

E Hawkins - Izzily Patreon by Thomas Bell (30/January/2024 - 17/March/2025)

[Why drink this juice?](#)

[Jan 30, 2024](#)

Or: hey so, why write a superpowers story anyway?

An ask I received made me think about this subject, and there are a ton of reasons. The easiest is that I've been a superhero fan since I was a kid. I got into Avengers volume 3 around when it started, and kept following those comics for several years. Some of the earliest stories I tried to write had superpowers.

That kept with me growing up, even though I stopped reading comic books in my teens (incidentally, I was also reading fighting fantasy choose your own adventure novels at this point, so there's my entrypoint into interactive fiction). In college I played a superhero RPG with friends, and I'd later get very into the Masks system.

Superpowers are also what grabbed me with the Choice of Games style of book. The Heroes Rise trilogy was just wrapping up, and I adored it. The opportunity to roleplay while reading and playing was something the old CYOAs had never done, and I formed rampant headcanons and even wrote a few fics. IF has come a long way since those days, but I'll always have a soft spot for Heroes Rise.

Back to Villain Juice: I've noodled around with this setting before, and when I got the urge to work on my own IF, it felt like a natural place to return to. Superheroes with an agenda. Superpowers that can be a blessing and a curse. Secrets and uncertainty. I chose to write about superpowers because it let me dip my protagonist (and their players!) into a dangerous world while still empowering them to do something about it.

Also there's this little gremlin in my brain that activates whenever I get the chance to write body horror.

[Character and costume](#)

[Jan 30, 2024](#)

Let's talk a little bit about character design!

Descriptions are my beloved. Love to think about how characters look, hate putting it into words. Heroes and villains make this extra fun, because there's usually the added layers of their alias and their costume. I had a pretty good time coming up with the player's selection of names for Villain Juice, though I bet a bunch of people came up with their own to suit their personal PC.

Convenient segue! Masks, all the characters have them in one form or another. The costume and the name a character picks say just as much about them as a physical description or how they act. This is an identity they're assuming, and one that means something to them. Even if they just chose something random, that tells you something too!

When writing superpowers, it's easy to jump to the straightforward option. There's an endless list of heroes and villains whose names are as plain as they get: Spiderman has a whole menagerie of animal-named villains with the powersets to match. That's absolutely fine; Spiderman's rogues' gallery is iconic after all. However, with a story like Villain Juice, it's important to think about opportunity. How can I use my design to reveal character?

Let's take a couple of examples.

Arcade is a big part of the opening scene. His power is lasers, which are colorful and flashy. Combine those powers with his personality; energetic, enthusiastic, and willing to banter, and it lends itself naturally to a loud and flashy name. Arcade.

Wyrd doesn't have much of a costume, and the narrative draws attention to that fact. They dress casually and their face is barely hidden with a domino mask. You'd assume that they're either not taking things seriously or they don't really care about their identity. The switch up, then, is that in actuality Wyrd doesn't *need* to hide their face. They can change it. Mallory's a little sly, a little tricky, and they love to mess with people, which their limited costume enables. Mal picked Wyrd, because they can keep everyone guessing.

Architect has probably the most distinct costume so far. A long coat, a featureless white helmet. Under the mask, he's all business, all the time. He's measured, calm, and a planner. An architect, you could say, especially if you consider that his powers involve forming building blocks of energy. Even out of

costume, Dion is neat and structured, taking meticulous care of his hair and appearance. That's who he is.

Drawing all these connections together is one of my favourite things about creating a hero or villain. Everyone in the story has a design to say something about them. Makes you think about the Coven's naming scheme, right?

[Character Q&A Poll - Voting](#)

[Jan 30, 2024](#)

Which character would you like to hand the reins of the ask box to for the month of March?

The winning character will be available to field questions over the course of the month: just send a message or make a comment with a question directed their way, and they'll answer in character!

Architect (Dion)

0%

Wyrd (Mallory)

33%

Ghoul (Wil)

33%

Fracture (Teddie)

17%

Rampage (Kay)

17%

Poll ended Feb 29, 2024 · 6 votes total

[February Character Q&A - Surpass](#)

[Jan 30, 2024](#)

Graciously here to show how this works, Surpass has got the hotseat for the month of February.

Q: So what do you make of that new villain group causing trouble in town?

S (circa chapter one): Eh, villains are a dime a dozen. Their boss fights dirty, but what else is new? Would like to see him try to take hostages with my fist down his throat. It was kinda fun rumbling with the creepy tentacled one. I'm down for round two.

Q: How do your powers work anyway?

S: I've got the trifecta. Strength, speed, durability. Simple, right? Wrong. Not so easy as all that. See, how it works is that I can only use 'em one at a time. If I'm strong, I can't be fast or tough, if I'm fast, I'm not tough or strong, and so on. It's not hard to change, and it doesn't take that long, but you ever been in a mask fight? Every second counts.

'Course, I'm usually kicking enough ass to make up the difference.

Q: Which of the 'three methods' are your powers from?

S: ...I'm a flare.

[Description crosspost](#)

[Jan 31, 2024](#)

I figured I'd put this on here, in case folks don't frequent tumblr.

Descriptions for the flashback four. A little more detailed than you see in VJ itself; I felt it would break the flow to go into depth during a flashback!

Beth: Short, slender, and serious. Very pale skin, very blue eyes. Hair is dark, almost black, and cropped short. Dresses in dark and sensible clothing. Limited makeup, but it is of course, all dark. Goth librarian vibes.

Prii: Middling height, average to slender build. Sharp features, high cheekbones. Hazel eyes. Originally. Medium brown hair that likes to get itself into a huge mess, especially when they've been wearing a hat, like on That Night. Makeup game on point, they like winged eyeliner and blue lip gloss. Several piercings in each ear. A colorful dresser, mix and matching leggings, jeans, hoodies, skirts, blouses and sometimes even a hair ribbon. (Not all at once. But they might have thought about it). Has the warmest coats.

Sauna: Fairly tall, comparable to the second-tallest MC option. Toned and athletic, but that's often difficult to see because she dresses quite shapelessly. Frumpy, some might say. Deep brown eyes, dark brown hair around neck length, wavy and textured. (It's kind of a nightmare to take care of, so she's reluctant to style it much). Light brown skin with darker birthmarks around her neck and jawline, hence why she often wears scarves. Oval glasses.

Grant: Middling height, middling build. Long and sandy hair which he usually wears in a ponytail. Lightly suntanned skin. Clean shaven. Fairly conventionally attractive. More self-conscious than he'd ever say about his bushy eyebrows; he tries to distract from them with a little line shave in each. Snappy dresser: usually looks ready for a night out on the town. Likes a good rope bracelet.

[Drink Your Villain Juice! - CH4 early access available.](#)

[Jan 31, 2024](#)

Whoa! Hot off the presses it's the very first patreon early release build for Villain Juice! (See next post for download).

* 25k words added, bringing the total count to 112k.

* Meet the two remaining ROs face to face.

* Learn about the mysterious Coven.

* Discover more of Paradigm/MC's traumatic past, with three different variations depending on the choices you've made up to this point.

* Get down to villain business with your new team, and perhaps find a piece of the puzzle to the agenda hiding from view.

* ...and get introduced to that douchebag that jumped you!

FYI, I haven't got saves operational for this build as it's not hosted on Dashingdon to keep the link private. The public build will be on there, but it'll require new saves regardless due to added variables.

[Drink Your Villain Juice! CH4 Early Access Link](#)

[Jan 31, 2024](#)

See attached to this post the download for chapter four. This update will be publically available on February 8th 2024. **You'll need to be able to unzip the file.**

If you encounter any problems with accessing the file itself, please let me know.

[Feb 8, 2024](#)

Hi folks! Chapter 4 of Villain Juice! is now out publically on [dashingdon!](#)

Thanks everyone that has supported the page so far, it means a whole lot to me, and I aim to keep this ball rolling over the coming months as the game continues to progress and grow!

Stay awesome, and drink your Juice. :)

[Description crosspost \(2\)](#)

[Feb 13, 2024](#)

More character descriptions, this time for the ROs! Another crosspost.

Kay: Stocky, somewhat husky build. Farmer's tan. She has very strange eyes, yellowish with horizontal pupils, and a pair of curling horns. Her hair is fluffy and grey-white. Usually zipped up in a hoodie and sweatpants, but when she's got to be active, say... for a villainous mission, she strips down to shorts and forgoes sleeves. (Which happens to reveal extra fluff on her arms and legs).

Teddie: Fair skin, short brown hair, green eyes. On the shorter side, and not heavily built. Teddie's physical appearance is kind of dominated by his Extra Bones. He's always rocking a number of awkward protrusions from his body. For instance, during the first meeting half of his brow has an extra ridge sticking out of it, plus a large pauldron like plate on his shoulder. Shit sucks.

Wil: Regardless of set gender, Wil looks more or less the same. Xe's very tall and toned, pale with short ash blonde hair and pale blue eyes. Black lipstick, black eyeliner. Just wears a whole lot of black to be honest. Studs, chains, buckles? All of those might make appearances in xer outfits. Boots, distressed jeans, a couple ear piercings. Great abs. Don't ask why I already know that detail.

Mallory: I have to asterix Mallory since they do not actually look the same all the time. However, they're korean and have dark eyes and hair. Often a little ambiguous so far as gendered appearance goes. A casual dresser, but a fairly fashionable one. Always smiling a lot. Pay close attention.

Control Group: Short and compact, a little bundle of muscle. Curly brown hair that's shoulder length when down, but usually isn't. Skin on the darker side of olive. Favours leather jackets, jeans, combat boots. Sharp eyes.

Alistair: Tall and muscular, though we're not talking body builder here. Dark skinned and dark haired, which he pulls back in a braided tail. Clean shaven, wears glasses. Decent dresser, often rocking a backpack. Where do you think he keeps all the pasta? Habitual smiler, very expressive with his face.

[Cut content - The Flashback/Prologue](#)

[Feb 14, 2024](#)

Alrighty, how about the first edition of some of the Villain Juice! cutting room floor?

Originally, the story opened with the flashback of the AdVenture team making their way into the compound. The overall course of events was similar, but certain parts were much, *much* more detailed. Unfortunately, this was to their detriment. I got a solid 17k into the chapter before I realised that this was far too slow as an opening and I was getting bogged down in too much intricate branching. At the rate I was going, the chapter would end up being the length of a novel by itself. (heck, the final/official draft version of the chapter is 46k, and that's with a lot of condensing!)

Of course, a lot of what I did write wound up retooled into the chapter 2 from the actual game, but there are a fair few bits that didn't make it. For example, picking out the exact ways in which you and your best friend became especially close (or you and your partner got together).

For example!

Furthermore, regarding your friendship with Beth...

*choice

#I'll never forget how she stood up for me at work.

While waiting for urban exploration to transform into a full-fledged career, you pay the bills by working in a coffee shop, and Beth also happens to be a colleague there.

One morning, during the opening rush, a customer started yelling and screaming at you that you'd made a mistake with their order, insulting everything from your haircut to your intelligence to your parentage.

*choice

#I got into a shouting match with them.

To put it bluntly, you were pissed, and you'd had it up to here with entitled customers criticising you while you were trying to do your job.

You let them know exactly what you thought of their double vanilla whatever with cream, and they stormed off, swearing that they would call the chain's regional management.

Beth swooped in as you stood fuming at the counter, told you to take a second to cool off, and handled the entire rest of the queue solo. When your boss asked afterwards what the heck had happened, Beth spoke up in your defence and calmly explained the customer's abusive behaviour.

All things considered, she probably saved you your job.

And how about:

Thinking about your relationship with Prii...

*choice

#There's that time they saved my butt from an angry drunk.

You didn't exactly plan to get a man built like a brick wall mad at you, but there you were, the guy's ham hock of a hand snagging a fistful of your clothes whilst he screamed obscenities into your face.

*if mc_height = 6

Nevermind that you were even taller than him, the dude was @mc_pro_build ripped|ripped|ripped|ripped|ripped|more ripped than [i]you[/i] and furious enough you feared he might try bringing you down to size by snapping off your legs at the knee.

*elseif mc_height = 2

He was so big and so ripped, in fact, that he was capable of lifting you fully off the ground. You know that because he demonstrated.

*else

The dude was ripped, furious, and looked all set to force feed you his fist a couple dozen times.

Honestly, you can't even remember why he was so angry anymore. The memory has been sandblasted out of your head by the sheer terror of the experience.

You were about to accept your fate, and then Prii...

*choice

#Somehow worked their magic, and defused the situation.

Did Prii care that muscleman had half a foot on them and was probably double their weight? No. No they did not.

Instead, with a genial smile and a joke you can't recall thanks to the aforementioned overwhelming fear, Prii cracked through the guy's rage and actually got him to laugh. Suddenly, whatever you'd done—or allegedly had done—to piss off Drunk McBeefcake was no longer at the top of his priorities.

A couple of drinks and a few more jokes later, and the walking pile of biceps was apologising to you profusely and crying on Prii's shoulder about a bad breakup. You're not entirely convinced Prii's powers of diplomacy aren't some kind of parahuman ability.

Prii still has Mr. Muscles on social media last you checked. Guy owns about six pet golden retrievers.

Other than these character pieces, the most significant change is that originally, someone (usually the MC, but there was the possibility of Shauna) was going to take a spill while trying to ram open a blocked door.

"Man, I am so over wriggling through little tiny spaces," Grant grumbles.

It seems like the group needs another volunteer.

*choice

#"Leave this to me."

*label sidlehub

*if (dated_grant)

"See that, guys? That's my \${mc_name}. So gallant." There's genuine pride and affection in Grant's voice, no matter how he tries to deflect it by mock swooning.

*elseif (dated_shauna)

"Be careful, \${mc_name}, okay?" says Shauna, fidgeting. "I don't want you to get hurt."

*elseif (dated_beth)

"Go slowly and cautiously please, \${mc_name}," says Beth. Her expression is stony as ever, but her voice holds a note of genuine concern.

*elseif (dated_prii)

"Don't go getting yourself hurt now, \${mc_name}," warns Prii. "I like my partner when \${mc_he} @singular is|are in one piece, thank you very much." You know them well enough to detect the worry that they're masking beneath the playful tone.

*else

"Thanks, \${mc_name}, you're the best," says Prii.

"Yeah, yeah, our hero," adds Grant, earning a disapproving glare from Beth.

I was pretty fond of this next bit. Perhaps small components may be recycled in future!

Incidentally, stealth was the precursor to subterfuge, and I was considering having it as an overall 'agility' style of stat. However, it felt like it overcrowded other skills, and given I wanted to use it as a deception style skill, 'stealth' felt unsuitable.

(as MC slides through the narrow gap between the door and wall, into a dark room)

Your eyes still haven't adjusted, but at least more of you is into the room than outside now. With one more twist of your body, you create the right angle to enable you to slide your other shoulder through the gap, followed by the rest of your arm and finally, your leg.

As part of the same motion, you take a step into the room.

And your foot plunges into a void.

*page_break Fall.

There's a split second to react.

*choice

#I scream.

Panic tears from your throat.

*goto thetruefall

#I swear.

"Fuc—!"

*goto thetruefall

#It's not enough.

There's no time—

*goto thetruefall

#I try to catch myself.

*if stat_stealth > 55

*else

*label thetruefall

You fall.

You fall, and an explosion of sickening pain blasts across your skull. Consciousness quakes, and an instant later, the breath is crushed out of your lungs as your back is slammed with an unforgiving impact.

What...

*page_break blink, blink

What just...

*page_break blink, blink

The blinking doesn't clear your eyes, overrunning with something hot and wet.

You think you're laying on your back.

It's so dark.

*page_break is that a noise?

You can't tell. It's muffled. Indistinct.

You taste metal.

*page_break the noise again

Blinding light assaults your senses, and in rushes the agony.

You choke out a hiss of pain, screwing your eyes shut.

*page_break what's that sound?

*set mc_health 4

*set injurydesc 2

*if (dated_prii) or (bestie = 2)

"\${mc_name}! Oh my god, oh my god—"

Arms wrap around your shoulders, trembling.

*elseif (dated_beth) or (bestie = 1)

"\${mc_name}! Thank goodness, I cannot believe—"

"Geez, Beth! Hold off on the lecture—"

"[i]Shut up.[/i]"

*elseif (dated_grant) or (bestie = 4)

"\${mc_name}! Holy shit, are you okay!?"

*elseif (dated_shauna) or (bestie = 3)

"\${mc_name}! \${mc_name}! P-please answer me!"

*else

"\${mc_name}! Stay right there! We're coming!"

Was that... Beth?

I'll always mourn the loss of this quip.

(upon failing to get the door open)

"Damn, who'd have thought we were dealing with the elite door."

Grant groans, which you choose to interpret as appreciation.

Overall, I think that the fall into darkness idea was a pretty fun one, but taking that step back and assessing was the right decision. The flashback is super important to the plot, but starting with it meant starting the entire story slowly, rather than with an action packed scene which immediately showcases the MC's powers.

I'll probably share a few more snippets of the original flashback in future! There's a few bits of it I enjoy a lot!

[Writing Update + Sneak peek](#)

[Feb 21, 2024](#)

CH5 is chugging along. Earlier in the week I completed what I've been calling the front part of the chapter, the continuation of the mission that CH4 ended off on. Lots of different options for dealing with it, and the aftermath.

Beginning to delve into the meat of the rest of the chapter and having a blast so far. Plots are thickening and it's high time Paradigm had to start doing some real work to keep all those plates spinning...

Stay awesome!

And how about a little sneak preview? Here's one of several ways the start of the mission can shake out...

"Heroes!" Fracture snarls. "Get out here!" He punctuates the challenge by absolutely demolishing a poor innocent mailbox with his hooked arm. Actually you're a little surprised that there was actually an intact mailbox in the Parks. Must have been involved in some shady dealings.

A pregnant pause, and then the door to the heroes' base bursts open below you, disgorging three figures. The first, a short man in green fatigues and a ski mask, strides to the front, brandishing a cumbersome-looking weapon that's half sword and half bat. Ranger, you presume. The other two wear matching costumes, sports style armour and knee and elbow pads in white. One has a red bullseye stencilled on their chest, the other a crosshair. You identify Hit easily enough: he's the one with the slingshot.

"Villain! To what foul ends do you darken our doorstep?"

Oh.

Oh wow.

Ranger talks like a Saturday morning cartoon's idea of a superhero.

Fracture faces the trio down impassively. "Beating the shit out of you."

Out of the corner of your eye you catch a glimpse of Rampage lurking at the side of the building, poised to charge into the action.

[Alternate POV - Mal at first sight](#)

[Feb 29, 2024](#)

I'm pleased to share the first NPC POV piece for Villain Juice! A little peek into Mal's head during the first chapter of the story, complete with a couple of alternate segments. Feel free to discuss the details elsewhere, but please don't repost etc. on other platforms!

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"So, think you'll be done with that sometime this century?"

Mallory leans against a wall, arms folded and a baseball bat propped at their side. Next to them, the other occupant of the wide alleyway glances away from the door he's crouched in front of. Dion's in his full Architect getup, meaning a helmet fully conceals his expression, but the terse shake of his head tells Mal all they need to know.

"I'm trying to concentrate," he growls, continuing to ineptly wiggle the lockpick in his hand inside the door's keyhole.

Mal rolls their eyes, smiling fondly. In their book, trying to infiltrate like this is a waste of time, especially when neither of them are particularly good at breaking and entering. Crashing the building head on would only shorten their window by a few seconds over taking the side entrance, and be a lot less boring to boot.

But that's Dion. When he truly sets his mind to something there's no point trying to persuade him otherwise. He's committed. It's endearing and frustrating in equal measure. It's the whole reason they're both here instead of back—

Mal nudges their trail of thought into the present before they get snagged somewhere unhelpful and unproductive. They've both made their choices.

A glance over to Dion confirms he's still wrestling with the lock. Okay this is just getting sad. Time for a little of the old Mal magic. "Hey, when the heroes—"

"If."

"When the heroes show up," Mal continues as if Dion didn't speak. "Who are you betting it'll be?"

"Please take this seriously," Dion entreats them, grunting in consternation as he fumbles with the lockpick.

"I'm just passing the time while that lock destroys your plans," Mal says. Dion stops for a moment and looks at them in silence. Despite the helmet covering it up, Mal knows the exact expression on his face.

They, of course, smirk back at him.

"This is the best way to avoid any alarms," says Dion, breaking his hidden glare to return to the door.

"Unless someone sees us being all suspicious," Mal quips.

"That's where you come in. Since you adore talking so much."

He's got Mal there. They tip an imaginary hat in acknowledgement of a point well scored.

"You know," they say, after a suitable pause to allow Dion to concentrate. (ten seconds). "I could totally break that down."

"And risk compromising your powers? I think not."

"Nobody's even here," Mal protests with a frustrated whine. They love Dion dearly, but he can be such a stick in the mud. It's going to get him in trouble one of these days.

"No, Wyrld."

Ah, there's that tone of voice. Mallory knows when to cut their losses. They drop the topic.

Back to the beginning then. "Personally, I think it'll be Vantage and maybe Arcade."

"Or, it could be nobody at all," Dion counters stubbornly.

Mal grins. They've got him going, exactly their aim. "Come oon. You have to have some guesses, oh mighty planner."

Dion groans. "Knowing our luck, Surpass."

"Wow, straight to the worst case scenario? Pessimist."

"You pester me endlessly for an answer, and then complain when you get one. Remind me why I bother with you?"

Mal winks. "Other than my dashing good looks and inexhaustible charm?"

"More like exhausting charm," Dion mutters. The lock clicks. "Ah!"

Mal hides a smirk in their hand. Distract Dion from overthinking and get results. As successful now as it's ever been. "Finally," they say. "I was about to call up the Hounds for fun."

"Focus," Dion replies, quiet yet firm. "Ready?"

"Yep." Mal flips their bat onto their shoulder and gives him a nod. No more prodding. For now.

Dion steels himself with a deep breath, and then throws the door wide open.

"Everyone down!" Dion barks as he strides into the lobby beyond, raising small blocks of energy on either side of himself to mark his passage. Mal saunters along after him. A ripple swiftly spreads across the room as its occupants realise what's happening and take cover below desks and behind benches. Mal catches the eye of a nearby man in a tan suit and tips him a wink, pointing their bat at him. The suit gets on the ground in a hurry.

The premises are busier than Mal would have liked, less so than they feared. It's something. Ahead of them, Dion sticks to his plan, cowing the nearby civilians with the flashy side of his powers while charting an unerring course towards a slimy-looking fellow with gel slick hair. Too bad Mal can't show off, but that would be a legendarily bad idea.

Dion corners Mr. Slick, boxing him in with barriers to prevent him from fleeing. "Your files. Where are they kept?" His voice is low and cold, lent an unearthly quality by the helmet. Mal isn't sure they'll ever quite get used to their friend's supervillain mode.

"I-in the back," Slick stammers.

"You will show my associate to them," says Dion, gesturing Mal forward. Mal shrugs off their reservations—always been good at that—and favours Mr. Slick with a grin, poking the barrier right next to his head with their bat. Slick flinches.

"Don't worry, we'll be in and out in no time," Mal tells him. "Just don't do anything cute and we'll all stay friends."

Mr. Slick swallows, nods, and leads Mal out of the lobby through a door with an electronic scanner. Turning right, Mr. Slick heads down a short corridor, and then stops at another door, this one keypad locked. With a nod from Mal, he punches in a code—which they memorise on the spot, just to be safe—and then pulls the door open, revealing a room crammed full of long shelf units. Boxes upon boxes of files occupy the shelves, and Mal can just barely see a couple of computers tucked away into one corner.

Each and every file a debt. A desperate person exploited for all they've got. If Mal and Dion have to rob anyone, it couldn't happen to a nicer bunch than the vampires working in this building. It's barely even villainy.

"Alright buddy, why don't you go face the wall and sit tight?" Mal tells Mr. Slick, who almost trips over himself in his haste to obey. Mal slips a USB stick from their jacket and plugs it into one of the computers. Not even password protected. Yeesh. Though to be fair, a password wouldn't do much against the fun little worm loaded onto the USB.

"I'm in," Mal affects a dramatic tone, smirking to themselves. The program finishes loading, and Mal leaves it to have its wicked way with the computers.

Mal's uncomfortably aware of every second that ticks by as they hunt along the rows of shelves. A timer started the instant they broke in, counting inevitably down to trouble. Teasing Dion notwithstanding, Mal would prefer to avoid clashing with the Glory Hounds so soon. Especially when they have a figurative hand tied behind their back.

What doesn't help their search is the necessity of grabbing the occasional file that has nothing to do with the goal. Smoke and mirrors; if all they steal is a single box, it won't take a master detective to track them down. No need for parahuman powers then. Still, Mal refuses to just snatch stuff at random, rifling through the papers they pick up to make sure they're recent, laying down a false trail.

They're onto the third row of shelves when they finally find the right file. Correct names, correct details. This is the one. Mal folds the papers into a briefcase they'd swiped from a previous box, and then makes a point of snagging two more sets of files before calling out a satisfied "Aha!". A little extra misdirection never hurts.

Retrieving their USB, Mal returns to Mr. Slick, briefcase tucked under their arm. "Thanks for that. Let's get going." Mr. Slick looks more composed now, but not enough to put up any resistance as he stumbles back out into the corridor.

At the junction, Mr. Slick hesitates. Heading back to the lobby is a left turn. For an instant, he pulls right.

Ahh crap.

Bracing themselves, Mal shoves Slick aside and steps forward—

—instantly ducking the punch flying at their head.

And there goes the timer.

Their assailant's fist slams into the wall, leaving a crater behind as it's torn free. Its owner, a shaven-headed woman with arms jacked full of cyberware, immediately resets her stance. Enfilade, huh? Not the worst outcome.

Mal can't swing their bat in the confines of the corridor, so they have to resort to a quick poke at Enfilade's ribs that's easily deflected. Mal spares a glance for Mr. Slick, but he's already scurrying away as fast as his shiny shoes will carry him. Simplifies things. Enfilade throws another vicious haymaker while Mal's distracted, but they're too wily to fall for that, dodging again.

This isn't ideal. Mal doubts Enfilade can hurt them much, but a delay is just as bad as a beatdown under these circumstances.

Gotta change the circumstances then.

Mal puts their back against one wall and refuses to budge, ducking and dodging as best they can. No easy feat with both their hands full; Enfilade lands a couple of solid body blows that Mal has to just suck up and take. Still, they stay upright, and Enfilade's expression slowly shifts from focus to frustration. Theeere we go.

Mal goes low and grabs Enfilade around the waist for a rather awkward tackle. The element of surprise is enough to bump the hero into the opposite wall, but she responds with a countergrapple, hooking Mal under their arms. Then, just as Mal hoped, she retaliates in kind, driving them back with all her might.

Even so, Enfilade probably didn't expect to put them straight through the wall.

They crash back into the lobby in a shower of masonry. Enfilade lands on top but Mal reacts first, having anticipated and even helped along this bit of refurbishment. They've wriggled out from under her and are back on their feet before she's even fully registered what happened.

A bolt of purple energy streaks past. Apparently Dion's had company too. And been doing some redecorating of his own judging by all the overturned furniture. Lean and handsome and wearing spandex practically painted onto his abs, it's Arcade, the Hounds' heartthrob. The good looks aren't doing much to help him past Dion's defences though, every laser answered by a blockade of cubes and cylinders.

"Hey Architect!" Mal calls. "I was fifty percent right! You owe me!"

"I did not make that bet!" Dion snipes back.

From the outside, it's banter. Between the two of them, it's Mal catching Dion's attention while they slide the all-important briefcase under a desk. They're going to need both hands for this.

Immediately that comes into play as Mal has to bring their bat up to block Enfilade's fist from wiping them out. The hero keeps up with the attack, not realising that Mal's a much bigger threat now that they have more room to play with. They soon demonstrate her error, cracking her in the knees with the bat, following through with a kick at full extension.

Pff, never gets old, making people think you're an amateur.

Out of the corner of their eye Mal sees purple. Another laser. They're only partway through twisting around to react when a shimmering cuboid of energy leaps from the ground to intercept the projectile. Phew. Thanks, Dion.

"Ooh! Not bad!" Arcade calls. "Enfi! You see that?"

"Focus, Arcade!" Enfilade barks.

That's when a dark figure drops from the upper floor, landing precisely between both sides.

Everything goes still.

The newcomer's face and shoulders are covered by an oily black substance that seems to shift and shimmer, moving ever-so-subtly. Two long tendrils extend from their back, winding to and fro in midair. As they turn their head, Mal gets a little chill at the featureless, faceless visage that meets their eye. Mallory... has absolutely zero idea who they are.

This is bad.

Even after the stranger goes after the heroes, apparently throwing in their lot with them and Dion, Mal isn't especially reassured. This shouldn't happen. Mal knows their shit. They make a point of knowing their shit. A mask they've never seen with powers they don't recognise is a capital P Problem.

Though admittedly, their presence makes handling the Hounds one hell of a lot easier.

Especially once things *really* hit the fan and Surpass comes strolling in. (Later, this will become a point of contention between them and Dion, but Mal maintains they won the bet).

Nodes!Paradigm:

After Mal gets launched halfway to kingdom come on the business end of Surpass's fist, the stranger spawns some kind of wriggling... flesh monsters from their body, gribbly little creatures skittering straight out of Mal's nightmares. Twisted lumps of ichor-splattered flesh scurrying around on fibrous little limbs, jumping and biting. And of course, *chittering*, because why the heck wouldn't they make horrifying noises to haunt Mal for weeks to come?

Absolutely awful and gross as the creatures are, they're also effective, stalling Surpass for long enough that Dion can pull a trump card on the engagement.

Mutations!Paradigm:

After Mal gets launched halfway to kingdom come on the business end of Surpass's fist, the stranger's... body? Powers? *Something* goes into horrifying overdrive. They shudder and convulse and writhe while their form shifts before Mal's eyes. Mal's glued to it with a kind of sickly fascination, thinking about their own shifting, smooth and painless.

This... Mal can't even describe it. The changes seem totally out of control, one arm growing to monstrous proportions, clawed and bestial. Eyes burst open without rhyme or reason, the stranger's head distorting, lengthening with the creak and crunch of bones audible even from their landing point across the room.

Mal's never seen anything like it. They don't know if they never want to see it again, or to watch the process every single day.

What they do get to see is those changes—those mutations—in action. Surpass looks every inch the hero, facing down the terrible monster unflinchingly like they've stepped from the pages of a myth. Still, Mal's misshapen ally proves to be her equal, bringing all the force of their claws and maws to bear until Dion can pull a trump card on the engagement.

Carapace!Paradigm:

After Mal gets launched halfway to kingdom come on the business end of Surpass's fist, the stranger's body shifts. That membrane of theirs shivers, as if awakening from a dormant slumber. The smooth surface bulges outward, fresh formed plates of armour overlapping across the stranger's shoulder and torso. They put Mal in the mind of an insectoid knight, a warrior plated in chitin.

Not that the membrane-turned-armour stops its slow and ceaseless swirling now that it's in a more rigid form. That would be much too reassuring, obviously.

Reassuring or no, the stranger's armoured carapace certainly proves to be effective. It shudders and flexes as Surpass's powerful blows slam into it, but it does not buckle, it does not break. Mal's knight lasts long enough for Dion to pull a trump card on the engagement, and if Mal's any judge, they could have kept on trucking.

Trump card is one way of putting it. That stunt... threatening the heroes and even a civilian. They'll be having words with Dion later.

Despite Mal's misgivings, there isn't much of a choice but to bring the newcomer along as they all go running from the building. Truth be told, they're in need of allies, and even if they intend to reject Oily McTentacles here, directly after they pulled their asses from the fire probably isn't the time.

So, all three of them run off to the not-particularly-safe not-much-of-a-house Mal found the other day, they talk a little, Dion extends an offer to meet the next day, and off the stranger goes. What a tidy little package.

After the footsteps of their *potential* new ally recede into the distance and Mal returns from poking their head out of the room to verify they're gone—can't be too careful—Dion addresses them.

"Your thoughts?"

"Taking a risk, D," Mal says quietly.

Dion nods. "Everything about this is a risk."

Mal sighs. Truer words have never been spoken. "I dunno. They know what they're doing. I like it and I don't." Dion inclines his head, inviting Mal to continue. "We just saw that they're effective. That's the good. The bad..." Mal clicks their tongue. "Dion, who the fuck *are* they?"

"You haven't heard of them either." It isn't a question.

"Been running masks through my head this whole time, I've got diddly and squat." Mal starts pacing back and forth. "So they're good enough to rumble with the Hounds, but such a nobody that they've never made the slightest splash. Doesn't that seem weird to you?"

Dion is quiet for a while. "It's suspicious," he says eventually. "But I'm not jumping to any conclusions. Neither of us are flawless, and they agreed to meet unmasked readily enough."

Mal screws up their face, and then unscrunches it in time with a big whoosh of an exhalation. "I *suppose*," they reply doubtfully.

"Consider the worst case scenario." Dion tilts his palms upward. "DPR. You and I both know we haven't made enough of a stir here to attract their attention."

True. Mal nods. "So what are you thinking?"

Motive - bring down the system:

"Apparently they're anti-establishment. That's useful."

"If they're telling the truth." Mal pokes Dion lightly in the chest. "Don't let your hopes blind you, Mr. Firebrand."

"I'll keep them in check," Dion replies.

"All I'm asking. We shouldn't take this at face value."

Motive - sick of getting stepped on:

"They have a grudge against heroes. It does make sense that they'd jump into a fight unprovoked."

"Mm." Mal strokes their chin. "Not that hard to test either."

"Test?"

"Well, yeah." Mal shrugs. "Would be pretty simple to set something up, given what we'll be doing."

Motive - money:

"While I'm not fond of mercenaries, I find them more credible for being upfront with it."

"What, you don't think someone can lie about being in it for the money?" Mal raises an eyebrow.

"Of course they can," Dion replies, a little snappishly. "But I find it more likely that a person would pick a less selfish motivation if they wanted to lie."

"Unless that's what they want you to think."

Motive - reasons are private:

"They refused to say why they helped us. I find that very interesting."

"Maybe they're a bad liar and couldn't come up with anything on the spot," Mal suggests.

"Maybe... or maybe they aren't sure about us either."

Mal cocks their head. "You're about to tell me why that's a good thing."

"We're taking a risk, but what about them? If they're a newcomer, it's perfectly plausible they'd want to keep their cards close to their chest."

"Or they're bluffing." Mal shrugs.

Dion regards them silently. Mal can picture the exact look in those soft brown eyes of his. Too soft for this kind of work. "I'll trust them no more than is necessary or earned."

"Good. And I'll keep an eye out."

Dion lets out a long sigh, touching a hand to his helmet. "Thanks, Mallory," he says, voice suddenly much more muted than resonant. "I couldn't do this on my own."

"Hey, someone's gotta look out for you," Mal replies. It isn't often that they feel the year they've got on Dion, but in this moment, it's so very acute.

"I appreciate it. I really, really do."

"Don't get sentimental on me now, D," Mal teases, because it's the only safe option.

"Hmph." Dion pats his pockets, opens up his longcoat, reaches inside, and then pulls out his hand with middle finger extended, a gesture so uncharacteristic that Mal collapses into a fit of giggles.

At some length, Mal manages to regain their composure. "I do know one thing for sure," they say, donning a serious expression.

Dion tilts his head. "Yes?"

The grin they'd been holding back instantly breaks free. "You probably should have asked our friend their mask name."

Dion goes very still. "Fuck."

Mal's laughter echoes around the ruined halls.

[March Character Q&A - Mal and Wil](#)

[Mar 1, 2024](#)

Well, turns out the poll was a tie! Mal and Wil got the same number of votes, so they'll both be in the hotseat for March.

Throughout this month, you can send in questions for one, the other, or both of these two either in the comments or via a message, and you'll get an in character answer. :)

(Here's one from Surpass's perspective, if you're looking for an idea of how this works: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/february-q-975229570>)

[Drink Your Villain Juice! - CH5 early access available.](#)

[Mar 2, 2024](#)

A new build for a new month! Chapter 5 (part one) is here.

* 30k new words, for a total of 142k!

* Make your official debut as an Altruist. Prove your worth in a fight.

* Or botch it. You could also do that.

* Introduce yourself to the camera.

* Navigate a delicate debriefing. Can you avoid Architect's scrutiny?

* Learn a little more about some of your teammates.

* Begin charting a road to recovery. If such a thing is even possible.

* Bugfixes. Cause sometimes you just gotta fix the same thing three times.

More of chapter five to come later in the month! I'm updating in two parts because it was growing clear this is gonna be pretty long and wanted to give you fine folk some new content.

[Drink Your Villain Juice! CH5 Early Access link](#)

[Mar 2, 2024](#)

See attached to this post the download for chapter five part one. This update will be publically available on March 9th 2024. **You'll need to be able to unzip the file.**

If you encounter any problems with accessing the file itself, please let me know.

There's quite a bit of branching here. If you want to see the maximum out of the chapter:

Methodical/Instinctive MCs get completely different routes through the fight.

Architect reacts differently to certain decisions towards the end of the battle.

Teddie has a very strong reaction to one particular choice.

[CH5 public release](#)

[Mar 9, 2024](#)

This is available (as of yesterday!) on Dashingdon!

Main point of note is that I've started implementing a chapter skip function. Currently you can jump ahead to chapter 3, and I'll be working on extending this function where possible.

Looking to get another build out this month which I'm continuing to dub chapter 5 part two. It'll be at least another 10k words, though I can't estimate just yet where it'll top out. As usual it will be available first on Patreon.

[Character Origins - Wil and Teddie](#)

[Mar 9, 2024](#)

I've been thinking about the history of some of the Villain Juice! cast and so hey, what better time to pop the cork on ~character history~

I decided to talk about Wil and Teddie together because they share an origin and chart a similar course in terms of development. Both of them hail from the very very first iteration of the Villain Juice! setting, a story I tried out many years back. The setting was a different beast back then, with much more focus on how superheroes became licensed to do their thing and a very commercialised structure to it all. Heroes weren't just celebrities, they were brands.

That original story saw our protagonist undertaking a Heroic Aptitude Test amongst numerous other hopeful heroes. At the end of the training program, the handful of young heroes that managed to pass became an understudy team to the hosts of the training. Those young heroes included Wally, AKA Ghoul, and Teddie, who hadn't nailed down a codename.

I never quite reached the point of thoroughly fleshing them both out. They were in the category of background shots, characters who would show up in the 'crowd scenes' of training and have small little moments as the field of trainees was slowly whittled down. Their prominence would slowly increase over time, and then you'd have a couple of familiar faces joining the main cast.

I think the fun divergence with Wil and Teddie is in just how they made the leap to Villain Juice!. They both changed, but in very different ways.

Wil/Wally always had his draining touch power and was called Ghoul from day one. However, he was a bit more happy-go-lucky and really revelled in his power, which is the opposite of Wil. He definitely wouldn't have pulled the 'responsible friend looking out for their buddies' thing that Wil does in their introduction. Wally was also, well, a dude, cause that story wasn't interactive. When deciding to refit Wally for Villain Juice!, I realised that it'd be interesting (and better balance the RO cast) to make his gender selectable. That cause his name to change: I couldn't really find anything that fit the vibe of Wally in other genders, and using 'Wil' enabled me to go on using that as a neutral nickname along with the full names of Wilson, Wilma, and Willow.

Wil's design changed a lot also. As I was writing their introduction in VJ, they just weren't popping off the page. They *really* felt lacklustre in comparison to Kay and Teddie. I decided to lean into the aesthetic of somebody who chooses a name like Ghoul, and thus was born our goth/punk androgyne. To be honest, Wil isn't androgynous just because their gender can vary; I felt that it suited their free-spiritedness and relaxed attitude to gender norms.

By contrast to Wil, Teddie's personality stayed almost identical, but his powers changed 100%. Teddie was always sullen and socially stunted, always determined and stubborn to a fault. For both versions of Teddie, a lot of this stemmed from their powers (albeit to an extent Teddie's just like that). Original Teddie had few powers of his own: an immunity to mind based effects, and that was it. This would eventually be revealed to be because Teddie *is* a power. His 'brother' isn't actually his brother. Teddie's a byproduct of the brother's power, acting as a type of psychic backup. He just popped into being one day. Needless to say, this is an existential crisis button, and that's how you get a very surly young man.

That wasn't going to work for Villain Juice!, so I refitted Teddie's power into something that can still impact him, but also serves as an interesting common ground for the protagonist. The result is a bony bony boy. Both he and the MC are badly affected by their powers. Teddie's bone growth gives him chronic pain, makes it impossible to blend in, and he's turned bitter and hostile as a result. (though again, he was never exactly a cheerful chap). I greatly prefer this version of Teddie, just because I think something like chronic pain is more relatable, and he fits much better into the VJ setting. Plus I could fit him together very nicely with Kay.

Also he originally had black hair and wasn't a short king. This, of course, is the most vital change of all.

It's been fun bringing these two along for the ride. I never could have imagined they'd take on such a new lease of life in an entirely different project.

[Drink Your Villain Juice! CH5 \(pt 2\) available!](#)

[Mar 13, 2024](#)

And now here's the second build of the month!

* 18k new words on top of the existing CH5's 30k, taking the game to 160k!

* Learn what mission lies ahead for the Altruists, and learn more about how the Zone came to be.

* Hunt for secret insights into your targets. But be careful.

* Share a moment with Wil, and perhaps even a little more?

* Report to Control Group. Which secrets will you keep? Which will you tell?

* *Bond* with Control Group?

* Drink Your Villain Juice!

* ...unless.

Some additions/fixes, also!

* Further choices with Wil added at the debriefing, including one rather tsundere choice if that's been your dynamic.

* New option to look into the fate of AdVenture.

* Restored an inaccessible option allowing you to claim to Dion that checking on the Patrol was part of a personal code of conduct.

* Teddie getting pissed off at you for endangering Kay now routes properly to the rest of the scene.

The public build has also been updated:

* Added the ability to skip to Chapter 4.

* Restored missing branches to the nodes/mutations routes through the Surpass fight. Unfortunately they're failure states, so have fun!

* Restored a missing branch with crushing on Prie; now you can tearfully confess your feelings as they die in your arms! Wait.

* Added new code/flavour text to restrict certain pseudonyms, including Dime.

* Asking Hypothesis about the earbud now actually tests your skills as it's supposed to.

* Added a reaction for abdominal maw MCs if they show off to Mallory.

* Fixed the choice to bluff Dion at the end of the briefing so you can actually fail it as was intended.

[Drink Your Villain Juice! CH5 \(pt 2\) Early Access link](#)

[Mar 13, 2024](#)

See attached to this post the download for chapter five part two. This update will be publically available on March 20th 2024. **You'll need to be able to unzip the file.**

If you encounter any problems with accessing the file itself, please let me know.

[Chapter 5 \(pt two\) public release!](#)

[Mar 20, 2024](#)

This is now available on dashingdon.

I've had a couple of bug reports recently - I'm honestly not quite sure what's causing it but if you get a Not a number error, rest assured I'm looking into that! (I can't replicate it myself, which is why it's hard for me to get to the root)

[Writing update](#)

[Mar 25, 2024](#)

Chapter 6 is in a state I'm calling 'so far so good'. I'm about 14k into it at the moment and progressing steadily. CH6 I've roughly divided into three sections in my brain, and the first of those was finished last week. Some fun stuff in there!

CH6 branches less than CH5 so I anticipate it'll take less time overall. We'll see. As usual I'm not putting a number on it. Another part one/part two type of release in April isn't off the table, but I'll see how things are flowing and overall progress. I like to ensure the updates feel satisfying to play and I could see it being annoying if I sliced them too fine.

I'll likely push a few bugfixes and tweaks in the next day or two, but nothing major.

[Update tomorrow](#)

[Apr 1, 2024](#)

Please enjoy a small sample of one fork in the road. :)

The passage takes on a gentle curve, though there's still no change in the general décor—or lack thereof. What does change is Architect. He cocks his head to the side, and then stops, turning back to you.

"Thresh. Are you whispering?"

You shake your head.

A sharp breath hisses from within his helmet. "Something's wrong." His fists clench. "Someone's here. Watch out."

The passageway begins to take on a gentle curve, though there's still no change in the environment. No décor, no signs of life, not so much as a swept floor. "

You say something?" Rampage suddenly asks. You glance at her and shake your head. She frowns. "Could've sworn..." Stops. "There! You hear that?"

No you do not.

[Drink Your Villain Juice! Ch6 early access available.](#)

[Apr 2, 2024](#)

Chapter 6 (part one) is hot off the presses!

- 25k words added, bringing us to 185k! Goshdarn.
- Head into the Zone! Work your way around security!
- Take a detour for added protection.
- Venture to the hidden door.
- Discover what lies below. Unravel more threads.
- Meet someone unexpected.

[Drink Your Villain Juice! Ch6 Early Access link](#)

[Apr 2, 2024](#)

See attached to this post the download for chapter five part one. This update will be publically available on April 9th 2024. **You'll need to be able to unzip the file.**

Lots of different methods to go about the infiltration here! Some work better than others.

I really, really like this chapter. Enjoy :)

[Character origins - Surpass](#)

[Apr 16, 2024](#)

I've been thinking a lot about Surpass recently for no particular reason. *stares at the chapter 6 cliffhanger until it shuffles awkwardly away.* As such, I thought it'd be fun to share some details about how this hotheaded hero came to be.

So, folks have asked a couple times about whether I've read the web serial Worm, AKA the Parahumans series, which y'know, makes sense considering in Villain Juice, superpowered people are also called parahumans. I have read Worm, (fun fact it's in a roundabout way how my wife and I got together), and I wrote quite a few fanfics about it back in the day. One of those featured Surpass, a brash and cocky but ultimately goodhearted hero desperately trying to keep a ragtag team together under extreme circumstances.

Although I only created Surpass for a prompt event, she kinda stuck with me. That's how it tends to go with characters that you really vibe with, I guess. I wound up writing a lot of backstory for her, involving getting passed over as leader of a group of junior heroes entirely due to age, which she absolutely wasn't bitter and absolutely was very mature about. Just ask Portrait, who I also created at the same time as a foil.

She was so mean to him. So so mean. Villain Juice Surpass and Portrait probably have a much better relationship, come to think of it.

I actually started another Worm story featuring Surpass set in the aftermath of the first one. With her whole team dead, she was trying to both process the loss of her close friends and assemble a new team to continue heroing, cause villainy don't stop just cause your friends died! This story didn't go super far for various reasons, but it meant I kept Surpass in my back pocket and grew more attached to her. I even wrote another entirely original story with her back in the junior hero role, as swaggeringly confident as ever.

So, when it came to setting the cast of Villain Juice, I knew I needed some heroes, and Surpass was top of the list. She's honestly almost entirely unchanged from her original form. Her powers are the same, her personality is almost identical, she just fits for the role I want for her in the story. She's a great recurring boss in my books, and I'm looking forward to showing her off some more.

Little more of a meandering tale this time! Surpass is very dear to me and just a total blast to write. Something something muscular women something.

[Writing Update](#)

[Apr 22, 2024](#)

Currently I am in The Slog TM. I'm happy with how Chapter 6 is progressing but involved action sequences are, well, involved, and I must admit to some fatigue with writing almost exclusively action for the last while. (one segment in particular has some pretty complex code with a bunch of moving parts) Last week also had some craziness IRL that I won't get into but was rather stressful, and that stole away some days. Still, I'm back in the saddle and moving forward.

I *might* do something I haven't before and write one 'route' of CH6 before the other to push into an update. That'll allow me to section the workload a bit better. I haven't fully decided though. Depends on how well I can get through these subsequent action sequences.

Once again, thanks to all the readers and commenters.

Have a teaser!

*selectable_if (wpp > 1) #...I struggled to beat the D-list. No way am I match for her.

You've never felt more out of your depth with your mask life than in this moment. There's a very real chance she mops the floor with you.

...Well, freaking out isn't going to get your ass any less kicked.

You step forward and ready yourself. Vantage's eyes track your every movement as you begin warily circling each other. Her bare face makes her look oddly naked, despite her dark skin being only otherwise exposed at her lower arms. Weird how quickly you grow accustomed to these things.

"\$!{mask}," says Vantage. "Protective coating combined with versatile additional appendages. @{{fighting_style} Capable close quarters combatant.}Capable tactician.}Skilled user of parahuman abilities.}DUMMY}" She twists her wrists. "You lose in ninety-seven point six five percent of simulations."

@{{knowledge > 37}

!cgtoldyoualittleaboutVantage'spowersandhowthey'retheorisedtooperate.Shecancollateinformationanduseittorunscenarios—simulacra. For your purposes, if Vantage has studied you, then she's likely to anticipate your usual tricks. |!{cg} said... something about how Vantage's powers operate, but she was bombarding you with so many different parahumans and powersets that you don't properly remember. Vantage's powers let her run scenarios in her head and predict things. Somehow.}

#"Yeah? Suppose I should make this the two point three five percent then."

#"If you think you can model me, you're sorely mistaken."

#Don't speak. I need every ounce of focus.

#Her clinical tone reminds me too much of Hypothesis, and I'm shaken.

#Her clinical tone reminds me too much of Hypothesis, and I'm furious.

#"That's the worst threat I've ever heard."

[Alternate POV - To The Arcade](#)

[Apr 27, 2024](#)

So, what have our 'heroes' been up to lately?

-

Sammy Niwa—better known to his sometimes adoring, occasionally critical, always intrusive public as Arcade—is not having a good week.

It started off so promisingly too, with a not-entirely-spontaneous interview spot with a reporter from The Cowl, one of the more reputable sites for parahuman coverage. They had great rapport, everything went smoothly, and the icing on the cake was an absolute chump of a mugger choosing the exact wrong time to run past, letting Sammy look cool as hell with a perfectly threaded laser to knock the would-be thief's legs from under him. Couldn't have plotted it out better himself.

Maybe your week peaking on a Monday is a bad omen, because it's all been downhill from there.

First, him and Enfilade go out to this loan shark in response to a hotline distress call. Two unknown masks wreaking havoc. Awesome, Sammy thinks, hasn't been anyone new to tangle with for a while, should be a good workout and an easy win.

Nope. These villains are tough customers and worse yet, some kind of creepy black tentacled spider person *thing* crashes the party, randomly joins the bad guys—as much to their surprise as him and Enfilade's—and freaking breaks Sammy's nose.

Like, okay, Sammy's taken his share of hits. He's been injured before, and much worse than a knee to the dome, but *come on*. Messing up his face? Seriously? Some of Sammy's teammates—cough Surpass cough—would ride him mercilessly if they caught him being precious about his appearance, but his looks are *kind of a big deal*. And man, somehow things only get worse from there. Surpass is usually the Hounds' closer, the one to sweep in and wrap the mission up.

That's... not how it shakes out.

Nodes!Paradigm:

Black and shiny goes full horror show, chucking up a gaggle of scurrying creatures that swarm all over Surpass, biting and gnawing and making the worst noises Sammy has ever heard. Fast as she is, Surpass can't handle the gross little bastards and the villain at the same time.

Mutations!Paradigm:

Black and shiny suddenly turns into something out of a horror movie, their body exploding into a terrifying new shape. Clawed, fanged. Mouths where mouths shouldn't be.

Eyes. Sammy won't forget those eyes for a long time.

Carapace!Paradigm:

Black and shiny goes beetle mode, coating themself in a suit of chitinous armour that's somehow a match for Surpass's fists. Sammy's seen her punch through brick walls, through steel. Anything that can stand up to force like that is something Sammy wants no part of.

He reckons Surpass would have won, given enough time. She's resourceful, she's hard as hell to hurt, and she's stubborn as all get out. Thing is, thanks to Sammy already screwing up, the whole battle goes sideways.

A villain seriously held him hostage. Sammy's had the occasional L in the past, but this is like, the next level of L. Absolutely humiliating. If he hadn't had the shit kicked out of him by tentacle jerk, he might have been able to defend himself. Instead, Architect boxes him up like a complimentary gift wrapping and uses him as a bargaining chip. The three villains get away. The media gleefully covers the Hounds' failure, Sammy and company get the riot act from Corporate for giving the DPR even more dirt to dish.

Corporate. Coming up three years as a Hound, and Sammy still isn't used to answering to non-powered higher ups. It's bizarre having a boss separate from the actual leader of the team, much less a random suit who's within their rights to chew him out. He's done his homework, he knows the Glory Hounds' structure is nowhere near as commercialised as some heroing outfits: Corporate has limited control over the roster—they can't appoint a leader, can't hire without going through the team, can only fire under certain circumstances—and are far more permissive to boot, but while they're a necessary evil, not all of their evil is necessary.

Doing the right thing should come first. Always.

Pining for his days as a hotshot independent notwithstanding, Sammy's week from hell went ahead and got even worse yesterday. Those three villains popped back up, and apparently they'd gone through mitosis because their ranks had doubled. Six villains, a brand new team, two hits in two different locations, both of them over and done with before the Hounds could even start to respond. A fresh round of criticism from the suits for not being prepared. Vantage at least shut them up by pointing out the team's patrol routes for the week had been laid out by Corporate. Knockoff-brand-suit had gone real quiet after that.

Sammy just feels bad for the Wesson Parks Patrol, and not only because their team has a terrible name. Ranger's the kind of guy you kind of just root for, someone who's got more passion for heroing in his little finger than a whole building of DPR goons, who never stops fighting the good fight, even with special abilities that rank pretty much on par with a regular person who trains kickboxing a few times a week. Ranger cares. That matters. Mis/Hit are good people too; Sammy and the Hounds have coordinated with them a couple of times when the Shreds are having one of their half yearly rampages.

Point is, the Patrol had managed a huge win, given those smug Businessmen a bloody nose (Corporate views those scumbags as 'low priority'. Urgh), and then got curbstomped. It's honestly cruel.

Now everyone's up in arms over the Altruists, Sammy's nose still hurts like hell, and he woke up this morning to six straight texts from his ex.

No, Paco, he was not in fact also 'laying awake thinking about what we had'. Furthermore, while serenading him with what he's pretty sure was a self-penned poem may seem like a grand romantic gesture, said gesture loses a lot of its power when delivered at *four in the morning* in some unholy, offkey combination of Spanish and Japanese. A for effort, F for execution, W for will-you-hurry-up-and-get-over-it-for-fuck's-sake-it's-been-almost-an-entire-year-this-is-getting-depressing.

Also, the coffee machine on the Hounds' floor of HQ is broken, and *yeah* Sammy could go the one on the next floor up, but that one doesn't have the right flavours and never seems to get the temperature quite right.

Taking a morose sip of his lukewarm coffee, Sammy leans on the wall outside one of the conference rooms and waits for someone to show up to let him in.

Cause uh, carrying keys? In this spandex? Yeah no that's not going to happen.

He's actually very early for today's briefing—thanks Paco—so he winds up awkwardly loitering in the hallway for almost half an hour before Enfilade rounds the corner. Hey, at least Sammy wins his silent bet with himself. With Enfi, on time means showing up ten minutes ahead of schedule. Minimum.

"Morning, newbie!" he calls. She rolls her eyes, and Sammy grins. He's actually only sort-of making fun of her; Enfi's spent her entire career smothered in DPR rules and regs, and giving her a little shit is his way of breaking her out of the shell. "Do me a solid and open sesame?"

"Even when you manage to be early, you forget your keys. Typical." Enfilade's tone is stern, but Sammy just sees his teammate breaking out of her chain-of-command robotics to clap back and privately calls it a win.

"I know, I know, I'm a terrible slacker."

"Hmph." She produces a massive ring of keys, instantly selects one, and then unlocks the room, holding open the door for Sammy. He gives her an ironic bow and strolls inside. It's just as it was left from last time, the oblong conference table shoved up against one wall with a scattering of chairs arrayed in loose rows facing an electronic board. Propped in front of said gadget is a more analog version, covered in scribbled notes and affixed with innumerable clippings.

Vantage prefers working manually. Sammy's seen her private thought boards, insane spiderwebs of tacked-up notes, photos and annotations that would make a conspiracy theorist blush.

Sammy takes his usual spot, left front. Enfilade goes to the middle and sits, back ramrod straight. The mechanical parts of her arms whirl and click as she folds them. Sammy glances sidelong at her, studying not for the first time the disproportionate bulk of her forearms, the slight plastic sheen of synthskin. Must be weird having body parts that are as much weapon as limb. Maybe that's rich coming from a guy who can shoot laser beams from his hands, but Enfilade's cybernetics are so obviously artificial.

He hasn't asked her the circumstances of her becoming an augment. Not yet. Probably not for a long while. It's not the kind of question you just fire off in a casual conversation. He doesn't know her well enough. Give it time.

Sammy still remembers his first encounter with a reporter desperate for a scoop on how he ignited, a greedy vulture salivating over the worst day of his life. Some flares are lucky enough to have glorious beginnings, their powers coming at the perfect moment for dramatic heroics.

Some.

Augments? DPR augments? They're the kind of people willing to risk life and limb, signing themselves away to the government for a chance to become something different. Those breaking away from the DPR's watchful eyes are a slender minority.

Enfilade will tell him when she's ready. If she's ready. He won't be a vulture.

She meets his eye. He winks at her. She scoffs and looks away.

They aren't alone for too long; the door opens and in walks Vantage, putting Sammy's predictions at two for two. Unlike Enfilade, he actually knows her real name, but he always tries to stay in work mode around the base. Less chance of slipping up and using the wrong one in a tense moment. Sammy is briefly amused to realise that wearing a mask makes him the odd one out of the group; that's rare.

Vantage nods at each of them in turn. Sammy waves back lazily as she walks to the front of the room, flips the paper on the easel board over, and immediately begins writing on the fresh canvas. For a couple of minutes, the scratching of her pen is the only sound in the room. In such quiet, Sammy—along with everyone else—hears Surpass long before they see her. That booming, boisterous voice is unmistakable. Sammy can't quite make out the words, but if he was a betting man, he'd wager that she's ragging on Portrait, a favourite hobby of hers.

Sammy... thinks they're friends? Sometimes it's hard to tell.

Surpass bursts through the door first, laughing with a joke Sammy didn't fully hear but had a punchline something to do with geese. Portrait's only half a step behind her, but such is the size difference that Sammy can't actually see him until he slips off to the side. Portrait isn't even that small, Surpass is just tall as hell and absolutely jacked.

Needless to say, Sammy maintains that super strength means her physique is totally cheated and she's totally disqualified from any kind of competition. Some people have to *work* for their six pack, thank you very much.

"What is UP?" Surpass shouts at nobody in particular. She's not actually asking a question, just making sure she hasn't been missed—as if anybody could—and is totally content just receiving the usual nods and waves en route to sprawling into the largest chair, right in the back.

Portrait takes the seat next to Sammy's and gives him a prim smile, which he answers with his own more relaxed version. When Sammy first joined the team he hadn't known what to make of the guy, with his elaborate costume that looks more suited to the theatre than fighting and his aloof attitude. Over time, Sammy grew to understand that Portrait just winds up real tight, real quick when he's under pressure. Otherwise, he's as mellow as you'd like.

Vantage turns around, eyes making a quick sweep of the room. "That's everyone," she announces. "Phalanx won't be joining us, she's—"

"—working on her armour," Sammy and Portrait chorus in unison. They exchange grins.

Surpass straightens from her slouch, glaring at them both. "She needs—"

Vantage's turn to interrupt. "We're aware, Surpass. No need to cover it again."

Unusually for Surpass, she subsides without further comment. To be honest, Sammy's heard his teammate's counterargument so many times that he reckons by now he could recite it from memory. First, she points out that Phalanx only has the one set of armour, since the DPR confiscated the others when she told them to go fuck themselves. (Surpass's words, not Sammy's) This, Surpass reasons, means Phalanx *has* to spend a lot of time on her armour, otherwise she won't be effective in the crunch. On top of that, Phalanx is still learning the workings of her gear; the DPR intentionally kept her in the dark so she'd be more dependent—and so on and so forth.

Vantage continues. Or should that be 'begins'?

"As you know, we've got a new set of villains in town. Since they were kind enough to give two separate introductions, we even know what to call them." She nods to her board, at the top of which she's written 'Altruists'.

Portrait breathes a laugh. "Provocative, aren't they?"

"Maybe they really believe they're in the right," suggests Sammy. Wouldn't be the first villains to think as much, and most he's encountered have had at least some justification for what they're doing, even if it often involves a lot of self-delusion.

"Perhaps, which may help us predict their next move," says Vantage. "Presently, I'm just as concerned about how quickly they've recruited. The other gangs have remained relatively stable for the past eighteen months. The Altruists went from smalltime activities as a duo to adding four members in three days." She frowns. "Not to mention, there's no trace of any of them operating at all until recently. That's less data than I'd like."

Sammy understands her consternation. Vantage's power works best when she's got information to work with. The more information, the better she can simulate and predict her opponents. Sammy tries not to think too hard about the exact way her precognition works because whenever he does it makes his eyes cross, he just knows that she can handily kick his ass and it's not even close.

Enfilade raises her hand, speaking only when Vantage gives her a nod. Months after joining the team, that habit persists. "I've cross-referenced the Hounds'—sorry, our—parahuman database and also conducted independent research." She shakes her head. "I had no strong hits for any of the powers displayed."

"You mean there aren't any other bony boys out there?" Surpass says, leaning forward. Sammy can hear the smirk in her voice.

"None that match Fracture, no," Enfilade replies, completely plain faced. Surpass is visibly disappointed, though Sammy doesn't think there's any malice in it. She's kind of just like that.

"Thanks for trying, Enfilade," says Vantage. "We may need to revisit that in the future once they've shown more of their hand. Currently, we don't even know their full toolkits."

"What about Tentacle Creep?" Surpass pipes up. "Think we've got a pretty good idea of their bag."

"Surpass... Thresh has introduced himself now. You can't keep calling them Tentacle Creep." As always, Sammy marvels at how completely unfazed Vantage is by their teammate's nonsense.

Nodes!Paradigm:

"Sure, whatever." Surpass waves a dismissive hand. "Anyway, so Creepy can make those gross flesh nuggets on top of all their tentacle shit. Like, don't know about you guys, but villains hucking bits of themselves all over the floor is the kind of thing that sticks in my head. If they're not brand new, then somebody's gotta remember them."

Sammy suppresses a shudder. Somehow the worst part is the sound the wriggling black creatures made when they hit the floor. Like meat slapped onto a counter. Or a lifeless carcass dropping to the ground.

Mutations!Paradigm:

"Sure, whatever." Surpass waves a dismissive hand. "Anyway, so Chompy's body flipped the fuck out right in the middle of all that. Like, forget the tentacle shit, if a villain suddenly grows extra mouths and eyeballs and turns into a giant mutant fleshbeast, that shit is going straight on the ten o' clock news. If they're not brand new, then somebody's gotta remember them."

Sammy doesn't know that he'd describe the transformation as turning into a giant mutant. Moderately sized mutant. With some giant parts. Then again, he's not the one who had to punch the thing.

Carapace!Paradigm:

"Sure, whatever." Surpass waves a dismissive hand. "Anyway, so Shelly has their tentacle shit and can also go like full, bug samurai with all those armour plates. That's memorable, you know? I sure as hell never fought anyone who can just grow a suit of armour out of their own frigging body. If they're not brand new, then somebody's gotta remember them."

Sammy was pretty out of it when the actual change happened, but he's seen footage from the security cameras. Even in a distant, grainy recording, the sight was unsettling. Bulging, shifting shapes beneath the inky black surface, pushing through one by one. Sammy's just glad it was Thresh's weird membrane and not their actual flesh. He doesn't think his stomach would be up to the task.

Enfilade shakes her head again. "Nothing on record."

"So they just appeared out of their weirdo puddle one day and decided to be our problem. Amazing. Love it." Surpass sits back and groans. "If none of these assholes have any history, then how the fuck did Head Asshole—"

"Architect," Vantage corrects.

"Then how the fuck did Architect, noted asshole, even find them? Pretty sure they don't run villain classifieds." Surpass glowers like Vantage is concealing that information on purpose.

"Maybe there's a villains-only social network," Sammy drawls casually. "MiscreantSpace."

Surpass's frustration vanishes in a snort of laughter. "Dude that's not even a pun."

Sammy shrugs, grinning. "I'm not even a villain." She laughs again and settles down, just as Sammy had hoped. Sometimes you've got to clown around a little to smooth things over.

"At this point it doesn't matter," says Vantage. "What we need to take into account is that they're resourceful and clever enough to grow their ranks and then act on those increased numbers." She sweeps across the group. "Everyone's taken the time to look over the breakdown of yesterday's attacks, right?" Murmurs of assent from all save Surpass, who instead delivers a lazy thumbs up. "Good." Vantage nods, raises her pen. "Let's get started." Her eyes gleam.

One *intensive* whiteboarding session later, and what was once a pristine page now resembles the same maze of scrawls it replaced.

Sammy's exhausted—thank you, mask, for conveniently hiding the black smudges under his eyes—but feeling pretty good about how much they got down. The Altruists aren't as blank a slate as feared, and he knows that mapping the details out like this can only help Vantage's power come online.

Not that he wants to rely solely on Vantage. Surpass may be pissed that Architect pulled one over her by taking the low road, but Sammy got his clock cleaned. He got his *face* messed up. He's earned the right to nurse a grudge.

Thresh. There's more notes alongside their name than any of the others, and they're somehow still the most enigmatic. Faceless. Their powers unpredictable, unique and yet unrecorded. The way they appeared from nowhere, unexpected even by their supposed allies. What lies below that blank exterior? A mask that's more than a mask?

Anything. Anyone.

...Someone Sammy's going to hit with so many lasers, next go round. Like, at least half a dozen. Good ones too, not the lightshow style pew-pews that come out when he doesn't charge up that barely leave a mark.

"Arcade, can you wait behind?" Vantage's voice halts his revenge fantasy. He looks up, blinking, and gives his leader a shallow nod. He hadn't even stood up to leave anyway.

Sammy remains in his chair while the others filter out of the conference room, and after Enfilade shuts the door behind her, he turns back to Vantage. "Detention again, huh?" He smiles. Vantage doesn't, then asks the last question he wants to hear.

"Sammy, are you alright?"

His smile stays fixed in place. His stomach plummets. "Sure. Why wouldn't I be?" he deflects.

Wrong answer. "You were held hostage. Architect threatened your life." There's no sarcasm, no implication of *duh*, *obviously*. She's plain and matter of fact, with a sprinkle of concern.

"We're heroes, our lives get threatened all the time." Sammy feels his laid back tone slipping. He's too tired and too sore.

"That doesn't mean it can't affect you." Vantage pauses. "Or that you have to pretend it doesn't."

"Good to know, but I'm fine." His voice is dull. Unconvincing. Dammit. He takes a quick breath, tries again, shooting Vantage a smile for good measure. "I appreciate you thinking about me. I won't lie, that did suck, but seriously, I'm good."

She slowly nods. Not for the first time, Sammy wonders if her power works on conversations just as it does on combat. Maybe she knew from the start this wouldn't go anywhere. "Remember that the team has resources if you ever feel the need to talk." She inclines her head. "That's all. Try to get some rest, you look—"

"Like an unwanted Spanpanese love ballad woke me at an ungodly hour, yeah."

Vantage's mouth hangs open a moment. Heh. Didn't predict that, did she? Sammy basks in the satisfaction while Vantage's lips twitch into a half smile. "Sure, we'll use that analogy. Take care of yourself, Sammy."

"Always do." He winks. "But if this is your way of telling me I'm allowed to nap while I'm on call, I won't say no." Getting up, he flashes a mischievous grin and then heads out, feeling her eyes on his back every step of the way.

Sammy's smile slides off the moment he leaves the room. Yeah, that's our Arcade. The golden boy. Wouldn't do to have him look worn out or pissed off or hurt.

He's got an image; the handsome, cleancut, flashy youngster. The guy the cameras love, always willing to spare a moment for the press and a few more moments for the fans. In short, just the kind of person to rehabilitate the Glory Hounds' public image.

Before that day, the day they lost Shannon and Rory and the trust of the town, Sammy was the plucky rookie, the younger brother. And sure he'd roll his eyes and quip to the media and he really did believe that he could cut it as a Hound and that he wasn't so green as they all played it up, but part of him enjoyed the attention, the extra bit of slack he always got. He knew that no matter how bad things got or how out of his depth he dove, somebody would always be there to bail him out.

God, he was such a *kid*.

Sammy starts down the corridor before Vantage can come out and ask why he's still there.

It's not the broken nose, or the embarrassment of capture. Not really. It's what those represent. Defeat. Flaws.

He's not supposed to have flaws. He can't *allow* himself to have flaws. He owes it to the dead and the living both. He promised to step up. Be a hero. Be *the* hero.

Sammy feels the heat in his palms. The energy crackling from shoulders to fingertips.

He pictures that featureless black visage, shimmering and swirling like liquid night. Wisps of smoke coil from his hands.

"Next time," he whispers. "Just watch me."

[Drink Your Villain Juice! Ch6 pt 2 available!](#)

[May 13, 2024](#)

Chapter 6 is now locked and loaded!

- Another 25k words, for a total of 215k.
- Confront the Glory Hounds. How will you measure up against Alderbrook's finest?
- Assist your allies, or prioritise your own safety.
- Perhaps you'll learn the consequences of running your Juice dry.
- Under the right circumstances, encounter a revelation.
- Come up with an escape plan, alone or with others.
- Come face to face with Surpass again.

[Drink Your Villain Juice! CH6 \(pt2\) early access link.](#)

[May 13, 2024](#)

See attached to this post the download for chapter five part one. This update will be publically available on May 27th 2024 **You'll need to be able to unzip the file.**

Some complex code here, it does all seem to be firing as it should, but let me know ASAP if there are any problems and I'll get them fixed.

Edit: 17:55 (EST) - I've uploaded an amendment of the file. I accidentally introduced an error while fixed something else by leaving in a snippet of code. Please redownload if you've downloaded before that timestamp, and apologies! ^^

[Cutting room floor - phantom friends, chatting with Altruists](#)

[May 20, 2024](#)

Another bit of cut writing for you folks! Originally, Not!Prii wasn't alone... Also, there was going to be full conversations with each and every Altruist.

So, ghosts first. I wound up abandoning this idea quite quickly: I felt it diluted the impact (and it kind of muddies the purpose of Not!Prii, something that I can't yet elaborate). As such, there's only a very brief snippet.

"You know, I'm surprised you haven't run off yet, \${mc_name}. It's your speciality."

*if alive = 2

"Priii!" calls another voice. Another ghost. Shauna walks into view, arms folded and frowning over her glasses. "Don't be mean to \${mc_name}! I'm sure \${mc_he} had a good reason!" She looks over at you, eyes brightening. "Isn't that right, \${mc_name}?"

*else

"Sheesh, Prii," drawls another voice. Another ghost. Grant strolls into view, hands in his pockets, hair loose around his shoulders. "Cut \$!{mc_name} some slack. Bet \$!{mc_he} had \$!{mc_his} reasons. Right, \$!{mc_name}?"

It'd have been really fun to write more Dime-getting-bullied, but yeah, I realised it wasn't going to be suitable; the 'how else would I have your powers?' moment was too critical and it necessarily had to be Not!Prii focused.

Then there's chatting with the Altruists. I got a decent chunk into this scene, but I was also writing it out of order. By the time I came up with the actual staging of Dime's introduction to the rest of the team, having them wandering talking to each and every teammate felt stilted and slow. Some of this is likely to be repurposed, but more diffused through the rest of Juice. Mammoth dialogue trees... ain't it.

She peeks up at you from under her fringe. "Oh hello, \$!{aka}. Do they need me down there?"

#"You and Teddie seem close."

Kay nods happily. "We've had each other's backs since we were kids. He's my best friend." She pauses, then smiles sheep—bashfully. "I know he isn't the most sociable guy. If you want to get to know him, give him space and don't push him too much."

Her expression hardens, a stark transformation in her demeanour. @coven_history You desperately curb the urge to flinch. A reflexive apology springs to your lips, and you barely hold it back. Your hackles are up instantly, anticipating her turning on you. "I wouldn't do that, \$!{aka}," Kay's voice is quiet, but cloaked in steel. "I'd like for all of us to be friends. If you want the same thing, then there are places you shouldn't go, okay?"

#"I have to admit, you aren't the first thing that springs to mind when I think of supervillains."

Is that a little blunt? Perhaps, but you have a hard time picturing bubbly-yet-shy girl like Kay taking on heroes in battle. Or battling anyone, period. It conjures the same incongruousness as imagining a teddy bear wreaking mayhem. Only with more fluff.

She laughs. "Just wait until you hear my evil speeches, doubter."

*if expressive < 40

Studying her, you arch an eyebrow in challenge.

"What? You don't believe me?"

You answer with a shrug.

"I guess I'll have to prove you wrong."

*else

"Go on then, hit me with one," you challenge.

Kay shakes her head, smiling. "I don't do requests."

Protective!Kay is worth revisiting, I reckon.

Fun fact, was originally thinking about having a variable purely for Dime being an awkward mess. Didn't end up implementing it, but it's hanging around in some of the old code.

Mal is a tease:

"\$!{aka}," they call, raising a hand to you. "Yooo."

You give a quick wave of acknowledgement, and they smile as you lean against the wall opposite them.

"So, how's it going? Making friends?"

*fake_choice

#"I guess we'll see."

The exact same smile remains in place. "Guess we will."

#"No idea."

Their smile widens, showing teeth. "Fair enough."

#"Enemies, actually."

They don't quite laugh, it's more of an amused huff. "Troublemaker, huh?"

##"Sure."

*if (interactcounter = 1)

Their smile widens, showing teeth. "Considering I haven't seen you speak to anyone else yet, I'm loving the confidence."

*else

The exact same smile remains in place. "Good to hear."

*selectable_if interactcounter =1 ##"I haven't actually talked to anyone else yet, so..."

"So you're speaking to little old me first? I'm flattered."

Mal shifts to directly face you, folding their arms and sliding into a comfortable slouch.

"Anyway, what's up?"

*choice

##"I realised I never thanked you for vouching for me."

Both of their eyebrows rise for a moment. "Mm. Is that what you're doing now?"

*if (awkward)

Are they making fun of you?

A half dozen memories flit through your head. A conversation is led one way, you think you know where it's going, and then your legs are swept from beneath you with a snide remark. Is that happening here?

*choice

#I stumble over my words.

"Well—I uh. I guess I—that is..." you trail off.

`\${aka}, relax." Mal's expression seems amused, but not mocking, exactly. "I was teasing. You're welcome."

"Cool," you manage, hoping you're not blushing.

"Was that everything?"

Mal talking about their powers:

##"So, you can shapeshift?"

*set malshifting true

"That's right." Before your eyes, Mal's face changes. Their nose alters in shape. Their jaw narrows. Their hair lengthens and lightens. In a matter of seconds, you're looking at a completely different person.

Well, maybe not entirely. The same smile remains on their new face. "Ta-da." Their voice is subtly different, though the tone is unmistakably Mal.

*label malshiftmenu

Their expression is expectant.

*choice

*hide_reuse # "Can you only change how you look?"

*hide_reuse # "Do you have a... 'default' appearance?"

"I do. Maybe you've even seen it."

*if (stat_observation > 50)

Although they sound flippant, there's something about the comment that doesn't quite sit right with you. The way they spoke was almost too casual.

You doubt you've actually seen their real face.

*else

"And if I want to know for sure, I have to guess, right?"

Mal winks. "You got it."

They continue. "Otherwise, I'm Korean, so I usually don't switch from that unless I have to. It feels uncomfortable. Not physically. Just you know, in general."

*hide_reuse #"Can you turn into other people?"

Mal laughs, and unsure how to interpret it, you hesitate.

They seem to pick up on your confusion. "Would you believe that most people ask that even faster than you just did?"

*fake_choice

#"Is that a bad thing?"

"Eh, nah, not really. It's natural to ask."

They shrug lazily.

#"What's the fastest it ever happened?"

"Oh, no contest. One time, this girl had heard about my powers before we met, and first I knew of it was her running up and yelling 'change into me!', 'change into me!.'" Their smile turns sly. "I might have exaggerated more than a couple of her facial features."

#"Sorry."

"Oh, no need to apologise. It's just this game I've got to keep track of how long it takes people to ask about it."

"Anyway, to answer the question, I kind of can. I have to study the person and know them decently well. Ideally they're right there in front of me, or I have some pictures, and even then..." Mal shakes their head. "It's difficult to explain, but my mind's eye of a person isn't always exactly how they really look, you know?"

*fake_choice

#"I get it. I think."

"Nice. Score one for my explanations."

#"So you might turn into a funhouse mirror version instead?"

Mal laughs gently. "Yeah you know, that's not a bad way to describe it. Might start using that."

#"I don't really understand."

"Mm. That's okay."

Definitely going to be some variation of this in the actual story down the line, though it'll need some tweaks of course.

[Alternate POV - Architecture of an Escape](#)

[May 31, 2024](#)

There's no sign of Architect as MC and the others run foul of Surpass in the Zone. Here's where he wound up.

Nothing is ever easy, is it?

Architect wouldn't class himself as a pessimist—moreso a realist—but he has to admit that a part of him has been counting down the minutes until something went wrong all night.

Naturally, his fears couldn't have come to fruition at a worse time. The tantalising room he'd glimpsed down in the facility dances through his mind, taunting him ceaselessly. Its secrets dangle just out of reach, strung between the hands of—who else?—Thorn. The biggest mystery of the group, the one with too little background and too many questions. The success of this mission depends entirely on what they could find—

"Get back here and take your beating!" a voice bellows from somewhere beneath him.

—alright. Maybe not *entirely* on that.

Architect projects a square of energy from the wall above him and leaps up to it, clambering to the new platform. In the same moment, he dissipates his previous creation. He spares a quick downwards glance and grimaces under his helmet, and not only due to the vertigo washing over him. His pursuer, Surpass of the Glory Hounds, is keeping pace on the ascent up the artificial chasm rending the Zone in twain. Where he crafts a staircase from his powers—he jumps to his latest projection—Surpass is punching directly into the wall, launching herself higher through sheer brute force.

This does not bode well. Architect is forming new platforms as fast as he can make them, ascending an ever-moving stairway, and he's not gaining any appreciable distance. On a flat plane, there isn't a prayer of him outrunning Surpass. Though, he reminds himself, the Zone is anything but flat. No more distractions, he needs a plan.

First, an easy, low-cost tactic. Architect looks down again—another dizzy spell, and dammit, is she *gaining* on him?—sees Surpass digging her fists into the concrete, muscles bunching. As she tenses, propelling herself upward in a shower of grey dust, Architect thrusts out a hand, punching a cylindrical barrier out of the wall to strike Surpass in the chest. The impact pushes her outward, airborne and unmoored.

For a moment, he dares to think that the hero will plunge to the cavern floor. That hope is extinguished far too soon. Surpass twists in midair, reacting nigh-instantaneously to snatch a handhold. Her entire body swings from that fingertip grip, and yet in seconds, she has fully secured herself and is straight back to climbing.

"Nice try!" she shouts up at him. "One more I owe you!"

Architect doesn't bother backsassing. That move let him pull that little bit further ahead. He's loath to use the same trick twice, so instead he waits a few platforms, a few jumps, and then midway through another of Surpass's leaps sends a long flat projection from the wall above her, blocking her ascent.

That, at least, is his intent. To his consternation, Surpass punches straight through the barrier, shattering it to pieces without even slowing down. Architect grits his teeth, blinking sweat from his eyes. He's tiring too quickly to afford that kind of wasted effort. He lands heavily on his next platform, placing a hand on the wall to steady himself. Involuntarily, his senses slip deep into the rockface, its every crack and irregularity and weakness sweeping through his mind. Bringing it down would be simple, even trivial—

Architect tears his hand away and continues climbing. No. Even if such a course wouldn't threaten his own allies, a display of destruction on that scale would raise far too many questions. Much as he hates the DPR, they aren't foolish enough to overlook a clue so obvious. Those abilities must remain a last resort, and perhaps not even that. Jail cells can be sprung. Secrets cannot be unspoken.

Still, that momentary glimpse into the wall told him that he's approaching the apex. Just a short distance further, and the real trial begins. One, two, three steps upward, and then the fourth sees his boot land on solid ground in place of projected energy. Architect wastes no time, breaking into a full sprint into the upper Zone. The more distance he can gain in this moment, the better positioned he will be.

If there's any silver lining to Surpass's single-minded pursuit of him, it's that he has the best chances of evading her of any of his fellow Altruists. Perhaps Thorn or Rampage would give her the slip, but Architect wouldn't like Fracture's odds, nor Ghoul's.

M—*Mallory*—would probably manage. They're slippery, and they've already pulled a disappearing act. He compartmentalises their absence, tucking his concern to the side. He'll believe Mallory is fine until there's direct evidence to the contrary; time and again they've proven him a fool for worrying.

Not that it stops him.

Architect's thoughts linger dourly on the situation below as his arms and legs pump, breaths reverberating around his helmet. Unless the others follow instructions and get out of there as soon as possible, his fledgling team could be in serious trouble. Tonight took months of preparation, from planning to recruitment. He can't afford the delay of replacing so many allies, not to mention the possibility of them spilling information if captured. Starting over would be a devastating setback. Then there's Thorn, the sole remaining chance of getting any information out of all this: if something happens to them, the mission will be an abject failure.

Also, while secondary, Architect actually likes this ragtag crew he's assembled. He'd prefer they not end up behind bars.

The crash of shattering brick a few feet from his head reminds him that he'd best attend first to his own liberty.

"You're going nowhere!" Surpass goes from a voice some distance behind Architect to a motion blur skidding to a halt ahead, cutting off his retreat. Architect stops, hands at his side, palms facing outward. Ready. Surpass clenches and unclenches her fists, eyes narrowed into a fierce glare. "Done running, you piece of shit?"

"For the moment," Architect answers, scanning the area as much as he's able without turning his head and giving the game away. The area has more than its fair share of blind spots and hidey-holes, but concealing himself would only be a temporary solution. He suspects Surpass is willing to demolish a wall or two if it means catching him. That she's able isn't even a question.

"So. Easy way or the hard way?" Surpass puts her hand to the side of her mouth, like she's letting him in on a secret. "Spoilers, I'm gonna fuck you up whichever, but I'll hold back if you come quiet." She pauses, lets out a short laugh. "A little, anyhow."

"What an enticing offer you make." He doesn't bother hiding his sarcasm. He knew he was invoking her wrath when he threatened her comrades during their last encounter. Though the situation demanded it, taking that path has shortened his options now. "May I have some time to think?"

Surpass laughs again. "Sure." She holds up a hand, fingers outstretched. "Five... Four..."

Architect acts the heartbeat before Surpass barks "Three!" and superspeed rushes him, slamming into the barrier he'd conjured that very instant. Simultaneously he forms another projection beneath his feet, lifting him into the air as it extends further and further from the ground. He tries to keep his breathing steady as he rises higher, frozen in place, lest the slightest movement ruin his balance and send him tumbling back down.

At roof height, Architect makes a leap for the closest ruin just as the pillar below him shatters at the base courtesy of a Surpass haymaker. He pitches forward, limbs frantically flailing. He's helpless, falling—just barely making it, landing chestfirst on the rooftop. He scrambles to his feet, heart pounding. That's exactly why he took the earlier climb in steps.

He creates two more barriers at right angles to the rooftop and has broken back into a run before they even finish forming. Any second he can buy is precious. Even so, as he crosses to the opposite side he pulls into a dead stop at the edge. Looking down, his vision swirls, blurring dizzily. It's so dark that the ground below is swallowed up in the murk.

God he hates heights.

Architect knows he's dawdling, knows that his choices are to get over it or get captured, which is no choice at all. Still his feet remain rooted to the spot. Still his clammy palms tremble.

Move.

Perhaps there's roof access. Or even a hole by which he can descend to a lower floor. Surely he could lose Surpass in the twists and turns—

Move.

Architect steps over the edge. He hears his breath catch, suppresses a yelp of fear with all his might, and then lands on the firm surface of his projection a few feet from the rooftop. He desperately wants to lean against the wall until his jelly legs firm beneath him once more, but instead he steps again. Drops. Lands. Steps again. *Again—*

"C'MERE!"

A heavy weight slams between Architect's shoulders, sending him flying from the platform, plunging into the dark. He screams, knowing he'll hit the ground at any moment—arms wrap around him, and before he can process what's happening, impact crushes all the air from his lungs. Impact... on top of something. Wait. He can still feel the arms; make that someone.

"Gotcha," Surpass growls triumphantly into his ear.

The sequence comes together. She dropped onto him from the roof, knocked him off the edge, and then broke his fall.

More sporting than he would have credited her for, to be honest.

Architect tries to fight past his wheezing breath and scarcely-subsidizing panic to come up with something—anything—he can do in this position. Surpass has him in a vice grip. Struggling free is out of the question when all she needs to do is squeeze to break bones.

He sees a single way out, and of course it's the option that'll piss her off more than ever. He feels a mild pang of guilt—despite all her talk, she did actually protect him from serious injury—but it soon passes. He has far worse on his conscience.

Twisting both hands, Architect brings two projections from the ground directly beneath Surpass. These aren't his usual geometric shapes, they're thin, almost flat, each tapering to a sharp point. The spears hit resistance, and Architect feels Surpass go rigid.

"You shady motherfucker," she hisses.

Architect uses the distraction and wrenches forward, gaining just enough separation to hurl his helmeted head backwards into Surpass's chin with a resounding clang. Her arms loosen and he tears himself from her grasp, rolling to the side and stumbling clumsily to his feet, blinking away stars.

At the last instant he sees the fist flying for his face and lurches backward, arms windmilling for balance. The punch sizzles the air, just inches from connection. Before he can regain his footing, Surpass shoulderchecks him into a wall. Snatching him by the coat, she slams him against the brickwork with a single hand.

"I knew you were a piece of work," she snarls, her superhuman strength pinning him like a butterfly to a board. "But you just keep finding new lows, don't you?"

"I've seen you shrug off bullets," Architect manages, despite the immense pressure on his chest. "Don't tell me you're afraid of a sharp object or two. I didn't even break the skin—"

"Shut the fuck up." She slams him into the bricks again. He groans, sagging, then forces strength to his legs to remain upright. So long as he's conscious and mobile, escape remains possible.

The gears turn in his head. He expected angry and he got it, but this reaction has an edge outside the norm. His comment wasn't for show; there's well-publicised footage of Surpass getting shot in the chest, then rushing the hapless mugger and crumpling his firearm into a pretzel, emerging completely unscathed. The projections were intended as a surprise, not to cause serious harm.

Unless...

"Not so... invincible... are we?"

Oh, *that* lands. It's the flash of doubt in her eyes. The short sharp inhalation. How close to the mark doesn't matter. Only the opportunity.

A younger Mallory—one wearing a different face—helps him up off the ground, flashing him a wry smirk. Thick streams of blood trickle from his nostrils, and he tastes it as he gasps for air, too breathless to thank them.

Mallory claps him on the shoulder. "*Last chance, D.*"

Yeah. Same here as it was all those years ago.

Best pull out all the stops.

Architect jerks his head to the right. Surpass anticipates the fresh projection from that vacated space, but not the pillar he forms beneath her feet, lifting her off the ground. He twists in her grip, shedding his long coat—he can get another—to shuck her grasp and make a break for it. Surpass tries to leap back to the ground and he creates a ramp, blocking off her descent. He switches the construct's angle, forcing her in another direction, and that's when he hears a frustrated growl. A rapidfire glance confirms that sure enough, she's drawing back a fist to punch straight through.

He shifts the surface of his barrier, turning it jagged, and is rewarded with a clusterbomb of pained expletives. He dissolves the barrier, instantly forms another, steeply angled, pitching Surpass onto the ground.

Desperate, panting breaths echo through Architect's ears as he tears around a corner. He hasn't stretched his power this much in a long time, and fatigue presses heavily upon every step. Ahead, a collapsed building forms a tempting tunnel as it rests against another ruin. Architect overrides his instinct to head for the passageway, instead forming a fresh barrier to block the entrance and rushing off in opposite direction entirely.

He clammers through what used to be a window, picks his way across a rubble-strewn room, nerves jangling with each too-loud footfall, emerges out the far side, turns another corner, and then almost walks straight into the uniformed back of a DPR officer.

Architect has the man in a chokehold before he can even begin to turn, and in short order the officer is sprawled unconscious on the ground. It's a split second decision for Architect to drag his victim through the closest doorway, its occupant long since destroyed.

No sign of Surpass, though he knows she won't give up so easily. This is a brief reprieve, a brief chance to plan. Whatever scheme he devises will need to be a good one.

Architect's gaze falls upon the insensate DPR officer, and the wheels begin turning once more.

He tugs off his helmet, pulling a face as the cool night air chills his sweat-drenched head. He just knows his hair will be a nightmare tomorrow, though if haircare is the greatest of his worries, he'll count himself lucky.

Another look at the officer, confirming that they're about the same size. Suddenly, Architect finds himself smiling. As brazen as it is, he thinks this plan will actually work. When did his ideas become so audaciously hare-brained?

...He's spending too much time around Mallory.

[Character Q&A reminder/refresh](#)

[Jun 4, 2024](#)

Hey folks! Just popping in to talk about the character Q&As/polls, which haven't really taken off so far.

I didn't actually receive any in-character questions, so I went a bit quiet on the poll front as I wasn't sure how best to proceed!

This post is a reminder that the opportunity is there for all members to submit questions to be answered IC by the characters who are in the interview chair. You can do this with comments or by sending a direct message. Currently, you can ask Wil or Mal!

We'll see how this month goes and I'll update y'all with another poll as and when it's live. In the meantime, stay awesome, and happy Pride.

[Writing update](#)

[Jun 7, 2024](#)

Hey folks! I'm deep into what will very definitely be the final part of this monster chapter! Majority of Surpass fight route is written, the rest is being sketched out, and so is most of the aftermath, including an opportunity to chat with Teddie and Kay and potentially have some trans bonding. What remains is concluding a debrief with Dion, an optional section with confiding about not-Prii, and the outcome if you got absolutely bodied.

So, we're getting there! I've mentioned a couple times but I started a freelance gig recently and I'm trying to strike the right balance between picking up jobs and working on Juice. Can't say for sure when the update will come but it'll at least be here on Patreon in June in which case hopefully public for the end of the month?

As always, thanks for reading and commenting! I read every single comment and they mean a whole lot to me.

P.S. got some questions for Wil and Mal! Yay! You can send those at the lowest membership level.

[Character Q&A - Mallory and Wil - June '24](#)

[Jun 15, 2024](#)

We're midway through June, so I figured I'd have the delightful Mallory and Wil answer the questions that have come their way so far! They'll be here for another round at the end of the month.

For Mal:

Q: Mal, is there a look you feel the most comfortable in?

A: Sorta? It's more like, there's a range I prefer staying inside. I don't like being too tall or too short, I like keeping the toned bod. I'd have glasses a lot more if they weren't a pain in the ass with a mask. Usually prefer not being too masc or fem, but that depends. It's a comfort thing. Oh, and I don't like changing ethnicity. I dunno how to explain it but it feels, like... yeah I dunno. Lying isn't usually a problem for me but that kinda lie makes me feel not okay.

Q: When did you first discover you could do what you do?

A: I was like nine or ten and I was screwing around in the kitchen. I think I was trying to microwave dirt or something? I was a little shit when I was a kid. Anyway I picked up my toasty dirt and my hand kind of just melted and I'm freaking out and thinking I invented acid dirt. Luckily mom was there and ran in and she kinda knew what to do, so I put my hand back together and started changing skin colours. Red, blue, orange, all kinds. Then I got grounded for microwaving dirt.

Q: What's your idea of a good date?

A: Hm, good question. I like to switch things up, but I'd rather be doing like, an activity. I get kinda restless with sitdown stuff like dinner or going to the movies. Would rather curl up at home if we're gonna watch something. But yeah, like, going to the club, dancing, just doing things in each other's company, and if we can go home and cuddle or uh, more, afterward, then even better. I mean that's not essential, touch is just a thing for me.

Q: What do you think of the new members?

A: Teddie needs to lighten up. I know his power is a shitty hand, but the grouchy act gets kinda old when you're trying to work as a team. Kay's fun, though if she sticks with this career she's either gonna wise up or she's gonna get burned hard. Still, it's nice having someone around who gets gender stuff. I like Wil but I don't think he's cut out for this line of work. Just a feeling. Guilty conscience, you know?

[MC] is interesting. 'lil bit of a wildcard. Definitely holding a lot back, but who isn't? There are deep wounds there, and I mean *deep*. I dunno. People with nothing to lose are dangerous, and I doubt [MC] has much.

Q: What kind of movies / TV shows do you like?

A: I'm an unrepentant lover of trash. Give me shitty reality TV and direct to DVD movies. Musicals, too. Just, uh, hope you don't mind hearing all the songs over and over the next few days cause I'll be singing them nonstop.

Q: Did you ever think of being an actor?

A: Nah, not for me. Only two things I ever wanted to be. Still working on those.

For Wil:

Q: Wil, what's your idea of a good date?

A: A good date's one where everyone enjoyed themselves. The actual activity could be almost anything. I love taking people to concerts, though. Not big ones, I'm talking the kind that you get at a bar or *maybe* a smallish performance centre. There's just something special about it.

Q: What do you think of the group?

A: I don't like that Dion kept things quiet until we'd already committed ourselves. I'm all for giving the government a big fuck you, but Dion held it back on purpose. Makes it harder to trust him. The group as a whole is alright, I guess. Get along okay with everyone. Little surreal to have coworkers and friends as a villain. Hanging out with buddies in downtime isn't something I ever pictured villains doing, you know?

[MC] worries me a bit. There's this... haunted air, and that doesn't happen out of nowhere. I kind of hope there's something I can do to help.

Q: What music do you listen to?

A: K-pop and country.

cracks up

Okay, that was a lie. Yeah, I'm absolutely predictable. I like punk and metal, bit of alt rock. I have a pipe organ album, too.

...what?

Q: How did you meet Teddie and Kay?

A: We were all younger. Their powers were both already a thing, mine weren't. They used to hang out a lot in this one neighbourhood next to the Parks which is basically the Parks minus one percent, and I happened to work at a coffee place there. They came in now and then, got the impression they couldn't really afford it very often. Exchanged a few words here and there, hadn't really *met* them until they staggered in one day all bloody and bruised. I guess I was the nearest person they vaguely thought they could trust?

Anyway that's how I wound up getting introductions while fixing Teddie's broken nose.

[Drink Your Villain Juice! Ch6 \(pt 3\) available!](#)

[Jun 17, 2024](#)

Chapter 6 is fully completed, and the early access build is now available here on Patreon at the Coven level!

- 25.5k new words, for a cool 75.5k chapter and 240.5k total for the game. Yeah this probably could have been split, chapter wise.
- Throw down with Surpass, alone or with teammates! Show the toughest hero in town that you can hang!
- Regroup with your allies. Did everyone make it out?
- Share your discoveries from the facility.
- Face the consequences of injury or power overuse.
- Get a little closer to certain teammates.
- Do you trust anyone enough to confide in them? Would you even want to?
- Some tweaks and fixes.

[Drink Your Villain Juice! CH6 \(pt 3\) early access link.](#)

[Jun 17, 2024](#)

See attached to this post the download for the full chapter 6, including a non-placeholder Surpass fight! This update will be publically available on July 1st 2024. **You'll need to be able to unzip the file.**

As always, if you encounter any errors, please let me know, and I'll get them fixed ASAP.

Edit 24/06 - New version uploaded with a couple fixes! Most relevantly, I've tweaked the juice decay levels such that you can actually properly run out in a few more scenarios now!

[Cutting room floor - meeting Surpass](#)

[Jun 24, 2024](#)

So a scene I partially wrote surprisingly early on involved a chance meeting with Surpass out of costume (ft. reflections on Catalyst). I didn't get that far with it because honestly, too much stuff was still in prototype and I didn't have enough information to actually put together a full scene. It was a good lesson that I needed to nail down some of the fundamentals of both story and mechanics before jumping ahead!

It was probably also to an extent one of those scenes where... you get an idea in your head for something that sounds cool/funny and you need to commit it to paper, but that doesn't necessarily mean it's good.

You can tell this is something I wrote early cause it's got the old version of coven history *and* the old variable for coven loyalty. But hey, the concept of meeting in a library got repurposed in the end!

Spending the better part of your afternoon in the library wasn't the plan for today. Unfortunately, Catalyst has never given a damn about inconveniencing you, so it's hardly surprising that he didn't start today.

No-showing after his invitation would be a bad idea. Realistically, this isn't an invitation at all. It's an order.

*choice

#I don't like this, but antagonising Catalyst gets me nowhere.

You need to pick your battles, and it's not worth getting into it with Catalyst over something so minor.

#I'm biding my time. Playing nice for now will be to my advantage later.

In the grand scheme of things, what's one more instance of Catalyst being a jerk? Sure, it's not particularly fun to have to shape your afternoon around someone who didn't even bother to give you a time, but it should keep him out of your business for a while, and that's worth the irritation.

*if coven_history = "long"

You're no stranger to playing the long game, and past experience suggests that this is the best way to deal with him.

*else

Hopefully.

Catalyst is fully capable of being much worse than just annoying.

#It's just another slap in the face, and I'm keeping score.

*if obedience > 70

*set obedience -10

You physically jolt. Where did [i]that[/i] come from? The surge of resentment feels so foreign, and yet the emotion is viscerally your own.

*choice

#That... huh. Gonna need to think about this one.

Something to file away for future examination.

*selectable_if (coven_history = "broken" or "addiction") #When did I last feel so defiant?

*if coven_history = "broken"

You thought they'd crushed out every last speck of your rebellion.

Your hands tremble. You can't—these emotions are dangerous.

*else

So often now, you're just stumbling from dose to dose of Juice. How can you think about payback when breaking from the Coven will result in you getting cut off?

Your fingers twitch. Suddenly, your mouth is dry.

*choice

#I have to put this feeling to bed.

Yeah. Yeah. That would be for the best.

#Maybe... I want out from that life?

*set dependence -5

Maybe you do. It's... difficult to think about. Frightening, even. Not something you think you can properly unpack right here and now, especially not with Catalyst due to show up at some point.

But you're going to keep hold of this feeling.

#Nope. Nope. Abandoning ship. Now.

*set obedience +5

It's an intrusive thought, that's all. You're burying this feeling and you're never thinking about it again.

You continue to tell yourself that, and you try to ignore what's bubbling beneath the surface.

*label surpass_arrives

A voice breaks you out of your train of thought.

*page_break "Hey, mind if I take a seat?"

You look up. And then keep looking up. A very tall, very built woman with medium-brown skin and short, curly hair now stands across from you. She's clad in sportswear, holding a paperback in one huge hand, and gesturing to the opposite couch with the other.

*if observation > 60

*set met_surpass 1

*comment basically this should pass if observation is MC's main stat

You're instantly struck by a sense of familiarity, and for a moment you say nothing, just looking at her.

The woman is absolutely massive, her biceps on full display thanks to her choice of clothing. Her physique seems impossible outside of the realms of professional sports, weightlifting—

It clicks in your head.

—or superpowered enhancement.

*fake_choice

#Oh no. That's Surpass.

#Oh [i]fuck[/i]. That's Surpass.

*if observation > 40

There's something oddly familiar about her, though exactly what, you can't place.

Your moment of hesitation is apparently long enough for her to take as acquiescence, because she proceeds to shoot you a broad smile.

"Thanks!"

*fake_choice

#"Um."

#"Wait—"

#"Hey—"

In the process of swinging a duffle bag from her shoulder in order to sit, she fails to notice your words. Well, word. The couch creaks uneasily underneath her considerable weight.

You look her up and down. She's absolutely massive, her biceps on full display thanks to her choice of clothing. Her physique seems impossible outside of the realms of professional sports, weightlifting—

It clicks in your head.

—or superpowered enhancement.

Very low observation was originally gonna have a variation where they just straight up failed to realise who they were talking to, which is kind of the thing that this whole section arose from, I think.

Damn. That is one massive lady.

Behold... placeholders. I don't know why I was using fake_choice so much, I guess I hadn't realised you could use implicit control flow yet.

She thumps you rambunctiously on the shoulder. "Nice meeting you."

*if coven_history =1

You immediately and instinctively flinch from the contact. Surpass freezes, looking absolutely mortified.

"Oh... dude. I am so sorry. I don't think things through sometimes and—yeah no. Sorry. That was really uncool of me. Won't happen again. Guaranteed."

*fake_choice

#say it's okay... badly

#thank her for the apology

#can't talk

#play it off.. badly

#ptsd

*fake_choice

#Berate self

#Resentment (Surpass)

#Resentment (Coven)

#It's fine. It happened. Move on.

#Sad time

Bonus:

*choice

#I cannot believe I'm even thinking this, but she's hot. @{ftone [Flirt, passive]}

[Jun 24, 2024](#)

The Surpass scene felt a little too incomplete by itself, so here, two for the price of one.

This is the original version of the scene where you're dragged into the Altruists' hideout after getting beat up. I intended to go more into depth with MC's general medical trauma and giving the chance to set some body related details, but it wasn't fully clicking because I hadn't reached the point where the injuries actually happened so I was working off incomplete details.

Some of this may still make it in, especially Mal's commentary on various injuries, but the actual scene ended up being a bit too intense for that kind of conversation.

Also, RIP getting that cheesy flirt in with Kay.

*choice

#I lean on Fracture.

Fracture lets out a surprised grunt the moment you grab hold of his arm for support. For a second or two you think he might just shake you straight off, but instead he slows his pace to stop you from falling behind.

With his help, you navigate the remainder of the way to the hideout.

#I lean on Rampage.

Rampage glances at you as you take her arm, and then nods resolutely, setting her jaw in determination. She begins practically hauling you along, seemingly committed to getting you back to the hideout as soon as possible.

It's frankly exhausting, and you're stumbling and staggering by the time the three of you reach your destination.

#No, I'll make it back under my own power.

*if guts < 25

That's what you attempt anyway. And you very nearly pull it off, staggering doggedly towards your destination with gritted teeth.

It's the stairs that do you in. Just three tiny steps, but they may as well be a mountain.

Your wobbling legs manage to endure the first of the stairs, and then as you raise your foot for the next, your muscles spasm. The world tips backward as you pitch into a fall, zero chance of catching your balance—

With a thump, your fall is arrested by a strong set of arms.

You have a fantastic view of Rampage's upside-down face looking down at you with concern. "Are you alright?" she asks, gingerly standing you back up.

*choice

#Heat rushes to my cheeks. "I'm fine, thanks." @{ftone [Flirt, passive]}

Half a smile flickers across her face, and then she looks away.

#"I'm fine, thanks," I mutter, embarrassed.

#Annoyed, I shrug her grip off. "You didn't need to do that."

Nearby, Fracture snorts derisively.

#"I'm okay, thanks to you." I'm genuinely appreciative.

Rampage smiles sunnily. "It's no sweat."

#"Usually I don't fall for girls that easily," @{ftone [Flirt]}

Rampage laughs self-consciously, breaking eye contact. "I'd hope not. I can't always be behind you."

The first sight upon entry is Mallory lazing around on one of the couches. However, the second the door opens, they spring straight to their feet.
"Holy shit, \${aka}. Heck happened to you?"

Of course that's what they ask.

*choice

#I leave it to the others to explain.

After you're silent for a couple of seconds, Kay pipes up. "Stuff got kind of intense. \${aka} wound up being hurt."

#I'll be direct and to the point.

"Things didn't go as smoothly as we hoped."

#I make a joke of it.

*if expressive => 40

"You should see the other guy."

Mal smirks.

*else

"I tripped."

Mal stares at you for a second, and then cracks a grin. "Anyone ever tell you that you're not amazing at this joking thing, \${aka}?"

"...Yes," you admit grudgingly.

*if doctormal = 3

"I know last go round you didn't want me to look you over, but this time, I gotta insist. You're a mess and Dion's gonna lecture me if I don't do my job."

*elseif doctormal = 2

"Well \${aka}, you know that I know what I'm doing, so you can trust me to take a look."

*else

"So, \${aka}, you're in luck." Mal grins broadly at you. "I'm a doctor, I can fix you up right quick."

*choice

#"Sure you can." I'm sceptical.

*set rel_wyrd -2

Mal's grin actually broadens. "I know, I don't look like the type."

"Gonna need your top off for this one, \${aka}"

*choice

#I freeze up. I don't people seeing my body

*comment relate to a choice RE coven about not having dignity etc.

#I freeze up. they'll see my scars.

"Okay, lemme take a look here..."

*if feature = 3

"Oh, huh. Wow." Mal tilts their head to the side, studying the veins on your shoulders with obvious interest.

*choice

#"Can you not do that?"

"Sorry!" they say cheerily, not looking particularly sorry. Nevertheless, they refocus immediately.

#I shift my body away from their scrutiny.

#I shut my mouth and bear it.

#""You can look later if you really want."

Mal laughs, pinching one of their earlobes. "Sorry, shouldn't get distracted."

#""Less gawking, more treatment."

"Whoops, you're right."

*if feature = 4

"Whoa." Mal tilts their head to the side, studying your stomach with a mixture of interest and alarm.

*comment project related injuries.

"Damn," Mal breathes quietly. "You've seen some shit, haven't you \$!{aka}?"

*choice

#""Yeah."

#""I don't want to talk about it."

#I concentrate on my breathing and don't respond.

#I'm too caught up in memories to reply.

[Updated files - CH6](#)

[Jun 24, 2024](#)

Hi! Just a heads up that the post with the game file has been updated!

The main change is that I've adjusted the levels of Juice decay and the costs of a couple of choices, such that you should now find that if you just use your powers over and over, you'll almost definitely run out.

I'll probably tweak this more in future as it's still taking a little too much usage for my liking, but it's passing the main threshold I wanted that constant usage results in a bad time.

[Chapter 6 \(full\) now live!](#)

[Jul 1, 2024](#)

Hey all! The demo build has gone public on [Dashingdon](#) and is now available on there. It's actually slightly more polished than the patreon build with a couple extra fixes (nothing crazy in terms of additional content)

I just wanted to take a moment to thank everyone for their support on this platform! It's overwhelming and gratifying to have so many people as members; both paid and followers. I literally could not do this without you.

Side POV piece coming in the next couple days! It'll be from a completely fresh pair of eyes.

Also, in case this is your kind of thing and you're not on tumblr, my lovely wife wrote a *spicy* ParadigmXRanger piece. Since this was from a donation, it's freely available for everyone. (NSFW): <https://archiveofourown.org/works/56986588>

[Alternate POV - DPR Zone Blues](#)

[Jul 3, 2024](#)

Here's something a little different for you! A POV piece for a character who hasn't appeared yet! Meet DPR Captain Ramón Ramos, the man with the worst job in Alderbrook. According to himself.

Author's note: This piece assumes a no-alert infiltration and Dime getting the upper hand on Vantage.

Not for the first, third, nor—he's depressingly certain—the last time, Captain Ramón Ramos, DPR, wonders whose goddamn cereal he pissed in to earn himself this posting.

No gear, no paras, no backup, a shoestring budget, a skeleton crew, and oh, just as one more 'fuck you', better keep the locals in check.

Independents. Ramos fucking hates independents.

Ramos glares into his third shot of shitty machine espresso since his beeper woke him up under an hour ago, downs it in one, and stalks over to the clustered group ahead of him, tossing the empty cup over his shoulder as he goes.

A makeshift staging area has sprang up in the upper section of the Zone, not far from the Department's portacabin HQ; someone's dragged a couple of floodlights over and the majority of Ramos's team has congregated there. Attention fixed on the group, Ramos stumbles over a shattered piece of concrete and bites off a curse. This fucking place.

Ramos's mood sours yet further when he spots a familiar face in the crowd. More accurately, the gaggle of officers is facing her. Is tonight for real? He gets called away for five minutes for a pointless briefing (consisting entirely of variations on 'Hey, don't go in that place we told you not to go into, got it?'), and Vantage manages to show up at the exact moment he's not there to keep the situation under control? It's not like his any of underlings have spines stiffer than damp cardboard.

"Alright people, enough standing around!" Ramos calls, pushing through the cluster of dawdling agents. "You mix this up with a PTA meeting? Sweep and secure the site! Go! Go!" Most of the team scatters with a flurry of 'yes sirs!', leaving only a pair of specialists whom Ramos promptly ignores to focus on the heroic pain in the ass in their midst. "Vantage," he says. "Better have a good explanation for crashing our jurisdiction."

They both know that she does, and she knows that Ramos knows, but he's stalling, giving himself time to think on his next move. He's not sure whether her power works on conversations and that bothers him far more than he lets on.

Vantage calmly provides the expected reply. "Captain Ramos. We were alerted of villain presence in the Zone."

Ramos already has his follow up ready. "Our agreement doesn't extend to unconfirmed reports, and your 'alert' didn't come from a DPR channel."

"One hundred percent of simulations indicated the alert was correct."

Ramos barely doesn't roll his eyes, and only then because it's again, the exact thing he knew she would say. 'Precognitive Simulation'. Yeah, sure. Why doesn't this chick have a telepath rating, again?

"Convenient," he replies. He's not playing for time this go round. He's just annoyed.

"Considering how late your officers were to the scene, I agree." Vantage's expression is carefully blank, guarding the barb of her criticism; Ramos isn't fooled for a second. He's already done this dance a dozen times.

"We deployed well within operational parameters." Ugh. He sounds like a goddamn desk jockey. "Question is, how'd you get here so fast? Something you wanna tell me, Vantage?"

There's a fringe faction in the Department that the Hounds' success and survival owes itself to an elaborate false flag operation, but Ramos thinks the theory's idiotic, wishful, and arrogant. The Hounds are good at what they do, that's why they're such a pain in the ass and a legendarily botched job only barely opened the door to the DPR.

No, Ramos isn't throwing out a conspiracy theory, he's trying to get under Vantage's skin.

She sighs. "Captain, you're better than that. Come on."

The seemingly genuine disappointment in her voice catches Ramos off guard, bringing an embarrassed flush to his cheeks. One of the specialists, Zhang, studiously fixes his gaze anywhere but the argument, the other, Castillo, awkwardly clears her throat and gets very interested in the portable radio she's carrying.

Ramos changes the subject. He got sidetracked. "...Anyway, I'm not seeing the rest of your team. Or any captures."

Strangely enough, that does actually put a crack in Vantage's stoic mask—not that she wears one, arrogant bitch—and she frowns. “Your officers managed to drop a containment field on most of them. Considering their justified frustrations at being cut off from facing the Altruists, I thought I should meet you alone.”

Ramos tries not to laugh, but not very hard. He authorised the containment field—one of the few decent pieces of gear the Department let him requisition, because they're assholes—but he hadn't heard that they caught the Hounds instead. What a shame. He'd be irritated at his guys screwing up, but it serves the Hounds right for butting in.

Actually, now that he's been in front of Vantage for a minute, Ramos realises she's pretty worse for wear; her costume is scuffed and torn in places, she's streaked with dirt, and she's heavily favouring one arm. “Wasn't the field that roughed you up. Maybe my guys saw you were in trouble and tried to protect you.”

Oh, *that* gets to her. Vantage's eyes narrow. “It was a difficult fight. The kind of fight that botched interference can completely derail.”

“Really? Cause from where I'm standing, looks like those villains gave you a beatdown.” Ramos smirks disingenuously. “Aren't your powers supposed to predict everything?”

With visible effort, Vantage suppresses her irritation. “Captain, I didn't come here to trade insults. We've both got better things to do. My team entered your jurisdiction, so I'm carrying out my responsibility of telling you. I'll have the necessary paperwork on your desk tomorrow.” Vantage pauses, then grimaces. “Today, I suppose.”

Now she wants to act professional. Whatever, Ramos can be content with the small victory; at least Vantage will be out of his hair.

On the other hand, he's already got another jab lined up, and he hates to waste it. “Sure, we'll go back to cleaning up your mess. The Hounds swooping in, accomplishing nothing, then leaving the DPR to pick up the pieces; where have I heard that before?”

Vantage gives him a glare so cold Ramos swears he feels the temperature drop. “Careful, Captain.”

“Why? Only pointing out patterns. Good thing we were here this time, made sure nobody di—”

“Finish that sentence and I will end your career, Ramos.” She delivers the threat with utmost calm, and it gives Ramos pause. His eyes flick between the pair of specialists. Zhang swallows. Castillo is still inspecting the radio, but her hands are trembling.

...Maybe he should ease off a little. “You wish you could get rid of me that easy,” he scoffs, not sounding as confident as he'd like.

Vantage ignores him and addresses Castillo. “You'll want to get that.”

“Huh?” The radio suddenly buzzes to life, and the burly woman jumps out of her skin, then scrambles to answer. “Uh, receiving, over!”

“This is Simons, requesting backup! A collapse just buried my whole squad, over!”

Shit. *Shit.* Buildings coming down occasionally is nothing new in the Zone, but Ramos has never had more than minor injuries to contend with. Six officers trapped under rubble is not something Ramos's crew is equipped to handle; they don't have lifting vehicles and even if they did, how the hell would they reach the location?

To her credit, Castillo stays professional even with eyes wide as saucers. “Reading you! Stand by, over!” She looks beseechingly over at Ramos. “Captain? Orders?”

His mind is blank. Anyone he sends to assist may not even be on the correct side of the chasm. Not to mention there's the risk of secondary collapses. Castillo's still staring at him, and he snaps out of his daze. “Coordinates! Get their location!” A start. Not a solution.

The radio buzzes again. *“Simons here. Uh, Surpass showed up out of nowhere and started freeing everyone. Could uh, could still use a medic but we're in a better spot, over.”*

“That's great. Let me know where you are and I'll route someone there, over,” Castillo replies.

Ramos's head instantly snaps to Vantage, perfectly correctly. The timing was all too perfect. “How.”

Vantage taps her temple. “I'm told my powers predict everything.” The very corner of her lip tugs upward.

“Don't get cute with me,” Ramos snaps. “If you knew that was going to happen, why didn't you warn us? My people could be dead or crippled because—what, you wanted to score points off me?”

She shakes her head, that tiny fraction of a smile vanishing. “If I change the input, the simulation changes too.” She sighs. “I've had projections running in the background all night and the, I suppose, likelihood of this happening has steadily increased. Shortly before you arrived, I ordered Surpass to head to the highest percentage area. I didn't have time to simulate anything else, and I usually only get to a hundred percent certainty right before the situation plays out.” Vantage locks eyes with Ramos, startlingly intense. “This gave a roughly seventy-four percent chance of all your people surviving. I can't simulate the effect of telling you *without* telling you, and then it's too late. Maybe the seventy-four percent shoots up. Maybe it completely falls away. Those are the decisions I'm making every single time I act on my power, Captain. Have a good evening.”

She strides away and, feeling like he just got run over, Ramos can only watch her go. That's more words than Vantage has ever spoken to him in one go, and in lieu of unpacking it all, he switches focus to rescue and recovery.

Well. Recovery. Relaying a flurry of messages back and forth with Castillo, it swiftly grows clear that Surpass, digging through rubble like there's no tomorrow, has the rescue part in hand. Ramos breathes a quiet sigh of relief as Castillo confirms via Simons that all six of the trapped officers have been extracted alive.

"Tell Simons to thank Surpass on my behalf," Ramos gruffly instructs Castillo, because he's not enough of an asshole to ignore the Hounds' help. With that begrudgingly handled and the medics on their way, Ramos can regroup a little. Take stock of that conversation.

Firstly, he's not convinced that Vantage is fully on the up-and-up. It's not like he has any way of verifying how her powers work; hell, she might have put a positive spin without even intending to. In Ramos's experience, people want to think they're better than they are, want to talk themselves into believing they've done the very best they can.

Independents especially.

On the other hand, even if he takes her with a big pinch of salt, Vantage just slipped up. The Department's information on Vantage's power has been frustratingly limited to this point. Any kind of precognition is difficult to fully understand and it's never been clear where Vantage's boundaries lie. Another reason why this posting has been so goddamn infuriating. Hey Ramón, we need you to stay one step ahead of someone who can literally predict the steps. Good luck!

Now, Vantage has finally tipped her hand, and even though the Department haven't really earned the information, Ramos is a professional and it's going straight into a report.

...After hours of clean up, debrief, and bookkeeping. Ramos rubs his sleep sore eyes and emits a quiet growling groan. He's gonna need another coffee or four.

One thing at a time. The Hounds stole a march on him tonight. There's two plausible explanations for the information leak; outside surveillance and the team having a mole. Luckily, Ramos can pretty much discount the latter. The crew was reassigned wholesale from other jurisdictions, and every officer under Ramos had at least three years on arrival, so call that four and a half years working for the Department. Sure, somebody could have been flipped in that time, but if he narrows it down to just officers on duty tonight, he's looking at a list of trusted veterans.

Getting paranoid will only give Ramos headaches. He'd rather focus on the other, much more likely explanation.

"Zhang," Ramos calls.

Zhang, short, slim, and stoic, comes to attention. "Sir."

"Get in contact with the Businessmen and tell them if we find a single spybird snooping around our restricted areas again, I will personally make sure their shitty excuse for a club burns to the ground."

Zhang nods, expression so blank it could be etched in stone, and hurries away. Ramos likes Zhang.

"Sir?" Castillo glances up from the radio and tilts her head. "Nobody's reported sighting Conspirator's birds."

Ramos does not like Castillo.

"Doesn't mean they're not—or weren't—here," he answers. "The Glory Hounds found out about the Altruists somehow, and they don't have the resources or the paras to do it alone."

"Still... you think they'd work with the Businessmen?" Castillo seems dismayed by the prospect.

"Anything to hold onto their footing," he asserts. Castillo falls into a gloomy silence.

The more Ramos thinks about this, the more sure he gets. The Hounds aren't afraid to get a little dirty, and working alongside a lesser evil—what they think of as lesser anyway—to undermine the DPR sounds like the exact kind of calculation Vantage would make. The Hounds know the Department's hand was *somewhere* in that operation eighteen months ago, and so they struck a deal to get the eyes in the Zone they can't place for themselves.

Now, if only the higher ups would deign to tell Ramos what the fuck "Facility NX-Ak" is and why the fuck it warranted a wholeass false flag to cover up, then he'd be golden. Whose bright idea was it to mandate Ramos kept the Zone locked down and Alderbrook monitored without telling him what's *here*? He's asked a dozen or more times over the last coming-up-two-years and all anyone ever says is that his clearance isn't high enough.

Then *upgrade it*? God fucking damn.

Whatever, he's getting distracted. "Anything from Sawicki yet?"

"Negative," answers Castillo. "Should I contact him?"

"We'll head there in person. No point standing out in the cold any more." Castillo looks crestfallen, and Ramos takes a guess at what's on her mind. "If there's one thing those villains are good at, Castillo, it's getting out of dodge. They're long gone. We'll continue the sweep per protocol, I just don't expect to find

anything.”

“Captain.” She sounds deeply disappointed, which is a mild boost to Ramos’s mood.

Ramos moves back to the portacabins, his very own castle. In front of the cabins, one officer crouches over another, taking a small pair of wire cutters to the zipties binding their wrists behind their back. Ramos doesn’t even bother asking, instead heading directly for the main cabin and entering. Within, a pasty, balding officer is hunched over a desktop computer, muttering darkly to himself. He doesn’t notice Ramos until he clears his throat right behind him, whirling around in a flurry of note paper.

“Agh—! Captain!” The officer—Sawicki—hurriedly stuffs a wedge of paper into his shirt pocket. Ramos raises an eyebrow. “Oh, this is—uh. It’s personal stuff. Hadn’t realised I left it out. Nothing to do with the investigation.”

The guy’s rapidly reddening face convinces Ramos he’s not bullshitting. “The footage?”

Sawicki’s expression switches from embarrassment to consternation. “Nothing doing, Captain. Someone scrubbed the log then shut it all off. I got the cameras back online, but whoever did this was thorough; it’s fully erased.”

Ramos swears. In Spanish, so Sawicki won’t understand. Then belatedly realises Castillo followed him in here. *Pendeja*.

“Understood, keep trying,” he tells Sawicki. The officer nods, nervously smoothing his front pocket. Ramos considers informing Sawicki that he’s already had the displeasure of finding one of his notes luridly describing Surpass’s figure, but decides he’s not quite annoyed enough to murder the guy.

No footage, what a shitshow. Ramos’s intel has gaping holes everywhere you look. Can’t analyse tactics, can’t compare timestamps, can’t know the Altruists’ purpose here, can’t know how and when the Hounds showed up. He’s got six injured officers and all there is to show for it is the humiliation of needing the Hounds’ help. No doubt the second Ramos reconvenes with the Department, he’s gonna get chewed out for ‘letting’ their precious Facility get compromised. No, they can’t tell him why that’s such a big deal. No, they can’t give him more people or gear. No, they can’t up the budget for the employee appreciation night. Eat your crap sandwich and thank us for it, bitch.

Ramos brushes past Castillo and back outside, tugging his notepad from his jacket to start up the first of many reports to come.

Just another day in paradise.

...where’s that goddamn coffee machine?

[Crosspost: Power descriptions](#)

[Jul 6, 2024](#)

This is also on tumblr/choice of games, but I thought it’d be neat to include here too!

Here are some more detailed descriptions of all the cast’s powers. :)

Altruists

Dion - Can create energy projections which emerge from terrain, e.g. walls, floors, ceilings. These can also extend from each other to a more limited extent. They specifically seem to manifest as geometric shapes, as in, rather than just a vertical energy barrier, it would be a cube-shaped projection.

Mal - Exceptional durability/resistance towards physical harm (cuts, blunt trauma, etc.) Capable of altering their own appearance, including height/bulk, but not precisely enough to accurately mimic others (could maybe hold up to a cursory inspection, but nothing more).

Kay - As well as having sheeplike physiology, she is able to absorb impact (and energy to some extent?) and ‘charge’ herself with it, resulting in an electrical aura. More charge = harder hits and greater speed.

Teddie - Constant bone growths that push through his skin. Luckily for him, his body works with these to not be, y’know, constantly bleeding everywhere. Unluckily for him, he still feels the growth. And he can only get rid of them by breaking them off. He’s able to influence/stimulate growth to an extent, allowing him to construct exoskeletal armour for missions (hence his more elaborate setup on the two jobs so far)

Wil - Able to drain energy from others via touching them, temporarily boosting their own strength and speed. Apparently works on constructs like Portrait’s too, neat!

Hounds

Surpass - Super strength, durability, and speed. Doesn’t work quite as straightforwardly as advertised, but we’ll get into that in time. ;)

Vantage - Creates precognitive simulations which enable her to predict roughly how likely a given course of events is to happen. The more information she has on the topic, the better her prediction. Has limitations: introducing outside factors to a simulation will likely render the previous simulation useless, and she'll have to do it again, and she doesn't have infinite concentration/mental energy to constantly run every possible permutation of events at all times. 97.65% was a bluff.

Arcade - Shoots lasers!! - fires colourful lasers from his hands, growing in intensity the longer he charges them up. Easily capable of causing burns/starting fires.

Enfilade - Augment. Cybernetically enhanced in various ways, boosting physical capabilities. Most prominently, her arms are almost entirely artificial, and one forearm houses a powerful bolt launcher.

Portrait - 'Paints' constructs from inorganic material, with the creations taking on some characteristics from the material (i.e. a concrete construct would be hard-skinned). The constructs have limited autonomy and are heavily reliant on Portrait's orders, which as you can imagine is a significant weakness. Struggles to maintain more than three at a time, though there's no diffusion of overall power (they don't get weaker as he makes more). Unclear whether the animal theme is a preference or a requirement.

Phalanx - Telekinetic manipulation of metal (so nope, she's not Magneto). Metal she's manipulating exerts force roughly proportional to the weight/size, meaning she's liable to dragging herself around. Though that essentially renders her capable of flight, score!

Coven

Hypothesis - Still a secret!

Catalyst - Physical attacks are repeated threefold. He punches you once, you feel it thrice. One two three.

CG - Superhumanly perfect balance. As in "can run on walls and stand on pretty much anything capable of bearing her weight" perfect.

Variable - Can teleport herself a short distance, leaving behind a weird membrane like they just shed a shell.

Gremlink - Augment. Cybernetically enhanced with a particular view towards integrating tech with her senses. Absolutely none of this was done through legal channels. Tinkers her own cyberware because, to be frank, she's possessed of a reckless disregard for her own safety.

Lullaby - They sing, you snooze.

WPP

Ranger - Can produce a temporary chameleon-like effect, allowing him to blend in with his surroundings. Maybe chameleon isn't quite the right word as it's maybe a bit more like stealth camo from Metal Gear? Anyway, he goes close to invisible, albeit still possible to make out a silhouette, with effort.

Hit - Greatly enhanced accuracy, especially with projectiles. Technically works in close combat but uhhh he's kind of shit in a fistfight.

Mis - Greatly enhanced reflexes. Operates on kind of a scale depending on how close and direct something threatening physical harm is. Hence, in a straight up brawl it's nigh-impossible to land a clean strike. Nowhere near as effective with grappling or indirect attacks, and, well, she doesn't have eyes in the back of her head and she's no stronger than any other young adult in decent shape.

[In the Zone One Night...](#)

[Jul 16, 2024](#)

Consider this a thank you for all the support! It's a short piece available everywhere.

Phalanx crashes into Fracture with a satisfying clang of metal on bone. The villain drops, and with practiced ease, Phalanx plants her lance into the shattered concrete below her, halting her momentum before she can carry off too far.

This situation is getting out of hand. Fracture and Rampage were already a handful, and with Enfilade down, Phalanx and Arcade are fighting at a disadvantage. Surpass is nowhere to be seen and given Vantage's most recent opponent is now reinforcing the enemy, the team leader must be incapacitated.

Phalanx disliked this mission from the start. Given the choice, she'd never have set foot in the Zone again.

She shakes herself out of the malaise. Fracture is resilient, she needs to be on guard, and a little help from her teammate wouldn't go amiss. She's not eager to take another zap from Rampage.

"Arcade! Cover my flank!" she calls, levelling her lance at Fracture. This is entirely winnable, provided she focuses—

"BETH!"

Her heart stops.

Nobody should be calling her that. Not in the middle of a battle. Even a comrade desperate for help surely wouldn't cross that line.

Phalanx whips around. Arcade? No. Enfilade? No. She can't see any other teammates around.

Then... what does that mean?

"Who said—" Before she can finish the sentence, Fracture rises up and slams a fist into her chest plate, knocking her backward.

She almost doesn't care.

Someone just called out to her.

But already, she's second guessing. Doubting herself.

"Quick—"

"Get away from them!"

"There's no time to argue! Go!"

"I'll be fine! I promise!"

So, so many times, Beth has heard their voices. She's wondered what she could have done. She's taken that night apart piece by piece, searching for a better way. Searching for a way to save everyone.

She's grown accustomed to the ghosts of failure, but familiarity does nothing to dull the blades of their contempt.

"BETH!"

It itches in her head, even when the battle is done and the Altruists have wriggled from their grasp, when the weary Hounds regroup as a team.

What she heard is simply impossible.

The weight of the Zone and the stresses of combat made her think back to that night underground, where her life was irrevocably altered and she lost so much. And so Beth 'heard' someone call her name.

She must have imagined.

She must.

"BETH!"

She must, lest she crumble for good.

[Character Origins - Beth](#)

[Jul 30, 2024](#)

My girl...

So, Beth holds the distinction of being the longest-tenured character in Drink Your Villain Juice. As in, I first wrote her in 2009ish. Back in ye olden days, she was a roleplay character (a pattern for the AdVenture guys, but we'll get into that another time), and in fact she was *originally* originally played in an In Character chatroom for the website. That was pretty much ancient times so far as chatrooms went, the days of chatzy and mibbit. Discord wouldn't come along for another 6 years.

In any case, Beth's personality has always been cold, blunt, and formal, but her original incarnation was far worse. She was acerbic and downright rude, a complete social outcast with very few friends. She also still was grumpy about being called by her full name, and preferred her nickname (which was an ironic reference to her unpleasant personality)

And, surprise! She *still* went through mad trauma, because the roleplay she was a part of was a death game! Just a regular ol' person flung into a situation and told she had to kill to survive. Beth wound up softening her outlook and realising that she'd been kind of an awful person and determining she needed to do better. Lucky for her, then, that she wound up getting rescued from the death game and codependently bonding with her only friend whom she'd spent much of the game clinging to.

This is not a particularly healthy grounds for a relationship, but they sure did start dating.

Is a wife and growth as a person worth the lifelong trauma of seeing your friends die in front of you? Wait why does that sort of feel like it could apply to Villain Juice—

It's actually kind of crazy to think that since I also roleplayed Beth many years later both in real life and in character that she fully grew up, matured, married, and had a kid. (yes there is an alternate timeline milf Beth). The personality of late!deathgame!Beth has a lot more in common with that of villain juice!Beth, with a lot of the rougher edges smoothed away and replaced with a greater level of empathy and general kindness towards others.

In Villain Juice, Beth's kind of the midpoint of the original personality of the original character and her endpoint. She's more willing to be sociable even if she struggles with some of the niceties and gets exasperated with tomfoolery. She's willing to stick her neck out for others and she cares a *lot*, despite her protests to the contrary. I do think of her as a distinct character from her original version because original!Beth definitely wouldn't have tolerated some of the nonsense AdVenture get up to and would have been significantly more reproachful towards the others, even lashing out verbally. She felt like an ideal presence to include in the group, a brake lever to everyone's enthusiasm and a more serious, logical thinker who is willing to focus on the details, cause dammit, *someone* has to!

Also, there had to be somebody to call Grant out on his bullshit.

Beth's a little bit of a hybrid character too; let's talk about Bulwark and Phalanx.

Bulwark was a character in the story I wrote in Villain Juice's rough setting. She was taciturn and stoic and emotionally blunted. Her power was very reminiscent of the carapace speciality, in that she grew her own armour plating (this was a longer term investment for her; she couldn't just reabsorb it). She was also the former friend of that story's protagonist, someone who'd once been a teammate to them, but their paths diverged when protagon chose to strike out on their own. So far as Bulwark knew, that friend had vanished for good.

Then said friend showed up as a new villain in town (sound familiar?)

So, obviously, Bulwark's role in the story still existed and I still wanted that conflict. However, the exact details of Bulwark as a character didn't mesh: I never conceived her as somebody who gained powers during the story, so I had no perception of her as an unpowered person. Plus, her power felt like it would overlap with one of the expressions I was considering for my MC.

As a result, I figured, okay well, what about combining this with one of the characters in this flashback? Beth's stoic personality already lent itself best to having the role of the returning friend from the past, so Beth got combined with Bulwark, resulting in Phalanx, a mysterious armour-clad enemy with a cold, closed off demeanour, and the worst possible secret identity for our main character to learn.

Gosh. I'm really happy to be writing Beth again. :)

[News for CH7](#)

[Jul 30, 2024](#)

Hi folks!

Chapter 7 is deep in progress (24k and counting), but not presently in a state where it's ready to be posted. I mentioned this previously but I don't want to put out what's currently done as a partial chapter because too much of the word count is in divergent routes that a player won't see in a single playthrough. (e.g. there's a possible scene which only happens if MC has no juice and smashed the vial, there's mutually exclusive hangouts, and so on).

What this means is that CH7 won't be out quite as quickly as some of my previous updates. I'm a good chunk of the way through what I have planned but the latter half of the chapter isn't properly fleshed out; I know what happens in the various scenes but it's all a bit skeletal right now. What I might end up doing is posting it once all the essential story stuff is done and then adding a couple more scenes (relating to Mal's romance and uhh *consequences* for certain previous actions) as a part two.

I'm trying to remind myself that my updates are, to my knowledge, on the fast end of the scale, but I can't help feeling a bit bad I don't have a demo build ready this month for y'all. I don't anticipate this being another megachapter like CH6, but yeah, I think probably another two-ish weeks for the next demo? (don't hold me to that! might be a bit sooner or longer)

Once again, I'm super grateful for all the support people show towards the game and I hope to continue making fun and intriguing new content for you!

[Drink Your Villain Juice! Ch7 \(pt 1\) available!](#)

[Aug 17, 2024](#)

Chapter 7 part one is in the chamber, and the early access build is now available here on Patreon at the Coven level!

- 36k words, putting us to 276k for the full game!
- Endure an unpleasant awakening, and talk to a well-meaning teammate (or don't!)
- Recuperate from the Zone.
- Face the fallout of a broken vial (potentially!)
- Venture into the Masquerade.
- Conduct business.
- Smooch Mal?
- Keep it professional, dig for secrets, or, perhaps... dance?

[Drink Your Villain Juice! Ch7 \(pt1\) Early access link](#)

[Aug 17, 2024](#)

See attached to this post the download for the the first part of Chapter 7! This will be publicly available at the end of the month.

I *think* I busted the worst of the bugs here: the tests are running clean, but I did run into some formatting issues on my manual scrape that are now fixed. I also haven't extensively tested the skipping functions (you can jump straight to chapter 7!) so they may have some weirdness that I missed.

Please let me know if you encounter bugs, and I'll get them fixed ASAP!

[Character Origins - AdVenture](#)

[Sep 6, 2024](#)

Specifically, we're talking the trio of Prii, Shauna, and Grant. MC/Morgan/Dime is their own thing and Beth has her own post. ([here!](#))

All three of Prii, Shauna and Grant, much like Beth, are characters I originally roleplayed in play-by-post games. I'm not a habitual character recycler, but back when I started writing Villain Juice, I was in a spot where I just *really* wanted to get a project off the ground. I had an unprecedented level of freedom/free time and I was essentially saying to myself 'okay, now or never to chase that writing dream, get started.' Often, something that bogs me down is trying to come up with a full cast on the fly, and I knew that I had to get AdVenture right or else nobody was going to care when the origin flashback went horrible for them. If the characters are one dimensional and boring, then people aren't going to be invested in their fate.

With this in mind, I pulled from the well and picked out four characters I already knew. Beth I've discussed before, but briefly, she made a great straight (haha, straight) woman for a group I knew would be pretty relaxed overall. Shauna was a favourite of mine who I felt would be easy to write and made a good fit for the quieter and less confident member of the group. Prii I had written/roleplayed most recently and still wanted to do a bit more with, plus they were creative and assertive, making them suitable as the leader and to an extent the face of AdVenture. Finally, Grant rounded things off by acting as a little bit of a wildcard, somebody who would crack jokes and push buttons, serving as a slightly prickly presence who could cause a little friction. Especially with Beth. Gosh, that dynamic fell into place instantly; absolutely those two people who wouldn't be able to stand each other without mutual friends.

Shauna's the most similar to her original incarnation. She was always lacking in self-confidence and struggled a bit to stand up for herself (if anything, DYVJ!Shauna is *better* at that). She liked art, writing, and sports, all of which carried through to DYVJ, albeit with the artist part pushed more to the forefront. She's got a mean jumpshot though; Shauna's a baller. I think most notably is just that Shauna was chronically unlucky. She was the worst player on a great basketball team, so her confidence and skill growth were stunted. She annoyed exactly the wrong person in the roleplay, and wound up getting hung upside down in a net for her trouble. She accidentally almost killed her only ally (a character written by my wife. Before we even started dating, at that!). Oh and she did, in fact, wind up dead. There's a parallel with Villain Juice: Shauna's the unlucky one. She gets in over her head trying to be the hero and save MC/Grant, and without MC's intervention, she'll end up dead. For a character I like a bunch, I sure do bully her a lot.

Speaking of bullying characters I like a lot. Prii. Actually, Villain Juice!Prii almost serves as a post character development version of their original self, having learned to stand up and take charge, really dig their heels in on their convictions. Original!Prii essentially spent their time in a death game trying to find an actual goal for themselves, a distinct line to draw, and a recurring theme was how they settled for 'good enough', basically talking themselves into accepting the minimum. They died thanks to getting tricked and betrayed, and even then, their final act was trying to find meaning by slowing their killer down to allow their friend to get away.

Huh. Weird.

Anyway, I liked Prii a lot and kind of felt that I had some unfinished business with them, so they made a good pick. Funnily enough, DYVJ!Prii has taken on a life of their own and they're probably one of my favourites in the cast. I've written like ten times as much Prii now than I ever played them in roleplay.

Grant's the most distant from his origins, simply because original recipe Grant was an absolute dick. As in, a murderous asshole with zero empathy who sold others out on a whim and killed multiple people because it was convenient. It's kind of why it took me a long time to come around on why the readers like him so much: original!Grant was so awful that "Grant did nothing wrong"/"Grant's a great guy!" is a running joke to this day between me and one of my roleplaying friends. Basically he was designed to be a remorseless villain with a little bit of swagger who got his just desserts, getting arbitrarily sniped by somebody who never even met him and bleeding out right as he was about to abscond scott free.

So... yeah. Grant got re-tooled a lot in some ways, but not so much in others. Like his basic personality is fairly intact. He doesn't take things seriously. He likes to mess with people. He's sociable, but doesn't necessarily connect deeply.

I think what's fascinating about DYVJ!Grant is that he's like... still kind of a jerk in several ways. He pushes buttons on purpose and there's a couple of occasions in the flashback where he verges on starting arguments, either because he's bored or because he's stressed. That said, he's fundamentally a better person than original!Grant. He does actually care to an extent, and he risks his life for a friend. Original!Grant would have shoved MC into the Project, not dove in front of them.

And that's AdVenture! The group as a whole is something that came about through Villain Juice, and none of the members ever interacted in their original setting (to be fair, while Shauna, Beth, and Prii hail from the same play by post RPG, I roleplayed none of them contemporaneously: Beth's like ten plus years older than both of them in that timeline!) - the combination was all new, and I have to admit, I'm kind of delighted how well they gelled.

[CH7 pt 1 is public + discord!](#)

[Sep 7. 2024](#)

Hey folks!

A little belated for me to be mentioning this, but CH7 pt1 went public at the end of August. The main reason I'm posting though is cause we've set up a discord for Drink Your Villain Juice!

It's linked from any of the paid tiers and I've integrated it with pledges so uh... yeah! You should be able to jump right in!

Please behave and be nice to one another :)

Edit: Since I've never done this before, it's apparent that if you have discord connected to patreon, it basically tosses you directly into the server instantly, so uh, apologies for how abrupt this was!

[In character Q&A - AdVenture](#)

[Sep 8. 2024](#)

Since it's been a few months since last time we got some questions and since y'all have been extremely normal about Beth recently, I thought it'd be fun to kick Q&As back off with a bang!

Subscribers: go right ahead and submit any questions (via messages, comments, discord if you're feeling super spicy) you've got for any of the members of AdVenture (Beth, Shauna, Prii, and Grant), and they'll answer in character.

This *might* involve spoilers. If so, I'll make sure to tag the post appropriately. :)

[In-character Q&A - AdVenture \(1\)](#)

[Sep 11, 2024](#)

Let's kick things off with a few questions from the last post! (there were some more great ones from the same commenter that I'll definitely take a look at at some point)

Beth

How did you all meet?

Shauna and I went to the same high school. I met Grant through Shauna; he stopped to greet her while we were hanging out. Prii and I met at a game store, as we both enjoy tabletop RPGs. They also introduced me to [MC], though since we subsequently became coworkers, we actually would have met independently of them.

We all met together at the same time at a birthday party for Shauna.

Who's your favorite of the group?

(for everyone, assume that this flips to MC under any circumstances where they're dating/best friends)

It depends. I'm fond of Shauna, but she can be frustrating. Prii's very charming, but could stand to get their head out of the clouds every so often

Did you have hopes to make it big as urban explorers or was this just a hobby?

The notion of making it big with any kind of video-making seemed farfetched, particularly with five of us involved. Honestly, I was surprised at how popular Urban AdVenture became.

Did you ever think you would have run into anything parahuman-related?

No. Our hometown has a small, low-profile parahuman population, and we had only travelled further afield for videos on a handful of occasions. Encountering any parahumans seemed rather unlikely.

Prii

What was your first job/video in AdVenture? (Prii's fielding this, cause the answer is the same for everyone)

There's this old mall in our hometown that everyone just calls 'the mall'. There's this whole thing with a new development and they were super insistent that the new place is *the* mall so everyone started insisting on calling the old one—I'm getting off topic.

Basically, we went to the old mall. It's actually somewhere Grant and I snuck into a couple times before and part of how I got the urbex bug in the first place. If you're from the same place as us I don't think it's really that exciting but it made a decent video to an outsider. Though nowadays I see a lot of holes in it.

How did you all meet?

So my older brother is friends with Grant's older sister, and we crossed paths when we were like, preteens, and started hanging out too. I know Beth from our local game shop. Grant knew Shauna from... somewhere, and I met her through him. As for [MC] and I, uh. Well.

We were kind of, both in the ER? They'd been knocked off their bike and I'd done... something dumb, and we wound up sitting next to each other for a few hours in the waiting room.

Who's your favorite of the group?

Everyone there is a special kind of person to me. Uh, not to sound bigheaded or anything, but I make friends pretty easily, and there's still pretty much nobody else I'd pick to do the AdVenture stuff with. I guess if you twisted my arm for an answer, Grant has tenure, so I'll give it to him.

Did you have hopes to make it big as urban explorers or was this just a hobby?

I kept it to myself, but I always felt like we could maybe take off. I was starting to get pretty excited at watching the numbers go up, and a couple of our more recent videos were getting noticeably more attention. So yeah, I was hoping.

Did you ever think you would have run into anything parahuman-related?

I figured we might if we kept doing the videos long enough. Always a chance of running into something strange; we'd already had our share of weird stuff. Always thought it'd just be like... signs of past presence or something, though.

Shauna

How did you all meet?

I went to high school with Beth! Couldn't really tell you how we became friends, it just happened at some point. She's coworkers with [MC] and I went by the coffee shop a lot, so I was gonna meet them sooner or later. I met Prii through Grant at a small get together.

And Grant, I met playing pickup.

giggles

I kinda smoked him.

Who's your favorite of the group?

Aw, do I gotta pick? That's hard.

Um, I do really appreciate Beth's friendship. She can be harsh but I know she doesn't mean it in a bad way. Prii's really nice and encouraging and just generally comfy to be around.

Did you have hopes to make it big as urban explorers or was this just a hobby?

I never really think most things I do are gonna make it big...

Um, urban exploration is fun, but I never feel like the face of it or anything.

Did you ever think you would have run into anything parahuman-related?

Yes, absolutely.

Creepy abandoned places are perfect for evil lairs and hideouts.

Grant

How did you all meet?

Oh, I've known Prii since we were kids. They were in the car one time when their parents came to pick up their brother from my place and I guess their brother mentioned my sister had a sibling their age, and they wanted to see who I was, and the rest is history. Beth happened to just like, be around one time when I said hi to Shauna, and *Shauna* I knew from a couple basketball games. Oh, and Beth introduced me to [MC].

I think as a distraction, 'cause I was annoying her.

grin

Who's your favorite of the group?

Not Beth!

laughs

I guess, Prii? Like I said, we go back. [MC] takes a joke pretty well and doesn't put up with my shit, so points to them.

Did you have hopes to make it big as urban explorers or was this just a hobby?

It was fun, but I didn't really have any aspirations for it. Like... c'mon, be realistic.

Did you ever think you would have run into anything parahuman-related?

Pff, no way.

[Character Q&A - AdVenture \(Beth!\).](#)

[Sep 14, 2024](#)

When did you find out you liked MC ?

(two different answers, since there's two distinct relationship modes with her)

Love at first sight: ...You will laugh, but somewhere in the midst of our very first conversation. Truthfully, I never believed in love at first sight, and I'm generally slow to warm to others, but Prii introduced us and there was... a connection.

I have never felt so close to someone so quickly. I did not call it love right away, but like them? Yes. Certainly.

Only 'recently' got together: Truthfully, I think I knew for a while, I simply wasn't ready to admit it to myself. That isn't to say it was immediate affection, more along the lines of something that grew slowly over time in their company. Perhaps I should have spoken up sooner but... I did not want to spoil what we had, and it worked out.

So I thought.

What jobs did you have during/before AdVenture?

I have been a barista for a few years now while I continue working on college. It isn't glamorous, but it pays what it needs to pay. More or less.

Hiiiiii do you wanna go out? 🍷🍷

I'm... sorry? Who are you?

Of anything MC can say before the elevator shut, which hurts the most?

This is like asking which variety of knife is most painful to be stabbed with.

...It all hurts. The reasons differ, but it all hurts. To be told it isn't my fault. Screams for help. To be blamed. The helpless stare. The confession.

Each can haunt my dreams just as well as its counterparts.

Now that MC is back, what's the worst first words they can say to you?

...

"Why did you give up on me?"

Other than AdVenture did you have any hobbies?

I liked to read. I played tabletop rpgs on occasion. I enjoyed painting miniatures, but I did not assemble large collections: I tended to work on them one at a time.

After That Night did you ever think you'd see MC again?

I hoped I would.

I hoped for a long time.

...It's difficult to hold out hope for half a decade.

[Character Q&A - AdVenture \(Prii!\)](#)

[Sep 17, 2024](#)

Prii

When did you find out you liked MC?

I knew pretty fast. I mean, I liked them enough that I swapped numbers in the dang ER, so obviously there was something there. Not that I was swooning over them while we were both injured, just, I felt a connection.

And, well, yeah, within a couple more times of hanging out, I knew for sure.

Sometimes the certainty is just *there*, you know?

What jobs did you have during/before AdVenture?

Nothing glamorous. I was working customer service at a bank. The upside was that my hours were pretty consistent, made it easier to arrange things around my schedule.

The downside was customer service.

Out of the three powers you could get which would have been your favorite?

Yeesh, way to hardball me.

I guess it'd be the... I don't actually know what to call them. Seedlings? Plant buddies? I'd rather have flowers and cute little dudes following me around than bark growing out of my face or a massive set of horns.

Were there any difficulties being the leader of the group?

Sometimes? Like, the onus was usually on me to play peacekeeper or make major decisions, and uh, I don't know if you've ever been in this situation but it's not super fun when you're technically your friend's boss? AdVenture wasn't quite formal enough for it to matter as much as it could have, but things got spiky every now and then.

Also, keeping Beth and Grant from killing each other was always a fun challenge. *laughs*

[Character Q&A - AdVenture \(Shauna!\)](#)

[Sep 24, 2024](#)

(by the way, these are still open for new questions from patreon members!)

When did you find out you liked MC?

Oh jeez, um...

I honestly liked them quite a bit from the start. I'm just not, you know, very good at figuring this kind of stuff out. I kinda talked myself out of it a couple times, but then the way they were acting around me I realised that I'd be so totally bonehead not to at least see how they felt.

And also, I wanted to be brave, just one time.

What jobs did you have during/before AdVenture?

Mostly I did graphic design. I wanted to make comic books but I wasn't really confident enough to put myself out there. So um, yeah, designing logos and websites and that kind of thing.

If you were a parahuman, what would you want your power to be?

Something flashy, but in a pretty kinda way! Oh but not super dangerous or anything, I wouldn't wanna hurt anyone bad. So like maybe firework type blasts that can stun the bad guys?

[Character Q&A - AdVenture \(Grant!\)](#)

[Sep 29, 2024](#)

When did you find out you liked MC?

Do you 'find out' that someone's hot? I dunno, I liked them well enough as soon as I met them. Maybe took a little while longer to work out that it was, you know, a serious feeling and not just... natural appreciation. I'm good with this kinda thing though. I know what I'm about.*

*(bullshit, not nearly as smooth as he claims to be.)

What jobs did you have during/before AdVenture?

Eh. Bit of this and a bit of that. Nothing interesting or that you need to hear about

If you were a parahuman, what would you want your power to be?

Okay hear me out, but illusion powers would kick so much ass. If you're smart about them they're kind of a free win. The fireball guy can't hit you with fireballs if you make like, a fake building to block his view. A superspeed guy isn't doing dick if you're making him see a football game or something instead of you.

Plus, I'd be able to get away with SO much bullshit. It'd be hilarious.

[Character Q&A Poll](#)

[Oct 2, 2024](#)

The AdVenture Q&A was pretty fun (and still ok to submit questions for, members!), so I'll keep the momentum by opening votes for who has the hotseat next.

In celebration of chapter 7 and its main movers and shakers, the options are CG, Alistair, and Mr. White (with apologies to Mal - they had a turn earlier this year, so they have to wait for a bit!)

CG

Alistair

Mr. White

27 votes total

[Drink Your Villain Juice! Ch7 \(pt 2\) available!](#)

[Oct 3, 2024](#)

That's right! Update time!

This one's for the Mal enjoyers. Except not really it's also for the action enjoyers.

Play time on this might vary a bit: it's possible to end the post-Masquerade job pretty fast, and obviously if you don't hook up with Mal, that's shorter. If you want to explore the content, the main variations are high/low knowledge, level of violence, fighting Libra/not, and if you've flirted with Mal (and aren't demi, ace, or touch averse). (There are also some lesser variances based on having blackened veins/maw scar and being brokenhearted, and a fun alternate lead up to the scene if you've already got something going with Wil)

- +19k words, for a 295k total!
- Handle a job for the Businessmen.
- Cross a line. What kind of villain are you, really?
- Deal with a direct conflict in your loyalties.
- Under the right circumstances, let off some steam with Mal.
- Have a completely normal sleep where nothing weird happens whatsoever. :)

[Drink Your Villain Juice! Ch7 \(pt2\) Early access link](#)

[Oct 3, 2024](#)

See attached to this post for the second (and final) part of Chapter 7! It'll be publically available in two weeks.

There's the potential for a bit of buggy weirdness here especially around if you're already in a relationship with Wil but flirt with Mal. It should work fine, but that was a bugbear to code.

[Character Q&A update](#)

[Oct 8, 2024](#)

So it's looking like CG is the decisive front runner in [the poll](#) at the moment: I'll let it run for another week and then the winner will be on deck for questions.

In the meantime, please continue submitting any questions that tickle your fancy for the AdVenture members!

[Character Q&A - AdVenture \(parahuman round!\)](#)

[Oct 14, 2024](#)

We've heard your opinions about running into parahumans, so I was curious how you all think either you or the other AdVenture members would've fared as masks? Maybe who'd go hero and who'd go villain?

Prii: Villain? Grant.

Beth: Grant.

Shauna: Grant.

Grant: Grant.

...what?

-

Prii

Uh, me as a mask? That'd be something. I don't know. I'd like to think I'd try my best? I'm not really an action hero type of person though. I like film-making, not sure I'd be great as the star of the show. Well—obviously right now I am kind of the showhost but, we both know that's different from being a mask. Also I really wouldn't like having to listen to the DPR. Rules and constraints and all that. I've been trying to get away from those since I was a kid.

I think Beth would be a good hero. Like, she'd try to downplay it but her heart's always in the right place. She cares a lot, which is more than you can say for a lot of so-called heroes. They're in it for the celebrity. Beth wouldn't be. Shauna, uh, I don't know if Shauna could handle the stress? She'd mean well but burn out, I think.

[MC] I could go either way. Not that I think they'd be a villain! I just don't always know what's going on in their head. They're great at things they're passionate about so it sort of depends how into it they get.

Grant... Grant would talk a big game that he'd be a bad guy, but I don't think he's got it in him to be worse than like... a nuisance. With the right (wrong?) powers he'd be a total menace, but I mean that in a trolling type of way, not a 'striking fear into the populace' way. Still, when it came down to it, I know he'd do the right thing.

Beth

Prii would... try. They would try to be a hero. They would try to be good. That counts for a lot, I feel. Heroes do not hold an inherent sense of morality and justice. It does not simply come with the mask. If Prii became a hero, I do not doubt they would get over their head, perhaps not make the perfect decisions at all times, but nor would anyone need to steer them along and keep them from walking down a dark path. They would do that for themselves.

Grant is just the opposite. Absent anyone to keep him on the straight and narrow, he would dive headlong into petty crime, I'm quite certain. Out and out villainy? I'm not going to say that; if I thought so little of him then I would refuse to spend time with him. He'd certainly make a nuisance of himself.

Shauna would... need to find firmer convictions. I believe she would have the heart to be a hero, but I'm not sure she would be able to stick with it. To make hard decisions, and to handle the scrutiny of the public eye. She is a sweet person. The kind of person the world chews up and spits out. [MC] has the grit to be a mask, but I don't know that they have the motivation. It's hard to be certain what drives them at times.

As for myself... of course I would not resort to harming others for personal gain. Conversely, I'm unsure that the heroing lifestyle would be for me. Power begets responsibility, but I have my own goals in life. The concept of my future being preordained because I obtained powers does not sit well with me.

Shauna

Oh! We'd be the coolest superhero team! We could go from AdVenture as urban explorers to AdVenture: the saviours of the city!

Prii's great and they'd work super hard at heroing if they were a mask. I'd um, I'd worry that they would be too fixed on doing their own thing though. Like the DPR isn't always the best but they'd been doing hero stuff for a real, real long time and that experience has gotta count for something. Beth would be like the scary kind of hero! Yeah sure she's always rolling her eyes and calling the rest of us out for things but that's 'cause she cares. She's way too responsible to sit out of the action if she has powers.

Grant is...

Grant, I think is putting on a show a lot of the time. Like that he's this ultra cool guy and nothing fazes him and that he's way too much of a bro to care about stuff like this. But um, he does. He does care. He does stuff that he can dodge credit for or if he's gonna get credit he plays it up in this way where he's kinda, downplaying it by exaggerating it? Like you say thanks and he goes "don't worry about it, you just have to worship the ground I walk on", and then you laugh and you kinda stop thinking about how he went out of his way for you.

Which, well, so what I'm getting at is that I think he'd hero while pretending like he wasn't. Like he'd 'just happen' to be there to stop a robbery. Or find a reason that he 'didn't have a choice' to help out. That kind of thing.

Maybe I'm treating it too much like a story, but... yeah.

And [MC] is a good person. I know they'd be a hero.

For me, um...

I know being a hero isn't easy. And I know that I'm not... I'm not always confident or strong or um... good enough. But I feel like, if you know people are getting hurt and it's in your power to do something about it then you've gotta—I'd have to *try*, you know?

Grant

Prii would try to be a hero so hard it wouldn't even be funny. They like attention, and attention for doing good things? They'd be there instantly. Dork.

Beth already has a stick up her ass about, I dunno, everything? Which is to say that yeah clearly Beth would be into heroing work as well. Would prolly be really good at it too. She's got that single-minded view on things. If there was a chain of command she'd listen 'cause of course she would. Some people are built for it.

Is [MC] built for it? Dude, I dunno. [MC] is a mystery box, and I dunno what they'd do when the chips were down. They'd do *something* at least. Not the passive type.

Shauna. Shauna Shauna Shauna.

She'd talk herself into being a hero. Right place, right time, right... mentor, I think she'd do ok. There's steel in our girl, even if she doesn't always show that backbone. But people underestimate her. Shauna's out of her comfort zone 24/7 and she still shows up to everything, still does her best. I heard that matters for heroes.

Me... come on, you think I'm gonna give you the inside scoop? If I get powers someday, I don't want anyone knowing what I'll be doing with them!

[In-Character Q&A - CG](#)

[Oct 15, 2024](#)

CG was the runaway winner for the poll, so she's now in the hotseat for *in character* questions from you members! Let me know in the comments or via message what you'd like to hear from her!

[In-Character Q&A - CG](#)

[Oct 22, 2024](#)

(still open for new questions from members!)

How did you end up in the coven?

That's a long and sad story.

Not by choice.

What were your first thoughts when you saw [MC]?

Poor, poor bastard. Wrong place at the wrong time.

How did you get your powers/ignite?

What do you think?

The Juice. It's always the Juice.

Who's your least favorite in Coven (other than Hypothesis)?

You'd think it'd be Catalyst, but no.

Variable.

They're so blindly loyal to someone who gives them nothing in return.

And they're also just annoying.

What are your thoughts on the Hounds?

My job would be a lot easier with them not around. Old job, I guess. New job sort of involves them, so...

What I mean is. They're good at what they do and that's a pain in my ass.

Thoughts on the DPR?

I've been around enough people with money to know that government just means 'in the pocket'. Only question is whose pocket.

So I don't trust them. And the way they treat kids is a fucking disgrace.

Did you ever think of being a hero yourself (especially now that you kind of are one)?

I was the one who needed a hero.

By the time I got powers of my own, it was too late for me.

What's your real name? :)

Gutsy.

Fine, I'll throw you a bone.

Starts with M.

[Alternate POV - Catalyst of Hate](#)

[Oct 26, 2024](#)

What's this guy's problem again? That night, from the perspective of a certain 'older brother'

Catalyst hates watch duty.

Sit in a dark room, wander around the base to freeze his ass off, return to the dark room. Repeat for the entire night, some asshole chirping in his ear for pointless updates. Meanwhile the real work, the *important* work is getting done.

Catalyst doesn't say anything, but he's never been good at bottling it up. Hypothesis knows. The calm, soothing explanations take a little sting from the task, it's just hard to keep Hypothesis in the mind when he's restless and bored out of his skull.

Tonight's especially fucking annoying, because the asshole buzzing him like the fly that just won't die is the smuggest and assholest of the bunch.

Lullaby.

Catalyst fucking hates Lullaby.

They act like Hypothesis should be grateful for the opportunity to pay their jacked up fees. They backtalk. Any time they use their power, they throw in little reminders that they could put anyone under if they chose, and then still have the balls to expect a *thank you* for singing the Project to sleep.

Jackass should be happy that Catalyst doesn't feed them their fucking teeth.

They think they're so fucking smart, too. Giving him backhanded compliments and shit like he doesn't know exactly what they're doing. [i]'You're a credit to the Coven, Catalyst,'[/i] they'll say, wearing that smarmy smile of theirs. What's a credit is Catalyst's willpower in not strangling the little shit on the spot.

But even aside from all that, what grinds on Catalyst's last fucking nerve is how untouchable they believe they are, how *valuable*. They're not even a real part of the Coven! They're a fucking merc. Hired help. They don't belong with the rest of them; they don't share what Catalyst and the others share. Hypothesis made Catalyst and the rest, Hypothesis *pays* Lullaby.

Sure, since the Project started getting too big to safely restrain or tranquilise, they obviously needed some way of getting the thing settled down. Sure, Lullaby's power works perfectly for that, and there's no DPR ties or other bullshit raising questions about loyalty, but they're still a hired fucking gun. What happens when they decide the contract doesn't work for them anymore?

Catalyst's fingers twitch. He finds himself smirking.

Aight, well. Maybe he wouldn't mind that so much. Loose ends and all.

Still, there's a lot of masks out there. A lot of powers that could fill the need. Why does it have to be the biggest asshole this side of Kansas?

Whatever.

Catalyst disinterestedly flicks through a couple of camera feeds on the monitor in front of him. The coverage of the compound isn't great, even though they've been holed up here for a while. Can't put any cameras in plain sight, can't run cables all over, and with all the limitations the place is just too damn big to see much. Can't exactly post sentries either. It's a small town and word travels fast. Last thing the Coven needs is cops or masks sniffing around.

Like, they're not a *threat*. Fuck no, Catalyst would fucking end any DPR stiff who came poking into their business. It's just that then they'd have to uproot the whole fucking operation while the heat died down, and that shit would be the biggest pain in the ass imaginable. Who wants to drag the Project into the back of a fucking truck? And yeah, Catalyst's used to living rough, but that doesn't mean he wants to go back to sleeping in his car or a squat while they track down a new base.

Not to mention there's about two people he can tolerate being around for more than a couple hours without wanting to smash their face in. Worst of all, bailing on the base would fuck up Hypothesis's research. There's a lot of shit here that they wouldn't be able to take with them, meaning starting over. Hypothesis's work is too important to get derailed by something as dumb as getting spotted hanging out in the open. The security situation is why Hypothesis has been on the lookout for a techhead for a while now, but no dice.

Catalyst cycles the cameras again, seeing nothing. Checks the time. 21:01. Things have been underway downstairs for a while, but the experiment's expected to continue for hours yet.

That burns worst of all. Tonight could be a major breakthrough for the Coven, and Catalyst is out in the cold. He doesn't get to see it happen. He doesn't get to share in Hypothesis's excitement and triumph. Meanwhile, Lullaby's right there, *just in case* there's a need to pacify the Project. Lullaby doesn't give a fuck! Lullaby doesn't respect Hypothesis's genius, only his wallet.

It's a joke. A bad joke.

Catalyst checks the time. 21:02.

Fuck this. He's making a sweep. Walking the perimeter every so often isn't nearly as likely to draw attention as standing around outside brainlessly, and if he sits in here any longer he's going to start putting holes in the walls.

Grabbing his walkie-talkie, Catalyst stomps out of the little office on the first floor of the building, locking it up before clattering down the stairs into the main entryway. It's dark as shit, but he knows his way around, could do it with his eyes closed. Down on the ground floor, Catalyst glances wistfully over to the basement hatch, concealed under a rug. Everything's happening right underfoot. The *next step*... and here he is on the outside.

Catalyst clenches his fist and heads over to the designated spot for his walkie. He thinks it's fucking stupid to tape it under a desk—who the fuck's going to blunder this far into the base anyway?—but that's procedure. Can't take it even as far as the compound's edge, or maybe some random asshole gets within its limited range and just so happens to be on the same frequency, hears the wrong thing. That'd put them into scorched earth mode just the same as the DPR kicking down the door.

Grudgingly, Catalyst keys the walkie-talkie on. "I'm finna look around," he growls into it.

[i]"Enjoy your walk, Catalyst."[/i] Lullaby's voice is singsong. Catalyst grips the walkie so hard the plastic begins to creak. [i]"Do be careful, won't—"[/i]

He closes the channel before they can finish, then near enough slams the walkie into the sticking place on the desk's underside. Straightening up, he stays there for several seconds, glaring at the wall, shoulders shaking, raging coursing through his system.

Someday, he's gonna rip their prissy little head off. Try putting him down then, asshole.

Deep breaths. In, one two three. Out, one two three. In, one two three. Out, one two three. That's how Hypothesis taught him to keep a handle on his anger when it was threatening to blaze out of control. Deep breaths. Calm your body down, and the storm boiling around your head will ease up.

In, one two three. Out, one two three.

Catalyst closes his eyes, huffs a breath, short and sharp, then slaps himself on each cheek. Left, right, left, right, left, right. No using his powers to echo it; there's something... grounding about the physicality of his own two hands, feeling the sting of his palms after swinging them himself. Bit by bit, the anger ebbs, and his eyes slide open again, clear and focused.

Aight. He's good. There's a job to do and he sure as shit isn't letting Lullaby throw him off his game. Patrol time.

There's a trick to getting through the double doors leading outside, and Catalyst could sleepwalk through it at this point, nudging them open with ease, slipping through the gap, and letting them shut behind him. Picking a direction pretty much at random, Catalyst strides for the fringes of the compound. The next obstacle is the chain link fence separating the inner layer from the outer, though that's equally trivial since he's got a key to the padlocks on every wire door. The outer section of the compound is where things get annoying: there's often no gap between the 'temporary' security barrier and the outermost walls of the buildings at the fringes, the two types of walls meeting contiguously rather than forming separate layers.

Meaning to patrol, Catalyst has to either dip in and out of each section via the inner fence or else exit the compound entirely and then re-enter further along. First option takes longer, second is a little riskier.

Catalyst prefers the second option, obviously.

There's nothing worth writing home about on the front half of his route, just trash and distant engines, far removed from anything he cares about. He's making good pace, since slow patrols are bad patrols, and he hates letting Hypothesis down even more than the watch station.

Much, much more.

On the back half, Catalyst runs into the man and his dog.

Distracted, Catalyst almost misses him. He's not focusing properly on his surroundings, cause he could have *sworn* he just heard voices from none too far away, and now he's straining to make out any more sounds. Multiple people means breaking out his best security guard impression and getting ready to escalate if that doesn't send them running. He's only had to do that once so far, and luckily it was just a couple of teens looking for someplace secluded to make out. One 'who's there!?' from Catalyst and they'd taken off screaming.

As Catalyst rounds the little booth a few feet back from the compound's front gate—the only semi-open section of the whole thing—there's a quiet growl, near enough at his feet. Catalyst whirls, both fists flying up, and then stops.

A bedraggled, dirt-caked man with a thick grey beard stares back at him, wide-eyed. He's wearing a heavy, ragged coat, a threadbare beanie, and looks like he hasn't eaten a square meal in the past year. There's a stack of cardboard tucked under one arm and the ratty leash of an equally ratty dog wrapped around his forearm.

The mutt's staring at him too, tongue hanging out as it pants. Its eyes are a startlingly bright blue, and as Catalyst meets them, the dog's whip-thin tail begins wagging like crazy. It starts scurrying towards him, but the leash holds it back, causing its front paws to rise off the ground and turning its straining excitement into a little dance on its hind legs.

"Heel, boy," mumbles the guy. The dog ignores him. Seated on the floor with his back propped against the booth wall, it seems he was just about to settle in for a night just slightly kinder than sleeping on the street. Now, though, there's a look of resignation in his eyes, and Catalyst recognises hopelessness all too well. "Sorry," the man continues. "I'll just get out of here, yeah? Don't want any trouble."

Multiple people means breaking out his best security guard impression.

One person, it depends. Different rules, different judgement calls.

But a homeless guy, all alone?

That's meat. That's *fodder*.

The Project gets hungry fast these days. Can't pass up a free meal when it drops in your lap.

Catalyst's fingers twitch. The guy looks crushed. Defeated. The expression of someone who had just barely started to believe he'd caught a break, then had it snatched away at the last second. He clambers to his feet with the weight of the world on his shoulders, hunched up and painfully thin. The dog's eating better than he is. Catalyst watches the little grimace of pain as the man stoops and pets his companion on the head.

Orders are clear.

With a little more slack on its leash, the dog comes straight back to Catalyst, desperate to say hi. It tries to lick his fingertips and he startles, pulling back his hand. Hesitates, stretches his hand out again. The dog's tail is a blur, its whole body vibrating with happiness.

Orders are clear.

But Hypothesis is busy. Hypothesis *wants* the Project prowling for the experiment. Feeding it will make it sleepy and calm. ...calm as it gets, anyway.

"You can't stay here," Catalyst says, tearing his eyes away from the dog. "Private property." His voice sounds strange to his own ears. Unlike himself.

No... like his younger self. Before the pit Hypothesis saved him from. Before he learned what the world was like.

"I get it, sorry," mumbles the guy, seeming to withdraw in on himself. "C'mon Rollo. Bit more walking tonight, buddy." He tugs at the dog's leash, but Rollo's busy nosing at Catalyst's leg, trying to get into his pocket.

"Hey." It takes a second for Catalyst to realise he's the one speaking. "Hold on. When's... when's the last time you ate?"

The guy regards him for a long moment, then gives a pained smile. "Three days, maybe. Not sure."

Catalyst's record was a week. The hunger faded into a numb ache after a while. Those were the best moments. The moments when it didn't feel like his stomach was trying to claw its way out of him.

Orders are clear.

For once, that doesn't seem to matter.

He can help this guy out. Make things a little easier for someone down on their luck. Same way Hypothesis helped him, on a much smaller scale.

There's a couple stores within a few blocks. It's against the rules to go to any of them often enough to seem like regulars, but Catalyst hasn't been for two months at least. He's in the clear.

It's not far. He won't be gone for long. Besides, what are the chances of another break-in on the same night, the one time he isn't at his post? Even if that *were* to somehow happen, there's zero chance anybody gets into the actual base. There's no reason to try, too much effort to bother, and how the fuck would they find the secret entrance?

He's really talking himself into this, huh?

"Come with me, I'ma get you something," Catalyst tells it short and sharp, before he can change his mind.

The guy fixes him with a long, searching stare. Waiting to be the butt of the joke. Waiting for generosity to turn callous and cruel.

It was a special kind of asshole who would reach out their hand just to shove him back into the dirt. If Catalyst could go back and kill those motherfuckers, he would. No hesitation.

"I ain't fucking with you," Catalyst adds. Slowly, the guy nods. Slowly, he begins to follow as Catalyst heads for the gate.

In a way it's... nice, realising that he can still give a fuck. The Coven is home. Hypothesis is family. Just, there was a time when his world was a little broader than that. Maybe he's finding a couple pieces of how things used to be. Maybe he's rebuilding from scratch.

Maybe.

There's no conversation as they make their way out of the compound and through the streets. Catalyst was never much for small talk, even less nowadays. He doesn't know what to say. Doesn't know where a *chat* would even start. He tells himself that it's not important, that he doesn't care about talking anyhow, but he isn't fooling anyone. Especially not himself. It's been a longass time since he spoke with anyone outside the Coven. 'Til now, he didn't realise he missed it.

Whatever. At least the dog's cute in an ugly kind of way. Scruffy, angles a little wrong, like a well-chewed toy. A couple scars. A torn ear. Tenacious. A fighter. Reminds him—

—gives him something to look at.

It's a quiet part of town, all industrial and offices, and nearly deserted at this point in the evening. Nobody so much as glances their way, and Catalyst can relax a little; away from the compound, with a companion, he goes from 'suspicious figure someplace he shouldn't be' to 'some guy and his buddy'.

Soon enough, Catalyst is marching into a corner store, still trailed by his 'friend'. Turning to him, Catalyst flings an arm at the array of snacks and candy filling the shelves. "Grab whatever," Catalyst says gruffly. "I'll buy it." He shoves his hand in his pocket, feeling the crumpled bills squashed down at the bottom. He has no idea how much he has on him. Enough.

Homeless guy creeps hesitantly around the store for a little bit, then comes back with a single cellophane-wrapped sandwich. The salad is wilting, the bread soaking through with dressing. Timidly, the guy presents it to Catalyst, his hand trembling. His eyes are locked on the sandwich with the kind of yearning that only comes with sheer desperation, a hunger so bad that all you can think about is food, any food.

"Dude..." Catalyst sighs. "Get more than that. Fuck. Long as you don't grab a whole shelf we good."

The guy looks up from the sandwich and stares at him. Really stares. Then he licks his lips, nods, and moves into the shelves, tentatively collecting a small armful of items. Rollo obediently sticks to his heels while prancing around like this is the most fun he's had in months. Catalyst picks up a magazine. A glossy, plastic smile from a celebrity he doesn't know shines back at him. Frowning, he shoves the magazine back on the shelf, creasing the cover.

Again, homeless guy returns, balancing a couple of sandwiches, some chips, some kind of... nutrient bars, and a small bag of, on close inspection, kibble. Again, homeless guy feels like he's asking permission. Catalyst gives him the nod he's looking for, cause it's easier than talking through it.

The disinterested, acne-ridden clerk rings the guy up and Catalyst forks over a fistful of bills that ends up including a fifty. The clerk rolls his eyes, but knocks it off real quick when Catalyst starts staring him down. Little fuck.

With everything bagged up, they step outside. Before even touching anything else, homeless guy hand feeds Rollo a bit of kibble. The little dog scarfs it down, licks his hand, and then yaps with glee. The guy snatches a sandwich next, but still doesn't eat. Instead he turns to Catalyst, eyes damp. "Thank you, man. You're a lifesaver. Seriously."

Catalyst shifts uncomfortably, clearing his throat. "...ain't nothing. Just don't trespass no more."

The guy nods fervently, chewing through his first bite. "I won't, I promise." He swallows, then smiles. "Say uh, what's your name? I'd like to keep you in my prayers tonight."

Completely caught off guard, Catalyst speaks without thinking. "Cat—uh." He breaks off. Moron! What's wrong with him!? Another throat clear. "S'a nickname. Cat."

"Cat, okay. I'm Keith." He nudges Rollo with his foot. "Say goodbye to Cat, dog." He smiles at his own joke. Catalyst strains to reciprocate, lips pulling into a grimace. Luckily, Keith is too busy devouring his sandwich to notice. Leaning down, Catalyst pets Rollo, knuckling the dog's head a few times. Rollo's eyes close in bliss, tongue hanging out and tail whipping faster than ever. The forced grin melts into something more natural. Can't get this back home.

Speaking of, he needs to get back. Straightening with some reluctance, Catalyst hands Keith a twenty. "Hope things turn round for you," he says, surprising himself by meaning it.

Keith's still thanking him profusely as he turns away and breaks into a jog back towards the compound. He'll sweep the whole exterior again, just to be safe, then go see what's what.

His footsteps fall lightly. He hasn't felt this good in a while, despite the vaguely nagging guilt that he's let Hypothesis down. He's not even pissed off at the thought that he'll have to let Lullaby know he's back. Smug superiority can't dent this mood.

But as Catalyst reaches the base, his stomach sinks. Why is Control Group outside? Why is she pacing the perimeter? She sees him a moment after he spots her and rushes to meet him, eyes wide and terrified.

She's relatively new, but he's never seen her like this.

"Catalyst! Everyone's looking for you! Things are *fucked!*"

"Fuck you talking about?" Catalyst snaps, stomach continuing its plunge.

"A bunch of randoms got into the basement and ran into the Project!" CG stammer-explains. "A couple of them got away! H-Hypothesis is going ballistic!"

No. No no. She's kidding. This is a sick fucking joke. Intruders, right when he was away from his post? How does that—that's fucking absurd.

CG's staring at him. "Wh-what happens now?" she asks. "A-are we just dead?"

"We'll pack up and leave," Catalyst says distantly. "Where's... where's Hypothesis?"

"In the basement. B-but hey, maybe you should give him a chance to cool—"

Catalyst barges past CG, ignoring her entirely. This can't be happening. They've been building up to tonight's experiment for ages. It was supposed to be a breakthrough, Hypothesis's latest triumph. And, someone got in? Someone was here at the perfectly wrong moment? It—Catalyst's brain keeps skipping over the thought, a stuck record. It's just impossible.

He sleepwalks his way into base. The rug to downstairs is askew, the hatch open. He keeps moving, blanking those that scurry past as he forges onward. Lullaby, leaning on the wall outside the boiler room with folded arms, tuts and clicks their tongue.

"And here he is. You can thank me any time for cleaning up your—hgk!" Catalyst slams them into the wall, fingers wrapped around their throat. The smug look vanishes in an instant.

"Keep talking. I fucking dare you," Catalyst snarls.

"Catalyst. Get in here."

Hypothesis's command drifts through from the other room, ice cold. Catalyst locks up, all the anger draining from him in an instant. He lets Lullaby go, leaving them to sag and massage their throat, and then steps inside.

A bloodbath. The Project had its way with at least one of the intruders, gore spattering the floor and walls. The beast itself slumbers, collapsed on its side, more blood flecking its jaws and talons. Alongside it, Hypothesis.

He slowly looks up from the Project, face utterly devoid of emotion. It's just like... before. Before the Coven. There's nothing in Hypothesis's voice as he speaks. "Where. Were. You." Catalyst starts to stutter something, stopping as Hypothesis holds up a hand. "It doesn't matter. Your... error means we have no choice but to relocate. Even if we'd captured every intruder, five disappearances would be impossible to explain away. And we did not capture every intruder." Hypothesis removes his glasses, rubbing his nose for a moment. "We'll have to destroy all but the essentials, get on the move before morning."

Catalyst's head has been bobbing like a yoyo, even as he crumples further and further in on himself. How could he fail Hypothesis like this? "I'll get right on it. I'll put in two—three times the work, I'll make it up—"

"Be quiet." Catalyst shuts his mouth. Hypothesis exhales. "I was under the impression that I could rely on you. I see now that we need to make... corrections."

Catalyst recoils. "No! Please, I—I'll do better! Count on it! This—i-it was just a mistake!"

"Oh, Catalyst," Hypothesis sighs. "I wish I could believe you, but empirical evidence is empirical evidence. Now, be a good boy and cooperate. Remember, this isn't a punishment, it's for your own good."

He hears himself whimper, he hears himself plead, he knows it won't matter.

An entire week passes before Catalyst is lucid enough to realise they took one of the intruders captive.

Catalyst fucking hates them.

[In-character Q&A - CG \(2\)](#)

[Oct 30, 2024](#)

Are there any perks to working for Coven? Health care, espresso machine?

It's pretty cool to be able to run on walls, I guess. And it's room and board.

I dunno. What is there to say?

Do you have any moments of the years training Dime that stick out in your head?

The first time I saw them for training. Couldn't help but think how... lost and afraid they looked.

Remember pretty good the first time they landed a hit. Real moment of pride.

...what? Why are you looking at me like that?

What do you think is so important about the zone?

It's something to do with the incident itself, I'm sure of it.

Things like that don't happen by accident. There would be no cover up if there was nothing to hide.

Thoughts on the Altruists, do you think they deserve Dime?

I don't trust anyone who claims they're doing wrong for a noble purpose. I don't claim to be good, but at least I'm honest about it.

I'm... mixed on them having Dime. They're a pawn either way.

Any aspirations for inter office romance? I bet Vary would make a banging carbonara.

Vary? That's a joke, right?

Gonna be honest, nobody at the Coven can cook for shit—not that that's my bar for romance! I—

Look, point is, there's a million reasons that getting entangled with anyone would be a bad idea.

What was going through your head when you were confronted with a gallant (and handsome) tentacle beast who let you go?

Called them a gallant dumbass, meant it.

Maybe they were just following orders. In which case...

Nevermind.

What was going through your head when said tentacle beast beat your ass for the intel?

I mean I'm pissed off at them but something in me is a little proud. I taught them. Any martial artist wants their student to hit them in the mouth at least once.

Does the name Miggy mean anything to you?

Not a thing.

[In-character Q&A - New Poll](#)

[Nov 11, 2024](#)

CG's been in the chair for a month or so now, so time for a new poll!

We'll run this bad boy for a week or so (in which time you can still question CG if you like!), and then see who comes out on top.

So, enjoy a poll, Hounds edition! (Surpass and Phalanx already had turns, so they're sitting this one out)

Arcade

Portrait

Vantage

Enfilade

18 votes total

[Closing the Q&A poll later today](#)

[Nov 18, 2024](#)

:)

If you're interested, get your votes in.

[In-character Q&A changeover - Vantage](#)

[Nov 19, 2024](#)

Well, with 60% of the vote, the people want to see the leader of the Glory Hounds!

In comments/DMs, go ahead and submit any questions you'd like to hear her answer, in character!

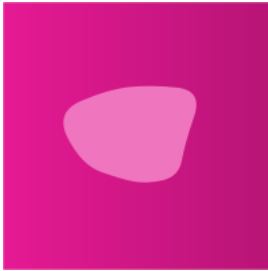
[Character Q&A](#)

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Just throwing out a lot, feel free to ignore some. Starting with a classic! 1.) How did you get your powers? 2.) What's the most interesting way you've used your powers. 3.) Do you actively hunt villains like the Altruists or do you just show up when they start to actually do crimes? 4.) What was the worst fight you've had? 5.) What are your official (and unofficial) opinions on your fellow teammates? 6.) What were your thoughts when Bet- I mean Phalanx joined? 7.) do you think there's a possibility of tensions between the GH and the DPR to boil over into an actual fight? 8.) (off the record) what are your thoughts on the DPR? 9.) have you heard of Coven at all? 10.) Would you allow a sad, tentacle having, former villain to become a GH? and finally 11.) will you marry me? 🙄

[Drink Your Villain Juice! Ch8 available!](#)

[Dec 4, 2024](#)

Man this was rough to finish. The author does not like the pharmacy messing her around!!

- +22k words. We broke 300k baybee!
- Some downtime with the team. (worldbuilding, in my DYVJ? it's more likely than you think).
- Bond and/or flirt!
- What's that, delayed consequences? (for running out of Juice, just slightly later)
- Why does this Alistair guy keep calling me, and the fun counterpart question, how does this Alistair guy keep showing up where I am!?
- CG is here too!?
- why is this café on fire.
- Oh you're in for it now, Dime.
- So hey, been wondering why Alistair reacts to your real name? :)

[Drink Your Villain Juice Ch8 early access link](#)

[Dec 4, 2024](#)

See on this post!

I've bugfixed as extensively as I could but possibly things might read oddly as I just didn't have time to do a lot of playtesting.

Kay's gendertalk stuff cuts in a bit abruptly if you're already hanging out with her; I do want to segue this more cleanly in future but tbh I didn't want to rewrite the scene in full so it was a necessary sacrifice.

As always, any issues let me know, I'll get them fixed ASAP! (no skip right now)

Updated 16:29 5th/12 - still trying to fix that pesky scene file name!

[In-character Q&A - Vantage!](#)

[Dec 7, 2024](#)

(she's still here for another week or so for members to submit questions!)

1.) How did you get your powers?

That's a gutsy question. I suppose I'll humour you.

In my early teens, my apartment block caught fire and my mom got trapped. I was shouting and screaming from the far side of a wall of flames and... I don't know. Everything just seemed to click at once.

I--it didn't go perfectly. I didn't understand how the simulations worked or how to recalculate on the fly. Mom had health complications from smoke inhalation and died younger than she should have.

I try not to dwell on it.

2.) What's the most interesting way you've used your powers?

If you believe Arcade, to cheat at video games. *laughs*

I once simulated hostage situation so effectively that the mask just turned themselves in immediately. That was interesting because I had a psychological profile to work with. Having access to that much information is incredible.

3.) Do you actively hunt villains like the Altruists or do you just show up when they start to actually do crimes?

That's complicated. It's usually a bad idea to go after villains in their secret identities, if they have them. That just escalates on both ends. However, if we know an enemy hideout, we'll hit it whether or not they're actively doing crime at that moment. It's a base of operations. The Businessmen are a wrinkle to that; they're too clever to leave evidence of wrongdoing at Masquerade, so we'd shoot ourselves in the foot.

It's been... more difficult lately for us to act preemptively. When your reputation has taken the kind of hit that ours did, you have to be careful not to lose the PR battle.

On a related note, I can't bring villains in based on what they *might* do. They have to have committed some crime first.

4.) What was the worst fight you've had?

The Zone incident, without a question.

I miscalculated. Then I didn't salvage my mistakes. People died.

5.) What are your official (and unofficial) opinions on your fellow teammates?

Surpass: Who wouldn't want a hero like Surpass? She can be reckless, but it's hard to argue with those powers, and we'd be a worse unit without her.

[Redacted]: She's a pain in the ass and I wouldn't change her for anything.

Enfilade: A consummate professional with a head for tactical thinking. She's been an invaluable addition.

Catherine: It's been good to see her come out of her shell bit by bit, although she'll never be a social butterfly. She's harder on herself than she needs to be. Speaking a little more cynically, it's good to have snagged someone from the DPR; it helps our reputation.

Portrait: His constructs offer superb flexibility in the field. He's a very useful teammate to have, and he cares deeply about helping people in a way few others do.

Troy: I like him. He could hold up better under pressure, sure, but that's not a huge deal. Maybe he could stand to believe in himself a little more too.

Arcade: He's a fantastic asset both for PR and in the field. He could stand to remember that he's still learning, though.

Sammy: I wish I hadn't forced him to grow up this fast.

Phalanx: She's razor sharp and pulls no punches, as well as having excellent mastery of her powers. She's a great hero.

Beth: Hah... Catherine would have been a tough nut to crack if I hadn't cut my teeth on Beth first.

6.) What were your thoughts when Beth- I mean Phalanx joined?

It was heartening to have someone flip after the Zone. Reminded me that it wasn't exclusively the Hounds--exclusively me--to blame for everything. I did have concerns that she'd cause tension, considering our losses, but the others treated her very well.

She was and is a very troubled person. Even more guarded back then, if you can believe that.

Honestly, it was a good reality check about my people skills.

7.) Do you think there's a possibility of tensions between the GH and the DPR to boil over into an actual fight?

Doubtful. Both sides would have everything to lose.

8.) (off the record) What are your thoughts on the DPR?

They're self-righteous and government-backed, which is a dangerous combination.

I expect many, if not most of their heroes have their hearts in the right place, but the organization itself is completely rotten. It says a lot that they're more concerned with who does the heroing--who's *seen* to do the heroing--than the heroing itself.

9.) Have you heard of Coven at all?

I can't say I have.

10.) Would you allow a sad, tentacle having, former villain to become a GH?

I'm willing to hear villains out if they're repentant. Would probably be a PR nightmare, but I'd rather take an opinion hit than lose the chance to help someone for the better.

What if this is the one and only time they believe they can be more than a person who hurts others? What if rejecting them just confirms what they think of themselves?

11.) Will you marry me?

I'm sure you're lovely, but even if I knew you, I have a dangerous life and an open identity. It wouldn't be right.

[Character Q&A Poll - S.C.U.M. edition!](#)

[Dec 14, 2024](#)

Since S.C.U.M. have made their glorious onscreen debut, I figure it'd be neat to hotseat them for the next Q&A. We'll run for a week or so: until then, Vantage is still available.

Rocket - *leader, loud and proud, abrasive. Railgun projectiles.*

Insider - *slimy, self-satisfied. 'Inside knowledge'.*

Spring Breaker - *conceited, faux-classy. Moisture manipulation.*

Conqueror - *cocky, overconfident, rebel. Spectral weaponry.*

Cannibal - *obsessive, experimenter. Augment scavenger.*

Rocket

Insider

Spring Breaker

Conqueror

Cannibal

19 votes total

[In-character Q&A - Rocket!](#)

[Dec 27, 2024](#)

Well, it was neck-and-neck, but Rocket eventually prevailed in the battle of the S.C.U.M.!

For the next while, their fearless leader is in the hotseat for IC questions. Feel free to submit via comment or message. Hope everyone enjoyed getting to meet DYVJ's loudest character in the most recent chapter! :)

[Alternate POV - Everything in Balance \(CG\).](#)

[Dec 28, 2024](#)

Two alternate reactions to how things could shake out after Masquerade...

A/N: Written from a perspective assuming Paradigm encountered CG-as-Libra after Masquerade.

CG stumbles hard against the stairwell wall, catching herself on the rail.

She stares at the bare bricks two inches from her eyes. Losing balance. She'd forgotten what that's like. Says something that she's so dead on her feet her powers didn't correct for the stumble.

It's been a long day. Week. Month. Years. Fistfighting gangsters Wednesday, dodging bullets Thursday, evading masks Friday.

Evading is the wrong word. Getting her ass beat by masks Friday.

CG pushes off the wall with her good arm. She's trying not to bend the other.

Dark stains seep through her jacket. She grits her teeth and keeps climbing. Two more storeys. She can handle two storeys.

She's correct. Barely.

Vision turning grey, CG unlocks her front door on the first try. She doesn't stagger as she moves into her one-room apartment, but she does collapse onto the floor the moment she shuts the door.

Alright. Alright. Job isn't finished.

Peeling off her jacket with a groan, CG grimaces at the shredded flesh of her arm, courtesy of Mr. White. Dark red blood glistens in the deep furrows gouged by those razorwire filaments. The bleeding has slowed, but not enough. She stares a moment that she cannot afford at the thick black lines winding through the ravaged flesh. Blood's even darker, in those spots.

Heavy, ragged breaths. CG scoots herself along the floorboards and pulls open a kitchenette cupboard, tossing rolls of bandages and gauze onto the floor. She fumbles one-handed with the gauze, glaring at her clumsy fingers, already knowing she's going to do a shitty job of this.

Whatever. Doesn't need to be good. Only needs to stop her bleeding out.

Muttering several choice expletives, CG painstakingly winds gauze around her arm, a haphazard snake of dressing that'd have a real medic tearing their hair out. Blood patters onto the boards below her, oozing steadily between the winding ribbon of gauze. Bandaging over the top does nothing to hide the mess; makes it worse if anything. CG has to hold the last loop of bandage in place with her chin until she can tie it off with her hand and teeth.

She shoves the cupboard closed, then puts her back to it, eyes squeezed shut. Fuck. Been a while since she's been hurt this badly.

A gallows smirk slashes her face. It's almost hilarious how much is wrong with her wound care. Didn't clean or disinfect anything, didn't suture or stitch; treatment like this could kill someone. These injuries need a hospital or a deft hand with a needle. Weeks, if not months of recovery and thorough monitoring.

CG? CG can slap a bandage on there and call it good. The juice will pull her together again. Knit the cuts and replenish the blood. Even prevent infection.

She doesn't get the luxury of staying hurt.

Stupid, really. She shouldn't resent her resilience. If it wasn't for the juice, she'd be in for a long and painful recuperation. If she even lived that long.

If it wasn't for the juice, she wouldn't be in the kinds of situations that get her hurt like this.

CG exhales through her nose. Faint, distant amusement. Symptom, not cause.

There's a cute lie she could tell herself. Claim that her younger self would be ashamed that she's faking hero; acting like she's standing up for the little guy when she doesn't give a solitary fuck.

Maybe there would be comfort in pretending she was a better, more idealistic person back then. That she had it in her to be something else, be *someone* else. Make herself believe that it's not her fault, and all she's doing is surviving, playing the hand she's been dealt.

But that's just ducking responsibility. Or—not *just* that. It's also giving the past an undeserved rosy tint. She's surviving for her own sake, not for the sake of a kid who never existed. She was never the good daughter. Never the good girl.

A deep-buried memory surfaces from somewhere. She's sixteen and blundering into her home, sobbing in pain, clutching her limp arm. Same one as today. An older kid had broken it in an argument over—she doesn't even recall—nothing important. Just a kid being spiteful and cruel to someone weaker than them. CG does remember the little gleam in the other girl's eye as she realised that nobody was going to stop her from twisting her arm all the way to snapping.

CG's dad doesn't know how to handle her tears. Never has. Instead of getting help, he spends a half hour lecturing her that 'he warned her something like this would happen if she didn't learn to behave herself'. She's trembling and trying not to scream. Eventually the butler—you were too fucking good for that place, Ernesto—hears her sobs and volunteers himself to drive her to the hospital.

"Fine, fine." Her father waves a hand. "Just don't be too long."

She opens her eyes.

Thinking about—dwelling on—dad isn't useful nor helpful. The past is neither as dead nor as buried as she'd like, but it's still the past. Bad parenting isn't why she's bleeding all over the floor of her shitty apartment. Well indirectly it is, but only in the longest term—

CG grits her teeth. *Concentrate.*

Tonight went wrong in about as many ways as it's possible for something to go wrong. Her contact was compromised—mental note to check on Watson when she has the chance, though he's most likely dead already—the Businessmen intercepted the dead drop, and for some fucking reason, they brought the Altruists along for the ride.

Her head pounds. Almost enough to distract her from her fucked up arm. She should drink something. Slug some painkillers while she's at it.

She can't think and work at the same time. Doing this one-handed demands too much concentration. It's only once she's grappled way too long with a pill bottle, dragged her ass to the fridge, fought even more with the sealed cap of some water, and then finally drank the whole thing down that she can resume her trail of thought.

The Altruists were not a wrinkle CG expected. Architect may have worked with the Businessmen before, but those jobs had clearcut benefits for his team. He doesn't strike her as the kind of guy to out and out do another gang's dirty work. Must be an agenda.

Regardless, CG could have dealt with Mr. White and some Businessmen goons. Probably even given White and Scour the slip, if the suits had pulled out all the stops, but the Altruists...

More specifically *an* Altruist. Dime.

CG props herself against the foot of her bed—she can't handle the task of clambering up there right now—and shakes her head. She shouldn't be smiling. Why is she smiling?

The Coven's interests shouldn't have intersected in that way. It's stupid to pit agents against one another. Counterproductive. CG's role as Libra isn't supposed to impact Dime's role with the Altruists, and vice versa.

With the unexpected spanner in the works, the outcome should still be obvious. CG has seniority. She's still Dime's handler, as unwieldy as that's become since she wound up with her own assignment. Dime should have ceded to her, no questions asked. There was even an open window for them to throw the fight without witnesses, and it's not like losing to her would be a big hit to their credibility or cover. She's an unknown. Plenty of room for excuses.

Dime didn't do any of that.

They stood up to her. They took what she taught them, and used it to fight back.

Part of her is pissed. She doesn't like to lose.

Maybe that says something though, right? She's madder about that geriatric rustbucket Mr. White fucking up her shit and the Businessmen catching out her source than she is the setback to the Coven. Any anger at Dime is competitive, frustration at losing to a skilled opponent. Perhaps she's even eager for a rematch.

Which is wrong. Absolutely wrong. Again, that situation shouldn't have happened. A repeat would be a disaster. CG's already going to have a hell of a time explaining this to Hypothesis, and she doesn't know how much she'll be able to cover for Dime. Fighting them again should be the furthest thing from her mind.

But damn, she wants that win back.

Anyway, she's missing the wood for the trees, because something else should be front and centre.

Dime fought back. Dime resisted. It could have been the heat of the moment, a kneejerk reaction.

On the other hand, it could be something else. It could be something very significant. The *most* significant.

CG smiles through the pain and the fatigue. If she can talk Dime around...

Maybe she'll have found the ally she needs.

A/N: Same scene, but Dime threw the fight.

CG takes her time getting back to her apartment. After the beartrap of a situation she just escaped, she can spare some extra caution.

That was way too close. She's been running herself ragged these past weeks, and tonight it caught up to her.

All those bullets she had to dodge yesterday probably should have been her warning.

Stupid. Letting desperation make her reckless. Now she's lost her best contact—mental note to check on Watson when she has the chance, though he's most likely dead already—and the Businessmen are good and fucking riled. They even brought in outside help.

Concentrate.

With difficulty, CG calms her whirling thoughts, checking the sightlines outside of her building for the third time. She already doubled-back twice on the way here, then hid in an alley for a solid ten minutes. If anyone followed her, she's done all she can to shake them off.

One more scan. High this time. Rooftops, balconies, windowsills. No spybirds in sight. At this point she's got a pretty good handle on the limitations of Conspirator's surveillance, but it'd be stupid to dismiss them. She's not getting burned again tonight.

With that, CG finally heads in. She's got several storeys to climb, and the aches have settled deep into her legs by the time she reaches her apartment, joining the party of complaining muscles and throbbing joints.. It'd be easier to list off the parts of her that *aren't* sore. She doesn't bother promising herself that she'll rest tomorrow. Something will come up. Something always comes up.

Inside, CG sets down her battered tote bag, crosses the room in depressingly-few strides, then flops onto her bed.

Hell of a night.

She didn't expect the Altruists. Architect may have worked with the Businessmen before, but those jobs had clearcut benefits for his team. He doesn't strike her as the kind of guy to out and out do another gang's dirty work. Must be an agenda. She's fairly confident she could handle or at least evade Mr. White in a straight fight, even wriggle away from White and Scour in a pinch, but with half of team of extra masks in the mix? If Dime hadn't been there...

Dime...

Coven agents shouldn't be working at cross purposes. Thresh's goals conflicting with Libra's is an operational breakdown. Still, Dime did what they were supposed to and ceded to CG. She's their senior and their handler, so that's only natural. Only protocol.

But in that case, why can't she get this stupid grin off her face? It's completely normal to defer to a higher-ranking teammate. There's nothing exceptional about Dime stepping back and letting her get away. And letting her rough them up a bit. Which she feels kind of bad about. Regardless! Nothing exceptional about it.

"I can't fight you," they said.

That's not a 'following orders' type of comment. That wasn't a 'following orders' tone of voice.

"Dumbass," CG mutters. She can't bring herself to mean it.

It's stupid to think that they care. It's stupid to read into things. She's supposed to know better. Hasn't she wised up by now? Those lessons took their toll in blood and pain and tears, and she's sitting here with an idiot's smile and a fool's thoughts. How many times will it take for her to learn?

"Dumbass," she repeats with venom.

She's on her own. Always has been. Her 'colleagues'? They're loyal to either Hypothesis or his bankroll. Hypothesis himself doesn't give a damn about any of them as anything more than tools. What he did to Catalyst for letting Dime and their friends break into the old facility taught CG everything she needed to know. The Coven's not home and it's not the family she wished she had.

She stares up at the ceiling.

Dime... it's better—easier—not to hope. It's better—safer—to tell herself they were following orders, or that they were just showing loyalty to the Coven.

Too bad that smart enough to know better means smart enough to see through her own bullshit.

She's afraid. To trust herself. To trust her instincts. She's masking her fears then calling it logic, conveniently omitting that she *knows* her chances get so much better with an ally. All because she's scared of what it could mean. Scared to let someone get that close to her.

Yeah, it's a risk to bring in another person. So what? It's a risk to even consider what she's thinking of doing, and she's doing it anyway.

CG's eyes trail all the way down to her arm, where her sleeve has rode up a few inches. Thick black veins wind beneath her skin, almost seeming to pulse.

She swallows thickly, and tugs her sleeve back into place.

Dime doesn't have to be anything other than an ally. They're trusting her, so she'll listen to her gut and put a feeler out to them. Explore the possibilities. They deserve freedom more than anyone.

And CG will just... set aside the other implications. Set aside how Dime's gallantry makes something flutter in her chest. Set aside the treacherous little 'what if?' at the corners of her mind.

CG buries her face in her hands with a long groan.

How many times will it take for her to learn?

At least one more.

[Discord FYI](#)

[Dec 28, 2024](#)

Heyo! Just a quick checkin that if you're having trouble with the discord (which automatically has you join, fun fact), let me know and I can shoot you a direct invite if you'd like.

[Character Q&A - Rocket \(1\)](#)

[January 13](#)

Were you part of S.C.U.M. since the start?

Sure was. S.C.U.M. wasn't S.C.U.M. before I came along. Was more just like a couple dudes. I'm what got it serious.

How did you manage to become the leader?

Killed the last motherfucker who was in charge.

Needed to happen. Not proud of it.

How did you join S.C.U.M. in the first place?

I was the hot shit on the block after I got my powers. Wasn't stupid though; knew there was only so much I could get done by myself. So I'd kind of y'know, assessed what was out there and figured that the couple of dudes I mentioned were the best bet.

So after we got done brawling, we got talking, and then S.C.U.M. happened.

In the same vein of that question: What led you to being a villain in the first place?

Look... having powers isn't all sunshine and fucking rainbows alright? Not everyone gets to be in the right place at the right time, or have a fucking... TV-perfect personality. Sometimes you got responsibilities and shit that don't line up with being an angel. Sometimes there's a motherfucker who needs to get his legs broken.

Sometimes the best thing to do is double the fuck down.

What would you consider your biggest victory/failure?

Man I don't fucking know, it ain't a competition, not unless you count 'being alive' as a competition.

I've made mistakes. Trusted the wrong people. And I let someone down who needed me, but let's not try and fuckin'... dress it up like something it ain't.

Who are your favorite/least favorite heroes to fight?

Arcade's kinda fun I guess. Shootouts are cool and he's got an actual fuckin' personality, unlike some of his teammates.

I'm talkin' about Vantage. Vantage fuckin' sucks.

How'd you get your powers/augments?

Well ain't you bold as fuckin' brass. **laughs**

Look... I come from a family with exactly one good person, and I don't mean me. Fill in the blanks, yeah?

What are the internal politics of S.C.U.M. like? (like are they cut throat or a little more chill?)

We're all assholes, but we all know we're assholes, so y'know.

We argue and fight but we're still a team. Still mostly buddies. S'got tougher recently, after shit broke bad in the Zone. Good thing Spring and 'Sider started hooking up; they handle each other pretty well.

Uh-like not in the-not like how they- ...less I know about that the better.

What are the best strategies for handling the Glory Hounds and/or the DPR in your opinion?

Yeah see so, I take this here ball **holds up a golf ball** and I break the ribs of the first, second, and third motherfucker I see from either the Hounds or DPR.

Any questions?

[One Year of the Juice](#)

[January 14](#)

So, it's about a year ago I first posted the WIP of Drink Your Villain Juice! January 1st, 2024 to be exact. Started working on it a couple months before that.

It's been a blast, and an amazing learning experience, and completely exceeded my expectations as to the reception. Like, as a writer, you want people to like your work, but I've never had this many people enjoying something I've made before. It's incredibly motivating and gratifying and numerous other 'ing' words.

Anyhow, I'm committed to this project. I'm pumped about writing more of the game and sharing the story with all of you. Maybe even get the whole thing finished! We'll see.

Thank you from the bottom of my heart for all your support; comments, likes, reblogs, feedback, fanart, subscriptions, and even those of you who quietly just read and enjoy. Sincerely, I wouldn't be doing this without you.

Love, the Author.

[Character Q&A - Rocket \(2\)](#)

[January 16](#)

Who came up with the name S.C.U.M?

Me and the other guys when we first started out.

What do the letters stand for?

grins

Abso-fuckin-lutely nothing. We just thought it sounded cool. Plus it drives a certain kind of person crazy, and that's hilarious.

What do you think of the other villain groups in Alderbrook?

Shreds - They're fucking assholes. Worse than that, they're dumb as shit. Who does crime just for the sake of doing crime. Fuck dudes, at least get a fucking ideology.

Businessmen - Ugh. Smug pieces of shit. Act like they're some kind of higher class of villain just because they wear suits. Newsflash, you ain't any better than the rest of us. Putting on a tuxedo doesn't make you less of a drug dealer.

Altruists - The new kids, huh? Don't trust 'em. They're even shadier than your average villain. Pretty sure they ain't just here to carve a piece of the pie, you know?

I like sheepgirl though. She's got flash.

[Character Origins - Hounds \(Vantage, Arcade\)](#)

[January 23](#)

Gonna get a two-parter for origins stories this month, since I don't have as much to say about all the Hounds as with some characters. We've been over Surpass and Beth already, and those are the big ones.

Anyhow, I've mentioned this before, but there have been three iterations of the Drink Your Villain Juice! setting. The earliest one I talked about a bit in the [Wil/Teddie](#) origins post; that iteration was more heavily focused on the commercialised aspects of heroing.

Vantage was part of the superhero team that was hosting heroic aptitude tests that the protagonist was participating in. She uh, never actually appeared on screen in that version of the story, cause she wasn't one of the trainers. That left her as kind of nebulous, but already possessed of several seeds of the DYVJ incarnation. I initially envisaged her precognition as more immediate, seeing the next few moves ahead type of thing, and that only changed coming into DYVJ itself. However, a key element of her character has always been that she's an advocate specifically for telepaths.

I haven't delved into this too much and honestly it maybe requires more discussion within the text (something for an edit pass, maybe!), but telepaths have kind of a raw deal in the DYVJ setting. The DPR crack down on them a lot harder than other types of powers. Vantage is someone who just barely didn't get classified as a telepath, and that's a big driver for her: she wants to stand up for people who get unfairly punished by the system.

In the second version of the setting, Vantage's importance kind of ramped up, but she still never actually appeared onscreen at the point I reached. Since the protagonist of the second version was herself a telepath, Vantage, as part of the Glory Hounds (yup, they existed in that version!) made a great foil. Our protagonist was a telepath evading the system, Vantage was an antagonist almost-telepath standing up to the system.

I'm glad I finally got to flesh Vantage out and fully realise her in DYVJ itself. She's been hovering on the fringes for forever and absolutely came to life when I wrote the fight with her.

Arcade was also part of the original DYVJ setting. In fact, he was the deuteragonist to the second POV character.

So, POV 1: young man trying to make it as a hero without relying on his family connections. POV 2: young woman plucked from obscurity trying to navigate suddenly being famous and all the demands this entails. This woman, Jester/Miia, had a best friend plus heroing partner in Arcade/Sammy.

There was baggage. One of the demands of the job, and their fading star of a hero boss, was that the team needed gossip and drama to keep the public invested in them. So, Jester and Arcade should have a romance; mask fans love that!

One problem with that. They're both gay.

That plot then, was a whole bunch of angst about having to fake it and having people fawning over a fake relationship. Eventually, both would have found someone they were actually interested in, just to make things even *more* complicated.

Arcade as a character honestly didn't change much at all once he made it to DYVJ. His basic personality is still very much intact, maybe a smidge less cynical, though original!Arcade never had to deal with his friends dying. The fake relationship angle has been replaced with different kinds of pressures; now Arcade feels he has to be PR-perfect all the time, and has to prove that he's more than just the pretty-faced rookie, he's an actual hero. Arcade kinda just... made sense to import when I was starting the story: he's got neat powers and just enough going on to be interesting as an opponent. (I wasn't expecting the grudge against Dime to develop the way it did! He surprised me). Arcade was basically the first name on the character sheet once I came up with the opening scene with Dime dropping in on the fight at the loan shark. It's really nice to have someone who can banter!

His bestie Jester didn't make the cut, though I considered her. I *sometimes* manage to curb my urges to rampantly add new cast members, and the Hounds felt stocked enough. Maybe one day we'll see some incarnation of her.

So yup, that's Vantage and Arcade, thanks for reading the ramble. :)

[Character Origins - Hounds \(Portrait, Enfilade\).](#)

[January 23](#)

Part two of the Hounds origins!

This pair I probably have the least to say about, main reason I decided to do a two-parter.

Portrait has deep ties to Surpass. That is to say, she bullied the heck out of him.

The two of them were both *Worm* OCs. I'm not going to get too deep into the lore of someone else's work on a members post, so for our purposes what you need to know is that they were junior heroes on the same team, and team leadership was decided by age. Eldest leads. When they graduate to full hero, next eldest leads.

By this system, Portrait wound up in charge. Surpass Did Not Like That, giving him the derogatory nickname Twenty-Four, the number of days older than her he was.

The original version of Portrait was kind of a doormat but he was also younger than the DYVJ incarnation, thrust into a position he genuinely did not want and was not well-equipped to perform. Portrait doesn't do well with conflict and isn't what you'd call the most decisive guy, so having loud, brash, *teenaged* Surpass needling him constantly was a recipe for disaster.

A Portrait POV is the one time I tried to speedwrite: did an entire ficlet in under an hour and it's basically just the poor guy having an emotional meltdown over none of his friends liking him or trusting his abilities.

DYVJ!Portrait is really similar to the original character, just with the benefit of more experience under his belt. And Surpass actually likes him. The Hounds were feeling very girl heavy so Portrait felt like a good addition, especially when I started picturing how fun it'd be to write out fighting his painted constructs. On which note, his powers are pretty much identical too. He always had his animal sidekick dudes. His name did change though; he was originally Tristan, and I realised I used that for one of Dime's default names, so... one of us is gonna have to change.

It was neat writing Portrait as a person for the first time in Chapter 8. Dude's just... really nice.

Enfilade gets the honour of being the first DYVJ-original creation if we're not counting Dime. Since I knew Arcade was in the opening scene, and he was kind of the bantering character, he needed a straight man. Combine that with wanting to show an augmented character early, and Enfilade sprung into being.

And well, that's about it with her! Can't give much of an origin when she originated in this very story! I'm looking forward to showing how she ticks a little better (I really enjoyed the character beat of her getting enthused by hand-to-hand!Dime knowing muay thai), but ultimately she's never been intended as a main character, and that's okay.

[DYVJ CH9 - Early Access Now Available!](#)

[February 5](#)

It's locked and loaded and available here on Patreon at the Coven level!

- +16k words, for 333k total!
- Meet the Hounds on their home turf!

- Help CG in an underhanded scheme. Or leave her to twist, if you want.
- Reunite. (positive)
- Reunite. (derogatory)
- Handle Things Fantastically.
- GDI Alistair just tell us your deal, already.
- Go to a meeting.

[DYVJ CH9 - Demo](#)

[February 5](#)

CH9 is here for the private early release. As usual, this will be available publicly two weeks from now.

I've been pretty thorough debugging this one, so it should run fine, but if you encounter any issues just let me know and I'll get them fixed ASAP.

[Bonus POV - The Past Five Years - Beth](#)

[February 18](#)

So, ever wonder what Beth has been doing between now and last we saw her?

I had the idea for this months ago, but Beth had to show back up for real first! A couple of segments make mild assumptions about Grant being alive, but for major variations there's alternative sections for Grant vs. Shauna.

As the blinding blaze of twin novas fades, stars blinking across Beth's vision, a sudden weight yanks her to the side. There's an uncanny feeling of connection, of sensing with a part of herself that didn't exist before this moment.

*Beside her, Prii screams, shuddering wildly. Something **cracks***, and Beth's stomach lurches as she realises it's her friend's* **skull***. Blood pours down their face, horns pushing through flesh and bone, the screams reaching a fever pitch—**

"Miss Volkova?"

Beth startles. Her eyes refocus. Where—who—

DPR Hexbury. Officer Jalen Lamont. He's seated across from her, hands laced together and resting on the table. A mug of coffee sits in front of her, untouched and probably stone cold.

"I'm sorry," Beth rasps, throat crackling. "Can you repeat that?"

"Of course." Lamont smiles. He's a few years older than her, if she's to guess, though the thick beard might be throwing her off.

Beth's never felt less of an adult.

Lamont continues. "As a fresh flare, our responsibility is to ensure that you can learn to use your powers safely, while supporting you through this difficult time." He sighs. "What happened to you was horrible, and you shouldn't have to handle it alone."

"My friends," Beth mumbles for the sixth or seventh time. She can't help it. Prii, Morgan, and Shauna are still in danger. *Grant's* still in danger, a couple rooms away down three pints of blood. Beth's not the one who needs help.

"We're doing everything we can," Lamont replies for the fourth or fifth time with the same patience as the first. "Sky Surfer and Lockstep have taken every available officer to investigate the area you described." Lamont has told her that already too. The mask names barely mean anything to her; she's never paid parahumans much mind beyond their presence being a simple fact of life. Hexbury isn't the kind of place where heroes and villains battle upon the streets.

Underneath said streets? It appears that's a separate story.

The reality of the situation fades in and out. It's morning now, Beth thinks. She hasn't slept. She isn't sure she'll ever sleep again. If she squeezes her eyes closed hard enough, she'll reopen them surrounded by her friends, preparing for an 'adventure' worthy of the name only after judicious video editing. Grant will tease, Shauna will worry, Prii will herd the cats, and Morgan—

Lamont is speaking again. "Our current concern is that whoever is behind this will go to ground, especially if what happened hits the media." Lamont lets out a small sigh, brow creasing with sympathy. "I'm sorry for what you went through. That creature you encountered sounds... monstrous, and in my books you handled yourself remarkably well."

"She claims her friend's injuries were inflicted by some kind of mutated animal. Frankly, if she wasn't dragging around half the metal in every room she enters, we wouldn't even be bothering you with this. I suspect drugs—"

"Thanks, doctor, we'll take it from here. Appreciate your discretion."

The hospital staff had taken one look at Beth, blood-splattered, babbling in panic, and hauling around Grant's unconscious body, and written her off. Lamont has accepted everything she's told him at face value, from what she and the others were doing in that place to her description of the monster.

She still can't accept the compliment. She 'handled herself well'? She left almost everyone behind.

Beth shakes her head, just slightly.

Lamont hums. "I suppose it doesn't feel that way to you. I won't argue." He leans further forward, adjusting his hands to match. "As I was saying, the department is here to help. Both you and your friends."

Months later, Beth will remember the ever-so-slight hitch in Lamont pluralising 'friends', and put a hole in the nearest wall.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the department cares about more than just your powers, and more than just parahumans. Your friend there didn't ignite, but he's in almost the same position as you." Lamont looks saddened. "In some ways, normal people who brush against the masked world have it worse. Everyone wants a piece of the pie while the five minutes of fame last, and villains sometimes decide they technically aren't civilians any more and target them."

Grant saved:

Literally all of this is news to Beth. If Shauna were here, she'd know exactly what Lamont means; she's always been the one with her finger on the pulse of the masked world.

But she isn't here.

Beth considers the possibility she'll never see that shy, sweet smile again, and can't swallow the lump in her throat.

Shauna saved:

Literally all of this is news to Beth. Ironically, it's Shauna herself who'd know these implications best. She's the resident mask aficionado, always talking about this hero or that villain, writing and drawing all kinds of parahuman content.

Down in that place, Shauna was braver than any hero. She doesn't deserve this.

Lamont is still talking, and Beth tries to concentrate on the words. "Point being, we can shield you and if necessary your families from reporters and reprisals. It's along the lines of witness protection, though our hope is always that we get there quickly enough that the criminals don't even know who they're hunting down."

"I—" This is a lot, very quickly. If Lamont means the comparison to witness protection literally, he's talking about uprooting five entire families for the sake of secrecy and safety. To Beth's knowledge, only Shauna actually lives with her parents, but Lamont even raising the possibility is hard to compute. "All of us?" she ventures, struggling to believe him.

Lamont pauses. "Well... strictly speaking it would be a little more complicated for you and your other ignited friend."

"Prii."

"Right." He nods. "So as it stands, you and Prii—once we find them—are non-department parahumans. There's nothing wrong with that; plenty of parahumans live regular lives or even make use of their powers in a professional setting. With the appropriate licenses, of course." Lamont chuckles indulgently. "All of which is to say, you're under no obligation to do anything. If the mask life isn't for you, then nobody's going to force you into it." He hesitates. "However, we can't really protect you in the same way as an unpowered person, especially with you being brand new to your abilities." A smile. "Unfortunately, people usually notice metal gravitating towards someone."

"Sorry," Beth says reflexively. Whenever she stops actively concentrating, the table with its metal struts begins to slowly inch closer.

She's had to nudge the table back into place rather frequently.

"Don't apologise, it isn't your fault." He sounds sincere. Beth decides not to second-guess the only person who has been on her side. "The issue is that it will be very easy for you to be outed as parahuman, and there's a certain kind of... internet sleuth" — Lamont says it like something he'd scrape off his shoe — "who delights in digging up every piece of a parahuman's private life." Lamont sighs. "Maybe you can see where I'm going with this? If your identity goes

public, there's a high risk of your friends getting exposed too, regardless of whether they're in protection. You said you guys post videos online? Your names and faces are out there?"

The pit of anxiety in Beth's gut endeavours to dig a layer deeper. "That's right."

Lamont grimaces. "Well, we'll do what we can. Maybe we'll get lucky," he says, in the same tone as someone looking at a gray sky and saying '*Maybe we'll dodge the rain?*'

"Hold on," Beth interjects. Lamont raises an eyebrow. "You mentioned this is the case for non-department parahumans. Does it differ for *department* parahumans?"

Grant saved:

She's thinking of Grant. Colossal pain in the backside though he is, she can't stand the thought of destroying his privacy through their shared connection. He needs to rest and recover in peace, not with the press clamouring at the door for a scoop.

Shauna saved:

Beth's thinking of Shauna, the very opposite of a social butterfly. Press clamouring at her door would *destroy* her, and the notion that their shared connection could cause that is sickening. Shauna needs—deserves—peace and privacy to recover; for pity's sake, with the state of Shauna's leg, she may not be able to *walk* for months, if ever.

"It does," Lamont replies, eyes flicking to a sheaf of papers off to one side of the table. "Department parahumans are the folks you see on the news. Our very own Sky Surfer and Lockstep are DPR." He spreads his arms wide. "Basically, it's every parahuman officially under our umbrella, and under our umbrella means we can protect you *properly*, secret identity and all. The media knows that there will be hell to pay if they start sniffing around our people's private lives, and there's not a wannabe detective in the country who's getting through DPR security."

Beth nods slowly. A twinge of cynicism tugs at the corners of her mind, but she's exhausted, burned out on adrenaline, drowning in anxiety. She just wants to feel *safe*, like every door and window isn't about to burst open and disgorge an abomination of eyes and claws and razor-filled mouths. "And you would take care of Grant?"

Lamont smiles gently. "That's not contingent on you joining the department, Beth."

The cynical voice gets quieter still. Not that Beth thought they'd toss Grant out on the street while bleeding to death, but she'd harboured suspicions that there would be a bill. "I'm afraid I'm not particularly familiar with parahumans or your department as a whole. How would this work, exactly?"

Maybe Beth's weary brain notices the sudden gleam in Lamont's eyes. Maybe she convinces herself it's little more than a spark of enthusiasm. She'll curse herself either way.

"There's a fairly standard agreement, if you want to take a look." Lamont reaches over to the papers, sliding them to the centre of the table and swivelling them to face Beth. "Mainly it's there as a safeguard for you and your colleagues. It protects things like secret identities and ensures you can separate your private life from mask business if that's what you want. In terms of responsibilities, you'd be agreeing to undertake training in proper control of your powers and to represent the DPR appropriately in public appearances."

The training was a given. Beth's a little more dubious about public appearances and the implications thereof. "So I would be expected to, well, work as a hero?" She fumbles with her words. The concept of her being a *crimefighter* is patently absurd.

"If your powers are unsuitable to the field or your instructors don't feel you're ready, you wouldn't be forced into heroing," Lamont replies. "Nobody's throwing anyone to the wolves."

"How did you let him dodge the question, you moron?" Beth will hiss at her broken reflection, blood trickling down a dozen faces, oozing from her knuckles.

Beth scans the contract, eyes and thoughts hazy with fatigue. It's a little dense, but nothing seems truly objectionable.

Lamont goes on. "To be honest, a lot of what's there is about, ah, image rights and licensing." He laughs boyishly, flashing her a sheepish grin. "I know, I know, you don't want to think about *marketing* at a time like this, but hey, at least you've got guarantees that if you become the next big thing, you'll get a piece of the pie."

He's correct, Beth doesn't give a damn about the commercial aspects of heroism. She especially doesn't give a damn about building some kind of *brand*. She reads that DPR parahumans are salaried, and that sense of unreality crowds at her temples, her skull pounding with a sick heat. Three of her closest friends could be dead, another is critically injured, she's lucky to be *alive*... and she's sitting reading about the DPR's compensation package.

She wets her cracked lips, and looks back up to Lamont. "They will contact you if they find anything, won't they? And I can provide further details about the compound if it would help."

"They will," Lamont confirms. "And it's good of you to offer, but you gave us a lot to work with already and I wouldn't want to distract the team."

Beth slumps. She's useless. Utterly useless. Superpowered, and she couldn't even get one person out in one piece.

She should have stayed with Prii. Perhaps together they could have fought the monster off. Instead she was all too eager to accept their courage and flee. She clenches her fist. She should have—

The entire table jolts. Beth flinches from her thoughts. She mumbles an apology and pushes the furniture back into place once again. Slowly, the realisation is sinking in that this is something she has to live with now, that chances are, she'll always have to devote a portion of her attention to not flinging metal around.

She looks at the contract again. "Can I ah, unregister, as it were? This isn't indefinite?"

"Oh! Of course!" Another bashful smile. "Sorry if I implied that signing on is for life. Jeez, can you imagine? There's a six month probation, and assuming it's not going terribly, the contract will run another six months. Then it's up to you what you do." He gestures vaguely at the contract. "Oh, but it's really not as set in stone as all that. There are a bunch of clauses making sure you won't have to stay if it's not a good fit."

Technically, Lamont never lied to her.

Technically, Beth is unable to decide who she wants to hurt more: Lamont, or her younger self.

Across from her, the DPR officer has one more smile, carefully reassuring, *crafted* to reassure. "Like I said, you shouldn't have to handle this alone, Beth. If you'll let us, we'll do everything we can to help."

His voice is soothing and gentle and in the depths of this waking nightmare, Beth simply lacks the will to distrust him.

She signs the paper.

"Nothing at *all*?"

Sky Surfer, tall and toned and handsome, slowly shakes his head. "I'm really sorry. There were signs the building was occupied, but that's all."

If he says anything else, Beth doesn't hear it.

How can the evidence have vanished overnight?

They can't all be gone. They *can't*. They...

Grant saved

"Huh. Didn't think I'd wake up to *you*."

Beth's drooping eyelids slam open. She snaps bolt upright. "Grant, you're awake!"

A ghost of a smirk crosses his pale, drawn face. "And you're excited? Is this bizarro land?"

She's too relieved for the snark to leave a dent. "You have been unconscious for days, can I not be happy?"

Grant *tries* to whistle, but it turns into a cough. "Days? Jeez." He finally seems to notice his surroundings; hospital bed, IV stand, monitor. With a frown he starts to shift, then his eyes go wide. "Ow ow, fuck. That hurts."

"Try not to move too much," says Beth. "Your back is sixty percent stitches at the moment."

Grant grimaces. "Right. Yeah. I'm remembering now. Not gonna lie I was hoping that *thing* was a bad trip." Somehow, he manages another smirk. "Hope Morgan knows they owe me big time. You guys been taking shifts at my bedside or something? I'm touched."

Beth's throat tightens.

Grant, for all his faults, is good at reading people. A shadow falls over his face. "Beth."

"Morgan, Prii, and Shauna are... missing," Beth whispers.

He stares at her. "Sorry, *missing*? How do you lose three wholeass people?"

Beth, badly, wants to break from the accusation in his eyes, but she owes too much to shy away. "Prii said to run. So I took you and ran."

Grant breathes a 'ha'. "Yeah okay, sure. You carted me around with those noodle arms. You get superpowers while I wasn't look—" He breaks off. Again he stares. "Holy shit, you actually did, didn't you?"

He's reading her like a book. Beth nods. "Prii too. That's why they stayed. To make sure we could get away."

"And I guess Shauna and Morgan just fell down a fucking pit on the way out?" Grant snaps. Beth opens her mouth, but he keeps going. "No, forget it. I'm not hearing this right now."

Not for the last time, Grant turns away from her.

Shauna saved

"Beth... is that you?"

Beth's drooping eyelids slam open. She snaps bolt upright. "Shauna! How do you feel?"

Shauna blinks slowly, struggling to focus without her glasses. "Fuzzy. What's... going on?"

The relief in Beth's chest is so overwhelming that she's almost struggling to breathe. "You're in a specialised hospital. We're safe. If you are feeling groggy, it is probably the painkillers and anesthetic."

Shauna continues to blink, eyes dilated. Her attention drifts downwards. "Oh... my leg." The limb in question is practically mummified, held securely in place with straps and cradle.

"They have conducted two surgeries. I think they intend to do more." Beth had done her best to keep up with the DPR doctors' assessment of Shauna's injuries, and though she was reluctant to decide anything on Shauna's behalf, early intervention was the difference between potentially saving the leg and amputation.

"Oh..." Shauna mumbles again. Her eyes slide back to Beth. "Where is everyone?"

Beth's throat tightens. "Grant... didn't make it," she croaks. "Prii and Morgan are missing."

"But—but—Morgan *saved* me," Shauna protests weakly. "How can they be missing?"

She struggles to meet Shauna's eyes. She owes her that much. "We were separated at the exit. Morgan was trapped inside."

Shauna would never blame Beth openly. She isn't that kind of person.

But in the weeks and months to come, the mingled disappointment and accusation in Shauna's face will become all too familiar.

Beth's back slams into the crash mat for the fifth time in as many minutes. She stares at the ceiling, winded and dazed, every muscle in her body screeching at her, athletic gear plastered to her body with sweat. Dart's face appears over her. They look fresh as a daisy.

"Phalanx, if you want to do actual hero work, you've got to pay attention to the basics."

I don't. I'm not a fighter. I'm not a hero. I shouldn't even be here.

Beth pushes herself seated, then wobbles to her feet. "Alright. Show me again."

"Phalanx, right? *Huge* fan of yours, happy to be working with you!"

Beth frowns at the sharply-dressed woman proffering a hand and a dazzling smile. "I'm sorry?"

Unperturbed by her hanging handshake, the woman clasps her hands together. "Oh, right! I forgot that you're new to this. Sherilyn Daniels-Roy—call me Cherry—I'm your liaison with the suits. *I'm* here to make sure you can focus on heroing while still getting your voice heard on the corporate end."

"Nobody said anything about a representative." Beth was not ready to be ambushed one step outside her quarters. She notes Cherry's subtle denigration of 'suits' while wearing one herself.

"Ah, well, you see, this is normal practice for rookies—no offence meant of course!—new to the hero lifestyle. Otherwise, it'd be way too easy for say, the image team to ignore your input and set you up with a costume you hate. Think of me like your advocate in the room." The woman won't stand still, buzzing with an energy born either from prodigious quantities of caffeine or... some other stimulant.

Not important. Beth's brow furrows further. "But the department assigned you to me."

"Bingo." A wink so practiced Beth can almost hear the tinkling of a star*.*

"Meaning you are my advocate, employed by the people to whom you are advocating."

Cherry blinks twice. Then, like a force-rebooted computer, her blindingly white smile returns. "Oh you're *sharp*! I can tell we're going to get on like a house on fire, Phalanx!" Laughing, she claps Beth on the shoulder.

Beth disagrees with this conclusion.

Flight is the breakthrough.

With a round shield strapped to her arm and metal bands around her wrists and ankles, Beth can manipulate the metal to bring herself airborne. It's uncomfortable, but her control has come along in leaps and bounds.

"Not bad at all, Phalanx." Dart grins as Beth emerges from the agility course, panting softly. They know by now not to offer a fistbump. "How's the gear feel?"

"A little uncomfortable," Beth admits, though in truth it's worlds better than when they first added the shield to her equipment. She's grown stronger since then. It's strange to see *definition* in her arms. "Slightly unsteady at times."

"Yeah I noticed a couple of wobbles in there. Thought about a full suit of armour? That would probably help you keep stable."

"It has been mentioned," Beth answers. Dart grins, and she smiles faintly back. She likes Dart. They're constructive, patient, and don't treat her like an idiot for being unfamiliar with—well, anything about the DPR. They're one of the few bright spots of this experience.

Beth unbuckles the shield and sets it down, then turns her back on Dart to raise the visor serving as her mask and mop her face with a towel. Most of her parahuman colleagues here in DPR Boston don't wear masks in the building, but at least she's not the only one hiding her face. Not that the department doesn't already have her name and appearance on record.

Beth finishes up and replaces her visor, then turns around to see Dart watching her, arms folded and leaning against the wall, expression uncharacteristically serious. She raises an eyebrow.

Dart smiles gently. "So... we're at a point where I'd feel comfortable passing you for fieldwork. You have a good grasp of your powers and you can handle yourself in a fight."

"I see." Through admirable effort, the words emerge from Beth without trembling, without betraying the ice trickling down her spine.

"I understand if you're nervous. This is big." They raise a hand to the side of their mouth, conspiratorial. "Between you and me, corporate's been pushing for my approval for a while. I can stall them a while longer if you don't feel ready."

Beth sits heavily. "I don't."

"Talk me through it."

She closes her eyes, grimacing. Personable as Dart may be, she has no intention of telling them about her only 'real' experience with her powers. "If I fail, people will get hurt. I do not trust myself."

Prii screams at her to run. Morgan's wide eyes lock on hers as the doors slam closed.

"I get that, I really do," Dart replies. "Being depended on is scary. I worry about letting people down all the time." A shrug. "You've got the ability, Phalanx. You just need the confidence. I trust you, even if you don't."

Beth has to excuse herself.

Beth departs from the stage, the hubbub of the press conference buzzing behind her. Each step wobbles.

"Wonderful job, Phalanx! *Great* introduction—"

Beth sidesteps Cherry, ignores the beckoning DPR officer, and barrels into her 'dressing room'.

"Phalanx, we need to—"

Beth shuts the door in Cherry's face, locks it, rips off her mask with a trembling hand, and pukes into the potted plant.

Beth catches the woman in midair. For a moment, she dips, the added weight battling with her power's pull.

She wills the metal around her to *obey*, and what could have been freefall turns into a controlled descent.

Beth sets the woman back on her feet. She turns and flings her arms around Beth's shoulders.

"Y-you saved my life!"

"Don't mention it," Beth mutters, stiff as a board.

She can't say if the gratitude or the hug unsettles her more.

"Thought I'd find you here."

Beth, curled in a cubby with a book, glances up. "Am I so predictable?" she asks, just a hint of a smile tugging at the corner of her mouth.

"Only a little." Shun—and somewhere along the way it's become *Shun* rather than Dart—takes up their customary position leaning against the wall. "Still thinking about your next steps?"

From anyone else, the question would have earned a mechanical, off-the-rack answer. Shun, who might *almost* be a friend, if Beth could bring herself to allow it, deserves something with more substance. "I am, although..." She takes a moment to scan the room. She's been alone in the miniature library since entering, and didn't hear anyone enter, but the walls have ears. "...I'm leaning towards taking a break."

Shun nods. "As team deputy, I'm contractually obligated to say you should stay." A pause. They smirk. "And with that out of the way, you should do whatever feels best for you, Beth."

Beth's smile comes to fruition. She still hasn't told Shun about what brought her to the DPR. She's not sure she ever will. However, they can read between the lines. A nervous wreck of a flare walking through their door with no experience speaks volumes. "Thank you."

"For what? Basic consideration?" Shun clicks their tongue. "You've done everything you've been asked to do. You've more than earned some time to yourself."

Briefly, Beth's eyes well. She holds her breath, holds the emotions. Exhales. "I appreciate your support, Shun. Without you, I'd be a disaster."

"Hey, don't sell yourself short. You've worked hard."

"Are you *certain* you're not attempting to butter me up? You're laying it on rather thick."

Shun chuckles. Beth smiles again. It will be nice to be mostly normal for a while once her DPR term expires; there's a lot she needs to sort out, not least her own general wellbeing.

Afterwards, though? Beth can think of one fairly compelling reason she may well sign back on for the heroing life.

"Phalanx! Great news! They're extending your contract!"

Beth regards her 'advocate'. She'll be the first to admit she hasn't been forthcoming with her intentions to Cherry, but Cherry, quite frankly, is annoying. "They made an offer."

"Yes!" Cherry cheers, pumping both fists. "I know we've been hoping for this. It's a huge win!" By 'we', Cherry of course means her.

Beth lets Cherry celebrate for just a moment longer than is entirely kind, then shakes her head. "I don't want it."

Cherry's smile freezes over. "Ah, uh. What?"

"The extension. I don't want to sign."

A contoured jaw works. The colour has drained from her face. "Are you, uh, are you sure?"

It's not often Beth smirks. "Entirely."

Cherry laughs nervously, running a hand through her hair. "Uh. Okay. Well. I'm going to uh, I'm going to ask for your understanding, but I ah, I assumed..."

"This is watertight, I'm afraid." Beth's lawyer removes his glasses, setting down a stack of papers. "You authorized her to act on your behalf when you signed the original contract."

Beth wants to scream. Locked in for another three years, all because they put a deal in front of her she was in no fit state to critically assess. Nobody gives a damn that Beth hadn't even *seen* the extension before Cherry agreed to it. Too bad so sad, shouldn't have accepted the advocate in the first place.

They wouldn't do this to a hero with more clout and a bigger bank balance, but she's not important enough for them to treat like an actual person. She's *probably* got a case against the DPR, regardless of what the paperwork says, but one year of rookie-grade hero pay won't fund that legal battle.

"There's a silver lining, if I can draw your attention to this particular clause..."

Beth looks where she's pointed, and almost smiles.

Firing Cherry via text is one of the most satisfying things Beth has ever done.

A chestplate comes first.

The bands become gauntlets and greaves. The boots have lifts. She isn't sure if she should be aggrieved.

Then a larger shield. A lance.

The helm and the full armour arrive at once.

Phalanx, an armourclad hero. The more they add to her ensemble, the less she's expected to talk; helps her 'mystique'.

Suits Beth fine.

There comes a day she glimpses her reflection and simply... stops.

Scars. Grey at her temples. Definition both in muscle and in the lines on her face. She runs her thumbs across her fingers and palms, feels the calluses.

Beth slumps into a chair, grabs her phone, stares at it.

Dials Morgan.

Ring. Ring. Ring.

The number you have called is unavailable—

Ends the call.

Slumps back until her head hits the wall with a dull thud.

Tries to tell herself she'll try again tomorrow.

"Hey, Knight, you sure you can't drop us any hints what we'll be doing?"

The man who may or may not be an Agent looks up from his tablet and grins. "You know I can't, T. You've been briefed on what you need to know."

T-Pecs, shirtless, muscular, and dappled with scales, leans back in his seat with a grumble. "You're no fun." He glances at Beth, swaying slightly with the motion of the van. "Any guesses, rook?"

"Stop calling me that," says Beth. Of the four heroes plus one maybe-Agent in the back of this van, she's the least experienced, and the only one who hasn't had a 'special mission' before. T-Pecs has decided that this singles her out as the rookie.

"Fine, fine." T-Pecs is smirking, and sure enough he follows through. "What about 'new kid'? Is that better?"

"Shut up, would you? I'm trying to concentrate," a woman grumbles from across the aisle. She's lean, mousy, and a total mismatch to her vibrantly coloured costume.

"Alright, but only cause you asked so nicely, Carnival," T-Pecs chuckles.

Carnival flips him off.

Beth likes her better than the others.

"Knight, ETA?" Carnival asks, methodically massaging her temples.

"Still holding," Knight replies. "Need to let the Hounds show their hand first. Sorry."

Carnival grunts and closes her eyes. Beth tries not to think too loudly. She doesn't have much experience with telepaths, even weaker ones like Carnival.

"Hey, uh..." The van's final occupant has spoken little since the team assembled. Rattan is sitting up straight now. "Before we get going, I just want to say good luck to everyone." He manages a shy smile. "I know we can do this if we work together."

He'll be dead within the hour.

The tunnel is too dark, too tight, and too *familiar*. Panic claws at Beth's throat, and it's all she can do not to scream. There's no monster at her back, but this place has something far, far worse.

How *could* they? Bastards. Scum.

If only the rage could overpower her fear.

Ahead of her, the shadow that is Carnival stops and turns. Her eyes glitter in the barely-existent light.

"What is it?" Beth manages, fighting through terror.

Carnival is quiet for a moment, then sighs. "I'm sorry about this."

And—

Grant saved:

"Sup Beth?"

"I thought I would check in. It has been a while."

A noise on the other end of the line. Not quite a snort and not quite a laugh. *"Well you've been busy quitting your job, I hear."*

Beth winces. "That has not caused you any trouble, has it?"

"Me? Nah. I get a call like every six months and otherwise I pretty much don't exist to them. Which being clear, is preferable."

"Good, then."

"Mm." There's an edge seeping into his voice. *"Media's saying some pretty nasty things about you, Beth."*

"I'm aware." The coverage has been inescapable. The DPR does not abide a turncoat. And if it is this bad in the mainstream, then online must be even worse.

"I'm sure it's hot air. I know you'd never turn your back on your friends."

Beth hangs up, squeezing her phone so hard the casing creaks.

Good talk, Grant.

Shauna saved:

"Beth! How are you?"

The enthusiasm Shauna can muster at a moment's notice never ceases to amaze. Beth very nearly smiles. "Not terrible, I suppose. It could certainly be worse."

"That's—I was gonna say great, but I guess it's not great. That's un-terrible!"

"Un-terrible works," says Beth. "I hope I haven't caused you any trouble."

"Oh, because of your uh, employer?" The way Shauna talks around the DPR is always rather endearing, and frankly she pays more attention to security than some of Beth's actual colleagues.

Former colleagues.

"Ex-employer, but yes."

"It's been fine so far. Honestly they don't really contact me much any more, so yeah."

Beth directs her sigh of relief away from the phone. "I'm glad." It's largely her concern for Shauna that kept her from quitting the DPR before the very final straw.

"Mask media is going totally wild with this. Congrats on starting like twenty flame wars."

Beth laughs, and lets pleasant conversation carry her worries away for a time.

"So, you're on our side now, huh?"

Beth looks around, then up, then up some more.

Surpass is a very tall woman.

"That's right," she answers, guarded. DPR had Surpass pinned as a loose cannon, and the Hounds lost people during the destruction.

"Nice." Surpass sticks out a hand.

Hesitantly, Beth accepts. She's half expecting Surpass to start squeezing, but the other woman lets go after a quick firm shake.

Surpass's shemagh conceals most of her face, but her grin reaches all the way to her eyes. "Lemme show you around the place."

Beth's workshop is hot, stuffy, and reeks of metal and oil. It's one of her favourite places to be.

She is so, so glad she took the time to actually learn the maintenance of her armour back in the DPR. Plenty of people questioned her for bothering: 'We have a team for that!'

Yeah, and where's the team now? Working for the DPR, and Beth isn't.

She misses having a backup suit. And the spare components. The Hounds have been extraordinarily generous providing her with all of this, but there's a lot that they can't replace. It's much easier to conduct repairs when you don't have to keep using the same dinged-up armour every day.

"Knock knock," a voice announces, then comes in anyway. That's taken some adjustment.

"One of these days you are going to walk in and take molten metal to the face," Beth says conversationally, winding a metal plate into a vice.

"Eh, I can take it," Surpass responds, as usual, then pops her head around a toolrack. "Damn, you're in full on blacksmith mode, huh?"

Beth glances at the thick apron covering her torso, her leather gauntlets. "Yes."

Surpass grins. "Wanna make me a sword?"

"No."

"Boo."

"Nobody in their right mind would trust you with a sword."

Surpass makes a show of thinking about that, then shrugs. "Yeah fair. Hey hold on—" She cranes her neck, peering at Beth's arm. "You've got a tattoo?"

Beth startles, hand going self-consciously to the spot. "I, ah—yes."

For all that she can be cocky, brash, and blunt, Surpass has a gentle side. Her grin fades. "Hey, if it's a sore subject, I never saw it."

"No, it's, well..."

It's been almost five years. It's something she's never talked about. It's still haunting her now.

Maybe it's time.

Taking a deep breath, Beth pulls off one glove, then the other, perching on her workbench.

"Several years ago," she begins. "I was into urban exploration..."

"You *need* us, Vantage!"

"What I need is for you to be reasonable, Captain Ramos."

The DPR officer elects not to be reasonable, and in short order, is storming from the meeting room. Vantage follows, and so does Beth.

Beth's so tired of hearing this self-important bootlicker posturing and beating his chest. She's so tired of tolerating his unsubtle jabs at her for quitting the DPR.

She spots him making a beeline for two people seated in the waiting area, and she's too far behind to head him off. Great, fantastic. That's most likely the civilians who got wrapped up in a S.C.U.M. raid, and this is going to be their first impression of the Hounds.

Ramos rants at them for a few seconds. Beth catches up and tells him to get out. The captain strides off like he's proven anything other than his capacity to throw tantrums. Maybe she should apologise to these two for his behaviour. Beth withholds a sigh and turns—

Her heart stops.

That can't be who it looks like.

It can't be anyone else.

[Character Q&A Poll - Dealer's choice](#)

[March 1](#)

It's been a little bit since the last one of these; I was deciding who to poll next!

I figured since the patreon has been going about a year, it'd be cool to reset and let people vote for whoever so long as it's not been too recent. (so no CG or AdVenture, or S.C.U.M. members, but others are back on the table). I've grouped the Hounds, Businessmen, and Coven, since the Businessmen especially have much smaller roles. If a group wins, peeps will be able to ask questions of specific members or have it open to the floor.

Mal

Wil

Kay

Teddie

Dion

Alistair

Hounds (excl. Phalanx)

Businessmen (Mr. White, Scour, and Management)

Coven (excl. CG & Dime)

Someone else? (comment)

41 votes total

[Q&A Poll](#)

[March 5](#)

The character Q&A poll will still be running for a few more days!

There's a pretty close race at the top between Wil and Coven, but there's still time for an underdog to catch up. :)

[Poll here.](#)

[Character Q&A - Coven](#)

[March 13](#)

The margin was narrow, but the votes are in and the Coven came out on top for the poll.

Feel free to send or comment any questions you have for members of the Coven to answer in character! As a reminder, this is excluding CG and Dime, cause the former already got her turn and the latter is, y'know, the protagonist.

You can be specific and ask individuals ('question for Hypothesis...') or leave it open to the floor, though in those instances I might not have everyone answer if they don't have anything interesting to add.

This'll probably run fairly long since CH10 is gonna be very Covencentric and I expect people might have more questions once that drops.

[Character Q&A - Coven \(1\)](#)

[March 17](#)

Lullaby: Why did you choose to become a mercenary?

Freedom to choose. The capacity to make money without having to tie myself down to a specific cause. Plus, it avoids any... misunderstandings about loyalty and obligation. If I'm getting paid, people know I'm here for the money, not to make friends.

And sure, I've been with the Coven a long time, but this job is cushy. I get paid on time and I don't have to risk my neck week in, week out.

Hypothesis: Are you single?

...Yes. Not that it's any of your business.

Do any of y'all "like" dime in any way? Grudging respect, funny to laugh at? Any positive emotions honestly-

Variable: I do!

Catalyst: No. They can fuck off and die in a hole for all I care.

Hypothesis: Paradigm has proven receptive to instruction. I'm reserving judgement on their qualities as an operative.

Gremlink: Dime? Dime's fine! More interesting than the rest of these nerds, anyway!

Lullaby: I mean it's funny seeing how badly they piss Catalyst off just by existing.

Variable: I... I do!