux pas, he whipped his halberd down into the ‘armed and ready’ pose, the blade pointed at Adrian’s chest, his thumb on some button or other on the haft.

“Uh, Hi,” Bayleaf said, grinning sheepishly and waving.

In retrospect, smiling at an armed and armored man with a mouthful of fangs was probably a bad idea. But really, the taser dart had been a bit much...
“--Bipedal, anthropoid with canine or lupine characteristics, digitigrade, seven to eight feet tall--no, it’s hard to say exactly due to his stance--yes, it’s definitely him. The radar and cameras on the Rig tracked his trajectory from that airburst--”

Bayleaf came to. He was lying on his back in the sand, tingling and aching in a most extraordinary fashion from… what was it?--oh yeah, Armsmaster had TAZED him. What a great guy. Wait. An airburst? Explosion? He must have made one hell of an entrance. And over the airspace of a superhero base, no less. That explained a little of why Armsmaster was so quick on the trigger.

Bayleaf lay very still. He had no intention of acting in any fashion that got him zapped like that again. He carefully thought out his next course of action…

Suddenly it dawned on him. He had an “in,” now. He had Armsmaster, the Protectorate’s walking recruitment poster, right here. Give him five minutes--assuming the tinker cape didn’t have an itchy trigger finger and tased him again--Armsmaster would be hardselling him to enlist. From there it would be smooth sailing, right through the PRT doors. Hi there, I’m a new Cape, golly gee I always wanted to be in the Wards…

“--the suspect made aggressive moves…” Armsmaster was saying, his finger pressed to the corner of his visor. Bayleaf could hear a faint, but clearly agitated voice arguing with him. “--He bared his claws and fangs at me!” Armsmaster protested.

Bayleaf considered the pros and cons. Pros: immediate legitimacy. Food, clothing, shelter, and funding. Access to materials for his “tinker powers” as an enchanter and engineer. Close proximity to several of the important individuals in his little quest…not the least of which was being within throttling distance of Shadow Stalker aka Sophia Hess. he could potentially intimidate the girl into leaving Taylor Hebert alone. Failing that, put her in a hammerlock and force her to behave herself. Or straight up outing her to the PRT for her criminal actions.

“Regardless of what it looked like to YOU, Dragon--”

Downsides: some real biggies. The PRT was secretly run by Cauldron. It was also currently infiltrated by Coil. Its Director in Chief was a Cauldron cape named Alexandria who was a borderline sociopath who would snap an innocent’s neck in an eyeblink to keep Cauldron’s secrets; The regional director was a bigot who’d rather slowly die of kidney disease than let a Cape heal her. Her potential replacement was a xenophobic warhawk that made her look reasonable just by contrast.

“--I’m requesting permission to use Tinker tranquilizers on this one-- Because it will be more efficient to let him regain consciousness in an environment under our control--” Bayleaf heard teeth grinding. “On what grounds?”

Then there was the petty bureaucracy. The administrators, lawyers, and bureaucrats would be watching his every move and dictating when and where he could work, sleep, or take a pee. It would be impossible to perform his mission with all that breathing down his hairy neck.

And he wasn’t sure he could put up with Glenn Chambers for five minutes without killing him. If he was anything like in canon, the PR idiot would tie a ribbon around his neck or something ‘to make him more approachable by the kiddies.’

“---send out prisoner transport, along with containment foam. Tell them to send the news crews
out here too--” more chatter. “It’s not about taking credit,” Armsmaster said stiffly. “I just want them to assure the public that the cause of the disruption has been dealt with--”

And he’d be working with this doink. He growled silently to himself; that did it, no sale. He’d go full Indy and stay that way.

He must have growled a little less than silently because he heard Armsmaster jump. There was a whirl of micromotors from his armor. “Freeze!” Armsmaster barked. “Do not move, do not attempt to come any closer.”

Bayleaf raised himself up on his elbows and glared at the man. “You TAZED me,” he said in disbelief. His new voice, surprisingly, was not a raspy growl like he suspected, but a low, smokey bass, almost like James Earl Jones.

“That dart should have had you out for at least another 10.25 minutes,” Armsmaster said, clearly displeased. His grip tightened on the haft of his weapon.

“Guess it wasn’t as efficient as you thought,” Bayleaf couldn’t resist needling him. Thanks to his wolf ears he could literally hear the egotistical tinker’s teeth grinding together. One thing canon got correct: Armsmaster’s Tinker ability had a specialization in making things more efficient. Anything with overlap, lag, leftovers, or superfluity grated on his power’s nerves. He would, canonically, burn weeks on end for a tenth of a percent improvement in weight or battery life. And Armsmaster’s ego was practically flammable if you suggested his work was inefficient in any way.

“You’re being detained,” Armsmaster grated out, “For invading the restricted airspace over the Protectorate base in the Brockton Bay harbor--”

“Invading the-- I was plummeting to my doom from umpty thousand feet up!” The hero’s officious, authoritative attitude was getting on Bayleaf’s nerves.

“You will be interrogated,” Armsmaster said impassively, “and if your story clears than you will be released without incident. If you resist arrest it will go poorly for-- do NOT move!” In the middle of his little speech, Bayleaf had casually flipped to his feet and taken a step towards him. “I SAID FREEZE!”

“Yeah, I heard you,” Bayleaf said, holding up his hands, palms out. “Freeze.” His palms swirled with forest green light. The ground around Armsmaster’s feet erupted, and in a twinkling he was cocooned in the coils of thorny green vines as thick as his armored thigh.

In World of Warcraft, Entangling Vines was a low-level power, so badly nerfed by timid designers obsessed with “game balance” as to be literally worthless. Here though, it was pretty darned effective. The thick, woody vines were so rigid and tough that the armored hero was completely immobilized. Not that it kept him from trying though; he grunted and strained with all his might, barely making the leaves adorning him rustle. “Computer! Emergency Escape Code--”

Bayleaf darted his hand in and crushed the microphone embedded in Armsmaster’s chin strap with his claws. He hooked his fingers around and stabbed out what he suspected were the eye motion tracking sensors in the visor for good measure. “Ah ah ah,” he said. “You’re in time out, Mister.” With those out of commission, Armsmaster would be unable to use voice commands or eye motion to activate any of his surely countless nasty little gizmos. Hal-beard was going to stay put until the cops showed up to free him and Bayleaf was long gone.

“That was Protectorate property you just destroyed!” Armsmaster yelled.

“Really… Don’t… Care.” Bayleaf turned to go. “Later, Hal-beard.”
“Wait!” the voice was tinny and clearly feminine. Surprised, Bayleaf stopped. One of the lenses on Armsmaster’s helmet was swiveling to track him. “Please, don’t go.”

Bayleaf bent over and squinted into the lens. There was only one person that he could think of that it could be. “Dragon, I assume?” he said. Dragon was another individual from canon: an artificial intelligence built by a very paranoid Canadian Tinker, who incredibly became a Tinker herself when her creator died in the Endbringer attack on Nova Scotia (at least, that was what happened to him as Bayleaf recalled it.) Unfortunately, the Tinker in question had apparently spent too much time reading bad sci fi about robots overthrowing their masters, and had put countless poorly thought out "safeguards" into her programming that effectively crippled her, and even threatened her life. Finding a way to free her was on Bayleaf’s rather extensive to-do list.

As it so happened, she was also close friends with one Colin Wallis, aka Armsmaster. She collaborated with him often via internet, and actually dreamed of moving their friendship into a more romantic arena... possibly because she was the only sapient being on the planet who could tolerate his presence for more than five minutes.

“Indeed,” the A.I. said. “I am Dragon, an associate of the Protectorate and PRT.”

“You hacked my gear?” Armsmaster looked utterly offended.

“Needs must as the Devil drives,” she said to him. “Now hush. Please, sir, allow me to apologize for Armsmaster’s…. precipitous actions. Your arrival caused a bit of alarm, and it put him a bit on edge. You do understand.”

“He fired on an unarmed man,” Bayleaf growled grumpily. “And then got on the phone to call the five o’clock News to brag about it.” Armsmaster stiffened-- well, as much as he could stiffen, wrapped in wooden vines.

“Again, I apologize,” Dragon said. “I’m sure this is all a misunderstanding. You are apparently a new Trigger, a Case 53, and out of your element. Please reconsider. I know this is a poor first impression, but the Protectorate and the PRT can be a real boon for new capes such as yourself. If you cooperate with the Protectorate they can help you out.”

Bayleaf realized that this was another golden opportunity: a chance to drop a few important bugs in a very important pair of digital ears. He decided to seize it with both hands. He let an expression of disgust cross his face. “Your local director is a bigot. Your PR office is run by idiots. You have a bullying psychopath in the local Wards --” (Armsmaster’s bearded chin twitched; ding ding, he obviously already had his suspicions who was being referred to)--” and word is on the street that you’re riddled with Coil’s spies.”

“Spies?” she said faintly. Hook, line, and sinker, Bayleaf thought smugly. That ought to set the super-intelligent AI to sniffing around for Coil’s fingerprints months ahead of schedule.

“--and even without that, you’re so tied up with red tape you can barely move, much less DO anything,” he snorted. “So no thanks.” Once again he turned to go.

Of course, Armsmaster couldn’t let that go. The Man With No Personality had to stick his oar in. “I don’t know where you came from,” Halbeard yelled at his retreating back. “But things will go a lot easier for you here in Brockton Bay if you work with us heroes and not against us!”

Bayleaf stopped, turned back and got up in Armsmaster’s face, looming over him. “Get one thing straight, you tin-plated, cereal-box-top Judge Dredd wannabe,” he rumbled, his muzzle threatening to curl into a snarl. “You’re no hero. You’re a grand-standing, glory-hogging, rent-seeking Prima Donna, and I’d rather be shot with a taser again in the DICK than work with you.”
Someone behind him spoke. “Holy--!” He spun around. Standing there on the beach were a couple of teenagers in heavy coats and hoodies and carrying backpacks. Bayleaf had no idea what a couple of kids would be doing out in the Ship’s Graveyard on a freezing cold day like this. Worshipping crack and smoking Satan, for all he knew or cared. But they had obviously just stumbled on their little tableau and were staring in astonishment at the sight of the lead hero of Brockton Bay being held at the mercy of a bedraggled eight foot tall wolfman. “Hey!” Bayleaf barked. They jumped. “Either of you got a cell phone with a camera?” The one on the left nodded.

Bayleaf loped over with his hand out. The kid pulled out a smartphone and very nervously handed it to the worgen. “Thanks.” Bayleaf loped back to where Armsmaster still stood wrapped in vines, fiddling with the buttons. “Camera, camera-- how do you—ah!” He threw one beefy arm over Armsmaster’s shoulders, held up the camera, pulled the goofiest expression he could think of, and clicked. The armored hero made a sound suspiciously like ‘arrrgh.’

“That camera is now legal evidence in an ongoing criminal investigation,” Armsmaster shouted at the teenagers in a warning tone. They ignored him, the phone’s owner gleefully working the keyboard.

“Too late, Colin,” Dragon murmured in his ear. “They’ve already posted it to Facebook.”

“Arrrrghgghgggh.”
Taylor gazed in horror at the filth spilling out at her feet. Before she could do more than gag, hands seized her from behind and shoved her forward into the locker. Refuse and roaches welled up around her legs as the locker door slammed shut behind her. She gagged, retched, and screamed, kicking and thrashing, trying to kick the door back open-- she heard the lock snap shut. “Enjoy your stay with the rest of the filth, Hebert,” a voice taunted her from outside. Emma? It was Emma?? No, Emma wouldn’t do this, things were bad but Emma would never go this far.. “Emma, please, don’t do this-- please you were my FRIEND--”

Three voices rang out with mocking laughter at her pleas. “Can you believe this bitch?” she heard Sophia say. “You were my friend, you were my friend--”

“I was never your friend, you hopeless sop.” Emma’s voice cut through the steel door into Taylor’s ears like a knife. “Nobody’s worthless enough to be a friend with something as worthless as you! Sit in there and rot with the rest of the garbage!”

A year and a half of torment finally came to a head; that last strut holding together the edifice of Taylor Hebert finally broke.

Everything went dark. Then the void filled with teeming, swirling light. Something vast, enormous, a fractal impossibility swarmed in the dark. Something vast as a continent broke free and floated down. It reached out a tendril glowing with countless promises, reached down--

“What is this?”

The Shard hesitated. INTERSECTION/INTERFERENCE/INTERVENTION?

“Oh, Sister, this is terrible.” Something white, golden, an aurora of pastels.

Something else; dark indigo, swirling with pinpoints of glittering light. “Strewnth, what-- infestation is this?”

“We should have stopped by decades ago...”

“We must needs make amends--”

“It will take some doing. We must be careful.”

“Yes. Carefully, subtly. But as for THIS wretchedness...”

The Shard flinched back, too late. Dawn and Midnight swirled and struck; the Shard gave a shrill voiceless cry, then melted away to nothingness like a snowflake, a fractal returned to chaos.


“Oh, poor little one.” The voice was as tender as the morning. “Here, dear child. We cannot yet do much directly, but let us do this much for you...”

A horn of spiraled midnight, a horn of shining white, touched her brow. Everything suddenly changed and Taylor’s world exploded with light.
Sophia, Madison and Emma cackled outside Taylor’s locker. “Come on, let’s go before someone on staff shows up,” Madison said.

Sophia snorted. “Don’t worry about the STAFF, Mad,” she said disdainfully. “They haven’t got a testicle or a spine between ‘em. But yeah, let’s go and leave Hebert here to think about her place in life… wait, what..?” Sophia’s arrogant sneer had turned to a scowl of surprise and confusion. Puzzled, her two tag-alongs turned to see what she was staring at. Taylor’s cries had stopped, and now her locker was vibrating with a deep, ominous thrum. Pale lavender light was shining out of the ventilation slots and leaking out around the seams of the door.

The explosion naturally caught them completely by surprise.

The call went out over the PRT comlinks. “Attention all Protectorate, this is Dispatch. We have a Trigger Event, I repeat, we have a Trigger Event at the Winslow High School, any Protectorate in the area please respond…”

Armsmaster and Miss Militia were already on patrol, cruising the streets on their custom motorcycles. Armsmaster was the first to respond; he opened the comlink in his helmet and spoke up over the thrum of his engine. “Dispatch this is Armsmaster and Miss Militia, we are en route, what’s the sitrep?”

“We copy Armsmaster. According to reports we are receiving from inside the school, we have a code two, possibly a code three Trigger event inside Winslow. One of the students manifested just about fifteen minutes ago and has been rampaging through the school, pursuing one particular group of three female students through the hallways and classrooms, believed to be the ones responsible for the trigger event. The staff are evacuating, and according to phonecalls we are receiving from inside the school Shadow Stalker is already on the scene and responding.”

“Is that confirmed?”

“The caller is a Madison Clements, who apparently was given Shadow Stalker’s PRT phone by Shadow Stalker and told to report in.”

“Sir,” a voice broke in over the transmission. “This is Kid Win. I was doing a flyby on my way to the PRT building when the balloon went up. I’m in a holding pattern over the school, do you want me to engage?”

“No, Kid, do not engage till we arrive,” Miss Militia replied as they accelerated down the street. “Give us oversight till then. Do you see Shadow Stalker or the Trigger?”

“Yes, I have a visual on them both. The fight has moved to the cafeteria, I can see them through the cafeteria windows.” His voice sounded odd.

“Can you give us a description of the Trigger?” Armsmaster barked.

Now Kid Win’s voice sounded really strange. “Yyyes, sir, I can…” there was a pause. “It’s a lavender unicorn.”
It’s a whaaauuh?” Armsmaster was so startled he veered off the pavement at the next intersection, jolting over the sidewalk at the corner.

“It’s a little lavender unicorn with a curly black mane and tail,” Kid Win said with determined fatalism. “And it is kicking Shadow Stalker’s ass.”

By the time Miss Militia and Armsmaster roared into the Winslow parking lot, the school had been evacuated. The student body, for a surprise, was still there, milling about at a distance and craning their necks to see; their morbid curiosity apparently keeping them in attendance. The two heroes kicked open the double doors and moved in, commando style; the ruckus, or the remainder of it, was coming from down the hallway, through the cafeteria doors.

Another commando-style kick-and-enter and they were inside. What greeted their eyes had them both forgetting every shred of their training, lowering their weapons and standing there gormlessly slackjawed.

The hallways had shown signs of battle—bent and half-ripped-off locker doors, books and litter blown about the floor, cracked and shattered lighting—but this was a whole nother order of magnitude. Cafeteria tables had been sent tumbling, steel trash cans upended, plastic trays had been scattered everywhere, some shot through the shattered windows, others embedded in the drywall ceiling, their loads of food spattered hither and yon, half the lighting in the ceiling ripped loose, along with parts of the ceiling. All in all it looked as if a troop of gorillas had expressed their extreme displeasure at the menu.

Off to one side was what had to be Shadow Stalker. At least Armsmaster surmised it was her, from what he could see of her. She was clad at least partially in her costume, presumably having to don the cloak and some bits of armor over her civilian clothes in haste. She was jammed headfirst into a partially full trash can. The mouth of the can had been crimped down by some force around her waist, pinning her arms by her sides and leaving her butt and flailing legs sticking in the air. Her crossbow pistols were lying on the floor, crushed like beer cans and tossed aside. Broken bolts—the kind with steel heads, which she was NOT supposed to have, Armsmaster noted with displeasure—were scattered across the floor, snapped like pencils.

At first he was puzzled as to why she was unable to free herself with her intangibility powers—then he noticed the blinking lights. Some well-meaning soul had apparently made an effort at decorating the cafeteria for the just-past holiday season and had strung electric lights around the ceiling; Shadow Stalker’s assailant had apparently pulled down one end of the strand and used it to tie up the abrasive Ward before stuffing her in the trash. Along with the troublesome Ward’s many personal flaws, she also had powers with a flaw: she could not go intangible and pass through anything with an electric current running through it, at least not without getting the mother of all uninsulated electric shocks. Muffled, sulphurous swearing was coming from inside the can as it rocked back and forth. Oh well, at least she was alive and, to judge by the vociferous nature of the swearing, in good shape.

On the back wall, between the hot plate lines where the chalkboard with the menu of the day hung, was a redhead girl of about fifteen years of age. She was bruised, battered, spattered with dust and debris and looked absolutely terrified. She was pinned to the wall, held several feet up off the floor by a lavender aura that wrapped around her and pinned her arms to her sides.
At the other end of that aura was a tiny lavender unicorn. The glowing tip of its horn was barely higher than his own armored knee. It had childlike proportions, enormous blue eyes, and a mane and tail of tumbling ebon locks that (he judged) would be the envy of any female. There was some sort of marking on each of its hips, but he couldn’t quite make it out as the tiny creature was spattered with absolutely vile looking filth, all over its hooved legs clear up to its shoulders and haunches. It stood there on all fours, splay legged, its eyes fixed on the girl in its intangible grip and an expression of unspeakable rage and pain on its childlike face.

The hostage saw the heroes standing there. “Oh god, help me! Kill it, shoot it, the freak’s going to KILL me--!”

“FREAK?” the little unicorn screamed. The voice was clearly feminine. “You and Madison and that bitch Sophia--” Armsmaster’s face settled into an even grimmer scowl behind his visor at the name. He was getting together a picture of what happened that was uglier by the second.”—torment me for a year and a half, you beat me up, destroy my things, steal my schoolwork, turn the entire school against me, stuff me in a locker full of rotting tampons—” and it became instantly clear what the mung and scraps of cotton and cloth clinging to her; Armsmaster and Miss Militia both suppressed gags— “You turned my LIFE INTO HELL for LAUGHS, AND I’M THE FREAK??”

The girl went white. “Taylor-- please--”

She floated the girl about a foot away from the wall and slammed her back into it, hard enough to knock the wind out of her. “You were my FRIEND, Emma!” She pulled her out and slammed her into the wall again. “We grew UP together!” Slam. “We did EVERYTHING together!” Slam. “YOU WERE FAMILY!” Slam. “YOU were my SISTER! I LOVED YOU!” Slam. “I loved you...” the unicorn’s voice trailed off into a quavering whimper. The telekinetic aura faded away, “Emma” slid down the wall, battered and bruised but otherwise unharmed. The little unicorn’s face screwed itself up into a vision of agony and grief. Enormous tears welled up from the clenched shut eyes; with a gut wrenching sob she turned and ran blindly, staggering, out through the cafeteria doors.

That snapped Armsmaster and Miss Militia out of their fugue. “We’d better follow her,” Armsmaster said unnecessarily. “Kid Win!”

The teenage tinker was there, hovering just outside the shattered windows on his hoverboard. “Uh, yessir!”

“Stay here, administer first aid if it’s needed.” the trash can by the wall cursed some more. “And maybe see about getting Shadow Stalker out of there.... No rush though.” His bearded chin radiated a grim future for the probationary Ward. “I’m going to want her to stick around, if you get my meaning.”

“Got it sir.” Kid Win snapped off a salute. Armsmaster nodded, and he and Miss Militia left in pursuit of the weeping unicorn. Kid floated in through the window and dismounted. After a cursory examination of the former hostage-- and a warning not to leave the premises until after the authorities had spoken to her. That done, he walked over to where his “teammate” was still imprisoned, and slapped an EMP cuff around her ankle. This elicited a shout of rage from the trash can. The cuffs in question were solid titanium alloy, rated for several categories of brute, were laced with high-voltage circuitry to restrain capes with intangibility powers, and had a built in tranquilizer to subdue anything else. They’d become standard issue shortly after Shadow Stalker had made her debut as a rogue, for some peculiar reason. “SO.” Kid Win said loudly, slapping the side of the trash can. It made a deafening bang, eliciting yet another oath from the
Ward inside. “Looks like you got your grimdark ass kicked by a Lisa Frank poster.” He played a quick bongo solo on the bottom of the can.

He held up his cellphone and hit record. The video of her epic swearing echoing out of that trashcan was going to be Youtube gold, he knew it.

It was fairly easy to track the fleeing unicorn; she was still leaving a trail behind her, bits of paper product and footprints-- hoofprints-- etched out in something tacky and disgusting neither of the Protectorate heroes wanted to think about. She wasn’t exactly evading them, either; the trail led straight to the school gym and beelined for the girl’s locker rooms. They stood outside the door, weapons at the ready.

“I’ll go in first,” Armsmaster said. He swung around the doorframe and in through the marked door.

Miss Militia said nothing. She holstered her weapon and stood in front of the door, arms crossed over her chest. “Three… Two… One…”

Armsmaster promptly came back out as quickly as he’d gone in. He pointed a thumb at the “women’s” logo on the door. “…You go in. I’ll go…"

“… Backtrack, examine the, ah, scene of the crime. Or something.” Miss Militia said. “Right.”

“…Right.” The tinker hero of Brockton Bay beat a hasty retreat. Miss Militia rolled her eyes, smirking behind her bandana, and walked inside.

It didn’t take much guessing to figure out where the distraught, mutated girl had run. Miss Militia could hear the showers going full blast… and the sound of the girl’s sobbing. She sighed, put her phone and wallet on a nearby bench for safekeeping and walked into the shower room.

Like everything else in Winslow, the shower room was bare, utilitarian and ugly. It was a single large room with bare concrete floors and walls, lined with drains and shower fixtures every few feet. Every shower head was going full blast, filling the room with spray and steam. The unicorn-girl was sitting on the floor under the last showerhead, hunched and miserable, water gushing over her and flattening her mane and tail. A few travel-size bottles of shampoo were scattered around her hooves. She was making a feeble attempt to scrub her own flanks with a hoof, trying to get the muck from the locker off her, and sobbing fit to break a heart of stone. She was the picture of abject misery. “Taylor?” Miss Militia said.

The unicorn looked up at her. If the sobbing hadn’t already done it, that face would have melted her heart like butter in a blast furnace. “Muh...Miss Militia…?” she quavered. “Oh… oh no...” she broke into a new round of tears.

Miss Militia took a long, invigorating breath and let it out in a sigh. She firmed herself to ignore the drenching her costume was about to get-- she’d waded chest-deep through leech infested swamps, she could tolerate having soggy britches from a high school shower stall-- and walked inside. She crouched down next to the girl… next to Taylor… and carefully, gently rested a hand on her withers. “Hey,” she said gently. “It’s going to be okay, I promise.”

Taylor closed her eyes and shook her head, wet mane flapping around her neck. “I-- I Triggered,” she whimpered. “I went ‘Carrie’ on the whole school...”

“It’s not that bad, Taylor.”
“I’m gonna go to the Birdcage...” she sniffled.

Miss Militia couldn’t help but laugh a little. “No, I promise you are not going to the Birdcage,” she said. “Noone was seriously hurt… and the damage isn’t even too bad...” she picked up one of the bottles at their feet and opened it. “Tell you what, before anything else, let’s get this mess cleaned off. Then it’ll be that much easier to tackle whatever’s next. Here, let me give you a hand… you’re not going to get very far with hooves...” that said she emptied the bottle on Taylor’s head and back and began scrubbing in a no-nonsense fashion. The gunge sloughed off mercifully quick, swirling to the floor and down the drain.

Taylor held up one of her hooves and looked at it. “Why...?” she said.

“You Triggered,” Miss Militia said, going for the obvious answer. “Your transformation is… pretty extreme, but with help you will be able to adjust—"

“Why did they do that?” Taylor went on. “Why did they do any of it?” She looked up at Miss Militia. “Months and months and months of hurting me, mocking me, hating me-- why would they do that. Why would a hero do that to an unpowered person? Why would anyone do that to anyone else? Why would someone do-- that-- to-- their-- best-- friend--” she broke down again, leaning her head against Miss Militia’s shoulder. “Why, why, why, why?"

Miss Militia patted her back and tried to think of something comforting. Then she realized the girl’s horn was glowing again. Trapped in indecision, unwilling to stay or leap away as the glow grew brighter-- then without warning exploded in an enormous wave of lavender light--

Armsmaster looked at what was left of the row of lockers. It was obvious which one had been Taylor Hebert’s. If the filth and gunge spilling out of the bottom hadn’t been an obvious clue, there was the fact that it was no longer so much a rectangular steel and aluminum box as it was a work of modern art. It had been ruptured open from within like someone had stuffed an M-80 into a beer can and lit the fuse. It was a miracle noone had been injured…

Though perhaps not, he reflected on a second look. From the look the… detonation, for lack of a better word… had been deliberate, blasting almost entirely upwards and sideways, mashing several lockers on either side and peeling itself open and laying it out like the petals of a flower. An extremely jagged, incredibly VIOLENT flower, but still.

He poked through the rubbish spilling out of it with a handy pencil. (There were quite a few handy… there was quite a bit of stationary lying about where students had hastily abandoned it.) He wrinkled his nose at the mess: it looked to be at least several waste cans worth, and had been in there for a considerable amount of time, long enough for some of it to start to rot. Probably over the entire holiday break. Roaches scuttled over everything, eliciting a grunt of disgust from him.

And they’d taken another human being and stuffed them into a locker full of this, he thought. Just for their own amusement. What kind of a teenage sociopath did this sort of thing?

His memory flashed back to a certain crossbow-wielding, highly antagonistic teenage vigilante of his own acquaintance and winced. Exactly, that sort of teenage sociopath…
“Hello?” one of the lockers said.

Armsmaster stared, then walked down the hall to where the locker in question stood. “Who is this?”

“I’m Madison?” the locker said, tremulous.

“The girl who called in the alert,” Armsmaster said, remembering.

“Oh.” There was a pause. “Is the scary pony gone yet?” she said, her voice high and fearful.

“She has been dealt with. How did you get possession of Shadow Stalker’s phone?” Armsmaster asked, his ‘interrogation’ voice on full.

“We stuffed the Taylor bitch in the locker, and then there was this explosion-- this EXPLOSION and purple light everywhere and screaming and the angry pony was coming after us--” the voice halted, then started again. “And then Sophia was pulling on a mask and armor and getting this crossbow out of the janitor’s closet, and she shoves this phone in my hands and yells at me to call the PRT and what to tell them… so I hid in here and called…”

“That phone is PRT property, I need it back,” Armsmaster said. The locker door cracked open just wide enough for the phone to slide out. He took it; the door shut again. “….Aren’t you coming out of there?”

“I think I’ll stay in here a while,” the locker whimpered.

“….Very well.” He returned to the ruined locker at the other end of the hall and poked about in the rubbish with the toe of his boot. Well, there wasn’t much here that any forensics officer couldn’t figure out. He grimaced…

Then the walls began to vibrate. The lockers rattled against each other. Armsmaster braced himself, but before he could do more than that a wave of lavender light swept down the hallway, passed through him, and then passed on down the hall-- eliciting a scream from Madison the Locker Girl-- before disappearing.

Armsmaster staggered and blinked. Then blinked again. The hallway was suddenly full of butterflies, blues and yellows and greens, a riot of color flitting back and forth. Where had they all come from?

He looked down. The mess of filthy bandages and tampons and dried blood had vanished, replaced with-- “red and wide rose petals?” he muttered. An enormous yellow and blue butterfly alighted on his helmet, unnoticed. He rewound his helmet cam and re-watched the last ten seconds of footage.

He blinked. He blinked again. Had he seen…?

Yes, there it was. As the wave of purplish light had washed over the cockroaches, they had transformed, one by one, into brilliantly colored butterflies.
It was a scene. The entire student body was still milling about, E88 punks heedlessly rubbing shoulders with ABB, Merchant junkies with E88, preps with jocks, all crowding in among the vehicles surrounding the building. Police squad cars, the fire department, the EMT, a PRT van and at least one TV News van were there; the PRT and BBPD were working to keep the crowd back while the school principal was busy shmoozing with the news crew, preening for the camera and spin doctoring as hard as she could.

As the mobbing students watched, the school doors opened and Armsmaster came striding out, his boots clanking loudly on the cracked sidewalk and his lips set in a thin line. Immediately behind him came Miss Militia, inexplicably soaked, and carrying a large bundle of towels from which peeped a mass of tousled curly black hair and pair of wide, worried eyes. The weaponsmaster cape made a beeline for the PRT vehicle; the crowd of students parting like the Red Sea before Moses the instant they caught a good look at what was in her arms.

Miss Militia smirked to herself as she climbed aboard. She was going to derive a lot of enjoyment in the future recalling hard-faced asian gangsters and tattooed neonazi punks retreating in wide-eyed fear from a little lavender unicorn.

Armsmaster cast about, looking for the principal: a highly unpleasant, scrawny blonde woman with a bowl-cut hairdo. She had struck him, even in his brief encounters, as completely unqualified to maintain discipline or structure over an educational institution such as this one, much less over a Ward like Shadow Stalker. Well, if what he had pieced together over this fiasco was any indicator, his original assessment had been laughably generous. He spotted her over by the news van, giving an obviously prolonged interview to the press, as the saying went, before the bodies had even cooled-- another damning black mark against her. He strode over, the butt of his halberd striking the pavement with every step so hard it should have struck sparks.

“Yes, the Protectorate responded immediately,” Principal Blackwell was saying. “The girl has been a problem for the school in the past, but we of course never suspected--”

A steel-gauntleted hand clapped down over the microphone. “Any and all information on this matter is under PRT jurisdiction,” he said. “Further inquiries will be addressed in a prepared press release.” The cameraman and the hair-sprayed talking head both yelped in complaint. He ignored them and pulled Principal Blackwell away by her skinny arm.

“What is the meaning of this--” she yipped.

“I would like to know, Principal Blackwell, why you have not complied with PRT or Protectorate procedures like you agreed to.” Armsmaster’s voice was low and dangerous.

“Now what do you--”

“You were supposed to keep a tight rein on Sophia Hess while she was under your supervision,” he said, his voice clipped. “You were supposed to immediately report any disciplinary problems-- any of them!-- to Director Piggot or myself. Yet I have just uncovered evidence of what had to be the culmination of a year long campaign of sadistic bullying by her and her two underlings against another of your students; one severe and traumatic enough to induce a TRIGGER EVENT.” His temper was growing so hot that the biofeedback readings were making the servo motors in his suit whine.

“And to cap it all off I find you out here, talking with the press, disclosing information about a metahuman incident involving those same students without our clearance. Principal Blackwell, you are in a great deal of legal trouble of so many kinds and variations it will take a week just to write out the list.”
Blackwell’s mouth flopped open and closed like that of a particularly unattractive fish. “Our legal department will be in touch both with you and with the Hebert family. We will be requesting many things, Principal Blackwell. Including all school records and files concerning all the parties involved, one GLOWING recommendation for transfer to Arcadia for one Miss Taylor Hebert, and your signature on a Non-Disclosure Agreement that will require you to fill out forms in triplicate before you pass so much as a FART, much less any information about what occurred today.

And for your own best interests, Principal Blackwell, I recommend you develop a sudden, fantastic case of amnesia concerning Taylor Hebert or anything to do with her. The only words that should cross your lips about her from here on out should be ‘Taylor Who?”

“Am I PERFECTLY CLEAR?”

Blackwell fishmouthed for a few more seconds. “...Yes?” she squeaked.

“Very good.” He started to stalk away, when yet another microphone and camera lens appeared in his path. Another blow-dried talking monkey, this one possibly male, beamed in his face. “Armsmaster, we just wanted to congratulate you and your fellow Protectorate members for swiftly bringing an end to this terroristic attack against one of our schools,” he said, his teeth gleaming. “Can you tell us anything about the events that led to this terrible rampage against innocent children?”

Armsmaster looked over his head at the teeming crowd of students. He spotted Merchants, Neonazis, Azian Bad Boys, and other gang colors scattered among them…. But that wasn’t so much to the point as the expressions he saw on all their faces. Whether they were jocks, preps, punks or gangers, it was the same; apathetic boredom, morbid anticipation, ghoulish eagerness—all of them waiting for a little blood or mayhem, all of them waiting to catch a little bit of the spectacle of someone else’s life coming apart at the seams.

He felt a vein twitch in his eyelid. Wordlessly, he activated the Crowd Addressing System in his armor, amplifying his voice enough to be heard by the entire mob. “Yes. I have found evidence that this incident was caused by a months-long campaign of sadistic and cowardly bullying against a student, one of such breathtaking cruelty and viciousness that it caused the innocent victim to go into a power-triggering emotional breakdown. Furthermore it was committed by three of the most popular students in this student body for no better reason than their own petty amusement.” Out of the corner of his eye he saw a seriously bedraggled and garbage-spattered Shadow Stalker being hustled into another PRT vehicle and felt a moment of satisfaction.

“It is also clear from what we have already learned that this campaign of bullying was made astronomically worse by the cooperation, both passive and active, covert and overt, implicit and explicit, of the COWARDLY and GUTLESS student body and school staff, who witnessed this CRIMINAL AND INHUMAN ABUSE and did NOTHING AT ALL to intervene. Many of them even contributed or participated...and noone, absolutely noone, tried to help the victim.” several of the teachers and students gaped in outrage, more than one cringed in guilt. “So I would have to say that it is my professional opinion that this entire school is full of nothing but WORTHLESS LITTLE SHITS.”

“Thank you and good day.” He roughly shouldered the flabbergasted reporter aside.

It was probably only his imagination that he heard several students on the fringes of the crowd applauding as he climbed inside the PRT transport.
He sat down across from Miss Militia, who was still cradling a towel swaddled Taylor in her lap. The patriot-themed hero’s eyebrows had nearly climbed past her hairline. “May I ask where that all came from?” she asked in a mild tone.

Armsmaster stared off at nothing in particular. “You are aware of some of the things they speculate about me on ParaHumans Online?” he said. “Autistic? Asperger’s Syndrome? That sort of thing?”

“Er, yes?”

His face, what one could see of it, was impassive. “How well do you think the public school system, or the children in it, treated autistic-spectrum children twenty to thirty years ago?”

The back of the transport was silent for a moment. “So what now?” Taylor said.

“We contact your parents or guardian...” Miss Militia said.

“Father,” Taylor said. “My mother, she– it’s just me and my Father,” she corrected herself.

“We contact your Father, and have him come out to the PRT building where we discuss your membership in the Wards.”

Taylor’s ears pricked up (Miss Militia barely restrained herself from squeeing at the adorable. It would have been terrible for her image.) “Really? You want me in the Wards? Even after all this?”

Miss Militia’s eyes crinkled in a smile. “Like I said, we’ve seen a lot worse than this.” Taylor’s muzzle wrinkled as she considered the track record of a certain other Ward in the next vehicle; Miss Militia wasn’t kidding.

“It’s sort of inevitable isn’t it,” Taylor said.

“It is most likely the best place for you,” Armsmaster said matter-of-factly. “With your unique circumstances and abilities, you are going to have some equally unique necessities. The PRT and the Protectorate are the best equipped to provide those.”

Taylor nodded glumly. “Something tells me a secret identity’s not exactly in the offing, is it?”

Miss Militia smothered a snicker. “Probably not. I think you’ll still need a cape name though. Taylor’s a nice name, but I don’t think ‘Taylor the Unicorn’ has quite the right pizzazz.”

Taylor made a noncommittal noise, but it was clear she agreed.

Armsmaster glanced down. “Hmm.. interesting.”

Taylor saw where he was looking. “Do you mind not staring at my butt, sir?” she said.

“What? Oh, hm, sorry,” he said, hastily averting his eyes and sitting stiffly. “I was just noting your odd markings… did you have tattoos before your transformation?”

“What? No!” Taylor protested. She craned her neck to peer at her own uncovered haunch. “What, what is that?”

Miss Militia poked at the mark. “It’s a ladybird,” she said with a smile in her voice.

“Hey!” Taylor protested. “… No, that's not what I meant, I meant how...” she gave up on that line of discussion. "Anyway that’s a ladybug...”
“You would be amazed at some of the strange symbols and markings that capes spontaneously produce,” Miss Militia said. "I've seen capes that had complex mandalas appear on their skin, or paragraphs out of books they had read. And that's what some people call ladybugs," she added. “Ladybird.”

Taylor seemed to consider. “Ladybird, huh?… A good a name as any.” She rolled the name around in her mouth for the feel. “Yeah.”

“Ladybird.”
“Please, I just want to see my daughter,” Danny Hebert said, alternating between pleading and threatening. “Let me see my daughter!!”

“We will shortly sir,” Battery said patiently. “But there are some things you have to understand about your daughter’s condition—”

“Condition? I wasn’t told anything about a condition!” They were on the hospital floor of the Rig. Danny looked about frantically and saw a glassed-in room off to the side that seemed suspiciously active. “Is that where you’re keeping her?” he pointed. “Get out of my way!” He lunged past the protesting heroine and marched for the room.

Danny opened the door.

Inside a small mob of medical professionals and technicians were gathered around an examination table. Sitting on the examination table was an adorable little lavender unicorn with a curly black mane and tail and a ladybug tattoo on its hip. They all looked up to see who had come in and stared.

“Hi Daddy,” the little unicorn said.

Danny closed the door.

Several long, unnervingly quiet moments passed. Battery walked over and stood next to him.

“Oh….” Danny Hebert said, his voice calm as oceans. “I’m listening.”

“Aegis groaned and palmed his temples. Of all things, giving Clock Blocker console duty as punishment for his past infractions was going to go down as the worst mistake of Aegis’ short career as leader of the Wards. He had possibly resorted to it one too many times in a failed attempt to simmer down the overly exuberant Ward, and Clockblocker had sworn that someday Aegis would regret it.

Well, he was right.

“And we switch now to footage from the cafeteria… Holy crap are those exploding crossbow bolts? Why yes they are--- it’s double secret probation for you, Stalky--- too bad it seems our friend the unicorn has some sort of forcefield. Holy cow look at those tables fly---”
In retrospect, Aegis couldn’t think of a worse mistake than giving a boy whose down-time hobby was editing together comedy videos for Youtube access the PRT Console system. During the Trigger Event Incident earlier today, he had managed to tap into the Winslow security camera system--- he suspected hacking help from Kid Win-- set up a laptop to record the footage, and had in a matter of a couple hours spliced together a highlight reel of Shadow Stalker’s disastrous battle with the new Cape, which he was now showing on his laptop to anyone who would watch. The footage was silent and in black and white (Winslow High was, in addition to being a terrible school, miserably cheap), and Clockblocker was narrating the onscreen action with relish.

Aegis suspected him of planning to add silent movie sound effects later. Possibly Yakkity Sax.

“Oh, oh, oh, she’s shooting out that glowing aura and it’s got Shadow Stalker by the leg! Ohhhh, slammed into the wall! And now the other wall! And the ceiling! And the floor! Ceiling! Floor! Wall again! And the floor! She’s gonna feel that in the morning all next week, folks--”

Thankfully, Aegis knew, the Triggered student hadn’t used nearly the force that it sounded like. Still, Shadow Stalker had bruises on top of her bruises, for sure...

“And she spots the trashcan by the wall… she shoots, she SCORES! Dun, duh duh dunt, DUN, duh duh dunt-- And that’s game, folks! Score: cute little unicorn, TWO, Shadow Stalker, NOTHIIING!”

The current captive audience was Kid Win and Browbeat. Clockblocker was sitting in the common room sofa with the laptop in his lap while the other two watched the video over his shoulder. Browbeat was leaning on the back of the sofa trying not to laugh; Kid Win was completely collapsed over it, by all appearances dying from lack of oxygen due to laughing so hard. “You do realize that if that video gets out on the internet I’ll have to kill you myself,” Aegis said to Clockblocker. “Otherwise Piggot will kill ALL of us and hang our bodies from the ramparts as a warning.”

“We have ramparts?” Clockblocker said, amused.

“She’ll build ‘em.”

“Not likely,” Kid Win snorted between fits of giggles. “Piggy’s already too busy trying to decide who to strangle first: Shadow Stalker for her screwup, or Armsmaster for his.”

“Yeah, between the parole violation, the bullying scandal, the Trigger Event, and Armsmaster’s little public op-ed, everybody in the tri-state area wants a strip of her hide. She’s gotta be tearing her hair out! The rest of us were good little boys and girls-- it’ll probably be days before she even remembers we exist.” Clockblocker chuckled and hit replay.

“Your highly irrational optimism is refreshing,” Aegis said. “I can’t believe you of all people have forgotten the Two Rules of Crap.”


Clockblocker’s smirk (his full-face visor was up) turned rueful. “You’re new, so you’re forgiven for not knowing the Two Rules of Crap in the Wards. One: When the stuff hits the fan, it never spreads evenly. Two: No matter how it spreads it always runs downhill.” He sighed. “Still, a guy could hope...”

“So don’t go borrowing trouble we don’t need,” Aegis suggested. “Keep that video off the web.”

“You ought to anyway,” Browbeat added, a look of empathy crossing his face. “The new kid is probably still pretty fragile. She don’t need to see that right now.”
Clockblocker’s smile vanished. “Yeah, you’re right,” he said, shutting down the app and closing the laptop. “I wasn’t going to put it online anyway, but-- yeah.” There was one thing you just didn’t jerk people around about when you were a cape: Trigger events. “So how long till we meet the new kid?”

“They said Saturday at the earliest,” Aegis said. “Her mutation is pretty extreme, so it’ll take them a while to clear her medically. The medics and the power wonks are going over her with every scanner and probe they got.”

Kid Win winced. “Better her than us.”

“I heard they were even asking Panacea to come in and take a look,” Browbeat threw in.

Clockblocker froze, so suddenly Aegis almost thought he’d used his power on himself. A slow grin spread across his face. “So after running the gauntlet she’s going to get an official introduction to us this weekend?” he said.

“That’s the plan,” Aegis said.

Clockblocker’s smile grew to unsettling proportions. “And that’s when Vista gets back from her family trip, right?”

“Yes, she… oh boy.”

“Oh man. This is gonna be good…”

Taylor sat patiently as the technicians and doctors and other PRT staff poked, prodded, and at one point waved booping rods over her. Her father sat next to the examining table, his hand on her withers; men armed with crowbars couldn’t have pried him away. It warmed her heart to know how devoted he was to her… even if he was looking a little poleaxed at the moment. At the moment there was a nurse with a clipboard speaking to them. “...With all that we’ve done so far, we’ve gotten the outlines sketched down of your daughter’s new physiology,” she was saying, “But with your permission, we’ve asked as a special favor for Panacea to come in and take a look.”

“Panacea?” that seemed to pull her father out of whatever world his mind was wandering in. “But I thought she was a healer. How exactly…”

“Panacea’s abilities give her an innate understanding of a person’s biology and biochemistry better than our best scientists and doctors,” the nurse said. “She’ll be able to spot things we never could, give us a general idea of your physical development, any possible medical concerns—”

Taylor’s stomach suddenly growled, loud enough to hear. She blushed brightly enough to see right through the fur on her face. “Dietary needs?” she said meekly.

The nurse laughed. “It has been a long day, hasn’t it. Didn’t they give you anything to eat?”

“I had a plain salad about an hour ago.” Taylor said. “It wasn’t much but it seemed safest.”
“Ah.” The nurse nodded, making a note. “Well, once Panacea looks you over, checks for any food allergies or the like, we can give you the all-clear for a proper meal. So… with your permission?”

Danny nodded. The nurse smiled and hustled over to the door. She leaned out and spoke to someone; a moment later the robed figure of the world’s most famous healer walked in. She was startlingly young; she couldn’t have been any older than Taylor herself. She had dark brown, curly hair that peeked out from under the hood of her white robes, and a scattering of freckles across her face, and despite the professional look of her uniform she looked terribly worn out, with a listless expression and heavy circles under her eyes. She slouched into the room, barely lifting her head. “Okay, I understand you have a new cape here, a case fuuuuu…” her sleepy eyes went wide as they locked onto the miniature lavender unicorn sitting in the center of the room.

“….Yes?” Danny said innocently, gently patting his pony daughter on her shoulder. “Something the matter?”

Taylor scowled up at him. “Daddee...” she hissed, poking him in the ribs with a hoof. “Stop winding up the world-famous cape healer.” She rolled her eyes. Dad Humor. Honestly…

Panacea jumped. “It talks!” she squeaked.

Taylor’s eyebrows tabled. “Yes, it talks,” she said sarcastically. “It also hears.” It had been a long day, and she was getting a little grumpy.

“Yes, ahem.” The lead doctor butted in. “This is Taylor Hebert, age fifteen, she just triggered and-…”

“She’s the trigger? A-are you sure a biotinker didn’t make her?” Panacea stalked forward like a cat who’d just seen its first laser dot. She reached out a hand to touch Taylor’s face.

“Hey!” Taylor said, pulling back.

Danny gently, but firmly grabbed the girl’s wrist. “Yes, she’s my daughter,” he said with patient amusement. “The only biotinkering that went into making her involved me and my wife, thank you very much.”

“Daaad!!” Taylor said, mortified.

Taylor’s wasn’t the only face flushing dark. Panacea backed up, hands to her mouth and her cheeks red. “Oh, I-- I’m so sorry-- I apologize, I don’t know what-- It’s just--”

“It’s just you don’t get too many breaks from patching up the same old breaks, bumps and bruises,” Danny said knowingly. “Or to use your power on anything unique or new. And,” he chuckled and looked at his daughter, “This is certainly unique and new.”

Panacea gave him a fleeting smile. “Yes, that’s… true. I’m sorry about that. If I may…?” she asked Taylor, holding out her hand.

“Go ahead,” Taylor said. She leaned her head forward till Panacea’s palm was resting on her forehead, just under her horn. The healer’s eyes fluttered shut for a moment, then back open. “Oh, wow,” she breathed.

“What??” Taylor asked in alarm.

“Your physiology it-- it’s incredible!” Panacea stammered. “It’s perfectly orchestrated to gather, generate, and transmit… s-some sort of energy, I can’t say what--”
“That glowing aura she generates when she uses her telekinesis,” one of the techs standing by said. “It’s giving our propeller-heads fits. The readings might as well say “Bingo Bango Bongo Boingo” for all the sense they make.”

“...Th-the keratin in your hooves, horn, mane, and tail all seem to conduct this energy too,” Panacea went on. “Reactive to it--”

“That would explain why her hair frizzed when one of the techs startled her,” someone muttered.

“Oh, your horn is alive, by the way,” Panacea told Taylor. “It has a nerve fiber in the base and a live root, and apparently grows like a rhino horn or a rodent tooth… slowly, but you may need to file it smooth every few months or so.”

“Important grooming tip, thanks,” Taylor muttered.

“Reproductive cycles are… different,” Panacea said, her brows furrowing as she stared at nothing. “Probably an eleven month pregnancy cycle--”

“NOT going to be an issue,” Taylor said.

“Normal for a horse, though,” someone else said.

“But a monthly waxing and waning fertility cycle--and no menses. Looks like you got spared your monthly visit from Aunt Flo, you lucky little stinker,” Panacea said.

“Nice to know but could we PLEASE move on from my ‘reproductive issues?’” Taylor said on a rising note. “What about dietary? Is chocolate poisonous to me now? Am I going to have to live on grass now or oats or something?”

“Actually… oh good grief…”

“Whaaahahat?” Taylor said. Would she ever stop DOING that?

“Well, you don’t have to worry about chocolate,” Panacea said. It was hard to tell whether she was more amused or annoyed. “Your body can easily handle the theobromides and other toxins that give dogs and cats so much trouble. In fact it can handle toxins way better than a baseline human… or a baseline horse. You not only COULD eat grass and like it, you could nosh down on plants that would kill a horse-- or a human.”

“Really,” Taylor said, impressed.

“What about meat?” Danny asked.

“You and your barbecues...” Taylor said.

Panacea huffed. “Yesss, she can still eat meat and dairy,” she said with a roll of her eyes. “For that matter, normal horses can eat meat too… it takes some time to adjust to it but they can. Her? She could sit down right now and eat a Fugly Bob’s Burger without a hitch.”

“So what’s the catch?” Taylor said.

“What catch?”

“You said ‘oh good grief’ earlier… that no sound good to me.”

Panacea snorted. “It’s just that on top of all the above, your metabolism, your lipid storage and
your insulin cycle are practically bulletproof. They can handle mass loads of starches, sugars, and carbohydrates-- in fact they’re turbocharged to run on ridiculous excesses and LIKE it.” She bent down to look the unicorn in the eye. “In layman’s terms you’re custom-built to snarf chocolate cake and ice cream sundaes like they’re going out of style.” She hummed. “Even your saliva and tooth enamel are more resistant to decay…”

“Oh, now I’m starting to hate her,” the nurse with the digital clipboard joked. “Someone up there must like you, kid.”

“Someone up there must think it’s adorable to have a little purple unicorn that can practically live on cookies and cake,” Taylor corrected her wryly.

“Part of it might be you have to burn a lot of calories to make that… glowy aura thing you did,” Danny pointed out.

“In part, yeah,” Panacea agreed. “Anyway, your growth cycle… hmh?” she paused, looking puzzled. “Oh… kay… your maturation is about the same as a human-- about 12 to 13 years to the start of puberty, full maturation by about 25… slightly longer lifespan, possibly close to 120 to 150 years--”

“Whoa, that’s good!” Taylor said.

“B-but… I can’t quite put it in words--” Panacea stopped and took a breath. “Okay, it’s… really fuzzy down past a certain point. But the impression that I get is that your ‘species,’ for lack of a better term, has three major possible forms. And that during the first month or so of your gestation- - that is, if you had actually had a gestation-- your form could have gone one of those three possible ways. The form of a unicorn is only one of them.”

“Really?? Then what are the other two?” the lead physician asked.

Panacea rubbed her forehead, vexed. “How would I know?” she said. “Reading a DNA strand to know how it MIGHT have developed is like-- like looking at part of a blueprint for a half finished house that got changed again and again before construction started. Short of cloning her and seeing what the clone grew into-- assuming we could even figure out what the trigger is to select the form-- we can’t tell.

“The real kicker though is that there’s coding here for a-- a conditional metamorphosis.”

Taylors’ eyes went even larger, and Danny’s body went stiff with sudden tension. “You mean I’m going to change AGAIN?” Taylor cried out in dismay.

“NO! No, no no,” Panacea said, shaking her head firmly. Both father and daughter relaxed, but only slightly. “Your physiology is perfectly stable. What you see is what you get.” Danny and Taylor sighed in relief. “But there’s… something here, a sort of switch-- almost a … promise of potential. one that will only activate under extreme duress or environmental conditions. Perhaps a- - larger form? No, not quite---” she sounded frustrated. She squinted at Taylor’s head under her hand as if the answers were written in a too-small font on the unicorn’s brow.

“So okay, I’m some sort of Pokemon or something?” Taylor said, cocking an eyebrow. “I’m going to ‘digivolve’ or whatever? Or possibly could?”

“It’s… not very likely? The sequencing sort of implies one hell of an environmental stressor--- a drastic change-- is needed to cause the paradigm shift…I’m sorry, my power usually isn’t this cryptic,” Panacea complained. “I haven’t hit a no-sell like this since they had me look at Weld-- and he’s made of living metal!”
“It’s okay,” Taylor said sympathetically. The healer looked like she was getting a terrible headache from trying. “You’ve already told us a lot of important stuff we really needed to know.” Her stomach suddenly growled again, making her blush madly. “Speaking of which—”

The techs and physicians all chuckled. “Okay, I think that’s lunch,” the lead said. “Or dinner, considering the time. If you like,” he said to Danny and Taylor, “the Rig has a pretty decent cafeteria. I’m pretty sure they’ll spring for the bill.”

Danny gave him a half-smile. “Sounds good. Sounds good Taylor?”

“Definitely,” Taylor said with relief. She’d been starving for ages, it felt like! She looked up at the healer. “Care to join us?”

Panacea blinked. “I… well yes. Something to eat does sound good right about now. Thank you.” She smiled briefly, as if it pained her. “Call me Amy, by the way.”

Taylor held out a hoof. “Taylor.” Amy shook it, this time with a sincere smile.

The staff of the PRT working out on the Rig were of the highest calibre, and of the highest professional standards. They worked with masked heroes who trusted them implicitly with their anonymity. Discretion was their byword and their personal code.

So naturally the photos of an adorable little lavender unicorn sitting in the Rig cafeteria, eating her way through an enormous hamburger and fry platter and a sundae almost as big as herself, hit the internet within a matter of minutes.

Emily Piggot, director of the Brockton Bay PRT, a jowly woman with a severe haircut and an even more severe scowl etched permanently on her face, sat behind her desk and glowered like a basilisk at the two leaders of the Brockton Bay Protectorate. She was not amused. She was never amused. But current events had her less amused than ever before. Her current level of amusement could be annotated in negative numbers. “So would either of you care to explain to me,” she said in the dulcet tones of someone who had spent the past 24 hours chewing nails and tearing hair, “why our illustrious Armsmaster decided to do an impromptu on-air interview and turn our intercession in a Trigger Event, something which should have been an easy PR coup for us, into a screaming public relations disaster?”

Miss Militia was seated casually across the desk from her. Armsmaster, in a none-too-subtle show of defiance, had refused a seat and was standing, staring out the picture window, sunlight gleaming off his blue and silver armor. “I’m not retracting my statement,” he said without looking at her.

“You will if I say you do,” Piggot said, her temper flaring. “Even if I have to stand behind you, mimic your voice and move your lips with my finger.” She rapped on the desk with her knuckles absentely. “Armsmaster, you stood on live TV and informed the people of Brockton Bay that their darling, angel children were all, quote ‘worthless little shits.’ Tell me that isn’t going to bite us in the arse.”
“That is a gross distortion of my words,” Armsmaster said, his lips a thin line.

“That is exactly what they’ll do with those words-- are already doing with those words!” Piggot leaned back in her seat, grimacing as her ruined kidneys twinged.

“And they were exactly what needed to be said,” Miss Militia said.

Piggot’s eyebrows raised. “And how do you figure that?”

“Director, I don’t expect someone who is never in the field to be aware of things as we are,” the patriot-themed cape began. Piggot bristled at the reminder of her permanent state as a PRT desk jockey, but held her tongue and let her continue. “But you read the dossier, you saw the photographs and the footage. What was done to Taylor Hebert by those girls-- by the entire school, staff included, was… obscene. And what’s more horrible is that this event was actually the culmination of a year-long campaign of cruelty--”

“Aided and abetted by the school administration’s willful apathy,” Armsmaster bit out. Piggot’s eyebrows rose further. She’d rarely seen Armsmaster so agitated about something.

“It not only needed to be said to the little assholes,” Miss Militia added with a sardonic tone to her voice, “It was in our best interests to express outrage and disgust at the whole thing, and as bluntly as possible.” Her brows furrowed. “Because, in case you forgot, Director, we are at least partially complicit in the whole affair. We were the ones who placed a highly questionable probationary Ward in that school. We were the ones the school staff thought they were pandering to when they hushed up the activities of Sophia Hess and her friends. And after today’s little media circus, to say nothing of the few hundred cell phone videos that are going to hit the internet over the next few days, anyone with the IQ of a gerbil is going to figure out that Shadow Stalker, the Protectorate Ward, is also Sophia Hess-- the leader of the most notorious group of bullies since they dumped a bucket of pig’s blood from the gym rafters in Carrie.”

Piggot made a sound somewhere between a snarl and a groan and rubbed her temples. She was defeated and knew it. “Could you at least have found a more diplomatic way to distance us from that?” she almost pleaded. “Did you have to let ARMSMASTER speak to the Press unfiltered?”

“Honestly, not without sounding mealy-mouthed,” Miss Militia said. She refrained from pointing out she didn’t ‘allow’ Armsmaster to do anything. “Tell me, Director; would you expect him--” she jerked a thumb over her shoulder “--to be diplomatic?”

“No,” Piggot admitted bluntly. “I’d expect him to sound like he was reading off a teleprompter if he tried.” Armsmaster made a few grumbling noises himself at that.

“Neither would anyone else,” Miss Militia said. Her eyes crinkled slightly in amusement. “In fact it’s expected of him to be utterly tactless.”

“I’m right here, you know,” Armsmaster said.

“So basically it works out that what we needed to say got said, in the way it needed to be said, by the one person who could get away with saying it.” Miss Militia’s amusement faded. “And within earshot of the one person we sincerely needed to hear it most: Taylor herself.”

Something in the heroine’s voice caught Piggot’s attention. “And why do you think it’s so important that the PRT curry favor with a talking plush toy?” she asked.

Armsmaster turned from the window and walked to her desk. He pulled two glass jars from a compartment on his belt and set them on her desk blotter. One contained a handful of red and white flower petals. The other had holes crudely punched in the lid, and held a vividly colored,
living butterfly. “These are rose petals,” he said, tapping one lid, then the other. “and this is a butterfly; a Holly Blue, by species.”

“And?”

“This morning they were a rotting tampon and a cockroach, respectively,” he said. “I can show you helmet cam footage of the precise moment of their metamorphosis.”

“When I was tending to Taylor during her emotional breakdown, she emitted a pulse of that strange energy of hers,” Miss Militia said. “The wave encompassed the entire school. We have techs going over the building with a fine toothed comb, but so far it seems all that was metamorphosed was the bugs and filth from the locker, including the remnant clinging to her own skin.” She held up an evidence bag with a few flower petals inside. “Daisies and carnations, in this case.”

“I thought you said she was a telekinetic!” Piggot sputtered in alarm. “She’s capable of transmutation, too?” She refused to say biokinesis. It was too alarming to even think on. Someone with the power to transmogrify things at range, without even line of sight, over an unknown area... the implications were frightening beyond measure.

“And who knows what else,” Armsmaster added. “The scans so far indicate this energy field of hers is... exotic beyond imagining.”

“She knows Sophia is Shadow Stalker,” Armsmaster went on. “She could hardly not figure it out, seeing as she went from being stuffed in a locker by her to thrashing her up one end of the school and down the other. It’s in our favor that we were quick to respond and that we moved to help her; that means she saw us as on her side right from the beginning. And right now she’s probably still a little shell shocked from all that’s happened to her. But the instant things settle down and she has time to think things over, she’ll start making connections.

“If she decides we’re still on her side, we’ll get a new and fantastically powerful member of the Wards. If she decides that the past two years of suffering were our fault, then the explosion we saw at Winslow could be small potatoes.”

“To say nothing of what her father could do to us,” Miss Militia couldn’t help adding, even as Piggot groaned and covered her face with her hands. “In case you missed it, Danny Hebert is in charge of the Dockworker’s Union, and a political gadfly in his own right. If he gets it in his head, he could raise a public stink like nothing you’ve ever seen.

“‘Protectorate covers up Ward criminal behavior,’” she said, making quote marks in the air as if reading a headline. “‘The big bad heartless PRT verses the poor little cute crying unicorn girl.’ How bad an aneurysm would Glenn Chambers have, do you think?”

“And what do you recommend?” Piggot hissed, sourly admitting defeat.

“How about the novel approach of ‘the truth’?” Miss Militia said cynically. “Look, the only way we can do it is if we just do it straight. Tell everything. All at once. Like ripping off a bandaid. We let the Heberts know everything, make it clear that we had a failure in our chain of command...”

“No fooling,” Piggot said dryly. “I know a certain Ward handler who’s getting thrown under the bus.”

“We come down on Shadow Stalker with both feet,” Armsmaster added. “No shipping her off to another district with a name change, no quiet shuffling away. Her family goes under witness protection and she goes straight to Juvenile Hall.”
“Do not pass Go, do not collect two hundred dollars,” Miss Militia said smugly.

“The Chief Director may give us trouble on that,” Piggot said. “The whole reason we gave Shadow Stalker probationary status was because she insisted the girl’s abilities were just too useful.”

“They’re still useful,” Armsgmaster said curtly. “But she’ll keep in the Cooler just as well as anywhere else.”

Piggot nodded and gave a grimace that could almost pass for a smile. “Fair enough.”

“And we make a point of cutting a sweetheart deal with the Heberts,” Miss Militia added. “Compensation for our part in her pain and suffering. Even if it’s a token gesture, it’s still a gesture, and should be made.

“The upper management will quibble over that,” Armsgmaster said. “Say that it’s too self-incriminating, or the like. Make it a few extra pluses on her eventual contract with the Wards; extra pay or benefits—say that it’s due to her unique physical needs, her inability to maintain a secret identity, etc.”

Piggot nodded slowly. “We already do something like that for the few Case 53s we have on board,” she said. “That will at least pass muster...” She sighed and shook her head. “I can’t find any reason not to do it the way you suggest. I’m just not looking forward to the ruckus— or the red tape— that’s going to cut loose when we do.” her expression soured.

“Look on the bright side, Director,” Miss Militia said, her eyes crinkling again. “Once she signs up we are going to make a MINT on merchandising.”
“And if you will sign here, and here,” the PRT office worker said. Danny carefully signed, then slid the paper sideways to his daughter, who picked up the pen with her hoof and signed with a cheerful flourish--

She picked up the pen in her hoof--

She picked up the pen--

In her hoof--

Taylor “Ladybird” Hebert sat there staring at her hoof, the pen clinging to the frog. “Wait. What?” She held it over the desk and dropped it. Then she picked it up again.

Danny and the desk lady blinked. “How...”

“Oh, right,” Taylor said suddenly. “Pan-- I mean Amy-- did say that my hooves conducted my power, too. I guess that gives me, er, grippy hooves?”

“Oh. Okay. I guess?” Danny scratched his head. “Still looks a bit odd.”

The desk lady cleared her throat. “Well, anyway. Let me be the first to say congratulations, and welcome to the Brockton Bay Wards…. Ladybird.”

“Why thank you very much,” Taylor… Ladybird… said with a smirk. She stood on the seat of her chair and gave a little pony-style curtsey. Danny and the secretary chuckled and applauded. “So what next?”

“I’m afraid Mr. Hebert can’t accompany you beyond this point,” the lady behind the desk said, getting to her feet. “We’ll be dealing with a lot of internal security matters, not the least of which is meeting your new teammates unmasked.”

“Ah, I understand,” Danny said with a weak smile. “And I’ve been here too long as it is. The Docks won’t run themselves forever.”

Taylor put a hoof on his leg. “I’ll be fine, Daddy,” she said, giving him her best brave-girl smile. “Besides I’ve got--”

“Call me Madelyne,” the office worker said.

“I’ve got Madelyne to look after me, right? Besides. I’m gonna be a superhero. I can handle whatever comes next.”

Danny crouched down and gave his transformed daughter a long hug. She threw a hoof over his shoulder and hugged him back. “You be good, Little Owl,” he said in her ear.

“I will...”

He patted her hair a couple of times. “Hmmm. Soft.”

“Daaad…!”
Danny chuckled. “Hey, couldn’t help it.” He got up to go. “I’ll be back tomorrow evening.”

“Bye..” Taylor followed him with her eyes as he walked out the door and down the hall-- quickly, and without looking back. Just like he did on my first day of Kindergarten, she remembered. She turned to Madelyne. “So… what next?”

“Next, I believe, you get to go over to the PRT and meet your new teammates,” Madelyne said over her shoulder as she finished running the papers through the computer scanner. She paced off down the hall, Taylor trotting in her wake. “You’ll love them, they’re a good bunch of kids… er, well…”

“We know about Shadow Stalker,” Taylor said, a trifle grimly. “We also know she’s not a problem anymore.” It had been two days of exams, tests, and paper-filling, but during that time they had kept informed. Director Piggot was sending Sophia Hess, aka Shadow Stalker, on her way to a stay in Juvie, and she wasn’t taking the slow boat to China about it either. They had met very briefly with the woman; she was an intimidating figure to say the least. But she had made it clear that she was solidly on Taylor’s side in this mess, which was a lifetime more than could be said for Principal Blackwood back in Winslow. “All the same,” she went on. “off the record… is there anyone I should look out for?”

The secretary hesitated. She made a point looking around the hallway before answering. She leaned over the desk in a conspiratorial fashion. “Truthfully-- Armsmaster can be a bit stiff. And Director Piggot can be a real hardcase… but so long as you stick to the rules and don’t go out of your way to tick them off, and don’t waste their time, they’re no problem. The only one I’d really worry about is Director Calvert.”

“What about him?” Taylor asked.

“Nothing in particular,” the woman said, biting her lip. “Mind, it’s only a personal impression. But he gives off this…oily air. Sleazy. Like you want to wash your hand after shaking his…That's just a woman's intuition speaking. That he's the sort of man who’s used to getting his way, and not too particular about how he gets it.” She shrugged it off. “Not that it should matter much, he’s not even close to your chain of command, so you should rarely even see him, much less have to worry about him.”

Taylor nodded in relief. After all that had happened, she really didn’t need to go through a round of inter-office drama. “Um, anything else.”

The secretary half-grinned, half-winced. “Well, there is Glenn Chambers. He’s the head of the Public Relations department and he…”

“Wait. Is he the one responsible for Glamour Girl out in Vegas having to wear gold lame’ and high-heel platforms into combat?” Taylor said with fatalistic apprehension.

The secretary nodded. “He’s… yeah. I haven’t heard a hero or heroine yet who hasn’t complained at the top of their lungs about him.” She looked down at Taylor and sighed. “At least he can’t jerk you around about your costume design, sweetie…”

Taylor frowned. “My costume design?”

“Well, you’re...” the secretary waved her hand up and down, indicating Taylor in the altogether.

Taylor’s enormous eyes went even rounder. Her pupils turned to pinpricks.

“OHSWEETMERCIFULCRAP I’M NAKED!!”
The next few minutes found a small enclave gathered around the nearest bathroom door. “Ladybird, please come back out,” Madelyne said patiently to the door. “You have nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“You mean besides spending the last several days running around completely starkers?” the door shouted back.

“Well she has a layer of fur-- ouch!”

One of the orderlies had spoken up; Madelyne had jabbed him with her pen. “Not helping,” she said. “Really, Ladybird, you’re making a big deal out of it. Nobody saw anything.”

“That’s not the point!”

“Actually nobody could see anything,” the lead powers researcher said, not looking up from his datapad. The others stared at him. He noticed the looks. “What? Didn’t you notice?”

“Notice what?” Taylor said from inside the bathroom. Ponies apparently had very good hearing.

The lead powers researcher leaned in toward the door. “Ladybird, look at yourself in the mirror,” he said. He had the air of someone who knew something nobody else had noticed.

There was a moment of silence. “Doctor Micheals,” Taylor said with exaggerated patience, “Do you know where the mirrors are usually located in a bathroom?”

“Er, above the sink?”

“And how tall am I, again?”

“She’s never seen herself in a mirror yet? I hope she washes her hooves after she-- Ow! Quit it.” Madelyne had stabbed the orderly again.

“Oh, er, right. Someone go fetch a full-length mirror? There has to be one around here somewhere, capes are all clothes-horses...” The orderly hustled off. Possibly for a mirror, possibly to escape Madelyne’s pen. He returned with a tall dressing room mirror in tow. “Okay, Ladybird? If you’ll just come out for a moment... I promise, there’s nobody here but us medical types. And Madelyne of course, but you know her.”

The door creaked open and a small lavender unicorn hustled out, cringing, her tail tucked underneath her. “Okay, take a look at yourself,” Doctor Micheals instructed. The orderly set the mirror on the floor and held it up. Sulking and fussing, Taylor faced the mirror. Her ears pricked up in surprise and her rump thumped on the floor. “Holy crap!”

“What?”

“I’m… cute!” Taylor said. “I mean, ridiculous cute. I want to give myself a teddy bear, a hug and a cookie!” She sounded as if she didn’t know whether to be horrified or not.

Dr. Micheals rubbed his finger fiercely over his mustache as he struggled not to laugh. “Well yes,
we’ve noticed. But notice anything else?” Taylor stopped staring at herself in the mirror to look at him. “Go on, stand up. Turn in a circle and look yourself over.”

Taylor obeyed. “….AAAH! I’m a kewpie doll!” She turned in a circle, then reared up on her haunches and looked down her belly. “Where’d everything… I mean everything was there the last time I went to the bathroom—” She realized what she was doing and fell down to the floor in a huddled crouch. She gave everyone a look. “Just a second. Iiii… gotta check something—” she backed into the bathroom and slammed the door.

“Wait. There everything… uh, I mean… okay, what the heck?”

“Remember what Panacea told you about conductive keratins?” Dr. Micheals said through the door. The door opened and Taylor stuck her head out. “Your fur is apparently projecting a, ahh, modesty-protecting mirage of sorts over your epidermis that camouflages certain areas of your body. Much like Narwhal does with her skin-tight layer of force fields.”

“So what you’re saying is that I’m basically dressed in unicorn pony magic?” Taylor said.

“Well, if saying it that way helps…” he shrugged expressively. “Yes, I suppose.”

Taylor sighed. At least she hadn’t been streaking everybody for the past two or three days. “Okay, but maybe it’s my imagination, but I’m starting to feel a draft in here,” she complained. She used her telekinesis to pull a towel from a nearby cart and threw it over herself like a shawl, so only her head and forehooves were exposed. “Could I please have something…?”

“Like what, a doggy sweater?… OW! Dangit already!”

Madelyne suddenly snapped her manicured fingers. “I know just the thing! Be right back!” She trotted off down the hall, her high heels clicking. Everyone stood around looking awkward for about ten minutes; then she came clickity-clacking back. She was holding something that looked a bit like a soft, off-white cloak… only it looked hand made, had a couple of buttons and a fringe, and seemed to be knitted or crocheted.

“What is it?” Taylor asked, cocking her head to one side.

Madelyne held it up. “It’s a shawl,” she said. “My mother made it. It’s not really my look, but it’s just the right size…” she knelt down, whipped off the towel Taylor had donned and threw the shawl over her. “see, we button it around the tail and down the back, and then we tied it off around the neck-- perfect!” Madelyne regarded her handiwork. “Not half bad… at least it’ll do till the costume monkeys come up with something more suiting.

Taylor regarded herself in the mirror. It covered her up like one of those-- what were they anyway, those cover things race horses were put in off the track?-- but it draped on her a bit, coming down to her knees in the front and her hocks in the back. It almost looked like she was wearing a dress. A little-old-lady dress cut for miniature ponies, but still-- far better than nothing.

“How does it feel?”

“Better,” Taylor sighed. It did feel better to be clothed in some fashion. People got used to walking around in open-backed hospital gowns, she supposed; she could get used to this. “It’s comfortable anyway.”

“Excellent. Okay, I think we’ve kept the Wards waiting long enough…? We have to catch a chopper out to the PRT base; that’s where the Wards HQ is...
Life was suck, Missy Biron decided. Work was suck, mandatory vacation time was suck, EVERYTHING was suck. She slouched into the elevator and hit the button for the floor for the Wards quarters.

It was all Piggot’s fault, she decided. It was Missy’s father who’d gotten it in his head to be “impulsive,” rent an RV, and take the whole family to Disneyworrrrrld(blegh) over the Christmas Break on some sort of “fix the family” outing. But it was Piggot who had signed off on Missy’s leave from the Wards-- who had made it mandatory-- that she go on this horrible trip to Disneyworrrrrld(blegh) with her family. Had shot down every effort Missy had made to sign up for extra duties, extra patrols, Console Duty, ANYTHING--(where was an Endbringer attack when you needed it?) to justify not going along with this incredibly bad idea.

So Missy had gotten the excruciating pleasure of spending several days trapped in a cramped RV on a road trip to Florida and back with two alleged adults that couldn’t stand each other anymore and who were probably plotting right now how to murder each other with their souvenir Mickey Mouse ears.

Disneyworrrrrld(blegh) had been no better. The park had been crowded, Missy lost track of how many attractions were shut down for repairs thanks to some Tinker villain LOSER who had tried to hold the entire park hostage the week before by using his weird remote-control powers to sabotage one ride after another till they paid him off… the local Protectorate had caught the LOSER, but not before he’d ruined dozens of computerized rides and games… the rides that had still been running had made Missy nauseous, and her parents had spent the whole time either fighting with each other or complaining how much everything cost. And Vista had to force herself not to suplex some of the more annoying costumed characters.

And now she was back, feeling like something the cat dragged in and then threw back out, getting ready to meet the newest member of the Protectorate ENE Wards. Apparently about three days ago some oh-so-lucky kid had a trigger event at Winslow High, and for whatever reason she was being express-shipped straight into Ward membership. Hurray, a newbie. And one who was still probably a shaking mess from their trigger event.

She sighed and adjusted her visor. Yup. Another day of suck.

The elevator doors swooshed open. She looked around the enormous domed room that made up the hub of the Ward HQ. Yup, just like she left it. Everyone was gathered in the main break area it looked like.

Then she clapped eyes on what was sitting in the middle of the couch and felt the air whoosh out of her lungs. For the first time since joining the Wards her eyes were fixed on something other than Gallant. It was little, it was lavender purple, it had cute little hooves and big adorable eyes and tumbling black locks of mane and tail and a dinky spiral horn from its forehead and it was the most perfectly wonderful thing that Vista had ever SEEN--
Taylor sat on the couch and chattered amicably with the other Wards. Things were actually going well; after getting over the awkwardness of introductions and her own shyness… and the totally unique awkwardness for everyone of holding a conversation with a talking mythical beast… they all opened up. Snacks and soda had been broken out and something of a makeshift “welcome to the team” party had taken shape. Gallant and Aegis were rather polite and charming, Kid Win was energetic and friendly, Clockblocker had an eccentric sense of humor, Browbeat was bluff but soft-spoken… they all went out of their way to make the new member feel welcome.

Still, Taylor got the odd feeling that they were waiting-- some like Clockblocker, on pins and needles-- for something to happen.

There was a chime from the elevator and the whoosh of doors opening. Clockblocker broke off in the middle of his story (something about a nun and a penguin) and looked up. “Ah, there she is;” he said with a crap eating grin.

Taylor stared at him “What--”

“OmigoshOmigoshOHMYGOOOOOOSSSSSSSH!”

WHUMP!

Without warning Taylor was hit amidships by a fast moving projectile. She got a brief impression of green cloth and blonde hair, and she suddenly had a twelve year old girl clinging to her like a limpet, seriously squeezing the stuffing out of her. “Ohmygosh she’sadorable ohgoshogosh a REAL LIVE UNICORN did some biotinkermakeherIcan’tbelievearealliveunicorn canwekeepher--”

"Uh," Aegis waved his hand in the air helplessly. “Vista, this is Ladybird.”

The gleeful little girl looked up at him as she petted the lavender unicorn with one hand while nearly strangling her with the other arm. “oh is that her name? Is she our new mascot?”

“Um, actually, I’m you’re new teammate,” Taylor said.

“Ladybird,” Aegis said blithely. “Allow me to introduce Vista.”

The transformation of Vista’s face from childlike glee to horrified dismay was heartbreaking.

She was still sitting in the kitchen area a half hour later, back turned to the door. Taylor stuck her head in the doorway and sighed at the sight of the twelve year old Ward. She was hunched up on a kitchen chair, eating her way through a box of ginger cookies, sulking and miserable.

It was only she had bolted from the break room literally shrieking in embarrassment that the others had broken down and gave Taylor the full story. After they had stopped laughing (that idiot Clockblocker was still giggling over the photos he’d taken on his cellphone.)

Apparently Vista had triggered with her space-altering powers at something like the age of NINE, and had been a Ward ever since. She was consequently both the youngest member of the Wards and the one with the most seniority. But since the PRT rules said that rank was by age… well, she’d spent the last four years being ordered around by capes with one-tenth her experience, then
watching them graduate to full Protectorate status-- only to have a brand new, inexperienced cape come in and replace them as leader and start ordering her around as well.

On top of that apparently she had Triggered due to the fact that her parents were a pair of selfish, immature, overgrown children who were constantly fighting and perpetually on the fringe of divorce, and like most poor children put in that situation she’d taken it upon herself to somehow try and pull her broken family together.

Throw in a horrendous crush on Gallant on top of that, one that Vista thought nobody knew about but everybody did...

To say she was a bit precocious as a consequence was an understatement. Her frustrations had made her constantly obsessed with being thought of as “mature” (hence the breastplate on her armor that she kept trying to make a bit more “breast” than “plate”) and was constantly posturing like she was a thirty year old veteran of the wars. She hated being called little or cute, she hated having to wear the skirted costume that made her look like a little girl (she was allegedly plotting to someday poison Glenn Chambers’ egg McMuffin), and she absolutely hated being caught acting like a little girl.

The fact that she was a little girl had zero persuasive force with her.

Taylor clip-clopped a few steps into the kitchen. Vista obviously heard her. “Don’t look at me,” she muttered.

Taylor sighed. She’d already had her dignity upturned a half-dozen times this week; one more time wouldn’t hurt. At least for a good cause. She trotted over, sat down next to the stool, and leaned against the girl’s leg. “Hard day?” she said, looking up at her.

Vista nodded. Taylor could practically see the girl struggling with the urge to reach down and pet her. She decided to up the ante and rested her head across the girl’s lap, pushing the box of cookies aside. “Ear skritchies,” she commanded.

“Hey!” Vista protested, catching the cookie box.

“Hay is for dinner,” Taylor joked. “Ear skritchies now.” Vista looked conflicted, then gave in to the inevitable, digging her fingers carefully into the mane around her ears. Taylor smiled; it actually felt rather nice. Her hind hoof started tapping in time on the tile floor. “Mmm, I’m starting to see why dogs and cats like this so much,” she said. This elicited a giggle from Vista. Progress! “My code name’s Ladybird, but you can call me Taylor,” she said.

“Um, really? Why Ladybird?” Wordlessly Taylor lit up her horn (eliciting a gasp of surprise from Vista) and lifted the hem of her shawl, revealing the ladybug on her hip. “Oh, neat,” Vista said, blinking. Taylor let the hem drop.

“My code name’s Vista, but my real name’s Missy,” Vista said.

“Sorta caught that,” Taylor replied. Missy’s face flushed red under her visor.

“I’m sorry I did that,” she muttered.

“Eh, I’m probably going to have to get used to it,” Taylor said. “I’m little, I’m cute-- adorable if I do say so myself-- “ she fluttered her lashes and smirked; Vista giggled. “and people are going to treat me a certain way.”

Vista’s expression soured. “Gee, that sounds familiar,” she muttered.
Taylor poked her with a hoof. “Hey, no pouting,” she said. “At least you’ll grow out of it. And it’s not all that bad, you know.”

“Really,” Missy said, her voice dripping cynicism.

“Yeah really. At least this way people are nice to me… or at least they aren’t freaking out screaming that I’m a monster. Which would YOU rather be: a cute and cuddly pony or something that looked like a naked mole rat?”

Missy grimaced. “What’s a naked mole rat??”

“Picture a rat that looks like someone turned it inside out,” Taylor said, amused.

“Ew!”

“Besides, sooner or later people will start respecting me for who I am, not just what I look like,” she said. “It just takes time.”

“Too MUCH time,” Vista muttered, thinking of a certain armor-clad Ward and blushing slightly.

“So? There’s no big rush. Till then I’ll enjoy what I have. Heck, I’m gonna exploit the heck out of it.” She looked up. “Now gimme a cookie.”

Vista giggled, tried to smother it, then gave up. “Get your own cookies, Ladybird.”

“But you have cookies right here and now,” Taylor said. She gave Missy the biggest puppy dog eyes she could manage and a wibbling lower lip. “Cookieeee…”

“Okay, okay,” Missy said, finally giggling openly. She pulled a cookie out of the pack and stuck it in the pony’s open mouth.

“Araarnum. Mmm, Good cookie,” Taylor said with her mouth full. She munched happily.

“You’re more immature than I am,” Missy teased, giggling fit to bust now. “How old ARE you?”

“Oh, fifteen,” Taylor said. “Practically an old woman.”

“Is this how practically old women act?” Missy said sarcastically.

“Whenever they want to. What’s the point of growing up if you can’t act like a little kid whenever you want to? ‘When I was a child, I acted as a child; when I grew up I put away childish things… including the childish need to be thought of as ever-so-grown-up,” she paraphrased her favorite quote from C.S. Lewis, giving the younger Ward a knowing grin.

Missy huffed. “They sent you in here to give me some sort of lecture on being “a normal kid,” didn’t they,” she mocked, making quote marks in the air and rolling her eyes. Her voice was full of the longsuffering of any child anywhere about being lectured by grownups. One minute they complained about you being immature, then they complained about you being too mature. It would be nice if they made up their minds.

Taylor shrugged. “I came in here because this is where the cookies are. Speaking of which: cookie.” Another cookie was popped in her mouth. “Fanks. Nom. …..Aaaaaand because you were here, and you were upset, and I felt kind of bad about that.” She finished her cookie. “So, you feel better?”

Vista dimpled. “A little.”
“Come back out with me?” Vista hesitated. “Come on, you aren’t gonna leave me alone out there with a bunch of doofus GUYS are you?….they’re talking about ordering in some pizza,” she tempted.

Missy snorted. “We’d better head back out there then and run an intercept. Kid Win puts pineapple on everything. Gak.”

“Can’t have that,” Ladybird agreed with a chuckle. The two got to their feet and ambled to the door.

“Can you eat pizza?” Vista asked in curiosity.

“Sure. I can eat pretty much anything. I’m a little four-legged trash compactor...”

On the way out the door Taylor looked over her shoulder and saw Gallant leaning, semi-casually, against the wall outside the kitchen. He gave her a covert thumbs up. Taylor gave him a smile in return, then went back to answering the youngest Ward’s question about unicorns.
Bayleaf stuck to his stealth mode form till he was fairly sure he was out of range. He found himself in an area filled with boarded up factories, decaying warehouses and run down tenements…. The Docks, if he remembered the layout of Brockton Bay canon correctly. He slipped between two buildings and changed to his human form— then reconsidered as gravel and broken glass cut into his bare feet. Swearing, he pulled the bits of glass loose and hastily shifted to his worgen form; the shifting seemed to heal the minor cuts, and the leathery pads on his wolfen feet were far tougher than his tender human skin.

It was time for a quick assessment. He was stranded in a strange unfamiliar territory with no money, no ID, no shelter, no… well it would be easier to list what he DID have, he decided. He looked down at himself. He had a shirt made of what seemed to be homespun linen, and dark brown breeches of the same with a rope belt. Not even shoes. Apparently Agent had traded in even the basic druid starting gear for more points to spend in the point-buy system.

So he had two pieces of clothes that might have won a medal at a renfaire for authenticity, and his own carcass. Oh, and a butt-load of talents and powers, but at this point that and two bucks would buy him a cup of coffee. So… what did he need first?

He needed clothing. That was a quick and easy fix, though. It was already close to sunset; he could wait. For now he contented himself with finding a back door into the abandoned factory he was hiding behind. The doorknob and lock snapped off easily. He slipped inside and looked around: it was dark, dusty, and there were no signs of anyone else, not even the junkies or homeless had gotten into this place yet--- probably too recently abandoned. Perfect. He had shelter now, at least temporarily.

Once the sun went down he turned back into the black sabertooth, went into stealth, and went on the hunt.

Calling the Docks a poor neighborhood was being generous. It was impoverished, run down, covered in graffiti and trash and there seemed to be a homeless junkie in every alleyway or at every other street corner. But struggling neighborhoods did have certain commonalities, no matter where you were, so it didn’t take him long to find what he was looking for: A Goodwill store, complete with one of their ubiquitous clothes-drop bins out front. Once he was sure the coast was clear, he shifted into worgen form and snapped the security chains off the bin. He grabbed as many bags of donated clothing as he could carry (which was a considerable number, considering his strength) and ran for it. A quick leap from alleyway to rooftop and he soon returned to the abandoned factory, his loot in tow.

He felt very little guilt about robbing a Goodwill; people dumped their old clothing and possessions there under the delusion that they were donating to a charity. They weren’t; even though Goodwill was listed as a nonprofit, the owners of had made themselves millionaires re-selling free stuff-- almost pure profit. They paid their workers a pittance, too, sometimes as little as a quarter an hour, while bragging about “employing the unfortunate and disabled.” Meanwhile their CEOs took home six figure salaries at a minimum.

No, he didn’t feel guilty at all stealing some of their free stock.

It was a mishmash, but he managed to find a few hoodies and tees that hung baggy on his human form. He even found a couple pairs of tennis shoes. He made extra sure to hit everything with his “purify” spell; it was meant for cleansing people of toxins, diseases and poisons but it doubled surprisingly well as a cleaning and sanitation spell. It wasn’t as good as a trip to the laundromat
but it would have to do for now.

He Purified and hung up his homespun on a peg in the wall. Waste not want not.

The moon was high now; time for step two in his brilliant plan.

There were beaches all along the Bay; some more popular than others. The ones nearest to his location on the North side of the harbor probably weren’t very popular with the beachgoing set, due to the proximity of the Ship Graveyard, but it would do for a start.

It was a short run in Worgen form from the abandoned factory to the beach. He brought along nothing but a backpack he’d found in the Goodwill loot and, because he was feeling optimistic, the now-empty garbage bags. He wouldn’t need anything else.

On Azeroth, there are certain abilities used by nearly everyone that, were anyone to examine them with an objective eye, would become obvious as being “arcane” in nature. Those trained in mining could use their thaumatic senses to locate nodes and pockets of ore, precious metals and gems, even from the air. Those trained in herbalism could detect plants by species, at considerable range. Hunters (and druids, when in one of their more feral forms) were known for their ability to detect any animal life form and differentiate by type and species.

Thanks to Agent’s min-maxing, Bayleaf had been brain-crammed with the training and talent for all three. It was how he had managed to avoid running into any of the residents of Brockton Bay while out on his little junket; he could sense someone coming from blocks away.

Here and now though it made him possibly the king of all beachcombers.

He knelt down to dig his claws in the sand, closed his eyes, and Searched.

When he opened them, hundreds of glowing ghostly stars speckled the beach as far as the eye could see. Some of them seemed to shine up through several feet of sand like lights underwater. Copper, silver, gold (and not a small amount of nickel and zinc...)

He grinned a wolfish grin and started digging.

By the time he called it quits for the night, the beach looked like it had been attacked by an army of gophers. (Heck with it, let ‘em wonder.) His Alexandria backpack was so full and heavy the seams were stretching. It was small change, mostly, but there were still quite a few watches, rings, bracelets, necklaces and earrings, ready to be rinsed free of sand and pawned. There were also a couple of raggedy wallets-- he had only sensed them because of a few coins in them or a key stuck in a side pocket-- and a couple of them were stuffed with bills and credit cards. After a terrible struggle with himself he regretfully dropped the wallets, contents untouched, into the first convenient mailbox. More than likely some crooked postal service worker would steal the cash themselves, but he wasn’t going to start out life here with that on his conscience.

He returned to his temporary lair, made a campfire with his Vine Entangle, and crashed out on the bags of clothing he had stolen from a charity bin.

The next day started, cold and clear, with a quick trip to a pawn shop to unload his boodle. The man running the place had raised an eyebrow at the sheer quantity, but had said nothing. He’d probably noted the sand still flecked on some of the items and took beachcombing as an acceptable explanation. Adrian left with about two hundred dollars in his pocket-- highway robbery, but he was in no place to quibble at the moment. Between that and the coins he had just
under four hundred in cash on him.

The next stop was the public library for a little research. Joy of joys, they had internet. His objective was to do a quick research of the Endbringer attacks, then failing that, the Slaughterhouse Nine, the Teeth, then maybe metahuman rampages in general, to find a likely destroyed city he could claim as his birthplace when he applied for status as a refugee.

It was morbid work. There were a depressing number of them; way more than had been listed in canon. Most of them though weren’t major cities. Major cities could generally bounce back from even a Hulk-style rampage; It was usually the small towns that had gotten the hard end of a cape triggering and going off the rails. Apparently unlike in the comics, where the villains always started their little rampages in places like New York where there were more capes per square mile than there were Starbucks’, the super powered villains in Earth Bet did occasionally have the brainstorm to start their campaigns of terror in some little podunk town with no heroes (see the Slaughterhouse Nine, who had obliterated several small towns in their travels already.)

Adrian eventually found a villain rampage that was practically custom made. Some doink chemo Tinker calling himself Memento had gone on a prolonged terror campaign out in the Midwest. He’d apparently go out on a junket till he found some podunk one-stoplight town that offended his inexplicable sensibilities, proclaim it a blight upon the face of the earth, then spray it down with his amnesia-inducing gas. Once the bewildered and panicking populace had run off, he’d hit it with fuel-air bombs and blast it off the face of the earth. He’d obliterated five dinky communities before the local heroes showed up and bagged him.

It had been less than a year, and Memento victims were still turning up dozens of states away with most of their previous lives a permanent scrambled blur. Society had pretty much shrugged in exhaustion, chalked them up as yet another categories of S-class or A-class refugee, and told the civil service sector to streamline putting them back in the system-- and the system had readily obliged. It seemed governments didn’t like it very much when people dropped off the grid and would go out of their way to get a nice shiny paper trail stapled to them again.

So a Memento victim it was. It was the right nationality, the right accent, the right background (he would have had a hell of a time convincing people he was a Nova Scotian or Japanese after all) and people would know better than to ask silly or inconvenient questions about his past.

He rented a room, little more than a closet really, at a decrepit building owned by a grungy fellow who asked no questions and who happily backdated him as living there for several months for an extra hundred up front. Then he stopped at the post office and snagged a PO box. From there he made a beeline for the Brockton Bay Human Services offices. He walked in as Adrian, a man without a country. Three hours after that he walked out as Adrian Smith, an official native of Brockton Bay, sixteen year old emancipated minor, complete with a fresh shiny ID card and a registered sophomore at Winslow Academy. From there it was a beeline to the local bank where he used his shiny new ID card and a chunk of his cash to open a bank account. Then for a final touch, it was over to city hall to open a business license: A tiny little pushcart business called “World of Crafts.”

He had a legal ID, a permanent address, a bank account, a legitimate revenue source, and a decoy paper trail that, thanks to the ridiculous circumstances of this world, looked totally legitimate despite existing for less than a day. That was as close to being a respectable citizen as anyone could get in Brockton Bay.

Then it was a quick shopping run. A cheap burner cell phone, some canned and packaged foods, a proper military backpack from an army-navy surplus (the Alexandria backpack had its charms, but really…) along with a few bits of camping gear, a box of tools, a sleeping bag and a few other oddments.
He also managed to find Fugly Bob’s. He used the last of his pocket cash and ordered a Fugly Bob Challenger… alas, in his human form he could not finish it, and had to pay for it. He doggy-bagged it for later. Doggone if he didn’t feel like a proper Brocktonian now, with a proper belly full of Fugly burger.

That would have been it for his day, except for a moment’s inspiration. He had lugged along some of his clothes, including the homespun he’d arrived in, and put them through a quick wash and dry at a coin laundromat. It was as he was folding and stashing the clothes that he realized something very important about his first outfit: it hadn’t been made in Brockton Bay. It had been made in Azeroth— or at least with Azeroth methods. Which had some VERY interesting implications.

The bell on the door jingled as he meekly entered the shop. It was a beautiful dress shop, but surprisingly small and crowded considering the reputation of the owner and manager. Every spare inch of space was crowded with manikins swathed in silk and satin, cotton and crinoline. Fortunately the showroom floor opened a little bit past the entryway.

He was still standing in the middle of the room gawping like a tourist at the sartorial splendor when the shoppe owner came in from the back rooms. “I’m sorry, sir,” she said. “But our boutique is by appointment only—”

She was a tiny thing, five feet if that, and dainty. She was wearing what appeared to be an antique dress with more ruffles and frills and furbelows than Adrian had ever seen, and her hair— or possibly her wig— was a veritable mass of golden Shirley Temple curls. Most disturbingly she wore a doll-like porcelain mask that completely concealed her face and made dark hollow holes of her eyes.

Adrian held up a hand. “I know, I apologize for intruding,” he said. “But I’m not here to shop— or to snap photos like a tourist. It’s just that… um, how do I put this? I discovered something that might be of interest to you.”

“Oh really?” Parian (for that was who she was) said warily. Out of the corner of his eye Adrian saw the dresses around him rustle. Ribbons hiding unobtrusively among the manikins floated on nonexistent breezes, coiled like cobras ready to strike. The cloth-kinetic cape had little to fear from the likes of him.

“Yes. Please, I mean you no harm.” The rustling stilled. He carefully set his backpack on the ground and gestured to it. “If I may?” After a moment she nodded. He unfastened a large side pocket and pulled out the homespun tunic and breeches. He held the folded cloth out to her. “What do you make of these?”

Parian took the clothes carefully in her hands and ran her gloved fingertips over them. “Let’s see. Linen obviously. Oh, and hand made linen, you can tell by the irregularities. You don’t see that often.” she unfolded the tunic and shook it out. “All hand stitched, with hand made thread—! The cut, the design, everything down to the buttons is authentic. Well,” she said, giving Adrian a look, “this could hang in a museum display on medieval clothes-making. Where did you find this?” she sounded intrigued.

“What do you make of these?”

Parian took the clothes carefully in her hands and ran her gloved fingertips over them. “Let’s see. Linen obviously. Oh, and hand made linen, you can tell by the irregularities. You don’t see that often.” she unfolded the tunic and shook it out. “All hand stitched, with hand made thread—! The cut, the design, everything down to the buttons is authentic. Well,” she said, giving Adrian a look, “this could hang in a museum display on medieval clothes-making. Where did you find this?” she sounded intrigued.

“Would you believe along with a load of donated clothing?” he said with a crooked grin. It was technically true, if not precisely so. “But that’s not the really interesting thing. Take a look at those breeches and tunic, then take a look at me. Think they’d fit me?”

Parian looked at the clothing in her hands, then gave Adrian the once-over. She took in his six-foot height and broad shoulders. “Not likely,” she said, amused.
“Well that’s the thing...” He looked around. “Let me show you. Do you have a couple of manikins to spare? One adult male, one child.” At her gesture two cloth-covered manikins tottered out from the workroom in the back and set themselves up in the middle of the floor. “Now, try the tunic on the adult.”

The manikin raised its arms and the tunic slid down over its head. It settled on its shoulders, hanging in a loose yet comfortable fit. “Okay,” Adrian said, “Now try it on the child.” Obediently, Parian sent the tunic over to dress the smaller manikin. It slid down over the child doll’s raised arms… and settled in place, once again a perfect fit.

“What?” Parian stammered. ‘How…?’

Adrian knew. The clothes were of Azeroth make. And in Azeroth, tailoring incorporated so much of the arcane that enchanter’s would salvage old clothing for the exotic dusts, motes, and energies they used in their own craft. Among other things it made the clothes more durable to the point that they were often used as a substitute for armor. But the most common feature added was to make the clothing naturally self-resizing. This was how an Orc could shop for clothing (or for that matter, real armor, which incorporated the same techniques) at the same place as a gnome.

Parian shot a look at Adrian. “Oh no,” he half-laughed, holding up his hands in protest. “I didn’t make them. They were just donated.” Which was the truth, more or less. “when I noticed their, er, odd behavior, I naturally thought of you.”

Parian pulled off one of her elbow-length gloves and ran her fingers over the cloth. “it… I can’t describe it,” she said. “There’s something… strange beyond explaining in this cloth. Yet… Don’t ask me how I know but I’m sure that with the right materials, I could duplicate this!”

Adrian smiled to himself. He’d figured as much. He suspected that Parian was as much a cloth tinker as she was a telekinetic. “Some tinker somewhere?”

“None that I know of,” Parian murmured, still stroking the cloth in a perturbing fashion. “And I know literally every tinker with a cloth-related specialty on the planet.”

“So,” Parian said. “How much, then?”

“Well, seeing as I only FOUND the things, maybe a small finder’s fee; I wouldn’t feel right--” before he’d finished the sentence she’d scribbled out a number on a scrap of paper and stuck it under his nose. His eyes went round in spite of himself. “And it was nice doing business with you,” he squeaked.

When he walked out the door, she had his tunic and breeches. He had her private cell phone number in case he made any more “discoveries”-- and as one might expect of a rogue who had to regularly do business with capes of every stripe, six figures in small unmarked nonsequential bills stuffed in his army backpack.

The weekend (it was apparently Wednesday when he made splashdown) arrived. Plans were progressing fast; he had a new identity… or would that be a false identity or a secret identity?… courtesy of the state and federal government, a sizeable bankroll (he had been in near hysterics before he’d finally gotten back to his rented room and hid it all under his mattress), and he was enrolled in the appropriate school… now for phase two.

Bank account or no, it was going to be a tricky process depositing most of that cash. A homeless
teenager who suddenly dropped six figures in cash into his bank account was the sort of thing that had people pressing alarm buttons. He’d probably have to disguise it as cash profits from his business.

Speaking of which, he needed to start getting together a stockpile of merchandise to sell. He was an Engineer, with the full category of gnome and goblin inventions, plus the entire catalogue from the Warlords of Draenor garrison engineer and the gnomish gearworks AND the goblin workshop. He had blueprints in his head and knowhow in his hands to make everything from toys to tanks. But, he needed a workshop to build this stuff… and to build all the cape gear, weapons and more that he’d need in the field.

He also needed a place to stash all the stuff he didn’t want people to know about just yet (like tens of thousands of dollars in small nonsequential bills, ahem), a place where he could rest, mend his own wounds, and keep his head down for a while when things (as per the original timeline) started getting more desperate and dark…

He needed a lair.

Thus began a long weekend at the library web-browsing for a certain category of abandoned construction and/or public works. He was sure there were plenty of old smuggler’s tunnels around the harbor; port cities tended to have those in multitude. But considering the forecast in the next two years or so called for cloudy with a chance of Endbringer, he didn’t particularly want anything too close to the waterline. Captain’s Hill, as he recalled, was going to remain well above the floodline and out of the combat zone when Leviathan came by to say howdy-doo. Unfortunately it didn’t have quite as much construction and none of the sort that he was looking for.

No, he needed to shift his search further North. Brockton Bay had been a shipping nexus even back in the days of the horse and cart. That meant a lot of on-site machine work. What he needed would probably be someplace between the Docks and the Trainyard… someplace where, back in the city’s heyday, a lot of cargo got shifted and a lot of steelwork needed done. He hunched over the library computer and clicked on the interactive map he’d found of Brockton Bay. There. He tapped a finger on the screen. There was a little patch of real estate, a little row of buildings right on the line where the Docks ended and the Trainyards began. It was deep in gang territory-- he grimaced to himself at the thought; in Brockton Bay the only place that wasn’t in gang territory was under a force field bubble out in the Bay.

He cross-referenced the buildings in question with the city records… bingo. Five of the buildings were listed as completely abandoned. Three were of the type he was looking for. One was available to anyone who was willing to pay the back taxes on it…. But noone had even benched an offer because of it’s utterly untenable location.

Fifty minutes later, the ghostly silhouette of a jungle cat could be seen slipping through the alleyways of the Trainyard. The building in question was just off the actual railyard by about half a block; he could hear the deafening clank and roar of the diesel trains as he scouted out the location. He squeezed through a narrow gap between yet another warehouse and an all-but-shuttered factory of some sort that took a sixty degree bend about fifty feet in, went twenty feet more, then opened into a little cobblestone courtyard. It was walled in on three sides with ancient brick and stone, and had exactly one door. There was part of an old fashioned slate shingle roof visible above it, with two or three stone chimneys poking up into the sky behind the factory’s more modern smokestack. Bayleaf switched back to his worgen form and forced the door, the ancient lock cracking like peanut brittle under his grip. He took a deep breath and stepped inside.

The place was one of those odd little forgotten corners. Back in the day it had been a repair and work shop, built right next to the railyard for convenience. Over the years it had been used to
provide the railroads with everything from shoeing draft horses to ironwork to brasswork to glasswork to... well, just about any work that required strong hands, solid tools and a hot furnace. But times had changed, the tracks had been re-laid, and the workshop had fallen into disuse as better facilities were built on the OTHER side of the tracks. Other buildings had cropped up around the workshop, building over it, overlapping it, till it was hidden from site and all but forgotten to the world.

Bayleaf looked around. It was perfect.

The dust was inches thick. It was undisturbed even by the footprints of mice and probably had geologic strata to it. Cobwebs were everywhere, long abandoned by the spiders that wove them for the lack of flies. But the walls were solid stone-- not brick, but stone, the bones of a world; huge raw-cut blocks that made his druidic senses hum with satisfaction. There were two furnaces, long cold. Stout worktables made of heavy oak beams and still scarred black. Even the tools were there, abandoned where they lay-- hammers, tongs, anvils, tools for iron and brass and glass and leather. There were even a couple of anvils. It was actually a two story building as well, with sleeping quarters up in the rafters.

There was a washroom in the back corner with an antiquated showerhead and a toilet...

To his surprise there was no wood rot, no mildew, surprisingly little rust as well. For a place near a seaside harbor that was a bit unusual. He could only guess that the place had been corked up so tight when it was closed that nothing of moisture or humidity could get in.

The only question that remained was how to get his equipment, materials, and the like in and out of the place. The answer came when he found the double doors in back. He ripped off the boards blocking it and opened it to find his back door directly faced a solid brick wall. Disgruntled, he began ripping out bricks with his bare clawed hands.

...To find himself in yet another abandoned warehouse. “Town oughta start trading in abandoned warehouses, they’d make a fortune,” he muttered to himself. He climbed through and found it spacious if empty. There were a few flickering lights-- perhaps not so abandoned?-- and a bathroom with running water, so whoever owned it was still paying upkeep for some reason. As he recalled, building owners tended to keep even empty buildings hooked up to utilities in order to keep the heat on, so as to prevent freezing and moisture damage...

Either way, bonus for him. Since they were so rude as to build over his back door like that, he would avail himself of the facilities and splice into the electric and water lines in here. Assuming he even needed them, considering his plans. But the real bonus was that the place had a front door and a delivery ramp and thus an address to have things delivered to. Whenever something he ordered arrived here, he would be on hand to open the door and roll it on in... and right through to the back, out the hole in the back wall, and into his workshop.

He found a loose sheet of plyboard large enough to cover the “secret entrance” (aka Huge Frickin Hole in the Wall) and set about cleaning the antedeluvian dust out of his lair.

Saturday was spent on shopping.

Not just any shopping, though. Porch sales. Yard sales. Garage sales. Flea Markets. Even Brockton Bay had such things, especially in a mild late October. He was treasure hunting, and he was stretching his Searching power to the absolute limit. The treasures he wanted were scattered far and wide... but it was amazing the amount of territory you could cover when you could turn
into a bird.

Added bonus? No receipts, which meant no paper trail.

He bought a few things for his comfort-- some bits of furniture including a bed, a little winter clothing, a propane heater-- but the main items on his shopping list were:

1. clockwork, engine, motor and electronic components.
2. certain gems, crystals, and rare earths and metals.
3. scrap metal in bulk.
4. tools.
5. Fuel.
6. anything his Searching power “pinged” on.

His approach was as methodical as his beach-combing. He first scoped out the local papers for any listed yard sales. Then he overflew those areas in his raven form, scanning. If he pinged on anything he dropped down into a secluded spot, turned human, and quickly bought whatever he’d pinged on, then followed up by going over everything else with a fine toothed comb. If the people running the yard sale were amenable to it, he’d pay them a little extra to box up and set aside what he’d found, with the promise he’d be back for it later.

He made some surprising finds; enough that he started wondering what treasures he’d completely overlooked in his past life when he went yard sale trolling. He found countless pieces of real silverware, including a serving platter and cover. He found more than a few bits of gold too. Gems were a rare find but he found plenty of crystals and semiprecious stones that would have been worth ten times their weight back on Azeroth. The hippie lady at the flea market with the new-age crystal stand must have thought her ship had come in when he came along and basically bought her out. He even bought the push cart.

He snapped up clocks of every size, wind up toys, old electric countertop appliances, pocket watches, and any number of items that no one watching could have guessed the reason… but he’d spot them amongst countless other debris, his eyes would get a funny gleam and he’d snatch them up. At one point on impulse he’d bought a stack of flowerpots, some potting soil, and an assortment of seedlings...

He’d realized even before he’d started that he’d have a touch of trouble dragging his haul back to his lair. Not for the first time since splashdown he groused to himself bitterly about Agent not equipping him with the standard Azeroth “bottomless” handy haversack (or more likely trading it in for more points.) He’d gotten around that problem by scouting around till he found a guy in one of the lower-rent neighborhoods lounging around who had a pickup truck, and offering to pay him a couple hundred to haul him and his crap around for the day. His name was “Efe,” so far as Bayleaf could figure; a balding, potbellied old guy with a ballcap, a wife-beater shirt and a fringe of shoulder length stringy hair and a disturbing resemblance to Cheech Marin. But he was mellow, and cool with doing a little driving for a few bucks. They drove around and picked up all Adrian’s purchases. By the time they got to the false front warehouse, it was loaded to overflowing. “Efe” helped him unload, wished him luck, told him they should go out for a few beers sometime and drove off…. Never even having asked Bayleaf his name. No fuss, no muss and once again, no paper trail.

One might have thought it strange that, in a world and a city where tinkers scavenged like
cockroaches, that Bayleaf pulled in such a load. Of course, the usual behavior of tinkers was to either scrounge dumpsters and junkyards, or try to pull off a not-so-daring heist and rip off a factory or a warehouse full of high-end technology. The few who even thought of money tried to order from horrendously overpriced underground companies like the Toybox, or even (in cases of extreme stupidity) tried to have stuff delivered to them in bulk from companies, thereby putting an enormous bullseye on themselves with a big fat blinking neon arrow above it that said “Please kidnap this Tinker now.”

Almost none of them thought to buy things directly from ordinary people with plain old cash. And those who spoke of tracking Tinkers by their “unusual purchasing habits” never considered the millions of people at flea markets, Salvation Army stores, and yard sales whose purchasing and selling habits would probably make the most demented Tinker look banal.

Sunday he would have taken rest-- but must needs, as the saying went. He threw his furniture in place, started up his propane heater to keep warm, sat down next to his stacks of salvage, and got to work.

There were over five hundred “toys” listed in World of Warcraft. He could craft a shocking number of them, just with what he had. In one hour his first trinket was clicking, buzzing and whirring around the Foundry floor. By the end of three he had a small platoon chattering along… including one very special one, for a special purpose.

Monday morning, he was ready.

Principal Blackwell sat back in her chair with a self-satisfied air. “Well, Mister… Smith…”

“Sorry,” Adrian said with a shrug and a half-smile. “I guess government offices aren’t exactly creative with names.”

“…Yes,” Blackwell said with pursed lips. “Well, according to the standardized test they gave you, you place in the sophomore or junior year. We will be observing your actual performance in class over the year to determine your actual placement…”

Yyyeah, that would be the purpose of the tests they regularly hand out to ALL students, Adrian thought to himself with a mental raised eyebrow. In other news grass is green, water is wet, film at eleven. Her point?

“But I trust that your future performance will… compensate for your checkered educational past.”

At this he did raise an actual eyebrow. Checkered past? According to the file she was handed, I’m an amnesia victim. I don’t even have a past to checker!

“I will warn you right now, we have low tolerance for troublemakers here…”

I just may barf. I walked past three skinheads swapping sandwich baggies just on my way to the office. Who is she kidding? He considered his appearance. Jeans, sneakers, t-shirt, and a leather jacket. Was she picking up her cues on “troublemaker on sight” from old James Dean films?

“I will say I had some misgivings about your enrollment here, Mr. Smith. Your past is due cause for concern.”
The penny dropped. Ah, I get it. Should’ve thought of that first. With things like the Simurgh, or Bonesaw, or Nilbog running around, there’s probably a certain amount of prejudice against survivors of metahuman attacks. She’s probably afraid that nutcase Memento might have turned me into some sort of teenage tyke-bomb. He huffed and curled his lip. Or that I might have a bad day and trigger all over her nice clean school. Irony ahoy.

She saw the tiny lip curl and predictably, misinterpreted. She stiffened a bit, and her already less than warm tone turned frosty. “You had best watch your attitude, young man. I run a tight ship here--”

hrnrrnk.

“--and I will be keeping a close eye on you for any irregularities. So don’t give me any crap.”

He looked at the scowling woman in her bowl-cut and only barely suppressed the urge to say You got it, Moe. “Understood, ma’am,” he said. “May I go find my locker now? I think lunch is starting soon.”

She glared at him for a moment. “Dismissed,” she said. He beat a hasty retreat.

He found his locker in short order, and started unloading his backpack into it. He looked over the inside. “Cripes,” he muttered. “This thing is enormous. I didn’t think anyone made lockers this size for real.” He shook his head. He needed to focus on his next objective: finding Taylor. Her description was pretty straightforward, so that shouldn’t be a problem, he decided. There was a good chance he’d spot her at lunch— but then again, maybe not. Didn’t she take up eating her lunch in various hidey-holes to try and escape the gruesome threesome? Or was that something she started after the locker incident…?

“Hey Taylor!”

Adrian’s head whipped around. He looked just in time to see a petite redheaded girl in an ungodly amount of makeup stick her foot out and trip another girl in a hoodie and backpack. The hoodie girl stumbled and nearly fell. The other girl went so far as to slap her in the back, to try and get her to stumble further. The girl in the hoodie managed to keep her balance though. “Better watch your step, Taylor,” the redhead taunted. “You’re just so terribly clumsy.”

Taylor didn’t even look back. She just righted herself and kept walking, her head down and shoulders hunched. Adrian felt like someone had taken a bite out of his heart. His conviction only firmed; even if he didn’t fix anything else, he was going to make this right. She kept walking down the hall right towards him…

And stopped at the locker next to his and began working the combination.

Holy carp. Luck of all the Irish. “Uhhh, hi,” he said. “How ya doin?” She jumped, then looked up at him, brushing stray curls of her dark hair out of her face. With her glasses she looked like a frightened owl…

Taylor flinched and looked up at the boy next to her warily. She blinked a little when she realized she didn’t recognize him. She was fairly sure she would have remembered being in the locker next door to a tall, dark, broad shouldered— she pushed that thought away, blushing. He was handsome though, with chiseled looks and dark gray eyes. He gave her a crooked smile.

Had he said something?
“Oh! Uh. Hi….?”

“You must be Taylor,” he said. “I’m Adrian.”

Taylor’s paranoia sprang to the fore. “How do you know my name?” she said warily.

Adrian jerked his thumb down the hall, indicating the departed Emma. “I overheard Princess Maybelline back there shouting it,” he said wryly.

“Princess Maybelline?” she said with a half smile of her own.

“Yeah.” He looked down the hall thoughtfully. “Dang, how many layers of makeup does she have to slather on to get that perfect Resting Bitch Face, d’you suppose?” Talyor did let out a hiccup of a laugh at that one.

“I don’t recognize you,” she said, immediately feeling stupid. Of course not, he was obviously a new student--

“Yeah, well. Funny thing is, if we had known each other, we probably wouldn’t now,” he said. He tapped his head. “Memento refugee.”

Taylor’s mouth made a silent “o.” “I’m sorry,” she said.

“Hey, not your fault. At least all I got was a clean slate; I could’ve ended up like those guys who can’t remember anything past the last half-hour, or whatever.” He looked a bit uncomfortable with the topic, and made an obvious move to change it. “So…basically means I’m totally new here. As new as you can get actually. Any more like Resting Bitch Face I should look out for around here?”

Taylor rolled her eyes. “You mean besides the neonazis, the asian gang members, and the junkies?” she said sarcastically.

“Well I know about those guys. At least they’re courteous enough to wear identifying colors,” Adrian said, amused. “But what about the rest?”

Taylor’s smile disappeared. “That’s Emma,” she said. “You’ll get to know her soon enough. Her, Madison and Sophia are the Queen Bees in this school and everybody knows it.” She pulled a trapper-keeper out of her locker and flipped through it. Then flipped through it again. “Dammit!” She threw her head back and stamped her feet in frustration.

“What?” Adrian asked.

“Those-- they stole my homework. Again!!” She threw the trapper-keeper down in the bottom of her locker and let her head fall against the doorframe with a thunk. “I can’t stand it. I even changed my lock...”

Adrian knew exactly why changing her lock made no difference, but he could hardly tell Taylor that at this point. He had to take a different approach. “What kind of lock did you get? Can I see it?”

Taylor looked up at him. “Just a regular combination lock,” she said. She pulled it off the door latch and gave it to him. He rolled it over in his hands and made a knowing sound.

“Eh, well, there you go,” he said. “Just a regular school lock. They could get this thing open lickity split.”
“How?” Taylor scowled.

Wordlessly, Adrian took out his walled and pulled a metal strip— it looked like it had been cut out of a soda can—out of one of the pockets. He closed the lock. Then he wrapped the strip of metal around the shackle and worked it down inside the body of the lock. There was a click, and the lock popped open. “Easy peasy,” he said. “They’ve got how to videos online.”

Taylor groaned. “Well that’s ten bucks wasted,” she grumbled.

A noise came out of Adrian’s backpack. “Vweep. Whirrwhirrwhiirr. Ebbeebbebep. PTING.”

Taylor backed up a step. “The heck was that?”

“Oh. Darn, must’ve turned him on by accident...” Adrian reached down in his oversized pack and pulled something out. It was a little toy robot about a foot tall, out made out of copper and brass. It had rotating red beacon light for a head, two headlight “eyes,” a short squat body, short little limbs with large bell-shaped hands and platform feet. “Oh, this is just one of the toys I make,” Adrian said, holding it up. “I call it the alarm-o-bot.”

“You’re a TINKER?” Taylor blurted out. Adrian laughed.

“Oh no no no,” he said. “This is all just off-the-shelf electronics, and a little handicraftyness.” He shrugged and laughed. “it’s sort of a gag gift. You place it where you want— like on your desk, or in your car, or whatever, press the button to set it, and if anybody sets off its motion detectors it sounds an alarm. Look—” he poked something on it.

The red light lit up and began rotating. “WARNING, FART DETECTED! FART DETECTED! CLEAR THE AREA! DO NOT LIGHT A MATCH!—”

“All clear, all clear!” Adrian shouted at it frantically. The alarm shut down. “um, wrong setting,” he said weakly, palming his face.

Taylor was trying not to laugh and failing. “That’s awesome! And you make these little guys?”

Adrian nodded, scratching the back of his head in embarrassment. “Yeah. I make little windup or battery powered toys, sell ‘em from a push cart...” he gave her a card. It said “World of Crafts” on it and listed a website and cellphone number. “Its how I pay the bills.”

“Neat.” she smiled and tucked the card away.

Adrian hefted the Alarm-o-bot and looked at Taylor’s locker thoughtfully. He could see a flute case in the upper compartment… they hadn’t stolen her flute yet… “Say, wanna have a little fun with whoever’s rifling your locker?” He held up the toy and waved it meaningfully.

It took a moment for the penny to drop. “Oh, that would be brilliant—” she hesitated. “Oh but we can’t. They’d break your little robot just to get even—”

His grin grew strangely feral. “Meh, I ain’t worried about that,” he said. “I make these things by the dozen, remember? Out of old cell phones and crap. Be worth it to scare the crap out of Resting Bitch Face, wouldn’t it?” He held the Alarm-o-bot up to her face. “Go ahead; say ‘All clear.’” he pressed a button on the toy’s back.

“All clear.”

“There, that’s the shutoff code.” He stuck the little robot in the upper compartment, clamping its magnetic feet so it stood in front of the flute case. “Back to your duty, soldier,” he said, giving the
toy a mock salute. Taylor laughed as he closed the door.

She never saw the toy return the salute…

“Wow, what other stuff do you make?”

“All sorts of things,” he said, stuffing his bag into the locker. “Most aren’t nearly as complicated as Obie, there.” He nodded at the locker.

“Obie?”

“Short for Alarm-o-Bot. AOB.” He picked out the books for his next few classes, and slammed the locker shut. “Anyway, most of my stuff is just windup stuff or battery powered trinkets. Stuff like this.” He held his hand up. Perched on his finger was a butterfly made out of wire and glass. As she watched it slowly opened and closed its shiny black wings. Even its antennae moved.

“Oh wow.” She reached out a finger and petted it on the head. “How--?”

“The wings are broken bits of solar cell,” he said. “and there’s a really simple electric motor-- more like a little solenoid-- that turns a little wire camshaft that moves the wings and antennae. The movement changes speed depending on how much light is shining on the wings. It’s not much more complicated than one of those bobbing bird toys, but it looks really lifelike, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah. Pretty, too,” she said.

He smiled. “Here.” He reached up and fastened it to one of the stray locks of hair sneaking out from under her hood. It clung there, fanning its wings slowly. She immediately started to protest.

“Oh no, I couldn’t--”

“Hey, free advertising,” he said with a smile and a shrug. “Besides you looked like you could use a smile.”

The school bell blatted. “Come on, we’d better get to the cafeteria before they give away all the good slop,” he joked. “Come with me?”

He watched her chew on her lip, undecided. She had to be half-broken at this point; convinced that noone would willingly associate with her; terrified her three tormentors would use it as a justification to turn their ire on her-- or him-- but by this point so desperate for someone, anyone to just be with… “It-- it might be a bad idea for you to be seen with me,” she managed to say.

“Great! I’m all about doing what’s bad for me. C’mon.” She hesitated again. Then, for a miracle, she gave him a smile.

“Okay… okay, sure.” After all, what did she have to lose, right?

“Mmmm, slop ahoy…”

Behind them in the locker, the Alarm-o-Bot sentry blinked its eyes and settled in for a long shift on duty.
“The great Harry Potter must listen,” the tiny, wizened elf said, wringing his hands. “The great Harry Potter must go back to Hogwarts this year!”

Harry frantically shushed the strange creature, then hesitated in confusion as he parsed what Dobby had just said. “That is what I was planning to do anyway, Dobby,” he said.

Dobby nodded and came in close. “Yes, yes,” he said in a stage whisper. “Dobby knows. But Dobby also knows that many bad peoples is trying to stop you. Dobby will help, as much as he can. But that is not much.” He shook his head in despair till his long ears flopped.

Harry decided to bite. “And why is it so much more important that I go back this year?” he asked.

Dobby moved in even closer, till his long nose was almost touching Harry’s. “Many things is coming to Hogwarts,” he whispered. “Strange and wonderful things. But bad wizards is planning terrible things, to happens to them. This must not be.

“The Great Harry Potter must save them from the bad wizards.” He looked deep into Harry’s eyes. “Because then, maybe, they is saving him, too.”

They were just changing into their school robes when there was a tremendous bump that shook the entire train. Exclamations of surprise echoed from all up and down the car, but nothing seemed to come of it. A bit of track that needed repair, Harry wondered? The Hogwarts Express was enchanted to roll right over such things, he’d heard.

It was then that Ron began slapping at his shoulder with a nerveless hand. “Harry?”

“Give me a minute, Ron,” he said. He was terrible at tying the knot in his tie.

“Harry?” Ron’s voice sounded oddly high. “This can’t wait.”

“What, what?” Harry said impatiently, looking up. Ron just pointed at the window, his face so pale his freckles stood out like dots on an astronomy map. Harry looked.

The ground was missing.

Harry looked down. And further down. And further down still. There was nothing; the blue sky faded slowly into a starlight night, an endless void below. He could see the train tracks curving out ahead of the engine, floating suspended on nothing. Just for the sake of argument he looked up--no, the ground wasn’t hiding up there, either. Just endless blue sky.

“Ron! Harry!” he heard Hermione shriek. She came bombing back into the compartment a moment later, her tie askew and her hair frizzed out more than ever. “What is this? Where did the rest of the Earth go? Ron, what’s going on??”

“Why are you asking me?” Ron exclaimed. “Do I look like somebody gave me a memo?”
Hermione socked him in the arm in frustration. “OW!”

“You’re the only one of us who was raised in the Wizarding World. You’re supposed to be the-the-the street smart native guide of our adventuring party!”

“When did we vote on that?”

“Guys,” Harry said suddenly, pointing. “Look.” Coming out of the distance-haze far ahead was an enormous floating island, almost an upside-down mountain. Spilling off one side and down into the void was an enormous waterfall. For counterbalance another waterfall, seemingly out of nowhere, was tumbling down out of the sky and into the lake that fed it. A forest, sitting on a shallower, broader island of floating earth and attached by a narrow bridge of earth, hovered off to one side. And standing on a rise next to the lake…


They all stared in awe. “That over there must be the Forbidden Forest,” Hermione said, pointing at the dark wooded island.

“The twins will have a bit harder time sneaking out there this year, I think,” Harry said, by way of a weak joke.

“Where is the water coming from?” Hermione wondered. “The lake should be running dry…”

Ron pointed up at the second waterfall. “I think it loops around, and comes back out up there,” he said. “The squid better not swim to close or it’s in for a heck of a ride.”

“Where’s Hogsmeade?” Ron said. “Anyone see it?”

“Down there and to the left, on that, er, island by itself,” Harry said. “The only way back and forth must be by broom.”

“Can’t imagine they’re too happy about that...” Ron said.

Hogwarts’ floating island drew quickly closer. As they watched the day slowly turned to night… not with the sun rising and the moon setting, but all at once, with the blue sky swirling away like a melting snow cone, and a purpling sky speckled with impossibly huge stars taking its place. They pulled into the Hogwarts’ station with a thump and a cloud of steam. All the students dismounted. Harry could hear Hagrid calling for the first years: a comforting note of familiarity, all things considered. It was a shockingly quiet group, for once. Harry realized with an inner laugh that for once the firsties and the muggleborns looked less gobsmacked than the older, native-born wizards. The muggleborns had no experience with the magical world other than through books and movies; riding a flying train to a castle on a floating island was probably nothing less than they had expected!

The carriage ride to the castle was quickly filled with chatter, though, as speculation ran wild as to what had happened, and what was going on. Hermione’s theories in particular were rapidly spiraling out of control, till Harry put a hand on hers and stopped her. “Dumbledore is here,” he reminded her. “If we just wait, I’m sure he will explain everything.”
The headmaster stepped up to the podium, a smile on his face. “Welcome, everyone, to another year at Hogwarts School for Wizards and Witches,” he said. “I’m sure you’ve all noticed some changes since last year…”

“No foolin,” someone in the Hall said. Several people shushed whoever it was. Dumbledore only looked amused.

“Allow me to proffer a brief explanation. During the previous summer, Some of our staff were conducting some minor experiments in their down time. There was… I can only refer to it as a fortuitous discovery that led to Hogwart’s current condition and location.”

“Magical accident,” Ron murmured to Harry and Hermione. “A walloping huge one.” They nodded. They hadn’t missed that Snape was sitting at the head table, sneering as usual and nursing a number of bandages and burns.

“Those researching the matter have determined that this particular condition is both safe, and stable. Hence the resumption of the school year without interruption. It has, in fact, turned out to have many benefits which the Department of Mysteries of our own Ministry of Magic is looking into… possibly as an option for any and all magical locations and communities. There may come a day when all magical locations in our world are moved to safe, private pockets like the one we currently inhabit.”

One of the Ravenclaws raised a hand. “But… where are we, exactly, sir?” she asked.

The headmaster paused as if searching for the right words. “I think the best description would be Between,” he said. “We are in a place that is between our own world and the next one over. Or the next several ones over, actually. There is a portal connecting us to our own world; you passed through it while on the Hogwarts Express. And there is a portal to yet another world-- I shall not disclose its location, for your own safety--- that connects to us, here.

“What is more,” he said, raising his voice above the buzz of voices this comment had stirred up, “We… that is, our Ministry… have made contact with the beings of this next world, and opened up diplomatic talks with them.” There was a resounding thump as Hermione toppled to the floor.

“Mister Potter, Mister Weasley, would you be so kind as to revive Miss Granger. She’ll get a chill lying on the stone floor like that.” A wave of the headmaster’s hand summoned a towel and a pitcher of water to where the trio sat.

“As I was saying, we have opened diplomatic relations. And in the interests of those relations, we will be hosting several of their own people as exchange students, here in Hogwarts.” There was a loud moan and Hermione passed out again. “Ahem.

“So without further ado, allow me to cede the floor to Princess Celestia, Sol Invictus, and Princess Luna, Nocturnis Immaculatus.” He stepped aside with a bow. From the back of the room stepped two visions.

“Coo!” the entire student body said, and gasped hard enough to suck the air out of the room.

One was a white mare, tall and slender with a long spiral horn and snowy wings. A golden tiara rested on her brow, and she was adorned with golden shoes and a gem-studded peytral. Her mane and tail swirled around her in a cloud of soft pastels.

Next to her walked another, clearly her sister. Only she was the color of midnight, and adorned in onyx and silver. Her mane was a billowing cloud of night and stars.

The two paced regally from the back of the room up to the podium. The white one, clearly the
elder, stepped forward and spread her wings. “Greetings, my little ones,” she said with a smile. “I am Princess Celestia of Equestria, and this is my sister, Princess Luna. I am pleased to meet you all at last, and hope that this is only the beginning of a wonderful friendship between our people.

“Both my sister and I wish that we could spend more time getting to know you ourselves, personally. Alas, though we do intend to look in on you all from time to time, our duties preclude us from spending too much time away from our thrones. So to foster better understanding between our two races, your Headmaster and we have come to an agreement: some of our little ponies—personal proteges of our own—will be attending here for the next seven years, as full students of Hogwarts Academy.”

The midnight one spoke. “We hope that thou wilt make them feel welcome, and trust that they will be good and proper guests to thee.”

“And now, regrettably, we must depart,” Celestia concluded. “We wish you well and we shall speak again soon.” The two began to shimmer, then dissolved into a cloud of sparkles that swirled away and disappeared.

“My, how precipitous,” Dumbledore said. “Well. Let us commence with the Sorting, shall we?” From the back of the room, where they had been watching the proceedings in silence, came the firsties… and noone failed to note that mingled among them were a number of small, fourlegged participants.

Professor McGonagall came forward with the stool and the Sorting Hat, which she set down with great ceremony. The hat straightened up, its folds and wrinkles forming a face. It opened its “mouth” and sang.

“This is your Sorting Song,
It isn’t very long…”

Everyone hesitated. “Well?” McGonagall said to the hat.

‘We’re running a bit long this year, aren’t we?’ the hat replied snarkily. ‘That’s all the song you get.’ Several students tittered. McGonagall huffed, but she let it slide. The hat was a bit right after all. She opened up the scroll of new names.

“Abercrombie!” She called out.

The students waited through the first few names on pins and needles. It was obvious that everyone present was waiting for only one thing: the sorting of the first Equestrian student. Finally though, it came.

“Rarity Belle!” She called out.

The one who trotted forward was a unicorn. She was pure, gleaming white, with an elegantly groomed mane and tail and a pattern of diamonds scattered on her flank… for all that she was the size of a unicorn foal and gifted with the childlike proportions of a plush toy, she was still the very picture of a magical symbol of pristine purity. She climbed up on the stool and sat demurely as McGonagall lowered the hat--

Only to raise a hoof and stop her. “Oh, just one moment, please,” she said. Her horn glowed and
blue-white sparkles shot from her horn into the hat.

“Heee! Stop, that tickles!” the hat protested squirming.

“My apologies, sir hat,” she said sweetly. “No offense intended, but after all those heads, I think both of us would appreciate the use of a quick cleaning spell.” Several students in the audience with unease started noticing a faint itching in their scalp.

The hat huffed. “I’ll have you know I have permanent cleaning and sanitation charms—” it groused.

“Oh. My apologies,” Rarity said, embarrassed. The grumbling hat was lowered onto the unicorn’s head. Once again the audience said “coo” and held their breath. A long, slow minute passed.

Well, this is a conundrum.

Pardon?

Truthfully madame, you have plenty of ambition. And cunning I see here aplenty. More than enough for a dozen of the Slytherins running about today.

You do flatter, Mister Hat.

Heh. But that House, dear lady, has fallen far. They mistake avarice for ambition and cruelty for cunning. And there are many in it that favor the Dark, for it readily gratifies both vices. And there are evils in our world that regard that House and all in it theirs for the taking. The house of Slytherin is little loved by others. You would have a long and hard time of it there.

Those poor children? Rarity thought in disbelief of the crowd of first years. Her decision, her new ambition, firmed.

Then I will have to show them a better way.

You are well named the Element of Generosity, Miss Rarity Belle. So be it.

“SLYHERIN!”

All across the room, jaws dropped. More than a few quickly strangled cries of disbelief sprang up here and there. The expressions around the room ranged from shock to outright horror. The expressions at the table of the snakes, however, were ones of unsuppressed glee. Once the hat was removed Rarity gave a curtsey to a stunned McGonagall and trotted off to the Slytherin table, the cravat she wore turning Slytherin silver and green.

“No way,” Ron rasped. “No bloody way!”

“I don’t think she really knows that house’s reputation,” Hermione said. “Cunning and Ambition don’t sound all that bad on their own, after all. I think she’s in for a rough ride.”

Up on the stage, Applejack leaned over to Rainbow Dash. “What was all that about?”

Rainbow Dash smirked. “I don’t think those Snakes know Rarity’s reputation,” she said. “I think those guys are in for a rough ride.”
“Sweetie Belle!”

The next one up drew coos of adoration from half the witches in the room. She was a tiny unicorn filly with a soft curly pastel mane and adorable as the day was long. She got up on the stool— with a little boost from McGonagall— and donned the hat. Her entire head nearly disappeared under it down to the shoulders.

_Ohohoho. You ARE a sly little thing, aren’t you._

_Am not._ The filly blushed.

_Ha. I know better. Even your own sister doesn’t have a clue, and she’s as sharp as a tack, that one._

_I don’t mean to be— Sweetie thought._

_“Oh that is not a bad thing, not always. ‘Be ye harmless as doves, and cunning as serpents.’ Sometimes it is best that people underestimate you, especially the wicked. Remember that.”_ I will, sir.

_Oh and good luck on your singing career. Perhaps next year we can sing a duet?_

Sweetie giggled.

_But first, let’s put the cat among the pigeons— or the sneaky little unicorn among the poor luckless Snakes—!_

_“SLYTHERIN!”_

If the silenced had been shocked for the first, the cries of dismay, for all they were quickly hushed, were piercing. Sweetie doffed the hat and stared out at the crowd in bafflement. “WHAAaaaat?” she demanded. When nobody replied she rolled her eyes, climbed down off the stool, and joined the Slytherin table with her new silver and green cravat proudly displayed.

_“I never would’ve thought of Sweetiebelle as cunning or ambitious,” Scootaloo whispered to Applebloom._

_“Those ‘re the kind y’ gotta watch out for,” Applebloom muttered back, amused. Their conversation was interrupted by McGonagall._

_“Apple Bloom!”_

_Hmm. A good bright mind, you could do fairly well in Ravenclaw. Oh my, an aptitude for potions?_

_‘swhat my cutie mark means, Applebloom thought, thinking of the apple in a klein bottle on her_
Oh I see. How fascinating. It’s rather like you all have a sorting hat on your backsides, isn’t it? The hat’s amusement was rich.

Hy-lerious, y’all are. Mister Hat?

Hmm?

Could you put me in Slytherin with my friend Sweetie Belle? And Scootaloo too?

And why would you want that? -- Oh, I see. In a moment the Hat flitted through her memories of the Cutie Mark Crusaders: of a lifetime of adventures and laughter and friendship shared in a few short seasons. He chuckled.

My dear, who said that you had to stop being friends if you were in different Houses?

Well-- it’s just--

Apple Bloom, sometimes friends have to be apart, so that each of them can thrive and grow in their own way. Sweetie Belle will thrive in Slytherin; but you would be utterly out of place in it. As out of place as if you tried to follow Scootaloo to flight camp. You would be miserable!

Apple bloom had a vision of herself taking her first flying lesson off the edge of Cloudsdale. Yeah -- Briefly, she thought, her mental voice dry.

What? -- Oh. Oh! Ahaha. Good one! The hat actually chortled out loud, puzzling some of the onlookers. Well, you’ll have plenty of time together even in separate houses. You’ll have classes together, and meals together, and countless hours of down time you can spend together how you wish, and of course the holidays… you’ll spend some time apart, grow into your own hooves, as it were, and your friendship will be the stronger for it.

Well, okay. You’re the expert…

The hat chuckled again. Anyhow, you’re no stranger to hard work, and you’ve got loyalty for miles, that much is clear. No better place for you than--

“HUFFLEPUFF!”

More than a few anxious students sighed in relief. For a moment it had looked like the whole herd of Equestrians was going to end up in a Slytherin stable. Apple Bloom trotted down to the Hufflepuff table in her new black and yellow cravat, hesitantly at first but soon with a happy gallop as welcoming smiles and applause greeted her.

“Rainbow Dash!”

The cocksure pegasus fluttered up from the back and landed with a thump on the stool. The hat went on.
Merlin!

Pardon you?

Heavens. I’ve never seen such a Gryffindor mind. Gryffindor to a FAULT. You, my dear young mare, are the most Gryffindorish Gryffindor I have seen in years!

Well then that makes the choice easy, I guess. Huh.

What, may I ask?

I woulda figured Hufflepuff. On account o’ me being the Element of Loyalty, and they’re the house of Loyalty…

Oh, they’re more than just THAT. Just as you are. Take this chance to show other people that you are more than just one thing… and maybe to hone that “Gryffindor to a fault” into a proper virtue.

“GRYFFINDOR!”

Dash flew over the tables, did a backflip and dropped into an open Gryffindor seat. “Called it,” Applejack chuckled, while a grousing Spike handed her a galleon.

“Apple Jack !”

“Ack!” the farm pony hustled to the stool. She took off her hat; McGonagall took it from her. “Uh, thank y’ kindly.” The hat dropped down.

My my, you and your sister are two peas in a pod, but for a few years. Pomona Sprout would never forgive me if I put you anywhere else.

“HUFFLEPUFF!”

“That was quick.” Apple Bloom said as Applejack sat next to her.

“I suppose some things are obvious,” Applejack replied.

Several more young wizards and witches were sorted, followed by:

“Scoota Loo!”
The orange pegasus filly buzz-hopped onto the stool. “It’s one word, by the way.”

“My apologies,” McGonagall said primly, and placed the hat on her head.

*My, so many obvious ones today.*

“**GRYFFINDOR!**”

Every Hogwarts native stared and blinked when Pinkie Pie’s turn came up. “I’ve never seen anything that shade of pink before,” Ron said to Harry, who shook his head in agreement.

“And nothing that… *frizzy,*” Hermione added. The other two stared at her. “*Oh shut up!*”

*And then the hat began to laugh.* It started as a deep chuckle and rolled into a full bone-shaking belly laugh. It laughed for a good solid minute, rocking back and forth on the giggling pink pony’s head.

“**HUFFLEPUFF!**” It finally shouted between gales of laughter. “And good luck, Pomona!” It was still laughing as the pink pony pronked her way to the Hufflepuff table.

“Well, that wasn’t ominous,” Pomona said under her breath to Flitwick. For his part Flitwick made a silent bet with himself on who would crack open the Glenfiddich first this year-- McGonagall or Sprout.

“Flutter Shy !”

There was a loud squeak, then a long pause. “Flutter Shy!” McGonagall repeated. There was a rustle from the back of the crowd of first years’, then a pegasus slowly made her appearance. She was soft yellow, with a long trailing mane and tail of pastel pink. She caught a glimpse of the crowd staring at her, let out a squeak of alarm and vanished behind the other first years again.

“Miss Shy!” McGonagall said sternly. “Come on out and be Sorted. You’re holding things up!” Cringing nervously, her tail tucked beneath her, Fluttershy came back out and climbed up on the stool. There were a few unkind sniggers at how fearful she was. The other Gryffindors had to restrain a glaring Rainbow Dash from finding the mockers and making something of it.

The hat came down-- surprisingly gently this time; McGonagall wasn’t totally heartless-- and the students waited.
“GRYFFINDOR!”

“Huh?” seemed to be the general consensus at this decision. Fluttershy hurriedly made her way over to the Gryffindor table and sat between Scootaloo and Dash with an obvious air of relief. A few snickers and unkind remarks at the Gryffindor House’s expense wafted across the room, largely from the Slytherin table. This time Dash wasn’t the only one to swell up and get to her feet. Several curt words and pointed glares from Heads of House soon had things settled down, though. Only barely.

Two more students were sorted into Gryffindor and Hufflepuff. Then McGonagall read the name that nearly upset the apple cart.

“Princess Twilight Sparkle!”

The commotion at this took several minutes, and finally a call from Dumbledore himself, to settle down. A princess! Whichever house got her, that was going to be a feather in their cap— even more than two white unicorns like the Slytherins had.

Twilight stepped forward. At first she seemed like an ordinary unicorn, as much as a unicorn with a violet coat and a deep purple mane could be ordinary anyway. Then she spread her wings and fluttered up onto the stool. She perched there with her wings mantled for balance as the hat came down.

It certainly didn’t take long.

My, you ponies don’t do things by halves, do you. Try not to get yourselves lost in your books like you did in your LAST school, Princess. You’ll miss out on a lot.

Er--

“RAVENCLAW!… as if the rest of you lot hadn’t guessed,” the hat said sarcastically. Several of the ponies snickered.

The applause from Ravenclaw table was thunderous as Twilight, bronze and blue cravat neatly tied, stepped over to join their table.

“Spike!”

Everyone peered curiously. One more? A moment later a short, scaly, purple and green figure
stepped out of the firsties. Unlike the others he wore a proper robe and tie. Perched on the row of
spikes on his head was a small, faintly glowing yellow bird. Webbed wings unfurled from his
back and he flapped up onto the stool, his spade-tipped tail curling around the legs. “A dragon?”
Neville yipped.

Fluttershy spoke up. “Oh that’s Spike,” she said. “Don’t be afraid of him, he’s a sweetie, and a
perfect little gentleman.”

“Your dragons are very different from ours, then,” Neville said warily.

“Um, well...”

“Is that a baby phoenix perched on his head?” Hermione exclaimed.


“But... Phoenixes don’t grow up from chicks! They hatch, then have their first Burning Day and
are completely full grown!” Hermione protested. “I read it in--”

“Hermione, If you say ‘I read it in Hogwarts, a History,’” Ron said in an overly sweet voice, “I
swear that the next time we ride the Hogwarts Express I’m chucking that ruddy book right out the
window.” She gaped at him in outrage. “And good luck finding it in that fathomless void that’s
out the window now,” he added as an afterthought.

Harry laughed at her expression. “Hermione, don’t you get it? They’re from another world.
Everything your books have to say about them is probably wrong. You’re going to have to do
more than just run to the library to learn everything about something this time, because books are
going to be pretty much worthless.” He turned back to watch the proceedings, while his best
friend sat there and spiraled into an existential horror at the blasphemies he’d uttered.

McGonagall set the hat on Spike’s head. “Oy!” the hat said. It hawked and spat, shooting an
angrily chattering Peewee across the stage. “One customer at a time, you!” The students laughed
as the tiny phoenix fluttered off to perch on a nearby sconce and sulk.

Ah, let’s see...

Ravenclaw please.

Hm? Hold on now, lad, I’ll be doing the sorting here.

Look, trust me. I’m Twilight Sparkle’s number one assistant. I need to be there for her.

Now hold on, lad., hmm. My word, you’re certainly smart enough to fit in Ravenclaw fairly well.
Scribe, Librarian, musician, chef, you have quite a multiplicity of talents and skills.

Comes from having to be Twilight’s assistant. It’s in the job description.

And quite a load of book knowledge, at least of your own world.

You don’t hang around the smartest and most powerful unicorn in a generation without picking a
few things up.

Unicorn?-- oh, I see, a rather recent promotion. Or metamorphosis rather?
Ehh. Little of column A…

Ah. But the point, you see, is that my job is to place you where it will benefit YOU the most. So YOU have a chance to flourish. It’s in the job description.

Touche’. So where would I do best? Just for argument’s sake.

Let’s see then. Like I said, quite talented and smart, so Ravenclaw would be fairly good… hmmm, and a good bit of ambition. Mostly that draconic need to get a proper hoard going-- that would serve you well in Slytherin-- but also a certain amount of aspiration for a certain lady fair, no?

...Shuddup.

Heheheh. You’re a hard worker, definitely loyal, and have more than your share of bravery. My word, you tackled three diamond dogs barehanded as a hatchling? And gave them a bit of a thrashing too, I see. Bravo. You could fit fairly well in any of the Houses.

In that case it’d better be Ravenclaw.

Got a one track mind, do you?

Dude. Did you or did you not see my memories of the Smarty Pants incident?

The Smarty Pants…? Oh dear.

Or the Gala Ticket fiasco?

My.

Or the Birthday party meltdown?

Good heavens.

Like I keep telling you-- Twilight’s smart, and brave, and kind… but she needs someone to keep her on an even keel. And she isn’t all that good at taking care of herself. Here, lemme show you the last time she cooked for herself--

No, no, I get the point. Eh, I did say you’d do well anywhere, and she does need a little help, it’s obvious… but my boy, do try to take advantage of this time, and do a little growing for your OWN benefit.

I’ll give it a try anyway.

“RAVENCLAW!!”

Spike proudly trotted over and joined his Housemates. Before McGonagall could call the next name, Peewee dove down from his perch and flew up inside the hat. He cheeped in a demanding fashion.

“Oh fine. RAVENCLAW for you too!” it spat the bird back out. Peewee flew over and perched on Spike’s head, fluffing up proudly. The Ravenclaw students looked proud enough to burst. The Slytherin table, on the other hand, looked fit to be tied; their little coup early on had been flipped.
completely over.

A half dozen more Sortings, and the platform was clear. Dumbledore stepped up to the podium as the hat and stool were put away. “A most momentous sorting, I do say. But now, our welcoming feast has been put off long enough. Let’s eat!” With that, the tables were suddenly laden with food. The by-now ravenous students cheered and tucked in; many taking great pleasure in pointing out various delicacies to their new equine classmates.

The door to the Gryffindor tower opened, and the Gryffindors piled in. Harry came through, A groaning Ron leaning against him with his arm over his shoulder. Right behind them came Hermionie, scolding and quibbling. Behind her came another pair of students bearing a groaning Rainbow Dash. Both victims were left to sprawl over the nearest sofa while the other students spread out around the common room or totter their way up to bed. “I can’t believe you challenged a little pony to a pie eating contest,” Hermionie scolded Ron.

Harry smirked. “I can’t believe she won.”

“Totally worth it,” Dash grunted. She lay on her back sprawled out, her belly pooching into the air.

“I think I have some of those fizzy tablets in my trunk if you want, Dash,” Fluttershy said.

“Nah, I’ll be good in an hour or two,” Dash said. She looked up. “Hey, where’s the squirt?”

“Already asleep. One of the firsties already carried her up to your room.” It was true and it had been adorable. Colin Creevy had snapped a half-dozen shots of it, to go with the hundred or so he’d taken since getting on the Hogwarts express that morning.

“Yeah,” one of the older students said. “Most of the first years are already out of it by now. But you guys can hang out down here with us for a little bit. Get to know each other better, sort of thing.” He opened one of the end tables scattered around the room and pulled out a bottle of cherry fizz. (While Ravenclaws stashed books everywhere, the Griffs had long ago discovered the glories of the handy and easily concealed Mini Fridge.)

Several voices were raised in agreement, urging the two pegasi to stay up and chew the fat a bit. Dash was easy enough-- it was clear neither she nor Ron were moving till several plates of pie were digested-- but the sudden burst of attention, Fluttershy balked.

“Oh no, I don’t think I should,” she stammered, wings fluttering nervously. “It is a long day tomorrow and-- oh, I don’t… um… goodnight--” the timid mare fled up the stairs to the girls’ dormitory.

Seamus Finnegan shook his head. “I’ve no idea how a timid little thing got in Griffindor of all places,” he said.

“People can surprise you,” Neville said defensively.

“Oh, she’s nice enough,” Seamus hedged. “But in the house of the brave? I don’t--”
“HA ha!” Rainbow Dash let out a raucous laugh. Everyone looked at her in surprise. “You REALLY don’t know Fluttershy yet,” she said, cackling.

“How so?” Harry said, curious.

“D’you know I once kicked a full grown dragon in the face?” Dash said incongruously.

“Oh, no way,” someone scoffed.

“Yes way. In. The. Face.” She smirked at the scoffers. “Big jerk was hibernating in a mountain over our town… his snoring was clogging the air with smoke. We all went up to get him to move out. He wouldn’t get his lazy tail up, so I bucked him in the face. Whammo.”

“You’re joking,” Ron said. He looked at her face. “You’re not joking.”

“Yep!” She rubbed her head with a hoof sheepishly. “Not one of my brighter moves...”

“So what’s your point?” Someone threw in.

“I’m the one who kicked it in the face and made it mad,” Dash said. She pointed up the stairs. “She’s the one who made it BREAK DOWN AND CRY.”

The Gryffindors stared at her. “And that was nuthin’,” Dash went on. “Manticore? Pulled a thorn out of its paw and had it eating out of her hoof. Cerberus? Gave it a tummy rub. Cockatrice? Beat it in a STARING CONTEST.

“She keeps a full grown grizzly bear in her cottage as a PET, and she gives first aid to rattlesnakes and mountain lions. And she civilized an avatar of Chaos, and has tea with him every weekend!

“Sure she’s shy and timid and meek and all that, but when she needs to be, Fluttershy can be a force of nature. And don’t you ever forget it.”

The Gryffindors stared at the little rainbow maned pony, speechless. There was no telling how many of them even believed half of what she said, but in the passing days it would certainly cross their minds.

The Hufflepuffs were gathered in their common room; Pomona Sprout, their Head of House, was presiding. She was a round cheeked woman who smelled of earth and green growing things, and had a natural gift for settling the nerves of young and jittery students away from home for the first time. “Welcome one and all to House Hufflepuff,” she said. “Don’t worry, we won’t be long. I’m sure you all want to get to your beds.” Several students and one yellow pony yawned in unspoken agreement. “But I do like to have a quick meeting to welcome everyone and get them situated their first night here. We’ll have similar meetings every weekend, so we can air any problems and talk things out as a House.

“Now we have a busy year ahead of us, and we’ll have many opportunities to shine both as individuals, and as a House.”
“Fat chance of that,” one of the older students muttered.

“I beg your pardon, Mister Macmillan?” Sprout demanded. Everyone in the room turned to look at the transgressor.

Macmillan waffled, but decided to double down. “Oh come on, Professor, look at this,” he said, waving at the room. “Hufflepuff got the short end of the stick AGAIN.”

“And just what do you mean by that, Mister Macmillan?” Sprout said sternly.

“I’m only being honest, Professor Sprout,” he huffed. “Let’s look at facts here. We have a Headmaster who plays favorites with Gryffindor. Remember the House Cup scoring last year?”

“Yes, I remember,” Sprout said, huffily. “We had WORDS with the Headmaster over that, I assure you.”

“And the Deputy Headmaster is the Head of House for Gryffindor. She plunked Potter onto her team as Seeker a year early, even bought him a brand new broom for it. Broke like three or four Hogwarts rules in the process, but nobody said a thing.” He sneered a bit. “My, wasn’t THAT impartial.” Several students shifted uncomfortably. “And don’t even get me started on Snape--”

“Professor Snape,” Sprout corrected him sternly.

“Well Professor Snape hands out points to his own house-- and demerits and detentions to everyone else-- like they were penny candy,” Macmillan went on.

“But even if half the staff wasn’t running around playing favorites and making earning house points a joke…We’re still a house of duffers, because that’s how that Hat sorts us.

“And this year’s sorting just takes the cake,” he said. “Gryffindor gets three Pegasi. Slytherin gets two unicorns. Unicorns! And Ravenclaw gets a winged unicorn--”

“Alicorn,” Applejack said drily.

“--An alicorn princess, a dragon and a Phoenix! And what does Hufflepuff get?” He waved at the three new pony classmates. “three plain as paint nothing ponies.” His voice turned bitter with disappointment. “‘And I will take the rest,’ Hufflepuff said. Once again we get the leftovers that nobody wants.”

“Nothing ponies?” Pinkie Pie said, sounding wounded. “Hey!” Applebloom exclaimed, hopping to her hooves and looking angry.

Professor Sprout grew livid. “MISTER Macmillan, you will apologize to your new Housemates this instant--!” But Applejack stepped forward and held up a hoof.

“Hold on, Ma’am,” she said. She looked at Macmillan. “So that’s what you think? That your House always gets second best… and that us earth ponies are just another bunch of second best. Is that it?” Her words were uncommonly kind.

He wouldn’t look at her. “An’ maybe after seein yore house come out second best so often, maybe you’re wondering if YOU’RE second best, and that’s why they put you here?” He voice was even gentler. He still didn’t look at her, but he nodded. “Now,” she said to the rest of the group, giving them a gimlet eye. “How many of you are feelin’ the same way, but were just skeered to say it out loud?” Slowly, several hands rose in the crowd.

To their surprise, Applejack gave a short laugh. “I think I get how he’s feelin’, Professor,” she
said to Sprout. “Believe you me, this ain’t the first time folks have thought that about us Earth ponies. Not by a long shot. Shoot, hunnerts of years ago they used to call us ‘mud ponies,’ said we weren’t nuthin’ cause we couldn’t shoot magic out of horns on our head, or fly, or fiddle faddle with the weather. Even now a lot of ponies in the other two tribes underestimate us.

“But would it help y’all to know we’re just as magical as the other two?” She got several skeptical looks. “Naaauw, I ain’t joshin’ you. It’s just with us Earth ponies, it don’t show on the surface so much. Here...” The room, true to Pomona’s love of all things green and growing, was decorated with planters and flowerpots of all sorts. Applejack scooped some dirt out of one with a water cup. Then she pulled an apple out of her saddlebag, bit it in half with a single chomp, and spit the seeds into the cup.

She balanced the cup on her hoof and squinted at it, straining. The dirt filled cup shook, and with a tiny fountain of dirt a seedling shot up out of the soil. In seconds she was holding a food high sapling in her hoof. “We got us a few things up our sleeve,” she said over the exclamations from the other ‘Puffs.

“My word,” Professor Sprout exclaimed, delighted. She took the sapling from Applejack’s hooves and looked it over. “I do believe you’re going to do quite well in Herbology, Applejack.”

“Heh. That ain’t nuthing. Pinkie, show ‘em that little trick from the rock farm.”

One of the ‘Puffs looked up from staring at the sapling. “You grow rocks on farms?”

“Wellll, certain kinds of rocks,” Pinkie said. She pulled what looked like a bag of gravel out of her mane (earning herself a few stares), poured it in a pile on the floor, and stuck her hoof in. She grimaced wildly, her face contorting in ridiculous shapes as she pressed down, rolling the gravel under her foot. There was a creaking noise, like ice being pressed in a vise, and the loose pebbles began squeezing together, changing shape, becoming more sparkly and crystalline--

“Merlin, is that a sapphire?” One of the older students reached in and picked up a pebble. It was; it was an uncut sapphire about the size of the tip of her pinky. “And--” she picked up another. “I think this is a ruby!”

“Crystallized aluminum oxides,” Pinkie said. “Not very good quality though; a rock farmer properly cultivates them over months to get the right purity and clarity. But it’s a neat party trick.”

“Earth pony magic works with plants, growing things, with minerals and ores and anything from the earth. Hence the name Earth Pony,” Applejack said with a smirk. “We’re also tougher’n stronger than the next three unicorns or pegasus combined.

“We also tend to be crackin’ good builders, inventors, potioneers--” she paused to give her little sister a noogie. “jewelers and blacksmiths. We grow and build and invent everything everypony else uses and depends on. We’re not flashy, but we’re the ones that keep the world workin’. We work hard, we play hard, we stick by our families and our friends. That’s the earth pony way.

“An’ I’m lookin’ around at this Hufflepuff House an’ I see the same thing. Hard work, good friends--”

“And fun!” Pinkie said, leaning over Applejack’s back.

“Those are the things worth havin.’ If other folk don’t appreciate it, well tough luck. An’ if you got made a Hufflepuff, maybe it ain’t because you’re second best.” She gave Macmillan’s arm a gentle pat. “It’s just that you’re somethin’ most other folks hain’t learned to appreciate yet.”

Professor Sprout applauded solemnly. “Well said, Miss Applejack,” she said. “Well said indeed.”
Spike looked at Professor Flitwick and sighed in disgust. “You just had to show her the Ravenclaw tower private library,” he said.

Once Flitwick had opened the door it was all downhill. Twilight had taken one look and had gone into full book mania. She had looted the shelves, piling books around her in multiple stacks and burying her nose in two or three at at time.

Flitwick for his part was looking a bit perturbed. He’d never seen such a manic reader; she made Hermione Granger look positively placid. Nothing he said or did could stir the pony princess and get her to go to bed. “I can’t. I just can’t! An entire library of knowledge from another world-- I just can’t!” Was all she’d say to his requests, pleas, and even threats. He was reluctant to try anything more drastic…

Spike came toddling back in, pushing a tea trolley with, oddly enough for Great Britain, a pot of fresh coffee on it. “Don’t worry, Professor,” he muttered, “I’ve dealt with this before.” He carefully poured out a mug of steaming brew, added three lumps of sugar and some cream, and set it beside the frantically reading pony.

“Oh thank you Spike,” she said. Without looking she levitated the mug and downed it in one gulp. One second passed, then two. She sat up straight and glared in outrage at Spike. “Spike, Did you use those knockout drops in my coffee ag--”

SPLAT. Her head hit the tabletop without even time to blink. Seconds later she was snoring softly. Spike held up the bottle of “creamer” and wagged it softly. “From her Majesty Princess Celestia,” he said. “To be used in cases of Twilight Sparkle only.” He proceeded to drape the snoring pony over his shoulder. “ugh. When she wakes up rested in the morning she’ll have calmed down enough to realize she can’t read the whole library in one sitting.” He struggled to lift her. “Bit of a hand?”

Flitwick chortled and waved his wand. Twilight floated out of the room silently, and up the stairs to the girls’ dorms. “Thanks,” Spike said. He yawned. “I think I’ll head to bed myself.”

Flitwick shook his head as the dragonling headed to the boy’s dorms. “I get the feeling I’ll be glad the Hat sorted you here,” he said.

Snape glowered down at his new first years-- two legged and four legged. “It is late, and you are more than likely already too sleepy to pay much attention, so I will keep this brief. There are a very few important rules in this house. The most important is this: Outside these rooms, you present a united front. In here, you may have your squabbles, your disagreements, your dunderheaded childhood feuds. If you have a difference you wish arbitrated, you will come to me or to your Prefects. If you wish to settle matters in a duel, we have a room for that as well. But
outside, you are only Slytherin. You will not carry your squabbles out where others may see them and you will not show any weakness or division in front of the other houses.

There are rules here in Hogwarts; they are listed in your handbooks and on the bulletin board in the common room. If you are caught you WILL be punished.” Even the first years could hear the unstated in his voice: first, you had to be caught. “If you are caught and I believe you are insufficiently punished you will answer to me.” Whether punished for the infraction, or punished for being so foolish as to get caught, was again left unsaid. “The Great Hall opens for breakfast at seven. Your first classes are at eight. Do not be tardy.” He swept from the room in a swirl of his cloak.

Only then did the first years dare to breathe again. “Crikey,” someone muttered.

“Well, that was… something,” Rarity said. She approached one of the other students-- a girl with blonde hair and icy blue eyes… Greengrass, was it?--- “Excuse me, dear,” she said. “Nopony clarified the sleeping arrangements… I was wondering..?”

Daphne looked down at the unicorn coolly and nodded. “Of course. We’ll all be sharing a room together-- we three, and three others.

“Well, that’s fine I’m sure. Come along, Sweetie.”

Sweetie was standing on the couch by one of the vast picture windows. “Rarity, I think we’re under the lake! Look--” she pointed at a fish swimming past, just in time for a webbed clawed hand to flash out of the dark and snatch it away. The rest of the mermaid appeared out of the dark of the water in the next instant. With their bulging eyes, wide mouths and needle-like teeth, even by the light of day, mer-folk are an unsettling sight. Three inches from your nose in the dead of night is an outright no-sell. The little unicorn yeeped and vaulted backwards so violently she somersaulted off the couch onto the floor.

“WELL that’s enough sighs steeping let’s got to bed AWAY FROM THE WINDOWS--” she galloped past Rarity and Daphne for the girls’ dorms.

When Daphne and Rarity arrived, Sweetie had found her bed by the trunk at its foot, and was up on the bed bouncing on the pillowy mattress. “This whole thing is mine?” she squeaked in delight.

“Where are the others?”

Daphne looked around. “Ah,” she said, pointing to a closed door. “They’re in the showers, getting ready for bed.”

“Oh, excellent!” Rarity said. She pulled her towel and her nighttime beauty products from her trunk. “I do need to put my mane up. Be back in a few, Sweetie.” She trotted into the bathroom, the door swinging shut behind her.

“Well that’s the last we’ll see of her for an hour or two,” Sweetie said. She looked up at Daphne as she continued bouncing. “What’s wrong?”

Daphne Greengrass was a pureblood daughter of a pureblood family, and raised to the fashion. She was poised, she was reserved, she was dignified and aloof in everything she said and did and she couldn’t stand it anymore. She snatched the unicorn filly out of the air in mid leap and snuggled her for dear life. “EEEEEEEeeeee you are just too cute to STAND Oh I wish Astoria could see you now you are the sweetest thing EVER--”

In the next moment, with a desperate wrench of self control, she released the flabbergasted pony and dropped her back on the mattress. She pointed a threatening finger. “If you dare tell
ANYONE that just happened… I’ll… I’ll deny it to the GRAVE.” With that she turned her back and, cool disdainful mask back in place, went to open her own trunk and began getting ready for bed.

Sweetie Belle stared and rattled her head. “I have NO idea what the heck that was about,” she muttered.
Adrian, aka Bayleaf, was a metahuman. He could change at will into a half dozen different forms. In his baseline worgen form he could leap a city street or deadlift a truck by the bumper. He could maneuver in land, sea, or air. He could summon extradimensional energy to smite his enemies or heal his allies, and control (with some limited success) both animals and plants. He could craft weapons that would make a platoon of marines crap their pants. It may not have shown but even in his most minimal form, that of a baseline human, he was beyond pinnacle baseline human ability.

And at lunch it became unsettlingly clear that his first, and biggest hurtle was one for which all his brute powers would be virtually useless: shutting down three epic level Mean Girls set on destroying Taylor Hebert’s life. That was something that was going to require intellect.

The first salvo was early on. They’d found some seats at a corner table; Taylor had packed her own lunch so he left her and his backpack to hold their seats while he waited in line for… he sniffed multiple times. Meatloaf, maybe? While he was standing in line waiting to get a tray, he saw the Gruesome Threesome make their first move out of the corner of his eye. It was a “drive-by” this time. Emma, or Resting Bitch Face as he now thought of her, and two other girls, one a tall athletic black girl with cornrows, the other a petite brown haired girl in a crop top and demin skirt with her hair up in a “cutesy” style, went sidling past Taylor’s table. The black girl made a point of clipping Taylor in the back of her head with her elbow; while Cutesie-Hair shoved his backpack into the floor in passing, obviously thinking it belonged to Taylor. Emma didn’t do anything physical, but he’d managed to learn how to keep his wolfen hearing in his human form, so he clearly heard her as she passed Taylor’s seat:

“Ew.”

Subtle and vicious, like a hat pin driven through your ribs. He gave it an eight out of ten.

He briefly contemplated doing something nasty in retaliation while he was still up, but beyond blasting them with a bolt of moonfire while their backs were turned (which really wouldn’t go over well) he was short on ideas at that second. Instead he took his tray, let the lunch ladies fill it up with whatever it was they were serving, and returned to their table. Already he could see Taylor pulling back inside her shell. That wouldn’t do.

He pretended to spot his bag in the floor, shoved it under the table with a foot and sat down. “The mighty hunter returns with his kill,” he said, dropping his tray on the table. Man, he knew it was a common joke about cafeteria food, but this stuff looked seriously nasty. Some macaroni and cheese of some sort on the side, wrinkled peas, and… he still wasn’t sure if it was meatloaf. “A mercy kill, from the look of it,” he added.

Taylor “snarked” a little, then glanced over at his tray in genuine puzzlement. “What is it?”

Adrian poked it with his fork. “I’m not sure,” he said, “But I think I know what happened to Jimmy Hoffa’s body now.” She’d been in mid-bite of her sandwich roll; her snort of laughter sprayed a few bits of cheese and meat across the table. Face red as a tomato, she swept it up with her hand; Adrian handed her a napkin without a word. “So what are you having?” he asked as if nothing happened.

“Um.” She wiped the corners of her mouth. “Chicken wrap, with lettuce, rice and some mixed shredded cheese. Oh and a little sauce.” She brushed her hood back; the butterfly in her hair fluttered in the cafeteria light.
“Sounds good,” he said earnestly. “...Trade?”

“Not a chance.”

“Come on. We’ll go halvsies. Half your tasty chicken roll for half my Jimmy Hoffa loaf.” She spluttered with laughter into her napkin. He pointed at his macaroni cheese sludge. “I’ll throw in some of this delicious Cream of Cootie, whaddya say?”

“Eww, you are awful--”

A dark-skinned hand slammed down on the table; Taylor jumped in her seat, the smile vanishing from her face. It was Sophia. Flanking her were Madison and Emma, in full Resting Bitch Face mode. She stood there, leaning over their table in a domineering, space-invading pose. “Hey, Herbert. ‘Sup?” Her smile was thin and toothy and about as warm as the ones he’d seen on a shark.

Adrian hadn’t been taken by surprise. He’d been tracking them with his peripheral vision since he’d sat down. They’d been at what he assumed was one of the ‘popular kids’ tables, Emma and Madison shmoozing it up with their social fu while Sophia lounged there like a cheetah on a rich jetsetter’s leash. All three of them had been keeping a spare eye on Taylor; when he’d sat down their look of surprise on their faces had been blatant. Emma’s mouth had even dropped open in surprise. (Really? It was that unusual and outrageous that someone had sat down with Taylor?) The three had begun whispering together-- too quiet for even him to hear-- and eventually gotten up and headed for where they were sitting, social murder clearly on their minds.

Adrian had faked ignorance till they were right at the table. When Hess slammed her hand down he looked up and cheerfully drawled “Well, what can I do you for?”

Sophia just gave him a look. That was right, she was the more physical of the three. It was Emma and Madison who handled the more verbal attacks. “Oh, and who is this?” Madison chirped, all bubbles and sunshine. “C’mon, introduce us, Taylor.”

Sophia, like a good little attack animal, took her handler’s cue. “Yeah Taylor,” she said with a smirk, eyeing him up and down. “Introduce us.”

Adrian felt his eyebrows go up. Now what was that all about? Did she just give him the once-over? He decided to go with a neutral approach first. “Adrian Smith,” he said. “New here. New everywhere, actually.”

“Why are you hanging around with Hebert?” Madison said, giving me a lookover as well. “Really honey, she’s not your type.” She gave Taylor a little sneer.

My social-fu is a little weak, here, Adrian thought. ...time for a quick jab below the belt. “Hmm, I think I know you,” he said. “Heard your name somewhere... what was it?” he snapped his fingers, pretending to think. “Oh yeah, Massengil.” Taylor had been taking a sip from her water bottle to calm her nerves; she nearly choked on her own spit take. Madison’s face went wide with surprise then puckered up into a scowl. Emma and Sophia bridled up but Adrian wasn’t through. “Well, it seems Douche Princess has nothing to say,” he snarked. “How about you, Barnes?”

Taylor went from coughing to choking. Madison’s eyes went wide and her mouth formed a perfect “o;” she looked like someone had slapped the pigtails off her. Emma and Sophia bridled up but Adrian wasn’t through. “Well, it seems Douche Princess has nothing to say,” he snarked. “How about you, Barnes?”
Give her points, she rallied. “We saw Hebert here hanging off of you,” she said, her nose tipped up. “Since you’re new we figured we’d come over here and warn you.”

“Oh really.”

“Yeah really.” Emma tossed her red hair. “Taylor here’s a headcase. She’ll be all friendly like at first, but then she’ll get upset about something—just any little thing, the poor dear—” she simpered. “And then she’ll be in the Principal’s office, making up all sorts of wild accusations about you. She did it to us…” her smile was sweet as an arsenic-laced cookie. “Just a friendly warning.”

“Oh.” He smiled back just as sweetly. “You mean like, saying you knocked her bag in the floor?” He said, picking up his own backpack and holding it up. He let them see it before setting it down in the chair next to it. Her smile didn’t move, but her eyes glazed. “Or saying you tripped her in the hall and tried to knock her down with a push to the back? I caught your performance in the hallway, Resting Bitch Face. Eight out of ten for effort but a zero for execution. You should leave the physical stuff to your friends.”

Sophia shifted her stance so she was facing him. “You like to live dangerously, don’t ya, Adrian Smith?” Her eyes glittered dangerously.

“Well, kitten—” he slapped his much larger hand down over her relatively slender one where it rested on the table. Scowling she tried to yank her hand away; to her consternation she couldn’t. She tugged again, then harder. It was no use, he was pinning her hand to the table without any apparent effort. “You just may be right. But I’ll tell you one thing I don’t do.” His smile vanished, his face became an expressionless mask but his eyes smoldered.

“I don’t play little girly games. I don’t do this running around little ‘tee hee, he said she said let’s call them names out loud in the cafeteria’ crap. I don’t drop anonymous hate email or scribble crap on someone’s locker and then go running off giggling with my little school friends about how badass and edgy I am. And I don’t put up with useless skanks who do that kind of crap.

“So take Douche Girl, Resting Bitch Face and the rest of your little goldfish poop gang and go be worthless somewhere else.” He lifted his hand; she yanked hers back and glared at him like she wanted to burn holes through his head with her eyes. But the look in his eyes, eyes that a second ago she could have sworn were a cool blue grey but she now saw were flecked with gold, was a kind of dangerous that her cape hindbrain couldn’t ignore. She whirled around and marched off, hackles up and all but radiating vicious anger. Emma and Madison fell in behind her and marched off too, noses high but cheeks flaring red.

“Whoa” came from several nearby tables. There were laughs and catcalls and a few bits of applause, even…everyone loved a free show. Adrian turned his attention back to his alleged lunch. Taylor was hunched over her own meal, looking like a terrified rabbit. “Why did you do that?” she hissed.

He shrugged. “Why not? I was supposed to put up with that crap?” It was important he establish that this was for his own benefit, as well as for hers.

“She won’t let that go,” Taylor said. “None of them will. You don’t know how bad they can make things for you—”

Adrian snorted raucously. “Taylor, they’re a bunch of high school bitches,” he said. “They’ve got three and only three things: money, tits and popularity, and the first two is where they get the last one. And no matter how much of the first two they have, without the last one they’re like a Beverly Hills bimbette without her daddy’s credit card: useless.” He gestured around. “How popular are they really? Did you hear how many people applauded them getting ganked just
now?” He stabbed his meatloaf with a fork. Possibly to make sure it was dead. “All it takes for
them to lose it all is for just one person to not take their crap.”

Taylor shook her head. “You’re a hopeless optimist, in that case.”

“Ehh, shuddup and eat your Jimmy Hoffa Loaf,” he said, pushing the tray at her.

She pushed it back, grinning and wrinkling her nose. “Ew no. You eat it!”

“No you!”

“You!”

“Okay, a compromise, maybe a respectful burial in an unmarked grave out back--”

The day proceeded; Taylor and Adrian shuffled from class to class, discovering they shared a
handful Gladly’s regrettable class, and Mrs. Knott’s for computers, just to name two. For a
miracle, the Gruesome Threesome actually kept their heads down the rest of that day. Adrian was
pleased.

Taylor was not. She knew it just meant they were planning.

Taylor was generous. For all their malice the Threesome would never be known for in depth
strategy or, for that matter, an ability to think through long-term consequences. Emma was the
closest thing they had to a tactician. After their fumble at lunch, she knew they had to act fast to
re-balance the scales.

The three were in the bathroom together, skipping out on the last period of the day. “So why not
go after this Adrian bitch’s locker?” Sophia was complaining. “He’s the one who talked back to
us...”

“Because we’ll be the first suspects everyone thinks of if we do,” Emma said, carefully touching
up her eyeliner. “We get dissed in the cafeteria, then two hours later he gets his locker trashed?
Blackwell and the teachers may not care but even they wouldn’t be able to pretend they didn’t
know, and I don’t know about you but I don’t wanna spend my afternoon sitting in Blackwell’s
office sucking up to her, trying to get off the hook. Gimme your lip gloss, Madison.” The other
girl obediently handed it over.

Sophia snorted and crossed her arms. “Look at it this way, Soph,” Emma said. “This Adrian guy,
he obviously thinks he’s some sort of white knight or something. Taylor’s already starting to latch
onto him, to hide behind him-- and that’s just after one day!

“But if, while he’s out there on bended knee, promising his lady fair he’ll defend her honor, you
wreck her stuff right under his nose--”

“He’ll look like a chump,” Madison threw in, tucking her rouge in her handbag and blowing
herself a kiss in the mirror.

“Better yet it’ll yank the rug out from under Taylor again. Big bad muscly macho man couldn’t
even keep her safe for 24 hours...She’ll be heartbroken. She’ll probably never trust anyone again.” Emma sighed, dropping the lip gloss into her own bag and snapping it shut. “Such a tragedy.”

Sophia’s face split in a grin. “Damn, Emma,” she said. “You are one vicious little minx.”

“Don’t I know it. We’d better hustle. Maddie, you’ll stand at one end of the hall, just around the corner, and be lookout...”

Minutes later, they were in the hallway in question. Taylor’s locker was in a short dead-end hallway off to one side. There were no classroom doors in that hall, and none in the main hall that looked in on it. It was the perfect blind spot-- the main reason the three of them had gotten away with so many things they’d pulled on Taylor already.

Madison took up her lookout position just around the corner. Emma however stayed by Sophia’s side. Emma wasn’t on the lookout for teachers; she was busy watching Madison in one of the curved security mirrors at the end of the hall, making sure Maddie didn’t get it in her head to peek at an inopportune moment. It was a good thing Maddie wasn’t particularly bright. “Okay, Soph, she’s totally focused on the classroom doors,” she said. “Go ahead and do your thing.”

Sophia stepped up to Taylor’s locker, a smug smile on her face. “You said the flute, right? In the top compartment?” She said.

“Yeah, it was her Mom’s. She’ll be devastated.”

“Got it.” Sophia grabbed the lock. Her hand suddenly went smokey and transparent, like a shadow given form… the lock along with it. She yanked it off, dropping it to the floor. She opened up the door--

“BIMBO DETECTED! BIMBO DETECTED! THIEVING SKANK ON THE PREMISES!”

The locker lit up from within with a strobing red light and a klaxon, piercingly keen and loud enough to wake the dead, began blaring. Over top of the klaxon the voice continued shouting.

“CRIMINAL TRESSPASS! ATTEMPTED BURGLARY! BREAKING AND ENTERING! HALT WHERE YOU ARE CRIMINAL SCUM!”

Sophia yelled and tumbled backward, slapping her hands over her ears. “The HELL?” she screeched. It was some sort of damned toy-- a robot or something with a police light for a head. It was strobing the hallway with fire-engine lights and blasting out siren noises fit to wake the dead.

Madison hadn’t come running yet, she’d apparently been startled into confusion by the noise and the flashing red lights illuminating the hallway. Emma could see her in the mirror, spinning in a circle in panic. Emma mimicked Sophia, covering her own ears against the deafening noise. “Turn it off, turn it off!” Impulsively, Sophia reached in and grabbed for the toy planning to smash whatever-it-was with her bare fist, if she had to.

This might have gone badly for Obie. It went decidedly worse for Sophia. While Obie was built from Azeroth blueprints, the Agent’s gifts had made Adrian a gifted enough engineer to make certain improvements. The first of course being Obie’s rather attention getting voice. The second
being a much more potent power supply.

The third being the tasers implanted in Obie’s stumpy metal hands.

There was a flash of blue-white light and a sound like a tesla coil sparking, and Sophia Hess went flying across the hallway to smack into the lockers there with a bang and fall in a heap to the floor. She was shaking and jittering, and the rubber bands binding her hair braids had come undone, giving her the start of a rather impressive Afro. “Sophia!” Emma cried. She ran to the undercover cape’s side, panicking.

She looked around. She could hear doorways opening and people pouring out in the main hallway, teachers and students alike. Maddie, thank Scion, was still there running interference—crying and yelling and freaking out and taking up everybody’s attention. The janitor’s closet-- it was open! She grabbed Sophia under the armpits and dragged her to the closet door. She pulled her inside and shut them both inside a split second before everyone began pouring around the corner to see what in hell all the noise was about.

Mr. Gladly was at the head of the pack. He stood there and stared at the sight: a wide open locker with what looked and sounded like a fire engine going berserk inside. “What in the world…?” he mouthed. Then somebody panicked-- or more likely took advantage of an opportunity-- and pulled the fire alarm. The mob of curious teenagers suddenly turned into a torrent as they began pouring for the exits, sweeping up the bewildered teachers and staff in their path.

A moment later Adrian and Taylor both, for similar but distinct reasons of their own, squeezed out of the herd and came running around the corner. Both stopped and stared for a moment at the tableau. “All clear, all clear!” Taylor shouted. Obie fell silent; the fire alarms unfortunately continued.

The toe of Taylor’s sneaker caught on something. She looked down and picked it up; it was her combination lock, still closed. “What…”?

Adrian sized the situation up. “Rrrright,” he said. He grabbed Obie and stuffed him in his sack. “I think we’re both taking an early day. I’ve got my stuff, you grab yours…”

Taylor nodded; as the saying went, her Momma didn’t raise no fool. She grabbed her flute case and her books, pocketed the lock, and followed Adrian as they hastily-- but in a quiet and orderly fashion, of course-- blended into the yelling mob of students flowing out into the street.

Eventually the fire alarm stopped, although the danger lights in the hallway kept flashing. The broom closet door rattled. “Ah @#$^!!!” Emma’s muffled voice said. “The door must’ve locked when we-- Soph, wake up, you gotta get us out of here. Sophia!”

“Nuh mummy, I duh wanna enter the junior beauty pageant….”

Emma groaned in disgust.

Then the sprinkler system-- including the heavy duty sprinklers in the Janitor’s closet-- kicked in.

“AAAHAHAHAHG!!”
The Warcrafter, Chapter 5

The first week eased on by. Adrian got used to the drag of the daily grind of high school. Each
day he went in, put in his six hours, then booked his way down to the Boardwalk, his little
vending license in his hot sweaty hand, and set up his little push cart, selling trinkets and toys
cribbed from Azeroth… paper zeppelins, little clockwork bugs, comical toy tanks that shot ping
pong balls, Creeepy Crates, widgets that sparkled and spun and went PING and did absolutely
nothing… the Sunshine Butterflies sold quite well. When night fell and the streets rolled up, he
closed up his cart and trundled it on home-- then beelined to his workshop, where he put in an
hour or two assembling gadgets of more serious use. Then to bed, up at six, lather, rinse, repeat.

Things were going well with Taylor as well. Considering all the hurt she’d been put through and
the betrayal she’d suffered, he’d feared he would have to spend far too much time earning her
trust. Apparently fleeing the authorities after triggering a building wide panic with the strobing,
klaxon-voiced evidence in tow was a bonding moment, because she warmed to him rapidly.
Already they were, if not fast friends, then at least kindred spirits and fellows-in-arms.

And according to Taylor, she hadn’t been bothered by anything more than a few hostile glares
since then. The Threesome were currently laying low, it seemed. He would wager a guess that he
was an unknown commodity. The usual routine with anyone attempting to befriend Taylor in the
past was that they quickly knuckled under, or were such social dregs (like Greg Veder) that
chasing them off wasn’t worth the bother.

Greg Veder. That was someone else he’d like to help, if he could. He’d have to think about that.

Either way, Adrian was outside their usual paradigm. Taylor figured they were regrouping,
deciding how to attack next. Adrian figured they might be waiting until their hearing came back.
Sophia was still sort of twitchy, days later…

Friday afternoon came and went. The tools were tucked away, the various trinkets and gadgets he
was working on shut down and tucked away on their shelves. He lay back in his bed in the rafters
of his Lost Workshop and snoozed away the waning day. At midnight though his alarm went off,
a gentle chime from a domed clock he’d found during his yard sale frenzy. He woke up, stared at
the roof a few inches from his nose, and smiled. His fangs gleamed in the dark. “Time to start
cleaning up the neighborhood,” he said to himself, and chuckled.

Bayleaf’s lair wasn’t just in a poor and crime ridden neighborhood. It was located in the heart of
the territory of the Archer’s Bridge Merchants. To anyone else with any mind for real estate, this
would have been a calamity. To Bayleaf, it was a bonus.

The Archer’s Bridge Merchants were dealers and junkies. Their rank and file were junkies. Their
capes were junkies. Their leader and his woman were both junkies. They dealt… and used…
every known substance, licit and illicit, known to man, and quite a few more known only to
metahumans. Oh, they dipped their rancid toes in everything else too: prostitution, protection,
armed robbery, and the like. But it always came back to drugs. Most of them spent the majority of
their day wasted, and what little was left either jonesing for their next hit or robbing someone to
pay for it.

The utter bafflement was how in the name of all things holy that they functioned at all. Before
coming to Brockton Bay, Bayleaf would have sworn that a group-- noone could call it an
“organization”-- like the Merchants was simply functionally impossible. Back on the old home
Earth, there were drug lords and barons and gangs of dealers of course, but one of the cardinal rules of those organizations was that if you were in charge, you didn’t sample the merchandise. Pickling your own brain on a regular basis was a shortcut to your empire crumbling around you, that or one of your more temperate lieutenants putting a bullet in the back of your head and taking over the show. These guys on the other hand were running the candy store with both hands in the bins; they should have imploded long before now if for no other reason than that they swallowed, smoked, snorted or injected all the stock.

And yet, despite all this, they not only managed to stay in business, they managed to hold territory against three other gangs, and thwart the Protectrate as well, and still make enough money to keep Skidmark, Squealer and their lieutenants bombed out of their freaking minds.

Which led Bayleaf to one conclusion: Despite all appearances, Skidmark and Squealer were not the ones calling the shots. Someone-- someone with a still-functioning brain with all its original chemicals intact-- was running things, and they were just along for the ride. It would be interesting finding out who.

For now though, he was going to spend a few nights going after the low-hanging fruit. It was time to establish a presence.

Of all the skills downloaded to him, armor crafting had not been included. He could of course take hammer, tongs and anvil (or leather punch and knife, or cloth and thread) and handicraft something, but the Azerothian art of not only creating armor of cloth, leather, and metal but of infusing it on the anvil (or the rack, or the loom) with enhancing attributes was a complete enigma.

But he did have the skill of enchantment. And he could improvise.

The cloth given to Parian had yielded fruit. She had quickly figured out how to incorporate the arcane enhancements into other types of cloth-- (or rather, Bayleaf suspected, her SHARD had…..) She had not only figured out how to make clothing that was self-resizing, but also how to make it stronger, tougher, more durable…

Bayleaf had been busy the past couple of weeks as well. His efforts at disenchantment had yielded a considerable amount of dusts, essences, and shards-- primarily from items of particular age or sentimental value, he noticed, though he suspected some few were the idle trinkets of tinkers; his own scrapped projects had ended up recycled in the same fashion. As an experiment he had crafted several low level enchantments-- plus-ones to armor and the like-- and given them to Parian to experiment with. Within a matter of hours she had begun producing clothing with armor ratings and attribute enhancements he could feel for himself.

It was something of an open secret between them that he was a cape, but she never spoke of it. To be a rogue in Brockton Bay was to have a code of customer confidentiality to rival that of a physician. She was sitting on her clothier discoveries for now, but already she was grateful enough to offer him commissioned work for free. He asked, and discovered to his gratification that she actually DID work with leather from time to time…

He, ahem. didn’t ask.

Then he’d dug out the Enchanted Leather recipe, and things had really gotten interesting.

He hadn’t gone with any Azeroth designs for his costume. They looked, quite frankly, ridiculous, and the pauldrons would have broken his neck the first time he raised his hands over his head. (he suspected the real Azerothians used shoulder pads a bit more subtle.) Instead he and she (very well, MOSTLY she) had crouched over a drawing board and worked out something original.
A hooded leather jerkin, so dark brown as to be almost black. Bracers of the same material, thick as bootleather. Fingerless gloves. Breeches with kneepads to match the ones at his elbows. A wide belt, with stout buckles. A long hooded cloak. And footwear that, to Parian’s consternation, were somewhere between boots and sandals, with bared toes. It was stitched with a repeating pattern, a Celtic knotwork. Parian had thought it fitting.

Everything was lined inside with soft, sheer cloth for comfort… a futuristic fabric invented by a tinker that fit like silk yet breathed and wicked away moisture like Gore Tex. It had integrated with the “new weaving technique” so perfectly it was alarming, Parian had told him.

The final addition sort of scared the heck out of him. It was a belt pouch of thick cloth, not much larger than a fanny pack, designed to hang at his hip. Yet it held something like ten times its volume… there was only one compartment, and it only held so much before “burping” and spilling out whatever you put in it, but there it was.

A first generation handy haversack. In just a week's time. What would she be crafting in two?

He had thanked her profusely, taken the costume home, and set to adding his own improvements.

The cloak had been quickly upgraded into a Parachute Cloak. The design was improved, though; closer to a modern parasail than the crude four-corner thing the design normally had. Enchantments for added armor, fireproofing (he KNEW about Lung), and boosts to his “arcane” powers went everywhere he could fit them.

The haversack got loaded out with a variety of explosives (gnomes and goblins, whaddya gonna do?)-- flash bombs, fireworks, and the like; several automated decoys; a pile of high-level first aid bandages (he had BEGGED Parian for the scraps), and his favorite invention thus far-- a Gnomish Universal Remote.

One last item was added. He had been working on it from the moment he’d found his workshop: his staff. He he’d bought it at the flea market from a woodcrafter, a bit of extra scrap he’d had no use for. Bayleaf had taken it, whittled it down and smoothed it, carved maze-like grooves into its entire length, hardened it in the fire, then hammered silver melted with moonfire into the grooves. A gem, fused together from the odd crystals and metals he’d collected and probably unidentifiable by any earth-born gemologist, had been put into the fitting carved at one end. Then he’d slathered it with every bottled enchantment he’d had left on his shelves, whether they were intended for a weapon or not.

To his astonishment, they’d stuck. The moonsilver had glowed, then sunk into the wood and vanished. The gemstone had been covered, engulfed in a knot of wood. To all outward appearance it was now just a plain, slightly crooked, gnarled piece of fire hardened driftwood. Yet he could feel the countless enhancements in it whenever he picked it up.

He didn’t know what had driven him to do something so recklessly wasteful, or even just plain reckless. But he had been driven, motivated by some muse. He’d taken notes, or at least tried to, as he proceeded… perhaps someday he’d make sense of them. All he knew now was that it was stout, it fit in his hands perfectly whether human or worgen, it also fit neatly in his haversack without trying, and he could whack it with all his strength across one of his anvils and it didn’t even crack.

He donned his costume piece by piece, almost reverently. When he’d dropped the last item-- his staff-- into his haversack and buckled it shut, he looked in the cracked mirror leaning against the wall. Man. He looked good.

“Showtime,” he said, his teeth gleaming.
There was a whirr-whirr-whirr, and Obie came trotting across the workfloor, his rotating strobe faintly glowing. Bayleaf patted him on the bubblegum machine. “Keep an eye on the place while I’m gone, Obie,” he said. Obie saluted.

A moment later a trapdoor opened on the rooftop of his workshop, and he leapt out. He raced out across the rooftop on all fours and disappeared into the night, looking for the one thing that Brockton Bay provided in surfeit:

Trouble.

“So,” Emily Piggot said, her hands folded across her desk, her expression (as always) sour. “Do you have ANYTHING to report on the unidentified cape that literally dropped out of the sky on us a little over a month ago?” She turned the screen on her desk around so that Arm master could see it. “Besides this, I mean.”

Onscreen was a photograph, one that had become famous online and notorious around the Protectorate and PRT offices. It showed a rather interesting double selfie. On one side, his nose almost to the lens, was an enormous wolf-man, his eyes bugged out mouth hanging open and his tongue dangling out of the side of his mouth in a goofy canine grin. Next to him in a near headlock was Arm master. What wasn’t half-wrapped in the werewolf’s arm was half-wrapped in woody vines. Arm master himself was looking as utterly displeased with the situation as a human being possibly could. His goatee practically radiated anger. “I like the caption on this one,” Piggot said idly. “Hello. I M WulfMan. I hav just met yu and I luv yu.”

Assault let out a muffled snort, then a grunt as his wife Battery elbowed him. “Nothing to report on our side,” she said matter-of-factly. “Of course most of our patrols have been out near Captain’s Hill. Most of the sightings have been in the Docks or the Trainyard.”

“Any eyewitnesses?” Piggot said, not turning a single hair.

“A few,” Miss Militia said. “Most of the sources, though, are rather…”

“Pickled?” Assault ventured. “Ow!”

“I would have gone with ‘embalmed,’” Miss Militia said dryly. She was idly flipping a glowing green butterfly knife in one hand while she talked. “This wolf-man seems to be concentrating his vigilante efforts in Merchant territory, picking off the drug dealers, pimps and other charming underlings Skidmark attracts. He’s also stopped a number of small time robberies and several assaults… but consequently the eyewitnesses are… less than reliable.”

“Need I point out that we have a speedster in the room?” Piggot said, annoyed. “You may not be able to affect him while at full speed, Velocity, but you could still cover the entirety of the Docks in a handful of minutes. Surely you could have spotted him.”

“Not necessarily,” Arm master said. “As I said in my report, the cape in question assumed a secondary form that promptly turned invisible-- or so close that I couldn’t tell the difference.”
“Couldn’t you spot him on infrared?” Velocity said, surprised.

“Infrared is still LIGHT, Velocity,” Armsmaster said, his lips pressed thin. “Whatever cloaking method or device he’s using is very effective.” He hesitated. “Either that or he is able to cool himself down to ambient temperature at will… hm.” His eyes unfocused and flickered in the manner that indicated he was taking down notes on his HUD.

“Still..” Piggot said.

“It doesn’t seem to matter,” Miss Militia said. “Somehow, when we’re still blocks away he knows we’re coming. According to the few… ah… chemically non-enhanced eyewitnesses we’ve found, he’ll suddenly bolt for the rooftops or the shadows without warning, just a minute or so before we or the police arrive on the scene.”

“So he somehow knows when we’re coming?”

“That would be indicated, yes.”

“Lovely.” Piggot’s expression was anything but.

“The longest he’s spoken to anyone was one incident last night...”

Clara sprawled on the ground in the trash-strewn alley where the mugger had thrown her. She scrambled backward on her hands and heels, trying to keep her distance from him and from the knife gleaming in his hand. He was raggedy, dressed in clothes that reeked in only the way that could come from someone who never bothered or cared to clean themselves, and his eyes were glazed. “C’mon,” he said, all too confident of how this would go. “There’s nothing in that purse worth dying for.”

A shadow-- an enormous one-- seemed to detach itself from the wall behind him. Glowing red eyes looked down on him. “Funny,” it growled in a voice as deep as a well. “That’s what she ought to be saying to you.”

The mugger whipped around, knife out. Before he could even move a clawed hand the size of a small shovel whipped out and wrapped around his head. He was lifted off the ground, his screaming muffled by the palm covering his face. He kicked helplessly at the air and lashed out, stabbing blindly one, two, three times-- the other hand appeared and grabbed the mugger’s knife hand. There was a crack. The muffled screaming went up an octave, and the monster threw the broken knife away---

“So, some level of invulnerability?”

“Or just body armor.”
“True. Continue.”

The mugger-turned-prey clawed at the monster’s arm with his good hand, to no avail. “All the suffering in this world,” the monster said, his voice as much sorrowful as it was angry, “And you have to add to it. For what? For nothing but a few minute’s poison.” He turned and marched further up the alley. There was a muffled THUMP, and the mugger’s screams ceased. This was followed by a loud squelching crunch-- and the monster returned; behind him the unlucky mugger was crammed, headfirst, into a can full of trash. He was alive, or at least still moving feebly.

“Head first in the trash, huh?” Assault was clearly amused.

“It… seems to be his trademark,” Armsmaster admitted reluctantly. “He doesn’t just beat up and secure his prisoners; it seems he has to humiliate them in some fashion as well.”

“I could like this guy,” Assault said.

Clara was scared stiff; too scared to move or even breathe too loud. The monster came closer; in the dim light she saw that he was an enormous wolf-man, dressed in a leather cloak and wielding a wooden staff. He was seven, eight feet tall if he was an inch, and his eyes glowed blood red in the moonlight.

He knelt down and reached for her. She shrieked and cringed. He pulled back. “I’m not going to hurt you, I promise,” he said. “You’re hurt. Let me help.” He reached out again. This time she held still. He pulled out a patch of cloth and wiped at the cut and bruise on her face. It was cool and tingled as he wiped it across her skin. It stuck in place, covering the wound. “There, that should help.” He took her hands, carefully brushing the gravel out of the cuts, and wrapped them in more soothing cloth. “Do you have a phone?”

“I-I yes, I do.”

“Call the police,” he said. His eyes seemed to squint in amusement. “And next time you go out, carry something a little higher caliber than speed dial.”
“So now he’s encouraging people to arm themselves,” Armsmaster said, in obvious disapproval. "Just what this city needs. A bunch of frightened women running around with firearms."

There was a loud SCHICK-CHACK. Miss Militia’s infinite weapon had changed from a butterfly knife to a pump action shotgun. “Gun control,” she said sourly, “is the proposition that a 98 pound woman should have to fight off a 200 pound rapist with her bare hands.”

Assault leaned over to Battery. “Awk-warrrrrd,” he sing-sanged sotto voce.

Pigott growled. “Table that. Back to the point.”

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“Thank.. thank y--” But before Clara could finish saying it, the wolfman’s ears pricked up. Without a word he leapt… clear to the rooftop… and vanished.

Mere seconds later, the familiar thrumm of Miss Militia’s motorcycle echoed down the alleyway. She stopped with a jerk at the mouth of the alley and shone a spotlight down on Clara, making her squint. “What happened here, Ma’am?” She said over the engine roar.

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“That incident is typical of all verified encounters with him,” Armsmaster concluded. “He drops out of nowhere, stops the perpetrator cold-- generally leaving him in a humiliating position-- dresses the wounds of the victim, and then vanishes moments before the authorities arrive. Sometimes he strikes so quickly that the eyewitness never actually sees him. There’s just a blur and suddenly the perp is down.” His beard bristled in irritation. “At least those are the cases we know he was involved in…”

Pigott raised an eyebrow. It was the most she’d moved since the start of the meeting. “Pardon?”

“There have been other incidents,” Velocity said. “Odd enough that we think he may be involved. Such as a pack of drug dealers we found, tied to a lamp post, surrounded by ruined baggies of their “product” and in hysterics. They were all high as kites, but they gave the arresting officers what they THOUGHT was a cock-and-bull story about being attacked by an invisible tiger.”

“An invisible tiger…” Pigott said.

“Yes, they couldn’t see it, but they could hear it… and see its paw prints on the ground… they were apparently doing some buying and selling out of an old storage facility when this thing attacked them. Smacked them around, scattered their product all over the place, shredded the tires on their car so they couldn’t get away-- Any of them pulled a gun or knife a huge invisible paw would slap it out of their hands.
“It played cat and mouse with them for about an hour, chasing them up and down that old storage yard. Every now and then they’d think they lost it, then it would roar right in their ear… it finally threw a phone at their feet and said one word: “Call.” They couldn’t dial 911 fast enough. Then they say there was this gigantic flash of blue-white light, and when they woke up they were all tied to the lamppost with their merchandise spread out all over the place around them.”

“Vicious sense of humor, too,” Assault noted.

“Well that matches Armsmaster’s report of him turning into some sort of invisible creature,” Battery said. “This guy’s an interesting grab bag.”

“His avian form is accounted for too,” Velocity said. “Some perv tried to kidnap a little girl over on the boardwalk. He didn’t make fifty feet with her tucked under his arm before a giant owl dropped out of the sky—”

“A giant OWL?” Piggot’s eyebrows both raised at that one.

“A giant bleepin’ owl,” Velocity said. “It falcon punched the guy and knocked him out.”

“I feel like an excuse for plot exposition, but… “falcon punched?” Battery asked.

“Some birds kill their prey by literally punching them,” Assault told his wife. “They dive down at a hundred miles per, with their feet clenched up in fists like this—” he held his fists out in front of him. “When they hit, WHAM.” Everyone paused. “Hey, I watch Animal Planet, okay?”

“Eyewitnesses say the guy flipped completely over in the air before hitting the ground,” Velocity said. “He’s in the hospital with some nasty skull fractures and one hell of a case of whiplash.”

Assault started chuckling. “I really hope this is all one guy, because he gets better with every story,” he said.

“Please don’t tell me there’s more,” Piggot said.

“Please tell me there is!” Assault said.

It was another street, another mouth of another alley, and another mugging. This time it was a young couple on their way home from a movie. This time the mugger had a gun. “Wallet, watch, jewelry, phone. Come on!”

Bayleaf was on the rooftop. He had accidentally stumbled into a clothesline someone had stretched there, and was untangling himself from a beach blanket they had forgotten to take in. He looked over the edge of the roof, saw the mugging taking place, and had a terrible, awful, wonderful idea…

The young man hastily removed his watch and dug out his wallet. The guy snatched them from his hands with nervous fingers. “Now you too, sister—”

It was then the alley rang with a mighty battle cry.
“BJORRRRRRK!!”

The mugger spun about, gun at the ready, but he wasn’t fast enough. He was flattened to the pavement by an enormous wall of blubber as a walrus, wearing a beach towel tied around its neck like a cape, lunged out of the alley and bore him to the ground.

The two lovebirds could only gawk in astonishment the one ton aquatic mammal reared up and “orrrek” in triumph. They could see the mugger’s head, arms, and feet sticking out from underneath their bizarre rescuer.

The mugger arggghled and tried to reach for his gun where it had fallen to the sidewalk. Bad mistake. The walrus saw him trying to reach the weapon and proceeded to bounce up and down on top of him.

“HuaghHuaghHuaghHuagh!”

The walrus barked, gave one last bounce, and slapped the gun away from the mugger’s limp hand with a flipper.

The couple stared.

The walrus stared back. It nudged one of the cellphones lying on the sidewalk in their direction. “Wha, what, who do we call??” The young man stammered, his common sense derailed.

“Call nine-one-one,” the mugger groaned flatly.

“Right right, we need the police,” the young man said, jabbing at the buttons.

“We need an ambulance,” the mugger moaned.

“Are you… some sort of hero?” The girl asked the walrus. By way of reply the walrus reared up, showing the “W” smeared on its chest in white paint.

Sirens started to draw close. The walrus turned and began belly-walking back into the alley. “Thank you...” the girl called out. It looked back, gave her a salute with one flipper, and belly-walked out of sight.

Moments later a squad car, lights going, pulled up to the alley. Up on the rooftop Bayleaf lay on his back, rocking back and forth and biting his own arm to keep from howling with laughter.

Everyone in the meeting room watched Assault warily. He was rocking back and forth, face red as his costume. There was, everyone privately calculated, a good chance he would explode.

“There were further sightings,” Armsmaster went on, as if in pain. “A walrus saved a drowning man out in the bay. And a couple of smugglers in a fishing smack were boarded and routed by an angry walrus in a cape.” He grimaced; the next words came out like he was passing a kidney stone. “He’s already become something of a local meme in the neighborhood; people in the Docks have begun referring to him-- it-- as Wonder Walrus--”
“WONDER WALRUS!!!” Assault shrieked, toppling over backwards out of his chair. He rolled on the floor, howling and clutching his ribs.

Battery watched him and sighed. “He’ll need a minute,” she said.

Piggot slowly massaged her temples. “Good, because I’LL need a minute,” she said.

Later… MUCH later… after Assault had calmed down enough, they resumed. “So we’ve determined he’s a shapeshifter with at least four forms,” Piggot said. “A wolf-man or beast-man form, an aerial form, that of an owl, a stealth form, of an invisible great cat of some sort, and…. An aquatic form… of a walrus. Shut up, Assault.”

Assault let out a smothered giggle.

“We have one other possible,” Triumph said, speaking up for the first time. “Though… well, I’d include it only because it’s so strange.” His mouth curled up at the corner. “And strange seems to be this guy’s thing.”

Piggot sighed. “Continue.”

“It came in from Panacea, of all people...”

Amy Dallon, the legendary Panacea, slumped and groaned in relief as the door closed behind her. A moment’s privacy, finally. Some days it was just more than she could take, working hour after hour in the hospital, healing the same blasted problems over and over...

Thank whoever was responsible for this space. It was an enclosed courtyard in the middle of the building. Few people used it, especially this late in the fall, and there were few windows looking down on it. She’d taken to sneaking out here to sneak a smoke where nobody would bother, or worse, lecture her about it.

It was a shame noone else came out here though. It was a pretty little garden courtyard. Especially now with the flowers blooming and the green in the trees...

She stopped with the cigarette in her lips, lighter halfway to the tip, and reviewed that thought. Flowers. And green leaves. In early NOVEMBER.

She looked around carefully. What was going on? For one thing, she did NOT remember that tree standing over there. And this faint, misty-green glow over everything. At first she thought it was just the light filtering down through the branches of the tree. Then she realized the light was coming FROM the branches of the tree.

Curiosity overcame common sense. She approached, stealthy as a cat, to see what was going on. Just as she was within arm’s reach, the “tree” lowered its head, looked at her and slowly smiled…
She realized what she was seeing now. The part she had mistaken for a stump of a bough was actually a long-jawed head, with a craggy face like an old man and glowing green eyes. The two largest boughs were upraised arms. It lowered them. Then it reached out with one leafy hand and plucked the cigarette from where it dangled, forgotten and unlit, from her lower lip. The treant—there was no other word for it—flicked the cigarette over its shoulder and slowly shook a finger at her. “Baaaaad…. Forrrr …. Youuuuu.” It said, smiling at her gently.

Flummoxed beyond words, she fell back on her old standby: snark. “Oh fine, great,” she said, “now the trees are lecturing me on my personal habits. Look, whatever you are, that’s my business and not-- ugh. Huuk. HACCK!” While she had been speaking the Treant had laid one hand on her back. There was a strange second glow. The next thing she knew, a violent coughing fit hit her. She doubled over and a wad of phlegm and tar the size of the palm of her hand hit the path between her feet.

“Oh, yuck. Wait, that was in my lungs?” She blinked. “Did you do that?”

The Treant winked at her.

Amy bridled. “All right, buster. What are you doing here??” She demanded.

“Giiiiift… of… Eluuuune.” The Treant raised its arms and looked at the sky. It’s glow grew brighter. And brighter.

Panacea suddenly realized something: she felt good. No, really good. Better than she had in days. Her exhaustion was gone, dozens of little aches and pains she’d had in her back, her feet, her legs, all became apparent by their absence. She checked her hand; the scratches she’d gotten from her neighbor’s pet cat the other day were gone completely. Was this what it felt like to be healed? No wonder so many people wanted a touch from her power so badly. She found herself doing something she rarely did; she smiled.

There was a commotion at one of the windows. A little girl was there, in a hospital gown, bouncing up and down waving excitedly.

Amy gawked like a fool. Wasn’t that the little girl on the third floor? The one who had an aneurysm and was in a coma??

“Holy crap,” Velocity said.
“Got that right.” Assault agreed.

“They did a quick survey and eval of everyone at the hospital,” Triumph went on. “There were no real “miracle cures--” noone grew back a lost limb, and most cancers were only diminished, not cured. But scars burns and other wounds were healed, broken bones mended, infections vanished, poisoning cases cleared up instantly… everyone, staff included, experienced at least some uptick on their physical health.

"But an aneurysm?"

"Just a broken vein or artery in the brain," Assault said. "A tiny little wound. Which is what makes them so tragic."

“Did anyone attempt to capture, or at least speak to him?” Armsmaster asked.

Triumph shook his head. “After all the staff, and Panacea, were through running around figuring out what was up with their patients, they found out the Treant had disappeared. The closest thing we have to an eyewitness is a little girl who said ‘the Magic Tree turned into a big bird and flew away.’”

“Which ties him back to our strange visitor from the sky,” Piggot concluded. “Okay, this cape has become priority one. He’s a brute, a changer with who knows how many forms, a stranger with invisibility that fools even infrared cameras, – his healing abilities alone make him absolutely priceless to the Protectorate. We can’t have him getting snatched up by some gang or supervillain team or worse. Recruit him. Offer him whatever it takes. Find him and get him on the team!”

Amy sat up in bed, staring at what lay in her palm by the light of her alarm clock face. She hadn’t told anyone about it; it seemed too important. Shortly before the Treant had flown off, while everyone in the hospital was running around like chickens with their heads cut off, she had gone back out to the little enclosed park to confront him, to try to speak to him.

Before she could say a word, he had taken her hands in his and pressed something into her palm. “Do… Soomthing…Newwww,” he’d said. Then he winked again, and vanished in a flash of blue white light. The last she’d seen of him-- though she didn’t know it till later-- was an enormous owl, flying up into the sky.

She had sat up, examining the acorn with her power. To her relief, as well as her disappointment, it was just what it appeared: an ordinary acorn from an ordinary oak tree somewhere. For a while there she’d thought she’d been asked to raise the Treant’s offspring.

But that wasn’t what the treant had said. It had said for her to do something she had been terrified to do since she was a little girl.. to use her powers to do more than just heal. To try something new.

Wouldn’t that be something. She had so many ideas. So many she'd been so afraid to even THINK of. Her power seemed to leap about like a puppy at the very idea. Eager to try.

She looked at the acorn.

Could she? Did she dare?
Carefully, slowly, she opened her power into the acorn. It began to glow…
The boats glided out onto the lake with barely a ripple. Slowly, majestically, the torch-lit towers of Hogwarts came into view. Behind them, far in the distance, stormclouds rolled. They cut a light-spangled silhouette against the night sky. Oohs and Ahhs greeted the sight. Hagrid smiled broadly, his teeth gleaming in the midst of his beard, and gestured grandly. “There she is...” he said.

Harry stood up in his own boat and gestured equally as grandly. “Camelot!” he pronounced in tones pompous and reverent.

Several of the Muggleborns got the joke and snickered. Hermione couldn’t resist. She stood and faced him, throwing her arms wide. “Camelot!” she replied.

“Camelot!” They said together, turning together to look at the castle.

“It's only a model,” someone in the throng shouted. Harry gave the unseen speaker a thumbs up while the rest of the muggleborns burst into explosive giggles. Hagrid only looked befuddled, while many of the purebloods looked confused or disdainful as suited their temperament.

“Muggleborns are weird,” Pansy Parkinson was heard muttering. No one disagreed.

The view didn’t last long; the distant stormclouds had quickly become not-so-distant even as they ascended the stairs from the docks. Lightning flickered, and thunder rumbled, still faint in the distance but closing fast.

“So how does your, um, family deal with vampire hunters?” Hermione had taken the moment to resume asking Harry questions about his vampire family, right up to the doors of the Great Hall.

Harry shrugged. “It’s not really a problem in Wallachia. Anyway, we’re rich, we live in a fortress full of servants and guards and ghasts and gaunts and werewolves and-- well, you get the idea. Anyone who comes sneaking in looking to cause trouble soon finds themselves running OUT.” He thought for a moment. “If you mean regular middle-class vampires, though, I hear most use the Buddy System.”

“The Buddy System?” Ron interjected.

“Yeah,” Harry said cheerfully. “They’ll share a house or a flat with a werewolf or two. The werewolves keep an eye out while the vampire is sleeping during the day, and the vampires keep an eye on the werewolves when the full moon is rising. It’s a very mutually beneficial system, which is always good, Dad says.” Harry shrugged again. “Of course it’s not always werewolves. Sometimes they room with a poltergeist or a ghast or some hobgoblins or what have you. But it’s usually werewolves. We have a sort of a werewolf refugee crisis these days... what with your laws here.”

He gave them both a toothy grin. “Of course there’s always my third Uncle twice removed. Real hermit. Lives in an underground dungeon, with like miles of tunnels under a mountain. He never had any trouble with vampire hunters though...”
Hermione took the bait. “Why not?”

“He floods the tunnels with carbon dioxide,” Harry said. “Vampire hunters need to breathe. Vampires don’t.” He got a faraway look and snickered. “There was one time he replaced all the carbon dioxide canisters with helium… he said the look on that Van Helsing guy’s face before he passed out was priceless.” He pinched his nose and began reciting in a high squeaky voice. “Ach, foul vight, your vicked vays shall end mit-- vat? Vat in himmel? Vat is wrrrrrong mit my voice??--”

Hermione nearly doubled over laughing; Neville and Ron just laughed awkwardly like they weren’t sure they got the joke. “We’ll have to show you a trick with a muggle helium balloon some time,” Harry told them.

Any further conversation was interrupted as Professor McGonnigal had appeared. She gave them all a brief lecture on the virtues of the various Houses, how they would be their home away from home, etc. Mention was made of a Sorting, and a test-- which promptly generated some small panic among the student body. The professor though was on a roll and ignored any of the questions the firsties blurted out. “DO take a moment to smarten yourselves up,” McGonnagall said, eyeing a couple of the more disheveled students with stern eyes and pursed lips. “We will be letting you in shortly.” She then vanished back through the door, shutting it behind her with a dull boom.

Hermione fretted aloud that it might be written; had she studied enough? More alarming was Ron’s muttering something about having to wrestle a troll. They didn’t have much time to worry about it though.

There were sudden loud shrieks. Two ghosts had just floated through the wall next to them! The two were arguing aloud about some matter or the other, and didn’t seem to notice as they passed right through the students, throwing several of them into a terrible fright. One of the ghosts, a fat man in a monk’s robe and cassock, seemed to notice them at last and looked down at them with a mellow smile. “Oh my, Firsties,” he said. “Is it really Sorting time again…? I hadn’t realized it was that time again.”

Harry suddenly let out a loud snort, drawing several surprised glances. He gave no explanation though; simply staring at the ghosts through his smoked glasses with a raised eyebrow and a thin smirk on his face.

This seemed to throw the specter off his stride somehow. “Didn’t mean to frighten you all,” he said with increasingly false cheer. “Bit of a thing, all us ghosts roaming about, it happens from time to time--” he trailed off as Harry’s eyebrow rose further. “Well, er, I… hope to see you in Hufflepuff… my old house… not all of you of course, but um, a good few… nothing wrong with the other--”

The other ghost, a courtly looking fellow with an enormously wide ruffled collar, coughed discreetly into his fist. “Perhaps we should be going,” he said discreetly. “Don’t want to be late...”

“Quite.” With an air of relief the two ghosts fled-- back through the wall they had entered by. Harry stretched out his arms and proceeded to give the departed Departed a slow theatrical clap. “Bravo,” he said dryly. “Nicely staged...”

Hermione gave him a confused and possibly offended look. “What.?”

Harry leaned over to her. “They were winding us up, Hermione,” he said gently.

“What? It’s obvious that was a setup,” he said. “Didn’t know it was that time again,’ my great-
grandfather’s false teeth. They’ve obviously been haunting this castle for hundreds of years; they probably know the schedule better than the teachers do.

”And they somehow missed the roomful of people on the other side of that door? … I can hear their heartbeats from here,” he explained. “Ghosts in magical homes and mansions are always doing that to new visitors,” he informed the muggleborn girl. “They just wanted to see how many ickle firsties and muggleborns they could get a rise out of.”

Several students relaxed a bit. Ron even rolled his eyes. “I can’t believe I fell for that,” he muttered. “Da warned me that ghosts are always doing that sort of thing…”

Harry snorted. “They thought that was clever,” he said. “The little initiation ritual the ghosts at my Dad’s castle put newbies through, they would’ve needed to bring out a mop and bucket and fresh undies for everyone.”

McGonagall returned. “Come along, it’s time to begin.” She then led them into the Great Hall, between the rows of tables. Nearly everyone took a moment to gawk at the ceiling, which Hermione informed them was enchanted to look as if it were open to the sky and was now filled end to end with rumbling black clouds. They milled forward in a huddle…

All save for Harry, who strode slowly but confidently ahead of the others, his robes billowing around him in a manner that would be the envy of his future potions teacher, his fanged smile gleaming in the candlelight as faint flickers of lightning strobed in the windows and behind the clouds above. He looked like he belonged there, in a huge, drafty, candlelit castle or one like it; Hermione reflected that he looked every inch a Dark Lord marching up to take his iron throne-- or he would have, if he hadn’t been only eleven years old and so short he’d have needed a step stool to keep his feet from dangling.

Then he and the crowd of firsties gathered up at the front of the room, and the moment was gone and he was just another pale-faced, black-robed Firstie among many.

McGonagall followed them up. She set a wooden stool upon the stage and upon the stool she set a battered old hat. The wrinkles on it creased and crumpled, folding into a face on the side that began to sing:

Oh you may not think I'm pretty,
But don't judge on what you see,
I'll eat myself if you can find
A smarter hat than me.

You can keep your bowlers black,
Your top hats sleek and tall,
For I'm the Hogwarts Sorting Hat
And I can cap them all....
The hat finished its solo number, everyone applauded politely (as one wit once said about a
dancing bear, it wasn’t so much that it danced well as that it danced at all) and the sorting began.
Students were called, they marched (or crept, or sidled) forward, donned the hat and were sent off
to join one of the four tables waiting for them, to cheers from their fellow housemates (and one or
two catcalls from their rivals, from time to time.)

“Abbot, Hannah!” A young girl scurried to the stool and donned the hat.

“HUFFLEPUFF!” the hat roared.

Slowly the crowd of firsties thinned, and the tables filled. The stormclouds grew thicker and more
turbulent, the lightning more frequent as the wind dashed against the invisible roof. As the sorting
stretched on there was a sort of breathless air in the hall that seemed to get thicker by the moment.
Everything seemed to be building to a crescendo.

“Orlock-Potter, Hadrian!” McGonagall said, stumbling a bit at the unexpected added syllables.
“Er, POTTER, HARRY!”

Thunder BOOMED. Half the people in the room raised an inch out of their seats. When they
came back down and caught their breaths, Harry was already seated and the Hat was slipping
down over his ears.

_Oooh my_, said the Hat on (and in) Harry’s head. _Quite an… unexpected upbringing you’ve had,
Mr. Orlock-Potter._

_I know, right?_ Harry replied. _And just go with Harry Potter. We’re all friends here right?_

_Certainly_, the H at chuckled. _Now let’s see… hmm… oh my. My oh my. The Hat sounded…
distinctly perturbed as it perused Harry’s memories. My, that IS a lot of torches and pitchforks…
how on earth did you fit THAT inside a ballroom?… werewolf rides??… the entire village got a
restraining order?… that’s not supposed to explode! It’s not even supposed to be flammable!…_

The hat muttered to itself for an alarmingly long time. _My word. My word indeed. Well you
certainly are a challenge to sort… and thank Merlin once I’ve sorted you you’re someone else’s
problem_, it added in an ominous undertone.

So let’s go over them. Ahem. Hufflepuff…

_The Villagers-With-Torches-and-Pitchforks House,?_ Harry contributed facetiously.

_Hm, not what I would have said but I could see them doing that on a bad day, yes, the hat said
wrily. Perhaps Ravenclaw…_

_Oooh, the Mad Scientist house, _Harry said.

_Indeed, they’d either all end up as your minions working down in the lab, or dissecting you to see
what makes you tick, the H at said. And Slytherin--- good heavens no--_

_‘Heaven won’t let me in but He’ll is afraid I’d take over, right?’ _Harry thought with a carnivorous
grin.

_‘The school has enough troubles with the House of Snakes without me letting a Mongoose loose
inside it,’ the H at said witheringly. “They are a pitiful tribute to their forefathers. There are some
few good ones among them but most count it ‘ambition’ to dream of being the biggest fish in a
very small pond… you on the other hand would be a shark among guppies._
So in review, you'd scare Hufflepuff into a perpetual state of panicked mob, Ravenclaw would give you a talent pool of unprincipled geniuses that I shudder to imagine what they'd get up to for you, And you're completely out of the most cunning Slytherin’s league--- the only house even remotely capable of coping with your habitual state of unruly behavior, reckless risk-taking, complete disregard for law and order and your perpetual aura of imminent chaos with anything resembling aplomb would be--

“GRYFFINDOR!”

KRA-KA-KA-BADOOM! As the Hat made its pronouncement, a bolt of lightning split the stormy night sky overhead, throwing everything in blinding illumination. This time everyone DID jump in their seats. Many screamed. More than one or two even passed out.

Nice touch, the Hat said.

Thanks, Harry replied. People always seemed to forget that Vampires did have some influence over the weather... He got to his feet, removed the Hat and sketched a sweeping bow, first to the student body, then to McGonagall, then to the teachers seated at the high table behind the unsorted First-years. “It’s an honor to be here,” he said, letting his smoke-bespectacled eyes track meaningfully over the teachers and staff seated there. Some were looking shocked (and slightly deaf), others looked intrigued. The one in the purple turban looked positively sick; the hook-nosed, greasy haired one next to him looked positively livid, his face a barely held wooden mask over seething fury. The Headmaster on the other hand was leaning forward, his chin resting on folded hands, the benevolent, grandfatherly expression on his face not quite reaching his glittering eyes.

“I’m looking forward to working with you all,” Harry finished, his spectacles locking onto the Headmaster’s eyes. “Some of us have so much to catch up on.”

Thunder cracked again, and something flickered in the Headmaster’s eyes; something deeply apprehensive. Giving everyone a WIDE, toothy grin, Harry turned about and marched down to the Gryffindor table where two of his three friends from the train already waited.

The celebratory antics at the table were a bit… stilted.

“What was all that about?” Hermione stage-whispered to him as he took a seat.

“What?” Harry said blithely as he tucked his robes around himself. He didn’t look at her.

“Oh ve haff so much to ketch up on,” she said. “That!”

“Yeah, Harry,” Neville mumbled under his breath. “For a second there it looked like you were trying to murder the teachers with your eyes. It was kind of creepy.” The round faced boy looked unsettled.

“You do remember me telling you my story on the train, didn’t you?” Harry said a bit testily. “Half the staff at least was in on that little crime. Dumbledore’s the one who dumped me on a doorstep like a newspaper when I was a baby. And McGonagall and that big guy Hagrid helped him do it!”

Hermione and Neville’s mouths formed “o”s of surprise. “How-- how do you know--” Neville asked.
“My parents hired Para Investigators Incorporated when they adopted me,” Harry grunted. “They’re a Private Investigators company. They got Aurors, Muggle detectives, werewolf trackers, a couple of gypsy seers-- the works. They are GOOD at what they do.” His lip twitched. “They got the full story. Dumbledore had Hagrid beat the Aurors to the scene, and snatch me out of the rubble of my parents’ house before their bodies even cooled. Then he and McGonagall--”

“Professor McGonagall,” Hermione said automatically. She regretted it the moment she saw the look he gave her from the corner of his eye.

“And he and McGonagall,” he repeated, “stick a note on me and dump me on my relative’s doorstep in the middle of the night. Then they fly off and leave me there for a rogue ghoul with the munchies to find an hour later.” He growled a little, pausing to applaud as someone else was Sorted. “Let’s just say they’re not my favorite people in the world.”

“But.. but that breaks about a dozen laws!” Hermione protested, her whispering rising dangerously loud. “Kidnapping, child endangerment--”

“You better believe Dump-on-my-Door--”

“Harry!”

“--spent a pretty Knut or two keeping his bearded arse out of jail and the story out of the newspapers,” Harry noted. “But the real kicker is this: he did everything in his power to keep Voldemort’s people out of Azkaban, too.”

“What??”

“Oh yeah. That bearded old goat spent a LOT of money and time in the Wizengamot, pleading for leniency for every Death Eater they caught-- and getting more than a few of them off.” He nodded in the direction of the head table, not quite suppressing a sneer. “Kinda makes you wonder whose side he’s really on, don’t it. So, like I said. Not my favorite people in the world.” His smile was pure malevolence. “I intend to make Headmaster Albus Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore’s next seven years as interesting as possible.”

Ron was sorted, and all but ran to sit in the spot next to his friends. “So what were you all whispering about?” he asked. Hermione was looking… distraught for some reason.

“Dinner,” Harry said, his mood changing suddenly. Up at the podium, the Headmaster gave the signal for the Welcoming Feast to begin. Instantly the tables were filled to groaning with food of every sort.

There were trays, platters, and bowls heaped high, with pitchers of pumpkin juice dispersed here and there in between-- save right in front of Harry’s own place; there, a pitcher of something considerably thicker and darker colored waited for him. He filled a silver goblet that had materialized from somewhere and saluted his friends. “Dig in,” he said. “We got big days ahead of us.”

“Okay,” Harry said as he set out the potion-making kit at their desk. “Before he gets here and
gives us our first potion to do, we’d better sort this out. I’ll handle the mixing and adding, you handle the cutting and measuring.”

“Why do you get to do the mixing?” Ron protested, half joking.

“Because I’m the Vampire Prince, and it’s my turn to be Doctor Frankenstein,” Harry said. “And you know what that leaves you to be.”

Ron grinned. They’d spent the weekend watching old black and white horror ‘moo-vees’ on one of Harry’s electronic gadgets. “I dunno, but I’ve got a hunch.”

Harry stared at him through his smoked glasses. “That was bad, and you should feel bad,” he said.

“Aw, it was funny.”

“It was terrible. I should bite you for that. I should have Lurch bite you for that. Lurch, where are you? Come over here and bite him.”

“Good thing he’s still up in the tower attic.”

“Nuts, thwarted again.” Harry snapped his fingers.

The door to the dungeon laboratory (Dungeon Lab. Harry approved of the aesthetics, if not the practicality) boomed shut. Severus Snape, Potions master, glided across the room to stand behind his podium. He glowered at the class over his hook nose for several seconds as if waiting for silence (there was no need; you could have already heard a pin drop.) Once he was certain he’d set the dramatic mood firmly enough, he began to take attendance.

Eventually he arrived at Harry’s name. It couldn’t have been more obvious he had an axe to grind if he’d been projecting it to the back row in an operetta. He gave the vampire boy a gimlet stare. “Ah. Mister Potter. Our new… celebrity.” He drawled the last word almost luxuriously. He scowled suddenly, as Harry hadn’t ceased arranging the potion-making equipment on their table as he spoke. “Pay attention to me, boy!” he snapped. “Don’t think your fame buys you any leniency with me!”

Harry’s hands stilled. Ron felt his growing anger at Snape for tweaking his friend about his “fame” suddenly replaced by a vague nervousness. Harry was TOO still; unnaturally so. Ron was put in mind of an ambush predator about to strike. “Are you talking about that whole ‘boy-who-lived’ thing, Sir?” Harry said politely. “Because I’m pretty sure Wallachian Princes don’t make the news much here.”

Snape seethed. Snape was a small, mean and petty man. He had ruined his own life with his bigotries and hatreds, and had spent the last twelve years taking his bitterness out on everyone around him-- especially his luckless students. Every day of his misery he still blamed on everyone but himself, but especially his childhood nemesis, James Potter. He had been filled with bitter gall to learn that his old nemesis’ spawn was going to attend Hogwarts’. His discovery that the son of James Potter was now some sort of foreign royalty had nearly thrown him into an apoplexy. His only comfort had been the knowledge that the pampered brat would be at his mercy as one of his students, and he fully intended to flay and eviscerate the boy with his tongue at every opportunity.

“Every inch your disreputable father’s son, I see,” he said. “Spoiled, disrespectful and arrogant from start to finish. A pity your mother had to suffer the indignity of knowing -- look at me when I’m speaking to you, boy!” he barked. “And-- take off those ridiculous tinted glasses this minute!”

“…As you wish, sir.” A chill settled over the room that had nothing to do with the dungeon damp. It might have been a figment of imagination, but everyone who had been there agreed later that as
Harry had looked up and removed his spectacles, every open candleflame and cauldron burner had dimmed and guttered, throwing the room into flickering shadow.

As for Snape, he found himself nearly swallowing his tongue as two burning emerald eyes limned in coal red latched onto his. The moment the spectacles had come off he had of course lashed out with his Legilimency at the boy-- it was a favorite trick of his when dealing with those he considered impertinent or disrespectful; peeling loose their surface thoughts and then dropping them in the ensuing conversation, making it look like he could read the victim like a book and that they could get nothing past him, flaying them alive with their own insecurities. This time though it was a different story. He did not break through the weak walls of a child's mind, into a treasure vault of tumbled-together deeply private memories. No, it was as if his probe had fallen into an empty room-- or perhaps more aptly, a black and bottomless well. All the room around them faded to black and he could not look away from the boy's eyes.

“You stupid prick,” the miniature version of James Potter-- and yet more, oh so much more-- chuckled at him, gloating. “You actually tried to use Legilimency on a VAMPIRE PRINCE?”

Snape made a gargling noise. “Oh, don’t worry, Gargamel,” the boy sneered, stepping out from behind his desk. “None of the other Smurfs will hear. This is all in your mind right now; noone else will hear or see a thing. … Then again, that’s probably not too comforting right now is it? Seeing as you just insulted me AND my dead Mother and Father in one breath.” Snape realized he was sitting behind his desk, the boy somehow looming impossibly huge over him, glowing red-green eyes riveting his soul in place.

“Let me make the immediate future real simple for you, Professor Snape. I know all about you and my mother. When my parents adopted me they employed a passel of private investigators; they wanted to know everything possible about the baby they’d just turned and adopted. So yeah, I know you and my mother were childhood friends. I know that you and my parents were classmates, and that you spent seven years pining away after her, even though she was a ‘muggleborn.’ I know you were RIVALS with my father for her, long after it was clear you had no chance.

“Let me spell it out. SHE WAS NEVER GOING TO F$@#%^ YOU.”

Snape made noises of outrage at the profanity. How dare this brat sully the--- “No no no, get it straight,” Harry said. "I'm a Vampire Prince and I'm in your MIND, dumbass. You're an open book to me. Hell, you're a wall mural. You weren't in love with her. You COVETED HER. You thought that because you found her first, before anyone else in the wizarding world did, you somehow had DIBS on her.

But she was NEVER going to do you. She was NEVER going to be yours. She was a muggleborn, you pot-stirring retard, and you joined the Death Eaters... a bunch of people who killed muggleborns for shits and giggles. You were a neonazi skinhead trying to get in the pants of a jew. What did you THINK was going to happen when a nicer guy came along?”

Snape tried to rise from his chair and found he couldn’t. “Nicer Guy?? James Potter...was an arrogant.. bully...” Snape rasped, seething as he struggled.

“When?? Because he pulled pranks and picked on YOU and your Death Eater pals? What part of ‘I Was a Teenage Magical Nazi’ doesn’t REGISTER with you??” Harry snarled back, literally eyes blazing. ‘I’m in your head, dumbass. And even before that my parents had investigators backtracking my life, and my parent's lives, and the lives of everyone tied to them... the Death Eaters, the Order of the Phoenix, everything. It pays to have paranoid royalty for parents. I knew your school records even before you tried to poke me in the brain.
"Yeah, they harassed and picked on you-- and your Death Eater Youth Club friends-- and you DESERVED EVERY MINUTE OF IT!"

His pale hand lashed out and sank into Snape’s forehead. Snape could feel him digging through the bookshelves and filing cabinets of his mind, rifling through memories Snape had thought carefully hidden and locked away by his Occlumency. When Harry’s hand reappeared, it was holding a fistful of manila folders. Harry waved them in his face, flipping through them at random. ‘‘Terrorizing muggleborn firsties! Casting curses and hexes on half-bloods and ‘blood traitors!’ Hazing, extorting, blackmailing———trying to get another student expelled for lycanthropy—-dabbling with Dark magic, even filling your textbook margins with dark curses to use on your enemies... And lookee here— "he held up a page that looked like it had been torn from a potions textbook. "Your personal favorite spell. 'Sectumsempra.' You'd go to the infirmary with your skin turned green or your hair turned to a clown wig; my father and his friends went to the healer looking like you threw bags of razor blades at them. You really were a little piece of shit. And you wonder why you were James Potters’ favorite target?” He threw the folders at Snape’s chest.

“MY Dad may have been a jerk jock, but he got better. You on the other hand ran off to join Voldemort before the ink was even dry on your diploma. Oh yeah, I knew you were a ‘former’ Death Eater before I even got on the Express. My parents weren’t about to send me anywhere one of Voldemort’s trained monkeys lived without a warning ahead of time.”

He planted his hands on the desk and leaned forward till he was almost nose-to-crooked-nose with Snape, and smiled like a shark at a baby leg buffet. “You were a Death Eater, one of Voldemort’s favorites— and yet here you are, WORKING FOR DUMBLEDORE. Who bent over backwards double to keep your greasy butt out of Azkaban. My Dad really wanted to know why-- it bugs him when people who tried to kill family members don’t get prison time-- but all he got out of GeezerBeard the Great was ‘Snape has my complete trust,” over and over.

“You know what I think that means? I think that means that the reason Dumbledore knew down to the minute when to come fetch me from my dead parents was because YOU knew. And you did nothing to prevent it.” His smile vanished. “Here, let me replay you one of MY memories,” he said, waving his robes like a cloak in the air. The room filled with dark.

Then there were voices. A man, and a woman. A child crying. Then another voice; chilling and cruel.

"He’s coming! Take Harry, I’ll hold him off--"

“No, please! Take me, but please spare Harry--”

“Stand aside woman, I promised I would spare you--”

“No!”
Then a flash of green light, and silence.

The room reappeared; Harry glowering with naked hate at the potions professor. “Is that what he promised you?” he said, his voice getting louder and louder. “Is that what you asked of him? That he spare my mother? For YOU to claim?”

“I… tried.. to save her…” Snape choked, his own denial and self-deception gagging him.

“My FATHER tried to save her! And me! He stood between Voldemort and us and DIED FIGHTING. You didn't try to save her. You tried to save her for yourself.”

Harry hissed. “You hid off in a corner and tried to manipulate other people into saving her for you. What did you think was going to happen, huh? That she was going to see you standing there, come running to you with her arms wide open, trip over me and my father’s corpses and land on your dick?” Snape made a strangled, anguished sound. “Do you think she’d like you better NOW-- after you’ve spent TEN YEARS tormenting kids, and whining about how unfair it was that someone else got the piece of ass you were after in high school? When you just tried to DUMP on me for looking like my dead father?”

A taloned hand grabbed the man by his throat and lifted him into the air. “You were a DEATH EATER. You knew he was coming for my family. You knew when, and where, down to the MINUTE. And all you did was try and play both sides against the middle, and pitch Voldemort and Dumbledore at each other so you could pick up the pieces. You killed my mother the same as if you stuck your own wand in her mouth and blew her brains out.”

Snape made a sound like a dying animal. Here, in his own mind, he couldn’t escape the truth-- the truth that had been echoing inside his own skull for over a decade. Harry pulled him in close. The whole world was filled with those burning red-green eyes.

“Here’s the deal, Snape. You try and get up on your hind legs and act like a MAMMAL. You stop terrorizing the kids in your classes, or playing favorites with the Snakes while harassing the Lions. You manage to go seven years and don’t try to bully my friends, or my House, or ME, and MAYBE, just MAYBE, I’ll leave in seven years and NOT gut you like a trout. Sound good? Yeah, I thought so.”

“But just in case you think I’m bluffing...”

The blackness receded briefly. Snape slumped behind the desk in his mindscape, gasping for air, eyes round. Harry fished in his pocket and pulled something out, and set it on the desk between them. It was a rubber duck. A rubber duck with a widows peak, and a little black cape, and tiny little vampire fangs in its smiling bill.

Snape stared. “This is my friend Mister Quackers,” Harry said. “He’s a good friend of mine, ever since I was one year old and took my first bath. He’s going to be staying with you now. If you act up-- if you start being mean to kids, or grading their work unfairly-- and you KNOW its unfair-- or you start docking points for petty reasons or anything like that… well, Mr. Quackers will be VERY UPSET WITH YOU.”
Some of Snape’s old attitude came back. He was an Occlumens and Legilimens; he wasn’t about
to be intimidated by some silly post-hypnotic suggestion. He could wipe such things from his
mind as casually as a breeze. “You impertinent, arrogant, spoiled little son of a mudblood shit—”

Suddenly the fist-sized rubber duck was gone. In its place was a gigantic, two thousand pound
ball of webbed feet, feathers and hate squatting on his desk, its entire mass heaving with every
deep, rasping breath.

Snape tried to evaporated it with his Occlumency. He might as well have tried to move the Rock
of Gibraltar by blowing on it through a straw. The Duck of Hell glared down over its fanged beak
at him with beady, hellish eyes.

“Woopsie. You said the M word.” the damned Potter boy sniggered. “That means the duck comes
down.”

The duck lunged. Snape screamed.

The students were gathered around Snape’s desk. It had been a strange class indeed; in mid tirade
the Professor had suddenly slumped over. A couple of quick-thinking Slytherins and Gryffindors
had caught him and lowered him into his seat behind his desk, where he’d sat ever since, staring
into space across his desk.

That had been about five minutes ago. The class forgotten, the students were now gathered around
the desk. Some looked as if they were debating whether to fetch Madame Pomfrey, the healer;
others looked as if they were debating whether to seize the day and draw something on Snape’s
slack face with their quills. Ron and Hermione, however, were looking as if they wanted to
interrogate Harry, who was staring off into a corner and whistling innocently.

“What should we do?” Hermione said.

Harry looked at her. He looked at Snape. Wordlessly he reached into a pocket, pulled out of all
things a rubber ducky and set it on the desk in front of the Professor.

Snape’s rolling eyes drifted down and locked on the ducky. His shriek of horror nearly sent the
class running for the far side of the room. “Professor Snape! Are you all right??” Draco Malfoy
said.

Snape continue to stare at the duck, his back rigid and his hands clawing at the arms of his chair.
“CLASS DISMISSED !!!” he squealed in a high falsetto. Every student froze and stared at this
pronouncement. “I SAID CLASS DISMISSED! NOW! GET OUT!!” Students hastily began
cramming their things into their bookbags and fleeing for the door. “AND DEAR GOD TAKE
THE DUCK WITH YOU!!” He shrilled at their fleeing backs. Crabbe and Goyle hastily grabbed
for the rubber toy and hustled out the door, clutching it between them in an awkward two-man
carry.

The last student barely made it out the door before it slammed and locked behind them. Hermione,
Ron and Neville all stared at Harry; their demand for an explanation was as plain as day on their
faces.
So naturally Harry ignored it. “Well, that was an interesting first class,” he said cheerfully. “Can’t wait to see what happens next time, can you?”

“I think I could,” Neville said weakly. He was still clutching his chest. His heart had nearly burst through it when Snape screamed.

“Lunch it is, then? Lunch sounds good,” Ron proffered.

“Yes,” Hermione said faintly. “Lunch.”

The teachers poured in through the shattered bathroom door. The sight that greeted them was horrific. Quirrel slumped to the floor, clutching his chest; McGonagall got rather faint herself—though she’d deny it. Sprawled amongst the shattered remains of the girl’s lavatory was a mountain troll. It was very large, very foul and seeing as its skull was cracked with its own club and its throat had been ripped out clear to the spine, very, very dead. Blood was sprayed everywhere— the walls, the floor, even here and there on the ceiling, over the shattered remains of several sinks and toilet stalls and over three students…

One of whom was slumped over a toilet, noisily emptying the contents of his stomach. The other two on the other hand seemed to be ARGUING, of all things, even as grue and gore dripped from them. “IS THIS HOW YOU GIRL GENIUSES HANDLE THINGS?” Harry was yelling. “Running off to the bathroom to howl all day like Moaning Myrtle? Were you hoping to end up like her, is that it?”

Hermione’s face was tear and snot streaked, but she was giving as good as she got. “He didn’t have to say those mean things about me—” she squalled.

“Oh yeah, in a PRIVATE CONVERSATION which you OVERHEARD,” Harry snapped. “Eavesdroppers rarely hear anything they LIKE, Hermione. What’d you EXPECT him to say? You showed him up, then you lectured him like a little boy at the top of your voice in front of everyone like you were his MOTHER. You embarrassed him in front of the entire class! You’re always doing that to Ron and Neville and me, nagging us, lecturing us, trying to boss us around, your nose stuck in the air about how much smarter you are than everyone else—”

Hermione made a sound that reminded McGonagall of Eliza Doolittle in My Fair Lady. “If you all don’t want to be friends anymore you should have just SAID—”

Harry threw his arms wide, spattering the gawking teachers with a few drops of grue. “WHY WOULD WE BE HERE IF YOU WEREN’T OUR FRIEND?” he bellowed.

“Ron is always—”

“Ron is the one who sounded the charge when nobody knew where you were!” Harry said. “I was too busy trying to keep BumbleShmuck from sending half the school down to the basement where the TROLL WAS!— Oh, hey, Professor McGonagall,” he said, seemingly just now noticing her. He turned to her and gave her a beaming smile. It was not a comforting sight with all the blood covering his chest and chin. “You missed all the action.”

“Minerva, what—” Professor Flitwick finally caught up, stumbling through the doorway and gaping up at the carnage. “Ye gods and little fishes, it’s on the ceiling…”
“What...” McGonagall felt her gorge rise; the smell of dead troll was not improved by the smell of blood. She forced it down and went on. “Harry-- what happened here??”

“Well.” Harry took on the air of someone giving a presentation. “Hermione here embarrassed Ron in class earlier today-- you remember, Professor Flitwick."

“Indeed I do,” Flitwick said. He was half goblin; he wasn’t therefore too distracted by the gore. He reflected with some mild disgruntlement that someone was going to have to take Miss Granger aside and explain to her who exactly who should be lecturing whom in class.

“Well she overheard Ron grousing about it and got all upset, came up here to do the girl thing and bawl about it in a bathroom stall.” He paused and glared at Hermione. “For TWELVE HOURS.” Hermione withered a little. “So when Professor Quirrel--” He waved to the DADA teacher still sitting on the floor, clutching his chest--“came in yelling about the Troll, We realized… well, Ron was the first to realize.. Hermione wasn’t there. He was REAL wound up about it, blamed himself and insisted he had to do something…. So we sent Neville to tell you what was up, and went tearing off to try and find Hermione before the troll did.” He looked around then held up a thumb and forefinger, an inch apart. “Missed it by that much.”

“Did… anything… happen to you?” McGonagall said faintly.

Harry scratched his head and looked around. “More like WE happened to IT,” he said. “We got here just as it got through the bathroom door-- we tried chucking things at it to distract it, but Hermione kept screaming and it kept going for her, so Ron used a Leviosa on its club, smashed its skull in.”

“Ah, see? Now I knew he could get it eventually,” Flitwick beamed. “Ten points to Gryffindor, Mr. Weasley.”

“Yurgh,” said the bathroom stall.

“But it wasn’t going down… I guess trolls are like cockroaches, they can keep going for ages without a brain?… so I climbed up its back and ripped its throat out with my teeth.” He gave the teachers a rather bloody smile. They blanched.

Ron came staggering out of the stall, wiping his mouth. “thuh-that was awful,” he said. He looked over at Hermione. “Mione, I’m sorry,” he said. “Are you okay? You aren’t hurt, are you? I-I couldn’t live with myself if...”

Hermione, her face streaked with tears and snot and her clothes streaked with blood, looked over at Ron. Her eyes melted. “You mean that…?” she said feebly.

Harry held up a finger. “Not to be rude but I think you should all know,” he said cheerfully, “That, speaking as a vampire, troll tastes even worse than it smells. Scuse me--” he lunged for one of the remaining stalls, nearly plunging headlong down the commode.

Snape and Dumbledore were the next to arrive. Snape for some reason was limping badly and looking thunderous. Dumbledore was looking grandfatherly. Both, however, now looked poleaxed.

“What in heaven’s name...”Dumbledore said, staring in awe at the carnage.

“HHYYUARRRLGGALLLLPPHHH!” Said Harry.
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