Tabloid: Bonus Chapter Series

by babylonsheep

Summary

A series of semi-connected extra interludes and follow-up chapters that take place before and after the timeskip in Tabloid. Contains worldbuilding, humour, feels, insight, character development, and original artwork illustrations to complement the story.
These are the bonus chapters to Tabloid, written after the epilogue, but taking place in the continuity before the timeskip, and some after events of the epilogue. They were originally posted on Spacebattles, but after some requests to make them easier to read, they're now here for your viewing pleasure.

If you haven't read *Tabloid*, I recommend that you do so in order to understand what goes on in these chapters. Or you could just look at the artwork without context, that's fine too.

Each of the chapters contain illustrations relevant to the story, so please enjoy.
Chapter Notes

Takes place two weeks after the epilogue of Tabloid.

SUMMER 2013

Time passes.

Things change.

The status quo shifts; it buckles; people and societies that once thought themselves secure from the lofty heights at the top of the pyramid of hierarchy eventually discover how wobbly the foundations are. How their security — their entire existence — depends on people on the bottom churning away at the hamster wheels of minimum wage labor. Their function: to build tools to build the tools that maintain the great engines which hold up the pillars of civilization.

I've always thought it interesting to consider the boundary of where a community ends and a society begins. To dissect the complexities of modern civilization, ignoring all the hippies who push the holistic approach to understanding the world, and to come to the realization that all the Introduction to Economic Theory textbooks that I read back in my college days suddenly have an application to real life. And then those village-scale examples featuring the adventures of Farmer Joe and Fisher Bob suddenly came rushing back in an unpleasant case of cram session déjà vu.

For years, I knew where I stood in the hierarchy. Not at the bottom, of course. But since I made a living — or two livings, to be more accurate — from selling my labor to the highest bidders, it definitely wasn't the lofty heights. In both of my jobs, I was one of many, a cog in the system, inconsequential to the bigger picture. I was an opportunist. I waited. I watched. And if I saw a niche open up above me, I'd stick my foot in the door and force it open with a crowbar.

Now I find it interesting to consider that the bigger picture has shrunk to the size of a postage stamp. What was once a large ocean in which I was a little fish has now become a much smaller pond.

The small pond — the local system — might not actually have a Fisher Joe. But there's probably a Farmer Bob, along with his friends Miner Randy and Herdsman Jake.

And if there's a Lord Paul...

Well, I wouldn't have any reason to complain about it.

>>> 

Whoosh. Creak.

Creak. Whoosh.

Whoosh.

"Can you please stop that?" I snapped.

The creaking stopped.

Parvenu gave a loud and theatrical sigh. She sprawled over the seat and armrests of her rolling chair, dressed in my sister's cast-offs, baggy clothes a few sizes too large and a few inches too long. She kept the extra sleeve fabric folded up over her narrow wrists.

Parvenu had what could be described as the face of cherub, only grown up and hit hard enough by the puberty stick that the plumpness and air of gullible innocence was long gone. She had round hazel-green eyes and dimples that appeared when she smirked, and an unexpectedly sweet soprano voice that Josephine had dismissed as good enough for the choir, but not enough for the lead. I'd unfortunately become familiar with that voice several arguments — or rather, heated discussions — ago, and it really wasn't so sweet of a voice when it was spitting profanities.

"How come you never get bored?" she asked, swinging slowly back and forth in the chair. She sighed heavily once again, and picked up the remote control linked to the security office's monitor banks. "I always had security guards to do this type of work."

I glanced up from my book. "Boredom is only a state of mind."

"And you can just make yourself un-bored? How does that even work?"

"Have a personal investment in what you're doing. If something bores you, you obviously don't care about it," I said. I held up my book, Soil Classifications of Southern Canada. "Look, if you don't want to be the security monitor, you can go make dinner."

"'Go to the kitchen'? Wow, that's so sexist," remarked Parvenu. "Twenty-thirteen says hello and fuck you."

I rolled my eyes up to the flat, gray slab of smooth concrete that made up the office's ceiling. It was a design feature shared by all the rooms of the bunker built beneath my farmhouse. Metal...
scaffolding twined with wires crisscrossed the ceiling, regularly interspersed with modular lighting fixtures. "The barn needs mucking out. How about that?"

"On second thought," said Parvenu, "I think I'll stay here."

"Fine. Suit yourself."

I continued reading. This part of southern Alberta had such a flat topography that the local vegetation just rotted in place instead of being continually washed away by rain and rivers, as it did in the higher altitudes of the Canadian Rockies. This made for rich black soils and prime farmland, but according to last year's copy of Regional Roundup, beef was the most profitable enterprise, and the province's biggest export. I expected that the events of this year would make many property owners reconsider their current business models.

Hmm. What angle would be best for swooping in on bewildered farmers, and taking their problems out of their hands? For Mr. Mulligan, it had been taking on his debt and giving him a dignified way to bow out of the responsibility of transitioning his farm into a modern agro-tech property, a shining example of product placement ready to grace the covers of Farm Journal USA. But I didn't want to actually manage farms on a day-to-day basis.

I needed a way in, and a way out.

This skill was something I'd practiced during my evening gigs as my cape persona. Until recently, I'd kept my two identities separate. But more than ever, I'd come to the conclusion that success in today's world would require being both people at the same time. Habits, ground in from years of discipline, rebelled at the thought. I'd already broken my rule of keeping both of my identities a secret.

I'd been careless. I'd had a moment of weakness. It had been a bone-deep exhaustion that afflicted me afterwards, a fatigue that reached down through flesh and muscle and into my very soul, making me weak, stealing away thought and will. It was fatigue mixed with an extreme sleep deprivation, a light-headedness with the peculiar disconnect of an out-of-body experience. Memories became kaleidoscopic; sensations blurred together into a melting Neapolitan mess. The thought of it made me ill. I didn't want to think of it. I didn't want to think of the thousands of other people who knew what it felt like, and wore the proof of it on their arms or pinned to their shirts, like they'd done something extraordinary, as if it was something to be proud of. They'd done nothing. And it wasn't—

Creak.

"Parvenu," I said. "Didn't I—"

She stood up and folded her arms. Her lips pressed together in a thin line. The dimples reappeared, one little pit on either side of her frowning mouth. "No," she said. "You stop it. You're making me feel sick."

"I'm not doing it anymore," I muttered. "There you go."

"You should talk about it."

"There's nothing to talk about. Everything's fine."

"I can tell when it's not," she said disapprovingly. "You can hide, but I know when you're pretending."

Fucking mindreaders.

I closed my book, and set it on the floor. I took a deep and calming breath. "You were there. You know what it was like. I don't think it's necessary to discuss what happened."

Parvenu shook her head. "You keep waking me up with dentist dreams."

"What. My eyebrows rose by a fraction. "Dentist dreams?""

"That's what you taste like," she answered. "Something cold and heavy like the mirror on a stick that the dentist puts in your mouth to look at your wisdom teeth. Cold and metallic. Sharp edged. I could feel it pressing down on my tongue like it was trying to choke me. She gave me a careful look. "And then I wake up gagging and I can't run to the bathroom because you lock me in every night and I don't want to use the fucking bucket."

"I don't remember anything like that," I said.

"Of course not, dummy." She sat back down. The chair creaked. "You were asleep. You can't turn it off when you're asleep. It's how I found you. That first night."

Perfect control came from conscious control. When I was unconscious – or sleeping – it didn't work. I'd known about this, this weakness, the first few nights I'd recorded myself in my studio apartment, back in my college days. It was why I had never dedicated myself to the path of the supervillain, as profitable as it was. If I could accidentally discover this vulnerability, then someone else could do it too. Joining the villain side, as I well knew, came with a built-in enemy faction. It was a target on my back, and on my front. It was the reason why I made sure never to draw too much attention to myself in my costumed identity, and why I'd never bothered to form close associations with other capes.

"And now you're volunteering to be my shrink?" My tone was derisive.

"If you want."

I laughed. "Are you going to ask me about my mother? Or should I lie down on a couch first?"

Parvenu sniffed. "No one likes it when you act like a smartass. Not even Josephine. I can taste it."

I held a hand to my heart in pantomime. "That one hurt." Drumming my fingers on the armrest of my chair, I quickly came to a decision. "Fine. Shrink my head, O Wise One. If I judge that your advice is worse than what I'd get out of a Magic Eight Ball, I'm not going to pay you."
She cocked her head. "You weren't going to pay me anyway."

"Perceptive. I'd give you a gold star for that, but I didn't bring my sticker book today."

Parvenu blew a loud raspberry. "You're not as funny as you think you are."

"Ouch. Head shrinking in progress," I said, with a thin smile. "Down by ten percent."

Parvenu steepled her fingers, and crossed her legs, her features creased in a serious frown. The cut-down hem of her working trousers rode up, exposing the red blinking light of an ankle bracelet. Hey, nothing good ever came of being too trusting.

"So," she said after a few seconds of silence. "How about we talk about something different. If things didn't happen the way they did, what did you want to do with your life? What did you dream about doing? What do you think you'd miss most about the old world?"

I shot her a skeptical look. "And this is supposed to help?"

"It gives me a baseline."

"Have you done this before?"

"Sorta," admitted Parvenu. She gave an apologetic shrug. "I was a recruiter, mostly. The boss didn't want me to pick up the more unstable capes. He said we'd be better off leaving them to Bastard Son and the Oakland group. Maybe ship them out west to hold ground, or up north to Alaska." She bit her lip. "When I told the boss about you, that time you came for drinks, he wanted you. You had style. Flash. Cast-iron balls. And you were... I don't know, anchored?"

"And now there's less of a balance, maybe. Something's off. Not broken. You still have that resilience. Her eyes were bright and hard, and they met my own without flinching, not even when I held my breath and sat so still that I could count the slow, thumping pulse of my beating heart, slowly dimming away to nothing. "You just need to – to – get over it! Don't pretend it didn't happen! It did! It sucked!" Her voice grew louder and louder, until she was shouting at an empty chair. "I know how much it sucked! There was a black hole of suckiness from a thousand other people, and I was standing right in the middle of it, knowing, feeling, every single thing!"

She lowered her voice to a harsh whisper. "You're not the only one. And you're putting everyone on edge with your defensive sarcasm. Stop being an ass. Stop trying to dodge."

I blinked. "Am I that annoying?"

"Yes!" she hissed. She pursed her lips. "I haven't gotten much sleep in the last two weeks. Basically, you're like the guy who rolls around at night and hogs the whole blanket, while sleep talking." Parvenu's eyes widened, and then she caught herself before she gave anything away. "Maple sap. Salted liquorice. And mmm... sturgeon eggs? Interesting combination." She smirked knowingly.

I'd kept my expression level the whole time. "You're not going to explain, are you?" I asked.

"This is your turn to open up," said Parvenu, her voice firm. "Three, two, one, go!"

"Alright," I said, sighing. "Don't laugh at me—" I glared at Parvenu, "—but I always thought it would be pretty cool to be a PRT Director."

"Don't you have to be a—"

"Yes."

"Oh."

I shrugged. "After the Costa-Brown scandal, I had to be a lot more careful. And it was long odds, anyway. Most of the time they pick someone with political connections, or a military or intelligence background. PR, Accounting, and Parahuman Science backgrounds are generally considered too niche, too specialized to make for good leadership." I flashed her a brief, cold smile. "And by the end, I wouldn't have wanted the job anyway. Things were starting to break apart. All I wanted," I said, "was to be the one to call the shots. And it looks like I got exactly what I wanted. Funny how things turned out."

Of course, I didn't think it was funny at all. And I really had to stop making wishes. They had a nasty habit of coming true.

"Right," I said crisply. "Next question. What do I miss most? Complicated answer: stability. Simple answer: those swirly fried potato things on sticks with the melted cheese sauce, from the food trucks at county fairs." I threw myself back in my chair. It creaked. "What I miss most is the big crowds in the city. I used to go to all the ball games – the Giants, the Dodgers. The big championship games were the best. It was never about the game, but the stadiums. When they were filled up, it was fifty thousand people in the open air, all of them feeling highs and lows in sync. It was wonderful. And with so many people, there was always at least one other cape in the audience." Parvenu gave a deep and heartfelt sigh.
"It was great for recruiting!" She grinned. "I'd follow them to the exit gate afterwards, and then I'd send one of my guards to rough someone up right in front of them – it was better if it turned out to be a friend or family member."

"That actually sounds like it might work." I said, impressed despite myself. My initial impression had been distaste, but then my trusty of pragmatic side stepped in with a good dose of perverse fascination.

Recruiting was a big thing for both heroes and villains. The PRT got a substantial funding bonus from head office for every new hero they signed – it was why they gave the kid glove treatment to newly graduated Wards who might otherwise consider joining a cooperate team. And why special requests for costume customization were taken seriously, even if they were dumb as fuck.

"Of course it worked!" Parvenu said. Her eyes had a dangerous glitter to them; her cheeks dimpled with therecollection of fond memories. "They outed themselves half the time. We didn't even have to break the rules; they did it for us. Sometimes it was Protectorate, and then we'd have to cut and run before they called in the party vans. But it was always good fun."

Welp, I found myself thinking. This bitch is crazy.

This was the number one reason why I never actively looked for friendships with my fellow parahumans. A trigger event was the last straw, the final step in breaking a person. Every single parahuman was broken in one way or another -- the natural ones, at least. Most of us developed ways to deal with it, so that we could pretend everything was all right, and function in our daily lives. Some of us coped. We blended in. And then there were others who never did find ways to deal with their issues, and could find no place for themselves in society.

I had ninety-nine problems of my own. I'd had no reason in the past to tolerate the idiosyncrasies of other parahumans on a personal level. It explained my aversion to joining an established hero or villain team, my resistance to recruitment attempts -- I had no interest in involving myself with teammate drama. I already dealt with enough of it at work.

But... times change. And so we are forced to adapt.

"I hope you know," I said, speaking in a level tone that gave no indication that I'd made any judgements on her character, "that we aren't going to do that kind of stuff here. No spectacles, no shows of force. There's no Protectorate here, no rival groups that have to be told to watch their backs. I'm not running a gang. But I do mean business." I inclined my head and looked meaningfully at Parvenu, pausing as she gave a quick nod of acknowledgement, before I continued. "What we have is a business arrangement. No more, no less.

"And you just went from angsty to boring," Parvenu said.

"What can I say? I'm a boring person," I replied.

"You only want people to think you're boring, so they'll leave you alone." Parvenu gazed at me, her eyes wide, betraying very little of her emotions but a slight and subtle anticipation. I had the feeling she was testing me. She was probably mentally probing me, too.

"Got it in one." I reached under my seat and picked up my book, opening it up to where I'd left off.

Chapter Three: Field Classification Methods.
Section Eight. On Theory and Practice.
Loam, sand, and clay composition ratios for soil irrigation and aeration.

Parvenu huffed, and kicked her heels against the rolling wheels of her chair. "It won't help. Hiding won't work forever. I can tell when you're doing it." Her expression darkened, and she swept a hand over her face, fingers brushing against her temples. For an instant she looked drained and weary. "You have to talk about it one day."

"Not today, thanks."

"How about tomorrow?"

"We'll see."

"Hmph," was the extent of Parvenu's response. It was one brief puff of sound that contained a world of chafing dissatisfaction.

I rolled my eyes to the ceiling, not bothering to disguise my own irritation. Then I continued with my reading.

Creak. Whoosh.

Goddamn.
Character stats:

JOSEPHINE
— Born: 1979
— Height: 167cm / 5'6"
— Shoe size: EU38
— Costume details: Black cape, steel helmet, long gloves, metal belt, skirt and tights.
— Occupation: Actress
— Main residence: New York City, NY

PAUL
— Born: 1983
— Height: 180cm / 5'11"
— Shoe size: US10
— Costume details: Special effects cosmetics, theatrical prosthetics, civilian disguise.
— Occupation: Image consultant
— Main residence: Boston, MA

PARVENU
— Born: 1984
— Height: 160cm / 5'3"
— Shoe size: US7
— Costume details: Carnival mask, dress, cape, heeled boots.
— Occupation: Venue management
— Main residence: San Francisco, CA
Chapter Notes

Takes place in the timeskip between Tabloid Chapter 3.7 and the epilogue.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

JANUARY 2011
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

The waterfall surrounded him.

Water pattered around his bare feet, tinted a dingy dishwater gray. Steam climbed his ankles, a fine mist of it clinging to his body. It gathered in lines of translucent beads in his hair; it weighted down his eyelashes; it pooled in the hollows of his collarbones. His head was in the clouds.

Reynard opened his eyes.

The waterfall slowed.

The surge of water from the shower head wasn't one solid stream, but one-hundred-and-fifty-two lines ejected at pressure from a stainless steel spout. Each of those one-hundred-and-fifty-two lines of water were not truly lines under closer inspection. A series of falling droplets, following a curving trajectory downward, shedding energy and momentum and succumbing to the ceaseless pull of gravity.

On any normal day, he could spare a brief moment of attention, and by instinct he would know the angle of the parabolas, the velocity of each airborne particle, counting down to contact.

Whenever his eyes saw the flash of a muzzle, the thing, the glowing lump in his head that the M-scans proved was there – it would poke at his brain, urging it to dump chemicals into his bloodstream. His muscles would contract. He'd be thrown into motion. He'd leap, and the slow seconds would be sectioned into a hundred SI sub-units in which he lived every single one. It felt like flying—

The normal day was over.

He closed his eyes. The water trickled down his shoulders, rinsing away the soap, burning against the scrapes on his elbows and the raw red half-healed scar that pulsed hot on his left ankle.

He turned the water off. The last drops of water teetering on the edge of the shower head hit him on the cheek.

Another day down. Two-hundred-and-seventy-one left to go.

The towel went around his waist, the sweaty bike shorts and compression undershirt dumped into his name-tagged laundry hamper. His flip-flops flapped on the tile floor.

Flap, flap, flap.

He skirted a puddle on the tiles, turning the corner, his flip-flops skating on a trail of wet footprints.

Reynard twisted his body at the last moment into a graceful demi-pointe arabesque, his weight balanced on the ball of his right foot, and then he recovered his poise – not that he'd ever lost it, of course – with a half-spin followed by a hopping skip that finished with a sad little squeak from his damp sandals.

Six out of ten, he thought with a frown of dissatisfaction. No applause, disappointing. But no audience either, which was good. *I know I could do better.*

He straightened up, and brushed his hair out of his eyes.

No audience? I think I called it too soon.

"Hey," said Weld. "You dropped your towel."

The Wards' locker room had not been designed as a place for peaceful reflection at the end of a long day of patrols. Like the urinals in the adjoining room, it was a place where you went in, did your business, and went out, as quickly as possible, with as little talking and eye contact as you could manage. The interior design verged on stark, and the appliances and fittings were utilitarian, with a wall of rectangular wooden cabinets that served for lockers. Pale eggshell blue tiles covered the floor.

Because scientific studies said they gave a calming effect, Reynard assumed. Or because it was the boys' locker room.

He dressed himself, slipping into a fresh undershirt, and buttoning up his trousers. He relished the feel of his costume fitting him like a second skin, because it was skin. Micro-perforated kangaroo skin, cut to his measurements, the permanent creases at knees and hips indicating that he'd spent weeks breaking them in. Made just for him, and no one else. It made him like no one else. Special.

He felt more comfortable wearing his costume than his civilian clothes, never mind his school uniform.
Rasp, rasp, rasp.

Reynard closed his locker. That was a reminder that not everyone felt as comfortable in their skin as he was. He slid his gloves on, curling and uncurling his fingers until the warmth of his hands loosened the leather. He left his fur-collared coat and his mask inside.

Weld also wore gloves, but not much else. He was seated on a reinforced wooden bench in a corner of the locker room, shirtless, his back to the mirror. A towel was draped over his lap, and he had a wicker basket at his feet. He looked like he was struggling with something on his lower back; the layers of corded wire that made up the skin of his neck and collar twisted and bulged as Weld's head turned to look at something behind him.

Rasp, rasp, rasp.

"Uh," said Reynard. "You need any help there?"

Rasp, rasp, rasp.

"Guess not," thought Reynard. Time stretched out like pulled taffy while he contemplated whether or not he should say something else, and if Weld had heard him, or if it was better that he just walk out and pretend he hadn't said anything at all. To Weld, it had only been a second or so since he'd opened his mouth. *I'd be self-conscious if I was a Case Fifty-Three. With my own body, and with other people."

"You don't mind?" asked Weld, turning around with a soft clinking sound. He dropped a small handsaw onto his towel-covered lap. It had a plastic handle and a saw-toothed carbon-fiber blade, a non-reflective matte black surface dusted with flakes of powdered steel.

"No," said Reynard. "Of course not."

There, that was good. A perfectly timed answer, not fast enough to sound like polite false reassurance. No awkward pause either, no trace of hesitation at all. Powers came in handy sometimes.

"We're teammates, aren't we?" said Reynard. He flung himself onto the bench next to Weld, his leathers squeaking. "Here, let me." He reached out for the handsaw.

Weld stiffened, then his posture relaxed, and he allowed Reynard to take the handsaw, making room on the bench. He pinched the edges of his lap towel around himself, until he was as decent as anyone in such an awkward situation could be. Weld had gotten an eyeful of him, so Reynard supposed that if there happened to be some accidental reciprocation, he had no grounds to complain.

"Thanks," said Weld. He looked in the mirror, meeting Reynard's reflected eyes. Whether you were made of metal or flesh, there were still some Unwritten Rules about eye contact in the locker room.

"No problems," Reynard answered. He glanced down. Weld's back was made of dusky, gray textured metal like the rest of him, different shades of it ranging from a dull pewter to a fresh polished silver. The metal was woven into what looked like muscles, with the definition of a bodybuilder who'd been fasting and hitting the sauna for weeks to make weight for a competition. It was a physique far beyond the average teenager's, even teenage athletes as most Wards tended to be.

There was a length of metal chain stuck to Weld's back, thick hardened steel links in a line that rose from his skin like a second spine, dangling down to the floor like a tail. It jingled when Reynard picked up the end and set the edge of the handsaw to it.

Rasp, rasp, rasp.

"So, uh. That Chain Gang, huh?" Reynard grasped for conversation. Weld was the team leader. He knew that Weld's leader-ishness made him hard to approach on subjects outside of Wards work. Reynard wasn't sure that Weld even had a life outside of Wards work. Weld lived on base, because he had no home to go to at the end of the day. He spent his mandatory holidays with Armstrong's family at the Director's rumored personal ski lodge. "They would have gotten away if it wasn't for us meddling kids, right?"

"Chain Man will be recruiting more foot soldiers," replied Weld. "It's his M.O. to throw his lower levels at us as a distraction when he's pulling off a major job. They're expendable. It's why he goes radio silent for so long in between jobs."

"I wish they'd let us have a go at the boss, instead of sending us to round up the small fries," Reynard grumbled.

"Rules are rules."

"But we could do so much more!"

"We're doing as much as we can," Weld said, his voice firm. "We caught eight people. Prior convictions, parole breakers, bail dodgers, outstanding warrants. You did good today." Once again he looked at Reynard's face in the mirror. His silver eyes gazed at him, and not for the first time Reynard observed how cold and alien they could be. *Robot eyes.*

"We could have got ten! Twelve, even," muttered Reynard. "We're only doing as much as they let us."

"They're only trying to protect us."

"I don't need them to protect me."

**CLANK!** The end of the chain hit the floor.
"Have patience. Your time will come," said Weld. His head turned around to inspect the end of the chain still stuck to his back. "Hm. Do you mind sandpapering the sharp edges? They keep ripping through my shirt."

Ripping through my shirt. The words filtered through Reynard's mind, and he almost rolled his eyes. Weld had his own internet memes, his own dedicated fan following. Groupies even, after his national news debut when he'd made the cover of *American Hero* during last year's zombie hysteria. Weld wasn't a bad guy, nor a bad leader. He led training sessions; he made plans, and those plans worked. They'd won Inter-Wards championship trophies that Director Armstrong displayed with pride in his office. Reynard had been the one to hold the trophy when it was awarded, because it was metal and Weld couldn't touch it. He'd had the photo framed. He'd had the photo sent to Joust, that smug douchenozzle from New York.

Boston was the twenty-fourth PRT department by the date of its founding, but it made the top ten, probed even the top five shortlist, ranked by how effective its heroes were, and how much the public approved of them. Which was pretty good for a branch that was going up against others with Triumvirate members as Protectorate team leaders.

**Did he hate Weld?**

No. He didn't. He didn't hate him. He wanted the Wards leader spot for himself. Reynard couldn't deny that. It was a position that adults would pay attention to, something they'd take seriously. He'd be able to negotiate with the Deputy Director and the patrol schedule's assigned PRT squad leader on a near equal basis. It was responsibility; it was the ability to do more than he was doing now, because Weld, if he erred, preferred to err on the side of caution. Weld was a square. That was it.

All of these thoughts took place in the brief span of the second or two that it took Reynard to put down the handsaw and reach for the sandpaper block in Weld's wicker basket.

"Patience."

Reynard scowled. It wasn't the first time someone had told him that. He decided to change the subject. "Hey, have you been getting e-mails from Brockton Bay? Looked fake so I reported them to IT. They got back to me saying it was legit. Why would Aegis from East Northeast want to talk to me?"

Scritch, scratch, scratch went the sandpaper.

"I think he wanted to get a feel of the team culture here," said Weld. "He's applying for a transfer to Boston."

"What? Why?"

"He said he wanted to 'learn from the best'."

Reynard could almost hear the Quotation Marks of Modesty™ clapping into place on either side of the phrase. Of course Weld wouldn't outright call himself "the best". He was "only" number two in the Wards national ranking by popularity. Rankings didn't matter to him, anyway. He didn't do it to be "the best"; it was all about doing good and giving his best effort. Boss, what a square.

"So he's coming to our team, then?" Reynard asked, feeling something unpleasant coiling inside his belly. "Is it a done deal?"

Weld frowned. His silver wire eyebrows drew together in thought. "There's a paperwork holdup on the Brockton end. But yes, there's a good chance he'll be coming over to our team."

"He's the Wards leader over at ENE," said Reynard. "His birthday must be coming up soon. Where would that put him on the birthday schedule here?"

"Second, after me."

"Sorry, Rey."

Reynard realized he was crushing the sandpaper block in his fist. He let it go, and sucked in a deep breath. "I was really looking forward to my five months of being Leader."

"I'm sure we can get Armstrong to approve a shared co-leadership position for you and Aegis after I graduate to Protectorate," Weld said, a note of encouragement in his voice. "If it'll be just as good."

No it won't! It's not good enough! Reynard wanted to scream. He was screaming inside his head, drawing out the deciseconds, slicing them up until they began to bleed into milliseconds, venting his frustration in a way that was invisible to everyone else, passing through in less than a blink of an eye for them. This was what gave him his famed lightning reflexes. They didn't know that they were the slow ones. And then they called him impatient.

"I don't get it," said Reynard. "If he wants to join a mentor program, he should be applying to Los Angeles. They have the Wards training camp over there. They have Alexandria."

"New Englanders stick together," Weld replied. "Aegis will be good for the team. He can take a hit, and he can fly. He'll give us an edge this year's Inter-Wards, maybe another victory."

He adjusted his lap towel. "I suggest you talk to Aegis if it really bothers you. He's not bad. Decent leader on a near equal basis. It was responsibility; it was the ability to do more than he was doing now, because Weld, if he erred, preferred to err on the side of caution. Weld was a square. That was it."

"Second, after me."

Weld looked apologetic. "Sorry, Rey."

Reynard realized he was crushing the sandpaper block in his fist. He let it go, and sucked in a deep breath. "I was really looking forward to my five months of being Leader."

"I'm sure we can get Armstrong to approve a shared co-leadership position for you and Aegis after I graduate to Protectorate," Weld said, a note of encouragement in his voice. "If it'll be just as good."

No it won't! It's not good enough! Reynard wanted to scream. He was screaming inside his head, drawing out the deciseconds, slicing them up until they began to bleed into milliseconds, venting his frustration in a way that was invisible to everyone else, passing through in less than a blink of an eye for them. This was what gave him his famed lightning reflexes. They didn't know that they were the slow ones. And then they called him impatient.

"I don't get it," said Reynard. "If he wants to join a mentor program, he should be applying to Los Angeles. They have the Wards training camp over there. They have Alexandria."

"New Englanders stick together," Weld replied. "Aegis will be good for the team. He can take a hit, and he can fly. He'll give us an edge this year's Inter-Wards, maybe another victory."

Reynard scowled. It wasn't the first time someone had told him that. He decided to go the sandpaper. "I was really looking forward to my five months of being Leader."

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"New Englanders stick together," Weld replied. "Aegis will be good for the team. He can take a hit, and he can fly. He'll give us an edge this year's Inter-Wards, maybe another victory."

He adjusted his lap towel. "I suggest you talk to Aegis if it really bothers you. He's not bad. Decent track record, hard worker, a bit inexperienced, with room to improve. You could even sit down with the Director or Mr. Braganca. Director Armstrong approved and fast-tracked the paperwork.

Mr. Braganca recommended the transfer.

"And," he continued, "Aegis will be good for team diversity. I know we already have two Case Fifty-Threes on the team."

Weld gave a chuckle that trailed off with a touch of awkwardness when Reynard said nothing. "Aegis is approachable. Well, more approachable than me or Hunch, and that's a big selling point. I want to end my Wards career on a high point."

Went unsaid was the fact that a good Wards record led to a good Protectorate posting after graduation. Award-winning, powerful, popular Wards got their pick of Protectorate job offerings, in their choice of location, where many others who signed on directly to the Protectorate got non-negotiable marching orders. Wanted sunshine and beaches? Honolulu and Miami would leap at the chance to make room. Wanted the superhero paycheck and plenty of time for yourself? San Francisco and Houston were big cities low on the crime rankings. Went unsaid was the fact that Reynard's power ranking wasn't that high on a relative scale, not in
the grand scheme of things, not even as a member of the Boston Wards. Weld and Hunch were Case Fifty-Threes. Freaks. They might be nice people when you got to know them, but they looked different, and to most people, different was bad. You still couldn't discount their powers. Weld was a heavy hitter. He broke the Manton rules, as he recalled from the Parahumans 102 lectures he'd attended last year. And Hunch was a pre-cog. A weak one, sure, but he had no parents to hold him back from Endbringer fights, so he'd already racked up a couple of official commendations from water boy duty against the Simurgh.

Reynard knew he was more competitive than most people. He didn't consider it a blemish on his character. If it made him a better hero, then it could be nothing but a good thing.

Scritch, scratch, scratch.

"There, done," said Reynard, his tone infected with more curt irritation than he'd intended. He tossed the sandpaper block into the wicker basket, and brushed off his gloved hands. Silver flakes of powdered steel drifted down, covering his trousers, sprinkling the floor like an exploded glitter bomb. "Can't you drop the stuff stuck to you without bringing the tool shed? I've seen you do it before. That Cambridge bust last year, when you had a stop sign stuck to your leg."

"It feels weird," Weld admitted, one hand reaching around to feel the lumps of where metal chain had begun the slow process of being absorbed into his skin. "Like popping a giant zit weird. I think. I've never had a zit. If I have another choice, I'd prefer not to do it."

"Oh," said Reynard, getting to his feet. He headed for his locker to retrieve his coat and fox mask. "Fair enough. I'm clocking out for now."

"See you tomorrow," Weld said. "Don't forget to write up the incident reports from today. I want them on my desk by the end of the week."

"Sure thing," Reynard paused at the door, and for an instant his face twisted into a sneer that Weld couldn't see.

What a square.
The door was cracked open half an inch.

It gave the impression that the person who used the office was the "I'm Your Boss and Your Friend" type, the one with the "My Door is Always Open" policy. Reynard didn't think Mr. Braganca was his friend. He'd barely talked to the man. He'd heard that he was very much sought after, that he had a packed schedule that took him to other PRT departments for days and sometimes weeks, and that was why Reynard's appointment requests kept being bounced back. Somehow Weld's always got through. Reynard and his fellow Ward Hunch had defaulted to the other Image rep in the building, Ms. Cavanagh. She was nice, if a little unsure of herself, and she didn't mind if the Wards used her first name. Reynard got the feeling that parahumans made her uneasy.

Reynard knocked on the door.

He waited for a response. A second passed. Another second passed. Then another. The gap between each continuous and unfolding iteration of Now widened, growing ever wider, if only in the depths of his own mind. Reynard's hands prickled with sweat inside his leather gloves.

"Come in."

...Finally.

Reynard opened the door.

The office was one of many in the Boston PRT building. Standard rectangular layout, shelves and filing cabinets against the wall. A desk, a scattered array of office stationery supplies, a phone, a computer monitor. This office was larger and much neater compared to Ms. Cavanagh's. Along one side of the room was a small sidebar with a glass-fronted fridge, and a matched pair of two-seater sofas with a coffee table in between. Reynard picked out all the details in a fraction of a second, which always felt like much longer to him. On one of the shelves was a row of glass oblongs and brass-and-wood plaques: industry awards. There were no family photographs, no fun bobbleheads, no candy jars. The only personal touch was a bulletin board on the wall decorated with an official PRT calendar and a handful of postcards. One of the cards had Alexandria's face and autograph on it.

The back of Mr. Braganca's chair was facing the door. Reynard couldn't see his face, but he could see two feet propped up on the windowsill. The blinds were up, and the view outside showed only the PRT building's courtyard and the Boston skyline in the distance, the sky above dull and gray with clouds, the ground below dull and gray with mushy snow.

The chair creaked. It swung around.

"Reynard. Good afternoon."

Mr. Braganca's words and his face revealed nothing. Reynard couldn't tell if Mr. Braganca was pleased to see him, if he was annoyed at the interruption from his work, from super important PRT business, from... reading a canned fan mail response from Alexandria? What?

Resting on Mr. Braganca's lap was a clipboard, and on that clipboard was an envelope with Alexandria's face on it. It was the generic kind of PRT envelope that Reynard recognized. Popular heroes got a lot of fan mail, more than they ever had the time to answer. It wouldn't do to disappoint the legions of children waiting by their mailboxes for a return letter, so the PR department had come up with pre-written, photocopied replies that the heroes signed. They slapped on a sticker, threw in a portrait postcard, and mailed them off in batches.

The clipboard and the envelope went into a desk drawer, but Reynard had already seen it.

Shut the front door, he thought. Mr. Braganca's in love with Alexandria? Is that why he works for the PRT?

It was kind of sad, now that he took the time to think about it some more. Alexandria was a top tier superhero; Mr. Braganca was just a normal guy who worked in an office. She was a stunner who looked twenty-five or so, but she was near forty years old, Reynard recalled. She could fit the locker room label of "Cougar", he decided. But you'd never say it to her face, because she was just as dangerous as one. If not more.

"What's the deal with Aegis?" Reynard demanded, folding his arms. He knew he made an impressive silhouette in his mask and fur coat. Not intimidating, not even imposing – that was a villain thing to do, and he wasn't a villain – but good enough. "Why did you recommend his transfer here?"

Mr. Braganca's eyebrows rose up the slightest fraction. His lips twisted in amusement. He wasn't ugly; Reynard didn't believe that someone like Alexandria would be completely out of his league appearance-wise. But there was something off about him, as if he was hiding something. A big juicy secret that he wanted nothing but to gloat about. His inner smugness, maybe?

"Because he asked," Mr. Braganca answered, straight-faced.

"Well, I'm asking now," said Reynard. "Send him back."

Mr. Braganca's eyebrows rose up some more. "Wow. Harsh."

Reynard remembered Weld's comment on the diversity value Aegis brought to the team. His face reddened; it happened involuntarily, and he was grateful that his mask covered most of his face. "I—I mean, not like that. You know what I mean. Whatever," he mumbled, and tried to recover. "I was promised five whole months of being Wards leader when Weld leaves. If Aegis shows up, he'll take it. That's my time."

Mr. Braganca leaned back in his chair. "Why do you want it so much? The leader position means nothing in the long run. Everyone gets a turn at it. It's the participation trophy for being a Ward."
“People don’t treat the Wards leader like a dumb kid. They take him seriously. They listen to him. Just look at Weld.”

“They do that because Weld is Weld, not because he’s the leader,” said Mr. Braganca. He yawned, and opened a three-ring binder book on his desk. “It sounds like you don’t like being a Ward.”

“I don’t like being treated like a dumb kid.”

“And you don’t like the rules, the bedtime curfews, getting pulled out of patrol for your mandatory potty break?”

“No.”

“Then drop out of the program.”

“Huh?” Reynard gaped at him, then collected himself. “Aren’t you supposed to keep the Wards in and feed them the Protectorate Kool-Aid?”

“The PRT does that.” Mr. Braganca turned a page in the book, scribbled a note in the margin, and looked up. “I don’t. I honestly don’t care.”

There were a lot of things Reynard could have said when he heard that. And with his power extended as far as he could push it, he could give himself the time to think of something clever to say, a witty retort, something so sharp and cutting that it would stick in his memory, so that he could replay it at leisure during boring lectures at school in the following weeks. There were many things he could have said. But only one felt like the right one.

“You suck,” said Reynard.

Mr. Braganca snorted. He set down his pen. “You want real talk? Let’s talk for real. The Wards is a babysitting program for kid capes. You don’t like being babysat. Here’s the solution: leave the Wards. That is, if you don’t have a disciplinary record? Probationary agreement? Court mandate?”

Reynard shook his head.

“I have a statement of withdrawal form right here.” He reached into his desk drawer. There was a sound of rustling papers. Mr. Braganca placed a manila folder on the desk. He slid his pen over.

“You won’t have to deal with the PRT anymore. No more grownups, no more rules. Just sign here.”
How did it get to this? When had the conversation twisted into this? Things were moving way too fast; Mr. Braganca talked too fast. He was too smooth. Reynard pushed on his power, giving himself time to think. *Time to breathe.* His visit to the PRT offices wasn't going as he'd planned.

He'd come with the intention of pushing for Aegis to be transferred to another Wards team, somewhere that wasn't Boston: Philadelphia, Pittsburgh. One of the many New York teams. Or even a minor regional office, like Hartford.

"The withdrawal won't be immediate," continued Mr. Braganca. "You won't be dropped from the roster in a single day. There'll be a transition period, during which you won't be scheduled for patrols, but you'll still have to do some PR events..."

This wasn't what he'd intended. This wasn't what he wanted. His problem was with Aegis. Not the Wards. Aegis.

"No," said Reynard. "No. That won't solve anything. I want to be a hero. I am a hero."

"You could be an independent hero."

"I want to be a Protectorate hero," Reynard said with as much confidence as he could muster. Independents were closely associated with vigilantes, and vigilantes had a reputation for going too far, doing things that Reynard's conscience couldn't support. They did them in the name of justice, justice which had nothing to do with laws and the Constitution. It was better than being a straight up supervillain. But... not by much.

"Protectorate heroes have to follow rules."

"...Then I'll follow them," Reynard winced. "But it doesn't mean I want to be friends with Aegis."

"No one ever said you had to be friends with the people you work with," said Mr. Braganca with a smile. Reynard knew now that behind those smiling lips was a mouthful of straight white teeth and a silver tongue. "And it's too late to do anything about Aegis. His paperwork is already in the system. But if you're set on being Wards leader no matter what, there might be some arrangements that can be made."

"Like?"

"Co-leadership. I believe the Minneapolis PRT has a dual-leader arrangement for their Protectorate and Wards teams."

"Pass. It's all or..." Reynard trailed off, very conscious that he was about to say "nothing", and that moment had already come and gone and left him behind in a worse position than he'd started.

"We can fudge the numbers for your birthday. If we extend the amount of time you're in the Wards, past your eighteenth birthday, and give you more time than most Wards get, you can be the leader when Aegis leaves. It won't be a full five months, unless you want to stay in until you're nineteen. But three and a half, I think we can manage," Mr. Braganca paused, shuffled the papers within the folder, and returned it to the depths of his desk drawer. "The downside is having to follow all the Wards rules when you're a legal adult, with Wards-level minimum wage. It's a take it or leave it deal."

"I—I'll take it," said Reynard, trying not to grit his teeth. He felt like he was being cornered with slow and subtle skill, so subtly that he couldn't see the edges of the net, and if there was a trap at the end of it, he didn't think his lightning reflexes could save him. The worst part was knowing that he had walked into it with his eyes wide open, and when the trap let him go, he would come out feeling grateful to Mr. Braganca in some way.

*Crap on a cracker,* thought Reynard, with a dawning sense of self-realization. *I'm the dumb kid.*

He almost cringed at himself.

This whole time I've been calling a Weld a square. If Weld is a square, then I'm a cone. I'm a dumb cone with the word D—U—N—C—E spelled out in big capital letters on the front.

"Good," said Mr. Braganca. "Congratulations, future Wards Leader."

"Thank you," Reynard found himself saying. He couldn't think of anything else to say. He had gotten what he'd wanted, in a roundabout way. It was a compromise, but he wasn't really any worse off, and he knew that he easily could have been, and that it would have been a pickle of his own creation.

"Is that all? Anything else you wanted to discuss while you're here?"

"No, that was it," Reynard shuffled his feet for a moment, and turned for the door. "Wait."

"Yes?"

"What's the deal with you and Alexandria?"

"Nothing," said Mr. Braganca with what appeared to be perfect honesty. "I've never even met her."
Reynard is a one scene wonder who appears in Worm's DRONE 23.4, the chapter where Taylor as Weaver and the Boston Wards entertain some kids with the statistics of being a cape. Basically WeaverDice Lite. The only description of his appearance is that he wears a fox mask, and his few lines in the chapter imply he's a straight-laced type of hero. I really liked the idea of a fox-themed hero, and a hero who named himself after Reynard the fox from folk tales. In the stories, Reynard is a smart talking asshole. I carried some of that characterisation into his character in this omake, someone who wants to be a hero but also has obvious flaws. With some added conflict drive from being a natural trigger.

Reynard's power was also made up for this omake. His power is increased reflexes, flexibility, and agility. His superfast reflexes work by speeding up his perception and thinking speed, which has a side effect of making it feel like time around him is slowed down. Time isn't actually slowed. He can dodge opponents, and think up fast comebacks, which fits into his "fox archetype" persona. He uses the power to appear more smooth in social situations, but he's a 17 year old kid who doesn't have that much life experience to draw on. He can think faster, but it doesn't stop him from making stupid decisions or being an ass. He's got a cool power, but he doesn't have superhuman durability or regeneration, so he is pretty squishy and relatively weak outside street level.
PHO Interlude

Chapter Notes

Takes place in the timeskip between Tabloid Chapter 3.7 and the epilogue.

WEDNESDAY JUNE 22, 2011.
NEW YORK CITY, NEW YORK.

One cup of kale, chopped. Two cups of almond milk, organic. One cup of banana chunks, frozen.
Half a cup of green apple, cubed. One teaspoon of fresh ginger, grated.
And one spoonful of sugar to help the medicine go down.

Josephine set the lid of the blender into place, locking the seal. It was part of her daily routine to
drink a green smoothie on show days.

She made the smoothie after her morning workout, and drank it before she showed up backstage,
before she was surrounded by her fluttering gaggle of dressers, stylists, and “Friends of the New
Amsterdam”, the big money box seat patrons who were not so much fans of theater as an art form,
but fans of her. It helped her re-hydrate, and it wasn’t a diuretic like the coffee people around her
mainlined—an important feature when getting in and out of her costume was such a hassle. It was
easier just to hold it in for the two and a half hours of showtime.

She pressed the blender button. The blades whirred into motion, slicing up the fruit and
vegetables, pulping them into a wet green mass that would please her colon more than her
tastebuds.

BZZZZZZZZZZ.

She reached into her cupboard for her travel mug, and when the smoothie was done, she poured it
in, giving it one final shake before screwing on the lid.

BZZ.

The buzzing sound was low and insistent. Not intrusive; it wasn't the loud and vulgar type of
ringtone that blared with unwelcome regularity from the rearmost seats during shows, even when
the signs posted at all the entrances reminded guests to turn off their devices. No, this was a
different sound, modest and unobtrusive. But it still demanded attention, and it didn't stop, but
went buzzing away, on and on, driving an unapologetic icepick into the quiet peace of her
morning routine.

She caught her phone before it vibrated itself off the edge of the granite-topped kitchen counter.
Wesley
incoming call...
Decline / Accept

Her finger hovered over the touchscreen. She knew what the conversation was going to be about. She'd known all last evening, starting in the late afternoon of yesterday, when normal primetime television programming had been replaced by breaking news specials about a shakeup in the Protectorate. About the PRT going radio silent with what until recently had been regular status updates on the S-Class threat that heroes from all over the country had been summoned to attend.

It had been too much for her. She'd switched the TV off. She'd turned off her computer, along with the screen on her fridge that left a running headcount of the voicemails other people left for her. She'd set her phone to Busy Mode, because she didn't want to hear the ping-ping-pinging inquiries of people who wanted to hear her opinion on current events, as if her opinion was one she wanted to share with anyone. She couldn't smile and say that everything was going to turn out all right, that things would settle into place as they always did, that she was fine and if there were any people who were not fine, her heartfelt prayers went out to them.

She didn't want to lie with a smile on her face, while in the dark recess beneath her ribs, something inside her crumbled in darkness. She couldn't do it. Not today.

BZZZZZ.
Wes... He knew. He was one of her few exceptions.

Her finger hovered over the button. She hit "Accept".

"Hey," he said, and the gentle familiarity of his voice, the smooth syllables that flowed like poured honey, prompted her to take a moment to clear her throat and prepare herself for her own response. "How are you holding up?"

He didn't ask if she'd heard the news. She was grateful for that.

"I'm fine," said Josephine. "Everything is fine."

She stared down at the gold engagement band on her left hand, three carats heavy with the weight of a commitment meant to last the rest of her life. With her thumb, she spun the ring around until the stone was turned into her palm. Trust. Loyalty. Partnership. Some days it felt like too much to bear, when she was tired and everyone else was just as tired, their heads drooping under a barrage of spotlights and hungry matinée audiences. On other days, the sight of his face made it all worth it, when he took off his cloak and his expressionless mask and she saw the smile that he reserved only for her.

"Good," came the voice on the other end. "I was worried about you. You took a while to pick up."

"I'm fine. I had my hands full in the kitchen and didn't hear you."
"Are you heading in soon?"

“Yes. I was just getting ready.”

“They're sending a car for you. Your concierge will let you know when it gets there. It's a mad house outside; the streets are packed,” said Wes. “Simon and I have been hounded all morning.” She heard the pause as he started to say something else, then bit himself off. He swallowed. “Hold tight, Josie.”

“Everything will turn out alright. It'll be back to normal soon,” she replied, her voice warm, her tone confident.

“I hope so.”

“See you later.”

The call ended with one last exchange of three word sentences, and she was once again alone in her apartment. She began to prepare herself for the day that lay ahead, armoring herself in routine. She showered, and let the hot water rinse away the Josephine of the evening before. The dumbfounded confusion, the speechless outrage; she imagined it draining away, until she was wrung dry, until there was nothing left behind but an empty vessel ready to be filled with music. And after she had stepped into her closet to pick a pair of shoes to match her handbag, and stopped to stripe concealer under her eyes as if it were warpaint, she felt ready to face the day.

When the car arrived, she swept past the saluting doorman, the photographers with their long paparazzi lenses pointed at her like a row of cannons ready to broadside, and the surging crowd of her fans who screamed at her and waved their posters, either to support her or to revel in the schadenfreude—she couldn't guess which. Probably both. She waved a serene hand to them as they called her name, then the car door closed, and she was finally cocooned in silence.

The streets and the long shadows of skyscrapers slid past the tinted windows.

The traffic at Times Square halted progress to a crawl.

She saw advertisements for now-playing shows. She saw her own face on them. She couldn't avoid seeing the live news feeds playing on the forty foot high JumboTrons. She saw the other Alexandria's face, the real Alexandria. The woman who had built the Protectorate and carried it on her shoulders, and as it turned out, the PRT as well. She had risen high; she had ascended to the heights, until she'd found herself in a fight that couldn't be won with a punch. And now, on her way down, she would be taking so many other people down with her.

What was it with superheroes and their love of collateral damage?

"The show must go on,” she mumbled to herself, turning her face away. The words lingered in her mouth with the taste of bile.

Welcome to the Parahumans Online Message Boards
You are currently logged in, JosephineVilliers (Media)
You are viewing:
• Threads you have replied to
• AND Threads that have new replies
• OR private message conversations with new replies
• Thread OP is displayed
• Ten posts per page
• Last fifteen messages in private message history
• Threads and private messages are ordered by user custom preference.

Topic: Final Curtain for Alexandria?
In: Boards ► Hobbies and Interests ► Entertainment/Media Discussion ► TV and Film ► Protectorate Pals
Pavarotti_1 (Original Poster)
Posted on June 23nd, 2011:

My wife and I have been wanting to see the show for years, and we were thinking of driving out to finally see it (we live in Ohio). Recent news has got me worried... are they going to close the show for good? When should we go? What showing should we book?

The New Amsterdam Theater show tickets website has pre-book options, but they don't say who's going to be in it. I want to see the original cast (Josephine, Simon, Wesley) and not the understudies. I don't want to get there on the day and have the scalpers rip me off either. Broadway buffs and show people, what's the best way to see the show?

AdBM and AoAAS general discussion allowed.
Protectorate Pals discussion goes here.
Phil Harmonica
Replied on June 23rd, 2011:
It's A!tBM, you forgot your exclamation mark, OP.
!!!
Can I say it again?
!!!!!
A!tBM is ending?????
Ok, question is relevant for me too. I want to see the show one last time before it closes. Booking my flight right now.

South_Side_Story
Replied on June 23rd, 2011:
Where's the source for A!tBM ending? StageBuzz site says no, Leonora XO's blog says yes, Symphonia says maybe, and the New Amsterdam isn't saying anything.
Where you folks getting the info?

No_24601
Replied on June 23rd, 2011:
Why are you people freaking out about literally nothing?
Just buy the DVD recording and you can watch it whenever you want.

Phil Harmonica
Replied on June 23rd, 2011:
@ No_24601 That's heresy, get the fuck outta here.
*drops a chandelier on you*

No_24601
Replied on June 23rd, 2011:
They tried to cram 2 seasons of Alexandria the Animated Series into 2.5 hours for the musical, and you can tell.
AoAAAS > A!tBM, prove me wrong.

Dumott Schunard
Replied on June 23rd, 2011:
Where did Leonora get the info from?
I like her blog, but all her cites ask not be named. @ LeonoraXO?

LeonoraXO (Media)
Replied on June 23rd, 2011:
@ DumottSchunard: Friends in the industry.
If you check the New Amsterdam website, the booking calendar stops on September 30.

Dumott Schunard
Replied on June 23rd, 2011:
Isn't that normal? That's the way they break up the Broadway season for the summer award seasons nominations.

LeonoraXO (Media)
Replied on June 23rd, 2011:
Alexandria is the New Amsterdam's centerpiece production. If they're going quiet on news for the upcoming Broadway season for their STAR PRODUCTION, it's a hint that there isn't going to be an upcoming season for Alexandria. All the other theaters in the district are starting to crank into pre-production for their star shows' new seasons. See the promotional campaigns for the Imperial Theatre's Mister Saigon, J. Gold's Glinda, Studio 27's The Bohemians, Adelaide Whitwell's Eva Argentina, and Westerfelder's Anna of Siam.

MY PREDICTION: A script and song re-write given what's happened with the Protectorate. That or they're looking for, or already found a backup production. The only thing I've heard confirmed so far is that stage crew won't be losing their jobs. They've said nothing about the top billers. Big shakeup? That's my best guess so far.

@ Pavarotti_1:
Cast scheduling is locked in 1-2 weeks before the day of the performance, depending on the show. StageBuzz has a volunteer-made calendar with the time and dates of main cast + understudy performances for all major theaters, and I've found it to be 95% accurate. My advice is to order tickets a week prior, two weeks prior for Saturday shows. The alternative is to show up early on the day, and if you're in the front of the line, hope they still have some good seats free.
Break a leg!

Pavarotti_1 (Original Poster)
Replied on June 23rd, 2011:
Thanks, Leonora.
Looks like my wife and I will have to find a way to take leave from work on short notice. This better be worth it lol.

Link Skylark
Replied on June 23rd, 2011:
They didn't win 6 Tony's for no reason, Pavarotti.
That said, if they do close, at least they got their Tony's.
I'll be holding a candlelight vigil with my church's chor if it goes for good. Fingers crossed for a future revival.

What new show do you think they'll be replacing it with? Thomas Jefferson the Musical?

► South_Side_Story
Replied on June 23rd, 2011:
We don't know if it's going at all.
Calm down, everyone!

► No_24601
Replied on June 23rd, 2011:
Color me surprised if it's all FAKE NEWS.

End of Page. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 … 24

SATURDAY JUNE 25, 2011.
WALTHAM, MASSACHUSETTS.

The streets were quiet for a Saturday afternoon.
The shade trees lining the suburban avenues sighed and wept. Rain pattered over slate rooftops, flooded gutters and drainpipes, and washed over the sidewalks. Oily rainbows swirled into existence on glistening asphalt. Those shining puddles were soon dispersed beneath the tires of Josephine's taxi with a splashing sound; they melded with the low humming of the engine and the swishing sheets of rain into the aural ambience of the commute experience.
The taxi stopped.
Josephine got out, struggling to unfold her umbrella in the rain, her hundred-millimeter designer heels unable to find a proper grip on the wet sidewalk. The driver popped the trunk, spared a minute to wrestle her luggage out of the back, and then saluted her after she paid out his fare. Then he was gone without a backward glance, the lights on the back of his taxi flaring with a red glow that soon faded away behind the falling curtains of rain.

She sighed, grasped the handle of her suitcase with one hand, and tucked the handle of the umbrella under one arm. There, one hand was free to search for the slip of paper with the address written on it.
The wind blew drops of water onto the paper, blurring the numbers, but the street directions matched the letters on the traffic sign. With droplets of water spotting the dark lenses of her sunglasses, Josephine stepped up to the front door, dragging her suitcase behind her.
Paul lived in a brick-faced townhouse in the suburbs of Boston. There was nothing to separate his house from the others lined up in a row on the same street. They were narrow structures, built on rectangular lots that left much of the house hidden behind, and each had stairs leading up to a grate-and-mesh front door. Josephine glanced around. A few of the neighboring houses had small pottery planters or urns on the front step, and most had put up some sort of patriotic decorations for the Fourth of July. Flags, now limp and drooping in the rain. Red, white, and blue streamers around the iron banisters on either side of the stairs. Bunting over the doors or draped from the bay windows of the upper floors. This house had only a doormat at the top of the stairs, woven with the design of a winking smiley face.

Now or never.
She stepped up to the mat and pressed the doorbell.

"Excuse me, Ma'am," said a voice that sounded like Paul's, the clarity of his words softened by the mechanical distortion of a speaker system. "Can I have a moment of your time to talk about our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ?"

"Haha," said Josephine, who wasn't amused by Paul's inverted approach to greeting unexpected visitors. She stamped her feet on the doormat, shaking the rain from her umbrella, and her pointed heel gouged into the winking eye of the smiley face. “Very funny, Paulie. Have you even been to confession once in the last ten years?” She pressed the doorbell once more. A thought occurred. With a smile slowly creeping over her face, she held the button down.

"Nope," said Paul. "I don't consider myself part of God's family. " There was a cracking burst of laughter from the speaker. "I'd say that I'm not even part of my family either... So what the hell are you doing here? And can you stop pressing the damn doorbell?"
Paul was silent, and Josephine strained to hear his response over the steady drumming of falling rain. She didn't hear anything, and several long moments later, she considered grabbing her bag, calling for another taxi, and allowing the complimentary hors d'oeuvres and champagne of First Class to soothe her ruffled feathers on the short flight home.

Then there was a soft snick as the mechanism within the door unlocked itself.

She reached out for the door handle, finding that it turned easily. The metal grate of the outer door opened without a creak, revealing an inner wooden door. Before she could touch it, it opened, and there was Paul on the threshold, looking more tired than she had seen him last, a full half year ago. His hair wasn't combed with its usual neatness, and there was something about the set of his brows and the slight frowning curve of his mouth that made him look worn and strained. She stared at him, picking out the nuances of his appearance that she hadn't noticed during his Christmas visit. One slow heartbeat stretched into two, as his features rearranged themselves until he showed no expression at all, and then they adjusted once more.

The corner of Paul's mouth quirked up in a wry smile. "Well, come in," he said, stepping back from the door. His eyebrows lifted a fraction as he observed the round, dime-sized hole that the heel of one of Josephine's patent leather pumps had made in his doormat. "And try not to scratch up my floor."

The interior of the townhouse, as Josephine walked through the narrow corridor, leaving her coat on a peg and her umbrella in a stand, was a peculiar combination of old and new. The house was old, with high ceilings and sculpted plaster molding, and the furnishings were new, but they weren't new enough for her to match the designs with anything she'd seen in the showrooms she'd toured with Wes in the tentative first stages of their moving in together. It was modern, but not aggressively modern. Practical, but with attention paid to aesthetics.

Paul's living room didn't look lived in. His home had the feel of a legal firm's boardroom, or the waiting room of an exclusive plastic surgery clinic. It wasn't by any means too busy or too cluttered, but as she eyed her surroundings, she saw that it wasn't catalogue perfect either. Here and there were the small touches of personal idiosyncrasy: full-size tripods and reflector stands bundled up in a tarp in one corner of the room, a zipped up gym bag on the sofa, a framed photographic print of something pleasant and rural on the wall, a coffee mug painted with a cow's face on the adjoining kitchen counter.

All in all, she decided, it was the home of someone who had no pets, no children, and probably no girlfriend.

"Nice of you to visit," Paul said. His words were polite, but his tone was sarcastic. "Do you want anything to drink? I have coffee ready, and I can make tea... but if you want, I can break out the hard liquor."

"Tea for now. I'll leave the liquor for later, thank you," Josephine answered, dropping the handle of her suitcase. She settled herself on one of the bar stools tucked under the edge of the kitchen counter. "And I did call your office ahead of time. The staff desk kept blowing me off and saying that they were busy and non-essential calls were on hold 'for the interim. Whatever that is, because no one's saying."

"Huh, the staff desk actually doing their jobs? That's the real shocking news right there," said Paul. He busied himself with kitchen things, filling up the kettle and setting it to boil. "They're following PRT damage control protocol if they're fielding calls like that. They can't release information, but they don't want to start a press panic, so they follow a script. It's all in the handbook. It's the same info lockdown OPSEC jazz as they use for S-Class battles."

Josephine picked up the mug on the counter. It had a picture of a happy cow on the front. The other side was inscribed with the text "CALGARY STAMPEDE 2009" in curling red cursive.

"I wanted answers," Josephine said. She watched Paul scoop loose tea leaves into a pot. His movements were steady as he set out a teacup, saucer, strainer, and slotted spoon on the countertop, as measured and precise as a casino croupier dealing out a fresh hand on green felt. "No one was going to tell me."

"Except me, apparently."

"Yes," Josephine rested her elbows on the counter, wrapping her arms around herself as a paralyzing wave of doubt swept over her, leaving her feeling cold in a way that she couldn't blame on the rain and her damp, rain-splattered leggings. "I know you. I know you know. And you wouldn't lie to me," she said, injecting certainty into her speech. She sang in front of a thousand people five nights a week. She pranced in front of them in tights. She was one hundred percent immune to stage fright. "We don't lie to each other."

"Of course not," answered Paul, sounding somewhat skeptical.

"You tell the truth," said Josephine, blindly trying to feel out by instinct the right words, the right things to say, to speak the language of persuasion in which she knew Paul was fluent. She was no expert at it, and now she was out of practice. These last few years, it had been other people who had sought her out and tried to win her favor. "That's how you hurt people."

"Wow, this is really convincing me to spill the classified beans."

"Am I wrong?"

Paul poured tea into the porcelain cup, and slid it over to her side of the kitchen counter. A cube of sugar and a slice of lemon sat in the bowl of the slotted spoon that balanced over the rim of the
Josephine's spoon rattled against the side of her cup. "We only sign for one season at a time."

"This will be your last, then." Paul looked away. "Sorry."

It was a disappointment, but some part of her had already guessed it might happen. She hadn't wanted to know, because she was aware of how terrible, how crushing it felt to have hope obliterated in an instant, with a single word. Every role she'd auditioned for as a fresh-faced actress new to the Hollywood scene, every reading, every screen test that had ended up in a rejection, or no rejection at all, only an announcement of the winner two months later—the memories, each and every one of them, returned to her in a sweeping tide of bitter humiliation. She winced, the sensation rising in her throat with the choking taste of failure.

She'd come to Boston because she couldn't not know, couldn't live with the uncertainty, the ominous weight of a guillotine's shadow hanging over her head. There was a sense of closure that came of knowing her fate. But it wasn't comfortable, and it gave her no peace.

It was like ripping off a crusty scab. It might give you the satisfaction of tearing it away, but then you were left bleeding and in pain.

Josephine, at a loss for what to do, sipped her tea. It was a rich and fragrant black tea, strong but not over-steeped. It was good. "This just might be the single worst day of my life."

Paul gave a short, choked laugh. "You know, the thing about worst days ever is that you only ever get one," he said. His lips twisted into a crooked smile. "Everything else is much better in comparison."

It was strange and unexpected, this attempt of Paul's to comfort her. He wasn't very good at it, and he must have known it, because he didn't try to smooth her in sympathy or condolences. It would have come across as insincere, and Paul, if he couldn't manage to be a trusting person, was a truthful one.

Josephine found herself chuckling, and some of the awkwardness, the stiff tension that held Paul away from her, and she from Paul, began to melt away. There was still a distance, as she knew there always would be. They had what amounted to a long-distance relationship, if the term could be applied to siblings separated by the two hundred miles and more from where she lived and he worked, and the distance of the years between them, between the times they saw one another in person. Distance still, but now it was the tiniest bit shorter.

"My show is on life support," she said, in a strained voice she could feel slipping into hysteria.

"If it helps, my job probably is too," Paul said. He leaned against the kitchen counter, and his eyes turned to the window that faced the backyard, a small tiled patio bordered by decorative shrubbery and two trashcans, wet with rain. "Since the PRT is a secret shell game and all. Downsizing is inevitable. It's already happening to the Protectorate. I have a feeling they're going to break out the buzzword dictionary and call it 'streamlining.' Or 'pivot.'"

"What are you going to do?"

"If they implode? Look for another job." He frowned in thought. "I bet the life of a Marketing Director is super exciting."

"And I'll be yet another washed up actress," Josephine sighed. "Maybe I could be a realty TV star.

"You could always go into teaching," Paul remarked.

Josephine choked on her tea, and begun to laugh. It was funny and sad and harsh and honest all at the same time. She'd worked with dancers from local ballet companies, principals and primas who were slowing down with age and injuries. They lost their flexibility, their reflexes declined, and every year, it took longer and longer to warm up for performances. The dancers envied her stage presence, something that didn't wane with age. Runway models she knew admired her singing voice, a skill that could keep fans around longer than a pretty face. She had some advantages, but show business was show business. It was a fickle beast on an endless search for the Next Big Thing. It gorged itself on talent, and when it reached its expiration date, spat it back out. People who had their lives consumed, digested, and regurgitated by the great glistening beast had one fallback they could rely on: guiding the next generation of starstruck hopefuls. Teaching.

"It's a last resort option," Josephine said. "I'd put it below being the opening act for a Vegas magic show and above subway panhandling."

"In that case, you should do a proper survey of your finances. Your current assets and investments. Contracts you've signed. Projected income from licenses and royalties. Your spending and expenses," said Paul, switching tracks to business talk. He paced the kitchen, counting off points of advice. "You won't have to take Z-list roles if you've been managing your money properly. Call up your agent and publicist, your lawyer, your accountant. They'll know what to do, how to take care of any problems. Or..."
"—Or I could call Mom."

Paul stopped dead, and gave Josephine a sidelong glance.

He was silent, and for a minute neither of them said anything. Rain hissed in the view beyond the window, the sky changing from gray to black as afternoon fled into evening. Inside the house, there was warmth and light, but she still felt cold. Josephine laced her fingers around her teacup, letting the residual heat warm her chilled fingertips.

"She misses you, Paul."

"I don't care."

"It's been ten years. Whatever she did to you, whatever she tried to sell you on, can't you just—"

"No."

A shadow fell over his face, and his expression darkened, but Josephine couldn't read it. It wasn't anger or sorrow; it wasn't anything she thought she could pin down with a name. The lines of his body were tense, the angle of his shoulders stiff, tilted inward, as if he was poised to shrink away, to draw in on himself and hide. He noticed her attention and turned away, and she couldn't see his face anymore, only his back. His hands gripped the edge of the kitchen sink.

He turned the water on and she could hear it splashing down the drain as he washed his hands, his movements slow and methodical. Then he turned the water off, wiped his hands off on a dishcloth, and when he faced her once more, it was as if the brief stretch of awkwardness had never happened.

His expression was neutral and his voice pleasant when he spoke. "I have to be at the office tomorrow. You have to catch a flight in time for your Monday show. I think an early night would be best for the both of us."

He smiled at her, every bit the perfect, gracious host, but his eyes were cold.

And just like that, the moment was over, and the distance between them felt greater than ever.
Thread Originator has selected [Option: Anonymous Posting].
Poster IPs in this thread will be marked by randomized tripcodes.
Reveal personal information at your own risk.

Subject: Leaked cover of AMERICAN HERO July 2011
User: 5LiJvv8jMe (OP)
Thread #93177995 | 19:55:27 — 06/30/11 — (Thu)

American Hero has an official interview with ex-PRT Director Rebecca Costa-Brown (AKA Alexandria). Shit magazine with too many fucking ads, but if it's PRT approved, we can hope it's better than the rumors people keep throwing around. Stop spitting balls and post your sources, Leekfriends. Don't be a PHOny.

It will be out on newstands at 6:30AM tomorrow morning (07/01/2011), and I'm posting page scans when I get my copy. Don't expect all the juicy deets to be spilled. It's an officially sanctioned publication, after all. Read between the lines and stay vigilant, and maybe we'll learn something new.

Attached Image:
File: image.jpg (422 KB, 814x1200)

User: TAPy36Msc
Post #1 | 19:58:20 — 06/30/11 — (Thu)
Is anyone surprised at all that a major government department is run by a secret conspiracy? They lied to us! Such a betrayal of the public trust!
Wow, it's fucking nothing.

User: QjHC8fUuQ
Post #2 | 20:00:04 — 06/30/11 — (Thu)
People have known SINCE 1969 that the government has been lying to us. Power corrupts. What did anyone expect to happen? I'm gonna be laughing if we find out that the Cauldron conspiracy is run by the Illuminati. And they're in turn controlled by reptilians from outer space.

User: PFCAJyExTQ
Post #3 | 20:03:17 — 06/30/11 — (Thu)
we can talk about in cauldron here????

User: dkD2amC8A
Post #4 | 20:09:56 — 06/30/11 — (Thu)
nosq's for where this noob came from.
GTFO.

User: PFCAJyExTQ
Post #5 | 20:13:38 — 06/30/11 — (Thu)
CAULDRON CAULDRON CAULDRON CAULDRON
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User: !gGzFpQFPw
Post #6 | 20:18:31 — 06/30/11 — (Thu)
Can we get this shitposter out of here please? Send him back to friendspace.com or the dumpster fire commonly known as PHO, where he belongs.

On the topic of Cauldron, how much were they charging for their moon juice?
...I have a friend who wants to know.

User: !K9oaXNghY
Post #7 | 20:34:52 — 06/30/11 — (Thu)

Check out this thread from earlier: >>#93168147
People who have bought or taken moon juice vials posted how much they paid for theirs in the comparison master thread. As far as we know, they were threatened with being exposed for buying their powers and/or having their memories wiped if they shared info about Cauldron. But since Cauldron got outed, everyone knows what they are and what they've been doing, and they can't do shit about the whistleblowing. Except for assassinations, that always works. Data is worth looking at, keeping in mind that a limited sample size will skew the statistics. Scroll down the page to see the graphs and ANOVA tests made by LeekBro.

The tl;dr of what we know:

...
1. Customers paid anywhere from USD$30k to USD$75mil for their powers. No one paid less than USD$5k, except for experiments who got theirs for free. Payments were not only cash (all currencies), but assets such as bullion, bonds, and property titles.

2. Cauldron charged based on the power output/riskiness of their moon juice formulas. Top rated powers = expensive. Lame powers = cheaper.

3. Cauldron charged what customers could afford. If you had $100k in your bank account, they'd take around $85k. Leaving you enough to live on, but you'd have to do something soon to keep the lights on... like signing up to do their bidding.

4. Cauldron is using or has used the Leek Exchange to take payments. Admins won't confirm.

5. Cauldron is a big white warehouse/lab/hospital, location unknown. They use inter-dimensional portal tech to get back and forth from their HQ.

6. They're international, and unaligned. They were caught peddling to the Protectorate, but had been pushing to all major cape groups, villain and hero. There's a compiled list of capes confirmed and suspected to be Cauldron plants/customers here in this thread: ao#93170638. Includes all Case 53’s, and half the Vegas Protectorate.

7. They've been running the show from the background, for most major governments. Infiltrated the gov, probably elected the president.

8. Clues point toward Cauldron being the ones who pressed for the D.D.I.D. containment procedures fast tracking into law. Lethal force and other measures were authorized for non-cooperating Simurgh victims since the 2009 Madison, WI attack. Easy way for them to clean up all the C-53’s they dumped into the quarantine zone, with the government to foot the bill.

9. The bogeymen are real, and they look like normal people. They can bypass LeekNet data hashing, but this hasn't been 100% confirmed.

10. Keep spreading the word, my fellow Leekers. The bogeymen can't hunt down everyone.

Join us in the Leeknet /CONSPIRACY subforum if you want to talk about Cauldron. Serious only.

STAY WOKE, SHEEPLE.

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**User: 5JjVV0jrMc**
Post #8 | 20:35:27 — 06/30/11 — (Thu)
Anyone pissed off at the shitbags who paid for their powers, when eveyrone else had to trigger the hard way? Pay to win IRL, this earth is fucking unfair.

**User: !K9oaXNgH4Y**
Post #9 | 20:39:02 — 06/30/11 — (Thu)
Anyone who gets powers, easy way or hard way, is fucked up. Do you not look at the casualty ratings LeekBro calcs and posts after each endbringer fight? 25-75% death rate. 30-120 capes killed each time depending on turnout. Many of them were capes who bought their powers. Face it dude, life sucks both ways.

**User: !xeibkozJ.I**
Post #10 | 20:43:16 — 06/30/11 — (Thu)
I'm wondering if the Cauldron Conspiracy being unmasked was part of their plan to sell more of their moon juice. Everyone likes free advertising, even puppet master bogeymen.

The power granter trump capes always have some catch when they give out powers, deal with the devil style. Just look at Teacher (killed the VP a few years ago, caged) or Bastard Son (Elite, oakland team). They don't just give you powers, they turn you into their weapons.

**User: !LVwPmLXPGc**
Post #11 | 20:48:41 — 06/30/11 — (Thu)
Why would they charge $10 million for the powers? Couldn't they get more customers if they lowered the price?

**User: !6O6AUJT2Qy**
Post #12 | 20:55:10 — 06/30/11 — (Thu)
They want you to think they're only doing it for the money, so no one gets suspicious and looks deeper into what their real plan is. Are they implanting mind control chips into the people who signed up for their secret herbs and spices?? People who took them claim they had a blackout/headache after they chugged the stuff. Could be caused by a hi-tech trackerchip implant gun (like they ones they use on your pets at the vet clinic) straight to the head. We know Cauldron can do memory wipes.

The way they do it is smart. They get all the money AND all the minions.

**User: !bpzG2bLpms**
Post #13 | 20:57:07 — 06/30/11 — (Thu)
I think they're using all the money to build a new endbringer. A mega endbringer to beat the other three, and then they can take earth Bet for ransom. World domination is always the ultimate end goal for all secret conspiracies.
TIMELINE OF EVENTS:

- **June 18, 2011** — Mayor Christner meets with politicians in Washington to argue for the reconstruction of Brockton Bay.
- **June 19, 2011** — Coil's cronies crash community conference. After the town hall meeting, Skitter kills Coil to rescue Dinah.
- **June 20, 2011** — Echidna is released from confinement and attacks Brockton Bay. Eidolon and Alexandria are trapped and cloned. Eidolon's evil twin reveals that the Triumvirate are Cauldron plants. The portal to an alternate Earth is opened. Remnants of the S9 have escaped Brockton Bay, and Bonesaw attacks Blasto in Boston for his equipment.
- **June 21, 2011** — Capes come back from the battle, spreading the news to their families.
- **June 22, 2011** — The news snowballs, and is posted on PHO. The Case-53's have quit to form the Irregulars. Alexandria is Director Rebecca Costa Brown.
- **June 23, 2011** — The cast of *Alexandria the Musical* are in shock. But the show must go on.
- **June 25, 2011** — Josephine visits Paul in Boston. Paul has been dealing with the PR fallout of the reveal, and the shakeup in the Boston cape community with the disappearance of Blasto. Weld, the star Ward that he has been banking on to make it big, has left for his own team.
- **June 26, 2011** — Legend announces that he's stepping down.
- **June 30, 2011** — *American Hero's* July 2011 cover is leaked to the internet via the LeekNet.
- **June 31, 2011** — Brockton Bay moves on and tries to get itself together. Greg is called out on PHO for not being a real refugee. (The interesting thing is that there is no June 31. June only has 30 days, check your calendars.)
- **July 1, 2011** — *American Hero*'s exclusive "New Protectorate" July issue is released to the public.
- **July 8, 2011** — Skitter is outed at Arcadia High School.
- **July 14, 2011** — Alexandria is killed and Taylor goes to jail.
- **July 26, 2011** — Scion kills Behemoth.

The time and dates used fit with the timestamps of the posts of Worm's *Arc 19 PHO Interlude*. 

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![The New Protectorate: Exclusive Feature](image)
The larger version of the cover portrait of Alexandria without the text can be found HERE.
Interlude: Sunshine and Candy Apples

Chapter Notes

This series of interludes is from Parvenu's perspective, and takes place 3-4 weeks after the epilogue of Tabloid.

JULY 2013
8:00 A.M.

Morning was Parvenu's favorite part of the day.

At her old job, she worked the night shift, and only got to climb into bed in the early hours of morning. She would sleep for a few hours, then eight A.M. would arrive exactly on time as it always did, and she would sit up in bed with the blankets pulled under her chin, listening, feeling, no—living—the morning rush hour as it rushed past her bedroom window. The blinds were closed, and the hanging curtains of the princess canopy that surrounded her bed blocked out the light, but she didn't need any light to see the people who lived in her city, the bustling herd of five million that sustained her with the energy of their emotions.

"The train is late!"

"Did I study enough for the second period English test?"

"I wonder if I should talk to the new secretary..."

"I hate rush hour."

She could taste the sour tang of anticipation from a hundred minds at once, mixed with the bitter resentment of being crammed into an over-crowded subway train, while she sat in bed with her eyes closed, the textures of their conversations playing out in her imagination like an all-you-can-eat appetizer buffet served on a never-ending conveyor belt carousel.

Sour, followed by the sweet victory of reaching the end of a long journey, and then the gummy backwash of exasperation at the prospect of yet another day of mindless routine. Parvenu likened it to biting into a slice of orange wedge: zesty citrus-bright notes of acid, lightened by an uncomplicated fructose sweetness, all tempered by the bitter white pith that dried out on her tongue with the taste of regret.

Some people had cigarettes and coffee for breakfast. Others had milk and cereal, or if they were the hyper-conscious CrossFit vegan type, an activated lentil shake. She personally preferred the orange juice breakfast classic, only instead of being served in a glass, she plucked it fresh from the minds of the milling crowds going about their daily business. Breakfast in bed, fit for a princess who slept behind a canopy of lace and velvet, and dreamed of being elite.

But time passes, as it always does. Things change. These days, she didn't have a four-poster bed to sleep on anymore. She slept on a lumpy mattress on a folding cot, and if there was a single pea hidden underneath, or a sack of peas, she wouldn't have been able to tell the difference. She had no more lace or velvet, no goose-feather comforter with ruffles on the edges, no display cabinet for her collection of satin sashes and pageant tiaras. Worst of all, the bedroom wasn't even hers.

Although one thing was constant: her love of mornings.

And this was a wonderful summer morning under a blue-and-white sky, like an overturned porcelain cup spilling out warmth and light from horizon to horizon. A fine day. Parvenu considered herself an expert judge of fine days. She looked forward to them, because sunless winters always tinged people's thoughts with a seasonal gloom that left an acrid aftertaste on her palate.

At this hour, beams of sunlight slanted in through the east-facing kitchen window. She could smell coffee percolating, and she could sense Josephine's melancholy as she sang to her pet cow in the barn a few hundred yards away from the house. She could sense Johnny leave the bathroom and make his way down the stairs. Johnny—Tabloid—Paul—whatever his name was. Josephine had let slip his real name in a conversation at dinner a week ago, but Parvenu couldn't bring herself to use it without permission. The unwritten rules of cape-on-cape courtesy at work. You didn't address another cape by their civilian name unless you were invited to do so, and it was expected that you share your own name in return. Her old boss had been a stickler for the tenets of social courtesy, which was natural, because he had been the ruling courtier of the Elite court for years.

Johnny... Paul... Whatever. He didn't know her real name, and he hadn't asked. The rules said it was rude to ask.

He padded into the kitchen, his hair in a tousled I-swear-I-woke-up-like-this style, a style that on attractive people was called "fashionably windswept", and "messy" on everyone else. He wore a pajama shirt and matching pajama pants, in blue tartan flannel. She'd noticed he did the matchy-matchy thing a lot with his clothes, making sure to wear that belt with those shoes, the relaxed-fit linen shirts with the dark wash selvedge, the crisp poplin shirts with twilled wool. He was as uptight about his wardrobe as Josephine was about her beauty routine, and he took as long as she did in the bathroom. It wouldn't come as a surprise to Parvenu if he was the type to iron his underpants.

Parvenu reached for the coffeepot, as he reached for his coffee mug.

"Good morning, Sunshine!" she said, her voice loud and cheery. She hadn't known what to call him, but "Sunshine" seemed appropriate for his frown and his serious eyebrows.
"Are we seriously going to do this?" he asked. His eyebrows lowered, switching gears from serious mode and down to stern. "Really?"

"It's morning. It's good."

"It's Monday."

"So? It's a nice day."

He sighed and bumped his mug against the lip of the coffeepot she was holding. She poured his coffee.

Parvenu leaned in close. "Did you sleep well?"

Up close, she could see the stubble on his jawline, and the purpling beneath his eyes. She could see the slight stiffening of his posture, the tightening of his mouth. He narrowed his eyes but he didn't break eye contact with her.

**Tabloid.** That was his cape name. He was so low-rated and obscure that she'd never heard of him, and it was why she hadn't been able to track him down in the ten years from the first time she'd felt his presence, scared and hiding in a toilet stall, and the last time she'd tasted his fear in the final chaos of what the people in the other Earths spoke of as Gold Morning. She'd sensed in him a searing cold acid that ate away at the bounds of the great echoing chamber of his cape-soul. She had a good grasp of his flavor signature by now.

Tabloid was a candy apple.

His outer layer was a brittle shell of saccharine condescension, the thing he called his "sense of humor". It wrapped around his cape-soul, a dusty well of cultivated apathy that she'd grown familiar with in recent weeks. Dry and floury and flavorless like last season's apples from the bottom of the barrel, withered and long-forgotten in a dark corner of the deepest cellar. Inside, buried all the way in the center, were the tiny seeds of repressed anxiety. They sprouted at night, growing like vines, twisted and heavy and choking, until she woke up with a hollow feeling in her stomach and her sheets tangled around her throat. Whenever it happened, and it happened almost every night, she sat up in her bed with her knees tucked under her chin. She tracked him as he paced back and forth in his room one floor above, flickering in and out and in and out of her awareness in that way of his that made her head spin—

"You can stop now."

"What?" said Parvenu.

"That's enough coffee. You're going to spill it." He nudged her with his elbow.

"Oh, Yeah." Parvenu lifted the coffeepot from his mug.

"Thank you." He glanced away from her and turned to the view outside the kitchen window.

"Huh," he said, taking a sip of his coffee. "It is a nice day."
And the bonus artwork:

“Welcome to Alberta”
"Parveen in Costume, circa 2006"
Solitude. It was such an ugly word. It had a such a complicated flavor.

It was a chunky amalgamation of a number of other sensations, none of which tasted very good alone. They tasted even worse together, like the contents of a dorm room fridge dumped into a bucket, mixed into a muddy slurry with a dirty shovel, and ladled out with that same shovel into her waiting mouth. That was the taste of solitude.

If she broke it down into its basic components, there was an animal musk of desperation, as much a smell as it was a taste. It was old bacon grease, the rancid stink of it disguised with garlic butter. Then there was a layer of loneliness, which was something like hangover champagne two days past its uncorking, thin and flat but drunk anyway despite the tongue curling notes of vinegar. And finally, an affirmation of existence, sought for and still left searching, a confusing and indecisive contrast of textures that she could only compare to freezerburnt hash browns microwaved on high, rock solid on one side and mushy blandness on the other.

When the house fell silent at ten o'clock, and Parvenu lay on her bed as one of only three human souls in the radius of her range, it was so quiet that she could hear her own pulse. If she concentrated, and if no other distractions drew her attention away, she could turn her senses inward and taste the flavor of emotion that surrounded her own cape-soul. It tasted like solitude.

How was it fair?

She'd worked hard for years; she'd worked her way up the ranks and earned the trust of the people that mattered. She had been so close to being given charge of her own group, her own handpicked cell filled with the capes she'd personally recruited and evaluated. Now, she had nothing. She was a prisoner in all but name. She wore an ankle bracelet whose red light winked at her as if it was gloating at her helplessness. It reminded her that even though she was called "guest" by her "hosts", the door was still locked from the outside, and she needed to wrap a spare sock around her ankle if she didn't want the bracelet to dig into her leg when she was sleeping.

If she could sleep.

She couldn't sleep when he couldn't sleep.

It was infuriating.

At around one o'clock, she woke with a groan and a rising sense of nausea. It was time for yet another late-night rerun of the Tabloid Show, an educational program eager to impart a cautionary tale on the perils of trigger events, irresponsible Mastering, and probably some bad parenting mixed in there as well. Most of the time it was bad parenting.

It was hard to swallow the fact that the man pacing circles in his bedroom at one in the morning was the same man whose food she shared at his table, the man who owned the house she lived in and locked her door in the evenings with a smile on his face. She'd wanted to punch that face for ten years. She'd thought it was a face made for punching ever since she had first laid eyes on that dumb little pencil mustache on Johnny Hollywood's upper lip.

Parvenu rolled around and glared at the ceiling.

Tabloid was her cape partner, for a given value of "partner". He called her "just a business partner", saying it louder if Josephine was in the room, to make sure they all heard. He was the only cape she knew, the only one in the crowd of thousands on that day whose leaking cape-soul produced a vivid burst of instant recognition. Her perfect memory had stepped in to tell her that he was the only one who would be able to do that anymore, because everyone else was dead.

Her feelings about Tabloid and of her own not-a-hostage situation were as complex as the flavor of solitude. They could be deconstructed, peeled apart to get right to the center. It was what she did. She was a Thinker, dammit! She could figure out something to fix her living situation, her quality of life, improve it to something that wasn't just tolerable, but comfortable.

Parvenu shoved her blanket aside and dug through the laundry hamper by her bed to retrieve a few sheets of paper and a ballpoint pen she'd swiped from the surveillance room a week ago. Glancing around her room's bare walls, Parvenu frowned, trying to ignore the throbbing in her temples of a headache announcing its ETA. There was a distinct lack of tables or chairs in her room, because apparently they were afraid she would break off a leg and use it as a bat, or smash through the window during the night. It had Tabloid written all over it. In the end, she decided to sit on the floor by the electrical outlet, her small desk lamp limited by the length of its cord.

Information I've got on Tabloid, she thought. He's the mastermind of this operation. What do I know about him?

She knew Josephine deferred to him. Josephine had a stiff-necked pride that led to requests being delivered behind closed doors in the form of carefully phrased suggestions. But while Tabloid could guard his thoughts during daylight hours, Josephine had no such means. On the outside, they presented themselves as equals. On the inside, it was Tabloid's playbook they followed. Parvenu had looked into what Josephine knew, scrounging her for any hints of the greater plan.
There weren't many. Tabloid didn't trust Josephine with them.

Because he doesn't trust me. Parvenu snickered.

It made sense, but it was kind of sad. Josephine was just about the only person who could look at him and leave Parvenu with the taste of dulce de leche melting in her mouth.

So Tabloid was the mastermind. But he wasn't an evil mastermind, nor even a real villain. Not in the way she thought the notorious Jack Slash would be. Not in the way Bastard Son was, with an utter lack of compassion and a flavor signature that was like licking a rusting meat hook and not knowing—whether the metallic taste came from corroded iron or crusted blood. Bastard Son was the rabid dog that you were happy to set among the villagers, because that meant he was out of your hands and not looking at you. And he had an annoying laugh, which was another black mark against him as far as Parvenu was concerned.

"You're too sensitive, Parv," he'd said on their one and only dinner date, nudging her foot under the table. "You think too much. Heh."

She shuddered.

- **Fact Number One: Tabloid is a jerk, but he's not a monster.**

She wrote it down on a sheet of paper, then hesitated. It was too subjective. She needed more concrete facts. She crossed it out, and turned the paper over, starting again on the other side.

Concentrating on writing the list, she was able to force herself to ignore the headache building behind her eyeballs, the steady thumping in her skull that came from picking up on Tabloid's cape signature as he left her range and reappeared over and over again. Speedsters, time manipulators, and short-distance rapid teleporters gave her similar discomfort, but there had always been other capes in her range that she could use to rinse the sensation out of her palate. Not so much here in the rural back end of nowhere.

Parvenu was nearly to the end of the page when she felt an unexpected change of texture in the room above. She tracked the physical distance as it increased, rising slowly foot by foot until it stabilized, still above her head, but higher now.

Buoyant contentment. A wash of fresh mint and cucumber to cleanse her mood and palate. Refreshing and brisk, it made a welcome change to her strained senses and her nauseous mind. She'd been lingering in that unpleasant mindscape for far too long. The image of the alley behind the Neverest rose up in her thoughts, a narrow backstreet that drunken patrons found themselves spending hours in after last call had come and gone.

Parvenu wondered what Tabloid found so interesting on the roof.

She stood up, stretching the stiffness from her numbed legs, and peered out of the window. Clouds obscured the sky, but she could see the edges of the cloudbank fraying like a threadbare sheet on a windy day. The sky revealed was a velvet black, the rich black of a jeweler's display case, scattered with loose diamonds. In the ass end of nowhere, no street lamps, security spotlights, or illuminated billboards broke up the view. Parvenu could see the stars, all the stars, a thin, dusty haze of twinkling light that sprawled out past the distant line of the horizon.

Ah, she thought to herself. Another layer.

- **Fact Number Sixteen: Tabloid is not a morning person.**
THINGS I KNOW ABOUT TABLOID.
Things I know about Tabloid

1. Worked for the PRT
2. Real name: Paul
   → from California?
3. Power: invisibility
   → stranger rating 1-4
4. Weird obsession w/ Cape Cookbook
5. Insomnia
6. Spends nights walking on roof.
   → Bedroom has roof access?
7. Has freezer filled w/ animal semen
8. Can’t drive stick.
   → Never passes speed limit!!!
9. Expensive camera collection
   → has expensive taste.
11. Bad at video games.
    → Can’t beat my Rimsaet, score or Josephine in Keytar Hero.
    → (I thought it was a skin rug collection until I checked.)
13. Hates being stared at but pretends not to notice
14. Hates being called goofy.
15. Is allergic to FUN.
   → Thinks cleaning the house is FUN.
Pals for Life!

Stop wasting my Polaroids.
Some people woke up radiant, without bed hair or crusty eyes or red imprints on their face from the wrinkles on their pillows. Their eyes sparkled and their skin glowed with a magical infusion of *joie de vivre*. These people were the effortlessly beautiful.

Tabloid was not one of them.

In his natural state, Tabloid would never win any tiaras for being Miss Congeniality or Miss Photogenic—although she could admit that he could give his competitors in the Miss Best Dressed category a run for their money. When Parvenu saw him the mornings, pre— and post-coffee, she saw a stark difference between the Tabloid of sleepless nights and rooftop acrobatics and the Tabloid who stood before her, polished and put-together, whose every hair was as firmly set in place as the smooth and featureless shell behind which he hid his true self.

He worked hard to look good, and looking good for anyone who had to work for it wasn’t easy. It seemed like all he did was work, or talk about work. Work, work, work, all day and every day, because no one said self-employment would ever be a cakewalk.

"—Have some cake," said Tabloid.

"Whuff," said Parvenu. She hadn’t been paying attention to the conversation, and now Tabloid had stopped walking and she hadn’t, so naturally she’d walked right into his back, bounced off, and fallen to the floor. She brushed herself off, ignoring his raised eyebrows. Bare concrete never made for a good place to hit the floor, she’d always thought, wincing. It gave an industrial vibe, suitable for low-budget underground raves, with a drawback in the sound design department that drove away any performance artists who cared the tiniest bit about audio quality.

Tabloid frowned. "As I was saying, Josephine’s birthday is coming up, so we’re going to be sorting through the storage rooms for the birthday stuff.” He turned to the door in front of him, a concrete door that looked identical to the other concrete doors they’d passed, all of which matched the rest of the basement’s interior design. The door had a stainless steel door handle, and above that, a number pad. Parvenu noticed that not all of the doors had handles or number pads; they were nothing more than rectangular outlines set into the wall. Tabloid turned, his back covering the view as he typed in the combination code. "There was a cake decorating kit in here somewhere..." he muttered.

The door swung open. The lights flickered on.

Tabloid reached into his pocket and pulled out a knife.

The inside of the room looked like a postal sorting depot had come, partied, and left, but not before vomiting all over the walls and floor. The room was piled to the ceiling with cardboard boxes sealed with packing tape, ten feet high in places, and smaller parcels in drifts along the floor. A narrow walkway meandered between the stacks, and along the sides of the path were opened boxes that spilled packing peanuts and sheets of bubble wrap underfoot in a layer of environmentally unfriendly snow.

"Let's start digging," he said, as he tossed her a box cutter with a plastic handle and a short blade that looked too puny to cut anything that could put up more resistance than cardboard.

The first box Parvenu cut open spilled strings of its innards in long green ropes. Christmas lights, big lights and little lights, coils and coils of it, bundled up with cable ties.

"Where did all this stuff come from?" asked Parvenu. She bent down and cut open the next box.

"Tinsel garlands in silver and gold. "Did you raid a party supply store?"

"There used to be monthly auctions for shipping containers and storage lockers whenever businesses went under or their owners died," Tabloid replied, arms full with a box of his own. "Surprisingly common in the bigger cities. I’d only bid if I knew they had good stuff in them. The trick is to sneak in a few nights before and pop them open to check if it’s not just junk, but when they go up for auction, you can't choose what you want out of them. You get the whole lot, grab bag and as is.”

"And you thought five miles of second-hand Christmas lights was a good deal?"

He shrugged. "It was in the same consignment as the baby grand in the living room. I wasn't going to pay retail price for one."

"I knew it!" Parvenu stifled a snicker. "You're cheap."

"The proper word for it is ‘frugal,’" he replied, the corner of his mouth pulling into a faint smile. "Besides, it's a good way to get rare stuff you can't find in stores. Like the matching chair and table set in the library. That was a good day when I picked those up for less than a hundred."

"Wait, those chairs?" She looked up, her eyebrows furrowed. "Why would you want to buy them? They're not even that great."
Tabloid made a disapproving noise, the condescension trickling from him in syrupy sweet ripples.
"They're mid-century Danish. Probably irreplaceable at this point."

"They're uncomfortable."

"It's called 'Bauhaus'. I think it looks nice."

Parvenu laughed, putting down her box cutter to hold her stomach.

"What?" asked Tabloid, his frown deepening.

"That's so fitting."

"What do you mean?"

"Nice looking on the outside, super uncomfortable when you get up close. Makes you butthurt if you spend too long with it," Parvenu said, in between laughs. "That's you."

"Thank you. I've always thought presentation was important," said Tabloid, his voice cool.

"You're missing the point."

"If you're talking about your pathetic attempt at flirting, I'm ignoring it on purpose."

Parvenu stood up, flicking a stray foam peanut from where it clung to her hair. She sashayed over to Tabloid, who was loading boxes onto a two-wheeled hand trolley. "Don't you flirt with people to get what you want?" she asked, looking up at him and fluttering her lashes for emphasis.

He snorted. "No?"

"No? No? Really?" Parvenu took one step closer, then another. "I mean, just look at you! The hair! The shoes! The cologne! Everyone I know—everyone you know, for that matter—is probably dead, and you're still here and smelling like cologne! You can't say that you've never used it. This—" she stopped herself, and gave him a long and lingering up and down look. He bore her scrutiny with the usual affected serenity she'd come to expect from him, but she did get a sense that the shell around him in recent days was more brittle than ever. "To get what you want out of people."

He rolled his eyes to the ceiling, loaded one last box to his trolley, and pushed it to the neat pile he'd started against the back wall of the cell-like concrete room. "Sorry to disappoint you, but I don't need to do that. Unlike other people."

"Pssh." Parvenu followed at his heels, close enough to kick the back of his feet. She found herself truly tempted. "You have to admit that it does work."

An open box on the side of the pathway between the stacks caught her eye. Checking to make sure Tabloid was ahead of her and not looking back, she dug through, picked up a few of the best items, and hid them behind her back. Then she caught up with him. He was stacking boxes, the big ones on the bottom and smaller ones balanced on top. She crept up close, her footsteps muffled in the slurry of drifting peanuts, until she stood right behind him.

"What are you doing?"

Annoyance seeped from the hairline fractures in his outer shell, a brackish wash of salt that mingled with and swept away the smarmy sugar-rushing egotism of moments before.

"Flirting!" said Parvenu. She threw her arms up and looped a highlighter yellow glowstick hoop around his neck. "What does it look like?" She added another one, this one in electric neon blue.

Tabloid pushed her away.

"What did I ever do to get stuck with you?" He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"You robbed a nightclub, maybe?"

"Oh. That. Of course. How could I forget—"

"You stopped by twice and never even hit the dance floor! And we were famous for our DJ's! Best mixers in the whole county. Parvenu whipped out two glowsticks of her own, which she cracked and shook until they began to flare with light. She waved them around, the walls of boxes brushing the ends on either side when her arms were fully extended. This underground warehouse didn't make such a good venue for the rave scene, as it turned out.

"I'm all for self-expression, but can we save that for later?" Tabloid interrupted her. His voice sounded more strained than normal. Good.

"Why can't you have fun for once? You can still do fun, right?" she said, ignoring him. Left foot first. Right foot second. Left, left, right, right, double slide, shuffle. Side step, shuffle left, extend foot, spin in place. It had been years since she'd worked the ground floor at the Neverest, but she still remembered all the moves. And it felt so good to hit the floor on her terms.

"No. I'm allergic to fun."

"When's the last time you had fun?"

"I—"

"I know! Last night!" Parvenu threw her hands in the air, completing the last spin with a final pose, glowsticks akimbo.

"—What? I'm afraid I have no idea what you're talking about." He sounded convincing, just the right touch of humble contrition with the slightest, almost imperceptible vocal hiccup at the end, the finishing note in his act of false sincerity. The cherry on top, candy sweetness laid on thick. If she hadn't known him any better, and had no tools in her possession to see beyond the placid smile and understand what kind of person he was, she would have believed him.
"The roof! I know you walk around up there every night before you go to sleep. What's so special about it?" demanded Parvenu. She'd noticed the pattern, after the evening she'd first started the list that she kept hidden in her laundry hamper. Tabloid looked forward to cloudless nights, and she thought he might relish them in that same way as she did cloudless days and sunny mornings.

"Why do you care?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

"It's none of your business."

"Your business is my business. You keep saying we're business partners."

"Argh," he groaned. He drew in a deep breath and squared his shoulders. "This is going nowhere. Fine. When I'm up there, I can see how big my tiny patch of the world is, and how far the sky reaches. It's... quiet. There's no traffic, no streetlights, no neighbors, no one else but me. When I'm there, that's when I can feel like I'm finally alone. The way I like. The way I'd always planned for it to be from the beginning. Now, can we get back to work?"

Parvenu said nothing for a few seconds. She could feel the emptiness he kept within him reaching out, swallowing emotion and sensation, engulfing her probing attempts to feel out the truth in his true essence. It swallowed his own feelings, hiding them from her second sight. He was still hiding something, some part of the truth, from her. She could empathize with his frustration. Well, let them both wallow in mutual frustration—she had never tried to put herself above pettiness.

"Wow. They really fucked you up, huh?" she said, twirling a glowstick between her fingers.

"No one fucked me up," he said coldly. "Am I not allowed to have my own personal space?"

Parvenu grinned. "You know what? I don't believe that one bit. And I don't believe in personal space either."

"I can tell." His eyebrows dipped a fraction lower, but other than that, his expression had remained fixed in a perpetual and infuriating state of attentive neutrality. Other people might say it made him a good listener, but if they thought that, they didn't know him enough to know that even though he listened and nodded at the right points, he had no interest in their problems. "What do you want, Parvenu?" he said in a low and dangerous voice.

She smiled. "I want us to be friends."

"Aren't we friends already?" he said, his tone inflected with sarcasm.

"Not yet!" sang Parvenu. She took a few steps to the side, rummaged through an open box, and found a disposable camera in a box of disposable cameras. She ripped away the cardboard packaging, exposing the rectangular plastic shell with a lens and flash on one side, and a viewfinder on the other. "How does this work?" she mumbled to herself, scanning through the instructions written in Spanish on the back. "Here's Lesson One in Friendship: friends put on silly party clothes, take photos, and call each other by their real names. That would be the friend thing to do."

"What are you doing?"

"Smile!" She slid next to him, the camera held at arm's length, and pressed the button.

CLICK!

"You were too close for the camera to focus. The picture's going to come out blurry," he remarked, after the violet afterimages had faded from their retinas.

"Then it's good that this thing has twenty shots, and this box has twenty cameras."

"Why are you doing this?" he snapped. His hand stretched out, grasping her wrist so she couldn't hide the disposable camera behind her back. Then he plucked the camera out of her grip, his hand still holding her wrist, not crushing or squeezing. A light but firm pressure like a handshake between friends.

"Because I think you're a sweetheart for baking a homemade surprise birthday cake," said Parvenu, knowing that the words were honest even if her intentions weren't. "Because I think someone should recognize that the effort means something, even if you won't." She didn't pull her arm away.

"Because," Parvenu whispered, lifting her eyes up to meet his, sending the sweet buttercream flavor of frosted vanilla shortcake in steady pulses that crossed the space in between them, with the hope that she'd unbalanced him enough to crack through the barrier that he used to hold himself together and apart. "I know for a fact that nobody, not one single person, wants to be alone forever. Not even you."

"I hate mindreaders so much," said Tabloid. He dropped her wrist and stepped away from her, his fingers tight around the plastic body of the disposable camera.

"I know, right?" she agreed. "They're the worst. Now, how about we get back to work... friend-o."

She saw him shudder.

_The things I do for a room upgrade_, she thought, smiling. _But some things make it worth it._
Animated version:
JULY 2013
2:45 P.M.

The cake was beautiful.

It had a layer of cream cheese frosting on all sides, smoothed down with a palette knife until it looked like an edible stucco wall. The cake itself was a lemon poppy seed butter cake, and in between each of its three layers was spread a generous dollop of lemon curd. Sweet and tangy, it exuded the rich yet subtle aroma of vanilla, so irresistible that Parvenu had to endure several curt warnings to keep her fingers out of the bowl. Because, as she was lectured at, double dipping was unhygienic, and licking the spoon to claim it as hers was unhygienic and childish.

But Tabloid was pleased with the final result, after he'd finished scraping down the sides and allowed Parvenu to decorate the top with a set of pastry piping bags. She'd made a field of daisies bloom on the cake, soft icing petals in white and yellow, frozen in their most perfect moment.

The cake, when it was brought out on a white porcelain stand, made Josephine smile when she saw it. The cake, when she lifted up her silver dessert fork and brought the first bite to her lips, made Josephine cry.

Parvenu blinked.

Cicadas droned away in the parched summer grass. The sun shone overhead, hidden from her view by the wide curve of the canvas beach umbrella, which shaded a paved outdoor dining area to the rear of the farmhouse. Birds chirped; the stream burbled; the windmill hummed, blades twirling in the wind. The day was perfect. The cake was perfect. The decorations, from the floral arrangements to the table settings, were as perfect as they could make it. Everything was supposed to be perfect.

Except now it wasn't.

The slamming of a door shattered her idyllic expectations of the perfect afternoon. Parvenu had no idea what had just happened. Or why.

She glanced across the expanse of crisp linen tablecloth to the other side of the picnic table. Tabloid sat across from her, tucking into his slice of lemon cake, cool and composed despite the heat of the day and the vacant place setting by his left hand. Josephine's seat. Her barely touched cake. Her abandoned glass of iced lemon tea, beads of condensation soaking into the tablecloth.

The cake was good. She'd tasted it during its assembly. Should she fault Tabloid for his apparent indifference to the guest of honor's sudden departure? Her gut feeling suggested that whatever had happened—whatever it was—he was somehow to blame. It didn't matter that he hadn't said or done anything outside his usual routine. She had already become familiar enough with his usual routine to know how irritating it was.

A wave of sensation flowed over her, umami richness sweeping over her palate, the mental equivalent of bathing in gravy. That was the taste of sadness and despair, a kaleidoscope of nuance that she could find some trace of in everyone. Rich and varied, infused with so much flavor, it defined a person and made each one different from every other. Delicious, an indescribably exquisite taste that occupied the thoughts while the demands of the body faded away from notice. It had been addicting when she'd awakened for the first time, her mouth filled with glimpses into the lives of the people around her. She'd reveled in suffering; it sated a long-stifled, shameful part of her which delighted in pettiness. She'd sought it out, indulged that side of her she'd never known she'd had. In the end, she'd proved to the people who mattered that she was worthy of their company.

She'd lost eight pounds that month. And she'd awakened for the first time with a dripfeed needle stuck in her arm. She had learned then that reading people—or ripping them apart—could be stimulating to the mind, but it did nothing for the body. It was easy to forget, so very easy.

The overpowering flavor of sorrow coated her tongue and rose up in her sinuses. Parvenu set down her fork, her appetite lost.

“What was that?” she asked.

“I didn't say anything,” said Tabloid.

“No,” said Parvenu with a huff of impatience. “What was that about? Josephine." She tossed her napkin onto the table and stood up.

“Nothing that you should worry about," Tabloid answered. He dabbed at his mouth with his own napkin, unconcerned. "You should sit down and eat your cake. The heat will make the frosting go mushy and then it's no good."

Parvenu continued to stand. When she stood, Tabloid had to look up to meet her eye to eye, and it was a pleasant reversal of their usual interactions. "If it's none of my business, why aren't you doing anything about it? She's your sister."

"Because there's nothing I can do," he said.

Parvenu sent out probing tendrils of her enhanced awareness to test him for honesty, but there was no emotional subtext behind his words. "You could cry," she said reproachfully.

"Try and what, exactly?"

"Something. Anything!"
"Such as?"

"The opposite of what you're doing now?"

"That would be... not eating cake," Tabloid spoke, sounding like he was growing bored with the direction, or the lack of it, that the conversation was taking. He poured himself a glass of lemonade from the pitcher on the table. "And I spent so long on this thing that it'd be a waste if no one ate it."

"You're a real dickhead," Parvenu said.

"So said the villain."

Parvenu folded her arms and glared at him. "You don't deserve to have friends."

"It's not like I asked for any," Tabloid gazed back at her, his face and thoughts unreadable. She read his body language instead, but found him to be not only comfortable and relaxed, but completely unconcerned by her unflattering opinions about him.

It was in that moment that Parvenu was tempted to smack him. In her past career, she'd met capes like him, ones who oozed resentment for some reason or another, quick to forget that they'd willingly chosen to join her in participating in the grand tradition of mischief making. They were often lone wolves who disliked working in tandem, never acknowledging the fact that teamwork improved results, increased payouts. She was a team player by nature, and if she encountered the more-than-occasional problem cape who wasn't, her solution in the past had been to shuffle them off to other teams where they might find a better fit. That or grant them free agent status where their special assignments required autonomy, and came with the benefit of washing her hands clean of her own liability.

None of those neat solutions could apply to Tabloid. He was immune, and her powers when applied to him answered with unreliable hit-or-miss results.

He knew that. She knew that. He knew she knew it, dating back from that one evening eight and a half years ago where a man in a slick tuxedo had shared a drink with a girl who wore a mask over her eyes and foolish overconfidence on her sleeve. Without the tuxedo, bereft of the silly games and silly mischief, she saw that he wasn't as slick as he'd made himself out to be. She'd learned that she could needle him, puncture a hole straight through to the heart of his true self.

She'd forgotten how he could needle her right back. Or how good he was at it.

When they had work to do, some necessary task on the estate that had to be carried out, their differences seemed irrelevant. They worked together, and they did the job, didn't get in one another's way, apart from the occasional hiccup whenever they found they each had their own method for skinning a cat. It was only when the task was completed and the time for relaxing had arrived that she remembered Tabloid was a man born with a stick up his ass that had over the years grown into a particularly inflexible tree.

He didn't know how to relax. When he was relaxing, he was usually doing something else, whether it was reading or preparing food or inspecting the greenhouses. Even now, sitting at a picnic table beneath the shade of an umbrella, under the guise of enjoying his cake, he was busy shepherding his thoughts, keeping his reaction at Josephine's departure hidden from her. He knew why. He wasn't saying. He was pretending not to know, because that way he would have no moral obligation to do anything about it. And all she got from him was a faint whiff of oily satisfaction at how well the party decorations had turned out.

"Enjoy the cake," Parvenu said, feeling sour. "I hope you choke on it."

She picked up her plate of cake and her glass of lemonade, both untouched, and brought it inside. She returned to the house and didn't look back, and only when the screen door had closed behind her did she allow herself to lean against the kitchen wall, letting it support her when her knees trembled and the ice in her drink rattled against the glass.

Tabloid made it easy for her to hate him. He could have made an attempt to be likeable, but he didn't bother trying. She'd seem him pour on the charm before, even though he denied that he ever used flirting to accomplish a goal. He'd never tried it with her. Was it because she already knew who he was, and there was no point in keeping up the disguise? Was it because he wanted her to hate him, just as he preferred people to think he was a boring man who lived an unremarkable life?

He kept everyone at arm's length, and Parvenu had a suspicion that he believed that no one was worthy of his trust, or his respect, or both. She wondered what kind of life had molded him into that kind of person.

They were capes. They were products of misfortune and circumstance. They had that in common, at least.

The taste of melancholy filled her awareness, a deep flavor that contained a vibrant symphony of contrasting notes, ranging from discordant solitude to a succulent and heavy nostalgia, ripe with a lifetime's worth of memories. It satisfied a hunger within her, one she was wary of indulging to the fullest. Restraint, balance, moderation. That was the key to ensuring that her powers worked for her, and that she wasn't consumed by them.

She'd turned over a new leaf in this new life of hers. It was the ideal opportunity to be a different person, to reinvent herself for this new world. A fresh beginning.

And it was a chance to be a better person, in some ways.

Parvenu lifted the cold glass to her forehead and sighed. There are no more games. The old labels are meaningless. The actions of the present are more important than the deeds of the past.

With her mind made up, she trudged up the stairs with plate and glass in each hand, following an invisible trail of breadcrumbs up to the second floor until she stood in front of the door at the end of the hallway. It had a golden star nameplate at eye level, reminiscent of a top billed star's backstage dressing room. It was old fashioned, Parvenu knew. Many modern changing rooms in
performance venues that she'd had the privilege of managing had switched over to digital displays years ago. Entertainment talent migrated too often to splurge on anything permanent.

Parvenu's own bedroom was on the same floor, so this door was not unfamiliar to her. She'd passed it several times a day to use the bathroom, but she'd never seen the inside. She knocked once, twice, and waited. No answer. She turned the handle and pushed the door open. It was unlocked.

Her first impression of Josephine's bedroom could be summed up in one word: expensive.

Curtains on the window instead of blinds and lavish, thick-piled rugs over the floorboards. A vanity by the window whose mirror was set with lights in the rim, a chaise longue upholstered in plush floral jacquard, a silk bathrobe draped carelessly over the back. The room's color scheme was in shades of antique ivory, pale gold, and champagne, and looked as if it could have belonged to a lady who owned coats sewn from the skins of dead baby seals.

Her second impression of Josephine's bedroom was speculation on how many of the room's furnishings had been acquired as part of an auction lot. Regardless, it was a beautiful room, which Parvenu might privately have confessed she would have been happy to own; it was decor that reined itself in just before it hit the border to tackiness. Which brought her around to her third impression, which was: What the fuck! Why does she get all this nice stuff? THIS IS FUCKING UNFAIR!!!

Josephine lay curled in one corner of her bed, her long, dark hair fanned out over the mound of pillows, and in this state of utter indignity, she was still beautiful. There was a softness, a sort of homeliness in that beauty that came of familiarizing herself with Josephine's domestic side. Its existence had never been hinted at in any of the glamorous magazine spreads that had graced her room, a place where coffee tables crossed the country. She was only human. In that moment, Parvenu realized Josephine was a grown up version of that girl, the one the other girls in the class would have secretly contemplated filling her dance slippers with sand or soap flakes. It wasn't shards of broken glass or iron filings the urban legends said happened in the professional leagues, but it was a reminder that casual cruelty thrived best when ambitious girls felt insecure.

"Josephine," said Parvenu, punctuating the awkwardness of the situation. "Please come back to the party. It's not the same without you."

She made her words enticing, a smooth and mellow infusion of semi-sweet chocolate ganache layered into her speech. It was a classic card pulled from her repertoire of persuasion. Not too intrusive, subtle enough that very few would notice that it was a result of parahuman power, and not an unconscious affinity with the speaker.

Josephine lifted up her head. Her red and swollen eyes widened, and then she scrambled to a sitting position on the bed, pillows falling to the floor around her. "You!" she snarled, fingers scrabbling at the drawer of her nightstand.

"Me," Parvenu said. She held up the plate and glass of lemonade. "I brought cake. You should have some. It's your birthday."

"You!" said Josephine hoarsely, pulling out a cylinder of rubberized plastic from her bedside drawers. "Get out!" She brandished it at Parvenu, flicking a button on the side with her thumb. It started buzzing.

...What was that?

"Nice dildo," Parvenu remarked.

"What?" Josephine stopped, and looked at the buzzing thing in her hand. "It's not a dildo!" She flicked another switch, and the thing extended, a metal telescopic wand rising from its tip. "It's a cattle prod. A taxer for livestock. Paul said that you weren't a Brute, so if I tap you with it, you're going down."

"You shouldn't listen to what Tabloid says," replied Parvenu, shifting from foot to foot. She preferred not to experience the business end of the electric dildo, even if the carpet under her bare toes was softer and more inviting than her bed. "He talks so much shit you'd think his ass was his face."

"Don't call him that!" Josephine said sharply, holding the cattle prod in front of her like a sword.

"An ass? Girl, please, I gotta call it like I see it."

"His name is Paul!" Josephine's voice was fierce and insistent. "He's not one of you!"

"And you're in denial," said Parvenu, taking a step closer to the bed. Fuck the cattle prod, if she went down, she was going to make sure that cake was rubbed into faces.

"No I'm—" Josephine caught herself before finishing the sentence, and Parvenu could feel her simmering emotions rise to boiling heat. "Get out! I never said you could come in! You came here, to this house, uninvited, and no one wanted you here!" She paused for breath, and then continued, her words pitched for maximum vocal projection. "Just... just go away! GET OUT!"

Parvenu held the plate of cake in front her like a shield, concentrating hard. The cake, how had it been made? Cream cheese, flour, baking powder, powdered sugar, caster sugar, lemon zest, butter, milk, eggs, poppy seeds. It wasn't just the sweetness or the lemon-fresh tartness that made it good—it was the structure, the texture, the moistness, the mouthfeel of airy lightness that stiff whipped egg whites and creamed butter brought to the overall experience of consuming each bite of cake. Simple in thought but complex in execution, to make someone feel like they were eating cake, without actually eating cake.

She packaged up the information and sent it all to Josephine.

Josephine shuddered. The tip of the cattle prod wavered. She turned her face away, a curtain of
"Stop it!" hissed Josephine. And in a small voice, she said, "What do you want? Why are you doing this?"

Parvenu inched forward, and sat herself on the end of the bed. The bedspread was embroidered with twisting vines and roses. She placed the plate of cake on the bed, and pushed it over to Josephine. Josephine hugged herself, radiating an aura of gloom and wary curiosity.

"No one should cry on their birthday," said Parvenu. "And this cake is too good to miss."

"The cake was my father's special recipe," Josephine said softly. Her hand reached up behind the veil of hair and Parvenu heard a sniff.

"Oh." It was the only thing Parvenu could say. "Oh. I'm sorry."

Endbringers. It wasn't just capes who lost in the wake of their appearances. Josephine Villiers had made a televised speech at the mass memorial, as a Los Angeles native who had felt the loss personally.

"I'm sorry you had to see this," Josephine took a slow and shuddering breath of air. She scrubbed at her eyes. "Please go back to the party. I'm fine."

A lie. Parvenu could see through them. "You're not fine."

"I will be. Just give me a minute."

"That's not how it works," said Parvenu with a sigh of impatience.

"It is. I'll make it work," Josephine insisted. "Paul is fine. He's always fine. If he can do it, get on with things, then I can too."

"Paul," said Parvenu with a pinch of distaste at using his given name, "should not be held up as the standard for anything. And he's not fine either. He's a cape. None of us are."

Josephine peered out from behind her hair. "I always thought he was the sanest of any of us."

"Sane, sure." Parvenu shrugged, found she was still holding the glass of lemonade, half the ice melted. She took a long pull to clear her throat and give herself some time to think. "I think he's so sane that he went in a loop and came out the other end. He's so sane he's crazy. Or so crazy he's sane."

She gestured at the room with an arm. "He built a secret clubhouse for a just-in-case End of the World scenario. Who the fuck does that?

"But enough about Paul. Today is your birthday," said Parvenu, lowering her voice to what she thought was a soothing volume. "I want to hear about the cake. What makes your father's recipe special?"

Josephine picked up the fork and peeled open the topmost layer of the cake. "Vanilla bean paste in the lemon curd. The seeds, see? It's what gives it the special flavor." She set the fork down with a clink, clearing her throat. "My birthday was one of the few days of the year where I could eat whatever I wanted. The rest of the year was broccoli and carrot sticks. But on my birthday, my father made all my favorites and I got to have as much as I liked. Lemon butter cake, stuffed squid, rice and beans, steak and sausage, caramel corn."

"The day before my birthday, he'd bake all day and spend four hundred dollars to overnight ship my cake cross-country, so I could have it by the morning. He did it every year, and I thought that this year would be different. Because nothing's the same anymore. But this cake... it's the same cake, it tastes exactly the same, and it was just too much for me."

"It's not the same cake. Paul baked it. I decorated it. And Natasha made the cream. Think of it as the new version of an old favorite," said Parvenu, swirling her glass of diluted lemonade. "Something to get used to, that. Having to re-frame old things in a new way. The old world is gone. Even before that, things have been changing for a long time. And we've only just now passed the point of no return."

"I miss the old world so much," sighed Josephine. "I know it was never perfect."

"It was broken and limping on its last legs, but they kept forcing it to walk anyway," Parvenu said. "You don't have to step around it."

"It is. I'll make it work," Josephine insisted. "Paul is fine. He's always fine. If he can do it, get on with things, then I can too."

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Josephine began to speak about who and what she'd never see again, and the routines of her past life that were fading away day by day. The atmosphere of melancholy began to dissipate, and Parvenu began to get a sense of who she was as a person. She had, until the events of today, been distant and untrusting—Parvenu rubbed her jaw in memory of that nasty punch that had made eating an excruciating chore for days afterward. Their dinertime conversation had been limited to polite smalltalk on safe, inconsequential subjects. She'd avoided making direct address to Parvenu unless it was an innocuous request to pass the salt or set the table.

Josephine, although she had nothing close to the depth of emotional signature that a cape would have, seemed like a gentle, if high-maintenance, person beneath the air of dark and dangerous elegance that the public saw of her. What Parvenu knew of her as well. She was one of many who followed with close eye the career of the woman who stood as a weathervane of public opinion on parahumans.

Parvenu knew that the younger version of herself would have resented Josephine. Josephine was effortlessly beautiful even through her puffy, tear-swollen eyes and messy hair that stuck up on one side; on the other side, it clumped against her cheek where it had been dampened by tears. Josephine was the girl teachers paid extra attention to, because she had that mystical and nebulous gift they called star quality, and if the talk about broccoli meant what Parvenu thought it did, then she had nutritionist plans and private lessons that set her ahead of the competition from Day One.

Today's Josephine, however, understood the meaning of humility. Younger Parvenu would have assumed she was faking it for the Nice Girl act, because that was what you did if you didn't want
your shoes to be filled with sand. Today's Parvenu could tell it wasn't an act. It was genuine. And she found that she was coming to like Josephine after several weeks of passing each other in the hallway or the kitchen and silently averting their eyes like crushing cousins or Mennonites at the laundromat.

She and Josephine had things in common. That was the strangest thing. It had been years since she'd been interested in the life of an unpowered human, and never with those she'd put in the mental filing cabinet labeled "The Talent". Josephine understood show business, from the glittering face to the dingy backside, and she could speak about the flaws within the system without tip toeing around them in the name of tact. And beyond that, to Parvenu's great disappointment, she didn't drop anything too juicy which would have given some insight into what he was.

They were interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Speak of the devil," Parvenu muttered.

Josephine went to answer it. It was Tabloid, who had come to announce in his usual snide tones that the food had been boxed up and put in the fridge, for anyone who had missed out on the party from a few hours ago. Parvenu realized then how much time had flown past. The cake she'd brought for Josephine was nothing more than crumbs. She'd skipped lunch and now that she'd stopped drawing on her power to read Josephine better, was experiencing pangs of physical hunger.

Tabloid stopped in the middle of a sentence. He looked past Josephine's shoulder, and his eyes narrowed. "I see you've brought the party upstairs."

"Maybe someone would have invited you if you weren't such a dick," said Parvenu.

"Maybe I would have been interested if I knew that you weren't coming," he snapped back.

Josephine scrubbed at her eyes and sighed. "Why do you two have to keep doing this? I know you broke up years ago, but—"

"Wait, what?" Tabloid interrupted her. "What the fuck have you been saying about me, Parvenu?"

Parvenu smirked and flipped her hair. "Nothing?"

"Josephine, can I speak to you in the hall? And you," he shot a sharp look at Parvenu, "stay there and don't touch anything."

He and Josephine left, and the door closed behind them.

Parvenu downed the rest of her lemonade, wiped the rim on her sleeve, and laid it against the door. She pressed her ear against the glass. There was no way she was going to miss out on a conversation that its participants thought was private.

"—Don't trust her." Tabloid's voice.

"You don't trust anyone." Josephine. "Do you even trust me?"

"Of course I do."

"Why didn't you tell me you were one of—one of them?"

"Would you have trusted me after that?"

"I'm not her."

"Why do you keep bringing her up?" He lowered his voice; Parvenu had to strain to hear.

"What did she do? Why do you do everything in your power to avoid talking about her?"

"Because we should speak well of the dead, should we not?" Parvenu could imagine Tabloid's smug face saying this. She could feel Josephine's irritation crackling in the back of her tongue.

"How can you say things like that?"

"I seem to remember that you used to call her the Wicked Witch of the West too. Well, ding dong."

"She was our mother!"

"And we were her investments," spat Tabloid, as if the words had left a foul taste in his mouth.

Harsh whispering now, and Parvenu couldn't pick up more than one word in five. She could pick up Josephine's unease, her thoughts floundering like a freshly caught fish, held up by a fine thread over shaky ground. She could discern nothing of Tabloid's current state. He came up blank, no traces of emotional leakage whatsoever.

"Excuse me," said Tabloid. The conversation, which had been quiet, now became inaudible.

Parvenu pressed herself closer to the door to hear.
The door opened, and she went tumbling backwards, her butt on the carpet and the empty lemonade glass rolling over the floor. Tabloid stood in the threshold, and there was an expression on his face that could have been anger or hurt or regret, or a mix of all of them. Or none of them at all, for there was no taste to his feelings, nothing that registered to the Geiger counter inside Parvenu's head. He towered over her, and for that instant he possessed a stage presence that rivaled Josephine's. In Parvenu's mind, to the perception she'd relied on every single day since that first morning when her eyes had been opened to a new spectrum of understanding, he was completely invisible.

Tabloid smiled, but his eyes showed that he was in no mood for humor. "I hope you enjoyed your earful."

"I'm sorry," said Parvenu. She had gotten some of the information she'd been looking for, but had never expected she would get it like this. It explained a great many things, and even if the whole picture remained unfinished, there was enough information there that she could fill in the blanks and see the shape of the truth. It confirmed something she'd guessed, but it didn't make for a pretty picture.

_The truth: bad parenting was the cape scene's most dangerous villain._

"I don't want your pity."

"It's not pity. It's sympathy."

"I'll take a raincheck on that too."

Parvenu picked herself up, suddenly angry. She wiped away the sticky smears of lemonade on her cheek with the back of her hand and glared at Tabloid. "You ass," she said. "You stupid, self-centered ass. You think no one gets it, but news flash, asshole: you're not the only one who knows what a trigger event is."

"Everyone knows what a trigger event is."

"Not everyone knows what it feels like."

"No one asked you to share," Tabloid said, rolling his eyes. He was a head taller than Parvenu, and although he preferred to cut a dandy-ish figure rather than an intimidating one, there was still something unsettling about his ability to conceal himself from her second sight while her first sight confirmed that he was right there in front of her. He was like a ghost with no shadow, a vampire without a reflection. It was spooky.

"That's not the point," said Parvenu. "Whatever you want to keep telling yourself, you're not alo —"

Josephine spoke up from where she was watching them from the hall. "Paul, your hands!"

All three of them looked at Tabloid's arm, which flickered like an old-fashioned television tuned in between channels. His hands were a blurry haze, the edges misty and indistinct, the view as if seen through a frosted glass window. As they stared, the lines sharpened and then he raised his hands to chest level, palm upwards, waving them in the air in what Parvenu might describe as a low-effort attempt at jazz hands.

"What about them?" he said. "They're fine."

Josephine exchanged a glance with Parvenu and made a face.
Chapter End Notes

Josephine and Parvenu as Elphie and Glinda. Yes, this is an obvious reference to Wicked. I thought it was thematically appropriate for the chapter.

In this chapter, there's a bit more about Parvenu and her powers. She's not perfect, but in many ways she's better off than Tabloid. Then again, all natural triggers mess up their hosts in some way, so there's that. She is frustrated in this episode because she thought he was learning to chillax (a tiny bit), but then she sees him act like an insensitive megadick and thinks he's regressing. She doesn't learn until the second part of the chapter that he avoids subjects related to his family, and when Josephine has a breakdown, that is the reason he he doesn't want to deal with her. In previous chapters, he has shown can share sympathy with Josephine when her fiancé (the Eidolon actor) died, or when the Alexandria musical was cancelled. He's not totally heartless... but yes, he's still kind of an ass.
Frustration, Parvenu decided, was the flavor of the day. She pursed her lips as she prepped the table for dinner. Their idea of dinner was more complicated than it had any right to be.

Forks went on the left side, next to the folded napkin. The knives and single spoon went on the right with the glasses. The salt and pepper shakers were dumped in the middle with the water pitcher, which she filled from a spigot in the kitchen that filtered the mineral taste from the piping. White wine came out of the chiller cabinet, red from the pantry, poured earlier to give it a half hour for aeration.

The order of operations was always the same. Same time, same task, every single evening. The order came from the “chore board” on the kitchen wall, a whiteboard marked out with a color-coded grid for each person living in the house. It was an inanimate dictator that broke down her week into individual daily assignments, morning to evening. It was pretty much a full-time job. And like any job, the amount of energy you put in did not equal the amount of recognition you got out of it.

*Only people who work jobs get paid*, thought Parvenu. She slammed a pitcher onto the table with a scowl. She didn’t. That was what you got when you lived in the Democratic People’s Republic of Tabloid, the land where every man had a vote. And since there was only one man, you could guess where the vote went.

Frustration coated her tongue. Like an appetizer, it was a taste that played prelude to an unpredictable host of other ones, stronger flavors that came later on, like fury or anxiety or desperation. It was universal, ubiquitous—you could have it by the dozen without too much work. To her senses, frustration was like hocking a canapé oyster, a cold loogie of slippery brine that went down easy at first, but was soon followed by the sensation of grains of sand scratching and scraping their way down her throat. A raw flavor that over time cut open raw wounds.

The taste of salty mucus passed through Parvenu’s mind, as unsettling as a cold finger trailing down the back of her neck. She shuddered as she pushed a rattling trolley of dishes and cutlery around the dining room table. Preparing the table for dinner had become a daily ritual for her, and not the fun kind of ritual with robes and leather masks. This was a mindless, routine task carried out in perfect silence, following a list of highly specific instructions made up by someone who’d died a hundred years ago.

She sighed. It was underwhelming to discover that beneath the layers of affected hostility that made up the majority of her interactions with Tabloid, there was nothing more that lay beneath it but a boy who resented his childhood.

No, not a boy. A boy with a grudge against the world, or rather, against the small part of the world that told him he couldn’t have this or do that, would have resorted to smoking cigarettes of defiance behind the school cafeteria and tagging alleyways with spray-painted pictures of lumpy carrots.

Tabloid was an adult. His antisocial tendencies therefore had a more sophisticated bent, because cigarettes, hard liquor, and song lyric tattoos were no longer symbols of rebellion once you were out of high school. He still had his vices, of course. But because he was an adult, he could disguise them in a way that they appeared not to be vices at all.

Tabloid occupied himself with the pursuit of material possessions. He lived in a big house, built under his supervision and decorated to his taste. He surrounded himself with beautiful things, satisfied with himself in the knowledge that he owned them all and they belonged to him. The name other people gave to what he had was “success”. A flagrant and conspicuous display of success, but success nevertheless.

*Ready for service*, she thought, as she placed the last coaster and picked up the last dish left on the trolley. She gritted her teeth as the bubble of frustration swelled within her. She had wanted to start her new life with a new team, be a valued member of a cooperative. It was what she was best at, what her powers were most suited for. She couldn’t imagine not being a cape or doing cape things. Caping, powers. She considered it an important facet of her life. It was her life, her identity, her sense of self, rolled into one package. It was more important to her than any dissatisfaction with the origins of her power.

She was feeling dissatisfaction now. She’d expected that her skills and experience would lead her to the role of co-pilot. Where she’d ended up was in the role of glorified air hostess. Her skills were being wasted, because Tabloid didn’t trust her. They were “business partners”, but she knew that there was no partnership without trust. And there would be no trust until there was some level of communication between the two of them. She was trying, with one attempt after another to get through, but he was resistant. He recognized what she was trying to do.

The minute hand of the dining room clock swung to the half-past position. Dinner, according to Chairman Chore Board, had officially begun.

Tabloid entered the dining room right on time, posture straight-backed and a frown on his face. He looked up from the wristwatch on his left arm. He held a covered basket of sliced bread with his right. He inspected the table. Then he inspected her.

Parvenu stared back at him, lifting her chin in silent challenge. *Well? Is it good enough for you?*

"Looks good," he observed. He put down the bread basket and whipped off the cloth cover. "But you missed something. The knives go on the right side, you got that one right. But the butter knife goes on the left side, since silverware is arranged in order of what you use first, and the bread is..."
served before the entrée,” he said, in a soft and flavorless voice devoid of the arrogance that usually accompanied his lectures about how to do things The Right Way. He reached out over the table to nudge the errant knives to the left side of the plates.

The emotional blank had become his habit during the daytime, an obscuring veil for most of his conscious hours, and the full force blackout curtain treatment whenever he needed to speak to her in person. He expected that she’d switch to secondary vocal and body language cues to read him when she couldn’t tap on her power. So he’d gone out of his way to present as bland an appearance as possible. Clever.

“Does it even matter?” Parvenu asked sullenly. He wasn’t going to acknowledge the overheard conversation of earlier. He was going to act like the events of the afternoon had never happened, and continue putting distance between the two of them, while dismissing any chance of their having a functional partnership, let alone a genuine friendship.

“No,” he answered, his shoulders hunched, and his fingers brushed against the carved wooden backrest of one of the dining room chairs, swiping a speck of dust off the Danish elm. "Someone should."

You don’t, he didn’t say. You should.

In the silence, she could hear the words he left unsaid. Straight-faced understatement, that was his personal tic. She’d figured it out after weeks of learning more about him, studying him, the way he talked, and the way she came out of their conversations feeling exhausted, like she’d just played a high-stakes game of ping-pong, and that he had come out the winner. And today, she’d been shown a glimpse of his past life. His hidden self. She was able to read him without relying on her powers for confirmation. Not well, true. But better than the clumsy fumbling about when she’d first met him when she was seventeen years old. Eighteen? Her own past life seemed so far away in retrospect.

“I think it’s funny,” Parvenu said. She gestured in the direction of the dining room window. Beyond the curtains was a flat view of the grassy driveway in front of the house, the largest front lawn she’d ever had the inconvenience of walking across. The locals called it prime pasture. She called it a goddamn trek. “You saw how many people died. From him. From what she did. And whoever is left… They’re left surviving. Outside your little bubble, they’re worrying about what to eat for dinner, while you polish your crystal and pick wine pairings.”

“Hey, that’s an interesting observation.” Tabloid rubbed his chin, and gave her a quizzical look. “Are you trying to say I’m out of touch?”

“What if I am?” said Parvenu. "What happened to the big-capital-P Plan to bring civilization back to the masses? Why are we here, weeks later, still kicking our heels at home—?"

Tabloid cut her off. "If you’d prefer to be out on the street where you came from, don’t let me stop you."

"Argh, fuck it," Parvenu groaned. She stamped her foot in irritation. She leaned in closer to Tabloid. "Look here, friend-o,” she said in a low voice, "I don’t care about your cognac and caviar. What I care about is doing something. The end of the world means there’s a power vacuum out there. That’s our window of opportunity. I don’t understand why we’re here, instead of out there, taking charge, setting the precedents, while people are too busy worrying about what to eat to care about who’s feeding them.”

"I’m doing something,” he snapped. "I know this. I’ve been arranging contracts in town, with the council, with the neighbors. The changes are happening. They know that they need my cooperation. I’ve made sure everything is airtight.”

"Then why am I the last to know?”

"Because it’s my plan.”

"So let me help,” insisted Parvenu. "I can do everything you can do, believe me. Better, even.”

"Ah,” Tabloid said with a wry smile. "I do believe you. That’s exactly why I don’t trust you.”

"You don’t trust anyone,” said Parvenu. She took a step forward and prodded him in the chest. If the concept of wardrobe malfunctions was alien to him, she decided that personal space would be alien to her. “It’s holding you back.”

"Is it?” he asked. His face had taken on a faintly amused look, that smug expression that would have been twice as deserving of a smack if he’d kept that godawful mustache of his from years ago when he’d bought her a drink at the bar she worked at.

She felt his arm slip around her shoulders, pulling her in closer. Was this a change of heart, right now? Was he going for a hug? Unexpected to be sure, but progress was progress. She bit her lip to keep from smiling. A small step in the right direction. She was finally getting through to him.

The arm switched from pulling to a gentle, guiding push on her shoulder. Her knees bent as the seat of the chair swept her legs out from under her. And then Tabloid pushed the chair in from behind and dropped a folded napkin on her lap.

"Why are we chatting away when the soup’s going cold?” Tabloid remarked over Parvenu's head. Josephine stood in the doorway with a heavy-looking Dutch oven held in mittened hands. "Don’t worry, we’ve saved some bread for you.” He looked down at Parvenu. "We wouldn’t want the food to go off, would we? Already had that happen to one meal today.”

Parvenu seethed through the first course of dinner, a chunky vegetable soup under a floating dollop of sour cream, accompanied by fresh bread rolls and sweet butter. She wanted to kick Tabloid’s leg under the table, but whenever her searching foot reached out for his, it brushed against the leg of his chair, the leg of the dining table, Josephine’s leg, but never his leg.
Josephine coughed pointedly and looked at Parvenu. "Whoever is playing footsie under the table, can you knock it off?"

Parvenu sighed and looked at Tabloid. Tabloid looked at her, then at the clock, and then the window. Josephine topped up her glass of Merlot and tried not to look at either of them. Perfect. Dinner time entertainment came in the form of a three-way decorum standoff. And what it lacked in violence, it made up for in awkward unresolved tension.

"If I'm the unwanted third wheel in this house, then I'll third the fuck out of this wheel, she thought. It's not like it can get any worse.

"Are we not going to talk about what happened today?" Parvenu's words fell into the uncomfortable atmosphere of the dining room like a brick through a window. Mouths stopped mid-chew. Spoons clinked. If anyone had been wearing a monocle, she was sure it would've made a delightful soupy splash. "Or are we going to pretend it never happened?"

"We prefer to call it 'Accepting our grief and moving on with our lives,'" Tabloid replied, casually buttering a quartered bread roll.

"Hahaha," said Parvenu, with as much sarcasm as she could manage. "You don't feel any grief."

"Well, that was very rude of you—"

"—Why do you hate your mother?"

They spoke at the same time. They glared at each other. Or rather, she glared at him, while he returned her glare with a conflicted look that wavered between offended, annoyed, and disinterested. Josephine watched them with wide eyes and a full glass, her emotions rolling from scandalized to the peppery prickle of curiosity.

Parvenu was aware that it had been an insensitive comment about a sensitive subject. While there were no codified rules for what you weren't allowed to say at the dinner table outside of topics related to politics or religion, she could tell that what she'd just said fell squarely into the category of things Not Done. On that same list was chewing with your mouth open, drinking the cooking sherry, and taking the last bit of food from a shared banquet platter.

The clock hanging over the dining room sideboard sliced away the minute, one second at a time.

"Oh boy," Tabloid said finally, pushing his chair back. "I should get the steaks out of the warmer before we spill our secrets all over the table. It'd be a shame if we lost our appetites before we had the sous vide prime rib. And it was supposed to be a birthday treat."

He walked out of the room.

That was ominous. It didn't help that his flavor signature had been flickering off and on all day. First he was invisible to her power, an empty spot in the middle of the room that ate and talked and told the rest of her senses that he was there and as annoying as ever. Then he appeared again, the outline of a man, the faintest trace of his outward emotions that marked his presence but lacked any true substance. Like a trail of breadcrumbs when all she hungered for was a loaf of bread. Parvenu was apprehensive about what this sudden openness in Tabloid's demeanor meant. This whole day had been a confusion. Too little information to work with, or was it too much of it, with no context to to put it into perspective? She couldn't decide what to think.

Tabloid had so many flaws that he needed a refund policy. It was frustrating but undeniable. It was also difficult to admit that he had strengths that made you want to overlook them, which she was sure that many people actually did, if they saw any flaws in him at all. He was anal-retentive about his table settings, but he almost made up for it by being good at cooking. He wasn't a culinary genius or innovative with his recipes, but he had enough kitchen competence that no one could turn their nose up at him as a future son-in-law. He talked a lot of bullshit, but at the end of the day, things he promised became things he did, and that made him better than ninety percent of the landlords she'd ever dealt with in her past experiences with apartment hunting.

"Paul says you're a villain," Josephine said in a conversational tone, when it was just the two of them at the dining table.

"Villain," Parvenu corrected her. "And I was one."

"Oh? Really?"

"What are you trying to say?" Parvenu asked. "There's a general amnesty out on everyone who keeps up the good behavior. No one's a supervillain anymore." She could feel the cold touch of frustration, not just hers alone. Everyone in the house had their thoughts colored by it in some form or another. Josephine's was there, the brightest marker in her range, a sparkling highway flare standing out in the dark horizon of her mental perception. Parvenu could taste the familiar savory bite of gloomy nostalgia garnished by a frustration... directed at her.

"We should never have let you stay," Josephine said bitterly.

"What? Why? I thought you were on my side." She and Josephine had in the few hours prior formed what she thought was a foundation to friendship. She'd had questionable motives behind it, of course, but everyone's motives were questionable to her. What mattered was a genuine connection, and she had seen the seeds of one.

"I can't be on your side," said Josephine, "when you're acting like a homewrecker."

"Whoa, whoa, whoaaa, hold up there," said Parvenu, startled. "I thought we had an alliance going." Josephine was a woman who should know firsthand the suffrage struggle in Tabloid's dictionary. They should have been on the same page, on the same side, or at least side-by-side when it came to taking control of their futures. After all, they'd shared some sleepover party bonding time. Parvenu knew they weren't quite up to the blood pact or pinky promises stage of eternal sisterhood, but that was a work in progress.

"We might have had one, Josephine hissed. "But you're ruining everything!"

"I'm trying to fix it!"

"Stop trying!"
Tabloid chose that moment to appear at Parvenu's left elbow, a pair of tongs in hand. "Horseradish, mustard, or herb butter?" he asked. When she didn't reply, he plopped a spoonful of each sauce on the side of her plate, and followed it with a steaming piece of pan-seared meat, medium rare on the inside, a crisp char on the outside. He served Josephine, then served himself before settling into his seat.

"Despite what you might think," he said, picking up his knife. "I don't hate my mother. Her existence is... irrelevant to my own. And if you knew her, I think you'd have trouble keeping a loving heart and an open mind around her. In fact, we have her to thank for making us who we are today. Yes," he continued, glancing around the table. "You too, Parvenu."

"Hub?"

"My mother's name was Naomi Villiers," said Tabloid.

"Doesn't ring a bell," Parvenu said with her mouth full. It was a grass-fed, locally-sourced, farm-to-table meal that appealed to the side of her that called San Francisco her hometown. It was prepared well, from the juicy pink interior to the butter-fried crusty edges. And it tasted really good, even better when she was eating on an empty stomach. Good food—and she knew what good food was as someone who prided herself on her refined palate—was one of the many small things that she'd gotten used to in the course of insinuating herself into this new life and new home.

"Ever heard of 'Uppermost'?"

She choked on her steak.

Tabloid recounted a story that began almost twenty years ago in the financial districts of Los Angeles, rose to the State Assembly in Sacramento, and swept through the streets of San Francisco. It was a dry case study on the history of parahuman legislature, spiced with the tiniest pinches of family drama, which Parvenu took to be embellished to make him look better and everyone else look worse. Tabloid was a sneaky son-of-a-bitch in that way. But she couldn't recall any time he'd told her a bald-faced lie that wasn't meant as blatant sarcasm. She believed most of this story. And she believed him when he admitted to being a literal son of a bitch.

"Motherfuck," she muttered. It seemed like the most appropriate response. "How long were you planning on keeping this a secret?"

"Forever," said Tabloid. "Did you think we were going to tell you that Josie here is indirectly responsible for you ending up in a villain gang?" He chuckled darkly. "You heard things today that we weren't going to tell you. Maybe you would have jumped to the right conclusions, maybe not. I wanted to correct your assumptions. An act of trust, wouldn't you call it?"

"I am not the bogeyman that you think I am. That honor goes to my mother. And besides," he added. "It's not like it matters anymore, does it?"

Parvenu said nothing. *Does he care what I think of him? Or is this another attempt to drive me away by giving me more reason to hate him and his stupid family?*

Whatever it is, this is a dumb game and I am tired of playing it.

She chewed on her steak, taking bites in between sips of a fruity red wine that sent heady fumes of alcohol vapor spiraling up her nostrils. It helped to ease the headache building up in the back of her skull, which came from leaning on her power to read someone whose own power made him near impossible to read.

"I think it matters," she said slowly, "It matters to you, even if you say you're fine. No one's ever fine about it, not when it comes that. She gave a sideways glance to Josephine, whose mouth had turned down in a perplexed frown. Parvenu guessed that she was trying to peer apart the layers of subtext in their conversation. Difficult to do when it was going around in circles due to the evasiveness of its speakers.

"I don't see you crying about it," Tabloid answered.

"I used to," Parvenu said. It didn't happen anymore, but mornings always brought a touch of the old whimsy. "I made my peace with it. It helps to talk to someone about it."

"And by 'talking to someone', you mean you, right?"

"As long as it helps," she said, and she gazed at him through narrowed eyes. "Tell me that talking about it just now didn't make you feel better."

Tabloid took a moment to reflect on that. Then he shrugged and said, "I don't feel any different."

"Yeah, yeah, keep telling yourself that, buddy," Parvenu sighed. She drained her glass and held it up. "I could go for seconds. Who's up for round two?"

To her satisfaction, her second serving of steak tasted as good as the first. If she ever left Tabloid's little law firm, she didn't intend to do so without a functional partnership. She could toast to that.

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Now that she had been shown a glimpse of how Tabloid had become the person he was, even if his own retelling of the story downplayed his own involvement or concern, she couldn't help but see him in a more human light. It wasn't as if she'd been expecting an origin story on the same level as otherworldly conspiracies, doorstep babies, or international espionage, but the mystery had turned out to be so... mundane. It showed that he had vulnerabilities just like everyone else. Just like she had. And somewhere on the road to forming a more complete understanding of his circumstances, Parvenu realized that she'd somehow detoured to genuine sympathy.

*Sigh,* thought Parvenu, as she found that her glass was emptier than she wanted it to be, and her mind more inebriated than she thought it was, *I think I might actually care about helping him.*
Vision became clearer when viewed through the refractive effects of a magnifying glass. Facts made more sense when seen through the bottom of an empty glass. Truth became easier to swallow through a haze of intoxication.

Facts. Parvenu needed a paper to write them down before they faded away.

Fact one: Tabloid was not a morning person, but evenings made him more tolerable. The alcohol helped.

Fact two: Cognac did go well with caviar. Josephine's birthday cake, when she finally had a chance to taste it, was delicious. The steak was great, too. Fuck it, Tabloid had expensive tastes, but Parvenu was willing to let it slide as long as it made for good eating.

Fact three: Tabloid was an uptight son of a bitch, but... it wasn't like she wasn't guilty of it too.

Parvenu knew she was guilty because of how good it felt to forgo the self-discipline. She was struck by how much wordless, self-contained tension had filled her recent life. But tonight, she allowed herself to celebrate something as innocuous as a birthday party, after weeks of stumbling along day by day to a forced routine, in a sour state of mind made worse by being forced to endure everyone else's. She woke up in the morning with the expectation that the flavors of human emotion would be chattering away beneath her windows once more. She'd dreamt more than a few times in the past weeks that she was back home, and everything was the way it should be, the way she remembered it: Sweet and crystallized, perfect and whole, the morning atmosphere of city life preserved in her perfect memory.

Fact four: As if she didn't have any more reason to hate on Josephine, the woman could mop the floor with them when it came to logging high scores on Keytar Hero.

Huh. These had stopped being facts, hadn't they? She was venturing down the path of unsubstantiated opinion, and into the realm of Things My Gut Says.

Things My Gut Says, because I would never say it.

Things like an appreciation of the way Tabloid looked, that look of concentration on his face when he rolled his sleeves up and let his hair down and picked up the plastic ukulele controller to join them in moshing their virtual way to the final Boss Battle of the Bands. He was so much easier to get along with if he lightened up a little. Always so serious, as if having fun was a waste of his time. He wasn't her type, of course, and he was a colleague—even if he considered her a minion in all but name—but she could imagine others calling him "intense" and sighing over his charm, his eloquence, his air of confident self-possession.

It wasn't quite so alluring when she could see through the confidence. It wasn't false confidence, because he didn't need it. He didn't need to pretend to be competent. He was, and he knew it. He just had a way of expanding the natural confidence of his so that it covered all facets of his life, covered his weaknesses and hid them from view. From everyone who thought they knew him. From himself. Parvenu could stretch her senses to the full extent of her power, and when she did so, few people could keep the state of their psyche hidden from her.

Tabloid hid himself better than most. Today was the day she'd finally found him.

In vino veritas, she thought, after they'd beaten the last stage of the video game and set a new team high score. She rested her cheek against the cool granite of the kitchen counter, her face flushed and her head pounding. Just a small break.

She watched a fifteen-year-old Madeira swirl around in the bottom of her glass.

Pans on the stove rattled. Metal clanked against metal. Oil hissed and spat. A savory aroma of frying butter filled the air. She sniffed. The aroma of alcoholic fruitcake filled her nostrils.

The counter in front of her clinked. A plate, a grilled cheese sandwich, straight diagonal slice across, warm bubbling cheese oozing out from between two slices of thick-cut, home-baked bread.

"For someone who worked at a bar," Tabloid remarked, "you aren't very good at holding your liquor."

Parvenu grabbed the first sandwich triangle, wincing as it burned her fingers, and tore off a piece. "Excuse me," she mumbled, spraying crumbs over the counter, "I was management, not a bartender, and employees don't drink on shift. I weigh what, mmm—this is good—like a buck five? Three glasses of red, that's, huh, five drinks. Higher for port wine and brandy. It's stronger, so up to... seven drinks?" She shoveled in more grilled cheese and licked her fingers. "Can I finish the rest?"

"It's two hundred dollars a bottle. You can't just chug it," he said reproachfully.

"Watch me," said Parvenu, lifting up her glass for a one-sided toast. She smacked her lips. "Eight down."

Tabloid swept the bottle away before she could reach for a refill. He poured himself a glass, the last glass left in the bottle, and set the empty bottle back on the counter.

"Is this a regular thing?" he asked. "Should we be keeping the liquor locked up when you're around?"

No," Parvenu said, starting on the second sandwich. "I don't normally do this. Today, I, I had enough. I wanted a break. I'm tired of caring. I don't want to care anymore."
She didn't know why she said it. She wanted to take it back, but the words had spilled out and now it was too late. Some part of her must have wanted to say it. The other parts of her, dulled by fatigue and an overindulgence on wine, knew it was true.

The challenge of figuring Tabloid out had been a thrill at first, a puzzle for the Thinker side of her that had once enjoyed blind tastings whenever new recruits were brought to her for examination. She broke them down, person, personality, power. That was operating at peak performance, and they were new capes, fresh and unformed. She would barely begin to know them before she sent them away on assignment.

But here, after her forced retirement confined to a room in a farm upstate, so far north they weren't called states anymore, the days wore on. She was worn out. The effort took something out of her, matching Tabloid step by step, softening him up with smiles and charm, watching and learning. Striking when she found something sharp enough to pierce through the layers of detachment that kept him removed from whatever haunted him at night. She gave as good as she got, caught him as he pulled away, but it was exhausting.

"No one asked you to care," said Tabloid. He folded his arms and leaned against the kitchen counter.

"I can't help it," said Parvenu, her tongue burning on melted cheese. "When you see into people, when you feel them, all the things they feel, when they dream or struggle and ache, when you know them the way I do, you can't stop it. You can't help it when you know them like they know themselves. My weakness, that's what you asked me the first day I came here. This is my weakness. Now you know.

"I'm so tired, Paul," she said, squeezing her eyes shut. "Every night, I try to sleep, but I can't. When I do, I dream of home. Every day makes me wish I was more like you. I wish I could turn it off, and just... stop caring. Be indifferent. The way you do it. You're so good at not giving a fuck about anyone."

Her tongue burned. Her eyes grew hot; they itched and burned too. She felt frustration wash over her, wet and briny. She could taste it. She hated the taste of it.

"Parvenu," said Tabloid. "Here."

She opened her eyes. The room wobbled, soft and blurry.

He held out a folded cloth napkin. Embroidery traced the edges of the fabric, spelling out his initials in a silver thread that matched the cream linen so well that you wouldn't notice it unless you knew what to look for. PFB. She had never seen such a flagrant example of unnecessary frippery.

"Valerie," she said, and her throat felt hoarse and dusty in speaking a name she hadn't used in years. "My name is Valerie." She took the offered napkin and pressed it to her face, wishing it was big enough to cover her up completely.

She heard him take a deep breath. She heard the barstool beside her creak as he settled his weight onto it. She heard the swish of wine.

"My mother caused my trigger event," said Paul, his voice low and soft. Her powers could sense nothing of his presence, but his physical presence was there beside her, in the rise and fall of his chest as he breathed and spoke, his breathing steady and meditative, his words measured. His shoulder was scarce inches from hers, his fingers laced together on the stone counter as if to keep himself from betraying any sign of nervousness.

"I know."

"I'm not as good at not giving a fuck as you think I am."

He was better at faking it than anyone she'd ever met.


"It's unfortunate, isn't it?" His gaze followed the last sip of two-hundred-dollar wine sloshing inside the glass. He didn't look at her. "Life would be so much easier if I didn't."

"It wouldn't be much of a life," she answered. "You think that you'd be stronger if you didn't care. It might be true. I don't know. I don't know how your power works. But caring, that's what makes you human." She sniffed. "We forget how important that part of ourselves is. It's the part that breaks. And powers only come from breaking."

"Have you ever wondered what it would be like not to have powers?" asked Paul, turning the glass over and over in hands. Only a faint sheen of violet near the stem remained of the two-hundred-dollar wine. Priced to the thousands by today's measure, if there was no more viticulture in Madeira, or no more Madeira.

"We'd be normal." She'd be blind, deadened, no sense of connection to the world around her. Worse, she'd be powerless.

She couldn't imagine being stripped of her powers. It would mean that every time she walked into a crowded room or crossed a busy intersection, she would have no sense of the weight and depth of the people around her. They'd still be there, and she'd be able to see them, but they'd be flat. Like interacting with a mass of talking mannequins, uncanny shapes that resembled human beings, but without the emotional register, they wouldn't be human to her. Without powers, they would be dull and unmemorable. And so would she.

"Normal's not so bad."

She burst into laughter. "Oh my god," she choked out between hiccups.

"What?"

"You're one of those capes," she said, holding her aching ribs. "There are girls out there who define themselves by not being 'like the other girls'. You're the cape who gets his jollies off by telling himself that he's not like the other capes.

"I've seen people like that. They have powers, but they don't use them because they want to be normal. They think they're above playing the game, that they can just be conscientious objects.
And they end up being hit by a car on the way to the grocery store, or squashed to death in an Endbringer shelter because that's what happens to normal people. You're not up to that level, maybe, but I can still see it. I know your type.

He gave her a speculative glance. "You seem to know a lot about me."

"I do," she said, remembering a conversation from hours earlier. "Someone should."

He propped his elbows on the counter, and rested his chin in his hands. Sighing, he said, "Then you know how much I hate it."

"I can guess."

They lapsed into silence eventually. She was grateful that it wasn't an awkward silence; she'd had a lifetime's worth of it in recent days. No, it was more like a companionable silence, a contemplative one, where they knew each other well enough to guess what the other was thinking, enough that speaking was unnecessary. She thought she knew what he was thinking. Probably coming up with a scheme to make sure that she would never tell the world his secrets. Convince her that it was in her best interests to hold onto what she knew of him, because she knew what made him weak.

The walls swayed at the edge of her vision and the floor teetered below her.

"You don't have to be afraid of me," she said. Her words were slurred.

"Go to bed," he replied. "You're drunk."
Parvenu couldn't decide what was worse: a Thinker headache or a hangover.

Oh wait.

She knew what overshadowed either of them—it was the sensation of both of them at the same time. It felt like her brain had been liquefied in the night, gathered into the pit of her stomach along with everything she'd eaten in the last fifteen hours, and the whole queasy mixture was now in danger of being ejected in the messiest way imaginable.

Best not to imagine it.

She lay in her cot, staring up at the white plaster ceiling of her bedroom. She tried to put the memories of last night into some semblance of order. She remembered dinner, and drinking, drinking some more, talking to Tabloid in the kitchen, and thinking that she would like him better if he learned to separate that part of himself that cared about other people from the part that pretended not to.

She turned back the hours, but it was so hard to place each event where it belonged. The room was so bright. She rolled over in her cot, the springs squeaking, turning to the window. The blinds were closed. The sun blinded her, adding another layer of discomfort to her continued suffering.

It was past morning. She didn't know how long she'd slept, but she was grateful to have slept uninterrupted. That was a rarity in recent weeks. The silver lining. As she blinked her eyes and her vision swam into focus, she saw there was another silver lining to appreciate. A bottle of water on the window sill, next to a folded piece of paper. A note? Perhaps it would help jog her memory.

She tried to stand up. It didn't work. She rolled out of bed, lowering herself to the floor on hands and knees, and crawled to the blaring light that burned an afterimage of violet squares through her squeezed shut eyelids. Her arms groped outward like an undead sleepwalker, until her fingers brushed against the bottle. Water, lukewarm but still good. Better than good. She drank half the bottle.

Then she unfolded the paper.

It was blank. She turned it over. Two small white pebbles clattered to the floor.

Aspirin, she saw, as she picked them up. She brushed them off, called on the Ten Second Rule, and swallowed them with the rest of the water. It was better than nothing.

Picking up the rest of her morning routine was a challenge when she was running at forty percent of her regular functioning capacity. First, the second-floor bathroom that she shared with Josephine, where she spent a solid two minutes staring at the wash basin counter, at the row of small glass dropper bottles with gold caps, marked with words that might as well have been in a foreign language. Salicylic acid, hyaluronic acid, retinoic acid, glycolic acid, zinc oxide. They looked like a list of ingredients on a bottle of drain cleaner. They stank of rotting flowers, like floral arrangements left by a graveside two weeks after the funeral. Josephine rubbed them on her face to scare away the wrinkle fairy.

Parvenu rinsed the excesses of the previous evening out of her mouth, her mood shadowed by the most odd and indefinable feeling that something was off about her routine.

Something's not right. What is it?

She looked around, peered at her reflection in the bathroom mirror. She was wearing sweatpants, instead of wandering around in her underwear. No full-frontal, not even half-naked. She knew that hard drinking was a common cause of losing all your clothes. A brief check confirmed she had all of hers.

Her teeth were brushed, and so was her hair. Her hair was growing out of her shoulder-length bob, the edges shaggy and the ends splitting from a lack of proper upkeep. She'd need a trim before long if she wanted to keep the style.

That wasn't it, was it?

Ah, I'll figure it out eventually, she told herself.

Breakfast was managed in a state of mechanical distraction. Or was it lunch? She settled for calling it brunch; it seemed fitting for someone eating their first meal of the day in the hour past noon, with a headache achieved from one top-up too many of top-shelf booze. Opening the kitchen refrigerator made for a similar sort of bewilderment when she found that her eyes had trouble focusing on the stacked wall of clear-sided Tupperware containers, each lid adorned with a masking tape strip labeled in a mysterious numerical code.

She stared, hand on the refrigerator door, the wafts of cold air a pleasant contrast to the heat of late summer. Her stomach growled. She picked a box at random and threw it in the microwave. The box spun around and around in circles. It was mesmerizing. She didn't want the carousel ride to end.

The machine beeped. The dance ended. The light switched off. Show's over. Aww.

Parvenu nacked into a leftover salmon fillet—slightly dry, she'd left it in too long—over fragrant saffron rice as she tried to puzzle out the day's schedule on the kitchen whiteboard.
**Greenhouse:** Remember to wipe feet in antechamber. Checklist on inside door. Nitrate level, water pressure, filter system, humidifier.

**Garden:** Green beans, snow peas, tomatoes, fennel. Collect, clean, trim and prepare for dinner.

**House:** Sort trash for recycling, crate bottles in storage shed. Vacuum duty: ground floor and garage. Laundry: wash, air, fold linens.

The list rotated between a set of chores for each day of the week. But today’s chore list was different. Arrows trailed from the colored boxes under her name, rearranging the tasks to another day, or another person. A sticky note was attached to the side of the board, black ink letters in a neat and precise handwritten script. The writing didn’t loop and swirl like Josephine’s, nor did it bounce around the page in irregular lines, like her own. She couldn’t remember writing a note to herself. She read on.

Please see me.
My office, third floor.
At your earliest convenience, thank you.

Oh. That was who the note came from.

It was the mix of authority and politeness that set her on edge. She was reminded of the games of social dominance that tainted every social interaction she’d had with her rivals in the cape scene. Power-assisted macho posturing, aggressive handshakes between male colleagues as a non-violent way to size up each other’s strength, flinty-eyed staring contests between members of opposite factions like two gun-slinging desperados in a saloon.

This note was nowhere near that level of aggression. Although it was brief, it gave its recipient a comforting touch of polite deference with its please and thank you, but there was an irritating dissonant quality in the way the courtesy disguised a non-negotiable command. Parvenu recognized it as the same technique used in text messages with smiley faces sent by people you didn’t like.

The inevitable walk upstairs was something of a walk of shame, helped by the fact that she was currently barefoot and hungover, and dressed in borrowed clothing. Up, up, up, she went, arms extended from her sides like wings. Left hand on the banister, right hand dragging against the framed photographic prints on the wall, twin drag chutes she towed behind herself to match the dragging step, step, step of her feet. There was also a faint touch of the creeping apprehension that came of being summoned to the principal’s office, each slow step spent contemplating how much you were getting away with this time. She’d always hated that. She hated the way she felt, light-headed and faint-hearted, the dregs of sleep still stubbornly clinging to her eyelids.

The moment came where she reached the top of the last landing. It was a long journey. She remembered how she’d gotten there—not just through walking up a flight of stairs, but from following the memory of a flavor, one tiny lingering hope in a sprawling battlefield of red and gold. She’d chased the memory of a long ago encounter through a window carved into the air, a window which opened onto a vast countryside of flat plains and open fields. She’d chased after safety, familiarity, peace. A quiet place where her head didn’t ring with a chorus of shell-shocked voices waking up from a bad dream. Clamoring voices, a thousand flavors at once, a thousand unique ways to express pain and loss.

The third floor. The smallest floor in the house, an attic-turned-loft built under the slanted eaves of the roof. It was divided down the middle with a hallway, walls painted in a muted fog gray, panels of frosted glass making a row of windows on one side. The office side. One of the glass panes had a handle set into it at waist height. The opposite side had a black door flanked between a series of black-and-white nature prints backed on mat board so that the picture itself took up only the smallest center portion of the wooden frame. She’d never understood why they did that.

She’d been up here a handful of times when she knew she was home alone, out of curiosity. She had picked up nothing but an aversion to Tabloid’s love affair with contemporary interior design.

Did she regret being here?
She found it hard to say.

She wished her state of mind had been clearer back then. She wished her mind was clearer now. It was still lucid enough for her to know that things could be worse. She didn’t live in the lap of luxury—she lived in luxury’s pool house. While she considered it beneath her dignity, she knew that the population who didn’t own swimming pools of their own would fail to see that.

Nevertheless. She wasn’t treated very kindly by her host.

He was reasonable and fair, but he was never “nice” to anyone, whispered a rebellious voice in the back of her mind, annoyingly sensible when all she wanted was to put herself in the position of the injured party, unfairly treated and bursting with righteousness.

She was their captive. She’d worn an ankle bracelet from the evening of her arrival.

She could walk out the front door right now and she doubted they’d put in the effort to catch her, truss her up, and bring her back. The bracelet was psychological. Any cape group she tried to join would consider it a sign that she was compromised. It didn’t stop her from leaving if she wanted to go.
She was given menial tasks. It was dehumanizing.

She was never asked for anything she couldn't give. She was never tasked with anything they wouldn't have done themselves, the voice said, calm refutations that drove nails into the coffin that held her building outrage. And it wasn't as if she didn't benefit from having clean clothes or regular meals.

She was—

She was delaying the meeting, because she didn't want to confront the fact that she—

Oh, shut up.

She knocked on the glass panel with the door handle. It was one glass sheet in an identical row of opaque glass sheets set into frames of steel, each panel connected to the next with vertical hinges. A modular, accordion-inspired folding screen. How very modern.

No answer. She reached for the handle. It turned in her hand.

She was struck by a sudden realization. She now understood what had given her the strangest feeling earlier, the odd sensation that something hadn't been quite right. She could name it now as she stood in front of the glass office door, fingers wrapped around the brushed aluminum handle.

Her bedroom door. It was always locked in the evening. In the morning, a knock woke her up so she could wash and dress and eat breakfast. Her eyes always opened to the sound of a rat-tat-tat and the click of a turning bolt on the outside of her door. It hadn't been locked when she'd woken up today. She hadn't been woken up today. She couldn't remember the door being locked last night. She couldn't remember climbing into her creaky folding cot last night.

Fuuuuuck.

Her knees sagged. She pressed her forehead against the glass door, cringing in mortification.

She hadn't been able to stand when she'd woken up. Last night, she couldn't walk in a straight line. She'd been unsure of the possibility of walking in a crooked one. She hadn't been able to stop herself from drooling on his shirt and saying stupid nonsense when he had stopped her from faceplanting on the stairs. Ugh. Why had she done that? Why had she not drunk enough so that the whole of last night could be conveniently forgotten? Instead, she was left with the most embarrassing bits.

Well, things can't get much worse, she decided. She pushed open the door.

The interior of the office wasn't what she'd expected. She wasn't sure what she'd been expecting. Something grand to the point of ostentation, in order to browbeat visitors into accepting that yes, this man had more money and better taste than you. Classic pieces like brass desk lamps with the green glass shades, leather Chesterfield sofas with the button quilting, somber oil-on-canvas landscapes in gilt frames. Something that spoke "smug jerk living in a 1950's estate sale catalogue" to her, and "rich and powerful executive schmoozer" to everyone else.

The reality was rather plain. Functional shelves at the back wall were stacked with books, magazines, and rectangular storage boxes. There were no green lampshades, leather desk blotters, or chandeliers in sight. There was a pair of sofas with square cushions, steel legs, and an eerie resemblance to an upgraded hospital gurney. There was a desk over a patch of carpet. There was a man sitting behind the desk, his gaze directed toward the outer window. And there was a contraption on the desk, a squat metal block with keys that looked like a mix between a typewriter and an old-fashioned rotary telephone.

He looked up when she approached the desk, bare toes dragging on the woolen rug with reluctance. He turned toward her, and his features rearranged themselves from a quiet stillness to the perfect composure she was familiar with. Careful and guarded, his thoughts concealed, his face disguised. She wondered if it was something he did around her and her specific abilities, or if it was merely second-nature to him.

She inched closer to the desk, observing the spread of papers on the tabletop, at the bulky typewriter with numbers instead of letters. Observing the slight changes that flitted across his face as he realized that her standing and his sitting meant he was forced to look up at her to make eye contact. Power plays. How she tired of them.

He rose to his feet, sweeping up the papers and bundling them into a manila folder. Now he had the higher ground.

"Paul," she said. His civilian name, four letters short, so unassuming and common. But no matter what she thought of it, names held importance to the people attached to them, and that was useful to her. There was also some satisfaction in saying his name and not having the god of superpowers smite her down for sacrilege to cape etiquette.

"Valerie," he replied, a hint of a smile on his lips. "Now we're even."

Shit! So she had told him. She'd hoped it had been a dream.

A trace of panic must have shown on her face. He noticed, and his eyes darkened. He stepped around the desk.

"How do you feel?" he asked. She couldn't tell if his concern was for real or show.

She scrubbed the back of her hand against her mouth. "I've had worse. Why did you want to see me?"

"I..." he began. "I thought we should talk."

"About last night?"

He gestured toward the sofas. "Please, have a seat. The past is the past," he said. "With your agreement, we can set that aside and focus on more important things. Like the future."
who was there would never find themselves in a forgiving mood. She on the other hand was one deed considered in a vacuum. She might not be able to forgive, and she was sure that anyone But she understood the intent behind the action, which gave it more significance than any single Her fingernails gouged into the upholstery of the sofa. She didn't like it any more than he did. Masters were to be feared and respected more than admired, even in villain circles. straightforward Alexandria Package Brutes would be at the top, and Masters at the bottom. don't have to worry about me. I'm not a Master." If cape classes were ranked by reputation, "I don't think you'll ever have to worry about seeing her again," said Parvenu irritably. "And you He didn't look convinced. "It could have been a portal opening and closing." She shrugged. "If it helps, I think someone took her out. She was with someone, a combat sinuses that grew stronger as time passed, making her head spin with the stench of ozone, an breadcrumbs. And then, so faint she struggled to pick it up, a weak buzzing sensation in her Parvenu knew her. A pliant and malleable texture for the outermost layer, mild and waxy like the skin of a cheese, but nothing too offensive or unpleasant. Delving deeper revealed what lay underneath as bitter and gritty, millions of tiny specks of sand scattered across a bed of burnt bread crumbs. And then, so faint she struggled to pick it up, a weak buzzing sensation in her sinuses that grew stronger as time passed, making her head spin with the stench of ozone, an aroma she'd long associated with Thinker aspects. She had never encountered a cape with a strength of signature like the Master of Gold Morning. Of the very few she'd met with an exceptional level of strength, what they had in common was a mixture of great power, experience, and instability. She shrugged. "If it helps, I think someone took her out. She was with someone, a combat thinker, maybe. And then she was gone." He didn't look convinced. "It could have been a portal opening and closing." "I don't think you'll ever have to worry about seeing her again," said Parvenu irritably. "And you don't have to worry about me. I'm not a Master." If cape classes were ranked by reputation, straightforward Alexandria Package Brutes would be at the top, and Masters at the bottom. Masters were to be feared and respected more than admired, even in villain circles. Her fingernails gouged into the upholstery of the sofa. She didn't like it any more than he did. But she understood the intent behind the action, which gave it more significance than any single deed considered in a vacuum. She might not be able to forgive, and she was sure that anyone who was there would never find themselves in a forgiving mood. She on the other hand was one
of the few who possessed the capacity to know the world beyond herself, to see farther than her own pain and loss, and she had sensed that the core of the creature known as Khepri held a painful desperation, a desperate willingness to sacrifice everything and everyone to make a difference against an unbeatable enemy. Khepri. It was the implacable will that filled her head, a melodic compulsion that drilled its way through her skull and drove her onward, even as her mind drowned in a thousand variations of indescribable horror.

Perhaps necessity wasn't a good justification, and it was in no way an apology, but it was more than anyone else would ever get.

"The first time we ever met, ten years ago, you did something to my head," spoke Paul in a conversational tone, as if they were two good friends at a bridge club. "It was one of the most unpleasant things I've ever experienced. You say you're not a Master, but I really can't see a difference."

"There's a difference," Parvenu said. No one who wasn't a Master wanted to be mistaken for one. It was a label that you didn't want on your permanent file, because having it meant reasonable force was on the table in encounters with the boys in the black vans. Reasonable Force was on the list of double-barreled phrases that Parvenu did not like hearing, next to Three Strikes and Quarantine Zone. "What I do isn't a compulsion. It might suggest associations with specific memories, but it doesn't make you do anything you don't want to do. It's nothing but a— an external manifestation of my main power."

"I find that difficult to believe."

"Let me show you," she said. "I can prove it, that I'm not her, that there's no force, no control. Whatever you remember from that night is not what I am."

"You want this," he observed, regarding her with wary eyes.

"Yes," said Parvenu. "You won't trust me unless I show you."

"I wouldn't trust you even then."

"Maybe not," she answered. "But it would take away the fear."

Fear. Knowing the cause of it, accepting its existence, and confronting it directly was the only way to make peace with it, and make peace with yourself. She knew that every parahuman had something that revived their most painful memories of helplessness. Parvenu understood fear, and because she did, she had gained the strength which came from self-awareness, and a deeper connection to the source of strength within. Her experience in this was what she'd used to help people and hold her team together when many others fell apart from internal frictions; she liked to call it her strength of compassion. But, as the petty side of her pointed out, her interference was as likely to come from compassion as an annoyance with silent brooders.

I'm not afraid. That was Paul's wordless objection. He said it through the set of his shoulders, the lift of his jaw, and the downward curl of his lips. Silent brooders. They were just as bad as the rowdy overcompensators.

He gave a negligent shrug. "If I give you this, I have a condition: you'll stop with the 'trust and friendship' spiel. It's become a bit repetitive at this point."

"Agreed," Parvenu forced herself to smile. "But only if you cooperate." She had already given the room a perfunctory sweep with her senses, and the throbbing in her temples reminded her that the excesses of the day before were doing her no favors. As did the reluctance of the man who sat opposite her, the elephant in the room who might as well be indistinguishable from the furniture.

"It's not working?" he asked. He sounded pleased with himself at the news, but then again, self-satisfaction seemed to be his default attitude in their past dealings. "So it's true. I can block you without going for the full fade. I suspected it when you never came after me, years ago."

"It doesn't work as well," said Parvenu, straightening up on the sofa seat. She felt a coil of anger unfurling itself in her stomach, once dormant but stirred to action after one too many pricks. "It's not working?"

"It goes on and off, like a cell phone call in bad reception. The message is scrambled, but I can still pick up enough to know what you're trying not to say. That is what's been giving me headaches; it's been bombarding me for your entire relationship. It's been draining me at night, when you can't control it, and everything you hate about her—everything you hate about yourself—you share with me.

"Hate her all you want," she snarled. "We all do. Hate yourself. You're not the only one. But don't hate me. I've done nothing."

"Hate all you want," she snarled. "We all do. Hate yourself. You're not the only one. But don't hate me. I've done nothing."

"Hate all you want," she snarled. "We all do. Hate yourself. You're not the only one. But don't hate me. I've done nothing." She found that she was panting when she'd gotten the last word out. It was cathartic to unload on him, when he'd been responsible for every prick that set her off.

His eyes had widened at her unexpected outburst, but he shook off what little surprise had slipped onto his face in short seconds. "And you say I'm the one who needs a chat with a shrink. Pot, meet kettle."

Parvenu threw herself to her feet. "Enough with the delay," she snapped. "I know you're doing it. Let's get on with this, and then I'll let it go. You can start by switching it off."

Paul sent her a slow and measured look, as if he'd gone too far to call his own bluff, and was now regretting what he'd promised her. He sighed, kicked his shoes off, and leaned against his weight against the backrest, shedding the unconscious stiffness that burdened him, the outer layer that was his shield against the world. He watched her under half-lidded eyes.

Slow and shuddering, like a dying pulse. Faded and distant, wavering into view as if seen through a murky pond, the first impression his presence made as it reached her senses, the familiar combined taste and texture that she would have expected from a parahuman within a two-yard range. She had felt it before, and she knew it now. A vast expanse, space spreading out below and above and beyond. Cold. Stale. Dry. Ashes and dust, swirling drifts of it that she swept aside to reveal the gall in the very center, bitterly corrosive even to her most delicate touch.

He was there. All of him, laid bare before her, his soul so close to her own, his body an arm's-
Parvemu made him relive the night of their first meeting. She hadn’t been subtle then, throwing the contents of a patisserie display window at him. She didn’t consider it unpleasant. It hadn’t been that bad, up until the part where her boss had chewed her out in front of the rest of the team for being careless, and then footage of the evening was leaked, resulting in their client having a call paid on him by the LAPD dog whisperers. She’d messed with the dogs to throw them off the scent, but while there were no convictions, it was the storm of bad publicity that had stalled the career of DJ Apex and almost killed hers.

"Is that—" he began.

She didn’t stop. She couldn’t stop them. The frustrations she’d felt on their first evening leaked into her memory and were sent into his. The fizzing sherbet flavor of powdered nose candy; the burning anger and chilling disappointment that she’d taken home in the early hours of the next morning; the crisp sweetness of loyal years shared with comrades; the visceral, metallic shock of tidal waves lashing through walls and windows. The sweet citrus tang from an offer of a fresh start, then a memory soured in the morning. The feeling of his fingers on her ankle, and his apology in her ears. She gave him all of it, her weeks of isolation, the fears that clawed inside her, of dying alone in the ass end of nowhere, unwanted and forgotten and among people who didn’t even know her name.

He wouldn’t understand any of it, she knew. To him, her power’s manifestation took the form of a flavor foul beyond words: the congealed scum from the bottom of an inner-city dumpster, packed with leaking trash bags on the night before pickup, a whole week of marination to enhance the essence of human consumption.

She heard him coughing, the dry retch of a chimney sweep’s last breath emanating from the back of his throat. She pulled back, slowing the flood to a trickle before cutting it off altogether. He was already fading away, his presence drawing further from her in the same way Movers with a flight power did when they zipped past the city limits. Then he was gone.

His breathing was ragged. His hand covered his mouth. "Excuse me," he rasped, "I need some mouthwash." He pushed himself off the sofa and stumbled to the glass door. He opened it, crossed the hallway, and entered the door on the other side, the black door between the picture frames.

Parvemu was left alone and unattended. She could have taken advantage of this opportunity. She knew she would have, if this had been last week, and she had the strength of last week’s resolve. But here in the present, Parvemu was aware that she’d pushed too far with her power, driving out a torrent of sensation that had in the past knocked unprepared, unpowereed people unconscious. She felt sorry for Paul, for taking on what he’d agreed to do but gotten what he’d never expected, and now he was dousing himself in boozy spearmint. She felt sorry for herself, for having no one else to share in her despair. In her own way, she was no better than he was, and no better off.

She shook herself off, took a deep breath, and headed out into the hallway. The door had been left ajar. There was a black line in the gap between latch and jamb. She pushed it open and entered.

A bedroom. A workshop. A private sanctum. The last place he had left that he was under no obligation to share with anyone else. The only place he had to himself, when she had instance fough she into every aspect of his daily life, starting with her intrusion on his hospitality. It ended in a room papered in shades of cool blue and steel gray, drawn curtains in the early afternoon leaving the floorboards shrouded in a gloomy artificial darkness.

Parvemu looked around. He had a fireplace, and above that was a framed topographic map,
contoured ridges in green ink curling over an intersecting nest of underground tunnels.

Bookshelves lined the far wall, stacked with more heavy coffee-table-style picture books than light reading materials; books covered a simple desk, and above it was a bulletin board covered in postcards. Opening dresser drawers revealed individual compartments for rolled up socks and neckties, and even a section for cufflinks and wristwatches. Mister Froofy, indeed. Anyone who owned a paisley silk pocket square deserved the title.

She peeked under the bed skirt—of course, the bed wore a skirt. She sighed longingly over the walk-in closet—of course, the clothing collection had a room of its own. And finally, her eyes settled on the bedside table. Interesting things were sure to be found in them, her recent experience told her. She sat on the quilted bedspread and slid out the top compartment.

Air horn, cattle prod, night vision goggles. That was boring, when she knew the really hardcore capes had houses full of spring-loaded crossbows with tripwires attached to the door handles, and safes built into decoy safes. The hardest of the hardcore even had decoy houses.

There was a brief moment where she considered that this level of intrusion might be a step too far, even for her. But she found herself wondering what purpose twiddling her thumbs while waiting for him to come back would have been. There was no point, was there? She knew when he came and went, when he slept and woke. Between the two of them and their respective sneaky ways, there was not much privacy left to be preserved.

She pushed the top layer aside. Bundled underneath was a stack of envelopes, tied together with a grosgrain ribbon. Personal correspondence, the juicy kind that was hand-addressed, instead of the generic barcoded To the Resident under a clear plastic window that signified, "I am trash, throw me out". She tore off the ribbon and flicked through.

It was a fascinating showcase of the USPS's postage stamp designs over the last ten years. It even included the annual Christmas editions, one letter for every year. And the most interesting part was that while some of them had scuffed corners and faded writing, none of them showed signs of having been opened. Sealed flaps and uncut edges on the lot. And yet all of them had been kept.

A door behind her swung open with a click. There was an en-suite bathroom too? *Motherfucker!* Even Josephine had to share hers.

"You're sitting on my bed," said Paul from the doorway, his voice hoarse. *Get off,* was what he meant. He smelled aggressively minty.

*He's always so polite,* Parvenu observed, *even when he doesn't want to be.* She couldn't recall ever hearing him raise his voice. We would have made a good team if he'd joined ten years ago. Her boss would have liked him; he appreciated the sophistication that you couldn't find in the average thug in a suit. That veneer of civilization was important, if the government was to remain tolerant of overt villainy.

"No one lets you sit at the cool kids' table in the cafeteria, unless you can prove you had a girl in your room." Parvenu didn't turn around. *'As far as I see it, I'm doing you a favor. Everyone*
"I never went to a school with a cafeteria," he said, running a hand through his hair in obvious irritation.

"Homeschool? Hey, that makes a lot of sense, actually," said Parvenu. She rummaged through the rest of the contents of the nightstand. Designer sunglasses, a weather almanac published by the Meteorological Bureau of Edmonton, a 2009 edition of The Cape Cookbook in trade paperback format with annotations by retired heroes. She wondered if the desk drawers in the office across the hall would have yielded more information.

"A refectory." He frowned. "I ate there, I mean. You can't go to school in a dining room."

Refectory. That was a cafeteria for monks and church schools. That the Paul of years past had once been an innocent little altar boy was hard to imagine when she compared it to the person he was now, but the image still amused her.

"I could use a dining room education, according to you," Parvenu answered with a blithe smile. "I wouldn't know my right from my left when it comes to silverware."

"Formal dining is an acquired taste," said Paul. He came over to the bed and straightened the wrinkles on the bedspread, a design of alternating stripes of blue and blue-gray on a smooth cotton sateen. Then, apparently out of tasks he could pretend to do, he sat down on the other side of the bed. "As was... whatever the hell that was."

"The psychic equivalent of a skunk spray," said Parvenu, in an attempt to lighten the mood. She returned the contents of the nightstand into a haphazard pile. She slid the drawer shut. "Also known as the full extent of my offensive power. I hear they rate me S-Class."

She'd always had the impression that her power's functions were unusual when compared to the straightforward flying bricks, the mad inventors, and the elemental manipulators. She'd never gone through formal power testing, not the proper scientific power analysis that the PRT offered to any cape brave enough to let themselves be strapped to a table and jabbed with electrodes. There were rumors that the PRT took parahuman tissue samples without asking, if you trusted the word of the black market tech dealers and information brokers.

"Yes," he said. "That. That was one of the worst things I have ever—"

"Is it as bad as being bodysnatched for cannon fodder?"

She could sense his hesitation, searching for an answer that would say what he felt in the most deprecatory way possible. The truth, or his own version of it, so he could continue pretending that he'd come out unscathed, framed with the right words so he could make other people believe it too.

"No," he said.

"When you mix together all the paints in an artist's palette," Parvenu said in a hushed voice, "you get the ugliest greenish brown color. When you pull together all the thoughts and feelings from a hundred capes in the most one-sided fight of their lives, you get the same kind of dumpster fire. Even a single parahuman has enough of it to fill a trash can."

It was strange to describe her power with simple words. She knew how her power worked. It was half instinct, half experience, and like most powers, the Hows and Whys didn't matter as long as it worked as it should and spat out answers when she asked questions. To explain to someone else what she'd known for years felt deeply personal and... intimate. But he wasn't a stranger anymore. Well, not that kind of stranger.

"Is that how you see us?" asked Paul. "As walking trash cans?"

"That's a good way to put it," she replied, finding it hard not to lean on the pillows piled against the headboard. She was tired, and her headache was the insistent background whine that filled the silent pauses in their conversation. Paul hadn't chased her off. She took it as permission to enjoy the comforts that she'd been denied in her own room. "Most people don't feel nice things every single minute of the day. Most capes are worse off. Instead of having good memories to inspire them, they have the bad ones that haunt them. It wouldn't be far off track to say most of them are a hundred capes in the most one-sided fight of their lives, you get the same kind of dumpster fire."

"A hot mess," he repeated. "And I'm guessing that I'm one of them."

"You're the hottest mess I've seen in a long time." She flipped through to the end of the stack, the most recent envelopes. She flipped through to the end of the stack, the most recent envelopes. She wondered if the desk drawers in the office across the hall would have yielded more information.

"You're the hottest mess I've seen in a long time." She laid on her back and patted the unoccupied side of the double bed. "Lie down. Let's chat."
"Are you inviting me to my own bed?"

"No one says that!"

"You wouldn't have offered," she said, yawnning. "Come on, everyone says that the most important deals are made in bed."

"We need some ground rules," said Parvenu. "Number one. I accept your position as team leader."

"That was never up for debate."

"Number two. I will respect the decisions you make as team leader, on the condition that you explain what these decisions actually are. I won't say I'll agree with everything you decide, but I can't agree with any decision if I don't know what it is."

"That seems fair," he said. "I accept. Is that all?"

Parvenu laughed. "If you're the boss, then I want an open door policy. I want to be able to discuss the big decisions, even if you have the final say. Major jobs, recruitment, splitting payouts, stock options, things like that. I have a voice. I live here too. I want that to count for something."

"I'll tell the HR department to keep you posted," said Paul in a snide voice.

"Please do," Parvenu said. "Tell them I want fries with that. Also," she added, "I want better accommodations. Starting with this pillow."

"But it's mine."

"You have four others!"

"Fine," he conceded with a sigh. "Anything else? Ketchup with your fries?"

"I'd like another grilled cheese sandwich," said Parvenu. "The last one you made was pretty good."

"So you do remember it," he murmured. She heard the slightest shift and rustle from his side of the bed. "It'd be a waste of ten dollars' worth of Gruyère if you couldn't remember eating it."

"Thank you for making it," whispered Parvenu, turning her face to his. The fabric of the pillow was cool against her cheek. "Thank you for letting me stay."

"It was something to me," she said softly. "Please, Paul. Just accept it. Just this once."

He pushed himself up on one elbow and frowned. "You're welcome, then," he spoke with reluctance.

"How do you get up to the roof from here?" she asked, after several minutes of industrious self-reflection.

"We lived on the side of a hill," Paul continued. "If you looked out one window, you saw your neighbor's patio fence. When you looked out the other, you saw the gate and the guardhouse. It was only when you climbed up to the roof that you could see over the tops of all the fences. And once the sun set, you couldn't see the fences anymore. At night, you weren't reminded why fences were needed in the first place."

Parvenu knew the history. She wasn't part of the oldest generation of capes, but she wasn't new either. The rise of capes made for a sense of uncertainty, back when there was no Protectorate so all heroes were technically unofficial, unauthorized vigilantes. And back when there was no Birdcage and no Endbringers, there was nothing to stop the villains from going all out either. They called the first generation of the bad old Eighties the parahuman Golden Age. She saw the era as the parahuman Wild West. Ordinary people feared for their lives, but as usual, the people of means had fewer reasons to fear. Some of the wealthiest communities back then had hired capes to be their security guards. The humble origins of the first corporate hero teams.

"We lived on the side of a hill," Paul continued. "If you looked out one window, you saw your neighbor's patio fence. When you looked out the other, you saw the gate and the guardhouse. It was only when you climbed up to the roof that you could see over the tops of all the fences. And once the sun set, you couldn't see the fences anymore. At night, you weren't reminded why fences were needed in the first place."

"The look he gave her was incredulous."

"Yeah, yeah. Moving on," she continued."It's an old habit."

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"The taste of clarity came to Parvenu with the clean snap of celery, fresh from the crisper drawer."
had grown used to wearing. It tracked her throughout the day. It was easy to forget it was there, "They would if they had something to hide," said Parvenu, thinking about the metal anklet she "I'm sure most people would hate it," he said. "Most people would hate the thought of showering of someone following your every move, every single minute of the day."

She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. He was still staring at the ceiling, and every now and then she saw the slow flick of his eyelashes with every blink. She saw the buttons pull and dip against the pressed chambray of his shirt with every breath, and the steady thump of the pulse at his throat. She heard the unhurried journey his words made as they left his lips, a leisurely bedtime story that took its time to be told. He was so relaxed, so peaceful, as if he was minutes away from falling asleep.

It was so deliberate. She knew what he felt like when he slept, and it wasn't like this. It wasn't this peaceful.

But it was a reprise, and she was so tired. She turned to the wall and the line of white sunlight that climbed its way out from between the crack in the curtains. She blinked, and the light had crawled a foot closer to the bed, and then when she opened her eyes again, the colors had changed and now the whole room was filled with blue. She lifted her head from the pillow and turned around, rubbing her eyes. Her headache had improved by a few degrees.

Beneath the circle of light shed by an overhead lamp, Paul bent over the nightstand, writing. Words, devoid of life and flavor, leaked out of him in blue-black ink. Drifts of paper scattered across his side of the bed, a spray of loose sheets on the floor, paper all around like the remnants of a much-loved birthday pilula. She watched him. Good posture, well-formed features, a fine profile. Sleeves rolled to the elbow to protect his cuffs from smeared ink. A watch on his left wrist, the kind of wristwatch owned by people who insisted on calling them "timepieces". He was right-handed.

Everything about him screamed vanilla. She knew him better than that. When she closed her eyes, she found herself reeling on the edge of a great black gulf, a yawning fissure stretching wider and reaching deeper; the walls drawing back and disappearing from view, until she was alone with nothing but the chalky taste of talcum powder drying on her tongue to remind her where she was. Her throat was parched; she gasped for breath. "Good morning." The pen in Paul's hand had stopped moving.

"Fuuuuuuuck," Parvenu said. She fell back into the mound of pillows. "Did I really sleep through the whole day?"

"No," he said. "I'm just messing with you. You woke up in time to set the table for dinner."

She groaned.

"There's some good news," he continued, setting down his pen. The tip of the pen was a silver arrow, stained with blue. A fountain pen, not a standard disposable ballpoint. Had she expected any different? * "A contract of the terms we agreed on, in triplicate." He held out a sheaf of papers. She took them. "I'll lodge a formal contract of employment in town, once I've arranged a new Canadian identity for you. Tax benefits, you know. But this will serve for now. For now, it's everything we agreed on."

She scanned the paper. Headings, subheadings, line after line of words, numbers next to letters from La down to Sg. The clean formatting of the pages made its contents easier to read... theoretically. She struggled through to the end.

"Well?" he asked. "Is it agreed?"

"One last thing," said Parvenu. She turned over to the last page. The last line was a space for her signature. He had already signed his name. PFB. Now she that knew what the initials stood for, including the ridiculous middle name, the final layer of privacy was stripped away. "Can I have a puppy?"

"A pet," he said, "is another mouth to feed."

"Josephine treats the cow like her pet," Parvenu pointed out. She doubted that Josephine would approve of the abattoir when it came time to upgrade to a newer model. "Besides, what happens when another trespasser shows up? You can take potshots at them in the dark. You can send your sister out to punch them in the face. Or I could train a dog to be a homing missile with teeth."

"You can do that?" He frowned, and his eyes glanced down at the lines of letters marching across a paper battlefield. Paul didn't win wars. He didn't fight battles. He stood on the sidelines and won a game of time and numbers. There were no glorious victories, and he never got his hands dirty. His victory came from the satisfaction of living out his days in comfort, when his glorious combatants had neither. But he understood the advantage that strength gave. She counted on that.

"It only takes teaching them how to play my version of Hot and Cold." Parvenu gave a careless track, circle, guard, attack.

"You can do that?" He frowned, and his eyes glanced down at the lines of letters marching across a paper battlefield. Paul didn't win wars. He didn't fight battles. He stood on the sidelines and won a game of time and numbers. There were no glorious victories, and he never got his hands dirty. His victory came from the satisfaction of living out his days in comfort, when his glorious combatants had neither. But he understood the advantage that strength gave. She counted on that.

"It only takes teaching them how to play my version of Hot and Cold." Parvenu gave a careless flack of her hair. Training animals was so simple compared to training humans—a series of quick signals linked to commands: track, circle, guard, attack. Simple orders for simple minds. Dogs had few restrictions on trusting her unconditionally. Humans, this one in particular, reached for reasons not to. "It works better with people, of course. Easier to interpret, better memory for the signal cues. But no matter how much you like the idea of an untraceable communication line," she said, pursing her lips in an effort to phrase her opinion in polite terms. "You hate the thought of someone following your every move, every single minute of the day."

"I'm sure most people would hate it," he said. "Most people would hate the thought of showering with the door open, too."

"They would if they had something to hide," said Parvenu, thinking about the metal anklet she had grown used to wearing. It tracked her throughout the day. It was easy to forget it was there,
watching her with its evil little red eye, unless she was changing her clothes for bed or lacing on her boots for work. "Do you?" she asked, and her eyes glittered with curiosity.

"Hiding. You call it secrecy. I call it privacy," Paul said, and she could tell he was drawing in on himself. The sense of vast space dwindled, the walls growing closer. The room came back, returning to the mundanity of its physical dimensions, blue-gray walls and off-white ceilings, but somehow it was... emptier. "These days it feels like the only thing I can call my own."

"You can get used to having nothing," said Parvenu. "I have."

He looked away. So there was some self-awareness on the insulated nature of his own life, a life accustomed to material comfort.

"Do you prefer any specific breed?" he asked, as he picked up his pen and shuffled his papers. He must have also been aware that he couldn't strike much of an authoritative figure when there was no executive desk to sit behind. To loom from.

It was a concession on his part. An accomplishment on hers.

"Thank you," she said.

"You can thank me by setting the table."

"Aren't you coming too?"

"I should change for dinner."

"No one cares." Parvenu heaved a theatrical sigh. "I'm wearing what I have on now. Whatever you wear, it's never going to be a fancy meal when someone at the table is dressed in sweatpants."

"Fine, fine," he muttered. He capped his pen, tidied up the stack of papers, and offered Parvenu a copy of their written agreement, with an addendum scribbled on the back of the final page.

She took it without reading and stuffed it into the pillowcase of the pillow she'd claimed as hers.

"Let's go to dinner, then," she announced, rolling off the bed with more difficulty than she cared to admit.

"It's not a fancy meal." Paul stood, brushed off his trousers, and strode to the door. "Don't overthink it."

She hugged her new pillow on the way down the stairs, humming to herself, trailing Paul who walked two steps ahead. Today was a day that had gone unexpectedly well, a day that had ended with a gift that she wanted to believe was given more from honest sentiment than future advantage. She knew he recognized the advantages; he wouldn't have made a decision where no advantage existed. But if there was something else, something softer and more conceptual that swayed his final judgement in her favor, she could appreciate it, and hope to see more of it.

Paul stopped on the second floor landing. She stopped too.

Josephine stared at them from the bathroom door. She wore a bathrobe with long, flowing sleeves and her hair was bundled in a towel, wreathed in the heavy floral scent of expensive shampoo. Josephine had just come back from the barn, but from her appearance, she might as well have been straight from the day spa. Parvenu stared back, made conscious of her own appearance. Her hair was messy. She'd brushed it in the morning, but since then she'd been rolling over floors and sofas and other people's pillows. She was sure the pillow had left wrinkle imprints on her cheek.

"Don't tell me that you two just—" sputtered Josephine, her eyes darting from Paul to Parvenu to the third floor stairs.

"We didn't," Paul cut her off. He continued down the stairs, one hand resting on the banister in such a casual way, as if this was yet another ordinary day where nothing unusual had happened. There was nothing in his expression that indicated anything out of the ordinary. No bed hair, no lipstick-smeared collar, no sign of a guilty conscience behind guilty eyes.

"Nothing happened," was the message given by his nonchalant air, the neutral expression on his face. Business as usual. Nothing to speculate about.

"Business as usual" was not what she'd call it. Business was going to be different from here on out. She had the proof of it in writing. She had six dense pages of it tucked in her new pillowcase. She couldn't let it stand.

"Don't worry," said Parvenu as she passed Josephine in the hallway. She covered her mouth and spoke in a conspicuous stage-whisper. "We used protection."

A twin blaze of scalding humiliation rose up in her throat. The heat and bite of first-hand embarrassment, the warmth and nuance of second-hand, both of them burning with discomfort.

She cackled. Dinner was going to be a real treat.
The first snow fell six weeks early.

The first flake of snow that Parvenu caught on her tongue tasted like dirt. These weren't the lacy doily snowflakes that decorated Christmas cards and limited edition takeout coffee cups. This snow fell in an ashen slurry, white confetti that turned to rain when it hit ground that wasn't yet cold enough to allow the buildup of proper drifts. When the snow melted on the knee-high sorghum plants, it left a gray residue on the thin, bladed leaves. Ash carried in from thousands of miles away dumped here, in a dirty powder that covered her boots and soaked into her sweatshirt.

Dirt on the ground, dirt from the sky.

Autumn sent them its season's greetings with the arrival of snow, but the message Parvenu heard was a loud and clear FUCK YOU.

The sorghum leaves shivered in the wind, leaves whispering against leaves in a tuneless, repetitive harmony like the inside of a seashell. Parvenu shivered too, tucking her hands under her armpits. The days were growing shorter, the nights longer. She could see her breath when the sun went down, and when it came up again in the morning, it was less and less likely to be a sunny one.

She closed her eyes.

There was one bright spot to cheer her up.

Fuzzy, instead of clear and distinct. A ball of compulsions driven by instinct. Basic, uncomplicated urges she could detect and understand in a single pass. Hungry, restless, curious, tired—a simple spectrum from a simple mind.

She sent out a signal, a combination of appealing flavors to catch the attention of one who had little of it to spare. The flavor of fresh cream skimmed from the top of the milk tank, sweet and buttery smooth. The texture of beef gristle, joints cut from a roasted haunch, the crunch of cartilage rich with the taste of rendered marrow. The aroma of canned sardines, salt and oil and fish in a pungent mix that could fill a room and linger for hours. Flash—flash—flash, one intense burst after the other.

The leaves rustled. Parvenu waited, counting down the seconds to contact. Stems crackled. A nose poked through the wall of leaves at knee-level.

"Pavlov," she murmured as the furry bundle leaped into her arms. She cradled him, her black-and-white puppy, and he licked her fingers in search of hidden food. Together they waded through a sea of shivering leaves, until they found the other spot in the near distance that called out to her senses like the pull of magnetic north.

Paul knelt on a foam yoga mat, watching the numbers scroll past on a small handheld digital display. Pixelated lines in black inched up the screen, resembling a game of Snake on a first generation cellphone. It looked just as entertaining. The handheld screen was connected by wires to a humming beige box nestled in a padded briefcase, and from the box a series of jumper cable clips on leads were attached to leaves on the surrounding sorghum plants.

He looked up when Parvenu parted the plants and stepped into the small clearing, her puppy following at her heels.

"Oh," he said. "It's you." As if it could be anyone else. Apart from the approximately two thousand people living in the closest town, there were forty-odd residents of the nearby farming properties that she could call, if she was being generous, neighbors. They were just as likely to be found in Paul's sorghum patch as they would be enjoying aged brandy while listening to jazz recordings on vinyl.

Pavlov barked on cue, placing his front paws on the lid of the beige briefcase.

"It's really creepy when you do that," Paul remarked. "And you say you're not a Master." The briefcase beeped. He set the screen aside and jotted down notes on a clipboard.

"And this looks like complicated science stuff I don't understand," replied Parvenu. "It doesn't make you a Tinker."

"You may have a point there," said Paul. He tapped his pen against the clipboard. "But any cape who collects or creates minions will always have a tough job not being called a Master. Threat ratings don't care about technicalities."


Paul rose to his feet, brushing his trousers off. "Whatever you say," he said. "I'm done for today."

He unclipped the equipment from the leaves and began to roll the cables up and bundle them into the briefcase. When he was finished, his eyes turned to the sky, blinking a little in the falling snow. It fell on his hair, a sprinkle of ice crystals that melted and left behind flecks of white powder like dandruff. The shoulders of his coat were dusted with ash. He brushed his shoulder off, but the white ash clung to his hands, and when he inspected his fingers, the faintest hint of a brown creased his face. "We should head back to the house."

"Shouldn't we go check up on the other plants?" asked Parvenu. "Before the weather gets worse."

She followed Paul out of the crop beds and into the narrow tractor access path. There weren't many crops. A handful of varieties planted before her arrival to the house, less than thirty acres compared to the over one thousand planted by other independent farmers in the area. The harvest would go to feed the cow over the winter. Or over the autumn, as far as the weather was looking.

She and Paul visited the fields every few days to gather information for his science experiments. It was part of the routine chore list: check the plants, check the ground, check the water, make sure everything was in working condition and tip-top shape. She recognized some of the things he did,
“There’s no point checking up on the other crops. The results are going to be the same. The plants — they breathe just like we do. Carbon dioxide in, oxygen out. If you can measure it, you can figure out how fast they’re growing. If they’re growing at all. They’ve been slowing down these last two weeks. In a week or two, if the weather keeps getting colder, the growth will flatline, and we’ll have to harvest before they all die. The same for the rest of the crops.”

“You're concerned because it directly affects you... somehow.”

“I'm not worried,” Paul replied. He walked at a brisk pace. Desiccated stems of the past summer's grass crunched under his boots. Parvenu jogged to keep up. “I'm concerned.”

“Well, then,” said Parvenu, humoring him. “Why are you concerned?”

“They’ll lose some of the harvest if they start early. August is supposed to be the prime growing month, the last stage. Paul pointed to the row of cornstalks to his left. The husks and silk fibers were green, the ears small compared to the roasting varieties stocked in the supermarkets of times past. “They’ll lose some of the harvest if they wait and a hard freeze gets them before they do. They’re already losing at least half the wheat. It won’t be ready until October.”

“You don’t care if the crops die. You’re not a farmer,” Parvenu said, tearing her thoughts away from a rabbit chase a hundred yards away. She pulled in her senses to scour the two-yard radius around her in close detail. Paul's presence was guarded, but he didn't make himself as invisible as he used to do.

“That's harsh. I'm not that heartless,” said Paul, laying a hand across his chest like a lovesick swain. It wasn't a lie, not when he wasn't actively using his powers.

“You don’t need a full harvest to repay the bank or feed a whole herd of cows.” Parvenu snuck a glance at him. "You're concerned because it directly affects you... somehow.”

Paul had a certain arrogance about him, a confidence that didn’t come from testosterone-fueled swagger. He had trouble pinning it down, and settled on an arrogance built on certainty, which to most people was indistinguishable from the illusion of having it. His was the kind of absolute certainty that could convince you that the Earth was flat and a sachet of dried oregano was worth thirty dollars. Parvenu trailed off, thinking. Pavlov sniffed at her ankles. At half his adult size, he was the perfect height for tripping over. She pushed him off with a mental prod infused with the burn of capsaicin. It wasn't subtle, but dogs had simpler minds than humans, and why bother with a scalpel when a hammer would do?

Paul is a self-centered ass. What would make him care about something indirectly related to himself? Parvenu considered the options. A smaller harvest than usual, does that make food more expensive? Do we need to buy supplies for the winter? Money was a problem when the price of basic goods rose by the week, and most people wound up hoarding their cash under mattresses and in gun safes. People were forced to barter for what they needed, and went without the things they only wanted.

“The way you put it is so charming.”

Parvenu cocked her head. “We gotta keep it real, you know what I mean?”

“Yeah, like totally, brah,” Paul said, rolling his eyes. They continued walking. Paul’s boots kicked over a clod of dirt. “My concern comes from the value of the harvest. This year’s crop will be small, and the farmers won't have to compete with Nebraskans. The supply is limited, but a lot of people will need food this winter. The market price per ton will be the highest it's been in fifteen years.”

“They’ll make a profit.” Parvenu shrugged. “You'll make a profit. The ledger in the office says you made microloan investments with the town credit union. Is this a secret humblebrag where you make a big deal about how you're going to spend all your piles and piles of cash?”

“Hey, it's a serious concern. It's enough cash to either fill up a bathtub or make it rain for five minutes, but not both. A man has to make tough choices,” replied Paul. The corner of his mouth lifted in a smirk, which would have irritated Parvenu a month ago, but she now appreciated it as the tiniest concession to Fun that Paul allowed himself to have. “On a serious note,” he continued. “My share is only a small part of the whole. The town needs the money, the city needs the food, two good things going both ways. And that's the kind of thing that attracts attention.”

“Oh,” murmured Parvenu, her steps faltering as she considered the situation from his eyes. Pavlov whined and butted her knee. “I see. Who do you trust to guard your goods if you don’t trust anyone?”

“How insightful,” Paul said. He glanced up at the sky, and there was a certain stiffness in his neck suggesting that he was somewhere in between impressed and annoyed with how well she’d...
"I don't suppose you've come up with a solution too?"

"If you hire the Wardens, the Edmonton New Protectorate, whatever they're calling themselves these days, their funding transparency rules mean other people will know who has stuff worth protecting," said Parvenu, closing her eyes as she walked. Blind triangulation. It was a training exercise that she hadn't practiced in months, for obvious reasons. Paul took point, and Pavlov plodded along behind, hopping over the ruts carved by tractor tires into the soft soil. When she closed her eyes, the world was dark and cold, with the exception of the lights ahead that pulsed with flavor. The sickly sweetness of Paul's strained courtesy, what he defaulted to when he was unsure of any better way to make an approach. The prickle of Pavlov's curiosity, fainter than a cape's, with a vibrant energy that came of only knowing this world for six months.

"Sounds like you trust people as much as I do," Paul said. "And you keep nagging on me for it."

"I know people." Pavlov salivated over a half-rotten dead rodent lying on the dirt. It was covered in a layer of ash, like confectioner's sugar, but much less appetizing. She stepped over it, eyes still squeezed shut. "It's not about trust. I know what they want. It's the same things you do."

"The Wardens," Paul continued, ignoring her. "They're the most trustworthy. But not the cheapest."

"How about mercenaries for your mercenaries?" Parvenu suggested. "Cheaper than the Wardens. Pay them each half up-front, and if one group tries to cross you, you attack them with the other group."

"Or they gang up on you and take everything."

"Or that."

"You're no help at all," said Paul in a disgusted tone.

Parvenu stopped walking. "Do you even want my help?" she asked.

"What if I said yes?" A question answered with a question, such a typical Paul response.

"Then I'd help you build your own home-grown mercenary team," she said, and cut ahead of him on the path. She could sense the house a hundred yards beyond. Josephine's glow, a rich and savory warmth, the bright and mouthwatering marker which made some wretched part within her hunger for more.

"That would mean letting guests use my guest rooms," said Paul. "And you know how much I hate it when people use the guest soap in the paper wrappers. They're for looking at, not for using."

Parvenu clucked her tongue. Pavlov's ears perked up. "Short term thinking versus long term payoffs. Sometimes you have to make a sacrifice to get with the bigger picture."

"Yeah, well," Paul replied, "I'd prefer if it someone else made them."

"Don't we all."

Parvenu took the steps up the veranda two at a time. She scraped her boots against the doormat, clumps of dirt sloughing off like wet coffee grounds emptied from the espresso machine at the end of the morning rush. It was as satisfying as taking off her mask after a long night at her old job. She waited for Pavlov to shake off the layer of ash that dusted his black-and-white fur. Then she waited for Paul to unlock the door. He held it open for her, and together they entered the comfort and warmth of the house.

She was grateful here and now for the expense Paul had spared on building his Barbie Dreamhouse. There was no more incessant howling wind, no more dry whisper of rustling leaves to distract her from her thoughts. But if she had expected peaceful silence, she didn't get it. Music filled the hallway, a slow descending plink-plink-plink that slipped down the scale, one octave after another. The rancid musk of solitude crept beneath her tongue. She swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry.

Josephine.

"I have a solution," said Parvenu in a quiet voice. "If you wait until the end of winter, when people will be at their hungriest and most desperate, you'll be able to recruit on your own terms. You won't have to offer them your guest room or fancy soap as job perks, and they'll be more loyal to you than at any other time."

"Devious." Paul smirked. "The sweatpants fit well."

She wore hand-me-down black PRT sweatpants. Letters in white spelling out the word VILLAIN marched down the fabric of her right leg. He was trying to make a joke, but it was only half a joke, and it was completely lacking in humor, so it wasn't really a joke at all.

"It's worth thinking about," she said. We both know this has a good chance of working, she declined to say.

He was silent in thought, as he opened the hall closet and stowed the briefcase and rolled up yoga mat next to a rack of umbrellas and wading boots. Plink-plink-plink went the keys of the piano from the living room. "The logistics need hashing out to make it a viable solution."

I'm considering it, he didn't say.

"After dinner?" she asked.

"I hope you like beef," he said. "They're slaughtering the herds to save on grain. People will need it more than cows come winter. With winter taking out the pasture grass early, beef cattle would have to be fed in barns instead of let out to graze. It would be expensive, if grain prices were as high as Paul estimated, and if the winter lasted as long as the almanacs predicted. The farmers weren't taking chances with the limited food supply. The cattle would have to go."

"You know how much I like your—" she began.

He cut her off with a roll of his eyes. "You can hold that thought right there."

"I was going to say 'cooking!'" grumbled Parvenu.
"Try again next time," he said, turning away and heading for the kitchen. "I might even remember to laugh."

Pavlov padded after him, and Parvenu scowled. Unfaithful puppy. He was beginning to discern between the sources of the real meat that bled and dripped, and the illusory meat that appeared and disappeared and left no sign of its existence. It was necessary that Pavlov recognize Paul as much as he recognized her, if he was to be useful to both of them in their mutual partnership. Parvenu recognized its necessity. It still hurt, just a little. Pavlov was hers. The one thing she had that was hers, and he didn't even know it.

Plink. Plink. Plink.

She sighed. Paul was gone. She was left to deal with this.

The living room had the same clean catalogue look found in every other room in the house. It wasn't exactly, or as unaccustomed to use as an old-fashioned granny parlor where every flat surface was covered in collectible plates and porcelain shepherdesses, but there was a certain something about it that gave him as to the stiffness of its owner. Parvenu decided it was how all the furniture was aligned at square angles, each piece equidistant to the other, a strict organization in the coffee table books placed, no, arranged in the center of the table, the remote controls for the TV and games consoles that were kept in labelled compartments in the TV stand. If Paul missed anything from the world-that-was, she guessed that it would be refills for his label maker machine.

The baby grand piano by the window contributed to that tasteful air of catalogue perfection. upright pianos were budget-friendly constructions of wood and white plastic Jenga blocks, rectangular slabs that became furniture once the lids were shut. Grand pianos were musical instruments when not in use, and art when they were. Like all proper art, it was a tangible display of how much extra cash an owner had to throw around, disguised as an appreciation for cultural heritage.

Plink plink. Plink.

"Swan Lake at half speed would be interesting to choreograph," Parvenu remarked from the doorway. She'd done backstage management for a few of her clients in her past line of work. Classical productions were different from modern-day concerts, but dealing with artistic talent was, in her experience, always the same.


"Go away."

Josephine's hair fell over her eyes. The folds of her dress draped the sides of the piano bench and trailed down to the floor. Her shoulders were slouched; her sitting posture would have prompted an instructor to make squawking noises as a reminder to pull in her elbows. Are you a chicken? Then don't flap like one!

She could see the similarities between herself and Josephine. As a matter of fact, she could see them in Paul as well, which he acknowledged in his own way—not as "We are alike", but rather, "We want the same things". That was Paul's manner of distancing himself from other people whenever he sensed the distance between them being bridged.

She and Josephine. They both sought for and had found connection in the old world, and they'd both suffered when all their links to their past were severed with one blow. It hurt. Josephine was still hurting, because she hadn't found new ones, new connections to ease the suffocating loneliness that settled over her shoulders and built up like drifts of falling ash.

Parvenu had found new connections of her own. So slowly, so hard won, so subtly had they hooked themselves in that she hadn't noticed what they were until they were already half-formed. They signaled that the times had changed. She didn't feel as lonely now. Nowadays, she didn't feel the miserable sinking dread of the world going to shit around her, with nothing she could do about it but let it close over her head and drown her. She had a friend; she had a companion in the form of her puppy, whose dreams of cornfield chases lulled her to sleep.

Josephine didn't have any of this. Unlike Paul, it mattered to her that most of her daily conversation was had through the notes on the kitchen whiteboard. And unlike Paul, she couldn't pretend she was happy—well, not unhappy—and make it convincing enough to believe.

She was unsuited for this rural life, to this new world.

On weekends, they drove to town to hear news brought in by the weekly messenger from Calgary, and to trade supplies with their neighbors. In a strange reversal, prime grade steak was cheaper than fresh salad greens, and a single plastic-wrapped vending machine cinnamon roll was more valuable than a half-dozen homemade. Paul tracked the exchange rates from week to week. The price of a can of beer grew from a sack of potatoes to a whole bushel, fifty pounds. Electronic gadgets remained the same price, while hand cranked sausage grinders and butter churns were dragged out of attics and worth refurbishing. The contents of hundreds of garages and basements were spread out on tarps and card tables for a town-wide jumble sale every Saturday.

"When a man buys you fur, it means he wants to marry you," Josephine had said when they were trying on coats smelling of mothballs and lavender. Folding tables lined the town's short Main Street, piled high with rusty tools, folded clothes and linens, and jars of homemade jams and pickled vegetables. She stroked the collar of the coat she was wearing, smooth and hirsute and made from the skin of a long-dead beaver or muskrat. "I would have been married by now," she sighed.

Parvenu had been trying on hats when she'd been assaulted by a wave of second-hand nostalgia. "I think that stopped being a thing fifty years ago," she said dismissively. "People don't make a big deal about getting married these days. They don't make a big deal about divorcing either. Happens all the time. Half the time, anyway."

It was crude, and a little cruel, but she hadn't ever met Josephine's ex-fiancé and didn't think much of him compared to Legend's actor, who she thought had a better range in the high notes and a stronger charismatic presence. Alexandria was the star, Legend provided the counter-lyric, and Eidolon was otherwise unremarkable, nothing more than an actor in a green muscle suit. Good, better than average even, but he wasn't a star.

Josephine had been pised at her, but she'd said nothing, and they'd moved on from the clothing booth after Parvenu had gotten a winter hat with beaver skin earflaps. On the drive back, Parvenu
made her shine under an audience's expectations amplified Parvenu's personal insecurities, which
regarding Josephine with a critical eye, which she then turned toward herself. Josephine's presence
Parvenu wondered why that was, in a brief second of introspection. She found the answer after
Josephine.

It was total bullshit. They hadn't suddenly become friends. Between the two of them, there was no
It wasn't so much a change of heart than a change of tactics.

speaking softly. “Your support and kindness mean a lot to me.”

from-Mom-at-the-end-of-the-month voice. “Please know that I appreciate it,” she continued,
exchanges, press ‘1’ to continue.

Josephine was silent in thought, trailing her fingers along the row of white keys. “Thank you,” she said.
Frustration, resentment, resignation; they pummeled into her one after the other like icicle daggers
of frozen vinegar, sharp and piercing at so close a range. Parvenu withdrew, pulling away the
The world was not built on consistency and logic. Senses, sentiment, sensitivity: they were the
parvenu always made the best of what she had. She worked hard to build connections, to build
connections, their friendships, their partnerships, all of their relationships formed without the knowledge that came of
true empathy. How did they do it? She didn't know. She thought it must be discouraging to reach
out to someone who didn't want to be reached, without being prepared beforehand with the insight
as to how to reach them.

Josephine repeated, her lip curled in disdain. Her voice was controlled, a warm
timbre with no hint of hitches or cracks, at odds with the actual words she spoke. “Is that all you
can say?”

Parvenu knew why he did it. So rigid he was, his mind a maze of clockwork gears that creaked
whenever the slow melody of Odette's libretto played out note by note from the living room.

Josephine was beautiful and graceful; she had talent
than most: it was the only thing I can give you.”

incongruous to a backdrop of denim and flannel. Josephine knew she stood out, and some part of
her liked knowing it. She didn't make much of an attempt to fit in, to adapt. To Josephine, it was
an extended holiday where the townspeople were charmingly referred to as “the locals”, as if they
were animals in a petting zoo, and the situation was only temporary. It was through this that she
clung to her past life, in the same silent and persistent way with which Paul rejected his own. It
only made things hurt more.

The memory of last Saturday must have lingered in Josephine's thoughts as well as her own. Sour
resentment filled the air between the two of them. The atmosphere of the living room, never warm
and inviting in the first place, grew chilly with an uneasy tension.

There was still a presence there to be sampled, something which trended more toward dark and
bitter, sour sweet and light, which was better than nothing at all. Parvenu couldn't help but feel
sorry for the unpowered who were as blind as newborn puppies. Their connections, their
friendships, their partnerships, all of their relationships formed without the knowledge that came of
true empathy. How did they do it? She didn't know. She thought it must be discouraging to reach
out to someone who didn't want to be reached, without being prepared beforehand with the insight
as to how to reach them.

"I'm sorry," said Parvenu. There was an itch in her fingers, an urge to fidget, but she kept herself
still, thinking of Paul and the careful way he maneuvered conversations. It was one thing to know
how someone felt, another to convince them to feel something else. "I'm sorry that you hate it
here. I'm sorry that we can't get along. I know we're doing our best, trying as hard as we can, and
it's been hard for everyone—"

"You don't think I'm trying hard enough," Josephine said, interrupting her.

"I didn't say that."

"You don't have to."

"I'm sorry," Parvenu said, holding in an impatient sigh. "I don't think there's any easy way to say
it." Round and round went these circular conversations, a feedback loop that reinforced one's state
of discontent while doing nothing to resolve it.

"I'm sorry?!" Josephine repeated, her lip curled in disdain. Her voice was controlled, a warm
timbre with no hint of hitches or cracks, at odds with the actual words she spoke. "Is that all you
can say?"

connection her power could make with Josephine's, no secret past to be revealed and deciphered
with a sweep of her senses.

It wasn't so much a change of heart than a change of tactics.

Josephine was silent in thought, trailing her fingers along the row of white keys. “Thank you," she said.
Her voice had changed, so soothing and pleasant that Parvenu was put in mind of pre-
recorded telephone operators on a customer service hotline. For enquiries related to refunds and
exchanges, press ‘1’ to continue. A radio jingle kind of voice. A $3.99 per minute, hide-the-bill-
from-Mom-at-the-end-of-the-month voice. “Please know that I appreciate it,” she continued,
speaking softly. “Your support and kindness mean a lot to me.”

It wasn't so much a change of heart than a change of tactics.

It was total bullshit. They hadn't suddenly become friends. Between the two of them, there was no
trauma shared, no ten-year-long backstory, no common goal to lessen the distance, nor a
desperate,aching need to close it. Everything in Paul that made her petty turned to cattiness with
Josephine.

Parvenu wondered why that was, in a brief second of introspection. She found the answer after
regarding Josephine with a critical eye, which she then turned toward herself. Josephine's presence
—that glorious stage presence—the way she spoke, spoke, took up space in a room so that no
matter how many people were in it, a certain emptiness was felt when she left. The little things that
made her shine under an audience's expectations amplified Parvenu's personal insecurities, which

Humble pie, Parvenu thought, tasted like rhubarb.

"I know 'Sorry' doesn't mean anything to you," said Parvenu with the uneasy feeling that it meant
more to her than it did to Josephine. "But it's the only thing I can give you."

I have nothing else.

Josephine was silent in thought, trailing her fingers along the row of white keys. "Thank you," she said.
Her voice had changed, so soothing and pleasant that Parvenu was put in mind of pre-
recorded telephone operators on a customer service hotline. For enquiries related to refunds and
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made her shine under an audience's expectations amplified Parvenu's personal insecurities, which
Josephine was a subconscious reminder of the aspirations that would only ever stay that, aspirations.

Parvenu wondered what Josephine thought of her, which had never occurred to her to consider beyond the most superficial level. She winced internally. "Homewrecker". It seemed... well, if not entirely deserved, somewhat understandable when viewed from the other side.

She straightened up and stepped closer to the piano. Josephine's head turned but she remained still, resting position with the heel of her hands on the frame of the keyboard, fingertips grazing the keys and thumb tucked in, perfect form with no flapping chicken wing elbows. Wary and alert, Josephine was aware she was being observed. This was her audience mode.

"Do you mind if I sit next to you?" Parvenu asked. Josephine silently shifted over, as far to the left as possible without falling off the side. The padded piano bench creaked as two people shuffled around on it, trying to avoid instances of skin contact or sitting on skirts, while trying not to make it obvious they were doing so.

"Don't you have other things to do?" Josephine remarked. Her voice was as warm as honey. Her emotions dripped with vinegar. "Other people to bother?" She reached up to the folding stand above the keyboard and rearranged the score sheets.

Parvenu stared at the names of the arrangements. Orchestral scores, theatrical suites condensed and adapted for solo piano. Scène Finale: Swan Dance. She'd recognized it as the one Josephine had played earlier, much slower than the time signature marked at the top of the page. Act V, Scene V: Confession of Cyrano. Chapter Four: Farewell to Orpheus. B.07: The Garret of Poets. They weren't all familiar to her, but she could see the pattern. Operatic arrangements for a high level of skill, the latter acts numbered four and five more common than acts one or two. And because they were opera pieces, the last act meant someone always had to die. It was morbid. It was melodramatic. It was Josephine's melancholy showing through, in the only way she could show it.

"There's no place I'd rather be," Parvenu said, watching pages unfold on the stand. Lakmé: Aria Selections for Piano. She wasn't sure, but she suspected that it fell in with the others in terms of unhappy endings. "I didn't come here to hurt anyone, or be a burden. Or steal your stuff and ruin everything for you. I know you don't believe me, but it's true."

"Good for you," Josephine answered, her tone suggesting 'Go fuck yourself' was what she'd really wanted to say. She flicked through the pages in the score book, skipping past the first few acts to the end.

"I didn't have anywhere else to go," Parvenu surprised herself with her own sincerity. "I still don't. I think it's the same for you, isn't it?"

"Can you read music?" Josephine's question was another surprise.

"What." Parvenu blinked, sensing the shift of atmosphere in the room. Josephine waited impatient and apprehensive, but no sign of it showed on her face. "Uh. Yes? But it's been a while, so I'm pretty rusty."

"Then let's start at the beginning," Josephine flipped to the start of the score book. Act One. "You're soprano and I'm mezzo, and this is a duet for both. I'll play accompaniment. I'll go slow, but try to keep up."

Parvenu's mouth opened. "Wait, how do you know I'm a soprano?"

"You sing in the shower," said Josephine. "I can hear it from the hall. You've had lessons." Her hands lowered over the keyboard.

"Wait---"

"Why are you here?" Josephine snapped. The hands descended. The first notes of the aria plinked into the living room.

Parvenu clenched her teeth. She thought she'd outgrown this sort of treatment years ago. The memories were faded and dull in her mind, because there was no tinge of power around them to enhance her recollection. She couldn't picture it with perfect clarity, but the old feelings were still there and came flooding back. Fleece leg warmers, hair pulled so tight her scalp itched, knees straightened so much they smiled, bathrooms filled with cigarette smoke and gossip and the sour stench of someone's breakfast splattering over a porcelain bowl.

Her voice came out as a croak. She cleared her throat and began again. This was Josephine's payback. Her forté, the one thing she knew she was better at than everyone else in the house. And it was also her therapy, even if she'd never say it. But that's alright, Parvenu thought. We both know it. This is why I'm here. This is why she allows me to be here.

Plink-plink-plink.

Josephine's voice sounded better in person than the version recorded on DVD and played through TV speakers. Range, projection, accuracy, elocution, all of it was miles better than Parvenu's attempt at a song she'd never practiced before, but Josephine didn't seem to care. The guardedness, the cold distance—there was no place for it here, crowded out by the music that filled the room to the ceiling and leaked out into the rest of the house. It was one of the very rare things in this new life that brought joy to Josephine.

She's enjoying herself, Parvenu observed. Why shouldn't I enjoy myself too? This is only karaoke done live.

Their first attempt at a duet wasn't very good. The second was a significant improvement. The third won Josephine's nod of approval, and a hint of a smile that broke the frosty mask of her face when Parvenu managed to hold the final melisma without cracking or losing her breath.

Parvenu began to wonder if the distrust and anger the unpowered held against capes was deserved. Justified, even. Capes appeared without invitation. They took without asking. They
Parvenu squirmed in her seat. Why couldn't he have chosen more comfortable chairs? Whatever points the furniture settings earned in aesthetics was won through the sacrifice of comfort.

Aesthetics. It was a strange line walked by Paul in his balance of functionality and appearance. There were things he did for show, like paying his taxes and sending his condolences along with gift baskets of corn muffins to residents in town who'd lost family in the attack on the Eastern seaboard. There were things he did for practical reasons, like wearing heavy working boots and Gore-tex-lined down vests for outdoor work, but his overcoat was tweed and his hair was styled with pomade. He was a chameleon when he wanted to be. It was a strange contradiction. It was fascinating in the strangest way.

The basement library was one of those strange intersections of function and whimsy. Bare concrete walls and floor, statement Scandinavian furniture. Rows of gray metal shelves on rolling tracks like the inside of an evidence locker, containing an eclectic assortment of reading materials ranging from niche hobby magazines and academic textbooks, star charts and world atlases, to hole-punched printouts in three-ring binders and pulpy science fiction novels with colorful covers and yellowing pages.

*The Roughnecks' Revenge. Priestess of A'Tuan. The Arrakeen Prince.* The last book seemed the most well-loved of the pile, the pages gone feathery-edged in the corners from multiple readings. She'd picked it up, along with a few hefty textbooks that would form the foundation of her privacy cubby.

"The internet came back the other day," said Parvenu, peering over the topmost book. They had landline telephone, but she didn't know any phone numbers, nor did she have any friends in town to call. She checked the computer in the surveillance office every few days when she was assigned to guard duty, but it had always been a message saying No Connection. Until two days ago, when it'd changed to Connections Available, and the web browser had produced a loading bar instead of a blank gray X.

"I know," Paul didn't look up from his laptop. Smug attitude delivered right on cue, check.

Unimpressed with everyone around him, check. Coffee in an insulated travel mug at his elbow, pen sitting atop an open spiral-bound notebook, a look on his face that said "Aren't we?"

"They hate us!"

"Hm," came his disinterested reply. "Breaking news."

"They think we didn't try hard enough," said Parvenu. "That we could have done more, saved more people. And because we didn't, we're somehow to blame." She scowled. "Responsible."

"Aren't we?"

She turned to stare at him, and her elbow bumped into the wall of books that made up her cubby, knocking the topmost volume onto the floor. "You're joking me, right?"

"You know what I don't joke about?" he asked, pushing his chair back and standing up. "Property damage." He picked the book from the floor and dusted off the cover, and an odd expression crossed his face, with the tightening of his jaw and the flare of his nostrils as if in a frown, yet there wasn't the usual tinge of bitter negativity that came with frowns. Something fell out from between the pages, fluttering to the concrete floor. A bookmark, a small white square of stiff paper. Paul tucked it into his breast pocket without a second glance.

"What's that?" Parvenu tilted her head to look at the book he'd placed on the table next to his laptop. It appeared to be just another old novel, with white lines scored across the paperback spine where it had been opened flat and read multiple times.

"Nothing," Paul said in a cold voice. "We did nothing when they called for volunteers to take the fight to him the first time. 'Nothing' is the value we added to the fight in the end. I already knew that. If people are looking to blame someone for what happened, it's not like they're looking in the wrong direction. If you want to feel bad about it, go ahead. But do keep in mind that they also did nothing." There was nothing they could have done, thought Parvenu. They didn't have any powers.

"Why are humans so horrible and petty?" she said.

Paul's smile was thin and cheerless. "I ask myself that every day." "You don't miss them at all? Does that mean you won't be joining them?" Beneath the table, Parvenu's hands twisted together, knuckles white, nails digging into flesh. "The City in Gimel. They're looking for survivors to help rebuild civilization. Five million already living there, they say. I heard it's an empty world. A new one."

"My old boss is now a chief director," Paul answered. He was standing, looking down at the open laptop on the table. "I never gave my two-weeks' notice. I expect that they still have me on payroll somewhere, if they're doing a payroll instead of handing out meal vouchers."
"So," murmured Parvenu, turning the information over in her mind. It wasn't unexpected. The first thing people did once they had a means of transmitting information was to search for the connections they'd left behind. Re-connecting. Re-uniting. Re-building. Returning to normality.

The plaintext forums of the new PHO was rank after rank of classifieds, people searching for lost friends and family. For teammates. "You could have your old PRT job back. Your old life."

Parvenu put those thoughts to words for his benefit as much as her own. The Birdcage, the minimum security prisons, the detention facilities and secret government black rooms, they had all been opened to bring more firepower to the fight, the inmates released and granted amnesty. There were some names on the lists of the living that she recognized. They'd recognize her too, if not by name and face, but by her power. The Tracker. The Elite recruiter whose specialty was in signing new triggers before the heroes could get to them. A Thinker, a versatile one with a talent in collecting information, and anyone who understood tactics knew how information gave advantage to the battlefield more than brute strength ever could.

The old life, the old tricks. The old crowd. Amnesty to them meant opportunity.

"It was only a job. Did you think I did it because I liked the PRT? Do you think they need someone to sell their action figures and write their speeches? That's all I was to them," Paul laughed. He didn't shy away from the worst possible outcome, nor the most likely one. "If I went back, it wouldn't be the same job. And my old life? I wouldn't have it either—I'm sure I'd end up sleeping in a barracks with the grunts and living off MRE's. But," he added, "if it's what you want, go ahead. I won't stop you."

"But you won't help me either. I looked it up," said Parvenu. The library had atlases and road maps, not all of them up to date, but she'd found some internal documents with the PRT department offices and major cube hubs marked out. "The nearest access portal is in Baumann, British Columbia. That's over five hundred miles away, and I know you wouldn't let me borrow a car. They'd never let her drive in their weekly visits to town. He and Josephine made sure to keep the keys locked up and hidden away when not in use. The pragmatic mind that had come up with the idea of using a tracking anklet was the same one who saw the utility of wheel clamps.

"You can't call it 'borrowing' when it's a one way trip."

"Come with me," Parvenu blurted out without thinking, and something in her chest squirmed with confusion and doubt.

"And leave all this? Be a refugee, living in a tent, with a choice of being a bandit or working in a road crew?" Distaste, dissatisfaction, crumbly and bitter like a surprise mouthful of mold in a week old leaf, the twitch of his upper lip in a faint sneer. Faint, muted, and gone within seconds. "Gimel has nothing I want. But if you want it," he said, "then you have about five weeks left before the blizzards set in and block the roads for the winter."

Beneath the flat surface of the table, her fingers wrung together, cold fingers folding against cold skin. Dissatisfaction, disappointment. Her own, this time.

"I don't want to go alone," she said, and her voice was more timid than she wanted it to be. "Then shoot," he spoke with the sharpness of implied finality. This marks the end of this conversation. Don't push it any further.

Paul sat down at his side of the table and resumed typing on the laptop. She could tell he was deep in thought, but he didn't look at her or appear to be outwardly affected by the unexpected turn their conversation had taken. It would have been more shocking if his reaction involved shouting and swearing and flipping tables.

Parvenu ducked behind the cubby built of stacked books and stared down at the Canadian travelers' guide, highway maps covered in a scattered array of dots, connected by long, squiggly lines like a plate of spaghetti dropped onto the page. Calgary to Edmonton. Calgary to Vancouver. Baumann to Vancouver.

She tried to think like he did. He had all the advantages here; he had everything lose. She could get used to having nothing, living with nothing, living on the charity granted to her by others. But he couldn't allow himself to live like that, dependent on the grace and goodwill of other people. The idea of depending on other people repulsed him, because in his eyes, in his world built on ledger books and logic, the grace and goodwill of others was unreliable at best, non-existent at worst.

Well, it wasn't as if teams were formed overnight. You had to ease into it, forming new routines, new habits, one day at a time. Training a dog was much the same.

But.

There was always a but, wasn't there?

There were no guarantees of anything beyond the small portion of the world that was the farm and the town and the fields of ash and dying corn. Safety, routine, eight hours of sleep, three square meals a day, triple-ply toilet paper, clean underpants—they were the first to go when the status quo was abandoned. They were the last thing on anyone's mind when they went and abandoned the status quo.

I want these things, she thought.

The rebellious voice whispered, You want—

Parvenu peeked over the stack of books. Paul was staring down at his keyboard. The square of paper was lying on top of the trackpad. A Polaroid camera shot. He studied it as if he had never seen it before, but it must have been his; it had been tucked in between the pages of one of his old books.

Paul looked up.

Parvenu ducked behind the stacks.

She heard him sigh.
Welcome to the Parahumans Online message boards.
You are currently logged in, ValleyGirl_101
You are viewing:
Threads in your curated list. Edit that list Here.

• Thread OP is displayed.
• Ten comments per page.
• Unread messages in private message history
• Threads and private messages are ordered chronologically.

Topic: Getting the band back together
In: Boards ➤ Teams ➤ ELITE (Private)
Magellan (Verified Cape/Original Poster)
Posted on August 20th, Y1:

What it says on the can.

Mainly wanting to pick up where we left off, with some of our old homies from the west coast. We have a few Estrellans from Anchorage, the Seattle crew, and we're looking for our San Diego, Bay area, and NY heavy hitters. Oakland, no offense, but there's too much heat on you guys for what we want to do.

Anyone who knows our M.O. and has passed initiation (we'll ask you proof in person) is welcome to join, former, current, and estranged members all.

Location for meeting is Darien, Alt-Connecticut in Gimel. The El Dorado Club on Kresby Street, don't come empty-handed.

(Showing Page 2 of 17)

Aldebaran_9
Replied on August 20th, Y1:
Empty handed? What's that supposed to mean?

490spqblb8k
Replied on August 20th, Y1:
Codename for "don't be a jackass", aka follow the damn rules. You show up presentable, you bring your own booze, and you don't fucking tell anyone you just joined the Fight Club.

Przegryw
Replied on August 20th, Y1:
We're keeping it down low here. Not using our old names, costumes. There's not enough of the old guard and established strength here to get away with using our old IDs like some of the other underworld groups, ie the Students. Draws too much negative attention if we did, and we are concentrating more on consolidation, rebuilding than catching heat from every new hero group wanting to prove they're hot stuff.

If you do come, bring something if you can. Supplies are always welcome.

Mauritus
Replied on August 20th, Y1:
News for anyone hitting the long road to Gimel: Thinkers and Movers are the capes most in demand, followed by Shakers and Brutes and anyone who can help with construction or rebuilding. Heavy hitters in those classes will get crowded with offers to join other teams, but there are dozens of tiny teams that form and fall apart in weeks.

If you want a team that you can stick with, and will stick with you... you know where to look.

Magellan
Replied on August 20th, Y1:
Invitation comes with the offer of your old ranks back, if you can prove your ID. We're working to expand our territories, forming offshoots, subgroups, and need experienced team leaders. Too many newbies and kids and old farts who have been in the slammer for years and don't know the old codes anymore.

Principe_Alaxandar
Replied on August 20th, Y1:
what's the policy on bringing a friend?

Magellan
Replied on August 20th, Y1:
1. Give them a heads up on the rules. You know which ones.
2. No spongers. Thinkers and Movers have priority.
3. You must vouch for them, and someone has to vouch for you.
4. Probation, no exceptions.
5. We reserve the right to take their memories if the council passes on them at any point.

Morganata
Replied on August 20th, Y1:
Any plans of expanding to New New York?
WE ARE: Construction contractors, based out of Gimel portal metro area.

OUR PROJECT: Efficient, mass housing apartment blocks for permanent residents.

SEEKING: Day laborers, construction workers, equipment operators, food and sanitation crew

PAY: 30G$D (gimeldollars) +1 full meal, 1 snack item per day. Subsidized meal plans and housing are available.

HOW TO JOIN:
Find our demountable office (trailer marked "Hollingbrook B8479").
Submit name, skills, and contact info.
If accepted, show up at our lot at 7:00 for clocking in. No clock, no pay.

REQUIREMENTS:
18+ only.
Be ready and willing to work 8 hours per day.
Obey foremen, supervisors, and safety protocol or you're out.
NO CAPES.

New community looking for skilled residents.
Sherwood Park, in the Norfair district, thirty miles from the metro border. Plenty of unclaimed territory, high quality cropping and grazing land within easy travel distance of major markets and clean water sources, as well as first responders and law enforcement.

Looking for applicants with agricultural and trades experience, preferably with own equipment.
Also looking for healthcare and technical expertise, MDs, DDS, RNs, EMTs.

Starting lots from 100–500 acres, depending on skill, experience, and capability. Temporary housing and rations will be provided while permanent structures are under construction.

PM or send your questions after the FAQ post.

I got my shine still up.
40 proof sugar cider for the girly's. 100 proof pure corn hooch for the men.
$80 for a half gallon, $120 for the full jug.
The tent city at Woodway, ask for Larry.
Parvenu wiggled the mouse across the mousepad. She picked it up, and looked at the bottom. No clumps of dust, and the LED inside was giving off a steady blue glow. The cursor didn't move.

Then it began to slide across the computer screen.

Parvenu whirled around. Or rather, she whirled the rolling chair around. It squeaked, but other than that, the security office was silent. The door was closed, the electric locking system in sleep mode. It hadn't made a peep. She hadn't heard anything unusual. There was no one in the room with her, and the only signs of movement were the camera feeds on the multiple screens above her head, playing a rotating selection of security footage from the house and grounds.

Empty fields, silent gardens, cloudy skies and drifting ash. The camera lenses would need a cleaning at some point.

This office was the only room in the house with unsupervised computer access. She supposed Josephine and Paul had personal computers in their rooms, but she hadn't seen them, and she wouldn't have been able to log in, let alone use them without being caught. In recent days, she'd taken advantage of the fact that her door was no longer locked from the outside. She snuck out to the garage, to the hidden panel in the wall, descending into the depths of the basement whenever she knew no one would be on the evening duty roster. She'd explored the rooms that opened to her pass code.

The library, an unexpectedly useful resource. The medical bay, wall-to-wall cabinets stuffed with cartons of bagged saline and gauze in hundred-yard bundles. The pantry. The storage rooms filled to the ceiling with useless junk. But in the end, she always wandered back to the security office. The lights, the moving screens, the small kitchenette filling the room with the fragrance of late night coffee. It was comforting—safe—in the unsettling silence of what felt like a dusty crypt.

She looked back at the screen. Words were being typed in the chat bar, supplying her half of the conversation with Anonymous. Words that she wasn't typing.

ValleyGirl_101: You are

She waited for it to finish, still glancing over her shoulder with an uneasy feeling in her stomach. The room was empty. Her powers confirmed it.

ValleyGirl_101: You aren't scheduled for security duty tonight.

FUUUUUCK.

He had remote access privileges. She wasn't the least bit surprised.

She was, however, very irritated.

Anonymous: You should be careful of what you post. I'd be disappointed if this location got out into the world wide web.

ValleyGirl_101: paranoid much?

Anonymous: Haha.

Anonymous: If I was really that paranoid, I'd be going through the database files and looking for the arrest records for any capes associated with Estrella, Solaris, Uppermost, Regalia, or Noblesse. If you join a team, you should know what your teammates are capable of.

ValleyGirl_101: thanks for ur concern, friendo

Anonymous: You're welcome.

Anonymous: Don't stay up too late.

ValleyGirl_101: how about yo

Anonymous has left the conversation.
Respect and Respectability

Chapter Notes

SB users voted on what sidestories to write within the Tabloid universe, and the winner was an extended flashback sequence on Paul's mother, Naomi Villiers. This chapter begins before the divergence of worlds that occurs upon Scion's arrival. The full timeline is in the notes at the bottom.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.


There was one thing Naomi's mother talked about more than Jesus and hard work. It was Respectability. The capital letter was important.

Respectability came from upholding certain standards, and making sure people knew you were doing so. Respectability was never a constant. You had to keep measuring yourself against other people to make sure you still had it, and keep topping it up when you didn't.

Respectability came from speaking in the right way. From wearing the right things, even when you were only going as far as the front lawn to pick up the morning newspaper. It came from taking holidays in the right places, with proof in the form of phonographs to show off in tedious slideshow viewing parties. And from being seen shopping in the right supermarket, even though Hakuhodo's Grocery two streets over sold the same things at a cheaper price.

It was tiresome, Naomi thought. She thought that of a lot of things, but most of the time she kept them to herself. People didn't like hearing how wasteful she considered so many of their habits. How inefficient, how unnecessary. There were many people, in fact, that she considered unnecessary.

"I told you, Mother," said Naomi. She would have frowned but had been told years earlier that it gave you wrinkles. "I can't come. I don't have the time for it."

They were returning from their regular Sunday devotions, the only social event her mother organized that she couldn't talk her way out of participating. She and her mother went to take Communion on Sunday mornings, had tea at the Hotel Grosvenor with some members of the Ladies' Aid Society, then helped prepare the Sunday roast so it was ready for Papa to carve when he got back from the golf club. Papa didn't always join them at Church. He just announced when he wasn't going and Naomi's mother would press her lips thin and that was that.

Naomi suspected that the day her mother had dropped her maiden name was the same day she'd lost her spine. Mother always made her go to Church.

Her mother's lips pressed thin then. They were walking back to their house from the trolley stop, the walk made a little more difficult in heeled shoes and Sunday dresses.

"I don't like your tone, or that attitude," Mother replied. "Darling, tell me, what would your husband think of it?"

"I don't have a husband," Naomi scoffed. "So it hardly matters what I do or don't have time for."

She wanted to run and outpace her mother so she could reach the house first and have five minutes to herself without someone nagging her to do whatever it was that she was least interested in doing at the moment. Or just five minutes without having someone around at all. Her weekdays were spent at college, where she shared a dorm with another girl who always kept the radio on.

But she didn't run. It wouldn't be seemly to run, even if was possible to run in heels down a steep incline.

"And you'll never have a husband if you keep that up," said Mother.

Naomi laughed. "As if it was a woman's attitude that men really care about."

Mother sighed. "I don't know if I should give up on praying for you, or if I should just pray harder."

"Pray for Gerry. He needs it more than me," Naomi replied. Gerry was her older brother. The good one in the family, because every family who had more than one child had a good one and a... well, if it wasn't exactly a bad one, it was one that turned out not so good in ways that made the parents glad they'd produced a spare.

Gerry was now Second Lieutenant Gerard Villiers, which had made Mother so proud when he'd gotten his commission—as if he wouldn't have gotten it with the conscripted ranks needing officers, and Papa's connections smoothing the way. But it always worried Mother, because mothers always worried when their sons went to war. Naomi knew that. Mentioning her brother's name made her mother go sad and quiet, and some quiet time was what Naomi desperately wanted.

They returned home, a neat clapboard house at the end of a street full of similar houses, with a small lawn in front and painted rows of white fenceposts on either side to delineate each home from the neighbors. It was a safe neighborhood, comfortable and scenic, but not extravagant, because showing off wasn't Respectable.

They wiped their feet on the doormat. They took their hats off indoors. Mother went to the kitchen and began pre-heating the oven. Naomi climbed the stairs to her room, kicked off her shoes, closed the door, and sat at her desk. Her half-completed homework lay open in front of
her, pages of matrices with the calculations jotted in straight columns. The graph paper pad she'd laid out on the desktop was blank and untouched. She didn't pick up her pencil.

Naomi's mother hadn't liked it when she'd wanted to study something that wasn't safe and conventional. Mathematics had always interested her. Unlike Respectability, the units they came in were clear and defined. They could be moved around at will, broken up into little pieces that could be added and subtracted. They could be balanced and measured, kept within the confines of her desk drawer, or spread out to touch the farthest edges of the world.

Her choice of what to study didn't agree with Mother's opinions. What kind of job could she ever get with a degree in mathematics? What kind of man—what quality of future son-in-law—would Naomi ever be able to find in such a workplace? It would be a monumental waste of time and Naomi would someday regret not following the path of Respectability. For it was Mother's opinion that a Respectable Woman could be one of three things: a nurse, a secretary, or a wife. Always one of the three, because it was impossible to be more than one at the same time.

A nurse, a secretary, or in a pinch, a telephone operator. They were all things you did to fill in the time before you were married. And once you were, it was time to give it all up in the name of family and duty.

Naomi had long since decided she didn't want any of that. There was nothing in it that appealed to her, starting with giving up her name to become a Mrs. John Smith. She liked her own name, both names, thank you very much. And being a wife, a mother, starting a family of her own? A lifetime of dealing with her own family had convinced her that it was more trouble than it was worth.

Unnecessary, was her final conclusion on the matter.

"Aren't you going to join the party?" asked Antonio, holding a long-stemmed glass in one hand. "We have wine and champagne by the case. Scotch?"

Antonio’s dark hair was thick and curly, his eyebrows expressive, and he had a black mustache that wriggled up and down like a caterpillar whenever he smiled. He smiled a lot. And he spoke with a hint of an accent, enough to sound exotic, but not enough to inform the average listener where he came from. Most people thought he was Cuban, which Naomi assumed was because they either got “Havana” and “Paraná” confused, or couldn’t hear the difference over the roar of conversation and the musicians hired to set the ambience for the evening.

He was a dashing young man, Naomi supposed. Dashingness aside—she was no expert in young men—she could see how Antonio wanted to make such an impression on other people. His collars were always pressed to a sharp point, his trousers flaring wide, paired to a matching jacket. Today, his pointy collared button-down shirt matched his ascot, and the perfect coordination of each garment suggested that his fashion inspiration came from a department store window display.

Unlike many who sought Antonio’s time and attention, she wasn’t here because she thought he was handsome. No, it was something much more shallow. She was here because of Antonio’s money.

She didn’t feel bad about it. It wasn’t as if it was wrong, not when she’d made it clear from the start the exact terms through which they could be useful to each other.

“Scotch,” said Naomi, setting down her briefcase on the office desk. ‘I’d be a splurge when she received her first paycheck from Leeuwins-Meriwether and Partners. A few years later and her base pay was not much higher, the current numbers boosted more by her share from the clients’ gains. ‘Wats water. No ice, thank you.”

Antonio closed the office door, shutting out the hum of people and music from outside. The office was spacious, built with the same generous dimensions as the rest of the gallery: high ceilings, tall windows, and exposed beams left over from the shirtwaist factory that had once occupied the space in decades past. Like all modern offices, it had a fully-stocked wet bar. Unlike all but the most modern of modern offices, the electric typewriter occupying most of the desk had computerized cassette drives.

How quickly he found ways to spend money. Here a charity auction, there a renovation for separate smoking areas, and now a lavish gallery showing for the artists and Bohemians that this town was bursting with. Over the time they’d known each other, she’d reined in the outrageous spending to a merely excessive level, as with tonight’s party. They’d sell a few paintings, then recoup the catering and entertainment costs with the gallery’s cut. She’d convinced him to host his parties here rather than in his home, invite the right sort of people, then acquire partial ownership of the gallery so she could work her magic and ensure that expenses incurred would be counted as business overheads.

It was her job to make sure Antonio’s account never ran dry.

"Hard day at work?" He lifted the crystal stopper off one of several decanters that sat in a tray on the bar counter. His other hand reached for a clean glass.

Naomi wondered how he managed to be so calm at all times, then corrected herself. Of course he’d be calm. There was nothing he had to worry about. He’d grown up with his parents’ money in a house full of servants, and he still had all of it waiting for him for when he grew tired of living this “artist’s” lifestyle. Or when his family stopped supporting such a lifestyle with a bi-monthly wire transfer. Perhaps in a few years he would leave the country to manage his family’s business affairs. They’d made their fortune in land—plantations originally—and with her advice, it had expanded into a diverse real estate portfolio.

She’d be sorry to see him go, of course. He was her biggest account, the whale that made her look good to her colleagues keep their comments to themselves in front of her. She’d be happy if she never heard "The steno pool is downstairs, sweetheart" again. Antonio was... different. He was kind-hearted, generous in a number of ways, which in the cut-throat finance industry was so rare as to be remarkable.

She smiled, accepting the drink. "Every day is a hard day when you’re a junior account manager. Emphasis on the ‘junior’.”

"If you don’t like Leeuwins, why don’t you go somewhere else?" Antonio asked. "Your friend Howard said he had a vacancy at his firm. A new place in Los Angeles, new building and everything. Very state-of-the-art. New ideas too, or so I’m told."

"It doesn’t work that way. You can’t just drop everything and start where you left off. You have to start at the bottom before you can get anywhere, “ she said. That was how the career ladder worked. A ladder, rings spaced out evenly along its length, right up to the shiny glass ceiling at its summit. Not that Antonio knew anything about it, having lived his entire life near the top.

"Besides, Howard’s not looking for a junior. He needs a partner."

Antonio shrugged. He’d picked up his glass, and now he swirled the wine around and around. Nervous about something? Or was it too much to drink? "Then you should be a partner," he said.

"I'd have to buy in. And I don't have the money. ’ She supposed the refreshing part of being in the industry was that everyone stopped hush-hushing around the money. She could talk numbers, hard numbers, with no tip-toeing around them as if they were swear words. "One-point-four million."

"I can lend it to you," he said.

Naomi blinked. "I can't pay you back," she replied. "And you're a client. Personal loans are not a sound investment, and it's my responsibility—and part of the contract between me, you, and Leeuwins—to take care of your assets. Responsibly. As part of my duty of care. And that is exactly the opposite of what you're suggesting."

"Leave Leeuwins, leave the contract. Then let me give you the money."
"Antonio," Naomi said, a trace of impatience in her tone. She could tell that he wanted something, but not what it was. No one threw away their money for nothing in return. Even those who gave to charity did it for tax deductions or the conscience boost that came of feeding hungry orphans. "It's not all your money. It's your family's money. For that amount they'd have to sign off on it, which they wouldn't, because it's a stupid idea."

"We could convince them to sign off on it," said Antonio. His voice was so calm it frightened her. "There's a way. There's always a way."

"What," said Naomi. She'd lifted the scotch to her lips but stopped dead when she realized what he meant. "No!"

"You're not happy," he said. He put his glass down and crossed the room, until he was within arm's reach of her. "I hate seeing how unhappy you are. I hate that I can't visit your office without hearing people whisper about us, or having your boss ask me if I wouldn't prefer someone else assigned to my account, as if you weren't good enough for me. You could be happy, Mimi. So much happier. And I want to see you happy."

Naomi curled her fingers around her glass, hiding the slight tremble she was afraid he might see. "Why do you care so much about making me happy?"

"I think you know."

"I see."

They were silent. Strains of music drifted in from the party, still going on at full swing. A contemporary jazz ensemble, a female vocalist who sang with a folksy twang. She could hear the whoosh and blare of traffic from outside the window, even this late into the evening.

A choice. That was what he'd just offered her. A choice, an opportunity, a decision.

If she boiled her decision down to her wants, she could see which direction they pointed. Her current employment situation, such as it was, was unfulfilling. She was always at risk of having her accounts poached, her clients warned of her relative inexperience in the industry, the unlikelihood of her being their long-term manager, because even if she posted high return rates this quarter, surely—surely—the time would come where she would have to take a leave of absence, be unavailable, her loyalties divided between her work... and elsewhere. They didn't say where. Everyone already knew what was meant.

She could see what he wanted, too. He wanted her companionship, a partnership, in a more meaningful way than a signed contract printed on company letterhead. He was more altruistic than was good for him, but he wasn't stupid. He knew that she was quicker, cleverer with the numbers than he could ever be; she could have easily treated him as a naïve foreigner with a blank checkbook to bleed dry. She hadn't. She'd been fair, fair from the very beginning with what she wanted from him.

It had convinced him that she was worthy of his trust. And not just his trust, it seemed.

Without this offer, where would she be? Where could she go from here? Naomi was a realist. She'd always known what she wanted from life. And she'd known how difficult it would be to get there alone. Had she ever decided that she'd never accept help from other people?

"If I say 'Yes', it would be conditional," said Naomi, choosing her words with care.

"Whatever you want," Antonio answered without hesitation.

"You didn't even wait to hear what I wanted."

"I know you." He smiled, not just with his mouth, but his mustache too, and his brows and eyes; they lifted up in the corners and showed her a glimpse of the happiness he felt. She saw it in his face and the set of his shoulders, lightened from a burden that she hadn't known about until today. She wondered what he saw in her, what he read in her face. "I know that we'll take good care of each other, won't we?"

Naomi returned to her apartment that evening, her head swimming with doubt and several glasses of scotch. It seemed like a betrayal of personal principles to accept his offer, when once the idea of accepting anyone's offer had been so deeply repulsive. But the price that came with the offer, near to one-and-a-half million dollars, was more than twice—three times—a lifetime's wages. If she had sold out her principles, sold herself... then she'd done so for a prince's ransom.

With a growing sense of irony, Naomi realized that the deal would grant her a great heaping dose of Respectability. Antonio wasn't a red-blooded American, but he came from a good family, the label "good" made better when rumors on the state of his personal finances became public. It would be more than enough to convince the in-laws that skepticism was unnecessary.

If only that Respectability didn't come at the cost of her self-respect.

But at least, she consoled herself, I'm never going to change my name.

Los Angeles, 1990.

The visitor arrived after sunset, a figure in black in a black night sky, soundless apart from the soft swish of fabric and a crisp knock on the office window.

Naomi's head snapped up at the sound. Her executive office on the top floor of the HDG building
had a balcony and a great view of Downtown, city streets laid out in a sprawling grid that glowed at night, a metropolis that by day blurred into the distance under a haze of smog. It was a different place to where she'd been born; it was louder, smellier, crowded and more congested, but things moved faster here, and it wasn't all bad. If only she had the time to sit outside and appreciate it properly.

The balcony furniture was clean and neat in the same manner of the best vacation homes, the ones owned by people who laughed at the idea of timeshares. But the balcony door, however rarely it was used, was a door for views, not a door for guests. She had a normal office door for that, and a receptionist outside to buzz in her appointments.

This wouldn't be a normal guest.

She set down her pen, shuffled her papers, and locked them in her desk drawer. Then she went to the window. She could see her reflection in the glass: her tired face, skin not as bouncy and resilient as it used to be, hair limp where the volumizing hairspray was losing its battle against time and gravity. And there was another gray hair peeping out among the strands of ash brown.

She tugged at the cuffs of her white blouse. She'd left her suit jacket hanging over the back of her chair, and she didn't have time to put it on. The heavy shoulderpads sewn into the jacket gave her more of a physical presence, and in the past, the confidence to face down a boardroom of hard-eyed, hard-headed men.

"Good evening," she said politely.

She opened the balcony door to reveal a young woman—not much more than a girl, really—black haired, a tanned complexion half-concealed by a reflective visor over her eyes and nose, and a black bodysuit with the insignia of a tower in the middle of her chest, worn under a heavy black cape that draped to the ground. For all her apparent youth, which Naomi could discern in the smooth, unlined skin and the slender figure still in its growing stages, the girl was her equal in height. Taller if Naomi measured up to her without her heels on.

The girl held herself with a supreme confidence, straight back, upright carriage, and addressed her as she would an equal. "I thought you'd be working late tonight."

"I hate wasting my time in traffic more than I hate the traffic in this city," Naomi answered. She stepped back from the door. "Please, come in."

"Thank you," said Alexandria, looking around the office. It was larger than the ones downstairs, decorated with tasteful feminine touches to separate it from the other executive offices that shared this floor. Fresh flowers—a chrysanthemum arrangement this week—on the glass-topped coffee table, between a pair of sofas, a few peaceful watercolors framed on the white plasterboard walls, and family photographs scattered across the shelving units. "I'm happy that I never have to deal with traffic."

"How fortunate." Naomi returned to her desk, but she didn't sit down. "Can I get you anything? Coffee? Water? I can send a messenger out for takeout if you're hungry; the building has a twenty-four seven concierge."

"No thank you," Alexandria said. Her head turned from examining the surroundings back to Naomi. "Just business tonight. I don't plan to keep you long."

"Of course. The business...?"

"We are aware that your specialty lies in financing property developments. We have recently contacted your office about specific locations in the Los Angeles business district, certain sites that we had an interest in re-zoning and developing. I trust you have the files on hand?" Alexandria asked, not elaborating on who exactly We referred to. Naomi found it curious to witness such an adept, professional attitude presented to her by a teenage girl.

Naomi glanced at her desk computer. "If you'll give me a minute?"

"Please." The girl stood at the foot of the desk. There were spare chairs for guests, but she didn't sit.

"Boyd, Sixth, Wilshire, San Pedro," Naomi read off the glowing screen of her PC. "Six potential locations in Downtown L.A., five with existing buildings on the property. Currently occupied by tenants, because the space is in demand, but not all of them are at capacity. And all of them are zoned for mixed commerce and residential. But that's not what you wanted, was it? I'm not certain that your stated purpose fits into——"

Alexandria cut her off. "Our people will arrange any zoning exceptions with the city. We want a location that fits our requirements. Full location, no sub-letting, no tenant sharing. If it doesn't exist, or doesn't meet our standards, we will demolish and rebuild to match the checklist. Storage, parking, street access, rooftop access, power grid. We prefer an outright purchase, but we will consider opening negotiations on a long term lease."

Naomi closed out of the spreadsheet, an all-important question rising to the surface of her thoughts. It wasn't cheap to buy out the tenancy contracts of other businesses, even if you had fingers in their parent company's pie. It wasn't just a problem to be solved with a liberal application of money, although the money helped. Contracts and the breaking of them cost favors. Future goodwill was the worst kind of I.O.U. because it never came with a fixed price tag. "You haven't mentioned your project budget."

"We don't have a budget limit."

"I'm sorry?" Naomi said. "We need a number for the filing system. If financing is an issue, we can come up with alternatives in, say, Glendale or Burbank. Much better value, cheaper utilities, and a lower annual property tax rate."
Alexandria answered with absolute certainty. "Set it at one trillion."

"So, not an issue then."

"It might be," said Naomi, keeping her voice as calm and confident as Alexandria's. "If you make it known how much you are willing to spend over present market value, you'll prompt some people to ask questions. I personally don't doubt that all your arrangements are legitimate."

"Which they are," Alexandria agreed.

"But anyone who does may be induced to set the auditors on you. Even if the auditors find nothing in the end, you will be inconvenienced for as long as it takes them to go through your books."

"This project interests you, then?"

"It does, yes."

Alexandria nodded. "May I call on you tomorrow night?"

"Please do."

Naomi opened the door for Alexandria, and they stepped out onto the balcony. There was always a stiff breeze this high up, chilly in the winter, but not unpleasant at this time of year. The skyscrapers around them glowed with light, yellow squares at each window, the sky above painted a rich, royal blue. The twinkling specks of light were helicopters and commercial planes instead of stars—this wasn't the black, boundless space you saw farther out in the desert or the salt flats. It never got fully dark within city limits due to the light pollution.

"Thank you," said Alexandria, her cape snapping in the breeze. She'd positioned her body to keep her long hair from blowing into her face. "Have a good evening."

"Just a word of advice," Naomi said, speaking over the howling wind. To face Alexandria, she got the brunt of the it, and it was her hair that whipped around her face. "If you go to our competitors to see if they can get you a better deal, we'll find out. And the more people who know what you're looking for, the more places they'll look to throw their wrenches in. Most people in this business aren't superheroes. Losing a big account looks better on the reports if you can say no one else got it either."

Alexandria absorbed the information silently, then she took off into the sky, straight upwards. She didn't make any of the flashy sonic sounds that had been shown in television clips on the evening news.

Naomi returned to her office, to the files on the computer that she now had the time to inspect in detail. A junior associate had prepared them after a teleconference with whichever group must have chosen Alexandria as their representative, then marked it as medium priority. The files included a few preliminary blueprints and a list of named construction contractors they wanted in on the plan. The associate had added notes at the bottom of the page.

Funding + budget unknown.
Checking subsidiaries, money legitimate but don't know how far down.
Tricky business. Dolphin passing as whale?
They want to see your skin in the game.
—L.B.

It hadn't been the first time an investment opportunity had come with Don't Ask, Don't Tell stipulations. It wasn't the first time that Naomi's office had cashed checks they didn't ask about, moving and merging funds through the vast golden bloodstream that fed the world, until no one knew anything about the money except that it was good for all debts. Good enough to get things done.

What did Alexandria want done?

To Naomi's eyes, it seemed like an exaggerated take on a supervillain's lair. Who else would put laboratories and barracks in one building? But it wasn't just one building they wanted. It was a series of buildings, starting with the flagship, the headquarters in Downtown. Support buildings later on, surrounding the HQ and spreading out across town, nailing down each sector of the city like forts on the edge of a frontier. All of the buildings were to be placed in prominent positions, accessible and visible, the opposite of what the typical supervillain wanted. But in some ways, they were similar. They were doing the same thing.

She scanned the subheading on the last page of the abbreviated file sheet.
"The Protectorate".

The superheroes were claiming territory. And for the first time, they were doing it with legitimacy.

Times were changing, then.

Naomi had little experience dealing with this new set who had arrived on the scene within the last handful of years. These parahumans. She knew that her colleagues, her associates in the industry, knew as much about them as she did. They were unpredictable in every way, from how they appeared and where they came from, to what they could do.

Their powers. Their abilities. So much potential. What would they do? She didn't know. She didn't know what they wanted.

What did she know about them? What did she have on them, beyond the dry technical reports sent by the research division? Physiological data, the brain scans, the plotted charts showing that every one of them was different from every other. There were only a few hundred solid cases confirmed, maybe a few thousand data points in total.

Facts, statistics, science. None of it told her where to proceed from here on.

She knew that their money was good. For now.

She knew the world would see more of them. It already was. They were powerful, and would grow stronger as they grew more numerous. And they were dangerous. That couldn't be forgotten.

Alexandria had already showed her a glimpse of how dangerous she could be. Not with her strength, or the speed she drew on to cross the skies in the blink of an eye. Not even in the way she moved, her feet floating a fraction of an inch over the office carpet, making sure that there would be no physical trace of her visit left behind. Mutual plausible deniability, how conscientious of her.

It was the planning. It was faster to work with a smaller institution which had established local connections, rather than tapping into the greater resources and even greater bureaucratic apparatus of a Top Four firm. Money could move mountains, but it didn't happen overnight. Plans like this took years to carry out to fruition.

And what would happen when it was carried out? There must exist many other plans, parallel plans unfolding outside the southern California finance community, if this ripple of change had reached the door of her balcony. What kind of world did Alexandria envision for the future?

Naomi decided that she would prepare plans of her own. It was only sensible.

She picked up her phone and dialed her receptionist. She couldn't remember which one it was; they changed shifts so there was someone manning the desk for eighteen hours of every twenty-four. It was convenient because the East Coast business hours started three hours ahead of the West, and it was proof that the company knew how much she was worth.

"Ms. Villiers? Can I do anything for you?"

"Call my husband and tell him—"

"—That you'll be late tonight?" said Carla, in a bright and chirpy voice. She must have just started her shift if she could sound enthusiastic at a quarter-to-eight. "Already done. Is that all?"

"A flower delivery. Bouquet, no vase. Tulips or lilies, something tasteful. For my daughter tomorrow night, at the dance recital," Naomi said. With the hand not occupied with the phone, she scratched out the entries marked in her desk planner.

"Ooh, ouch," said Carla. She coughed. "Sorry, Ma'am."

"My son started elementary school last week," Naomi continued. "He wanted to go to that ice cream parlor, the new Italian place in Santa Monica. I won't be able to take him, so have them send a few pints to the house."

"What flavor does he like?"

"Ask my husband. He'll know."

"I'll call them in the morning," Carla said. "Is there anything else?"

"Bring the car out an hour from now."

"Yes, Ma'am."

She set the phone back in the cradle.

It was easy to say she was doing this for the sake of her family, her children, their future. There was some truth in it, after all. It just sounded so stuffy, so insincere, to call it a "legacy", because that was what it was called by everyone who wore a tailored suit to work in a top-floor office.

It was easier to say she enjoyed it for its own sake. To speak, and have a whole room stop to listen. To sign her name, and know that an idea on paper would now be given a chance to enter reality. To move a decimal point, redirect the flow of golden blood, and feel a nation shift its course to follow.

It was better if she enjoyed her line of work. The alternative was resentment, and that would have been unacceptable.
Los Angeles, 1998.

Time chipped away at the face of the world.

The landscape of society cracked and ruptured around her.

The insular world within Naomi's house remained as it was, from day to day, and morning to morning. It centered her in the beginning of each day, gave her something to return to at the end; it was a reminder that there was something worth getting up for and doing it all again tomorrow.

It was curious how family had become such an important facet of her life, when the concept of motherhood had never come easily to her. Her husband had adored children years before he'd had any of his own, but for Naomi, it was years before she could look at the helpless, squalling creature that had been squeezed out of her body and think of it as anything more than proto-human. To think of it—them—as something special, because they were hers had come as a result of decade's work.

A house, a family. Children. A husband.

Strange, but also pleasant.

She could describe Step One of her average morning with those words, too. Antonio's beard brushing up against her cheek was strange. He had a beard to go with his mustache these days. The serious, dignified air it gave him made him look older than the other fathers at school PTA meetings.

The soft "Good morning" he whispered into her ear was pleasant.

She could see sunlight spearing in through the gap in the curtains. If she opened the curtains, the routines of other people's mornings would be revealed to her: dogs and their owners jogging down the sidewalks, hired staff clipping hedges and watering lawns before the heat of the day set in, a patrol van from the Neighborhood Watch doing the hourly security sweep, checking for unusual or out-of-state license plates.

The bedframe squeaked and the covers rustled as Antonio sat up in bed. She glanced at the digital clock on the nightstand.

6:45 AM.

"Are you doing breakfast?" she asked, pulling the covers over her head.

"Do you want anything?" he answered. "Bagels and coffee or proper food?"

"Mmm... Proper food sounds good."

Antonio shrugged on a bathrobe. "Late start this morning?"

"No appointments. The whole building will be glued to the TV today, and not just us and Bartley's or Kearing—everyone with a revenue stream over seven figures is invested in the bill."

Naomi sighed, then rubbed her eyes. "They won't miss me if I take a slow day."

She heard the slide and snick of the bathroom door opening. "I wish you'd take more slow days," Antonio said.

Naomi made a non-committal, too-sleepy-to-argue noise. "You take care of everything when I'm out. You don't need me here."

"That's not the point and you know it."

She groaned, the sound muffled by her pillow. "Fine, alright. Next time I can get away, we'll do a weekend in Aspen."

"Anaheim."

"Anaheim?"

"With the kids," he said. He turned on the faucet. Water swished down the drain. "You should spend more time with them. They barely see you."

"They know why I have to work. They understand. And they have you," Naomi replied, feeling somewhat defensive about her position. This was much too early in the morning to explain in eloquent words why her work was necessary, not just for him, but for the family as a whole. "Besides, the kids don't even like Anaheim."

She didn't understand why people liked the place. Anaheim was a traffic trap, a money pit for tourists, a black hole filled with hospitality workers and marketing gimmicks. It was only "The Happiest Place on Earth" to out-of-towners who didn't know any better.

"They deserve a break," said Antonio. "They work too hard. And so do you."

Oh. There it was, the disapproval, that concern. It wasn't enough to him that she provided for the family. $7,500 per semester for Paul's school tuition. $23,000 up-front plus registration fees for Josephine's new car, and $300 a week for her private lessons and tutoring. Antonio's charity causes, all the black tie fundraising galas she'd attended in the last twenty years where the price tag had never dipped below $125 per ticket.

She wasn't a woman of leisure like many of the women who lived in this neighborhood, on this very street. Like them, she had hair appointments, nail appointments, a sales associate at Gippurt's who saved a pair of shoes in her size at the launch of every new season. But whatever she had in
common with them, she had them because she worked for it. She couldn't just... stop working.

She pursed her lips. "Hard work never hurt anyone."

"Taking it easy doesn't hurt either," he said, turning off the taps. "Come down in thirty if you want breakfast."

Naomi fell back among the pillows, gazing at the twirling blades of the ceiling fan. It wouldn't be accurate to say that her life was difficult or unpleasant, because it wasn't. It was, in the best way she could put it, strange how she'd found her role reversed from the life her mother had once envisioned for her. She'd rejected that life, but it had caught up with her anyway. She was a wife whose husband's opinion on how best to raise the children differed from her own; she was a woman who lacked that natural motherly instinct, but had ended up a mother of two.

She lay in bed for twenty-five more minutes before she showered, dressed in one of her many silk blouses, and unwrapped one of her many business suits from its plastic dry cleaning cocoon. The role reversal had its benefits: her husband did the child rearing, the housekeeping, and the errand running. She had to wonder if he ever found his own role unpleasant or difficult. She imagined that many men, even many of the modern, turn-of-the-millennium man that Antonio was, could not see the domestic life as a fulfilling one.

She certainly didn't.

Breakfast had already begun by the time she arrived downstairs.

They had a formal dining room with twelve seats around a varnished cherrywood table, but the children preferred to eat in the kitchen. In fairness, Naomi's absence on most weeknights meant that she couldn't insist on dining with proper procedure. In contrast to the dining room, the kitchen was a cozier, welcoming space with large windows and a view of the backyard swimming pool, designed more for comfort than impressing guests. It was often filled with the good smells of home cooking, and to her husband, it was the center of their home.

Josephine and Paul sat at the kitchen counter, eating breakfast. She felt a sudden pang in her chest when she realized that the image of them she held in her memories didn't match what she saw now. In that malleable spectrum of age, they were approaching the far end of childhood.

Almost adults. It was a startling realization.

The two of them favored her husband's looks—dark hair, dark eyes, skin that browned in summer and stayed tan through all the months of winter. Josephine wore a pastel pink cardigan over a yellow sundress, a silver charm bracelet flashing on her left wrist. She had scrambled egg whites for her meal, garnished with chopped chives and served with a side of sliced avocado and smoked salmon. Paul was in his uniform: necklace, white dress shirt, blue blazer with the school crest on the left breast. He paged through today's copy of The Times, a half-eaten omelette on the plate in front of him.

"Good morning," said Naomi from the doorway. She could see Antonio behind the granite counter, cooking something on the stove. It was his habit to cook two different versions of each meal, a low-fat, carb-restricted dish for Josephine, and the full-flavor, butter-soused traditional recipe version for everyone else.

"Hi Mom!" Josephine answered, while Paul mumbled something without looking up from the paper. "I can't drive Paul to school today. The dressmaker finished the gowns for the Ländler scene yesterday and I have to pick them up for rehearsal."

The papers rustled. "That's fine," Paul said. "I'll just take the bus."

"No," said Naomi firmly, taking a seat opposite theirs. "I'll take you."

"What's wrong with the bus?" Paul asked, picking up his fork. "It's one dollar and twenty cents a ride. That's good value."

Josephine snickered. "One dollar twenty, and the meth stabbings come for free."

"You only get meth stabbings if you ride past ten at night," said Paul. His eyes scanned lines of text on the share prices page of the newspaper. "And that's if you sit at the back."

"Enough of that, Paul," Naomi said. "You're not taking the bus today. Just look at the page four headline, 'Twelve Injured in Bus Collision'."

"It wasn't because the bus was dangerous," argued Paul, through a mouthful of eggs and toast. "A bridge collapsed."

"The passengers would have gotten out if they'd been in a car."

Naomi pushed back her chair and grabbed a mug. She poured herself some coffee from the percolator on the counter. "All the cars made it out fine."

Paul shrugged. "This time. If it happens again—but worse—then both of us will be goners. Isn't it better to diversify the risk?"

"He just doesn't want people to see Mommy taking him to school," Josephine remarked, her eyes cast down demurely. "No offense, Mom, but you don't have enough implants or fillers to pass for Cool Mom."

"Almost Cool Mom," Naomi corrected. "I'm trying to be a Cool Mom."

"Almost Cool Mom," Paul said. "I'm trying to be a Cool Dad."

"Your mother doesn't need implants. She's beautiful as she is."

Antonio set a loaded plate by Naomi's elbow. "Demi-glace omelette served soft, bruschetta on the side. Enjoy." He smiled,
Josephine rolled her eyes. Paul tore his toast up into smaller and smaller pieces, remaining silent. Naomi couldn't remember when Paul had become this strange, sullen creature. She'd always had more to talk about with Josephine, because the mysteries of life known as "Girl Things" were not very mysterious to her. But although Paul had never been as close to her, he never was this distant. In the past, he'd held a keen interest in what she did at the office, asking questions about how they squeezed out the money in futures when the money didn't yet exist. He'd possessed a hunger curiosity about everything from the fax machines to the banks of computer monitors at each work station.

A phase, perhaps? Was he trying to find his place in this world, finding a balance between adult authority and his growing independence? There had been a time in Naomi's life when she'd thought very little of her own mother's authority and opinions. During that time she'd been so certain of her own judgement that she'd accepted everyone who disagreed as wrong. She recalled her willingness to test the boundaries of her burgeoning individuality, thinking nothing of the people around her.

For all that Paul resembled his father in looks—and she could see where he would grow into them more in the coming years—she recognized shades of himself in him. Not as much of the outwardly creative mind that Antonio shared with Josephine, but an inwardly reflective one like hers.

"It's settled," Naomi said. "Josephine, do what you need to do. I'll take Paul to school today."

"But—" Paul began.

"No," said Naomi, her tone final.

"Why do you like the bus so much?" Josephine asked. "The metro ones are just okay, but the south line buses are old and don't even have air conditioning. And they take you south of the county. What is there even to do there? Buy drugs?"

"No," said Paul. "Drugs are expensive."

"Watch people get stabbed for drugs, then?"

Paul's eyes darted in Naomi's direction before turning to his sister. "Yes," he said quickly. "Sure, that works. It's amazing how many interesting things we never get to see living here."

Naomi sipped her coffee, eyebrows raised. She'd known from her own experiences of growing up with a brother that teenage boys were secretive. Most of the time the secrets were harmless. A cache of magazines hidden in the woods or under the basement crawlspace, or a gap in the neighbor's fence that allowed peeping on sunbathers in the back garden. Letters signed without names, only smears of lipstick if there was an author's mark at all. If Paul was anything like that, then she assumed he was neither as secretive nor as subtle as he wished to be.

"I look forward to hearing more about it," Naomi spoke in a casual voice. "I'm sure we'll have much to talk about on the drive."

Josephine giggled at Paul's crestfallen face. "At least you tried," she said.

"Yeah, well, I don't know why I bother," said Paul. His tone was pleasant and conversational, but Naomi discerned a stiffness to his forehead and the muscles in his cheek, a flatness in the line of his brow. His father had those same brows that she could read in a single glance, but here Paul was deliberately stiffing the tells in his body language. He was upset, but hiding it from her. Did he really want to ride the bus so badly? Paul set down his fork and pushed his chair back. "I'm going to brush my teeth and pack my stuff."

"See ya, squirt," Josephine said. When Paul had gone, she continued, "Puberty's really hitting him hard. I know he's too skint for drugs and too goody-goody to sell my laundry to his school friends, but I think he's up to something that isn't good for him, and it makes me worry. He doesn't care about sports or cars or girls like a normal boy should. Maybe he doesn't care for girls, and that's fine, or maybe he still thinks they have cooties, I don't know. But I know that I was never like that when I was his age."

It was true; Josephine had been the manageable child from her early years, the child that mothers didn't have to worry about when they pulled out from the carpool lane in the mornings. The child all mothers wished they had, even when they told themselves their own children were just as good.

"Paul was born with a grumpy soul," said Antonio, who had been listening the entire time. He wiped his hands on a dish towel and joined them at the kitchen counter. "Just like your mother. You must have patience with him; he'll come around in time."

Josephine looked down at her plate, egg shreds disintegrating under a sprig of parsley. "I'm leaving for college in a few months. I won't have the time to watch out for him."

"He's getting to an age where he can take care of himself," said Naomi. The words were reassuring, delivered in a calm and soothing way. She wasn't sure if she believed them herself, but reminded herself that it didn't matter, as long as Josephine believed it. "And you'll come back during the holidays, and I'm sure by then he'll have missed you. You'll have plenty to talk about."

"I guess..." Josephine said, not fully convinced.

Naomi shot a helpless look at Antonio. This was not her area of expertise. She could deal with other people in reasonable circumstances, but when people became more emotional than reasonable, the structure of their conversation broke down. She understood that children needed boundaries, and she provided them. Her parenting approach was one of authority, not friendship as some of the new age guides recommended. When either Josephine or Paul needed more than the guidance of authority, her husband was there. He'd read those new age guides. He didn't need them. There were times she envied him that.
Antonio gave her a slight nod, then pulled out the chair next to Josephine. Josephine turned to him, her eyes lighting up. Dad was the source of the genuine comfort that Mom couldn't provide.

It was curious. As a child, her husband had been raised by an impersonal army of maids and nannies, but now he dedicated his life to raising his children the old-fashioned way. Naomi's mother had been a housewife, a homemaker, and it was this lifestyle whose every facet repelled her in ways she couldn't explain. She remembered thinking of it as a prison of social convention and biological imperative. Inescapable once you'd let it be built around you and found the door slamming shut at your back.

Nevertheless. She'd made her compromises to get where she was. The blessings without all of the burdens. She could see she wasn't needed or wanted in the kitchen.

Twenty minutes later, Naomi caught herself pacing the small entryway by the front door. With a coat closet and an umbrella rack on each wall, it was more modest and self-contained than the connecting foyer, and reminded her of the house of her childhood. That house was not small, not large, but modest. Humble under the eyes of the portrait of Jesus watching the door. In this house, she'd done away with saints and crucifixes as home décor. Modest she would accept, but always modern.

She heard footsteps from the foyer. She turned around. "Are you ready?"

"Yes," said Paul. He had his school backpack over one shoulder. His damp hair had been combed down, the ends curling over his temple and forehead. They were the same height, now that she'd put her heels on.

The drive to Our Lady of Mercy was quiet. The school was out west, almost to the Ventura County line. It had acres of land, sports fields, a well-appointed campus, a list of notable alumni. It was exclusive, safe from the problems that plagued inner-city schools, and it had a teaching staff of priests and nuns, the modern sort who believed that the Lord had a place in His heart for all denominations. Naomi's mother had recommended a military boarding school, the same one her brother had attended. Our Lady was a compromise.

"Have you put any thought into what college you planned to apply for?" Naomi asked, breaking the silence. The only sound was the soft hum of the air conditioning, and the occasional tick-tick-tick of the turn indicators.

Paul gazed into the distance. Hills, scrubby gardens, white stucco and red-tiled roofs and solar panels. Suburbs as far as the eye could see. "I'm only a freshman."

"You can take Advance Placement classes starting this Fall. The colleges around here accept some AP's as course credits."

"Mhm."

"Paul." Naomi gripped the steering wheel hard. It was so difficult to be patient with him when he acted as if the whole world bored him, as if no one was worth a minute of his attention. "You have to start thinking about the future."

Paul bumped his knees against the glovebox, a hint of the restless frustration that he didn't allow his face to show. "Why can't my future be cooking three meals a day and taking care of babies? All I need to do is find an heiress and I'll be set for life."

She had heard this unsubtle criticism of the parenting dynamic between his mother and father before. That dynamic had never been simple. Yes, Antonio Braganca's wealth had granted him certain liberties. He'd bought his way into an American marriage, a citizenship that had granted him an alternative to living under a military dictatorship in his home country. But he saw his role as a parent as a gift, not a duty. She could not see the same thing in Paul, who since birth had had everything given to him and taken for granted.

"Do you really want to take care of babies?"

He shrugged. "No?"

"Exactly. You'll need to get a job some day."

"I need to find a way to make money," Paul corrected her. "They're not the same thing."

Naomi gave a sigh of exasperation. "How is that different to getting a job?"

"A job is what you do," said Paul. "You spend all day in an office. I think I'd go crazy if I had to work in the same white cube every single day. The only thing worse is working in a post office."

They were approaching the school gates now, black painted iron with spikes on the top. Naomi decelerated and turned the car into a lane of blue lines painted on the asphalt. "What else are you going to do, then?"

"I'll come up with something," Paul answered. "When economy goes down the crapper, people will still need pool boys. Don't you think I have the legs for it?"

"I think you have too much mouth," said Naomi. The car rolled to a halt.

"Eh, nobody's perfect." Paul's hand reached for the door. "This is my stop. Thanks, Mom."

"Be good, Paul."

"I'm always good." He gave a faint smile before he glanced to the side. Uniformed boys in blue blazers, carrying blue backpacks, were walking up the pathway to the main building. "When's the last time I had detention? I know how to stay out of trouble."

The door shut with a thump. Paul swung his backpack over his shoulder. He didn't look back.

Naomi bit her tongue as the conversation played through her mind on the drive to the office. She knew what her mother would think. Mother would have said it, had she been here: that Paul's aimlessness came from a lack of discipline, from being spoiled with comforts and luxuries and soft
treatment. A computer in his room, Mass a few times a year, no prayers before every meal—their lenience had ruined him. She had her own suspicions. Paul came from the same mold as she had, and if that were the case, discipline wouldn’t solve it, whether it came from a wooden switch or a JROTC boot camp. If he was to find purpose, he needed to be challenged.

She might be considered a bad mother by the standards of every parent who attended the bake sales, the PTA meetings, or chaperoned school dances, but she could find a challenge for her son. She wasn’t that terrible.

She’d made her decision by the time the car descended into the underground parking lot beneath the HDG building. The car crawled down a sloping ramp lit by yellow lights set into the walls, passing through the automated barricades. The reflective metal bar slid up when she scanned her parking pass at the window-height laser reader.

Paul would have her full support. She’d been preoccupied with getting Josephine into college, but Josephine had gotten her first pick, and now it was Paul’s turn. The decision occupied her mind on the thirty-storey elevator journey. He was her son. He deserved to have the best, and although she was determined that he earn it on his own, she wouldn’t hesitate to give him the skills necessary to do so. It was what any parent would do.

"Ma’am?" The receptionist stationed outside Naomi’s office brought her train of thought to a standstill. "We have a call on hold for you. A congressman on Line Two."

"Was there a name?" asked Naomi. She was expecting a specific caller this morning.

"District Seventeen, he said." The receptionist tapped at her keyboard. "Fremont."

"Ah," said Naomi. Fremont, California. A quiet satellite city that had grown up and re-developed itself in the decades since she’d lived there. "Tell him I’ll be there in a moment, and sorry for the hold. I had to drop his nephew off at school this morning. You know how important family is to me."

"Of course, Ma’am."

She stepped into her office and closed the door behind her. It was the same top-floor executive office she’d been given when she’d joined the company, but the view beyond the window had changed since. She could see it, for one. The air was much less smoggy after the introduction of emissions legislation on cars and factories. The skyline was littered with different buildings, new ones constructed to the new safety codes.

She settled into her desk chair, feeling the foam inserts in the seat and back mold to her body. New technology was another upgrade to the old status quo, and one she’d embraced with open arms.

She picked up the phone. Dial tone, then a few clicking noises. "Hello?"

"Naomi," said a familiar voice on the other end.

She smiled. "Gerry. How are you?"

"I’m well," said Gerard Villiers. "We’re voting on the bill in twenty minutes. Before you ask, yes, I will. I’m paying you back, and then I’m done. No more favors."

No more favors. She’d heard that line before.

Her relationship with her brother had never returned to what it had been when they were younger—life had simply gotten in the way. The Gerry who had returned from his overseas posting was not the same Gerry she’d grown up with. And neither was she the wide-eyed, gingham-clad little sister that he remembered.

It hadn’t helped that their mother had applied an opposite set of expectations for what she perceived as Gerry’s ideal future. Gerry had gone for the career military route, and it’d been a solid living for a number of years... Then the formation of the PRT had led to a drastic manpower and budget drain for all branches of the armed forces. He’d served out his final contract upon qualifying for the retirement package. Then he’d cooled his heels for a while, adjusting to life as a civilian for the first time in years. And at her recommendation, he’d switched to politics, confirming Naomi’s suspicion that patriotism had never been his true career motivation.

Gerry was lucky to have been able to enter politics so quickly, and of that he was very conscious. His election campaign had only been possible due to her support. The carefree sibling relationship of the past was not easy to maintain when everything she did for him, and everything he asked for, came with strings attached.

But he still asked. And she still gave. Family was complicated.

"You'll call me when you want to run for senator," Naomi remarked. As a congressman, he was one of fifty-three in the state. As a senator, he’d be one of two.

"The party’s backing Putnam all the way," Gerry said. "I don't have a chance."

"Not in California. Don’t be stupid."

Silence on the other end for a few seconds, then Gerry asked, “What do you mean?”

"Idaho," said Naomi. "In the portfolio, there's an investment property in Boise. It's registered in your name. You should start spending your weekends there, take Lydia and the kids."

Her sister-in-law Lydia was a proper Mrs. Villiers in all the ways Naomi couldn't stand. Lydia Villiers was a blonde, devout homemaker, her rigorous church-going schedule inspired more by righteousness than habit. She’d made a good officer's wife, and now she was a good politician’s wife, which required the kind of mild, unassuming personality that Naomi equated with having no personality whatsoever. Perhaps it was unkind of her to think so, but Mother's instant approval of Lydia had irked her, when Antonio was still treated as an outsider after twenty years.

"How?" Gerry swallowed, switching tracks. It was convenient that she’d known him since
Naomi glanced at the family portraits lining the office bookshelves. She had one taken every Christmas to go out with their greeting card mailing list. "Since the first time you came to my house and asked my husband for money," she said.

"I asked him to back me," Gerry said, attempting to control his irritation. "Not you. I can't believe he told you.

She knew. He'd switched to calling her because the first line of contact had rebuffed him. Antonio deferred to her in matters financial. That had been their agreement.

"Why wouldn't he?" asked Naomi. "The money is mine. The principal was his, but every dividend in the last twenty years is in my name."

She couldn't help but feel a small swell of pride at that. If considerations of vulgarity and depreciation didn't matter to her, she could easily be in possession of a private jet or a holiday yacht, and that bumped her into the top one-percent of American households. Still, she had no fondness for the category they—Gerry and Lydia—put her in. Nouveau riche.

"I can't..." Gerry trailed off uncertainly.

"Do you want to be a senator or not?" The appeal to ambition was a mutual weak point in their moral defense.

"You're crazy. You know that, right?"

"Yes or no?"

"Yeah..." said Gerry. He cleared his throat. "Yes."

Naomi smiled. The best way to convince a skeptic was to make them think they had options. Give them a taste, then let them choose: everything or nothing. "I thought so. Good luck, Gerry."

"I'll call you later, okay?"

"Please do," Naomi said. "Boise is nice this time of year."

They made a few polite inquiries on the health of their respective children before they ended the call. Gerry's children were either in college or working adults—two sons and one daughter, all of them delightful little sycophants who knew Aunt Naomi managed their trust funds, donated to their schools' Booster Clubs, and brunched with their boss' bosses. They were such wonderful, well-mannered children, and Naomi had long thought it a shame that Lydia didn't like them visiting.

Naomi returned to her work. It would be some hours yet before the results of the vote were confirmed, but she already knew what the results would be, based on promises made by those in the House majority who owed debts or wanted favors. She also knew that while private victories could be soothing to the soul, there was nothing sweeter to the ego than an official, public victory.

So she waited, until a knock on the balcony window interrupted her thoughts.

She went to the door, wondering if it was worth installing a bell or a buzzer on the other side. She didn't have many guests who visited through the tradesman's entrance, but those that did had one common necessity: discretion.

"Good morning," said Naomi, unlocking the glass door and sliding it open.

The girl was no longer much of a girl. What had it been, nine years? Ten?

Alexandria wore the same costume as she had when she'd first come to see Naomi: gray and black, the signature sweeping cape, the tower insignia. But the small differences she noticed—the costume had changed, the belt worn slightly higher on the waist, seams in different places, the stitched panels curving around the line of hip and breast to flatter what had not been there before. She was taller, holding herself with even more confidence, an easy, effortless confidence that came from years of experience and success. She was older too, an adult in her prime, not the teenage girl who masked her insecurity with imperiousness. Naomi guessed she must have been somewhere in her twenties, but it was difficult to tell when half her face was covered by a visor.

Naomi felt a tiny twinge of personal insecurity. This girl had blossomed. From someone who'd looked thin and small and unremarkable standing behind a borrowed podium, she'd become Alexandria, and it wasn't just a silly false name. It was an identity, an image, an international icon. Naomi Villiers, in comparison, was a cog in a counting house, closer to fifty than forty; she was someone who ran as fast as she could, pushed herself as far as she could go, just to stay in the same place. Hair dye, collagen masks, an eye for cultivating talent—nothing could make up for the fact that Alexandria was half her age and had done so much in a career one quarter the length of her own.

"They passed NEPEA-5," said Alexandria. She stood at the doorway, but didn't enter the room. "Congratulations."

"You got what you wanted," Naomi remarked, taking a moment to straighten the freesias in a floral arrangement by her bookshelf. "It was the only way they'd give you Watchdog."

They'd developed a sort of business arrangement over the years. Naomi wasn't powerful on her own right, but she was well-connected to those who had connections to others. The words insider trading, extortion, misappropriation, or bribery would never be uttered by her or those in her circle, but sometimes there were rumors, and rumors were just a form of information. And information could be used by those who knew how to use it.
NEPEA-5 was one of those things that depended on disseminating the right sort of information. Oh, didn't it restrict only a certain subset of the population? Didn't it ensure a well-regulated, competitive, and most of all fair market? Weren't the taxes going to alleviate the economic burden of funding and equipping law enforcement, specifically the new breed of law enforcers who wore black-on-black and answered to a Chief Director? Wasn't all of that a good thing?

Of course it was.

Watchdog, or WEDDG in its official acronym form, was one of those things Naomi was less enthused about, fine print side effects of passing the bill. The soothing ointment for shareholders' meetings was NEPEA-5, which promised to give back to all who'd promised to support it, but the fly in the ointment was Watchdog, an organization she suspected was an underground blackroom type of deal that was now being brought out into the light of legitimacy. She liked the idea of a centralized information-collecting group, but it was to be staffed with parahumans, and that seemed to her like well-meaning pragmatism taken too far.

To catch a wolf, you didn't bring in your own wolf. It didn't matter that you'd trained it to eat out of your hand. A wolf was a wolf, not a pet.

"It's for your own safety," Alexandria assured her. "You've heard cases of multi-million dollar deals going through without either party remembering what they signed. Master-Stranger checks only go so far."

"I see." Naomi's answer was guarded. Alexandria was the wolf that kept the other wolves in line. How did no one see it? "Our job is first and foremost to protect our clients' interests."

"Mine is to protect this country," said Alexandria mildly. It seemed to Naomi that her words contained a gentle rebuke for not supporting Watchdog wholeheartedly, a pointed reminder that Naomi's support was motivated by doing what was best for the company, not the country. An appeal to patriotism, however subtly Alexandria wielded it, still rankled. Before the advent of parahumans or Endbringers, much of Naomi's adult life was spent under the fear of a Communist invasion, and she'd heard all this rhetoric before.

This was what came of letting the youth take positions of authority, which they had no qualifications for but some unnatural quirk of chance.

"Your effort doesn't go unappreciated." Naomi glanced at the bookshelves. Paul and Josephine's faces stared at her from last year's family photo. Josephine was smiling, but Paul wasn't, because he thought the forced poses were unnatural and the studio backdrops tacky.

"My children admire you," Naomi said. Not strictly true. It wasn't the open adoration shared by other children who bought the branded lunchboxes and wore the logo pyjamas, but a reluctant respect for her abilities. "They're not the only ones."

"Children are our future," Alexandria said. "Which brings me to the reason of my visit. The Wards project."

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"There are issues with the project," Alexandria said. It was a statement, not a question. She strode over to the sofa, sweeping her cape out to the side so it wouldn't be sat on and wrinkled.

"Only minor ones. The city council is delaying the approval." Naomi knew that being direct with Alexandria was the best approach; she tolerated no excuses or waffling or anything that wasted time. "Would you like to take a seat?"

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been a proven success story. We've rehabilitated at-risk teens and successfully transitioned them into the Protectorate. And the program isn't just about utility or practicality—it's about compassion. This is a place, the only place, where children with powers are allowed to be children. You should know how important that is, as a mother.'

Naomi disliked her personal life being brought up in client meetings, let alone used as a tool against her. How is your spouse? How are your children? That was the extent of forays into personal topics. No one cared or actually wanted to know. It was only a formality. Lip service, just like industry self-regulation or affirmative action policies.

"Most mothers don't foresee their children joining, or needing, the Wards."

Alexandria's head tilted to the side, at the family photos on the bookshelves. "You never know. How old are they? Eighteen and fourteen? The average age of new triggers is seventeen-point-eight years old."

"Fifteen. Paul had his birthday last month. Naomi bit back her irritation. "If we're going to quote statistics at each other, the rate of occurrence for trigger events is one in fifty-thousand. Highly unlikely at best."

She wanted Alexandria out of her office as soon as possible. It wasn't that the woman had been rude; it was that she had the uncanny ability to pinpoint sensitive topics, and the instinct to stop pushing before she passed the point of tactlessness. It left an unpleasant taste in Naomi's mouth, a negative impression of Alexandria that she might convince herself in time was unfair and unwarranted, because she'd been given no clear, defined reason for having it.

Mind games.

"If you want me to personally endorse this project to the committee," Naomi continued, "I'm going to have to refuse. My children have a comfortable life. They have the anonymity of my husband's name. She'd held onto her maiden name for more than just professional reasons. Villiers connected her to the San Francisco political scene, while Bragancas created a layer of separation to her personal life. They have everything they want. Our neighborhood has gates and armed security. They will never need Wards training."

Alexandria's visor turned to look directly at Naomi. Her mouth curled up in a tight smile. "It seems to me that you're the one in need of perception adjustment."

"My perceptions don't matter."

"That's where you're wrong. Everyone's perceptions matter."

"Everyone is allowed their perceptions, whatever they may be. Actions are what matter. My actions should speak for themselves."

The world had an abundance of those with good intentions. They bought yogurt with a pink plastic lid because the packaging said a percentage went to cure cancer. They thought about the poor orphans in Africa when they saw ads on the TV accompanied by the music of sad violins. But what they did... amounted to nothing. The world moved by the words and hands of those who didn't care, but ended up helping. The people behind closed boardroom doors who shook hands and cut deals to help those who would never know where the help came from.

A hundred million dollar disaster relief loan, a container ship of medical supplies, grant funding for pharmaceutical research. This was the modern face of humanism.

"I'd like to hear them speak louder," Alexandria spoke smoothly, interrupting Naomi's thoughts. "Convince the permit committee by the end of the week. Then have the contracts drawn up for the new Watchdog offices. Deeds, land titles, construction, permits, whatever is necessary. I want an office up and running in the first ten numbered departments by the end of the year."

Naomi pursed her lips. "Tight schedule."

"I trust that you can manage it."

"We'll see," Naomi answered.

She had doubts. If you threw billions of dollars at a problem to solve it fast, you could solve it, but the solution wasn't always a good one. Rushing things was inefficient. Every week she could shave off a deadline came from lining a politician's pocket, or left her owing another favor. She could build an office by December, and she could build ten of them, but someone else would have to deal with staffing them.

They wanted a parahuman staff, and parahumans were an unknown quantity. It was another problem. Fortunately for her, it was someone else's to deal with.

"Is that all?" Naomi asked.

"For now."

The meeting ended. Alexandria got up without a sound, slid the balcony door open, and disappeared into the sky.

Naomi remained seated on the sofa, gazing at the view. Her office was on the top floor, but the HDG building wasn't the tallest on the block, so other buildings across the street cast dark shadows on certain times of day. That was fine. They hadn't built this building too tall for a reason: its construction had been in accordance to the state's Seismic Code. Which was currently under review because the city of Los Angeles—no, the whole world—was now threatened by more than natural disaster.

Unnatural disaster.

The world had changed from what it was when Naomi was a girl. She herself had a hand in changing it. A small hand, a few nudges, but you didn't need more than that. A rudder could change the course of a ship; a lost nail could decide an entire war.
The world was still changing.

She could see it in the hydraulic cranes and steel scaffolding where buildings were being reinforced because the new Endbringer insurance policies demanded it. She could hear it from outside her office, where her receptionists watched a television announcement on the results of the vote. She heard clapping and cheering and the ceaseless ring of telephones. Congress had passed it by an absolute majority. Later, her junior associates and account managers would pop champagne corks. Her fellow executives, Mssrs. Locante, Devancourt, and Gericke, would light cigars and she'd have to keep her balcony closed or the smell would drift into her office.

The President had ten days to sign or veto. She had no doubts as to what he'd do.

But she still had doubts.

She doubted that the world was changing for the better. She was unsure if her actions helped more than they harmed. There were so many things she didn't know, things she was afraid of knowing. Fear of the unknown was bad enough, but what if there was something worse?

Then the only thing left to do was prepare for the worst.

Chapter End Notes

Timeline of Events:
1970 — Part 1 of this story. Naomi Villiers is a college student studying mathematics and statistics.
1975 — Vietnam War ends.
1976 — Part 2 of this story. Naomi Villiers is a junior account manager for an investment fund; Antonio Bragança is a wealthy foreign client.
1977 — Naomi Villiers joins HDG after buying a partnership stake. The firm specializes in property development and real estate finance.
1979 — Josephine is born.
1982 — Scion arrives on Earth.
1983 — Paul is born.
1986 — Rebecca Costa-Brown, a teenage girl dying of cancer, drinks Doctor Mother's mysterious vial. The price is two years' service with Cauldron. She is cured, powered up, and becomes Alexandria.
1987 — King is killed by Jacob and Harbinger. Jack Slash takes over as the leader of the S9.

1988 — Alexandria meets Legend and Eidolon, and comes up with a plan to integrate parahumans into society. She introduces the idea of a regulated, state-sponsored superhero team.

1990 — Part 3 of this story. Alexandria lays the groundwork for the Protectorate. Cauldron has piles of money, but to remain low-key, they need legitimate middlemen to fill out the paperwork.


1993 — Alexandria swears an oath to the President. The Protectorate is founded. Washington D.C. and Los Angeles are the first two cities to host an official superhero team.

1995 — Taylor Hebert is born.

1998 — Part 4 of this story. NEPEA-5 is passed. Uppermost is dismantled and becomes The Elite. Interlude 3.5 takes place not long after this section.

2000 — Death of Hero. Alexandria loses an eye to the Siberian, and becomes much more jaded with the world. This is the start of darkness that leads her to kidnapping people and turning them into C53's.

2002 — First appearance of the Simurgh in Switzerland. Tagg shoots a bunch of civilians.

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